

# CATHOLICISM

## THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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GLOSSARY & ENDNOTES

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WORD  
ON FIRE

"I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!"

— Luke 12:49

For the first few centuries, the Church had no shortage of ardor. From St. Stephen's heroic martyrdom to St. Paul's tireless missionary work, the Church was bolstered by the prophetic courage of St. Ignace of Antioch, the Church was first to attempt every attempt to quench its flames. And that's exactly what Pope John Paul II had in mind when he summoned fresh zeal as part of the New Evangelization:

"Over the years, I have often repeated the words of the new evangelization... [We must] allow ourselves to be set on fire with the ardor of the apostolic preaching which follows the Holy Spirit. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: 'Wee to me if I do not preach the Gospel!'"



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# NEW ARDOR

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as non-threatening, accessible, and culturally appealing as possible. Nuns and clergy exchanged distinctive dress and frowned on special rules; doctrinal peculiarities were set aside in favor of generally humanistic ethical values; liturgies were designed to be above all, exonerating homilies were delivered by priests who had far more questions than answers; troubling biblical texts dealing

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For the first few centuries, the Church had no shortage of ardor. From St. Stephen's heroic martyrdom to St. Paul's tireless missionary work, and further bolstered by the prophetic courage of St. Ignatius of Antioch, the Church was fiery and alive despite every attempt to quench its flames. And that's exactly what Pope John Paul II had in mind when he summoned fresh zeal as part of the New Evangelization:

"Over the years, I have often repeated the summons to the new evangelization... [We must] allow ourselves to be filled with the ardor of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel' (1 Cor 9:16)." <sup>24</sup>

But how did St. Paul and the earliest disciples get that way? Where does that ardor come from, and just as important, what prevents it from growing?

## "BEIGE CATHOLICISM"

Imagine a photograph of the Sistine Chapel. Carefully detailed and rich with vivid colors, it captures the splendor of Michelangelo's masterpiece. Now imagine that same picture laying outside, shriveling under a torrential rain. The details smear, the colors fade, and the photograph crumbles into a messy, unrecognizable blob.

This rain-soaked picture provides a good image for the religious experiences Fr. Robert Barron had as a child coming of age in the sixties and seventies. He describes it as "beige Catholicism," a turning away from the faith's vibrant details—"its particularity, its strangeness, that very spicy uniqueness that makes it fascinating"<sup>25</sup>—in favor of something much more tame and benign:

*"It seemed to be an overriding concern of the teachers, nuns, and priests who formed my generation to make our Catholicism as non-threatening, accessible, and culturally appealing as possible. Nuns and clergy eschewed distinctive dress and frowned on special titles; doctrinal peculiarities were set aside in favor of generally humanistic ethical values; liturgies were designed to be, above all, entertaining; homilies were delivered by priests who had far more questions than answers; troubling biblical texts dealing*

### TRAITS OF "BEIGE CATHOLICISM"

The New Evangelization provides an antidote to "beige Catholicism," a watering-down of the faith typically characterized by:

- A vague, abstract spirituality devoid of concrete traits distinguishing it from other religions and ideologies
- An overemphasis on feelings and personal experience instead of objective truths and external practices
- Reducing the Church to a lifeless institution rather than the dynamic means to encounter, receive, and share the Risen Lord
- Ignoring or explaining away the Faith's supernatural dimensions, especially those found in Scripture
- Viewing the Sacraments as mechanical rites of passage rather than opportunities to meet Christ and renew our fervor
- Treating Jesus as a mere historical figure rather than a living Lord whom we meet and follow today
- Reading the Bible skeptically as a historical document instead of trusting it to shape and transform our lives

## MODERNITY

For René Descartes, a seventeenth-century French philosopher, the world was bathed in confusion. Descartes thought nothing could be known with certainty. He looked around and saw, as Fr. Robert Barron explained in *The Priority of Christ*, that:

"On even the most basic issues, the best philosophers, poets, and theologians across the centuries were in fundamental disagreement, and worse, there seemed to be no coherent criteria by which to adjudicate their disputes. What's more, when Descartes looked to the moral practices of the various European cultures, he found a similar multiplicity and confusion: what was considered rational and morally upright for one people might be lightly valued or condemned outright by another."<sup>30</sup>

Descartes' solution was to doubt. He reasoned that if all knowledge was built on rocky ground, we should approach it skeptically. So he decided to test everything he knew. Descartes quickly dismissed tradition, since many traditions contradicted each other and therefore all must be unstable. He threw out abstract concepts, which he thought were too cloudy and unreliable. By the time he finished all his testing, he was only sure about one thing: his own existence, which he confirmed by the fact that he could think: *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am.")

Descartes' systematic doubt paved the way for a profound cultural shift known as Modernity. Stretching from the late sixteenth to the early twentieth century, many philosophers followed Descartes' lead. They turned away from objective markers of truth — God, the Church, tradition, and reason — instead grounding all knowledge on a combination of personal experience, intuition, and whatever one feels to be true.

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with the divine anger and judgment and the reality of sin were scarcely mentioned; Jesus was presented exclusively as friend and brother.

There was, above all, a hand-wringing and apologetic quality to the Catholicism of my youth. It seemed as though the project was to 'translate' uniquely Catholic doctrine, practice, and style into forms acceptable to the enviroing culture, always downplaying whatever might be construed as 'odd' or 'supernatural.' Thus, the biblical and theological tended to be replaced by the political, the sociological, and, above all, the psychological."<sup>26</sup>

Decades later, this "beige Catholicism" continues to haunt the Church and is part of the reason why so many have drifted away. Today, one in five Americans claim no religious affiliation—the highest ever recorded.<sup>27</sup> Upwards of 100,000 baptized Catholics wander from the Church each year.<sup>28</sup> And most Catholics within the Church do not share their faith with others.

To be sure, these trends have many causes. The sex abuse crisis caused widespread scandal and damaged the Church's witness. Cultural threats, such as relativism and consumerism, have also choked out faith. Yet still, many people drift not because of these threats but simply because of indifference. Over the years, Catholicism becomes for them boring, bland, and banal. It turns "beige."

But what drives this "beige Catholicism"? How did we go from the zest and zeal of the early Church to this modern tepidity? "Beige Catholicism" has many roots but two are worth noting.

First, the domestication of Jesus. Many today, both within and beyond the Church, have reduced Jesus to just one religious leader among many. He's a great preacher, yes, and a wise man, indeed, but he's mostly indistinguishable from Confucius, Gandhi, or Deepak Chopra. The problem, of course, is that Jesus is far more than a nice spiritual guru. He claims to be God in human flesh. He performs miraculous healings. His words and actions paint him as a strange, subversive figure. When C.S. Lewis described his fictional Christ-figure Aslan, he could have easily been describing Christ himself: "He's wild, you know. Not like a tame lion."<sup>29</sup>

Reducing Jesus to "just another religious teacher" obscures his uniqueness. It dampens his vibrancy much like the waterlogged Michelangelo photo. Our grasp of Jesus' singular magnificence generates our excitement about him and, therefore, our fervor for evangelization.

Secondly, the downplaying of Jesus' Resurrection also spawns "beige Catholicism." Again, if Jesus was were simply a nice, ethical teacher whom the Romans killed and who remains dead, then he's just like any other religious figure. And if that's the case, then who cares? Why spread Jesus' teachings any more than Gandhi's? Why travel the world and face death to spread that sort of news? However, Christians from the very beginning have incessantly and emphatically said that Jesus isn't just a nice teacher or just a good man. They shouted that Jesus is God, risen from the dead! That's the Good News, and that was the source of their ardor.

## THE RESURRECTION

Soon after Jesus' crucifixion, two disciples journeyed away from Jerusalem. With deep sadness at the death of their hero, they turned their backs to the Cross. Suddenly, a man appeared alongside them. The stranger joined them for seven miles, and after listening to their conversation, offered his own commentary on the past week's events. When they finally reached their destination, the two men invited the stranger to stay the night.

However upon entering the house, the visitor did an odd thing: he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the men. The men instantly recognized Jesus, risen from the dead. They looked at each other in shock. Reflecting back on their earlier conversation, they exclaimed, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way?" (Luke 24:32) The stranger vanished, and the two men immediately returned to Jerusalem, filled with passion and excitement, announcing the good news of the Risen Lord to the other disciples.

In this account we notice a striking pattern that appears throughout the Gospels: discouraged doubters meet the Risen Jesus and that encounter fills them with zeal. We see this with Mary Magdalene at the open tomb; with St. Peter and the other disciples in the upper room; and with St. Paul on the journey to Damascus. Meeting Jesus convinces them of his Resurrection, and that fact lights a fire within them, compelling them to spread the Good News.

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This modern shift lies behind many of today's worrisome religious trends. For example, the distressing rise of the "nones," those who don't identify with any religious tradition, corresponds to an explosive growth in "do it yourself" spirituality. Young people today especially like to say, "I choose myself how to live and worship God. Nobody tells me what to believe." Even worse, this trend has caused many Christians to measure Church teachings by their own feelings and beliefs. If the two conflict, they conclude that the Church must be wrong.

It's not difficult to see how Modernity strips Catholicism of its distinctive identity. When people approach our whole Tradition suspiciously, they reduce it to a least common denominator, to those few comfortable and widely accepted truths that aren't too troublesome. Thus Jesus becomes just another religious leader, a swell guy who encourages everyone to be nice to each other. The Church becomes little more than a helpful social service. And nobody sees either as special, vibrant, or attractive.

Modernity breeds "beige Catholicism" and therefore we must counter it. We should not completely dismiss individual judgments and experience, but we must distinguish them from objective truth.

## ST. FRANCIS XAVIER

Born in 1506 in Navarre, Spain, Francis Xavier was the youngest son of a wealthy state official. Though all his brothers joined the army, Francis studied law and theology at the University of Paris. There he met St. Ignatius of Loyola, the eventual founder of the Jesuits. Ignatius shared with Francis his dream of creating a society wholly devoted to the salvation of souls. On August 15, 1534, along with Francis and five other men, Ignatius launched the community. The men took vows of lifelong poverty and service to the Pope, which were invoked six years later when King John III of Portugal petitioned the Pope to send missionaries to the East.

The Pope chose Francis. After just two days notice, he sailed from Lisbon to Goa, the capital of the Portuguese Indies, where he began his missionary work preaching to pearl fishermen. Then after two years of successful evangelization, he sailed to other regions, preaching and baptizing at an astounding rate. Records attribute more than 700,000 conversions to the tireless missionary.

"...so great were the multitudes which he baptized, that sometimes, by the bare fatigue of administering that sacrament, he was scarce able to move his arm."<sup>38</sup>

In spite of constant weariness and sickness, Francis sailed across Asia. He went from India, to Malaysia, then to Sri Lanka. On August 15, 1549, fifteen years to the day after his initial vows, Francis landed in Japan, becoming the first Catholic missionary to enter that country. He evangelized the natives there and when they told him about China, he wanted to head there too. Unfortunately, Francis fell ill and died on December 3, 1552, a few miles off the Chinese coast.

Francis presents a living testimony to the "new ardor" required for the New Evangelization. His unshakeable drive, fueled by the Holy Spirit, carried him through vast lands and tiresome travels. Difficulties never overcame his ardor.

His resolute mission was to introduce people to the Risen Lord and that makes him a great patron and model for the New Evangelization.

"The Resurrection of Jesus is the crowning truth of our faith," explains the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.<sup>39</sup> Yet today, many deny a literal, physical Resurrection as both naïve and irrational. Some say the Resurrection only means that Jesus' teachings are immortal. Much like Homer's poetry, Shakespeare's plays, or Beethoven's symphonies, Jesus' teachings "live on" in our hearts and in that sense he's alive today.

Others suggest the Resurrection means that Jesus' cause goes on. Just as people today "revive" Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., or Mother Teresa by carrying on their legacies, people "resurrect" Jesus when they further his mission of peace and justice.

Finally, others claim the Resurrection accounts were simply poetic stories meant to inspire Jesus' followers. The disciples gathered around, felt his spirit, and then told evocative tales about empty tombs and appearances.

But if that's all the Resurrection means, we should just forget about it. We shouldn't spread the Good News of Jesus Christ any more than we talk about other religious or literary figures.

In response to all these theories, Fr. Barron proposes what he calls "The Grandmother Test":

"If you can't distinguish between the way you talk about your grandmother and the way you talk about Jesus, you've probably misunderstood Jesus...My grandmother mediated God's love and was a symbol of unconditional acceptance and concern. But I'm not founding a new religion based on my grandmother. If that's all Jesus was—a great grandmotherly figure or spiritual master—then to heck with him...The Good News is that Jesus Christ, who was crucified by the powers of the world, has been raised bodily from death."<sup>40</sup>

You sense on every page of the Gospel and in each of the great saints an overwhelming excitement resulting from a real meeting with a truly risen God. These people don't talk about symbols, legends, or literary devices. They describe an encounter so surprising, so unsettling and powerful, that they want to tell the whole world about it.

This is exactly the opposite of "beige Catholicism." This is Catholicism drenched, through and through, with vibrancy, color, and specificity. It produces the kind of faith that grabs you by the shoulders and shakes you with excitement.

## A NEW PENTECOST

After the earliest disciples met the Risen Jesus, they didn't immediately travel the world sharing the Good News. They first huddled in a room awaiting the Spirit that Jesus promised. Fifty days later, in a swirl of fire and energy, he arrived:

*"...suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit..." (Acts 2:1-4)*

The disciples radiated with zeal, so much so that on-lookers accused them of being drunk: "...they have had too much new wine" (Acts 2:13). This newfound enthusiasm, what Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa calls the "sober intoxication of the Spirit,"<sup>33</sup> inaugurated their mission with otherworldly fervor.

This event is known as Pentecost, and it offers another important lesson about evangelistic ardor, namely that the Holy Spirit activates it. We cannot artificially generate this type of zeal. And it does not result merely from intellectual conviction. As Pope John Paul II declared: "Missionary dynamism is not born of the will...It is born of the Spirit, who moves the Church to expand."<sup>34</sup>

## WORLD YOUTH DAY

Pope John Paul II instituted World Youth Day in 1984 as an international gathering of youth and young adults. Meant to stir up new ardor and showcase the Church's energy, it attracts hundreds of thousands of young people and features several days of prayer, worship, and celebration. Without question, it's one of the Church's most exciting events.

Every two to three years, the event is held in a different city: Denver in 1993; Toronto in 2002; Sydney in 2008; and Rio de Janeiro in 2013. Pope Benedict's message announcing the 2013 World Youth Day in Brazil encouraged young people to fight against evangelical apathy and boldly spread the faith:

"[A]llow yourselves to be led on by the power of God's love. Let that love overcome the tendency to remain enclosed in your own world with your own problems and your own habits. Have the courage to "go out" from yourselves in order to "go forth" towards others and to show them the way to an encounter with God...

I would like each of you to ask yourself: Have I ever had the courage to propose Baptism to young people who have not received it? Have I ever invited anyone to embark on a journey of discovery of the Christian faith? Dear friends, do not be afraid to suggest an encounter with Christ to people of your own age. Ask the Holy Spirit for help. The Spirit will show you the way to know and love Christ even more fully, and to be creative in spreading the Gospel."<sup>38</sup>

## GLOWING WITH FERVOR

"[T]he lack of fervor...is manifested in fatigue, disenchantment, compromise, lack of interest and above all lack of joy and hope. We exhort all those who have the task of evangelizing, by whatever title and at whatever level, always to nourish spiritual fervor...."

May it mean for us as it did for John the Baptist, for Peter and Paul, for the other apostles...an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench....

And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world."

— Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 80

In his exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI insisted on the Holy Spirit's vital role:

*"Evangelization will never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit...Techniques of evangelization are good, but even the most advanced ones could not replace the gentle action of the Spirit..."*

*It must be said that the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization: it is He who impels each individual to proclaim the Gospel, and it is He who in the depths of consciences causes the word of salvation to be accepted and understood."*<sup>35</sup>

To participate in the New Evangelization ourselves, we must respond to the Holy Spirit just like the earliest disciples. We receive the Spirit in baptism and confirmation. But then we open ourselves to the Spirit's work through prayer. We invite the Spirit to conform us to the Risen Lord and guide us in sharing our faith.

Since the Holy Spirit drives our missionary activity, strengthens our witness, and prepares the hearts of others to receive the Good News, the New Evangelization requires a "new Pentecost" as Pope Paul VI explains:

*"It is not by chance that the great inauguration of evangelization took place on the morning of Pentecost, under the inspiration of the Spirit..."*

[W]e exhort all evangelizers, whoever they may be, to pray without ceasing to the Holy Spirit with faith and fervor and to let themselves prudently be guided by

Him as the decisive inspirer of their plans, their initiatives and their evangelizing activity."<sup>36</sup>

Thus when we refuse to domesticate Jesus; when we're clear about his Resurrection; when we encounter the Risen Lord; and when the Holy Spirit fills us, we re-color "beige Catholicism" and enflame the New Evangelization with ardor.

"Come, Creator Spirit, come  
from your bright heavenly throne,  
come take possession of our souls,  
and make them all your own."<sup>37</sup>



## FURTHER READING

### *Books:*

*Bridging the Great Divide: Musings of a Post-Liberal, Post-Conservative Evangelical Catholic* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) by Robert Barron – A collection of essays examining the roots of “beige Catholicism” and offering several solutions.

*Handbook of Catholic Apologetics* (Ignatius Press, 2009) by Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli – Chapter 8 analyzes the evidence and alternative theories for Jesus’ Resurrection before making a clear and convincing case for its historical reality.

*The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress Press, 2003) by N.T. Wright – The definitive scholarly work on Jesus’ bodily Resurrection from the dead by a renowned Anglican biblical scholar.

*Set All Afire* (Ignatius Press, 1991) by Louis de Wohl – A fictional account of the Church’s most prodigious missionary saint, St. Francis Xavier. Journey with St. Francis from Europe to Goa, India, Malaysia, and Japan as he sets the Orient ablaze with the fire of Christ.

### *Church Documents:*

*Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), Pope Paul VI – This foundational text on evangelization focuses on the Holy Spirit’s role in section 75 and ardor in section 80.

*Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2000), Pope John Paul II – The Pope’s apostolic letter written at the beginning of the third millennium encouraging Catholics to be “filled with the ardor of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost” (40).

## QUESTIONS

### *For Understanding:*

1. What elements led to “beige Catholicism” and why is it so detrimental to evangelization?
2. Why isn't Jesus “just another religious teacher”? (John 5:18, John 10:30-33, Philippians 2:5-8)
3. What historical evidence is there for Jesus' Resurrection? (CCC 638-644 and Matthew 28:1-10, John 20:1-18)

Thus when we get into domesticating Jesus, when we're clear about his Resurrection, when we encounter the Risen Lord, and when the Holy Spirit fills us, we re-color “beige Catholicism” and embrace the New Evangelization with ardor.

“Come, Creator Spirit, come  
from your bright heavenly throne,  
come take possession of our souls,  
and make them all your own.”