

Freeing the New Evangelization: Removing Doctrinal Confusion

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More a Slogan than a Pastoral Reality

In one of his last writings before he died, Cardinal Dulles wrote a forward to a book on evangelization and cited a study that indicated 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 theologian which seem to imply that no one may actually end up in hell he states: “Rightly or wrongly, he is often interpreted as though he believed that in the end all men and women attain to the joys of heaven. 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.”² 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

¹ The statistics cited are from a study by Nancy T. Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), tables on pp. 117, 134, cited by Cardinal Dulles in the forward to the book by Timothy E. Byerley, *The Great Commission: Models of Evangelization in American Catholicism* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), ix.

² Avery Cardinal Dulles, “Current Theological Obstacles to Evangelization,” in ed. Steven Boguslawski and Ralph Martin, *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 19-20. Cardinal Dulles has also provided an excellent survey of what Scripture and Tradition teach about the reality of hell and the likelihood of people going there in an article that appeared in *First Things*, no. 133, May 2003, pp. 36-41. A response of mine to this article appeared in *First Things*, no. 136, October 2003, pp. 3-4.

evangelization is more a “slogan” than an actual reality in the Church today and there are other significant obstacles as well (the need for a “new Pentecost” and the need for a change of mentality from “maintenance to mission” are other significant obstacles) 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. As Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, Australia put it at the 2001 Assembly of Bishops “Hell is left unmentioned, except for terrorists and infamous criminals, while Heaven is the final and universal human right; or perhaps just a consoling myth.”³ One could correctly, I believe, identify this prevailing mentality as a “culture of universalism.” I travel quite a bit in my work and am exposed to the opinions of many Catholics. 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.”

³ *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, November 7, 2001. Cited in Avery Cardinal Dulles, “Current Theological Obstacles to Evangelization,” in ed. Steven Boguslawski and Ralph Martin, *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 19.

The unfortunate thing about this prevailing worldview is that it is exactly the opposite of what Jesus indicates is the truth about our situation.

“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)

In this brief article it is not possible to explore the legitimate exegetical and theological questions that such texts raise but I believe that Cardinal Newman makes a point that we should keep in mind as we deal with such questions. No matter what the scriptural warnings may end up meaning, the few can never mean the many (and the many can never mean the few). There is a limit to reinterpretation.

“Of course we must not press the words of Scripture; we do not know the exact meaning of the word ‘chosen’; we do not know what is meant by being saved ‘so as by fire;’ we do not know what is meant by ‘few.’ But still the few can never mean the many; and to be called without being chosen cannot but be a misery.”⁴

⁴ “Many Called, Few Chosen,” in *Parochial and Plain Sermons: John Henry Newman*; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987; p.1118.

When vast numbers of Catholics in the West have come to a view of reality that is directly counter to the view communicated by Jesus and the Apostles, a view that is deeply embedded in the tradition and history of interpretation, a view that 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 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 the lists of sins that exclude people from the kingdom of God are not to be taken seriously (1 Cor 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:3-6), will not most people find it much easier to actually commit these sins?

Jean Galot S.J., in commenting on theological speculation that sees Jesus' teaching on eternal damnation as merely metaphorical warnings that don't actual teach that hell is populated, puts it this way: "It also removes all effectiveness from the warnings issued by Jesus, repeatedly expressed in the Gospels. We must take these evangelical warnings seriously...We cannot diminish the value of these warnings, formulated in an explicit manner; we must accept them in their truthfulness and seriously consider the dangers expressed. An empty hell could not be a threat and vigilance would become less necessary."⁵

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? If anything ultimate – eternal – is not really at stake, why bother? If there

⁵*Eschatology from the Second Vatican Council to Our Days*, www.clerus.org

are no real consequences to believing or not believing, to obeying or not obeying, then why not pick and choose and do what one pleases?

Why this Culture of Universalism?

I would like to note three of the many reasons for the prevalence of this “culture of universalism.” The first reason is the philosophical presuppositions that are increasingly dominant in the intellectual culture of the West; what Benedict XVI has called the “dictatorship of relativism.” A second reason is that within the theological culture of the Church itself speculative theology of various kinds has given a strong impression, at least in its popularized forms, that there are many ways to God and that everyone probably makes it.⁶ Many books and articles have been written and will continue to be written on these major philosophical and theological foundations of the culture of universalism. In the limits of this article these very important contributors to the culture of universalism can’t adequately be explored. There is, though, another, and less noticed contributor about which some meaningful things can be said in this article; namely, the pastoral/evangelistic strategy of Vatican II which has often led to a neglect of some of its most important teachings.

The Pastoral Strategy of Vatican II

⁶ A serious study of the roots of this doctrinal confusion would have to include study of such representative theologians as Karl Rahner and his various writings on the “anonymous Christian;” Hans urs Von Balthasar’s writings on the obligation to hope that all be saved; and the various pluralist theories of the world religions such as that of Jacques Dupuis.

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. This silence concerning the consequences of rejecting Christ one finds in the Council documents themselves and also in the post Conciliar magisterial documents where 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.⁷

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.⁸

⁷ Benedict XVI gave a commentary on Psalm 136 (137) at the General Audience of November 30, 2005, in which, drawing on Augustine’s commentary on the same psalm, he made the point that “people who are committed to peace and the good of the community” who aren’t Christians and may not even have any explicit faith in God, can be saved. There was something of an uproar in the Italian press and radio about what was being interpreted as the Pope declaring that one no longer needed to be a Christian to be saved. So much so that a professor at the Gregorian, Ilaria Morali, felt the need to respond in an interview that was published in two parts through Zenit in their January 15 and 16th, 2006 editions, giving the scriptural and theological bases for the salvation of those who aren’t explicitly Christian. Both in Benedict’s original remarks and in Morali’s further explanations what was focused on was the possibility of non-believers being saved, but no mention was made of the strict conditions under which this is possible, nor the likelihood, that (as LG, 16 states) many will not fulfill these conditions apart from the repentance and faith that comes from responding to the work of evangelization, the preaching of the gospel.

⁸ John Richard Neuhaus, “Reviving the Missionary Mandate”, in *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles*, ed. Steven Boguslawski and Ralph Martin (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 34-42.

Cardinal Dulles concurs:

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).⁹

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.”¹⁰

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.”¹¹

⁹ Avery Dulles, “The Church as Locus of Salvation,” in ed. John M. McDermott, *The Thought of John Paul II: A Collection of Essays and Studies* (Rome: Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1993), 176.

¹⁰ John Lamont, *What was Wrong with Vatican II*, *New Blackfriars*, v. 99, no. 1013, Jan 2007, 92-93.

¹¹ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 166,

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 10-33-1037), yet this teaching is very rarely averted to.

The most authoritative magisterial explication appears in *Lumen gentium* 16.¹²

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.” (L.G .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

¹² Other comments on this question in the Council documents are found in AG, 7 and GS, 22.

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.

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” (“more often” is perhaps the best translation of the Latin *at saepius*) 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.” (Romans 1: 18-32)

There has been and continues to be significant theological reflection on how exactly it might be possible for someone who is inculpably ignorant of the gospel to actually come to supernatural faith and charity without the “propositional clarity” of positive revelation. Cardinal Journet posits two kinds of “lights” that come to human beings from God. One is “prophetic light” that illumines things that we must perceive for our salvation. The other is “sanctifying light” that calls us to assent to what is illumined in the prophetic light.¹³ Journet extensively quotes Maritain¹⁴ on how this process may take place in a “pre-conceptual” manner among those who don’t know the gospel. Maritain himself bases his reflections on the teaching of St. Thomas (ST Ia-IIae, q. 89, a. 6) concerning the theological significance of the first human act of an unbaptized child. Maritain’s point, following Thomas, is that contained in that first moral act – if it is an act that chooses the good – there may be an embryonic or rudimentary response to a prophetic and sanctifying light given by God that may actually involve a supernatural faith that is salvific, although quite vulnerable and perhaps unstable if it doesn’t come to consciousness.

¹³ Charles Journet, *What is Dogma?*, (New York: Hawthorn, 1964) 15.

¹⁴ Jacques Maritain, *La Dialectique immanente du premier acte de liberté*, in *Raison et Raisons* (Paris : 1947) 131-156). Also in translation, *The Range of Reason*, (New York: Scribner, 1952) 66-85, (cited in Journet, 130, ff).

With this pre-conceptual, pre-notional knowledge, through the will, of the “good which brings salvation”, of the “good by which I shall be saved”, we receive the least degree of prophetic light necessary in order that theological faith should be able to come into action and make the understanding, really, actually, supernaturally, assent to the mystery of the God who “exists”, and who “rewards those who try to find him.” [Based on Hebrews 11:6, the two foundational beliefs – *credibilia* -that must be present for salvation.]

But this is a provisional, unstable, dangerous, state of faith, a state of childhood; and knowledge of the mysteries of salvation will require that it should leave the shadows, be perfected, reach an adult state, and find its first conceptual expression in the two basic “*credibilia*.”¹⁵

Étienne Hugueny makes an even stronger point about the instability and fragility of such a first moral choice.

The good influences of the environment are unfortunately insufficient to prevent the falls and often the corruption of the will in formation; indeed, few there are who are able to resist the evil influences of the environment in which they are developing. It’s therefore common that the young unbeliever, in a pagan environment, will follow the inclination of his corrupt nature and the evil example of the

¹⁵ Journet, 35.

environment where he lives, when the hour arrives for him to choose his primary orientation to his moral life. Avoiding therefore the call of God, the number of negative infidels [this refers to unbelievers who have not yet made a positive choice against God but are unbelievers because of the environment of unbelief in which they grow up] will grow, who by a first sin against God who presented himself to their reason, have placed an obstacle to interior illumination or to exterior revelation, through which God would have given them the gift of faith, bringing to perfection their first religious idea.¹⁶

And for those who hear and reject? The sin of unbelief is grave.

He will provide relief to you who are sorely tried, as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels; when ‘with flaming power he will inflict punishment on those who do not acknowledge God nor heed’ the good news of our Lord Jesus. Such as these will suffer the penalty of eternal ruin apart from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might on the Day when he comes, to be glorified in his holy ones and adored by all who have believed – for you already have our witness to you. (2 Th 1: 7-10)

¹⁶ Étienne Hugué, “Le scandale édifiant d’une exposition missionnaire,” in *Revue Thomiste*, No. 76 (1933) 217-42, and No. 78-79 (1933) 533-67. p. 562.

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. An exploration of the footnotes in LG 16, which is beyond the scope of this article, would provide the historical background of this development of doctrine, and provide a clear way of reading this text in continuity with the tradition.¹⁷ At the same time though the Council clearly taught that “rather 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)

While it may very well be that, in Cardinal Dulles’ words, priests and theologians who give the impression that hell is a medieval superstition, are doing “Satan’s work” one thing is sure; they are not being faithful to the structure of reality as revealed to us in Scripture, they are seriously misleading people about the truth of our situation, they are

¹⁷ I’ve explored many of these issues at greater length in my S.T.L. thesis on this topic done at the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C.

not grasping the actual teaching of the Council, and they are doctrinally undermining an important rationale for evangelization.

It was already apparent to astute commentators decades ago that there were theological theories circulating which went way beyond what the Church understood the truth to be about the salvation of unbelievers.¹⁸ Despite these warnings the drift to speaking of evangelization as an “enrichment” of human life, or simply because we are commanded to evangelize by Christ, and the gradual disappearance of the “biblical world view” of the two ways, the two destinies, in conjunction with philosophical presuppositions that have become increasingly stronger in our culture, has only increased over time.

The tendency has been to repeat the argument from authority (we are commanded to evangelize) or to talk about the “enrichment” that knowing Christ brings to human life rather than to elaborate the reasons for the deep necessity of such evangelization; namely, vast numbers of people within and without the Church don’t appear to be seeking God and trying to do his will and follow the light of their

¹⁸ As early as 1933 astute observations were being made, and substantial articles being written, that showed that theological theories that were beginning to appear which assumed that the mercy of God wouldn’t permit many to be lost would convert mission to a matter of “a greater fullness of life” and not really a matter of life or death as regards eternal destiny; and would undermine it. One such article. “Le scandale édifiant d’une exposition missionnaire,” was written by Père Hugué, O.P. and appeared in two parts in the *Revue Thomiste*, No. 76 (1933) 217-42, and No. 78-79 (1933) 533-67. He states: “Si la prédication missionnaire n’est pas tant une question de vie ou de mort qu’une question de plénitude de vie; si elle n’est pas une question de vie ou de mort pour un grand nombre d’infidèles, l’Église n’est plus la voie normale du salut, mais seulement une école de perfection pour les grandes âmes appelées à la plénitude de la vie chrétienne. La raison la plus urgente des missions disparaît ; elle ne sera pas équivalentement remplacée par toutes celles qu’on s’efforcera de trouver, qui ne sont pas sans valeur, mais qui jusqu’ici n’étaient que des motifs complémentaires pour tous les missionnaires.” 227-8. My translation follows :

“If missionary preaching is not so much a question of life or death but rather a question of a greater fullness of life ; if it is not a question of life or death for a great number of unbelievers, the Church then is no longer the ordinary way of salvation, but only a school of perfection for great souls called to the fullness of Christian life. The most urgent reason for missions disappears; it will not be equivalently replaced by those reasons that people are trying hard to find, which are not without their value, but until now were only secondary reasons for people to carry out mission.”

consciences but are rather exchanging the truth of God for a lie, suppressing the truth, and living in rebellion and immorality and need desperately to be invited to faith and repentance in order to be saved. Evangelization is about *salvation*. Something profoundly important is truly at stake.

There's a consistent message woven throughout the Revelation of both Testaments. There are two ways, two choices. One leads to eternal life, the other leads to eternal death.

Mt. 7: 13-14 which treats of the broad and narrow ways is not an isolated text, but summarizes a fundamental theme of Revelation, the two ways, the two choices, the two races, the separation of humanity on the day of judgment, the weeds and the wheat, the sheep and the goats, the foolish and the wise, the vicious and the virtuous, the branches that bear fruit and those that are cut off and thrown in the fire, the saved and the condemned, the houses on rock, and those on sand, those who hear the Word and those who ignore it, the heavenly kingdom and hell, the just who are saved with difficulty, the godless who are condemned, those who die in their sins, those who die forgiven, those who love the light and those who love the darkness, those who receive Him and those who don't receive Him, the repentant, believing thief and the mocking, unbelieving thief etc.

St. Thomas teaches that the reality of the separation of the human race into those who receive God's mercy and those who reject it is prefigured at Calvary in the opposite responses of the two thieves crucified next to Jesus. Thomas cites Chrysostom, Jerome, Pope Leo, Augustine, Hilary and Bede for this traditional interpretation. Thomas' citation of Augustine will give a sense of these patristic commentaries: "The very cross, if thou

mark it well, was a judgment-seat: for the judge being set in the midst, the one who believed was delivered, the other who mocked Him was condemned. Already He has signified what He shall do to the quick and the dead, some He will set on His right, others on His left hand.” (Augustine, Jo. vii. 36), (ST III, q. 46, a. 11).

It is not just unbelievers who are liable to eternal death but believers who are believers in name only. In speaking of the Eucharist St. Thomas affirms Augustine’s judgment that “many take this sacrament who will never come to glory.” “Just as Christ’s Passion has not its effect in them who are not disposed towards it as they should be, so also they do not come to glory through this sacrament who receive it unworthily . . . it is no wonder, then, if those who do not keep innocence, do not secure the effect of this sacrament.”(ST III, q. 79, a. 2, ad 2)

This teaching is reaffirmed strikingly in a text from Vatican II that is seldom cited:

Even though incorporated into the Church, one who does not however persevere in charity is not saved. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but “in body” not “in heart” [the footnote gives several citations from St. Augustine]. All children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be the more severely judged. [the footnote here gives

citations from Lk, Mt, and James in support of what has just been affirmed]. (LG 14)

The citation of Romans 1 and the implicit reference to Romans 2 in LG 16 shows us that something is really at stake: eternal salvation or damnation. The gospel is a chance to “escape the wrath to come.” Judgment continually happens in history, but the “day of wrath,” the “day of the Lord,” will definitively pass sentence on the entire human race and there will be a permanent separation between those who believed and obeyed and those who didn’t. This isn’t just a theoretical possibility or an empty warning. The witness of the entire Bible- and indeed of all of human history - is to the actual historical realization of choice for and against God.

There are those who we see in history *actually choosing* the way that leads to life and others that *actually choose* the way that leads to death, those who choose the blessing and those who choose the curse. (Deut. 30: 15-20) We see the difference between the wise and the foolish (Sirach 21: 11-28), between those who serve God and those who refuse to serve him, between those who fear the Lord and trust in him and those who wickedly defy him and trust in themselves (Malachi 3: 16-21), between those who believe and those who refuse to believe, between those who truly know the Father and those who don’t, between those who grieve and quench the Spirit and those who don’t, between those who worship the one God in Spirit and truth and those who have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worship the creature, between the city of God and the city of man, between those who love the brethren and those who don’t, between the good and the wicked. This separation which exists even now is finalized and the

eternal reward and punishment appropriate to each individual and grouping is carried out definitively on the great Day of Judgment.

Jesus reveals to us many things but occasionally he emphasizes, with solemnity, that what he is about to say is of special importance. Before we consider these words we need to remember what Vatican II taught about the authority of God's Word:

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures. (*Dei verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 11)

In order for the new evangelization to flourish there is a need is for clear teaching and bold preaching, in the power of the Holy Spirit, which communicates the revealed Word of God as it comes to us in sacred scripture, the tradition, and the contemporary magisterium, including the neglected last three sentences of LG 16.

“25 Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. **26** For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, **27** and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man. **28** Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice **29** and come forth,

those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.

John 5:25-29 (RSV)

For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but condemned them to the chains of Tartarus and handed them over to be kept for judgment;⁵ and if he did not spare the ancient world, even though he preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, together with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the godless world;⁶ and if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (to destruction), reducing them to ashes, making them an example for the godless (people) of what is coming;⁷ and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man oppressed by the licentious conduct of unprincipled people⁸ (for day after day that righteous man living among them was tormented in his righteous soul at the lawless deeds that he saw and heard),⁹ then the Lord knows how to rescue the devout from trial and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment,¹⁰ and especially those who follow the flesh with its depraved desire and show contempt for lordship.

2 Peter 2:4-10 (NAB)

If the “new evangelization” is truly to flourish and the truly good news of God’s offer of mercy and eternal life is to be promulgated widely in the power of the Holy Spirit we have a decision to make. Servais Pinckaers frames the decision like this:

The Church in its turn must pass through the testing of faith, must stand alone before God far from the world, in order to be rooted in Christ, in God. These are the questions asked: will the Church dare to believe in the Word of God, even when it seems to be folly, a scandal, the stupidity of a prescientific age in the eyes of the world's learned ones? Will it have the courage to hope in God when human hope is gone, and renounce human support if need be? Can it love God more than the world and all it offers, more than itself...The crucial point in the encounter between Christianity and the modern world is found in the affirmation and audacious preaching of the supernatural, other-worldly character of faith in Jesus Christ. .. In the measure in which it avoids detachment and the transcendence of human values in order to remain bonded to the world....Whatever upheavals illusions, books it may produce, it is self-condemned to spiritual sterility. It recoils before the cross of Christ.¹⁹

May we choose wisely, courageously and faithfully.

¹⁹ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* trans. from the third edition by Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995) 313-315.