

Churches Together in Berkshire AGM
NEW EVANGELISATION: WHAT IS IT?

Thank you for inviting me to speak tonight. Thank you for all you do as *Churches Together*. As brothers and sisters in Christ, it is crucial that the world can see that what unites us is far more than what divides us. The topic is ‘New Evangelisation: What is It?’ So first, something on the meaning of this term ‘new evangelisation’ (NE), then secondly, the cultural context in which Christians in Britain find themselves today.

1. New Evangelisation

In an address in 1983 to the Bishops of Latin America, Pope John Paul II famously used a new theological term that has gained momentum ever since. What we need today, he said, is a “new evangelisation,” an evangelisation that is “new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression.”¹ Since then, the term NE has come to be used ever more frequently in Vatican documents and in general discourse among Catholics and increasingly among all Christians. Indeed, in 2010 Pope Benedict established the Pontifical Council for NE and announced a Synod of Bishops to be held in Rome in October 2012 on the theme “The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith”.² Its final 58 Propositions formed the basis of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis’s recent Apostolic Exhortation that summed up the work of the Synod and enhanced it with many further considerations of his own.³

The term NE implies immediately that there are circumstances or contexts in which the usual or ‘classic’ methods of evangelisation are not working; something different is required. To understand this we need to mention briefly the trajectory of the Church, especially in Euro-America, in the period since the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, held in Rome from 1962 to 1965. The Council continues to be, certainly for Catholics, a critical reference-point and an on-going reality. What made Vatican II unique was that unlike previous councils of the Church it was not called to respond to a crisis. When Blessed John XXIII announced the Council in 1959, he said it would be a pastoral council. It would not make any new definitions of doctrine. Its aim would be *aggiornamento*, an updating or modernisation; later, he spoke about opening the windows to let in some fresh air. The truths of faith remain the same, he said, but the Church’s style, discipline and worship, the presentation of her teaching, need to be modernised to communicate better with the modern world and to spread the Gospel. He also wanted the Council to help bring about unity amongst Christians.

¹ John Paul II “The Task of the Latin American Bishop”, Address to CELAM, 9th March 1983; English translation in *Origins* 12 (4 March 1983) 659-62.

² For its Final Propositions, see <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/final-list-of-propositions-of-the-synod-of-bishops> (March 2014)

³ See Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium. The Joy of the Gospel* (London, CTS: 2013)

This is not the place to discuss Vatican II, save to say that the Council's sixteen documents, on a vast range of topics from the role of the laity to the Church's missionary activity, initiated for the Catholic Church a period of exceptional change and development, with repercussions across every domain of ecclesial life. The Council also facilitated many new theological movements such as liberation theology, feminism, eco-theology, ecumenism, new philosophies and approaches, cultural studies, interreligious dialogue, and so on. These last fifty years, the 'post-conciliar' period, has coincided with huge changes and developments within culture, within 'the world' in which the Church is living. Vatican II coincided with the 1960s, a decade of explosive international, social and technological upheaval that still continues. Early 21C society with its new family, social and sexual mores, with its increasing affluence, at least in the West, with its new life-styles enabled by shopping, entertainment and better health-care, is radically different from the society of the early 20C.

In the first period after Vatican II up to 1975, the key issue for Catholics was the Church, the nature of the Church and change in the Church: What does it mean to be the Church of Christ in the modern world? But the Church does not exist for itself and John XXIII had called the Council in order more effectively to evangelise the modern world. In 1975, after the Synod of Bishops the year before, Pope Paul VI issued a document called *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* transformed the post-conciliar period by infusing a new missionary consciousness. It helped bring about a shift from a static, institutional, maintenance-model of the Church, to a much more missionary-minded evangelistic approach. In history, the Church has passed through numerous different periods and taken different forms: the Early Church, the Patristic era, the mediaeval period, High-Scholasticism, then the Counter-Reformation or Tridentine era leading to Vatican II. But as the Church enters the 21C and 22C, a new paradigm is emerging that some call 'Evangelistic Catholicism,'⁴ a transition taking shape especially among the younger generations. This new missionary awareness became central to John Paul II who spoke about evangelisation on all his world tours and visits. Since the 1980s and '90s, new movements have been growing up like green shoots. JP2 also instituted World Youth Days (WYD), huge international gatherings of young people every three years for catechesis, prayer, celebration and public witness. Although rarely reported in the British media, these have been greatly successful. The 1995 WYD in the Philippines drew the largest crowd of humans ever to gather on the surface of this planet: an estimated 7.5M people. Last year's in Rio drew over 3M people.

The term 'evangelisation' (Gk. εὐαγγέλιον glad tidings, εὐαγγελίζομαι to announce Good News) was not used at Vatican II. Before the Council, it was usual to speak of 'the missions.' The missions were overseas efforts by priests and religious to plant the Church among indigenous populations. However, the Vatican II Decree on Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes* put mission within its fuller context: not us or our activity, but the Blessed Trinity.⁵ Mission is Trinitarian: it is not what we are doing but what God is doing, the Father sending the Son and sending the Holy Spirit, reaching out and

⁴ See for instance G. Weigel *Evangelical Catholicism* (New York, Basic Books: 2013).

⁵ See Vatican II *Ad Gentes Divinitus* 2-9 in A. Flannery ed. *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (New York, Costello 1987) 814f

drawing everyone into His life within the communion of the Church. In this way, the Church is on mission on all six continents. Moreover, God's mission is not only a spiritual mission of conversion: it is about dialogue, about bringing justice and peace, about occasioning social and human development on every level. The term used to capture this new, richer, fuller meaning of mission is 'evangelisation' and in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Pope Paul VI reminds everyone that the Church "exists in order to evangelise, that is, to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace."⁶ Evangelisation is the whole point of why the Church exists. The Church is here to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ, to introduce people to Him, to unite all peoples in His Body, and through Him to draw everyone into the eternal life of the Trinity.

In a further development in the 1980s, the Church began to reach a deeper grasp of the theological meaning and value of culture: not only that to proclaim the Gospel effectively Christians must understand the culture in which they preach, but more, that culture itself can be a mediation of God, a conveyor of Gospel values and, at least in positive developments, a medium where the Holy Spirit is actively at work. There was a growing disquiet about the situation of the Church in Europe, where countries of ancient Christian origin were being rapidly de-Christianised, with secularism in the ascendant and the Church becoming a minority. This was the immediate background to Pope John Paul II's call for NE, an evangelisation "new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression." Indeed, his 1990 Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* outlined three different if sometimes overlapping contexts, requiring different manners of evangelisation: situations where the Gospel has not yet been preached and Christ is not known, the opposite situation where the Church is already well established, and intermediate situations, such as in Euro-America, where the Gospel has been preached but where people are baptised but indifferent or unresponsive, not in a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.⁷

Consequently, there are now three types of evangelization. The earlier understanding involved two stages. First, came the initial proclamation of the Person and teachings of Jesus Christ, the preaching of the *kerygma*, the Gospel of the death and resurrection of the Lord, in order to rouse up faith in those who have never heard of Christ before. This led to 'classic evangelization' and pastoral care, that is, the life-long insertion of the new disciple into the life of the Church and her sacraments through schooling, involvement in parish life, ongoing catechesis, sacramental preparation, attending Mass, hearing regular preaching, taking part in charitable activities, and so on. However, there is now a new cultural situation in which the Gospel has been preached but secularism is dominant. Those who have been baptised no longer respond or practice their faith; they are in effect sacramentalised but not evangelised, maybe connected with the parish through the school, but no longer (or not yet) in a real, living relationship with Christ in the Holy Eucharist. In this new cultural context, a third type of evangelisation is required, the NE John Paul called for, an evangelisation new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression.

⁶ Paul VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 14 available online at www.vatican.va (March 2014)

⁷ See John Paul II *Redemptoris Missio* (London, CTS: 1990) 33; cfr. Congregation for the Clergy *General Directory for Catechesis* (London, CTS: 1997) 58-9

All evangelisation is essentially a two-way movement: *ad intra* and *ad extra*, like breathing, reaching in and reaching out. Evangelisation means breathing in (*ad intra*), Christians themselves being evangelised, growing and deepening in their faith and love for Christ, a life-long journey. Evangelisation also means reaching out to others (*ad extra*) to propose to them the Good News. More, evangelisation is never a programme. In an Apostolic Letter from 2001 opening the millennium, JP2 said “

“we are ... not seduced by the naive expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and by the assurance he gives us: I am with you! It is not therefore a matter of inventing a ‘new programme’”.⁸

So not a programme but a Person. Yet JP2 mentioned three features: new ardour, new expressions, new methods. His meaning arguably is clear. He means a new passion for Christ, so that Christians will be willing to reach out to others. He means new ways of communicating the Gospel, including new media and new methods. He also means a sharper awareness of today’s culture. A key reason for the attrition of Christian faith and practice in schools and parishes is a doe-eyed lack of awareness of contemporary culture: that Catholics are different, a distinctive community, a countercultural people.

The proximate goal of evangelisation is always the individual and so resources need to be put into helping people discover a personal relationship with Christ, with a sense of their call to discipleship within His Body, the Church. The American Catholic author Sherry Weddell, in her book *Forming Intentional Disciples*, argues that many lapse from practicing their faith because their spiritual needs are not met.⁹ People go to church out of habit yet lack a deep personal relationship with God. In many parishes, she argues, the number of intentional disciples is just 5%, the same people going to everything. This suggests that more of the Church’s resources be put at the service of helping people to pray, to find God, to connect with him, to commit to him, to learn the art of praying, to develop a personal-passionate relationship with Jesus Christ, and to acquire a stronger sense of what it means to be chosen by him as His disciple.

Yet while the proximate goal of evangelisation is always the individual, the ultimate goal surely is culture. So let us turn to the issue of being Christian in a secular culture.

2. Responding to a Secular Culture

Hardly a day goes by without mention in the media of an apparent collision between Christianity and Britain’s so-called secular culture, especially in relation to sexuality and the redefinition of marriage. Recent, more general examples include the Pentecostalist couple from Derby who were told they could not foster children because of their negative views on homosexuality, a ban upheld by the High Court.¹⁰ Then there was the community nurse from Somerset who, feeling sorry for an elderly patient,

⁸ John Paul II *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 29, text available online at www.vatican.va (March 2014).

⁹ S. Weddell *Forming Intentional Disciples. The Path to Knowing an Following Jesus* (Huntington IN, OSV: 2012)

¹⁰ BBC News 28th February 2011: see www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-12598896 (March 2014)

offered to pray for her, for which she was suspended for failing to demonstrate a commitment to equality and diversity.¹¹ Again, there was the Catholic girl from Kent who was barred from wearing a crucifix at school.¹² And some local councils regularly replace the word ‘Christmas’ with ‘The Holiday Season’ and one year, an Oxford council-funded charity referred to Christmas as the ‘Winter Light Festival.’¹³

In Britain, secularism is now in the ascendant, although it remains more an attitude or atmosphere than a fully worked-out system of thought. The Birmingham-born agnostic George Holyoake first coined the term secularism in 1846 as a philosophy of life that seeks to develop the intellectual, moral and physical nature of man through material means, based on human reason and natural morality.¹⁴ Secularism essentially means a concern with the *saeculum*, the world, that is living, at least in public, without religion and its ‘sacred canopy.’¹⁵ It is also a political principle, that Church and State, religion and politics, must be separated and to protect the equality of every citizen in a pluralist society, politicians and policy makers must intentionally adopt a neutral attitude towards religious groups and personal life-style choices, as long as behaviour remains legal. Religion is thus driven out of the public square and becomes a domestic ritual. There are, though, three main streams of secularism: the principled secularism of Holyoake and his descendants such as the Harvard philosopher John Rawls (d. 2002), the hard-line ideological secularism of the atheist Charles Bradlaugh and the National Secular Society, and the more pragmatic approach of Richard Rorty and others.¹⁶ Whilst hard-liners seek systematically to exclude religion - as Alasdair Campbell once said, “We don’t do God”¹⁷ - soft-core secularists happily wish each other ‘Merry Christmas.’ They tolerate Britain’s Christian traditions, as long as those who practice such traditions do not expect any privileges or discriminate against the rights of others.

Essentially, and perhaps surprisingly, secularism in my view is a Christian heresy. It is a deconstructed version of Christian morality, a set of second-order Christian values shorn from their theological moorings, a post-Christian ethic that thrives because its values continue to derive their vitality from the Christian patrimony still embedded in British culture. It even has its own theological terms such as equality, diversity, freedom, respect, tolerance, non-discrimination, multiculturalism, social cohesion, ethnic communities, inclusivity, quality of life, sustainable development and environmentalism. All these values are derived from fundamental Christian values. The secular concern for tolerance, for instance, comes from the biblical love of neighbour but, disconnected from Christian practice and belief, it has become a soft, free-wheeling value, invested with new meaning to permit what formerly was unlawful.

¹¹ BBC News 1st February 2009: see news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/somerset/7863699.stm (March 2014)

¹² BBC News 13th January 2007: see news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/kent/6258451.stm (March 2014)

¹³ *The Daily Telegraph* 2nd November 2008: see www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/3367390/Christmas-banned-in-Oxford-by-council-owned-charity.html (March 2014)

¹⁴ See G. D’Costa *Christianity and World Religions* (Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell: 2009) 110f.

¹⁵ See R. Fisichella *The New Evangelisation: Responding to the Challenge of Indifference* (Leominster, Gracewing: 2012), especially 25-48. Cf. P. Berger *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, Doubleday: 1967)

¹⁶ D’Costa 110-119

¹⁷ See news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/3301925.stm (March 2014). He made the comment in 2003 to a journalist interviewing the then Prime Minister Tony Blair who was about to ask the PM about his religious convictions.

In Britain, secularism has been accompanied by secularisation, that is, the decline of Christianity and the emergence of a post-Christian culture. In the 2011 National Census, the number of those who self-identify as Christian was just 59% of the population (3 in 5). This is a decline from 71% in 2001; by 2018, Christians will be in a minority¹⁸. 1 in 4 people (25% of the population) say they have no religion, up from 14% in 2001.¹⁹ Only 1 in 12 attend church regularly, defined as once a month. Callum Brown, in his *The Death of Christian Britain*, argues that a catastrophic collapse in church membership occurred in 1970s, after the '60s with their far-reaching cultural, social and sexual revolutions: youth-culture, the music of the Beatles (1962), the contraceptive pill, the legalisation of abortion and homosexuality (1967), the women's liberation movement (1968), easier divorce and so on.²⁰ The 'Swinging Sixties' represented the collapse of the traditional family. Some sociologists, such as Grace Davie,²¹ argue that Christian beliefs do still remain; they come to the surface on public occasions, at royal weddings, baptisms and funerals, especially the funeral of a child. On the other hand, Graeme Smith argues that whilst most people in 21C Britain do not go to church, they do still believe in Christian ethics.²² Britain is a Christian ethics society and it is this that makes British culture Christian. Ethics is today's issue as seen in the recent debates about child-abuse, gay marriage and assisted suicide.

The British constitution and legal system was moulded over many centuries by Christianity and the natural law. Today it is crafted by lawmakers and politicians, educators and health-care professionals, pressure-groups and media, business and commercial interests, for whom those common, traditional values have less traction. Christian values have now become post-Christian, secular values. Individuals lobby for what they deem economic, expedient, tolerant, liberal, respectful, non-discriminatory, inclusive and sustainable, but essentially that which enables them to create the style of life they wish. Shorn from its moorings, the law is now increasingly adrift. It expresses the will of the legislator, the will of the loudest and most powerful, the will of a policy unit or the will of the majority, and this relativism is State-enforced. As Michael Nazir-Ali has argued, public ethics are determined either by focus groups or by an imposed, authoritarian utilitarianism which threatens to enslave people, to undermine traditional family life and moral values, to strangle the rights of Christians, and most egregiously to victimise the weak, the unborn child, the elderly and the dying.²³ It used to be said Britain is a free country. But, as Neil Addison asks, can that be said anymore?²⁴

¹⁸ See www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/index.html (March 2014).

¹⁹ Incidentally, Muslims are the next largest religious group, rapidly growing at 4.8% (up from 3% in 2001), then in order Hindus, Sikhs and Jews. Most Christians belong to the Anglican Church. Catholics number 5M or 8%.

²⁰ C. Brown *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, Routledge: 2001)

²¹ G. Davie *Religion in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1994)

²² G. Smith *A Short History of Secularism* (London, Tauris: 2010)

²³ M. Nazir-Ali *Triple Jeopardy for the West: Aggressive Secularism, Radical Islamism and Multiculturalism* ((London, Bloomsbury: 2012) 32.

²⁴ See N. Addison *Religious Discrimination and Hatred Law* (London, Routledge Cavendish: 2006).

John Paul II once stated that the “greatest challenge of our age comes from a growing separation between faith and reason, between the Gospel and culture.”²⁵ There are now vast sectors of contemporary culture from politics, business and economics to medicine, the arts and the human sciences, almost entirely ‘unbaptised’. The Gospel and Christian theology has yet to be brought into a critical conversation with those sectors, in order to offer them at minimum a sound anthropology, an account of the human person, their rights and duties. After the papal visit to Britain in 2010, Pope Benedict said he had become aware “how deep a thirst there is among the British people for the Good News of Jesus Christ.”²⁶ Later, he added that he could see

“how strong the Christian heritage still is and how active it still is in social life at every level. British hearts and British lives are open to the reality of God and there were numerous expressions of religious feeling that my Visit made even more visible.”

In other words, in his estimation Britain is ripe for evangelisation. Indeed, the visit “strengthened a deep conviction within me: the ancient nations of Europe have a Christian soul, which is one with the ‘genius’ and history of the respective peoples, and the Church [must] never stop working to keep this spiritual and cultural tradition ceaselessly alive.”²⁷

In its two thousand year history, the Church has never before engaged with a secular culture. There is bound to be an element of trial and error. The thesis here is that the Church must engage in a salvific conversation with contemporary culture. Secularism is too flimsy a basis for British society. It cannot guarantee human flourishing nor sustain long term the advances the British have achieved: the great value of freedom of speech, freedom of political affiliation, respect for the rule of law, a strong sense of individual rights and duties and the equality of all citizens before the law.²⁸ Instead, secularism is producing a society without foundations, one that develops randomly on the hoof through pressure-groups, legal precedent and political expediency. Its ring-fencing of religion to the private domain, its dissolution of the ground of ethics and the basis of law, its amnesia of the past and intentional eclipse of its Christian origins, its relativism that fosters harmful ideologies and leads to the victimization of the weak, its positivistic reduction of human knowing to the empirically verifiable, its proven inability to support stable marriages and family life, its growing restrictions on religious freedom, and its tendency towards greater surveillance and state-control, all suggest the Church has a crucial and therapeutic ‘anthropological mission’ within 21C British society. The Church’s task is prophetic: to communicate the saving message of Jesus Christ as the ‘natural way of life’ and the sure way to human happiness.

²⁵ John Paul II *Inter Munera Academicarum* 2, available on-line at www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19990128_inter-munera-academicarum_en.html (March 2014)

²⁶ *Faith Today. Special Papal Visit Souvenir Edition* 118.

²⁷ Benedict XVI *General Audience* Saint Peter's Square Wednesday, 22 September 2010: available on-line at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100922 (March 2014)

²⁸ These qualities Pope Benedict highlighted in his Address in Westminster Hall: see *Faith Today. Special Papal Visit Souvenir Edition* 83

Four suggestions for the NE. The first task is to demonstrate that spirituality and religion will never go away; the question of God lies naturally within man's horizon. The question of God is raised spontaneously by human consciousness.²⁹

The second task is to help people encounter God and to assist them to become intentional disciples of Jesus Christ. In this regard, the personal holiness of Christians is important: that non-believers encounter credible witnesses, who put their faith into action, not least in service of the poor.

A third task is to develop an effective 'apologetics,' that is, theological arguments that rebut popular myths, especially about science. Children should be taught about the interaction of faith and reason, the complementarity of religion and science, and the redemptive role of religion within human living. This apologetics should also address today's hot button issues about sex, authority and the dignity of human life.

And fourthly, the NE should retrieve and promote Britain's Christian patrimony, its history, art and architecture, its music and literature, its liturgy, theology and ethics. This includes taking the theological buzz-words of secularism and driving them back to their foundational values in the Bible and the Christian Tradition. A greater knowledge of the Bible would help. The Bible underpins much of English literature, and Bible stories have inspired British culture and folklore. Moreover, a greater knowledge of the history of the Church in Britain would also help, especially of the saints who established and developed the Christian character of these islands.

Conclusion

So to conclude. The Church is calling for a NE, an evangelisation new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression. Its proximate goal is the individual, but its ultimate goal is the secular culture in which we now live. This is a massive task and at times it might seem that Christians are flogging a dead horse. Yet Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14: 6) and at this very moment, the Holy Spirit is at work in people's hearts wooing them towards Christ. It is my own conviction that it is not the 'product' that is defective but the ability of people within a busy, secular culture to hear the call. That is why today, if we are to communicate imaginatively the Person of Jesus Christ to the peoples of Britain and thus enable them to reach the happiness for which they long, we need to pray for enormous creativity.

Indeed, may the Lord graciously hear and answer that prayer. Amen.

²⁹ See B. Lonergan *Method in Theology* (London, DLT: 1972) 101-103