

Background

In 1965, Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops “to promote a closer union and greater cooperation between the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops of the whole world” and to allow for a “greater use of the bishops’ assistance in providing for the good of the universal Church.” In 1974, 209 Synod Fathers took part in the Third Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which was devoted to evangelization in the modern world. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* was the first papal document to flow from a synod.

“When you read through the interventions during the 1974 Synod of Bishops that was convened by Pope Paul VI to take up the topic of evangelization, bishops themselves had a wide range of meanings for the concept ‘evangelization,’” says Father Wehner. “In his closing address to the Synod, one can almost detect a sense of frustration from Paul VI because the synodal fathers were not united on what we mean [by] ‘to evangelize.’”

“*Evangelii Nuntiandi* was a carefully thought out response to the confusion engendered by both liberation theology and the conciliar recognition that ‘seeds of truth’ were found in the various non-Christian religions by clearly and eloquently reaffirming that the liberation that Christ brings is foundationally a liberation from sin and its consequences and from the devil, and that salvation is not just about changing the structures of society but is about eternal life,” he adds.

Significance

One of the four aims of the Second Vatican Council, according to the opening sentence of its first document, was “to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church.” *Evangelii Nuntiandi* was particularly significant because it led Catholics to turn their attention anew to this conciliar mandate.

“It seems to me that this apostolic exhortation, written 10 years after the close of Vatican II, was both the precursor for the new evangelization and trailblazer for how we ought to interpret the work of the Council,” says David Spesia, director of the Diocese of Joliet’s Newman Institute for Lay Formation and a USCCB evangelization committee consultant. “*Evangelii Nuntiandi* sees the work of the Council as ‘striving to proclaim the Gospel to all people’ (no. 2), and so Vatican II is not a rupture with the great tradition but is an essential extension of the Gospel revelation for modern or postmodern times. In many ways, Pope Paul VI was already working on a ‘hermeneutic of continuity’—as Pope Benedict would later describe it.”

Evangelii Nuntiandi was also significant “because it explains how the Council’s teaching on the vocation of the laity and the Church’s commitment to human promotion and social justice are incorporated into the overall task of evangelization,” says Sister Sara Butler, M.S.B.T., a member of the International Theological Commission, an expert at the 2012 synod, and a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* “defines ‘evangelization’ in a broad sense so that it includes not only the first proclamation of the Gospel that leads individuals to conversion and baptism, but also the task of inaugurating the Kingdom of God in concrete historical situations.”

“Pope Paul speaks of both the conversion of consciences and the conversion of cultures, and makes the point that verbal proclamation is incomplete without the witness of life, but that witness of life is also incomplete without the proclamation of ‘the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God’ (no. 22),” she adds.

In writing *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul also emphasized that evangelization is essence of the Church’s mission.

“Paul VI did three vitally important things in the document: he spoke clearly and unequivocally; he spoke as a pastor with sense of urgency; most importantly, he spoke of the most central reality,” says Curtis Martin.

“Among the key themes of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* are human liberation, the cooperative personal and ecclesial dimensions of evangelization, the leadership role of the Holy Spirit, and the role of prayer (both liturgical and devotional) in equipping evangelizers for their task,” he added. “A very important, but oft-overlooked, theme of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* is the role that the local Church plays in evangelization. In an age that simultaneously inclines toward excessively

individualistic approaches to faith-sharing, and yet so often waits for headquarters (that is, the Vatican) to hand down marching orders, Pope Paul's emphasis on the diocesan Church's role in evangelization strikes a valuable center perspective."

It is clear that many Christians today do not prioritize their faith with the same level of commitment that they prioritize their gym schedule or their leisure time, and that many of our parishes are failing to address the real, heartfelt needs of our Christians. There are of course exceptions to this, but unfortunately, they are not normative. It is clear that unless the Catholic Church offers active opportunities for youth and adults to understand and dialogue with the teachings of the Church and [to learn] how to integrate the teachings of the Church into their lives, other voices and forces within the secular world will continue to influence them to believe and act outside of the faith. This is the genius of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: the willingness to ask the difficult questions, to call each person to deeper conversion, and to call us to put Christ at the center of all that we say and do as a Church, as a society, and as individuals.

Challenges

Nearly four decades after its publication, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* continues to challenge the Church in our own time. "The document challenges every Catholic to joyfully and boldly share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the world," says Murphy. "Today it challenges us to consider various ways to help a world to encounter Christ anew."

"This apostolic letter also cautions against claiming to love and give allegiance to Christ while dismissing the Church, and even calling into question its fundamental constitution," she adds. "It encourages the development of small Christian communities, as long as they do not adopt a mentality opposed to the 'institutional Church.' Today, some movements for Church reform seem in need of this message."

"This document remains a wake-up call for all Christians to place Jesus Christ at the front and center of our own lives and challenges those ministering in the Church to reach out to all believers and non-believers with conviction, credibility, and relatability," says Stanz. She adds:

We cannot call others to embrace Christ without embracing Christ ourselves, and we cannot challenge the culture for Christ without first allowing Christ to challenge, change, and transform us. ... In order to do this we must endeavor to rediscover our own faith and to strengthen our commitment to the person of Jesus Christ, lest we fall into the pit of secularism.

"Pope Paul VI points to 'word' and 'deed' as the hinges of evangelization," Father Wehner adds. "I think Catholics can sometimes feel that speaking about their faith in public imposes something on those who are not Catholic. The lie of secular humanism is that faith is a private affair. Hence, many Catholics have turned inward on themselves—this includes clergy and laity alike."

Ultimately, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* challenges Catholics to become missionary disciples—a phrase used often by Pope Francis. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, says Father Hurley, "invites Catholics today to think of themselves as disciples of Jesus. This fundamentally is what I think the call to a new evangelization is all about. It requires a paradigm shift from thinking of ourselves as members of the Church to disciples in the Church. This includes bishops, priests, and deacons as well. So often people in ministry in the Church identify themselves by the task they are doing rather than their deepest identity. Identity as disciples calls us to the deepest identity we have with Jesus, this encounter that Blessed John Paul II spoke so much about along with Pope Benedict. Of course, Pope Francis is taking this culture of encounter to a whole new level."

"Because *Evangelii Nuntiandi* speaks of the Church's deepest identity, it is timeless," says Curtis Martin. He explains:

The life of a Christian is a life of encounter with Jesus Christ...conversion, reconversion, and evangelization. It is only when I have encountered Jesus and live a transformed life that I can then invite others to encounter Christ. This is the great project of the Church. When we forget this central reality we fall into the danger of either moralism or social work. Jesus unites these two tendencies by elevating them. Our faith is a love story, where we strive to live rightly so that we can love and we strive to care for others because God first cares for us. We do not serve principles or causes; we serve a Person, who loved us first and has called us to imitate Him.