THE FIRST PROCLAMATION AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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The USA Xaverian Missionaries re-elected Father Carl Chudy, SX, as Provincial Superior, April 2012. Father Chudy is an active member of the CMSM Mission Committee.

The Changing Religious Landscape
An extensive survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life details the religious affiliation of the American public and explores the shifts taking place in the U.S. religious landscape which they found both very diverse and extremely fluid. More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion -- or no religion at all.¹ Roman Catholics, who are far fewer than Protestant denominations, have experienced the greatest loss. While nearly one-in-three Americans (31%) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four (24%) describe themselves as Catholic. Among the young adult generation whose numbers are the greatest for departures, they see themselves as “spiritual” (not affiliated with any church or institution), rather than “religious” (affiliated with the institution of the Church).

The devastation of the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City on September, 2001, propelled a young philosopher and student of neuroscience named Sam Harris to devise a solution to the worldwide problem of terrorism. Tolerance and compassion simply do not work for him since it is this very tolerance of faith that is the major cause of the problem. He presented two bestselling books: The End of Faith and Letter to a Christian Nation.² Essentially he says we can rid the world of faith not by violence but by reason and the spread of science. Other atheist writers whose impact is enormous are Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens. Numerically in the USA those who consider themselves atheist are rather small but there influence is being felt on many levels of culture as the “new atheism” takes root in many hearts. Their new potent, political agenda is finding more support in such groups as Freedom

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¹ The Pew Research Center runs the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. On February 25, 2008, the US Religious Landscape Survey was done in interviews with 35,000 Americans, 18 years old and older. The results may be found at: http://pewresearch.org/pubs/743/united-states-religion. Internet maps and graphics of the study can be found at: http://religions.pewforum.org/.

from Religion Foundation\(^3\) where they uphold that most social and moral progress has been brought about by persons free from religion. They pay for advertising encouraging people to leave their churches, mosques, and synagogues.

These characteristic experiences of departures from the Church and the “new atheism” demonstrate, in a poignant way, the shifting religious landscape which over many years has been changing throughout the country and felt deeply in Catholic Churches. The sexual abuse cases of Catholic priests, brothers and the perceived cover-up by bishops also helped to whittle at the credibility of the Catholic Church as an institution. There are of course signs of hope as well. In the last twelve years six million people were added to the ranks of Catholics in the United States. Catholics who actually attend mass regularly are about 22\%\(^4\) The number of Catholics nearly rivals the number of members of evangelical Protestant churches and far exceeds the number of members of both mainline Protestant churches and historically black Protestant churches.\(^5\) However, the shifting religious climate and its impact on the mission of the church over many years now is a powerful motivation to welcome the challenge of developing a “new evangelization” that seeks to revitalize the Church and its mission today from the United States.

The Mission of the Americas
The concern of the new evangelization in both North and South America was expressed in the Apostolic Exhortation, Ecclesia in America. It followed a special assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops which met in Rome in 1997, where special emphasis was placed on new paths of renewal in continuity with the Jubilee Year of 2000 and the 500th anniversary of evangelization in the Americas.

In this Exhortation Blessed John Paul II proceeds on the principle that a common spiritual origin and a common spiritual destiny unite the people of North and South America, and this unity is signified by the cross of Columbus and the apparition at Guadalupe. It probes the meaning of this origin and destiny so as to better explain the new evangelization of the new millennium. All of this begins with the “encounter with the Living Christ in America today.”\(^6\) The profundity of this meeting with the Lord Jesus wells up a deep and ardent desire to share Christ with others, something also called interchangeably mission or evangelization. He says: “An encounter with the Lord brings about a profound transformation in all who do not close themselves off from him. The first impulse coming from this transformation is to communicate

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\(^3\) The website may be found at: [www.ffrf.org/](http://www.ffrf.org/).
\(^4\) Church statistics from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate: [http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/requestedchurchstats.html](http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/requestedchurchstats.html).
\(^6\) Chapter II offers a meditation on the “Encounter of Christ in America” through some key experiences and realities: America’s Christian identity, the fruits of holiness, popular piety, the Eastern Catholic presence, the Church’s outreach in education and social services, growing respect for human rights, and the growing phenomenon of globalization and urbanization, the burden of external debt, drug trade and ecological concerns.
to others the richness discovered in the experience of the encounter. This does not mean simply teaching what we have come to know but also, like the Samaritan woman, enabling others to encounter Jesus personally: “Come and see” (Jn 4:29).

The final chapter thus offers the crucial consequences of this meeting with Jesus in the consideration of the mission of the Americas today. It is here where the concern of evangelization is brought to bear on the many cultures that comprise this vast continent where “a split between the Gospel and culture is the drama of our times.” Key areas in this American mission involve centers of education, the important use of mass media, and the challenge of sects. However, he leaves the most urgent concerns for this mission to what Vatican II called the *missio ad gentes* of the Church. He says: “…the name of Jesus is unknown to a vast part of humanity and in many sectors of American society. It is enough to think of the indigenous peoples not yet Christianized or of the presence of non-Christian religions such as Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism, especially among immigrants from Asia.” Asian immigrants are the largest number of new immigrants to the USA today.

It is not the vast humanity that does not know Christ in far-away lands outside the borders of the Americas that prompts this mission, but it is within the Americas itself where the urgent work of the first proclamation begins. The challenges of the new evangelization are not restricted only to the renewal of faith of those already Christian, but must also be directed in a concerted outreach to our non-Christian neighbors in both North and South America. Yet, for example, if you look through the document of the United States Catholic Bishops: *Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization*, the *missio ad gentes* is strikingly absent, as well as the role of religious and missionaries. There seems to be some inconsistency to what is universally understood as the main challenges of the new evangelization and what is actually playing out in many dioceses of the United States.

**The First Proclamation and the New Evangelization**

What is the relationship between the first proclamation and the new evangelization? One way to answer this question is in the preface of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the upcoming synod on the new evangelization: “This renewed dynamism in the Christian community will lead to renewed missionary activity (*missio ad gentes*), now more urgent than ever, given the large number of people who do not know Jesus Christ, in not only far-off countries but also those already evangelized.” There has been a concern for decades now that the *missio ad gentes* from the USA weakened over time. Cardinal Dolan mentions in his talk in Rome to the Curia: “The context of mission shifted not only in a geographical sense, but in a theological sense, as mission applied

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7 *Ecclesia in America*, 68
9 *Ecclesia in America*, 74
not only to unbelievers but to believers, and some thoughtful people began to wonder if such a providential expansion of the concept of evangelization unintentionally diluted the emphasis of missio ad gentes.” The mission encyclical of Blessed John Paul II states: “Difficulties both internal and external have weakened the Church’s missionary thrust toward non-Christians, a fact which must arouse concern among all who believe in Christ.” This discrepancy of the first proclamation, as understood within the challenges of the new evangelization continues to endure even as we come to understand what must be done in the new evangelization.

The traditional concepts and boundaries of the modes of evangelization of the church of first proclamation, pastoral care of the faithful, and the new evangelization do not hold validity anymore. The confines between countries of “ancient Christianity” and “mission lands” are no longer valid today because of the enormous changes worldwide in immigration, globalization, and so much more. The preparation document for the synod, quoting Redemptoris Missio asserts “The boundaries between pastoral care of the faithful, new evangelization and specific missionary activity are not clearly definable, and it is unthinkable to create barriers between them or to put them into watertight compartments.” Promoting and encouraging interfaith and cultural dialogue at home in the USA is a profound way we strengthen its urgency among local churches to share this same mission both locally and abroad, as well as contribute to a vital renewal in the USA Church.

Three-fold Impact of Missio ad Gentes on Parishes and Dioceses

In light of all that has been said, I would propose that there are at least three main areas where the first proclamation is experienced in many parishes nationwide, particularly in urban areas, although many non-urban places have similar experiences. They include:

1. First, the Catholic parish in the midst of a diverse, multi-religious neighborhood, both ecumenically and inter-religiously. Often parish life is quite insulated from this surrounding environment, like a Catholic island in a sea of humanity with no real meaningful connection. It is not merely on a social level, but on a level of faith, where they may not see that relationship as a necessary part of the mission of the parish, the first proclamation of the parish community. There are exceptions of course but few and far between. Some work is done through diocesan officers specifically charged with ecumenical and interfaith responsibilities, but with waning budgets and other priorities, this work is often undervalued.

2. Second, the Catholic parish in a rich and diverse multi-cultural environment is attended to with greater resolve. The diverse cultural groups in the USA are made up of people at many different levels of acculturation to the American experience. While the Church has served as a conduit for this process of adaptation throughout U.S. history, the bishops today are very clear about the fact that the Church’s mission is not to Americanize but to

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evangelize. This means respecting the languages, customs and style whereby particular cultures live their Catholic faith while seeking to form their emerging Catholic identity in light of the Word of God and Church teaching. The New Evangelization in this regard is about finding a fit between Catholic identity for today and the diverse cultural identities that comprise our parishes and neighborhoods.

3. Third, the thoughtful appreciation of global solidarity that each Christian, family, community, and parish is exemplified by many generous projects that local parishes carry out with other poorer communities worldwide, support of the Pontifical Mission Societies and missionary congregations, parish twinning, among other things. The assistance of missionary priests from outside of the United States in many parishes also underlines the global connection US Catholics feel more and more, a kind of reverse-mission. The bishops encourage this solidarity when they said: “At a time of dramatic global changes and challenges, Catholics in the United States face special responsibilities and opportunities. We are members of a universal Church that transcends national boundaries and calls us to live in solidarity and justice with the peoples of the world. We are also citizens of a powerful democracy with enormous influence beyond our borders. As Catholics and Americans we are uniquely called to global solidarity.”

These three areas can be the reference points of our own concerns in mission animation. They may foster new creativity and ideas for developing ways to assist parishes in these three important experiences. The resources of the US Catholic Church in this regard are many and all they need is a focus. The new evangelization is a call to re-discover our missionary origins by leading Christian communities to be less concentrated on themselves inwardly in the midst of the changes already taking place and more engaged in proclaiming the faith to others. In this regard, much is expected from parishes that are seen as an entryway, open to everyone in every place on the globe, to the Christian faith and an experience of the Church. But it is not only limited to parishes as other religious institutes and campus ministries are other important entryways to meet and share Christ. Missionary religious congregations and the Pontifical Mission Societies are an enormous resource for all dioceses in this regard.

The inconsistency in what are universally understood as the main challenges of the new evangelization and what is actually playing out in many dioceses of the United States continues to undervalue the essential challenge of the first proclamation of Christ to those who do not know him, and thus weaken the new evangelization at the outset. The failure to integrate the missio ad gentes in our plans for the new evangelization will only undermine the efforts of the new evangelization. The role of missionary institutes is clear. We need to collaborate with one another and provide the needed resources to bishops, priests, and lay leadership as each diocese clarifies their strategies that include all aspects of mission: the first proclamation, pastoral care of the faithful, and the new evangelization. In doing so, we assist the Church of the United

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States to own and value the first proclamation as essential to its mission and to embrace an organic and holistic understanding of the new evangelization.

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3 The website may be found at: www.ffrf.org/

4 Church statistics from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate: http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/requestedchurchstats.html


6 Chapter II offers a meditation on the Encounter of Christ in America through some key experiences and realities: America’s Christian identity, the fruits of holiness, popular piety, the Eastern Catholic presence, the Church’s outreach in education and social services, growing respect for human rights, and the growing phenomenon of globalization and urbanization, the burden of external debt, drug trade and ecological concerns.

7 Ecclesia in America, 68

8 Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi (December 8, 1975), 20: AAS 68 (1976), 19.

9 Ecclesia in America, 74


