



## ABP FISICHELLA: WE NEED NEW EVANGELIZERS

2012-08-09



(Vatican Radio) “We cannot conduct a new evangelisation without new evangelizers”, said Archbishop Rino Fisichella Thursday as he opened a three day conference on New Evangelisation in down town Sydney, Australia.

As keynote speaker at Proclaim 2012, the President of the Vatican Council for New Evangelisation spoke of the decline of the faith in Europe and western societies, which, he said, cannot be stemmed by a “reform of structures” but only by a personal encounter with the Risen Christ. He also urged “new relationships of esteem, of trust and of welcome of people’s various gifts” within the Church.

“To be an evangelizer is a vocation so that all people may be able to hear the Gospel of Jesus, believe in him and call upon him. That vocation is born on the very day of our baptism and it is a vocation to every believer in Christ to make of himself or herself a credible bearer of the good news encapsulated in his teaching. To be sent, then, is intrinsic to the baptismal vocation; this implies for all Christians that they assume this responsibility, each one in their own person, without any possibility of delegating it to others. The proclamation of the Gospel cannot be delegated to others; rather, it requires the awareness specific to the believer that he or she is to be a bearer of Christ wherever they go”.

Below the full text of Archbishop Fisichella’s intervention at Proclaim 2012

### WHAT IS THE NEW EVANGELIZATION AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE CHURCH?

**Sydney, 9th August, 2012.**

The new evangelization is a challenge. In fact, it is a great challenge that the Church accepts in order to confirm once more the presence of the Risen Christ, who guides her through history. We could find many different definitions of 'new evangelization'. However, already in 1974, Paul VI stated: 'No definition which is only partial and fragmentary can provide an explanation of the rich, complex and dynamic reality which is evangelization, without running the risk of impoverishing it and in the end of distorting it. It is impossible to understand it, unless we try to embrace within our perspective all of its essential elements.' Even so, he affirmed very strongly and to avoid any misunderstanding: 'There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom, the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, is not proclaimed'. Paul VI's concern, though, that evangelization might be truly new, is to be found in this passage: 'This problem of "how to evangelize" remains always a current question because the methods change according to the circumstances of time, place and culture and hence create a certain challenge to our capacity for discovery and for adaptation. The responsibility for creating the most suitable and the most effective methods for communicating the Gospel message to the people of our time, in a way which is daring but wise, in full fidelity to its contents, lies especially upon us, who are Pastors of the Church.' In this apostolic exhortation, we find important points which remain as fundamental elements of content of the new evangelization today: the liturgy, the primacy of witness, the need to know how to use the new instruments of communication, popular piety ... thus, the relevance of *Evangelii nuntiandi*, as the first reflection by the Magisterium a few years after the Council, remains as a constant source of stimulation.

From his homily at Nova Huta in June, 1979, where for the first time he used the expression 'new evangelization, John Paul II taught us for 27 years how important it is to understand the significance of a new 'fervour', of new 'methods' and of new 'expressions'. Finally, Benedict XVI wished to accept this challenge in a concrete manner and he has established the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization to 'offer appropriate answers so that the entire Church, allowing herself to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit, may be able to present herself to the contemporary world with a new missionary impulse in order to promote a new evangelization.' It seems important, however, to state, at the very beginning of our reflection, that the Church has not set out on the road of the new evangelization because she finds herself under strong pressure from secularism; but, first of all, she does this because she wishes to be obedient and faithful to the word of the Lord Jesus, who commanded her to go into the whole world and to bring his Gospel to every creature (Mk. 16:15). In this simple thought we can find in summary form a project for the decades ahead, which must find us able to understand fully the responsibility which lies upon the Church of Jesus Christ in this particular period of history. The Church exists in order to bring the Gospel to every person in every age, wherever they find themselves. Jesus' command is so crystal clear that it admits neither of misunderstandings nor of excuses of any kind. Those who believe in his word are sent out along the roads of the world to proclaim that the salvation which was promised has become a reality. This proclamation needs to be united to a style of life which enables the disciples of Christ to be recognised as such wherever they are. As long as the heart of Christianity is Jesus Christ, encountering him will demand an impact which will allow people to see in his disciples a life which is coherent with what they announce. The road of the new evangelization is marked out; we are called upon to renew the proclamation of Jesus Christ, of the mystery of his death and resurrection, to call forth once more faith in him through the conversion of life. If our eyes were still capable of recognising the deep significance of the events which characterise the life of our contemporaries, it would be easy to demonstrate how greatly this proclamation still occupies a place of importance. The area upon which we need to stimulate people's reflection, in fact, is the meaning of life and of death, of life beyond death; from those questions which touch human existence as such and which determine our personal identity, Jesus Christ cannot be excluded. If the proclamation of the new evangelization is not strong in presenting the element of mystery which surrounds human life and which relates us to the infinite mystery of the God of Jesus Christ, it will lack the effective power it needs to elicit the response of faith.

It may help us to enter more fully into our reflection if we take up the words of the apostle Paul: 'You must lead your whole lives according to the Christ you have received – Jesus the Lord; you must be rooted in him and built on him and held firm by the faith you have been taught and full of thanksgiving. Make sure that no-one traps you and deprives you of your freedom by some second-hand, empty, rational philosophy, based on the principles of this world instead of on Christ.' (Col. 2:6-8). The situation of the Christian community today is not very different from that of the first disciples in the city of Colossae. Unlike Christians from other communities, the life and the behaviour of these believers gave Paul no cause for complaint; rather, the news he received of them was a cause of praise both for the faith they had in the Lord Jesus and for their witness of charity; both the one and the other pervaded their thoughts and sustained them in their hope, as can be glimpsed from the opening words of the letter: 'We have never failed to remember you in our prayers and to give thanks for you to God, the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, ever since we heard about your faith in Christ Jesus and the love that you show towards all the saints because of the hope that is stored up for you in heaven.' (Col. 1: 3-5). The apostle's concern, however, is directed to the cultural context, within which the believers are living. He fears that they may be easily deceived by new doctrines, by philosophies extraneous to his preaching and by false ideas, which could lead to a form of syncretism such as to render null what is new in the Gospel. The invitation he addresses to Christians, therefore, is that of being able to discern between what is true and what is false, between that which bears fruit and that which, by contrast, is sterile and ephemeral. It is interesting to note that Paul reminds the Colossians, as his first point, of their profession of faith. Christ has been proclaimed to them, they have heard his word, they have welcomed the Gospel and they have been converted. On this reality, with its various stages, they have built their life and they have developed a behaviour which was such as to enable them to be recognised as disciples of the Lord. The community, therefore, must remain completely firm in the proclamation made by the apostle, without abandoning it in any way. In short, the transmission of the faith is decisive because, on the basis of that transmission, are determined both fidelity to the Gospel and the generous welcome given to it by all who come to faith. The four expressions to which Paul refers are particularly interesting and remain as imperatives for us too: 'to be rooted in the Lord', 'to remain firm in faith', 'to be full of thanksgiving', 'to take care no-one deceives you'. The firmness of the rock on which Christian existence is to be built does not stand in contradiction to the fact that we must travel with constancy along the path in order to penetrate ever more deeply into the mystery. Planting and building, moreover, are cause and effect and only in this way is it possible to build up the community with more and more new disciples. In the same way, that firmness is reinforced by the teaching which is offered to Christians so that they may not be tossed about and confused by widely disparate views about the meaning of life. The call to take care and to remain alert so that no-one may be deceived is a real worry for the apostles, not only so that his ministry may not be rendered vain, especially so that Christians may not fall back into the non-sense of life. Thanksgiving, finally, enables us to appreciate how much the life of the Christian community finds its profound and irreplaceable locus of meaning in prayer. It is not just a case of giving thanks to the Lord with the hymns and songs which are proper to prayer, but of giving expression to the time of the liturgical action with the fulness which is due for the gift of faith we have received. In a word, once more the apostles place believers before the fulness of the life of faith, which is rendered explicit in the profession of the creed, in prayer and in witness. To be sure, we cannot hide away from the fact that nowadays there are many 'winds of doctrine' which have shaken and which continue to shake us. The great problem of secularism has changed our society, our culture and hence our way of thinking and our behaviour. There are some expressions of this which it is well not to forget, in order to understand precisely the cultural context within which we find ourselves. It may be helpful to consider two such expressions. The first belongs to the philosopher, M. Heidegger: 'The time of the night of the world is the time of poverty because it becomes ever more impoverished. It has already become so impoverished that it does not even recognise the absence of God as absence.' The second is a challenge which comes from one of the most prolific thinkers of the nineteenth century, Dostoevsky: 'The key point of the question lies in this: whether a person, imbued with modern civilisation, a European, is still capable of belief, of belief precisely in the divinity of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. In this, in fact, lies the whole of faith.' During his visit to Germany last year, Pope Benedict XVI gave some points of orientation to respond to questions such as these:

'The absence of God from our society weighs upon us more heavily, the history of his revelation, about which the Sacred Scriptures speak, seems to be located in a past which becomes ever more distant from us. Should we perhaps give way before the pressure of secularisation, become modern by diluting the faith? Of course, the faith has to be thought out and especially lived out today in a way which is new, in order to become something which belongs to the present. But it is not the dilution of the faith which helps us here, but only living the faith fully in our world of today ... Tactical changes will not save us, will not save Christianity, but only a faith which is thought out and lived out anew, by means of which Christ and with Him the living God may enter into this world of ours'. Finally, it is asked: 'The question which time and again lies at the centre of disputes is: what is a reform of the Church? How does it take place? What are the ways of bringing this about and what are its objectives? With some anxiety not only believing members of the faithful, but even those outside of the Church observe how those people who go to church regularly are becoming older all the time and their number is in continual decline; how there is a stagnation in priestly vocations, how scepticism and unbelief are growing. What, then, must we do? There is an infinite number of discussions as to what to do so that this tendency may be reversed. Certainly, many things need to be done. But doing on its own does not solve the problem. The core of the crisis of the Church in Europe is the crisis of faith. If we do not find a response to that problem, if faith is not re-vitalised to the point where it becomes a matter of profound conviction and a real source of strength thanks to the encounter with Jesus Christ, all the other reforms will remain ineffective'.

### **The New Evangelizers.**

We cannot conduct a new evangelisation without new evangelizers. In St. Paul's letter to the Romans, we find written: 'For whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But they will not ask his help unless they believe in him and they will not believe in him unless they have heard of him and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher and they will not have a preacher unless one is sent, but, as Scripture says: "The footsteps of those who bring good news is a welcome sound" ' (Rom. 10:13-15). As we may note, the idea which emerges from the apostle, in the first place, is that of the necessary relationship between invoking the name of the Lord and having faith in him and of being sent out to proclaim him, so that all may believe. At the root of this mission is the call; that extends from invocation to mission, because it recognises that Jesus is Lord of everything and of all people. Therefore, to be an evangelizer is a vocation so that all people may be able to hear the Gospel of Jesus, believe in him and call upon him. That vocation is born on the very day of our baptism and it is a vocation to every believer in Christ to make of himself or herself a credible bearer of the good news encapsulated in his teaching. To be sent, then, is intrinsic to the baptismal vocation; this implies for all Christians that they assume this responsibility, each one in their own person, without any possibility of delegating it to others. The proclamation of the Gospel cannot be delegated to others; rather, it requires the awareness specific to the believer that he or she is to be a bearer of Christ wherever they go. We have evidence of this conviction already in the oldest writings; Cyril, the bishop of Jerusalem, stated this in his catecheses: 'having received in ourselves his body and his blood, we are transformed into bearers of Christ'. The Christian, then, is of his very nature christophoro (bearer of Christ) and only in this way can the words of the Lord, so rich in the meaning they carry, be understood: 'Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light' (Mt. 11:29-30). The yoke to which Jesus alludes is none other than the invitation to become his disciples and to share his very own life; hence, to take part in his mission of salvation.

The first evangelizer, certainly, is the bishop. As successor of the apostles, upon him is conferred the mandate of being a living icon in the world of a courageous and strong proclamation of the Gospel. He cannot stay silent; his experience of the Risen Lord obliges him to give witness. Peter's expression just after Easter: 'We cannot be silent' (Acts 4:20), notwithstanding the obligation imposed upon them by the leaders of the people and the

threat of violence, should remain in our lives as a pastoral imperative, from which we may not withdraw ourselves. Priests participate and share in the mission to evangelize which is proper to the bishop; together with him, they form the one presbyterate (unum presbyterium), that is to say the single priestly body placed at the service of the People of God to proclaim his word and to keep it always alive. Priests are asked to examine the challenges present in the priestly life. The first challenges they are called upon to understand stem from directly within our being priests. To the extent that we are able to accept and to make our own these challenges, we shall be able to see also as real the challenges which the world places before us. The first challenge, therefore, is in the order of reflecting upon what it means to be priests in the world of today, to understand the vocation fully. The priesthood is not a matter of human achievement nor a right, as many today think, but it is the gift which God makes to those he has decided to call, to remain with him, in the service of his Church. To forget this vocational dimension is the equivalent of misunderstanding everything and to make of the priest an employee and not a man who undertakes a service marked by its totally gratuitous nature. If we can accept this point, it will enable us to relate the priest first of all with the reality which brings him into being: the Eucharist. The real challenge consists exactly in understanding ourselves in relation to the mystery which is celebrated and which makes of every priest a minister of Christ. The Eucharist remains as a gift which can never be extinguished, which was made to the Church and to every priest personally; for this reason respect and devotion are due, without ever pretending to be able to control the mystery whose servants we are, as if we were its masters. The whole of the priestly ministry should be characterised by putting in first place not our own person, with our own opinions, but Jesus Christ.

A very special role is played by lay people, that is by all the baptised who live the experience of faith in parishes, in associations, in movements and in that incredible galaxy given by the action of the Holy Spirit, who constantly works for the mission of the Church of Christ and who never allows himself to be limited by anything. The document *Christifideles laici* (1988) constitutes a genuine theological and spiritual heritage for our understanding of the irreplaceable role which lay men and women have to fulfil in this special time in history. The Council's constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, contains an entirely original and decisive interpretative key for understanding the contribution of the laity to the new evangelization. There we read: 'Lay people are called above all to make the Church present and operative in those places and in those circumstances where she cannot become salt of the earth unless by means of them'. Precisely the phrase 'unless by means of them' should cause us to reflect on the specific contribution which lay people are called upon to make. There are settings and contexts which can be reached by no-one other than by lay men and women, who, through their professional lives, are in a position to give witness to the Gospel there. Their presence in these contexts is irreplaceable and only they are capable of bringing about the first form of humanisation, which is often the necessary prelude to speaking about Jesus Christ. It is necessary that every form of pastoral support be given to the laity by means of a renewal of the Christian community, which is not something brought about first of all by the reform of structures, but by new relationships of esteem, of trust and of welcome of people's various gifts. It is obvious that their action in the world will be all the more effective the more they are able to bring with them the community to which they belong, which encourages them in their mission, sustains them in the difficulties they meet and remains as the point of reference where they can recount the wonders the Lord has done through their apostolate.

### **The Path of the New Evangelization.**

To enable Christians to recover their identity and their sense of belonging to the Church can only be brought about to the extent that they recognise the need to insert themselves into the way of the Church and into her two thousand years of pastoral activity. A first element concerns formation. This involves everyone, with no exceptions. Formation makes it possible to recover the patrimony of faith and culture which we possess and which

we are called to transmit to the generations which will come after us. This implies that we are capable of entering into that culture, of recognising it, of understanding it, but also of transforming it in the light of the Gospel. Our presence can never be a passive one in the face of the development of culture in all of its manifestations. The Christian presence is 'seed' and 'yeast'; this implies an active presence in cultural settings, without being afraid of the strong determination of that current of thought which sets itself up as a form of 'language control' in order to prevent us from manifesting our own positions. Formation affects the important area of catechesis and extends to those of the preparation of future priests and of priestly preaching. There is a very special link between the new evangelization and the liturgy, which is the principal action by which the Church expresses her very own life. From the very beginnings the Church has been characterised by its liturgical action. What the community preached, proclaiming the Gospel of salvation, it then made present and alive in liturgical prayer. Salvation, then, was not just a proclamation made by enthusiastic human beings, but it was also an action which the Spirit brought about by the presence of Christ himself in the midst of the believing community. To separate these two aspects would be the equivalent of not understanding the Church. She lives by liturgical action, as the vital lymph for her proclamation, and the latter, once it has been accomplished, returns to the liturgy as to its effective completion. The *lex credendi* and the *lex orandi* form a single whole where, in the end, it becomes difficult to see the beginning of the one and the end of the other. Hence, the new evangelization must be capable of making of the liturgy its living heart, so that the proclamation which is made may have its full effect. It suffices to think not only of the pastoral opportunity afforded, but also of the value which certain celebrations possess for indicating meaning. From baptisms to funerals, everybody recognises what potential they have in themselves for communicating a message that, otherwise, would not be heard. How many people, 'indifferent' to religion take part in such celebrations and how many people are present at them who often are searching for a genuine spirituality! The words of the priest on these occasions should be capable of raising the question of the meaning of life, precisely on the basis of the celebration of the sacrament and of the signs which give expression to it. In short, what is celebrated is not a rite which is foreign to daily life, but it is directed precisely to the question of meaning which all seek. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the preaching and the signs are full of meanings which go beyond the priest and his person. Here, in fact, the link with the action of the Spirit enables us to recognise that hearts are transformed and, by his grace, are formed to render them open to welcome the moment of salvation. The importance of this connection between the new evangelization and the liturgy and between the liturgy and the action of the Holy Spirit makes it possible to foster in every believer a serious reflection on the responsibilities we have and on the witness which we are called upon to express in our way of life. In particular, we priests should reflect on a theme of enormous importance, which is that of the homily. Its value for the proclamation of the Gospel, for understanding the mystery which we celebrate and daily life is so obvious that it leaves us with no excuse. To neglect the preparation of the homily, or worse to improvise a homily, is a wrong done in the first place to the Word of God and, besides that, it humiliates the faithful. The time dedicated to the preparation of the homily is not time wasted, but it is the necessary condition for exercising the ministry in a way which is faithful, coherent and effective. In this way, too, we render a genuine service to the formation of the laity, planting in those who are listening the desire to know more and more about the Word of God and the contents of the faith.

Finally, a very special place in the new evangelization certainly belongs to the realm of charity. Entering into this perspective equates to focusing upon the multiple concrete signs which the Church continues, untiringly, to present to the world. Obedient to the action of the Holy Spirit, men and women in the course of these two thousand years have identified different areas for the purpose of making visible and of putting into action the word of the Lord: 'You have the poor with you always' (Jn. 12:8). The present form of 'have' helps us to understand very well how the history of the Church can never do without giving very special attention to the witness of charity. Here, in fact, her credibility is at stake as to that which constitutes the core of her proclamation: love. In his first encyclical, Benedict XVI has shown clearly the original meaning of Christian love, its origin, its development. its special character and the risks to be avoided. Love, however, is to be lived. In the circle which exists between faith and love, it is possible to verify the genuine nature of the relationship

which unites us to the Lord. In faith, in fact, we understand how God loves; in the exercise of charity it is made clear the extent to which Christians are faithful to his word. In a period such as our own, often marked by the closure of individuals within themselves without any possibility of having relationships with others, and in which delegating others to act often takes precedence over our own direct participation, this reminder of our responsibilities commits us to a form of witness which knows how to take upon ourselves the care of our brothers and sisters in greatest need. But, this after all is our history. At the Lord's word, we have learnt to insist upon that which the world rejects, which it considers useless or largely inefficient. The person who is chronically ill, the dying, the marginalised, the disabled and many others who, in the eyes of the world, express the lack of a future and lack of hope, find in the Christian one who is committed to them. We have many examples which recall in a powerful way the sanctity of men and women who have made of this programme the concrete proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and, with that, the beginning of an authentic cultural revolution. In the face of this holiness, every possibility of excuse collapses; incredulity gives way to credibility and the passion for truth and liberty finds a synthesis in the love which is offered without asking anything in return. From this perspective, too, the sign of voluntary work finds its place as a truly Christian proclamation on the part of those who are able to relativise every absolute which does not take the dignity of the person into serious consideration. In an age where everything seems to be possible just because it can be bought, we must increase the signs by which it can be shown that love and solidarity have no other price than commitment and personal sacrifice. This witness demonstrates that personal life comes to its full realisation only when it is placed in the perspective of gratuitousness.

### **In Conclusion.**

Turning the new evangelization into an empty formula, in which anything and everything finds a place, must be avoided. That cannot be. The expression needs to be understood and explained in a way which coherent with its proper meaning, because that is located in the foundation of the Church's own activity. Even with all of the uncertainties and ambiguities which invest it, it appears to be the most suitable expression to indicate the need the Church feels in this particular stage of history, especially in the West. The new evangelization, however, is not something alternative or parallel to what the Church has done in the twenty centuries of her history. New evangelization, therefore, indicates a new way of fulfilling the same, identical and immutable command of Jesus to the Church to bring his Gospel to all people. It is the proclamation of the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who in the mystery of his death and resurrection has redeemed the world, opening up to all who believe in him the gate to eternal life. For this reason, we need to rediscover the foundations of our belief. It is the time for a new and mature apologetics of our faith, to offer hope to today's world. We are called, therefore, to repeat with conviction the need to 'have ready the reason' for our faith (1 Pet. 3:15), recognising that this needs to be done with courtesy, respect and a clear conscience (1 Pet. 3:16). Reminding ourselves of these three terms has its value for our programme. The presentation and the explanation made by Christians of the hope we carry within us cannot turn to arrogance and pride on the basis of a certain sense of superiority which may be felt in regard to others. Let us not forget that our contemporaries are characterised strongly by a sense of jealousy for their own independence and for taking responsibility for their own personal lives. They have become allergic to any form of authority and they suffer from the illusion that that alone is true which is produced by science. They change rapidly their way of thinking and of living, becoming more and more subjects who wish to be involved in absolutely everything, even if it is greater than they are, especially if it draws them into that narcissism, no longer even hidden, which deceives them about the essence of life. We find ourselves in the midst of an explosion of claims to individual liberty, which affect the spheres of living out our sexuality, inter-personal and family relations, activities in our free time and at work. The space available for teaching and for communication has become caught up fatally in all of this and the entire context of life has been modified. In short, there has come to be created a situation which is completely new, in which people want to find substitutes for the old values, especially for those expressed in Christianity. That is why God has

become a useless hypothesis and a competitor to be avoided, if not to be eliminated. The consequence which derives from this, nevertheless, is that the human being has lost his bearings and has forgotten what is essential. The great challenge which awaits us in the future lies entirely in this; whoever wants the liberty to live as if God does not exist can live like that, but they should know what they will encounter as a result. They should be aware that this choice is the premise neither for liberty nor for autonomy. Reducing to silence the desire for God, which has its roots deep within us, will never be able to achieve autonomy. The enigma of personal existence is not resolved by denying the mystery, but by choosing to immerse ourselves within the mystery. This is the path to follow. As may be noted, the crisis is first of all a cultural and an anthropological crisis. The human being is in crisis. It is not in marginalising Christianity that we can attain a better society. That would be an impossibility. Such a reading of events is not only short-sighted, but it is mistaken in its very premises. To be sure, our history is made up of light and of darkness, but the message we bear is one of genuine liberation for human beings and one of corresponding progress for peoples. Therefore, it is necessary that we emerge from a certain form of neutrality into which many countries have enclosed themselves, even to avoid having to take a position in favour of their own history. If the West is ashamed of what it has been, of the roots which sustain it and of the Christian identity which still forms it, then it will not have a future. The conclusion can only be that of an irreversible decline. We Catholics will not be found lacking in regard to the responsibility we must assume and we will not accept being marginalised. Our work of the new evangelization implies this also. We are convinced that our presence is essential. No-one else could take our place. Deprived of the significant presence of Catholics, our countries would be the poorer and would be less attractive. We do not wish this to happen. The hope that we bear has something extra-ordinarily great about it because it makes it possible for us to look at the present, even with its difficulties, with a gaze that is full of confidence and serenity. It is the hope which does not delude because it is strong in a promise of life; God who loves and who forgives.

**Archbishop Rino Fisichella**