

## **New Evangelization and its Surprises...**

For some time now the Church has been using the expression “New Evangelization,” not in the sense of a new Gospel but to signify a new way of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, the permanent mission of the Church since the Incarnation of the Word. We are called to study and implement the ideas contained in the exhortation that followed the Synod on the New Evangelization held in Rome in the fall of 2012. 2013 revealed, as if in anticipation, specific aspects of this New Evangelization so dear to the hearts of two eminent disciples of Jesus Christ: Benedict XVI and Francis.

I call the year 2013 in the Church the year of “papal surprises.” In this article I will examine three surprises from Benedict XVI: his resignation as Pope, the witnesses he chose to evoke in his Ash Wednesday homily on February 13, and the sharing of his experience of Vatican II on February 14. Regarding Francis, it will be his speech to the pre-conclave General Congregation, his letter to non-believers and his interview with Father Spadaro, SJ. It is my opinion that these six events contain precious secrets that will help us to think and live evangelization for the 21st century.

### **An Ending Filled with Surprises**

“After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry.... For this reason, and well aware of the seriousness of this act, with full freedom I declare that I renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome, Successor of Saint Peter, entrusted to me by the Cardinals on April 19, 2005.” I would be interested to know more about the mysterious dialogue that must have taken place between Benedict XVI and Celestine V (1215-1296), the last Pope to pose such an act.... Indeed, it was a surprising decision imbued with profound humility, lucidity and a rare sense of freedom, an act that I believe opens a marvellous path of evangelization.

Two days after his resignation, Benedict XVI gave the homily on Ash Wednesday. He talked about the desert as being a place of conversion and spoke about the great conversions of Paul and Augustine. Then, even more surprisingly, he went on to name the great converts of the 20th century : Pavel Florenski, an agnostic who became a Russian Orthodox monk; Etty Hillesum, a young non-practicing Jew from Amsterdam who developed a great love for the Bible and Augustine, who before her death in Auschwitz came to love God and the practice of adoration; Dorothy Day, a militant socialist living in New York who was convinced atheistic communism was the solution to all social problems, was baptized and admitted to having an extraordinary attraction for prayer that even she could not understand.

Why did Benedict XVI choose these three figures? Their one commonality is their insatiable quest for God. His choices speak to the fact that his concerns were not limited to the Roman Catholic Church but to the question of what will become of God in the world. Would his concern have anything to do with the New Evangelization?

The following day, Benedict XVI talked about his experience of Vatican II, 50 years earlier when he was 35 years old. “There was an incredible sense of expectation. We were hoping that all would be renewed, that there would truly be a new Pentecost, a new era of the Church. There was a feeling that the Church was not moving forward, that it was declining, that it seemed more a thing of the past and not the herald of the future.

And at that moment, we were hoping that this relation would be renewed, that it would change; that the Church might once again be a force for tomorrow and a force for today.” His sharing made me realize the importance of considering the entire life-journey of the individual when relating it to the evangelization of persons and institutions.

### **Francis, a Man of Many Surprises**

At one of the pre-conclave General Congregations the then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio declared: “Evangelizing pre-supposes a desire in the Church to come out of herself. The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries.... When the Church does not come out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential and then gets sick. In Revelation, Jesus says that he is at the door and knocks. Obviously, the text refers to his knocking from the outside in order to enter but I think about the times in which Jesus knocks from within so that we will let him come out. The self-referential Church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him out.... Put simply, there are two images of the Church: the Church which evangelizes and comes out of herself and the worldly Church, living within herself, of herself, for herself.... Thinking of the next Pope: He must be a man who, from the contemplation and adoration of Jesus Christ, helps the Church to go out to the existential peripheries, that helps her to be the fruitful mother, who gains life from ‘the sweet and comforting joy of evangelizing’.”

Pope Francis continues to surprise us every day since his first appearance as Pope announcing his election and chosen name. I’ll never forget the reaction of Christian Bobin: “Despite his age, the fact that he has only one lung, the fatigue and heaviness of the task, I see a new man, alive and vibrant who has deeply touched me... he knows where Christ lives better than we do.”

On September 11 Pope Francis surprised everyone with a letter he published in the newspaper *La República*. The letter written in an “affectionately congenial” style was his response to the critique of Eugenio Scalfari (who identifies himself as a non-believer not in the search of God) on the encyclical *Lumen Fidei*. Far from reacting in an aggressive manner to the ideas of this well-known journalist, the Pope said he would be happy to have the “possibility to dialogue on a reality as important as that of faith.” This faith, said Francis, “is born from the encounter with Jesus, but could never happen without the Church.” He went on to say: “I feel at ease in listening to your questions and in seeking with you the ways through which we might perhaps begin a part of the way together.”

In his letter the Holy Father speaks of the reality of the cross as “there where Jesus shows Himself as the Son of God.” When speaking of the resurrection he says: “it is not to triumph over those who rejected him but to attest that ‘the love of God is stronger than death, the forgiveness of God is stronger than any sin’.” Francis says that Eugenio Scalfari is correct to think that the Incarnation of the Son of God is the core of faith.

It seemed to me that the rapid response from Pope Francis to Scalfari is a perfect example of what he means when he speaks about going to the existential peripheries of humanity. The tone as well as the content of the response reveal that Francis is not afraid to get to the heart of the matter. This was followed by a most unexpected phone call, an invitation to Scalfari to meet with his eminent interlocutor. We know this meeting took place because Scalfari spoke about it publicly.

The account of the interview conducted by his Jesuit confrere Antonio Spadaro, between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of August, gives us even greater insight into this man of many surprises. For the purposes of this article I will limit myself to his comparison of the Church to a field hospital after a battle: “I can clearly see that what the Church needs today is the ability to heal wounds and warm the hearts of the faithful, it needs to be by their side. I see the Church as a field hospital after a battle. It’s pointless to ask a seriously injured patient whether his cholesterol or blood sugar levels are high! It’s his wounds that need to be healed. The rest we can talk about later. Now we must think about treating those wounds... treating the wounds... And we need to start from the bottom. The most important thing is the first proclamation: ‘Jesus Christ has saved you’.... I dream of a Church that is both mother and pastor....”

We must also allow ourselves to be surprised by Benedict XVI: the style of his act of resignation as well as the action itself reveal a dimension of evangelization that is rarely highlighted. Our frailties can well be the place from which we are called to proclaim the Gospel. It is a fact that individually and communally we all experience days when our “doing” just doesn’t have the same reach, the same relevancy.

The idea of proposing three witnesses all at a different place in their lives... to go from agnosticism to belonging to a Christian church other than our own; to go from a life totally taken up with multiple amorous passions to a life of incessant dialogue with God; to go from a life conviction that atheistic communism is the solution to all problems to a life of social commitment at the service of the Gospel... is a marvellous way to broaden our concept of evangelization!

For Benedict to stop at the age of 85 and look back at what he was about at age 35 is another way to look at evangelization from a bit of a different angle.

By remaining attentive to the daily messages and actions of Francis we will see how true openness to the Gospel will lead us from one surprise to the next and we will discover the existential peripheries where we are called to go. We will not only learn that Jesus wants to come to us but that He wants to reach our sisters and brothers through us. We will be able to accept as gifts from God the opportunities to enter into dialogue with people wrestling with the same questions that disturb us. We will humbly accept the frailties of our Church. We will develop the attitudes of the caregivers in a field-hospital after a battle: we will heal the wounds with love and perseverance.

And now I ask you, what have we learned about THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL since November 26?

*Lorraine Caza, CND*  
lorcaza@videotron.ca