



# *Apostles for Today*

*Reflection and Prayer - February 2013*

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## **THE NEW EVANGELIZATION: INSIGHTS OF THE FOUNDER**

During the month of October 2012, His Holiness Benedict XVI gathered nearly 300 Cardinals, Bishops and experts for the 13th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. His purpose was to gain their assistance in discerning how best to respond pastorally to today's challenges rooted in the allure of Western secularization and the resulting rising number of Catholics who have been turning away from the Church.

As with each preceding synod, the Vatican prepared the participants in this Synod for a New Evangelization by first circulating a lengthy preparatory paper (Lineamenta) throughout the Church. The feedback resulted in a working paper which was then sent to the Synod participants in June of 2012. Fr. Vincent Pallotti, were he invited and given a copy, would have been an enthusiastic and resourceful contributor. As we know, his lifelong ministry was that of an evangelical trumpet, announcing the Good News of Christ and responding to the signs of his times.

Vincent would have been of one mind with Benedict's primary purpose, to enlist all Catholics, especially the laity, in calling secularized people back into the fold of true believers. The Synod for the New Evangelization was aimed "principally at those who, though baptized, have drifted away from the Church and live without reference to the Christian life... (Message, article 2). For the sake of brevity, I will respectfully refer to this target population as "secular."

So what makes today's evangelization "new"? Clearly, the gospel

message itself has not changed. Nor has the Vatican to date encouraged a novel strategy. What is clearly “new” is the target. As noted above, the primary focus is on the large population of former Catholics who, once familiar with the gospel message, have now turned away. In particular, as the Synod’s concluding Message made explicit, the rising numbers of these secularized Europeans and North Americans have captured the Vatican’s pastoral concern. To a lesser extent but also of serious concern is the limited number of South Americans who have been aggressively and successfully evangelized by non-Catholic religions.

Vincent was no stranger to the rise of secularism in his own day. The first and last decades of his life were like bookends, during which Rome itself was taken over by French troops who expelled religious and clergy from convents and monasteries and forced three popes into exile. Vincent’s response, like that of the 2012 Synod Fathers, was to affirm total trust in divine providence and redouble all efforts to spread the Good News to the ends of the earth.

His Holiness Benedict XVI will weigh the Synod’s recommendations and, within a year or so, write an Apostolic Letter on the New Evangelization, directing the Church’s future pastoral course of action. While eagerly awaiting that publication, we, as members of the Pallottine family, can prayerfully reflect on the insights which the founder brought to the task of evangelization in his day. One in particular has long impressed me as worthy of imitation, namely, Vincent’s explicit affirmation of God’s image within each person, even prior to that person’s birth, baptism or evangelization.

Vincent believed that each person was born in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). For him, this was not simply an exaggeration or metaphor, but a reality expressing the Creator’s infinite love for each individual. He understood each person to be a living image of God and thus also of all the divine attributes (Cf. *God the Infinite Love, Meditations VIII-XX, OCCC XIII*, pp. 59-115). One implication which flows from this Pallottine insight is the need

for us to bring a sense of deep respect for those with whom we intend to share the Good News.

The Synod Fathers' concluding Message (article 1) took as its starting point Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:5 ff). They affirmed Jesus as the authentic living water for which every human heart thirsts. They highlighted that the Samaritan woman came to the well with an empty bucket and noted that she was, as we are today, at risk of harm by drawing from society's polluted wells. The Synod offers this image to encourage us to be confident that the Church is the authentic source of Christ's living waters.

This stark contrast between true believers and an antagonistic culture reminds me of the challenge facing the first generation of Christians. They struggled with how to be effective evangelizers, first to the Jews and then, after much soul-searching, to the gentiles. Vincent was well aware of St. Paul's struggle to convince St. Peter to accept the gentiles as respectable participants in evangelization. Peter's encounter with the Roman Centurion Cornelius (Acts 10) concluded with Peter reversing his opinion and finally admitting that nothing that comes from the hand of God should be called "unclean." Again, in Acts (ch. 15), when the disciples were arguing this same tension in Jerusalem, Peter told them that he had changed his earlier beliefs because he saw that the Holy Spirit was given to Cornelius even before he, Peter, arrived to proclaim the good news (15:8-9). Peter's conversion and conclusion reminds me of Vincent's insight: because we come from the hand of God, we are born as His image even prior to the flow of baptismal waters. The examples of Saints Peter, Paul and Vincent encourage us to begin our evangelization with respect for all persons, including those who have different beliefs or who have turned away from the Church

Here then are several questions that may be helpful for prayerful mediation as we seek to discern our Church's call to commit ourselves to the New Evangelization and to identify what made Fr. Vincent Pallotti's evangelizing so effective in his day.

## Reflection Questions and Actions

1. The call to personal conversion is central to Jesus' message. Recognizing this, the New Evangelization encourages all who have previously rejected Church membership to take a second look at their view of the Catholic faith. A practical way to begin is to reach out to "secular" friends, family members and colleagues and ask them: What aspect of the faith or of the Church, if any, have you found most troubling?

2. St. Peter, with Paul's urging, had a conversion experience in how he approached gentiles. To what extent are there aspects within yourself or the Church which would benefit from discerning a need for conversion? Examples?

3. Share your findings with the members of your religious or Union community. Ask: to what extent do our findings confirm or challenge our understanding of why these former members of the Church have moved away from the Church? Do we, the Church, need to express our faith differently and do a better job of catechizing children and adults? Or, does the challenge require us to go deeper than simply doing a better job of delivering the message?

4. For the better part of nearly two centuries, the Pallottine family has engaged in evangelization by reviving faith and rekindling love. What aspects of this charism do you personally most treasure? How have those aspects influenced your own spirituality and guided the way you do your ministry, your work or how you interact with others?

5. This emphasis on being respectful of those who we attempt to re-evangelize is certainly not new to the Pallottine family. Share with one another some of the ways your community has followed St. Vincent's respectful approach to others.

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