

## *Ad Gentes*

**Ralph Martin**

### **The Purpose of the Council**

The overall purpose of Vatican II as expressed by the Council itself and post-conciliar popes could be stated as “renewal for the sake of evangelization”:

Although by the power of the Holy Spirit the Church will remain the faithful spouse of her Lord and will never cease to be the sign of salvation on earth, still she is very well aware that among her members, both clerical and lay, some have been unfaithful to the Spirit of God during the course of many centuries...Led by the Holy Spirit, Mother Church unceasingly exhorts her sons to purify and renew themselves so that the sign of Christ can shine more brightly on the face of the Church. (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 43)<sup>1</sup>

When Pope John XXIII stated the reasons for convoking Vatican II, he made it clear that his hope was that the work of the Council would result in an “aggiornamento” that would enable the Church to communicate the Gospel more effectively to the modern world. The post-Vatican II popes have shared this understanding of the desired outcome of the Council.

Pope Paul VI issued his influential Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World), “on this tenth anniversary of the closing of the

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<sup>1</sup> The translation I will be using for all Vatican II documents is that of Austin Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. vol. I. Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1992.

Second Vatican Council, the objectives of which are definitely summed up in this single one: to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the Gospel to the people of the twentieth century.”<sup>2</sup> Paul VI hoped that this document would help provide “a fresh forward impulse, capable of creating within a Church still more firmly rooted in the undying power and strength of Pentecost a new period of evangelization.”<sup>3</sup>

Pope John Paul II chose the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, in 1990, to issue the most important recent magisterial document on evangelization, the Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (Mission of the Redeemer), a document that draws liberally from the insights that Paul VI articulated in *Evangelii nuntiandi*. In this important encyclical the Pope made it clear that this “new evangelization” has its roots in the documents of the Second Vatican Council:

The Second Vatican Council sought to renew the Church’s life and activity in the light of the needs of the contemporary world. The Council emphasized the Church’s “missionary nature”. . . . Twenty-five years after the conclusion of the Council and the publication of the Decree on Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes*, fifteen years after the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* issued by Pope

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<sup>2</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (hereafter EN) (On Evangelization in the Modern World), December 8, 1975 (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1976), 2. The numbers after references to papal documents and the documents of Vatican II refer to the numbered sections of such documents, not page numbers. All subsequent documents will be abbreviated similarly.

<sup>3</sup> EN, 2.

Paul VI, and in continuity with the magisterial teaching of my predecessors, I wish to invite the Church to renew her missionary commitment.<sup>4</sup>

In the document intended to orient the Church as she entered the third millennium, *Novo millennio ineunte* (At the Beginning of a New Millennium), John Paul II again repeated his understanding of the twofold purpose of the Council:

From the beginning of my pontificate, my thoughts had been on this Holy Year 2000 as an important appointment. I thought of its celebration as a providential opportunity during which the Church, thirty-five years after the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, would examine how far she had renewed herself in order to be able to take up her evangelizing mission with fresh enthusiasm.<sup>5</sup>

### *Ad Gentes*

*Ad gentes divinitus* (The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity)<sup>6</sup> was intended, in the overall evangelization optic of Vatican II, to reinforce and inspire the ongoing traditional missionary activity of the Church, construed as bringing the gospel and planting the Church in regions where the gospel may not have been preached nor the Church established to the point of self-sufficiency. While not being among the most

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<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris missio* (hereafter RM) (Mission of the Redeemer), December 7, 1990 (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1991), 2.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo millennio ineunte* (hereafter NMI) (At the Beginning of a New Millennium), January 6, 2001 (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2001), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth references to the Vatican II documents will be abbreviated by the standard initials of their Latin titles, e.g. *Ad gentes divinitus*, AG; *Lumen gentes*, LG, etc.

intensely debated and controversial texts of Vatican II (unlike the debates over collegiality and papal primacy which took place in connection with *Lumen gentium* (Constitution on the Church), or those in connection with *Dignitatis humanae* (Declaration on Religious Liberty), or those in connection with *Nostra aetate* (Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), neither was it one that “sailed through” such as *Inter mirifica* (Decree on the Means of Social Communication) or *Gravissimus educationis* (Declaration on Christian Education).<sup>7</sup> Despite its rocky journey it ended up being approved by the biggest majority of any Council document with 2,394 yes votes and only 5 no votes.<sup>8</sup>

Initial drafts were criticized for not taking more fully into account the mission theology of LG which broadened the conception of mission from the “missions” to

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<sup>7</sup> Besides the material relevant to AG in *Acta Synodalia*, and the major histories of the documents of Vatican II such as the five volume *History of Vatican II* edited by Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak (New York: Orbis, 1995-2003) and the six volume *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* edited by Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967-1969) there are shorter treatments in Xavier Rynne, *Vatican Council II: An Authoritative One-Volume Version of the Four Historic Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 511-520; Stephen B. Bevans and Jeffrey Gros, eds. *Evangelization and Religious Freedom* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2009), 3-148; William R. Burrows, “Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity,” in Timothy E. O’Connell, ed., *Vatican II and Its Documents: An American Reappraisal* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1986), 180-196. It’s surprising to note that many notable books devoted to assessing Vatican II pay very little attention to AG: Richard R. Gaillardetz and Catherine E. Clifford, *Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012); Marc Cardinal Ouellet, *The Relevance and Future of the Second Vatican Council: Interviews with Fr. Geoffroy de la Trousse*, trans. Michael Donley and Joseph Fessio (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013); David G. Schultenover, ed., *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* (New York: Continuum, 2008); Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2012); Augustino Marchetto, *The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council: A Counterpoint for the History of the Council*, trans. Kenneth D. Whitehead (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2010). For an informal memoir of the development of AG by a Bishop who was involved in the process see Donal Lamont, “Ad Gentes: A Missionary Bishop Remembers,” in Alberic Stacpoole, ed., *Vatican II Revisited By Those Who Were There* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1986), 270-282. For a brief overview of the theological issues already percolating regarding mission before the Council, the development of the final document and a review of its main points see: Edward Hahnenberg, *A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007), 133-140.

<sup>8</sup> See Stephen B Bevans & Jeffrey Gros, eds., *Evangelization and Religious Freedom* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2009), 28.

mission as a constituent part of the Church's identity and the responsibility of all the baptized. When time was running out and a revised text was not yet in view the proposal was made to simply settle for a list of propositions and not a full-fledged document. The proposal was rejected and a group of distinguished theologians, including Yves Congar and Joseph Ratzinger, worked to produce the final draft that was overwhelmingly accepted.

The final text incorporated the broader understanding of mission articulated in LG – all of us are called to mission by virtue of baptism – as well as strongly affirming the continuing importance of traditional missionary work. Some of the significant theological foundations that AG articulated for the mission of the Church were that the mission flowed from the Trinity itself and was essential to the Church's nature, and that all the baptized were called, simply by virtue of baptism, to participate in the mission. Thus an important distinction was made between the traditional missionary work of the Church (missions) and the fundamental mission of the Church itself and all the baptized. Both are strongly affirmed in the document:

Having been divinely sent to the nations that she might be “the universal sacrament of salvation” (LG, 48), the Church, in obedience to the command of her founder (Mt. 16:15) and because it is demanded by her own essential universality, strives to preach the Gospel to all men. (AG, 1)

The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit (LG, 1). (AG, 2)

The special undertakings in which preachers of the Gospel, sent by the Church, and going into the whole world carry out the work of preaching the Gospel and implanting the Church among people who do not yet believe in Christ are generally called “missions.” (AG, 13)

The primary means by which the mission is carried out, affirmed numerous times in AG, is by the preaching of the Gospel. The goal of this preaching is to lead people to the sure salvation found in Christ and the Church. What can we say of the reception of this missionary decree in terms of its effectiveness in deepening the missionary impulse of the Church?<sup>9</sup>

### **What Actually Happened? Its Reception**

In the immediate aftermath of Vatican II, rather than seeing the missionary work of the Church invigorated, a rather calamitous collapse took place. Theological currents which had already been present before and during the Council, which questioned the

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<sup>9</sup> On August 6, 1966 Pope Paul VI published, *Motu Proprio*, “Apostolic Letter *Ecclesiae Sanctae*,” which established guidelines for implementing various conciliar decrees including guidelines for AG. The guidelines are mainly of an administrative, educational and financial nature, desiring to gain the support of the whole Church for missions and give greater input to the Vatican office coordinating missions on the part of the worldwide Church.

value of traditional missionary work, grew in strength, despite the strong affirmations of AG and LG. Magisterial responses to this doctrinal confusion consisted in primarily reaffirming the command that Jesus gave us to evangelize and describing in sometimes eloquent ways, how Jesus fulfills the human person. Despite regular mentions of “salvation,” the teaching of Vatican II that it is possible to be saved without hearing the Gospel or explicitly joining the Church (LG 16, Ag 7, GS 22), raised a cloud of doubt about the urgency of evangelization which magisterial attempts to deal with the confusion did little to effectively address.<sup>10</sup>

The era of colonialism was quickly drawing to an end and severe critiques of the entwining of missionary work with colonialism impacted many missionaries and shook their confidence. Theological theories which argued for the possibility of people being saved without hearing the Gospel grew in popularity and ubiquity. Possibility very quickly morphed into probability and then virtual certainty. Affirmations of the need to

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<sup>10</sup> See Robert J. Schreiter, “Changes in Roman Catholic Attitudes toward Proselytism and Mission,” in James A. Scherer, Stephen B. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2: Theological Foundation* (New York: Orbis, 1994), 114, 118-119. Schreiter, a well-known Catholic missiologist, describes the crisis that followed Vatican II as it affected the world-wide missionary effort of the Church, attributing it in part to the general questioning of certainties that took place after the Council, and most specifically to “the most profound questioning of the missionary movement, both in its principles and its practice, that the Catholic Church had ever undergone.” He cites the shift from a conversion-oriented understanding of mission to an understanding that now included dialogue, inculturation, respect for non-Christian religions, and sensitivity to Western imposition of culture in the name of the gospel as all contributing to the crisis. But he singles out the question about how necessary it is, really, for someone to become a Christian and a member of the Church in order to be saved. “To be sure, the Council documents continue to speak of the necessity of the church and membership in the church as the visible sign of the fullness of salvation to which we might attain here on earth. But in almost the same breath, speaking of the church as pilgrim and provisional necessarily opened up the question of just how necessary the church was – really – to salvation. Might not conversion to a better life along the lines one’s life had already taken be a better task for the missionary rather than insisting upon formal membership in the church? And what was to come into greater evidence in the succeeding period was that the boundaries of church itself, once so dear and secure, were now beginning to appear considerably vaguer.” For a broader, ecumenical view of the history of missionary work and contemporary thinking see: Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross, eds., *Mission in the Twenty-first Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

respect the values of existing cultures and the discovery and affirmation of the “seeds of truth” which already existed in them took the focus off the enduring need for conversion. The positive statements about the Jewish religion in Vatican II ushered in an intense time of dialogue which explored common values, attempted to definitively put an end to anti-Semitism in Catholic theology and life, and sometimes issued in claims that the Jews were no longer called to conversion to Christ but had a “separate covenant” that was sufficiently salvific. There seemed to be an extreme reluctance to directly say that all human beings are called to conversion to Christ, including his own people, which further allowed doubt to grow.<sup>11</sup> And the rise of “liberation theology” called for an emphasis on “development” and improving the political and economic situation and structures of peoples in a way that led many to neglect the fundamental mission of the Church of direct evangelization ordered towards faith, repentance and conversion.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In the United States the *Covenant and Mission* report seemed to deny the need for Jews to encounter Christ, and the resulting controversy led to the Doctrinal Committee of the US Bishops finally affirming that indeed, Jews too were invited to life in Christ. For an overview of the drift towards universalism and the reactions of various Church bodies to the drift see Gerald H. Anderson, “Theology of Religions and Missiology: A Time of Testing,” in Charles Van Engen et al eds., *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 200-208. “Today if a Christian theologian says that the Jewish people do not need the Gospel, the same theologian very likely will also deny that people of other faiths need the Gospel, and we end up with a theological relativism that rejects the Christian mission to all people of other faiths. Mission to the Jewish people is the litmus test of an adequate theology of religions for missiology.” *Ibid.*, 206. An Italian missionary, Fr. Anthony Furioli, M.C.C.F., writing in the *African Ecclesial Review* 34, (June 1992): 170-182, describes the theological atmosphere that undermines evangelization: “Some theologians today ask themselves: ‘*Is mission still necessary as it was in the past? Can it still be considered essential in this day and age?*’ . . . They base this above all on AG 7 which states that God in ways known only to Himself can speak to those ignorant of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. They say that Vatican II has great respect for great religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc. . . . and conclude by saying, ‘*Let these good and honest people live in holy peace*’” (171).

<sup>12</sup> A lot of the energies of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith during this time were taken up with formulating responses to Marxist inspired liberation theology, which until the collapse of communism in 1989, seemed to be sweeping Latin America and spreading to other continents as well. One trenchant comment on this era: “While the Catholic Church was opting for the poor, the poor were opting for the evangelicals and Pentecostals.”

As Stephen Bevans notes, despite the frequent magisterial calls for the central role that proclamation should have in the mission of the Church there is a great reluctance to accept this among many missionaries. Questions about the salvific value of other religions, concerns about “imposing” Western culture, theological speculation about how possible salvation is without hearing the Gospel, have all contributed to what Bevans notes is “much hesitation among missionaries and mission theologians about such a central role [for proclamation].”<sup>13</sup> Bevans points out that for the first few years after Vatican II the numbers of missionaries continued to rise but after 1968 a steady and often precipitous decline set in which has still not been reversed:<sup>14</sup>

Gone was any certainty of the superiority of the more firmly established “sending churches,” and gone was the certainty of the superiority of Western culture.... And, perhaps more radically, with Vatican II’s acknowledgement of the possibility of salvation outside of explicit faith in Christ and membership in the Church (LG, 16 and 9; NA, 2 Ag, 9 and 11), many Catholics – including missionaries – no longer saw missionary activity as an urgent need. If people

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen B. Bevans & Jeffrey Gros, *Evangelization and Religious Freedom* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2009), 100.

<sup>14</sup> For the statistics that map the shocking decline of the Church in Europe see Peter Hunermann, “Evangelization of Europe? Observations on a Church in Peril,” in Robert J Schreiter, ed., *Mission in the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 57-80. For the statistics that map the American decline see Sherry Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2012), 15-47. See also Ralph Martin, “The Post-Christendom Sacramental Crisis: The Wisdom of Thomas Aquinas”, *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2013), 59–77. See also, Ralph Martin, *The Urgency of the New Evangelization* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2013), 11-21.

could be saved by following their own consciences in the context of their own religions, why try to convert them?<sup>15</sup>

The collapse of missionary work though was part of a larger collapse which saw tens of thousands priests and nuns abandoning their vocations amid increasingly radical proposals for continuing change in the moral, doctrinal and disciplinary beliefs and practices of the Church. Some of the theologians who played a major role as theological advisors during Vatican II were quite public in their opinions that Vatican II didn't go far enough and further change was necessary. Conferences with the theme of "Toward Vatican III" were held by esteemed Catholic institutions. Pope Paul VI's decision to uphold the traditional Catholic teaching on the immorality of contraception in 1968 was met by open rebellion by priests and only lukewarm "pro forma" support by many Bishops, further encouraging the lay-faithful to pick and choose from amongst the Church's teachings what "in conscience" they felt good about.

Besides the confusion within the Church and the apparent inability of many in Church leadership to discern what was in harmony with Church teaching and what wasn't<sup>16</sup> or the inability to make the hard decisions that public opinion would not react kindly to, there was the upheaval in the wider culture. 1968 is often noted by cultural historians as a major turning point in the rejection of tradition and authority in the culture

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<sup>15</sup>Bevans and Gros, *Evangelization and Religious Freedom*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> When in the early 1980s the *Ad Hoc Committee to Oversee the Use of the Catechism* of the US Bishops reported on its evaluation of catechetical texts in use and found a great majority of them to be doctrinally deficient, despite many of them having the *imprimatur*, there was a strange silence about responsibility and competence, and not a word of repentance for the millions of souls that were misled. Fortunately the promise to do better in the future has been largely fulfilled.

at large, with the student riots and anti-war demonstrations, the assassination of Martin Luther King and the preceding assassination of John F. Kennedy, and a musical and drug culture that celebrated what traditionally had been seen as immoral behavior. The youth culture's turn against traditional Christian values – symbolized and epitomized by the “sexual revolution” - gathered force over the years and eventually influenced the whole culture.

During John Paul II's pontificate, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger described the actual situation in rather stark terms, using the biblically resonant phrase “mass apostasy”:

We are witnessing a sort of mass apostasy; the number of baptized persons is decreasing drastically. ... And an undeniable advance of secularism, as we have already pointed out, is also ascertainable, with different features, in the United States. In short, in the Western world the almost complete identity that once existed between European and American culture and Christian culture is dissolving. All this is true. And the number of people in the West who feel that they are really members of the Church will decline further in the near future. We do not know what might happen in fifty years time—such futurology remains impossible—but for the near future we see the process of secularization continuing; we see the faith diminishing; we see the separation between the commonly accepted culture and Christian faith and culture.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Michael J. Miller and Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 115.

We will now consider the papal response to this missionary collapse. The post-conciliar magisterial documents on evangelization provide not only an authoritative witness to the lack of reception of AG but also authoritative diagnoses of the theological currents undermining evangelization and serious, though largely ineffective, attempts to respond to the confusion.

### **The Papal Response to the Missionary Collapse**

#### **Pope Paul VI: *Evangelii Nuntiandi***

Regarding the situation prior to the 1974 Synod on Evangelization, Francis Cardinal George provides a helpful summary:

Taken out of the context of faith, valid questions spawned ideologies that destroyed mission, as missionaries and missiologists sometimes substituted a radical commitment to the world for the commitment of faith. In trying to rethink mission in the modern world, some opted to do so on the world's terms by emptying proclamation of its content and making missiology almost a secular science. With that development went a rejection of *Ad gentes* in practice and often in theory.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Francis Cardinal George, "The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity," in Matthew L. Lamb & Matthew Levering, eds., *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 300.

After the Synod, in an attempt to respond to the undermining of evangelization in general and traditional missionary work in particular, Pope Paul VI in 1975 published his enduringly helpful Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi*. Subsequent popes, including Pope Francis, cite it frequently. In the document the Pope strongly reaffirmed the traditional importance of missionary work and the wider emphasis of Vatican II that all of us are called to mission. Pope Paul VI directly addressed some of the major sources of confusion that he identified as weakening the missionary zeal of the Church. He writes to encourage the brethren “in their mission as evangelizers, in order that, in this time of uncertainty and confusion, they may accomplish this task with ever increasing love, zeal and joy.” (EN, 1) He asks: “in our day, what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News . . . . to what extent and in what way is that evangelical force capable of really transforming the people of this century . . . . does the Church or does she not . . . .after the Council and because of the Council . . . . find herself better equipped to proclaim the Gospel and to put it into people’s hearts with conviction, freedom of spirit and effectiveness?” (EN, 4)

The implicit answer to these questions is “no” and Paul VI devotes the rest of his Apostolic Exhortation to addressing what he thinks are the causes that have made the post-conciliar period a time of waning zeal and evangelization, a time of “uncertainty and confusion.” He addresses both doctrinal and spiritual factors and has strong and clear words as he addresses them.

In addressing the strong influence of liberation theology he asserts that Christian liberation is indeed liberation “from everything that oppresses man but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil one.” (EN, 9) In addressing those who claim that a silent witness is all that is necessary he affirms, “There can be no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth the Son of God are not proclaimed.” (EN, 22) In addressing those who say that salvation is equally possible in any religion, he makes the strong assertion, to be developed later in some theological depth in *Dominus Iesus*, that “neither respect and esteem for these religions nor the complexity of the questions raised is an invitation to the Church to withhold from these non-Christians the proclamation of Jesus Christ . . . . Our religion effectively establishes with God an authentic and living relationship which the other religions do not succeed in doing, even though they have, as it were, their arms stretched out towards heaven . . . . Let us state this fact with joy at a time when there are not lacking those who think and even say that ardor and the apostolic spirit are exhausted, and that the time of the missions is now past.” (EN, 53)

In commenting on the lack of fervor when it came to evangelization, Paul VI traces this in part to two misconceptions. One misconception, he says, is that to proclaim the gospel is to impose truth on people, a response to which was later taken up at length in the *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*, but which was addressed directly in 1975 by Paul VI as well who distinguishes proposing the Gospel from

imposing the Gospel. This distinction has been taken up and repeated by each succeeding pope.

The second misconception expresses itself like this: “why proclaim the Gospel when the whole world is saved by uprightness of heart? We know likewise that the world and history are filled with ‘seeds of the Word’; is it not therefore an illusion to claim to bring the Gospel where it already exists in the seeds that the Lord Himself has sown?” (EN, 80) To this Paul VI responds: “God can accomplish this salvation in whomsoever He wishes by ways which He alone knows [AG 7] . . . . even though we do not preach the Gospel to them; but as for us, can we gain salvation if through negligence or fear or shame – what St. Paul called ‘blushing for the gospel’ (Rom 1:16) - or as a result of false ideas, we fail to preach it?” (EN, 80)

With little exaggeration it has been said that according to EN the only class of people certainly not saved are Catholics who fail to preach the Gospel!

While Paul VI’s words are quite striking, because he does not convincingly make a case for why evangelization is necessary if people can be saved without hearing the Gospel, the rhetorical threat of Catholics not being saved if they don’t evangelize seems to have made little impact. We will need to return to what the Council actually teaches about the possibility of being saved without hearing the Gospel, as I believe this is “the” issue that needs to be clarified if evangelization is to flourish. I will attempt to show that the answer to the confusion that has persistently undermined evangelization lies in a

careful reading of Vatican II, particularly the last three sentences of LG 16, which have virtually been ignored.

### **John Paul II: *Redemptoris Missio***

The papal efforts to reestablish conviction about the need for evangelization and recover the teaching of AG took a further major step with the publication of *Redemptoris missio* (Mission of the Redeemer), the Encyclical of John Paul II. He purposely published it on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of Vatican II and the promulgation of AG, and the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of EN, to underline its continuity with the conciliar and previous post-conciliar papal teaching on evangelization.<sup>19</sup> As an Encyclical it remains the most authoritative post-conciliar document on mission. Pope Francis' inspiring document on evangelization, *Gaudium evangelii* (Joy of the Gospel), which doesn't primarily address doctrinal confusion or the post Vatican II missionary collapse, is an Apostolic Exhortation.

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<sup>19</sup> While not primarily focused on the question of mission, the Extraordinary Synod of 1985 which gave some very solid guidelines for the proper interpretation of the Council, was another important step in restoring a measure of balance to the whirlwind of theological confusion. The final "Message to the People of God," and "The Final Report" may be found in a number of places including in Xavier Rynne, *John Paul's Extraordinary Synod: A Collegial Achievement* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1986), 107-132. See also Hermann J. Pottmeyer, "A New Phase in the Reception of Vatican II: Twenty Years of Interpretation of the Council" in Giuseppe Alberigo et al, eds., *The Reception of Vatican II*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 27-43. For a somewhat detailed account of both the traditionalist and progressive criticism of the Council see: Daniel Menozzi, "Opposition to the Council (1966-84)" in *The Reception of Vatican II*, 325-348. For a complex analysis of the cultural and philosophical post conciliar period see: Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Christian Situation after Vatican II: Phenomenology and History of the Post conciliar Period," in *The Reception of Vatican II*, 1-24.

Pope John Paul opens the Encyclical with a summary of the purpose of Vatican II as regards mission:

The Second Vatican Council sought to renew the Church's life and activity in the light of the needs of the contemporary world. The Council emphasized the Church's "missionary nature," basing it in a dynamic way on the Trinitarian mission itself. The missionary thrust therefore belongs to the very nature of the Christian life. (RM 1)

But then the Pope immediately addresses the fact that rather than seeing a post-Vatican II resurgence of missionary activity just the opposite has occurred:

Nevertheless, in this "new springtime" of Christianity there is an undeniable negative tendency, and the present document is meant to help overcome it. Missionary activity specifically directed "to the nations" (*ad gentes*) appears to be waning . . . . Difficulties both internal and external have weakened the Church's missionary thrust towards non-Christians, a fact which must arouse concern among all who believe in Christ. For in the Church's history, missionary drive has always been a sign of vitality, just as its lessening is a sign of a crisis of faith . . . . I also have other reasons and aims: to respond to the many requests for a document of this kind; to clear up doubts and ambiguities regarding missionary activity *ad gentes*, and to confirm in their commitment those exemplary brothers and sisters dedicated to missionary activity and all those who assist them . . . .

(RM 2)

This diagnosis is a very grave one even though it is stated in serene tones. What can be a more serious problem for the Church to confront than a crisis of faith? The Pope then identifies certain theological theories which he believes are undermining motivation to evangelize:

Some people wonder: Is missionary work among non-Christians still relevant? Has it not been replaced by inter-religious dialogue? Is not human development an adequate goal for the Church's mission? Does not respect for conscience and for freedom exclude all efforts at conversion? Is it not possible to attain salvation in any religion? Why then should there be missionary activity? (RM 4)

Remarkably, 15 years after Pope Paul VI attempted to address the same theological questions, the same questions persist and John Paul II addresses them once again.

His responses to them are along the same lines of Paul VI's responses, although at greater length, with more detailed theological argumentation.<sup>20</sup> He reaffirms the uniqueness of Christ's identity and role in the redemption of the world (RM, 5); rejects theological currents that would separate the message from the messenger, Christ from the Spirit's work, the Kingdom from the Church, or the Logos from the person of Jesus – all major themes in contemporary theology (RM, 13-19). He states once again that the

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<sup>20</sup> For an overview of the development of missiology from Vatican II to RM see: Thomas Stransky, "From Vatican II to *Redemptoris Missio*," in Charles Van Engen et al eds., *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 137-147. For a book length overview see Francis Anekwe Oborji, *Concepts of Mission: The Evolution of Contemporary Missiology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006). Oborji identifies proclamation as the common thread of Vatican II and post Vatican II magisterial mission theology. "Proclamation could be called the unifying term of all previous and contemporary missionary paradigms and theories studied in this book." p. 206. See also William Richey Hogg, "Vatican II's Ad Gentes: A Twenty Year Retrospective," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 9, no. 4 (October 1, 1985): 146-154.

Church is not imposing when it carries out missionary work or violating human freedom but rather proposing (RM, 8) and makes clear that the Kingdom can't be reduced to simply temporal improvements (RM, 20). He reaffirms that indeed it is possible for people to be saved who through no fault of their own haven't heard the Gospel but come into a mysterious contact with Christ's redemptive work through the power of the Holy Spirit and respond to it positively (RM, 9-10).

John Paul then asks the question:

God offers mankind this newness of life, "Can one reject Christ and everything that he has brought about in the history of mankind?" Of course one can. Man is free. He can say 'no' to God. He can say 'no' to Christ. But the fundamental question remains: Is it legitimate to do this? And what would make it legitimate?

(RM 7)

Notably, there is no clear statement of the consequences of saying 'no' to God, or to Christ. And yet this is a key element of the preaching of Jesus and the Apostles.<sup>21</sup> This silence on the consequences of not responding positively to the Gospel is generally characteristic of the post-conciliar efforts to clear up theological confusion pertaining to mission. It is a continuation of the conciliar strategy of emphasizing the positive and winning people by a positive presentation of the beauty of the faith and the goodness of

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<sup>21</sup> I have devoted a whole chapter of my book *The Urgency of the New Evangelization: Answering the Call* (Huntington, IN: OSV, 2013) to the topic of what did Jesus and the Apostles actually ask us to tell people. Besides the positive message of God's mercy being offered there is also in the New Testament an emphasis on the need for a personal response, and a clear statement of the consequences of responding positively – forgiveness of sins, eternal life – or negatively – condemnation, perishing, hell.

life in Christ. I think we must say that up until now the strategy doesn't seem to be successful.

After John Paul II addresses the main theological confusions, he sums up the reasons for carrying out mission:

To the question, "why mission?" we reply with the Church's faith and experience that true liberation consists in opening oneself to the love of Christ. In him, and only in him, are we set free from all alienation and doubt, from slavery to the power of sin and death . . . . Why mission? Because to us, as to St. Paul, "this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ (Eph. 3:8). (RM 11)

This is a very rich encyclical and we have only highlighted the theological obstacles that John Paul II identifies as undermining the purpose of Vatican II and AG and indicated the lines of his responses. Other features of the encyclical that we can only note as enduringly important are his basic definition of "new evangelization" as contrasted to mission *ad gentes* and ordinary pastoral care (RM, 33); his challenging definition of the purpose of evangelization, namely conversion and discipleship (RM, 46); his extended theological explication of the work of the Holy Spirit and his frequent comments on the apostolic preaching and the experience of the early church as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles (RM, Chapter II); and his very important treatment of "missionary spirituality" where he brings out the importance of the contemplative and

charismatic dimensions of the Spirit's working in the apostles and the early church and its relevance for mission today (RM, Chapter VIII).

### *Dominus Iesus*

Ten years after RM and 35 years after the Council and AG, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published *Dominus Iesus* (DI) (On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church) on August 6, 2000 – the Feast of the Transfiguration and the anniversary of the death of Blessed Pope Paul VI. It was a document intended to deal definitively with an issue that the Council and previous popes had thought had already been dealt with.

As Cardinal George puts it in his commentary on AG:

It all seems clear enough. Yet the crisis in mission and in interreligious dialogue occasioned another document, *Dominus Iesus*, which repeats what the council had already said clearly in *Ad gentes*, namely, Christianity's claim to absolute validity.<sup>22</sup>

The main purpose of the document was to directly address the theological currents that relativize Christ and the Church and undermine mission, currents that despite the previous magisterial efforts to address them had grown in strength and ubiquity even in Pontifical Universities. These currents that had already been addressed by Paul VI in EN

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<sup>22</sup> George, 303.

and John Paul II in RM now were to receive what was intended to be a definitive theological refutation.

DI repeats the positive affirmations about the world religions found in Vatican II, affirms the importance of continuing inter-religious dialogue, but strongly reaffirms the necessity of evangelization:

Equality, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ – who is God himself made man – in relation to the founders of the other religions. Indeed, the Church, guided by charity and respect for freedom, must be primarily committed to proclaiming to all people the truth definitively revealed by the Lord, and to announcing the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and of adherence to the Church through Baptism and the other sacraments, in order to participate fully in communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (DI, 22)

And DI clearly identifies the relativistic theories that threaten mission:

The Church's constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de jure* (or in principle). As a consequence, it is held that certain truths have been superseded: for example, the definitive and complete character of the

revelation of Jesus Christ, the nature of Christian faith as compared with that of belief in other religions, the inspired nature of the books of Sacred Scripture, the personal unity between the Eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth, the unity of the economy of the incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit, the unicity and salvific universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ, the universal salvific mediation of the Church, the inseparability – while recognizing the distinction - of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ and the Church, and the subsistence of the one Church of Christ in the Catholic Church. (DI, 4)

While recognizing the limits of human language to encompass the mystery of God DI strongly affirms that a full, adequate and totally reliable revelation is really communicated to us in the words and deeds of Jesus since they have the Divine person as their subject. (DI, 6)

Perhaps the clearest statement of both the positive value yet radical limitations of non-Christian religions is contained in DI, 7 which begins by quoting the *Catechism*:

Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed. (CCC 150) Faith therefore “as a gift of God” and as “a supernatural virtue infused by him,” (CCC 153) involves a dual adherence: to God who reveals and to the truth which he reveals out of the trust which we have in him who speaks . . . . For this reason, the distinction between theological faith and belief, in the other religions, must be firmly held. If faith is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, which “makes it

possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently.” (John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, 13) Then belief in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute. (*Fides et Ratio*, 31-32)

Another significant statement is found in DI, 22:

If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation. (Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*: DS 3821)

At the same time DI generously acknowledges the work of the Holy Spirit in individuals in the various non-Christian religions which could bring them to a saving contact with Christ and the Church without that knowledge being explicit. (DI 21)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For a balanced interpretation of what Vatican II actually teaches about salvation and the non-Christian religions see the numerous articles and books published by Gavin D’Costa on this subject. His most recent published essay is “Vatican II on Muslims and Jews: The Council’s Teachings on Other Religions,” in Gavin D’Costa & Emma Jane Harris, eds., *The Second Vatican Council: Celebrating its Achievements and the Future* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 105-120. See also Mikka Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions: According to the Second Vatican Council* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 144-145. Note also the comments of Ratzinger in relationship to the final draft of AG: “Here, again, closer reflection will once more demonstrate that not all the ideas characteristic of modern theology are derived from Scripture. This idea is, if anything, alien to the biblical-thought world or even antipathetic to its spirit. The prevailing optimism, which understands the world religions as in some way salvific agencies, is simply irreconcilable with the biblical assessment of these religions. It is remarkable how sharply the Council now reacted to these modern views. During the debate on the parallel passages on the text on the Church, it had seemed more amenable.” Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), 173. In an examination of all the writings of Congar on the question of the relationship of non-Christian religions to salvation Thomas Potvin sums up Congar’s position: “Congar’s evaluation of Non-Christian or Non-biblical Religions, which a vast majority of the world’s inhabitants follow, is somewhat negative. To put it summarily, he does not recognize them as authentic instruments of that gratuitous salvation of humankind which the Triune God desires and realizes according to his universal plan of

DI was met with a mixed reaction. Some applauded it for its clear and strong stands on the uniqueness of Christ and the Church. Others attacked it for its negative judgments on non-Christian religions and what was considered an ecumenically insensitive reaffirmation of the unique claims of the Catholic Church.<sup>24</sup> One thing that is clear though is that the confusion about the grounds for mission has continued.

In 2007 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published its *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*.<sup>25</sup> Section 3 of the *Doctrinal Note* speaks, yet again, of the “growing confusion” which is undermining evangelization:

There is today, however, a growing confusion which leads many to leave the missionary command of the Lord unheard and ineffective (cf. Mt 28:19). . . . It is

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salvation. On the other hand, Congar is of the opinion that followers of such religions can, under circumstances we shall mention later, benefit from salvation, but not specifically through – to use a technical term – the ‘instrumentality’ of their religion, be it one of the world’s major and universally esteemed religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism or Taoism.” And: “In his eyes the latter [structures of non-Christian religions] are not exempt from the debilitating influence of the Adversary, nor are they free from serious limitations in teaching and practice, and they may serve to impede their adherents embracing the Gospel of God. Furthermore, they are properly speaking, the fruit of human inventiveness, representing the project of humans, rather than the positive and specific project of the Triune God which Christ Jesus has revealed to us.” Thomas Raymond Potvin, “Yves Congar on *Missio ad Gentes*,” *Science et Esprit*, 55/2 (2003), 139, 160. See also a typical article among the many Congar wrote on the topic: Yves Congar, “The Necessity of the Mission ‘Ad Gentes’,” *Studia Missionalia* 51, (2002), 157-165.

<sup>24</sup> Gerald O’Collins’ casual statement that AG 7 contradicts DI 7 is without foundation. Gerald O’Collins, *Living Vatican II: The 21<sup>st</sup> Council for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2006), 15. This misreading of magisterial documents is characteristic. See also, Gerald O’Collins, “John Paul II on Christ, the Holy Spirit, and World Religions” in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 72 (2007) 323-337. Gerald O’Collins in his book, *Salvation for All: God’s Other Peoples* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) devotes a great deal of effort assembling and assessing the Biblical testimony of God’s promise of universal salvation and draws conclusions on the basis of this that seem not well founded, since the methodology he adopted was to consider just the “positive” passages and not the “negative.” In his introduction, p. v, he states: “But my purpose is not to survey equally and appraise both the ‘negative’ and the ‘positive’ witness; to do that would call for a book twice the length of this one.” This remarkable “methodology” is similar to what we will see in people claiming to state the teaching of LG 16 while ignoring its last three sentences.

<sup>25</sup> Published December 3, 2007. Available at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) under documents of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In a tepid address given by Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of AG he simply reaffirms the solid theology of AG, speaks of the mission *ad gentes* as sometimes seeming to be “slowing down,” and reaffirms the need to push on anyway. Benedict XVI, “Proclaiming and Living the Gospel: The Duty of All,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, English Weekly Edition, N. 12-22 March 2006, p. 4.

enough, so they say, to help people to become more human or more faithful to their own religion; it is enough to build communities which strive for justice, freedom, peace and solidarity. Furthermore, some maintain that Christ should not be proclaimed to those who do not know him, nor should joining the Church be promoted, since it would also be possible to be saved without explicit knowledge of Christ and without formal incorporation in the Church.” (*Doctrinal Note # 3*)

While the *Doctrinal Note* addresses in a thorough manner the question of whether preaching the Gospel is an imposition on people’s freedom it doesn’t thoroughly address the doctrinal confusion lurking around the truth of it being possible for people to be saved without hearing the Gospel and the common temptation to presume such people are saved. This omission, not only in the *Doctrinal Note* but in all the post-conciliar magisterial documents intended to restore conviction about the need to evangelize I submit is the reason why the confusion persists, and unless addressed, will continue to persist.

### **Why the Continuing Confusion?**

Why, more than 50 years after the close of Vatican II, and after all the post-conciliar documents intending to resolve doctrinal confusion concerning the need to evangelize, does confusion still exist? I think the primary reason is that the primary cause of the indifference to evangelization has not been clearly enough identified and

responded to. I think the primary cause of the undermining of mission is a theological and popular culture of universalism which has come to hold as “gospel truth” that virtually everyone will be saved except perhaps for a very few especially evil people. With that as the common understanding, even sometimes among very orthodox and spiritual Catholics, why indeed, evangelize?

In a 1991 essay that appeared in the journal, *Theological Studies*, John Sachs, a Jesuit theologian at Boston College, expresses what he claims is the current Catholic theological consensus:

We have seen that there is a clear consensus among Catholic theologians today in their treatment of the notion of apocatastasis and the problem of hell. ... It may not be said that even one person is already or will in fact be damned. All that may and must be believed is that the salvation of the world is a reality already begun and established in Christ. Such a faith expresses itself most consistently in the hope that because of the gracious love of God whose power far surpasses human sin, all men and women will in fact freely and finally surrender to God in love and be saved.

When Balthasar speaks of the duty to hope for the salvation of all, he is articulating the broad consensus of current theologians and the best of the Catholic tradition. Like other theologians, notably Rahner, he intentionally pushes his position to the limit, insisting that such a hope is not merely possible but well founded. I have tried to show that the presumption that human freedom entails a

capacity to reject God definitively and eternally seems questionable. And, although this presumption enjoys the weight of the authority of Scripture and tradition, it would seem incorrect to consider this possibility as an object of faith in the same sense that the ability of human freedom in grace to choose God is an object of faith.<sup>26</sup>

I think there are certain texts in the documents of Vatican II that have been neglected that could provide an important key to finally resolving the confusion. The words of John Paul II remain true:

What a treasure there is, dear brothers and sisters, in the guidelines offered to us by the Second Vatican Council. . . . With the passing of the years, the Council documents have lost nothing of their value or brilliance. They need to be read correctly, to be widely known and taken to heart as important and normative texts of the magisterium within the Church's Tradition . . . the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning.<sup>27</sup>

And while the Council, and the post-conciliar documents on evangelization followed the overall conciliar strategy of "emphasizing the positive," they never intended to deny or

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<sup>26</sup> John R. Sachs, "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 252-253. While I was in Rome recently, a well-known theologian who teaches at a Pontifical University was teaching a group of American priests in Rome for a sabbatical theological updating, very much along the lines of the universalist consensus that Sachs claims. In a book prepared to update wider audiences theologically, John Fuellenbach, *Throw Fire* (Manila: Logos Publishing, 1998), 191, this same theologian offers this as a discussion question: "How convinced am I that God's saving will is meant for all, and that God will most probably save all human beings effectively?" My own in-depth assessment of the contribution that Rahner and Balthasar make to the collapse of missionary zeal is contained in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 93-128; 129-190.

<sup>27</sup>*Novo millennio ineunte*, 57.

not give their proper due to other elements of the message that are essential for the faithful and effective transmission of the faith.

As we have seen, the reasons given for evangelization in the major post-conciliar documents such as *Evangelii nuntiandi* (EN) and *Redemptoris mission* (RM) are predominantly positive, speaking of how Christianity can enrich, or fulfill the human person. Avery Dulles describes this pastoral strategy:

Neither Vatican II nor the present pope [John Paul II] bases the urgency of missionary proclamation on the peril that the non-evangelized will incur damnation; rather they stress the self-communicative character of love for Christ, which gives joy and meaning to human existence (RM 10-11; cf. 2 Cor 5:14).<sup>28</sup>

Richard John Neuhaus studied the reasons given for evangelization in RM and came up with six, none of which speak of the eternal consequences of rejecting the good news, or the fact that those who never heard the good news are not to be presumed saved. 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.<sup>29</sup>

This, of course, is in stark contrast to the traditional focus on the eternal consequences that rest on accepting or rejecting the Gospel that motivated almost two

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<sup>28</sup> Avery Dulles, "The Church as Locus of Salvation," in *The Thought of John Paul II: A Collection of Essays and Studies*, ed. John M. McDermott (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1993), 176.  
<sup>29</sup>John Richard Neuhaus, "Reviving the Missionary Mandate," in Steven Boguslawski, Ralph Martin, eds., *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2008), 34-42. The many very fine Pastoral Letters published by a number of American Bishops in recent years on the New Evangelization mostly follow in the same line; a positive presentation of life in Christ with virtually no mention of the eternal consequences of rejecting the new life. One such example is the very fine "Pastoral Letter on the New Evangelization," by Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl, Disciples of the Lord: Sharing the Vision, published on August 23, 2010, and available on the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., website: [www.adw.org](http://www.adw.org) (accessed May 2, 2011).

thousand years of mission. This emphasis also stands in stark contrast to the stress placed on the eternal consequences of accepting or rejecting the Gospel, characteristic of the previous modern papal encyclicals devoted to the missionary task of the Church, published prior to 1960.<sup>30</sup>

Pope Francis, in his very inspiring and valuable Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), nevertheless follows in the same line as the preceding post-conciliar papal teaching on evangelization, emphasizing the positive benefit of following Jesus, but remaining silent on the consequences of not following: “We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize.” (EG, 266)

When Christian conversion is presented as an “enrichment” it is very easy to view it as “optional,” since in the background of most peoples’ minds there is the belief that virtually everybody will be saved because God is so merciful – which is also, according to John Sachs, the consensus of Catholic theologians. And even when the magisterial documents speak of salvation from sin and the devil they do so in a way which doesn’t clearly explain what sin and the devil are, and why we need to be saved from them.

While most of the post-conciliar magisterial effort to establish evangelization and the intent of AG to a central place in the life of Catholics has focused on talking about the positive features of being a Christian, less attention has been placed on the necessity of a

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<sup>30</sup> For an account of the pre-1960 twentieth century mission encyclicals see Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 193-195. See also William Richey Hogg, “Some Background Considerations for *Ad gentes*,” *International Review of Mission* 56, no. 223 (July 1, 1967): 281-290.

personal response to the grace of God, and virtually no attention has been focused on the consequences of not responding – namely, eternal separation from God. I submit that all three elements need to take their rightful place in order for evangelization to flourish and the intent of AG to be realized, as they do in the preaching of Jesus and the apostles. Even apart from effectiveness it's a matter of faithfulness to transmitting what Jesus has asked us to transmit, without adding anything, or taking anything away.<sup>31</sup>

When *Dominus Iesus* and the subsequent *Doctrinal Note on Evangelization* were issued, many thought that the most serious doctrinal confusions affecting evangelization were definitively refuted. But these documents only addressed one part of the problem. These documents firmly restate the absolute uniqueness and necessity of Christ and the Church for salvation. There is only one savior for the whole world, and no one is saved except through Jesus Christ and some manner of link with the Church, however implicit it may be. Both the theologians mentioned by Sachs as providing the theological underpinning for what he thinks is the well founded hope that everyone will be saved, Rahner and Balthasar, agree with this central truth: no one is saved apart from Christ. The problem is that they do not acknowledge unambiguously the authoritative teaching of Christ, as carried forward in the tradition and rearticulated in *LG* 16, that “very often” human beings are not living their lives in a way that will lead them to salvation, and there

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<sup>31</sup> See Ralph Martin, “The Pastoral Strategy of Vatican II: Time for an Adjustment?” in *The Second Vatican Council: Celebrating its Achievements and the Future* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), ed. Gavin D’Costa & Emma Jane Harris, 137-163. Even in the traditional “mission territories,” mission seems to have collapsed into pastoral care or human development in many places. In reviewing contemporary mission magazines published by missionary orders and Pontifical Mission Societies almost all the “mission reports” seem to be focused on human development and the construction of buildings, with scarcely ever a mention of conversion.

is a real probability of many being lost unless they are addressed with a call to repentance, faith and baptism, and positively respond to such a call - an effective renewed evangelization. These documents deal with the issues raised by a theology of religious pluralism and a certain relativism, but they do not deal with the problem of a *de facto* or even theoretical universalism, which agrees with everything these documents assert, but still assumes that virtually no one will be lost.

Fortunately, there is an important text in the documents of Vatican II which gives us a key as to how such a balanced communication of all three elements can be undertaken. The most important text of Vatican II which explores the possibility of being saved without hearing the Gospel is LG 16. The two other main conciliar references to this possibility are in AG 7 and GS 22, both of which depend on LG 16.

So, what does LG 16 tell us? Even though *LG* 16 only consists of ten sentences, it is packed with carefully constructed phrases with significant theological import, and very important footnotes.<sup>32</sup> The text first explains how “those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways.” A footnote here references a text from St. Thomas, ST III, q. 8, a. 3, ad 1 (“Those who are unbaptized, though not actually in the Church, are in the Church potentially. And this potentiality is rooted in two things—first and principally, in the power of Christ, which is sufficient for the salvation of the whole human race; secondly, in free-will”). It is clear that this

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<sup>32</sup> The full Latin text of *LG* 16 with an English translation is available on the Vatican website, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) under Vatican II documents.

“relatedness” is not actually salvific, but potentially salvific.<sup>33</sup> Special mention is made first of the Jews, then of the Muslims and then of unspecified other religions and peoples, “those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God.” Buddhists and Hindus are specifically mentioned in *Nostra Aetate* but the text here does not mention them by name since it is not intending to limit its teaching to just the religions it names. The text then affirms God’s universal salvific will, citing 1 Tim 2:4 as a basis for its exploration of how salvation for those who do not know the Gospel might be possible. We will designate this first section of *LG 16* (the first four sentences) as *LG 16a*, although it will not be the focus of our analysis. Later on in the text, which we will cite below, a fourth group of those who have not heard the Gospel is added, those who “have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God.” We will include here the three sentences of *LG 16* that treat of how salvation for all four of these categories of non-Christians might be possible:

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. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any

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<sup>33</sup> A recent doctoral dissertation analyzes philosophically the text of *GS 22* which states: “For, by his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man.” See Caroline Farey, “A Metaphysical Investigation of the Anthropological Implications of the Phrase: ‘Ipse enim, Filius Dei, incarnatione sua cum omni homine quodammodo se univit’ (For, by his incarnation, he, the Son of God has in a certain way united himself with each man—*Gaudium et spes*, 22).” Ph.D. diss., Pontificia Universitas Lateranensis, 2008. 162-172. Here too it is clear that the nature of the union is not salvific. Her analysis of “in a certain way” shows the multitude of meanings that could be intended, as well as those which clearly are not. While the dissertation is done in the faculty of philosophy it draws heavily on Patristic and Scholastic theological sources. Her conclusions mirror Aquinas’ understanding of a union that brings with it “potential.”

fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel<sup>34</sup> and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life.

We will designate the above three sentences of *LG* 16 as *LG* 16b. And finally, the last three sentences which are virtually ignored in theological treatments of this topic:

But very often (at *saepius*)<sup>35</sup>, 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

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<sup>34</sup> The following footnote is inserted here as backing for this text: “See Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, I, 1: PG 21, 28 AB.” Joseph Ratzinger, “La Mission d’Après Les Autres Textes Conciliaires,” in *Vatican II: L’Activité Missionnaire de l’Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1967), 129, note 11, indicates that this reference to Eusebius does not really support the point being made, but, of course, the point can be supported in other ways. “The reason for this allusion is not very clear, since in this work Eusebius, in treating of the non-Christian religions, has another emphasis than our text: Eusebius underlines the aberrations of the pagan myths and the insufficiency of Greek philosophy; he show that Christians are right in neglecting these in order to turn to the sacred writings of the Hebrews which constitute the true ‘preparation for the gospel’.” (La raison de cette allusion n’est pas très claire, car dans cet ouvrage l’orientation d’Eusèbe, par rapport aux religions non chrétiennes, est tout autre que dans notre texte: Eusèbe signale les égarements des mythes païens et l’insuffisance de la philosophie grecque; il montre que les chrétiens voient juste en les négligeant pour se tourner vers les livres saints des Hébreux qui constituent la véritable ‘préparation évangélique’.) The *Sources Chrétiennes* translation of this text, *La Préparation Évangélique: Livre I*, trans. Jean Sirinelli et Édouard des Places (Paris: Cerf, 1974), 97-105, shows that Eusebius, in the chapter cited, only mentions the non-Christian religions and philosophies as being in dire need of conversion. He speaks of them as representing a piety that is “lying and aberrant,” (*mensongère et aberrante*) and cites the Scripture that speaks of “exterminating all the gods of the nations” and making them “prostrate before Him.”

<sup>35</sup> The Walter Abbott translation that appeared in 1966 translates the Latin phrase as “But rather often.” The commonly used Flannery translation of the Council documents translates the Latin *at saepius* as “very often.” This is the translation we will be using. (Austin Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New Revised Edition, vol. I, Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996). Other English translations use “but often,” (the translation of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the precursor of the National Council of Catholic Bishops; contained in: *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II: Introductions by Douglas G. Bushman* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1999). The Vatican website translation also uses “but often.” The English translation (by Clarence Gallagher) of *Lumen Gentium* in Norman Tanner’s two volume collection of the *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990) uses “more often, however.” The French translation of the text that Congar collaborated on translates *at saepius* as “mais trop souvent.” *L’Église de Vatican II*, Tome I, Texte Latin et Traduction, P.-Th. Camelot (Paris: Cerf, 1966). The Vatican website translation uses “bien souvent.” The Italian translation on the Vatican website is “ma molto spesso.” The Spanish translation on the Vatican website is “pero con mucha frecuencia.”

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.

We will designate these concluding three sentences of *LG* 16 as *LG* 16c.<sup>36</sup>

We have already commented on two of the three footnotes attached to *LG* 16. The third footnote is particularly relevant to our topic but given the space limitations of this chapter I can only indicate briefly what it references. It references the *Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston*<sup>37</sup> in relationship to the Fr. Feeney case. Fr. Feeney held to a very strict interpretation of the theological axiom *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus* (Outside of the Church there is no salvation) and believed that unless someone died as an explicit Catholic they could not be saved. The *Letter* reaffirms the possibility of being saved without explicit faith and even talks about implicit or unconscious desire but its definition of these is quite important. The *Letter* says that not any kind of implicit faith or desire is sufficient for salvation but only that which includes supernatural faith and supernatural charity – which involves a personal response to the God who gives light and

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<sup>36</sup> It's remarkable how little the entirety of this text is considered even when the theological matter it deals with is the main subject under analysis. Theologians such as Karl Rahner, among many others, focus on *LGa* and *LGb* but completely ignore the crucial *LGc*. One of the few theologians to notice the import of *LGc* is Alan Schreck, *Vatican II: The Crisis and the Promise* (Cincinnati: Servant, 2005), 219-239.

<sup>37</sup>*Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston*. The entire text of the letter in its original Latin along with an English translation was first published in *The American Ecclesiastical Review* in October 1952 (127): 307-315. It is also available in Neuner/Dupuis, 854-857, and Denzinger 3866-3872.

a surrender of one's life to the One who reveals himself, and the conformity of one's life to what is revealed.<sup>38</sup>

The Council here is teaching that under certain very specific conditions salvation is possible for non-Christians. What are these conditions?

1. That non-Christians be not culpable for their ignorance of the Gospel.
2. That non-Christians seek God with a sincere heart.
3. That non-Christians try to live their life in conformity with what they know of God's will. This is commonly spoken of as following the natural law or the light of conscience. It is important to note, as the Council does, in order to avoid a Pelagian interpretation, that this is possible only because people are "moved by grace."
4. That non-Christians welcome or receive whatever "good or truth" they live amidst—referring possibly to elements of their non-Christian religions or cultures which may refract to some degree that light that enlightens every man (Jn 1:9). These positive elements are intended to be "preparation for the Gospel." One could understand this to mean either a preparation for the actual hearing of the Gospel or preparation for, perhaps, some communication of God by interior illumination.

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<sup>38</sup>For a fuller treatment of what this *Letter* contains and the background that led to it and its implications for understanding salvation see: Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 40-53.

### *The Related Council Texts*

The two other Council texts we cited must now be considered. *GS 22*, when speaking of our incorporation into the death and resurrection of Christ, which gives us hope for our resurrection, has this to say about non-Christians:

All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.

*LG 16* is cited in a footnote as a foundation for this statement. Being “men of good will” is another way of stating a condition that is more fully explicated in *LG 16b*. *GS 22* does not try to explain how this possibility of salvation is offered and what response to it must be made for it to be effective. Joseph Ratzinger, in his commentary on *GS*, thinks that the explicit mention of the Holy Spirit in *GS 22* as the means by which the paschal mystery is made present adds an important element to *LG 16*, which he thinks could be interpreted in too Pelagian a manner, laying too much stress on what man must do to be saved, even though the role of grace is mentioned.<sup>39</sup> I do not share this concern because of the explicit mention of grace in *LGb*.

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<sup>39</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 5, trans. W. J. O’Hara (London/New York: Burns & Oates/Herder and Herder, 1969), 161-163.

Finally, *AG 7* must be considered:

The reason for missionary activity lies in the will of God, ‘who wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, himself a man, Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all’ (1 Tim 2:4-5), ‘neither is their salvation in any other’ (Acts 4:12). Everyone, therefore, ought to be converted to Christ, who is known through the preaching of the Church, and they ought, by baptism, to become incorporated into him, and into the Church which is his body. Christ himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mk 16:16; Jn 3:5), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church, which men enter through baptism as through a door. Hence those cannot be saved, who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded through Jesus Christ, by God, as something necessary, still refuse to enter it, or to remain in it [*LG 14* is referenced here]. So, although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him (Heb. 11: 6), the Church, nevertheless, still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize. And so, today as always, missionary activity retains its full force and necessity.

The obvious intent of this text is to reaffirm the continuing importance of missionary activity. It would appear though that relative to the world’s population, the numbers of those who know the Catholic Church is founded by Christ and is necessary for salvation but refuse to enter her are relatively small. Correspondingly, for the vast

majority, salvation must then be possible without hearing the Gospel. While emphasizing that it is the will of God that missionary activity be carried out, is certainly, in itself, a theoretically compelling reason, for many people failing to explain why missionary activity is still important given that people can be saved without it, and the presumption that usually accompanies this belief, leaves the exhortation much weaker in its effect than it could be.

What LG16 reminds us of, not only by its reference to the *Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston* in its very specific definition of what is required for non-explicit salvation to take place but also in LGc's explicit citation of Romans 1, is that none of us live in a neutral environment. The wounds of original sin, the reality of personal sin, the reality of the devil and of a world culture impelling us on paths that lead to destruction are at work today as they always have been. Even with all the helps we have as Catholics, some of us sometimes choose the darkness rather than the light. How much easier is it to be swept away by a culture of blasphemy and immorality without the help of Christ and the Church? What LG16c importantly tells us is that "very often" human beings may not be inculpably ignorant of the gospel, or may not be seriously seeking God, or may not be trying to live in accordance with the light of conscience, may not be responding positively to the impulses of the Spirit, the work of grace. Therefore for the sake of their salvation, it is urgent that we preach the Gospel, and call people who are on the broad way that leads to destruction to the narrow way of Jesus and His Church, that leads to life. What LG16c reminds us of is that Christianity isn't a game or an

optional enrichment exercise but a matter truly of life and death, salvation and damnation. The implication is that if we truly love people we will not only be concerned about their earthly well-being but concerned about the salvation of their souls, about their faith, their repentance, their fidelity to Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Unless we squarely face the bad news—original sin and personal sin have severe consequences—it is impossible to really appreciate the good news (God is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us we are saved by grace through faith).<sup>41</sup>

Following the often ignored but extremely important sentences of LG 16c we find one of the most stirring calls to evangelization contained in the Council documents: “By her proclamation of the Gospel, she draws her hearers to receive and profess the faith, she prepares them for baptism, snatches them from the slavery of error, and she incorporates them into Christ so that in love for him they grow to full maturity . . . for the glory of God, the confusion of the devil and the happiness of man.” (LG 17)

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<sup>40</sup> As one commentator put it: “The trouble with the Council’s approach to mission is that although it stresses that Catholics must seek to convert unbelievers, it gives no adequate reason for doing so. It does give Christ’s command to evangelize as a reason, but it gives no proper explanation of why that command is given, or of the good that the commandment is supposed to promote. This, of course, means that the command is unlikely to be followed; and it has in fact been largely disregarded since the Council. This lack of an explanation of the reason for evangelization is a departure from Catholic tradition, which has presented evangelization as an activity that should be undertaken in order to save the souls of unbelievers.” John Lamont, “What Was Wrong with Vatican II,” 89. See also Ralph Martin, “The Pastoral Strategy of Vatican II: Time for an Adjustment?” *Josephinum Journal of Theology*, 19:1 (Winter/Spring 2012): 70-90. Stephen Bullivant in *Faith and Unbelief* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2014), 125, after a very sympathetic treatment of atheism and the possibility of salvation, eventually comes to the conclusion: “According to the Gospels, Jesus himself testifies to this link between evangelization and salvation. Hence, from the previously quoted coda to Mark’s Gospel: ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned’ (16:15-16). This statement alone, quite apart from any hopes to the contrary – however well-grounded – ought to give us pause. As was argued at the end of Chapter 4, while hope may indeed be justified, presumption is not. And as unfashionable and unpalatable as it might seem to say so, it is this that is the best and most urgent rationale for evangelizing today’s unbelievers.”

<sup>41</sup> As one friend put it: "Before you can preach the Good News, you have to preach the bad news, because if you don't, they'll think that the Good News is not news at all."

The new “missionary age” called for by AG and hoped for by post-conciliar popes has not yet fully dawned but perhaps, as the full teaching of Vatican II on salvation is recovered, and our continued prayers for a “new Pentecost” are heard, we will yet see it burst forth.

