Freeing the New Evangelization

An article by Ralph Martin

Part I

In one of his last writings before he died, Cardinal Dulles wrote a forward to a book on evangelization and cited a study indicating that evangelization, despite increasing talk about it, was not in fact a priority for the overwhelming number of Catholic parishes. He cites these unsettling statistics.

Asked whether spreading the faith was a high priority of their parishes, 75 percent of conservative Protestant congregations and 57 percent of African American congregations responded affirmatively, whereas only 6 percent of Catholic parishes did the same. Asked whether they sponsored local evangelistic activities, 39 percent of conservative Protestant congregations and 16 percent of African American congregations responded positively as compared with only 3 percent of Catholic parishes. Converts to Catholicism often report that on their spiritual journey they received little or no encouragement from Catholic clergy whom they consulted….The Council has often been interpreted as if it had discouraged evangelization.¹

One reason for this lack of actual evangelization, in my opinion, is a certain doctrinal confusion. In a lecture at our seminary a few years ago Cardinal Dulles expressed some concerns about how in the rush to abolish limbo, certain fundamental truths were being brushed aside, such as the reality of original sin. In this connection he made some rather strong statements about how this impetus also often gave the impression that almost everyone would be saved and hell was not a real possibility, in the process undermining the need to evangelize. In commenting on the speculations of a well known

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Priests and theologians frequently give the impression that the doctrine of hell is a medieval superstition rather than an essential component of the gospel. In so doing they may well be doing Satan’s work because the fear of hell occupied a central place in the preaching of Jesus.” In these two sentences Cardinal Dulles has identified a doctrinal confusion that has quite significant implications for evangelization.

While this doctrinal confusion is not the only reason why evangelization is more a “slogan” than an actual reality in the Church today, I believe it is the most important obstacle. If it really doesn’t matter what one believes and how one lives, and virtually everyone is going to be saved, why bother to evangelize? Why bother to live lives of holiness?

Ordinary Catholics and the Culture of Universalism

There is certainly a very widespread impression among many Catholics today that virtually everybody will end up in heaven, with possibly a few truly awful exceptions. If I were to describe the prevailing “worldview” among most Catholics in North America, Europe and Oceania today I would describe it like this: “Broad and wide is the way that leads to salvation and almost everybody is traveling that way. Narrow is the way that leads to hell and hardly anybody is traveling that road.” Or to put it another way, “many are called and virtually everybody is chosen.”

The unfortunate thing about this prevailing worldview is that it is exactly the opposite of what Jesus indicates is the truth about our situation when he says, “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Mt 7:13–14; see also Lk 13:23–30) And: “Many are invited, but few are chosen.” (Mt 22:14)

Vast numbers of Catholics in the West now have a view of reality that is directly counter to the one communicated by Jesus and the Apostles, is deeply embedded in the tradition and history of interpretation, and is foundational to the writings of the greatest theologians and saints concerning the seriousness of sin and the very real possibility of ending up in hell rather than heaven. This reality shift has innumerable consequences for the life and mission of the Church.

When the impression is common, as it is today—that almost everybody ends up in heaven and hardly anyone in hell—the seriousness of the call to holiness and the call to mission are significantly undermined. If in the last analysis it doesn’t really matter much if people come to explicit repentance, faith, baptism and membership in the Church, why bother with evangelization?

Why this Culture of Universalism?

There are many reasons for the prevalence of the “culture of universalism,” including what Pope Benedict XVI has identified as the “dictatorship of relativism.” There is though, another and less noticed contributor, namely the pastoral/evangelistic strategy of Vatican II which has often led to a neglect of some of its most important teachings.

In the effort to renew the face of the Church so it could more clearly show forth the face of Christ to the world, the Council consciously decided to “emphasize the positive” and did an excellent job of recontextualizing the deposit of faith in a more biblical, spiritual and pastoral manner. This generally led to a silence on some of the negative consequences of rejecting Christ and his message—namely hell. In both the Council docu-
ments and also in the post Conciliar magisterial documents, hell is hardly mentioned, even in documents on evangelization where it could hardly not be mentioned if an integral biblical account was truly to be given.

Fr. Richard John Neuhaus shares the results of his study of the motivations/reasons given for evangelization in the most authoritative post conciliar document on evangelization, the encyclical of John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio (Mission of the Redeemer). He lists six reasons for evangelization that he discovers in the encyclical, none of which explicitly speak of the eternal consequences of rejecting the light of the Gospel. He claims that a study of Benedict XVI’s writings both as Pope and before would be in harmony with these reasons and this approach as well.3

As one commentator in an essay in New Blackfriars has pointed out, when the eternal consequences of believing and obeying or not believing and obeying are left fuzzy, “the essential faith of Catholics will then amount to no more than a vague theism with little specific moral content; just what it is for a large proportion of Catholics today.”4

A recent comprehensive study of the religious beliefs of American youth confirms this judgment, and extends it to the parents of such youth. In this study Catholic youth appeared to be in the worse condition of any Church group as regards orthodox belief. For example 57% of Catholics stated that they maybe or definitely believed in reincarnation. The authors conclude that even though the “shell” or “form” of traditional religion is there it has been colonized by an alien spirit which they describe as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”5

How does the Church understand, in its official teaching, the possibility of hell as a consequence for rejecting the gospel? And what implications does this have for evangelization? The Catechism of the Catholic Church is quite clear in its teaching on hell (CCC 1033–1037), yet this teaching is very rarely averted to. The most authoritative magisterial explication appears in Lumen Gentium 16.6

Lumen Gentium 16

“Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation…But very often, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather than the Creator (cf. Rom 1:21, 25). Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. Hence to procure the glory of God and the salvation of all these, the Church, mindful of the Lord’s command, ‘preach the Gospel to every creature’ (Mk 16:16) takes zealous care to foster the missions.” (LG 16)

The Council clearly acknowledges that God offers the possibility of salvation to people who have never heard the gospel. This is based on Romans 1:19–20 which indicates that God reveals himself to everyone in some real way through the creation; and on Romans 2:14–16 which indicates that the law of conscience is found in each person’s heart, and absent some additional revelation, will be the basis for condemnation or salvation. But there are very important qualifications that the Council also makes.

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First of all, it is those who “through no fault of their own” do not know the gospel who have the possibility of salvation. The implication seems to clearly be that people can be at fault for not hearing the gospel. One thinks of Paul’s vigorous answer to the objection made in his time that perhaps so many Jews rejected Jesus because they really hadn’t heard the good news.

“I ask you, have they not heard? Certainly they have, for ‘their voice has sounded over the whole earth, and their words to the limits of the world.’” (Rom. 10:18–21)

Secondly, salvation is possible for those who have not heard the gospel through no fault of their own, if they indeed “seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of conscience.” This seems to me to be a rather stiff requirement.

Thirdly, the possibility of salvation doesn’t exist in some neutral vacuum. There are opposing forces that seek to impel human beings to reject the light of conscience and prefer the works of darkness to the works of light, to seek self rather than God, and to do what satisfies the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, rather than the will of God. (1 Jn 2:15–17) In other words, the world, the flesh and the devil are formidable obstacles to responding to the light and grace that God gives. The Council acknowledges such with a rather striking reference to the downward spiral triggered by bad conscience that is described in the first chapter of Romans.

It is precisely these human beings without the gospel who very often yield to the deception of the devil, the allure of the flesh and the world, the intellectual, moral and spiritual confusion that comes from pride. Such people become subject to the just judgment of God, his wrath, since their choice against grace, against conscience and the light is “inexcusable.” (Rom 1:18–32)

It seems to me that Vatican II has given a sound interpretation of the scriptural teaching on salvation which allows for the possibility of salvation outside of the visible confines of the Church, outside of explicit faith and sacramental baptism. At the same time though the Council clearly taught that “very often” this possibility isn’t realized and the preaching of the gospel remains an urgent task, not just as an optional enrichment of human life, but because eternal destinies are in the balance.

It is important to see clearly, how perilous the way to salvation remains, for those who have not heard the gospel and are not members of the Church. It is unwarranted, I believe, given the teaching of Vatican II in LG 16, to jump from the possibility of salvation apart from Christ and the Church to the probability or even presumption of such salvation.

The sobering words of Peter remain very apropos: “If the righteous man is scarcely saved, where will the impious and sinner appear?” (1 Peter 4:18) To be continued.

Next month, Ralph will take a closer look at the fundamental biblical worldview of the “two ways” and how that very worldview provides the most important motive and rationale for a Catholic understanding of evangelism.

(Endnotes)

Models of Evangelization in American Catholicism (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), ix.


6. Other comments on this question in the Council documents are found in AG, 7 and GS, 22.

What Else Has Ralph Been Doing in Rome?

International Colloquium to Focus on Baptism in the Holy Spirit

Rome, March 7, 2011—Bishops, priests, theologians and lay leaders from around the world will soon gather in Rome for an international colloquium on baptism in the Holy Spirit. The event, sponsored by International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services (ICCRS) in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for the Laity, will be held March 17–20 at Fraterna Domus in Sacrofano.

The colloquium will consider baptism in the Spirit from biblical, theological, and pastoral points of view, especially in its relationship to the sacraments of initiation and to the new evangelization. The event will be attended by approximately 150 invited leaders from various expressions of the worldwide Catholic Charismatic Renewal.

According to Oreste Pesare, director of ICCRS, the colloquium will be followed by the publication of a document on baptism in the Spirit which will be “an important testimony and a point of reference for the whole Church.” As the Catholic Charismatic Renewal approaches its fiftieth anniversary in 2017, Pesare noted, “there is opportunity for mature theological reflection on our experience of the Holy Spirit and his gifts in the context of the wider Church.”

One of the conference speakers is Ralph Martin, president of Renewal Ministries and director of graduate theology programs in evangelization at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, Michigan. Martin will speak on the topic of “Baptism in the Spirit and the Sacraments of Initiation.”

Rediscovering the Need for God

Martin noted that the colloquium is one sign of a growing recognition that the Church needs to turn more ardently to God himself. “Whether it be heart-felt repentance as recently expressed in the apostolic visitations in Ireland, or Pope Benedict’s recurring calls for a new Pentecost, the challenges of the time are causing us to be aware of our great need for God.” Martin said that the upcoming colloquium is focused precisely on the need for God and how his presence and active role can be better understood and experienced.

Martin noted that the colloquium is concerned not only with the Charismatic Renewal as a movement but with what is of interest to the whole Church, namely, a new Pentecost. The purpose of the Charismatic Renewal, Martin said, is not to get people to “join it,” but to be a witness in the Church to what belongs to the Church: the Holy Spirit and his gifts.

Many people who have been baptized and confirmed don’t experience the reality of God, his love, his presence, his action in their lives, Martin said. The biblical meaning of baptism in the Spirit is rooted in the sacraments of Christian initiation. “We are now facing a challenge in the Church of helping many who are already baptized and confirmed to activate the graces of the sacraments.”

Martin added that in order to understand what a “new Pentecost” might involve, we need to have a clear understanding of the first Pentecost and the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to “baptize in the Holy Spirit” that occurred for the first time—but not for the last time—that day. “It is hard to desire what we don’t know as beautiful, in some way; it is hard to pray for what we don’t understand is essential,” he said.

Others speaking at the international event include Cardinal Stanislaw Rylko, Archbishop George Bacoumi, Bishop Michel Santier, Michelle Moran, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, Fr. Fidel Oñoro, Fr. Denis Biju-Duval, Fr. Peter Hooken, and Mary Healy.
That evening a huge bus arrived at the compound, filled with all the people who had been with us in Monrovia the week before. It was impressive that they had paid for this bus trip themselves and came to hear the same topics again.

For the past three years we have ministered in various parishes in the Archdiocese of Monrovia, but on this trip we expanded to the Diocese of Gbarnga (pronounced banga). We arrived at the Pastoral Center in Monrovia and were warmly greeted by Fr. Bobby Washington, the staff there, and Emmanuel and Jerry, our team members from Ghana.

We began our mission teaching the leaders of the charismatic renewal, the new evangelization group, and the Sacred Heart Society. The Archbishop asked us to concentrate on formation and evangelization and he plans to use this valuable resource of the various groups in the renewal to impact his diocese. People were very hungry for the truth of our faith and took notes on everything we said. Each morning Nancy taught for 2 ½ hours on the keys to spiritual freedom and then Jerry and Emanuel led the afternoon teaching session on formation. We left at 4 pm for the three night mission at St. Anthony’s, about an hour away through rush hour traffic. Nancy spoke on the topic of Forgiveness. The people of Liberia, like those in Rwanda are unable to deal effectively with the trauma, unforgiveness and bitterness from the atrocities of 14 years of war. Only God can heal their hurts. This parish held about 350 people and every night more people came and the last night it was full. The music was fabulous and they loved to praise God.

The second night Father brought out the Blessed Sacrament. He lovingly placed Jesus in the Monstrance on a small covered table with candles in front of the altar. After Nancy’s talk and some great praise and worship, the people came down the aisle in a very orderly manner. They formed two rows, bowing and then kneeling down in front of the Tabernacle long enough to pray and tell Jesus their needs. On the side of the church the prayer teams were also available. Afterwards, many people reported being healed or touched by the Lord and we could see the faith of the people increasing.

On Monday we attended the monthly informal gathering of the priests of the diocese. We met Fr. Sumu, a blind priest filled with the joy of the Lord. We also talked to Fr. Tony Borwah, the Rector of Sacred Heart Cathedral who eagerly told us that after receiving prayer last year, the nightmares that had plagued him for years ceased. Afterwards, we left for the Radio Maria radio station to tape an hour-long show. Due to courageous priests and the bishop, this station, despite significant damage during the war continues to be a source of inspiration for thousands.

We arrived at the Catholic compound at Gbarnga late Tuesday afternoon. Gbarnga was the home area of the former Liberian president Charles Taylor, who is now imprisoned for war crimes. There is a lot of pain and unforgiveness here. We were warmly greeted by Fr. Chris Brennan, S.M.A. the Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Gbarnga and his staff. That evening a huge bus arrived at the compound, filled with all the people who had been with us in Monrovia the week before. It was impressive that they had paid for this bus trip themselves and came to hear the same topics again. They were so hungry for more! Wednesday we taught on freedom and Catholic apologetics, and that evening we conducted a large rally with people from many parts of the diocese.

Adoration at the Holy Spirit Cathedral in Gbarnga was a beautiful and powerful time as people came forward to worship the Lord and express their prayers and heartfelt needs to Him.
Thursday morning and afternoon we taught the seminarians from the major national seminary, the diocesan Pastoral team, the catechists and the priests. That night, at the request of Fr. Washington, we taught on forgiveness and brought out the Blessed Sacrament just as we had done in Monrovia. It was very beautiful, very orderly, and very powerful. Before the Blessed Sacrament was reposed there was a time of praise and worship. Many came up around Jesus to worship and adore. Some continued to kneel in front of Jesus, praising, crying and expressing their love for Him. It seemed like these wonderful people realized more deeply that this was the same Jesus who had walked the shores of Galilee, teaching and healing.

On Friday during the day Lloyd taught apologetics and we had a time of group discussion. Here are some of their comments:

“I thank God for our team, that they bring their knowledge, their experience, and their very lives to us. In a special way that lay people can empower lay people.”

“There is power in the Catholic Church.”

“I feel so encouraged.”

“We were not sure what this workshop would be like. Our pastoral team canceled other programs so we could be here. 100% of the priests came. It has been like taking a hungry person to a supermarket.” (From the diocesan head of catechists)

That evening we had a closing Mass to celebrate all God had done for the Church in Gbarnga. After the homily four people shared powerful testimonies.

A young man who was unable to walk without help the night before had received prayer and he was able to now walk without aid.

A woman who appeared to be in her 60s had cancer of the throat. She said that the tumor had grown so that she could not swallow her spit, drink or eat. She began to recover when she came on the first day and she shared that she no longer had a problem with swallowing, eating or drinking.

A young man said that he had been trying to build his house for three years but had no money to complete it. The night before, in front of the Blessed Sacrament, he had asked Jesus for help. That very night somebody called and was bringing him zinc for his roof. The next day another phone call came and someone was bringing him tiles and a third call brought more building supplies. He had not told anyone about his needs except Jesus. As you can imagine he was ecstatic!

A beautiful young woman prayed in front of Jesus and asked Him to get her uncle out of jail because the whole family knew he had been accused falsely. When she got home that evening she got a phone call that her uncle was found not guilty and was set free!

The Lord has accomplished a lot in Liberia these past four years and the foundation has been set for some significant formation. We have been given favor with the Church authorities and their trust in us is evident. The bishops asked if we would be willing to go to the Catholic dioceses in Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast. Thanks for allowing us to serve Renewal Ministries and the Kingdom of God!
On the Road

May 2011

Mission to Ireland
April 28–May 8
Don & Pat Turbitt and Team

*Denver, CO, Legatus Meeting
Thursday, May 5
Debbie Herbeck

Ypsilanti, MI
Renewal Ministries Annual Gathering
May 13–15
Contact Kathleen at 734-662-1730 ext 132 or kkittle@renewalministries.net

Westphalia, MI, Most Holy Trinity Parish
Wednesday, May 18
Sr. Ann Shields
Contact number: 989-593-2162

Mission to Slovenia
May 25–June 6
Don and Pat Turbitt and Team
Contact Kathleen at 734-662-1730 ext 132 or kkittle@renewalministries.net

Plymouth, MI, Our Lady of Good Counsel,
Basic Christian Maturity Series
Friday, May 27, 7 pm
Sr. Ann Shields, SGL
Contact: www.olgcparish.net or 734-453-0326

June 2011

Rimini, Italy
National Conference of the Italian Renewal
June 2–5
Ralph Martin

Canton, OH, Living Bread Radio Event
June 3–4
Peter Herbeck

*Omaha, NB, Legatus Meeting
June 8
Sr. Ann Shields

Mission to Papua New Guinea
June 8–27
Lloyd & Nancy Greenhaw and Team
Contact Kathleen at kkittle@renewalministries.net or 734-662-1730 ext 132

*Birmingham, AL, Crossing the Goal Taping
June 27–July 1
Peter Herbeck

*Events not open to the public

Join Us for the 2011 Annual Renewal Ministries Gathering

“You Have Been Anointed by the Holy One”
Friday, May 13th–Sunday, May 15th

Eagle Crest Marriot Hotel (www.eaglecrestrresort.com)
In Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti just minutes from Detroit Metro Airport

For more information or to register
contact Kathleen Kittle at: 734-662-1730 x132
or kkittle@renewalministries.net
or go to www.renewalministries.net

Renewal Ministries is a Catholic ministry committed to renewal and evangelization in the Church. It seeks to proclaim Jesus Christ through its TV and radio outreaches, as well as through books, tapes, conferences, retreats and other international evangelistic events.

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