

## **What is evangelisation?**

The meaning of evangelisation follows the meanings of Revelation and Christian faith. Evangelisation is the process through which the Church cooperates today with God's act of self communication, calling human beings to conversion and to faith in Jesus Christ [GDC 46–49]. Like Revelation and Christian faith, evangelisation involves progressive stages.

There has been considerable confusion within the Church about the meaning of evangelisation. It is important to review briefly the Church's developing understanding of this term, for it affects some of the debate today about religious education.

### **Pre-1975 meanings of evangelisation**

Avery Dulles in his article *John Paul II and the New Evangelisation* points to the influence of kerygmatic theologians upon the Church's understanding of evangelisation before and immediately after the Second Vatican Council [Dulles, 1992]. Drawing from their understanding of the practice of the early Church, kerygmatic theologians understood evangelisation to be a stage of Christian initiation. During this stage, the basic Christian message (or *kerygma*) was proclaimed, inviting an initial faith conversion in Jesus Christ. This laid the foundation for initiatory catechesis (or the catechumenate).

After the Council, official Church statements adopted this meaning of evangelisation. For example, *The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* spoke of [RCIA 7 (a)]:

*The first period (which) consists of inquiry by the candidate, and evangelisation and the pre-catechumenate on the part of the Church. It ends with entrance into the order of catechumens.*

While neat and orderly, this understanding of evangelisation could not sustain the pastoral pressures of the twentieth century. As a result, by 1974, four understandings of evangelisation had developed in the Church. Also, sacramental historians questioned, and even challenged, whether the pastoral practice of the early Church was in fact as simple as the kerygmatic theologians suggested [eg Martos 1991].

The preparatory document for the General Synod on Evangelisation, held in Rome in 1974, identified the four most common meanings of the word 'evangelisation' used within the Church at that time. These were [EMW 1973, p3]:

*In the first place, the word can mean every activity whereby the world is in any way transformed in accordance with the will of God ...*

*Secondly, the word is used to mean the priestly, prophetic and royal activity by which the Church is built up according to Christ's intention.*

*A third ... meaning is the activity whereby the Gospel is proclaimed and explained, and whereby living faith is awakened in non-Christians and fostered in Christians ...*

*Finally, the word 'evangelisation' is restricted to meaning the first proclamation of the Gospel to non-Christians, whereby the faith is awakened (missionary preaching: kerygma).*

The Synod worked to clarify this situation. In 1975, Pope Paul VI, in his post synodal Apostolic Exhortation *On Evangelisation in the Modern World*, spelt out the meaning of evangelisation that has been used by the Church ever since [EN 18]:

*For the Church, evangelisation means bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity, and, through its influence, transforming humanity from within and making it new ...*

*The purpose of evangelisation is therefore precisely this interior change ... the Church evangelises when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, both the personal and the collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieux which are theirs.*

Within evangelisation, the *Directory* distinguishes two particular processes that need to be remembered in any discussion on religious education in Australia today. The first is the normal process of evangelisation which includes Christian witness and proclaiming the Word of God in ways that are appropriate to the different stages in people's journey in faith [GDC 47].

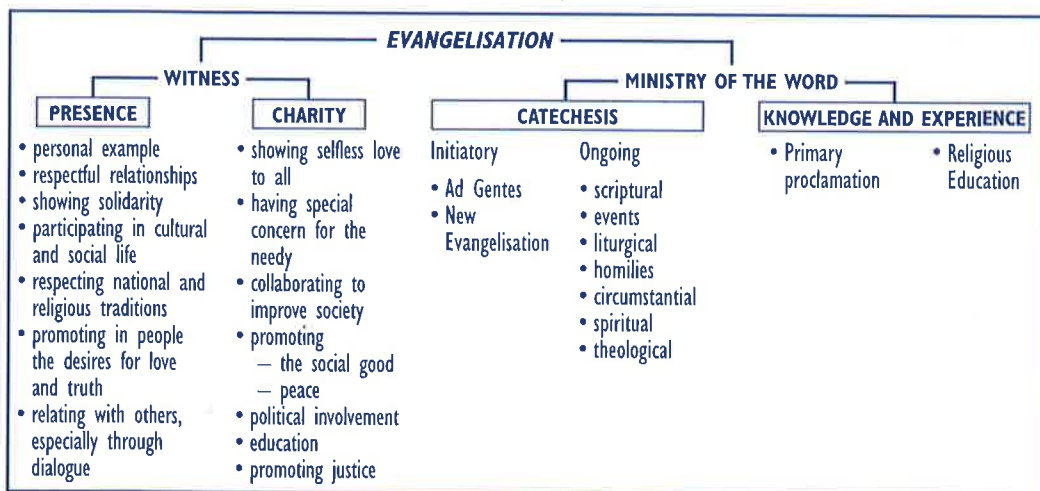
The other is the 'New Evangelisation'. This is addressed to *baptised* people who have *lost* a sense of living *faith*, of *belonging* to the Church, and of *Christ* and the *Gospel* [GDC 58 (c), cf CCC 154]. For these people [GDC 90]:

*The basis of their conversion is the Baptism which they have already received, and whose power they must develop.*

### ELEMENTS OF EVANGELISATION: CHRISTIAN WITNESS AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

The *Directory* spells out the two basic elements of the evangelisation process. Broadly speaking, these are *Christian witness* and the *ministry of the word*. The following chart attempts to provide a broad overview of all that is involved in evangelisation as it is explained by the *General Directory for Catechesis*.

CHART ONE



## **What is evangelisation?**

If God's act of Revelation reaches out to every human person on planet Earth, there are appropriate evangelisation activities through which every member of the Church can cooperate with God's Revelation to every person. This is true for everyone, regardless of culture, age, spirituality, belief or non-belief.

*Christian witness* is the 'first act of evangelisation'. Its activities are of fundamental importance for evangelisation, for they stir basic questions in those being witnessed to [EN 21]:

*Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst?*

The Spirit works through the efforts of those who endeavour to offer Christian witness by their 'presence' and 'charity'. Charity here means loving God and others for God's sake [CCC 1822]. The Second Vatican Council showed the scope of witness activities in its *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*. The examples given in the above chart are from this *Decree* [AG 11, 12].

The *Decree* shows that witness is much more than giving good example. It also requires relating with others, being involved in their lives and needs. Good witness, therefore, cannot be achieved from a distance or by conveying some sense of religious or moral superiority.

*Ministry of the word* in the *Directory* refers to any use of human words by any baptised believer to speak of God's works [GDC 50]:

*... to those [works] which God has done and continues to do, especially in the liturgy; to the witness of Christians; to the transforming action which these Christians achieve, together with so many [others] of good will, throughout the world.*

The *Directory* distinguishes between this sense of ministry of the word and that of the ordained ministry [GDC 50 n 55]. Baptised people exercise the ministry of the word through catechesis activities on the one hand, and through 'knowledge and experience' activities (one of which is religious education) on the other. The Holy Spirit builds upon all of these activities [GDC 142]:

*[The disciple] is assisted in developing in himself 'the divine education' received by means of catechesis, and by means of knowledge and experience.*

## **Obstacles to evangelisation**

Though founded upon 'the divine power of the Message', the need for conversion on the part of the hearer means that there are obstacles those seeking to evangelise need to face. The Parable of the Sower gives important examples [cf GDC 15].

The first is lack of openness [Mark 4:15]. Then there is the kind of shallow enthusiasm for the Word that lacks the depth needed for it to take deep root [Mark 4:17]. Anyone involved with young people today knows that, as is the

case with many adults, it can be easier to promote superficial religious enthusiasm than genuine evangelisation and lasting conversion.

Thirdly, there are 'the worries of the world, the lure of riches' [Mark 4:19]. These reflect priorities that choke the Word. Too often effective evangelisation is hampered by hearers feeling they can give little real time to prayer, to worship and to the things of God. Then there are 'the other passions', such as jealousy, bad temper and greed [Mark 4:19; eg Galatians 5:19].

To help hearers of evangelisation to become like 'rich soil', evangelisers need to do all that they can to promote openness to the Christian message in their society, firstly by effective witness. Challenging influences that can close people to the Gospel, such as the media, also need to be addressed.

Then there is the need to promote spiritual and other genuinely human values, and to counter those of materialism and affluence. Family stability and the kinds of life-styles that lead to healthy emotional lives need to be encouraged, and those which cause stress or lead to 'passions' need challenging.

Evangelisation, including religious education, also requires addressing whatever factors and influences in hearers and in society inhibit the divine action of the Message. Many other obstacles to evangelisation could also be mentioned – social injustices, misery and scandal given by Christians are examples.

### **Discussion starters**

*'Evangelisation is the process through which the Church cooperates with God's act of self-communication to people today'. Discuss ways this occurs in your parish and Catholic school.*

*What is evangelisation anyhow?*

*'For the Church, evangelisation means bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity, and, through its influence, transforming humanity from within and making it new'. Name some of the aspects of what you consider should be the Church's role in current global, national and local issues.*

*'The ... Church evangelises when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, both the personal and the collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieux which are theirs.' What is your understanding of the above statement in the light of your experience?*