

Pope Francis, Vatican II, and Three “Pope-Saints”

教宗方濟各、梵二和三位「教宗聖人」

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Abstract: One remarkable achievement of Pope Francis is that during his pontificate, he has canonized *three* popes, John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II. This is a unique contribution of Pope Francis. In the mind of this author, it is significant that all these three “pope-saints” were active participants in Vatican II (1962-1965). Thus, one could validly assert that Pope Francis has not simply canonized three “Vatican II Popes”, *he has also canonized the legacy of the Second Vatican Council*. This article presents a “brief glimpse” of these three canonized saints, it highlights their pivotal roles in the Second Vatican Council. The author claims John XXIII as the joyful pope, Paul VI as the pope of

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evangelization, and John Paul II as the global missionary pope. The article also notes their missionary contribution to the worldwide Church, as well as the admiration that Pope Francis has for each of them.

Keywords: Pope Francis, Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II

【摘要】教宗方濟各的其中一項顯著成就是，在他就任期間，他冊封了三位教宗：若望二十三世、保祿六世和若望保祿二世，這是他的獨特貢獻。在筆者看來，這三位「教宗聖人」都是梵蒂岡第二次大公會議（1962-1965）的積極參與者，這點意義重大。因此，作者認為可以有力地斷言，教宗方濟各不單只冊封了三位「梵二教宗」；他也將梵二的遺產也一併列為聖品。本文對這三位聖人進行了簡要介紹；強調了他們在梵二中的關鍵作用。作者稱若望二十三世為喜樂的教宗；保祿六世為福音傳播的教宗；若望保祿二世作為全球傳教教宗。本文也提及他們對世界教會的傳教貢獻，以及教宗方濟各對他們每個人的欽佩。

關鍵字：教宗方濟各、教宗若望二十三世、教宗保祿六世、教宗若望保祿二世

Introduction

Our beloved Pope Francis is now into his thirteenth year as leader of the universal Church. Elected on March 13, 2013, he was officially installed as pope on the solemnity of Saint Joseph on March 19, 2013. These past twelve years (2013-2025) have been filled with intense activity; available data from Rome illustrates Francis’ very many pastoral involvements.

As the 266th pope, Francis has garnered many “firsts.” He is the first pope to take the name “Francis” in honor of Saint Francis of Assisi; both share a special love of the poor and needy. Francis’ first pastoral visit outside of Rome was to the island of Lampedusa, one of the nearest gateways to Europe for Africans fleeing poverty and conflict. He is the first pope coming from the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and the first pope from the Americas. In addition, he is the first pope to visit the Arabian Peninsula, birthplace of Islam. Francis leads the Church of 1.4 billion (over one-sixth of the world’s population).

Francis has visited at least 60 states and territories on his international trips, traveling about 255,000 miles. In his late-2024 visit to Asia, he covered over 20,000 miles (32,000 kilometers). He has made 35 pastoral visits within Italy and numerous parish visits within his diocese of Rome. He has canonized over 900 saints, including Mother Teresa of Calcutta and martyred Salvadoran Archbishop

Oscar Romero. To date he has created 110 cardinals and held approximately 1,000 general audiences which include catechetical reflections on various themes: sacraments, Church, family, mercy, faith, Christian hope, and the Mass. As of March 2025, he has prayed the *Angelus* and *Regina Coeli* with pilgrims and visitors approximately 1,100 times.

In addition, Francis has issued a variety of major documents, including four encyclicals: *Lumen Fidei* (2013), *Laudato Si* (2015), *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), and *Dilexit Nos* (2024). He has published seven apostolic exhortations, the first being *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013); others include *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018), and *Laudate Deum* (2023). His writings include the papal bull, *Misericordiae Vultus*, where he describes Jesus as “mercy made flesh.” He has called several synods of bishops and declared special years focused on consecrated life, mercy, and hope. He has personally attended three World Youth Days (Brazil, Poland, and Panama). He wisely governed the Church during the Covid-19 pandemic. And, this list of activities (extending from March 19, 2013-2025) could easily be augmented!

However, one remarkable “achievement” which is *not* included in these many statistics is that during his pontificate, Pope Francis has canonized *three* popes: John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II. While this presentation does not delve into the merits of popes canonizing other popes, it does highlight a unique contribution of Pope

Francis. And, in the mind of this author, it is significant that all these three “pope-saints” were active participants in Vatican II. Thus, one could validly assert that Pope Francis has not simply canonized three “Vatican II Popes”; *he has also canonized the legacy of the Second Vatican Council.*

This piece now turns to presenting a “brief glimpse” or “quick snapshot” of these three canonized saints; it highlights their pivotal roles in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). This presentation will also note their missionary contribution to the worldwide Church, as well as the admiration that Pope Francis has for each of them. Finally, one notes that this year is the sixtieth anniversary of the close of the momentous Vatican II (1965-2025).

1 John XXIII: Joyful Pope

Pope John XXIII, along with John Paul II, was declared a saint on April 27, 2014, Divine Mercy Sunday. Over the years of his short pontificate (1958-1963) John XXIII became a beloved figure worldwide; he was popularly known as “Good Pope John.” He is remembered for the convocation of the Second Vatican Council; note that his annual feast day on October 11 is fixed to commemorate his opening of Vatican II on October 11, 1962. Each year as the Church celebrates this saint, we are asked to recall the pivotal role of Vatican II in the ongoing life and mission of the Church.

Angelo Giuseppe Roncali, the fourth of thirteen children of peasant farmers, was born in the village of Sotto il Monte in Northern Italy on November 25, 1881. He entered the seminary as a young boy. Significantly, at the tender age of fifteen he began writing his spiritual diary, which was published as *Journal of a Soul* shortly after his death. Undoubtedly, Pope John's aim in life was to be a holy priest. One could validly say that he always tried to be a saint—and he made it!

1.1 Papal Contributions

Beginning his pontificate at age seventy-seven on October 28, 1958, Angelo Roncalli brought a whole new pastoral and personal style to the papacy. Describing the person and contribution of John XXIII during his visit to Bergamo on June 3, 2013 (50th anniversary of John's death), Pope Francis noted that John XXIII's life is a lesson in how obedience and trust in God lead to interior peace.

Pope Francis said: "The whole world recognized Pope John as a pastor and father, a pastor because he was a father.... It is so beautiful to find a priest, a good priest, filled with goodness." He was "an effective weaver of relationships and a solid champion of unity, both in the ecclesiastical community and outside it." He was always "open to dialogue with the Christians of other churches, with representatives of the Jewish and Muslim worlds and with many other people of good will."

Pope Francis said that John XXIII’s decision to convoke Vatican II was the result of a “prophetic intuition” based on his “love for the Church’s traditions and his awareness of the constant need for renewal.” The Council and Pope John’s “offering of his life for its success” Francis said, are “a bright beacon for the journey that lies ahead.... Let yourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit. Do not be afraid to take risks, just as he was not afraid.”

1.2 Genuine Spirituality

John XXIII’s outlook is, in fact, a spirituality that he communicated to the world. He took the call to holiness seriously throughout his entire life. His profound trust was evident in his simplicity, patience, gentleness and affability, qualities manifested in all his varied writings.

John XXIII could be very forceful in asserting his conviction that the Christian faith should result in deep, joyful hope. In his opening speech to the Second Vatican Council he said: “We feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand” (quoted by Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 84). He believed that divine providence was renewing humanity and, through a perceptive reading of the “signs of the times” (cf. *EG* 14, 51, 108), one could discern that by God’s designs a new order of human relations was emerging in the contemporary world.

1.3 Joy and Humor

Many laudatory things can be noted about the life of John XXIII. Clearly, joy and joviality, humor and happiness were characteristic of his personality. These gifts fostered a spirit of hope throughout the Church—and even within the wider world. Some few humorous vignettes reveal the heart and person of John XXIII.

The *sedia gestatoria* (the mobile papal chair used in processions) was distasteful to John XXIII; he said that it was uncomfortable and made him dizzy (he compared it to a rocking-horse). One day while being carried in a procession he overheard some Italian women speaking of his appearance and that he was very old, overly fat, and quite homely, especially due to the size of his nose. Pope John turned and benignly observed: “You must remember that being pope is not exactly a beauty contest.”

A new diplomat was received by the Pope. He asked how many persons worked at the Vatican. “Oh, no more than half of them!” replied John XXIII, winking an eye. Shortly before receiving President and Mrs. Kennedy, Pope John inquired as to the proper mode of addressing the wife of the President of the United States. The monsignor in charge of protocol told him that he could choose either Madame President or simply Madame. When John XXIII entered the audience hall, he spontaneously opened his arms, smiled broadly and exclaimed: “Ah, Jacqueline!”

As Apostolic Nuncio in France, a guest at a dinner banquet once asked Monsignor Roncalli: “Are you embarrassed when there are women present who wear low-necked dresses?” He replied: “When there’s a woman with a plunging neckline, the guests don’t look at her. They look at the Apostolic Nuncio to see how he’s taking it.”

1.4 Daily Decalogue of John XXIII

In his homily on October 11, 2006 commemorating the opening of Vatican II, Cardinal Bertone quoted what is widely known as the “Daily Decalogue of Pope John XXIII.” The following are some excerpts: “(a) Only for today, I will seek to live the lifelong day positively without wishing to solve the problems of my life all at once; (b) Only for today ... I will not criticize anyone; I will not claim to improve or discipline anyone except myself; (c) Only for today, I will be happy in the certainty that I was created to be happy, not only in the other world but also in this one; (d) Only for today, I will adapt to circumstances, without requiring all circumstances to be adapted to my own wishes; (e) Only for today, I will devote ten minutes of my time to some good reading....”

Pope John’s Decalogue continues: “(f) Only for today, I will do one good deed and not tell anyone about it; (g) Only for today, I will do at least one thing I do not like doing; and if my feelings are hurt, I will make sure that no one notices; (h) Only for today, I will make a plan for myself; I may not follow it to the letter, but I will make

it.... (i) Only for today, I will firmly believe, despite appearances, that the good Providence of God cares for me...; and (j) Only for today, I will have no fears. In particular, I will not be afraid to enjoy what is beautiful and to believe in goodness....” We marvel at John XXIII’s wisdom and seek to put it into practice—each and every day!

1.5 Reflection Points

Saint John XXIII, a holy man with a great heart, radiated an infectious optimism and joy. Radically open to the Holy Spirit, he certainly helped renew the Church, seeking to transform us all into a truly joyful community of Jesus’ missionary-disciples! As individual churches around the world and local parishes, we all ask ourselves: How can we integrate the numerous insights of this “joyful pope” into our daily lives, both as individuals and as communities?

1.6 Implication to the Church in China

When John XXIII convoked the Vatican II, due to its socio-political situation of China, the Catholic Church was not able to get in touch with the outside world. Thus, the message of Vatican II was unable to be transmitted to China. In spite of the many challenges and difficulties, like John XXIII, members of the Church in China were still full of joyful hope. They shared the pope’s quality of simplicity, patience and gentleness. It was only in 1980s

that the Church in China started to learn more about Vatican II and followed the footstep of other local churches in Church renewal. Many Catholics in China can understand deeper what a truly joyful community is after experiencing sorrowful suffering.

2 Paul VI: Pope of Evangelization

On World Mission Sunday in 2014, Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) was beatified in Rome. The choice of the occasion was significant! First, on Mission Sunday, the Church focuses on her missionary vocation and identity. And, when elected, the new pope specifically chose the name “Paul” because he saw himself preaching the Gospel to the whole world, following Saint Paul’s missionary dynamism. Secondly, the date marked the close of a special Synod of Bishops on the family; it was Paul VI who established the synod of bishops in 1965 to assist the Church in both reading and interpreting the signs of the times. The canonization of Paul VI was celebrated on October 14, 2018 at the close of the Synod of Bishops that was devoted to the youth and vocations.

2.1 Missionary Initiatives

Aside from expressing his “core identity” with the chosen name “Paul,” Giovanni Montini accomplished much to bring the Gospel message to contemporary humanity. Sharing John XXIII’s vision of Church renewal, Paul successfully concluded Vatican II and systematically

implemented its missionary vision. In addition, Paul VI presented his “dialogical” vision of the Church in his first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964). He established the Vatican office, known as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, on Pentecost Sunday 1964.

Paul, the missionary pope, initiated papal travels, literally covering the globe. His most extensive missionary journey in November-December 1970 brought him to various parts of Asia and the Pacific with visits to eight countries. He was in Manila from November 27-29, 1970. At the airport welcome ceremony he endured an assassination attempt by a Bolivian man dressed as a priest. He remained calm and went on to celebrate Mass in the Manila Cathedral and meet the Philippine President; he also addressed the Diplomatic Corps and received a delegation from Taiwan. Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, who was a 13-year-old boy during the papal visit, has noted: “Filipinos were blessed when the pope set foot on our soil in 1970.”

2.2 *Evangelii Nuntiandi*

Pope Paul will always be remembered for his 1975 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), *Evangelization in the Modern World*. This was the first papal document to flow from a synod (the 1974 world synod focused on the theme of evangelization). This beautiful document, as fresh today as when it was written, asserts that: (a) evangelization is the vocation proper to the Church; (b) the Church’s mission continues the mission

of Jesus; (c) evangelization is a multi-faceted reality; and, (d) evangelization includes a commitment to full human development and social justice.

Paul VI asserted: “We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church.... Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize” (*EN* 14). “For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity” (*EN* 18). *EN* became the *magna carta* for Catholic evangelization in the last quarter of the second millennium of Christianity. Without doubt, *EN* is one of the most important ecclesial documents of the post-Vatican II era. *EN* boldly addresses the topic of evangelization in the modern world.

2.3 Background

EN, a document of 23,000 words, was issued on December 8, 1975; it emerged from the 1974 Synod, an event prepared over a three-year period. Then, on October 22 (just four days before the Synod’s conclusion) three-quarters of the Synod text was rejected; it had failed to capture the testimonies and insights that characterized the first three weeks of Synod work. Thus, the final session of the Synod (October 26, 1974) was awaited with keen interest.

Pope Paul VI addressed the assembly frankly and

openly: “the synod of bishops has ended.... We should want to assess its achievements.... We cannot but be genuinely satisfied and optimistic about its outcome.... The theme [of evangelization] is too wide and complex to be dealt with properly in so short a time or to yield all the conclusions to which its discussion might give rise.... For this reason we judge that the Synod as a whole has been fruitful. For it places at the disposal of Peter’s successor, for the benefit of the entire Church, an abundance of advice, admonitions and proposals.”

2.4 *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Emerges

During a year-long gestation period, Pope Paul VI labored to produce from the rich experience and insights of the Synod a document that is clearly the work of discernment and synthesis. *EN* is structured in seven thematic chapters and framed with an introduction and conclusion. Chapter titles clearly indicate specific content (e.g. “What is Evangelization?” “The Methods of Evangelization,” “The Workers for Evangelization,” “The Spirit of Evangelization,” etc.). *EN* has been described as Paul VI’s “last and finest apostolic exhortation, a novel and effective form of the magisterium.”

EN was not written as a theological treatise (although excellent theological reflection pervades the document). Paul VI notes that his words are designed to be a “meditation on evangelization”; he hopes that they will succeed “in inviting the whole People of God assembled in the Church to make the same meditation” (5); the theme of meditation

appears often throughout *EN* (cf. 40, 76).

Another pivotal theme centers on fidelity, a double fidelity—to God’s message and to people (cf. 4, 39, 63). This fidelity is “the central axis of evangelization” (4). In numerous places throughout *EN*, Paul VI carefully defines, nuances, and balances diverse elements within the evangelization process (e.g. local and universal Church, culture and faith, liberation and evangelization, strengths and limitations of popular religiosity, etc.). The unique genius of Paul VI is to have achieved integration and balance on so many topics.

2.5 Evangelization is Integral and Holistic

The understanding of the term “evangelization” found in *EN* reflects a comprehensive and inclusive view. Sections 17 and 24 of *EN* provide a long list of the various elements comprising the evangelizing action of the Church. Both sections also strongly insist upon integrating and balancing all facets of evangelization. “Any partial and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even distorting it” (17). “Evangelization, as we have said, is a complex process made up of varied elements; ... they are complementary and mutually enriching” (24).

Note the broad and inclusive manner in which Paul VI speaks: “evangelizing means bringing the Good News

into all the strata of humanity” (18); “upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind’s criteria of judgment” (19); “what matters is to evangelize man’s culture and cultures” (20) so as to overcome “the split between the Gospel and culture [which] is without doubt the drama of our time” (20). The scope of evangelization extends to the full transformation of humanity and cultures in the light of the Gospel.

2.6 Theological Foundations

Viewing evangelization holistically and integrally has important practical and pastoral ramifications. It allows Christians to appreciate the myriad manifestations of evangelization; individual gifts, talents, and charisms are desired and treasured (66); no individual or group is master of evangelization (15, 78); everyone acts “in communion with the Church” (60); “the work of evangelization is a basic duty of the People of God” (59). Evangelization is anchored in “the Father’s love” (26) and in the entire life, mission, practice, and witness of Jesus, “the first evangelizer” (7, cf. 6-12). The Church “is born of the evangelizing activity of Jesus and the Twelve”; she “in her turn is sent by Jesus” (15).

EN contains several beautiful descriptions of the Church as an evangelizing community. “Evangelization is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize”; “evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission

of the Church” (14). “The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself” (15).

2.7 Diverse Synod Themes

Paul VI presents many of the key themes of the 1974 Synod in the mode of a pastoral synthesis: salvation and liberation (9, 27, 30-38), non-Christian religions (53, 80), religious liberty (39, 80), secularization (55), secularism (55-56), atheism (54-56), ecumenism (54, 76, 77), basic communities (58), diversified ministries (73), popular piety (48), sacraments in evangelization (23, 28, 47, 68), mass media (45, 80), Church as sign and sacrament of salvation (23, 59), violence (37), signs of the times (75-76), the local-universal Church dynamic (60-68), culture (20, 58), and the role of the Holy Spirit (75, 82).

In *EN* the Church has renewed her commitment to being a community of disciples and evangelizers (13, 15, 21, 24, 59, 66, 80), filled with joy and enthusiasm (73, 80), eager to give authentic witness (41, 76), under the dynamic action of the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization (75) and guided by Mary, the Star of Evangelization (82).

2.8 Synthetic Overview of Integral Evangelization

Without doubt, Pope Paul VI has gifted the Church with a rich understanding of the theology and praxis of evangelization. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* for Paul VI

is a microcosm of his understanding of missionary evangelization. One may validly express this holistic vision by naming five “principal elements” of the evangelization process: (a) presence and witness; (b) commitment to social development and human liberation; (c) interreligious dialogue; (d) proclamation and catechesis; and, (e) liturgical life, prayer and contemplation (cf. *DM* 13 and *DP* 2).

These five areas of integral evangelization are reflected in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (*EN*) of Paul VI (1975), *Redemptoris Missio* (*RM*) of Saint John Paul II (1990) and *Evangelii Gaudium* (*EG*) of Pope Francis (2013). They can be succinctly noted along with pertinent references:

- ▶ Christian presence and witness of life (cf. *EN* 41; *RM* 11, 42; *EG* 14, 20, 119-121, 149-151);
- ▶ Development and service of humanity (cf. *EN* 18-19, 29-33; *RM* 58-60; *EG* 50-109, 181-185, 197-216);
- ▶ Interreligious dialogue (cf. *EN* 20, 53; *RM* 52-54, 55-57; *EG* 115-118, 238-243, 250-254);
- ▶ Explicit Gospel proclamation and catechesis (cf. *EN* 22, 27, 42; *RM* 44-51; *EG* 3, 12, 24, 110-111, 246);
- ▶ Liturgical life, prayer and contemplation (cf. *EN* 23, 43-44, 47; *RM* 46-49, 87-92; *EG* 47, 173, 259-288).

This is integral or holistic evangelization; in compact expression it is the wide view of evangelization promoted by Paul VI in *EN*. Indeed, for us Christians, to live is to evangelize, to truly become “missionary disciples” (*EG* 120)!

2.9 Pope Francis’ Affirmation

Evangelii Nuntiandi is the most quoted document in Pope Francis’ 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*; it is quoted on thirteen different occasions. One finds that Pope Francis, beginning early in his pontificate, regularly quotes and praises *EN*. In 2013 Francis said that *EN* includes words that “are as timely as if they had been written yesterday” (May 17); he called *EN* “a very full text that has lost nothing of its timeliness” (June 13). As Francis described evangelization, he asserted that *EN* was “that basic point of reference which remains relevant” (July 27). The pope went even so far (June 22) as to describe *EN* as “to my mind the greatest pastoral document that has ever been written to this day.”

Pope Francis reiterated his great admiration for Paul VI and *EN* on June 16, 2014 when he opened the pastoral convention for the Diocese of Rome. In reference to *EN*, Francis stated: “Still to this day it is the most important post-Conciliar pastoral document, which hasn’t been surpassed. We should always go back to it.” Undoubtedly, *EN* is the fertile soil from which Francis drew much as he authored his *Evangelii Gaudium* (as well as using other material from Pope Paul VI). Francis appreciates Paul VI, because he affirms that the testimony of Paul VI “feeds us the flame of love for Christ, love for the Church, and gives us the momentum to announce the Gospel to the people of today, with mercy, patience, courage, and joy” (June 22).

2.10 Reflection Points

Undoubtedly, popes Paul VI and Francis share several common perspectives. “Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing” (*EN* 80); “let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization” (*EG* 83). All Christians are challenged to be “evangelized evangelizers” (cf. *EN* 15) who are truly “missionary disciples” (*EG* 120); their spirituality must reflect “the fervor of the saints” (*EN* 80) and emerge from “a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ” (*EG* 3). Popes Paul and Francis are truly “kindred spirits”—aflame with the fire of evangelization. How can we, in our personal lives and communities, catch the same “Gospel Fire”?

2.11 Implication to the Church in China

The context of China, in general, including the historical, socio-political, and interreligious situations are full of complexities. With the long-term image as a foreign religion with an imperialistic background, the encounter of Christianity and Chinese culture has been full of tension. Such relationship affects the methods and strategies of evangelization at different periods of time. Under the Communist regime, the contemporary Church of China also faces many restrictions and difficulties during evangelization. To evangelize is to bring the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence

transform humanity from within and make it new, through proclamation and witness. Inculturation or interculturalization gradually became one of the key issues of evangelization and theological reflection for Catholics in China. Through dialogue with culture, religions and the living people, we can see how Christian faith is inculturated and contextualized.

3 John Paul II: Global Missionary Pope

The Catholic Church worldwide rejoiced as Pope John Paul II was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI on May 1, 2011 and then canonized by Pope Francis on April 27, 2014 in Saint Peter’s Square in Rome. Catholic and secular media covered the events from a wide variety of perspectives, emphasizing the many and diverse contributions of this 264th pope of the Catholic Church whose pontificate extended over 26 years (1978-2005).

3.1 Startling Statistics

When John Paul II died on April 2, 2005 the Reuters News fact sheet noted some remarkable statistics regarding his pontificate. He traveled a total of 775,231 miles around the world; this is 3.24 times the distance from the earth to the moon. John Paul II read aloud, before audiences in the millions, more than 20,000 addresses. As pope he issued more than 100 major documents, including 14 encyclicals, 45 apostolic letters, 14 apostolic exhortations, and 11 apostolic constitutions. John Paul II beatified 1,338 and

canonized 482 people, more than all of his predecessors in the last four centuries combined.

Undoubtedly, one of the major emphases of John Paul II was his focus on the renewal of the Church in her missionary identity and commitment. When his mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (Mission of the Redeemer: *RM*) was published on December 7, 1990 [25th anniversary of the mission document of Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*] Cardinal Daneels of Brussels wrote: “this document best exemplifies who this pope is; it is the fruit of his mission in every continent. There is nothing better to define his pontificate than to say: he is a missionary pope.”

3.2 Commitment to Missionary Evangelization

In *RM* the pope described his missionary commitment: “From the beginning of my Pontificate I have chosen to travel to the ends of the earth in order to show this missionary concern. My direct contact with peoples who do not know Christ has convinced me even more of the *urgency of missionary activity....*” (*RM* 1). John Paul II echoed his explicit pastoral choice in his Message for World Mission Sunday in 1981: “My trips to Latin America, Asia and Africa have an eminently missionary purpose.” Everywhere he went John Paul II emphasized a central point: “I wish to invite the Church to *renew her missionary commitment*” (*RM* 2).

The pope was concerned that “missionary activity

specifically directed ‘to the nations’ (*ad gentes*) appears to be waning.... For in the Church’s history, missionary drive has always been a sign of vitality, just as its lessening is a sign of a crisis on faith” (*RM* 2). John Paul II made the faith-mission link very explicit when he noted: “*Mission is an issue of faith*, an accurate indicator of our faith in Christ and his love for us” (*RM* 11).

Saint John Paul II did everything in his power to renew mission, because he continually asserted that mission is at the heart of the Church: “the Church here on earth is missionary by her very nature” (*AG* 2). He was deeply convinced that “missionary activity renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive. *Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!*” (*RM* 2). Pope Francis said of John Paul II: “I think of him as ‘the great missionary of the Church’,” because he was “a man who proclaimed the Gospel everywhere.”

3.3 Missionary and Saint

The choices of the dates for the beatification (May 1, 2011) and canonization (April 27, 2014) were certainly not accidental; both are the Feast of Divine Mercy. John Paul II had a deep commitment to this devotion as it was propagated by Sister Faustina Kowalska, a fellow Pole. One can also note the intimate link with mission. Is not missionary evangelization all about proclaiming God’s abundant love, compassion, and mercy? Is not Pope Francis known as the “Pope of Mercy”? Undoubtedly, mission is

grounded in being so filled with God's loving mercy that one wishes to proclaim it to the world. Mission makes God's merciful love contagious.

Earlier in this essay, some "statistics" of John Paul II were noted—and one could add many more. But, the "statistics" have a much deeper significance: they reflect the extraordinary mission commitment of John Paul II. He used *every opportunity* to spread the message and person of Jesus. JP II was an extraordinary apostle of Jesus Christ. This presentation now turns to sketching a synthetic overview of Saint John Paul II's mission encyclical.

3.4 Gift of a Mission Encyclical

John Paul II's eighth encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (*RM*) was issued on December 7, 1990 in the thirteenth year of the pope's pontificate. In *RM*, the pope sounds a clarion and urgent call to all Church sectors to renew their enthusiasm and commitment to evangelize the world. Composed of eight chapters plus an introduction (1-3) and conclusion (92), *RM* has a "doctrinal" section (4-30) and a "pastoral" section (31-91), respectively treating the "Why" and "How" of contemporary missionary evangelization.

John Paul II begins by stating his conviction about "the *urgency of missionary activity*, a subject to which I am devoting the present Encyclical" (1). The pope asserts: "Missionary activity specifically directed *ad gentes* [to the nations] appears to be waning." This fact "must arouse

concern among all who believe in Christ.” Why? Because “in the Church’s history, missionary drive has always been a sign of vitality, just as its lessening is a sign of a crisis of faith” (2).

The pope urges a “fresh impulse to missionary activity,” the deepening of “commitment of the particular Churches,” and the harnessing of “all of the Church’s energies to a new evangelization” (2-3). In a word, the focus of John Paul II is direct and clear: “I wish to invite the Church to *renew her missionary commitment*” (2). All are invited to participate: “*Peoples everywhere, open the doors to Christ!*” (3).

3.5 Vision of Evangelization

What view of evangelization emerges from a comprehensive analysis of *RM*? Repeatedly, the document speaks of mission, evangelization and salvation in a holistic fashion: “Jesus came to bring integral salvation, one which embraces the whole person” (11); “evangelical witness ... is directed towards integral human development” (42); “action on behalf of integral development and liberation ... is most urgently needed” (58).

Integral evangelization, as repeatedly affirmed in the encyclical (20, 41-60), reflects current missiological thought as well as recent magisterial teaching. As noted earlier, Paul VI in *EN* clearly encouraged Catholics to view evangelization holistically; the second chapter of *EN* speaks

of the complexity of the evangelizing action and its various complementary and mutually enriching elements. *RM* echoes this vision: “Mission is a single but complex reality, and it develops in a variety of ways” (41). Again, “mission is one and undivided, having one origin and one final purpose; but within it, there are different tasks and kinds of activity” (31). This is the vision of evangelization that the pope consistently promotes throughout *RM*.

3.6 Foundational Mission Theology

RM clearly affirms the foundations of mission theology and the centrality and urgency of mission in the life of the Church. The years following the Second Vatican Council were a golden opportunity to explore and debate, renew and clarify the Church’s mission; and, it is true that the Council “has already borne much fruit in the realm of missionary activity.... Above all, there is a new awareness that *missionary activity is a matter for all Christians*” (2). Yet, John Paul II also discerned a need to reaffirm diverse aspects of the Catholic Church’s foundational theology of Christian mission and evangelization.

At least one third of the encyclical (three chapters out of eight) deals with theological questions. Chapter One includes core elements of the dogmatic theology of Revelation and Faith, Christology and Soteriology, as well as Ecclesiology and Missiology. Chapter Two focuses on biblical theology, particularly the Kingdom of God. And, to the delight of missiologists and evangelizers, Chapter

Three is completely devoted to Pneumatology, examining the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and her evangelizing mission.

The following are key emphases in the opening chapter: (a) All mission is centered in God’s wonderful, generous loving plan of salvation (*mysterion*), made known through Jesus and accepted in faith. Jesus is the “definitive self-revelation of God” and “the fundamental reason why the Church is missionary by her very nature” (5); (b) While affirming with the Scriptures (I Tim 2:4) the universality of salvation, “the Church believes that God has established Christ as the one mediator and that it has been established as the universal sacrament of salvation” (9); (c) The Pope unhesitatingly reaffirms these basics of Church teaching, noting that “*Mission is an issue of faith*” (11).

The biblical theme of the Kingdom (*basileia*) is the integrating leitmotif of the second chapter. Preaching the Kingdom and promoting its values are the evangelizing tasks of the Church which is “effectively and concretely at the service of the Kingdom” (20). The encyclical offers clarity and interpretation on other dimensions of Kingdom theology: the Kingdom of God and the Christ-event are complementary proclamations (16); the Kingdom necessarily has a transcendent horizon (17); the Kingdom “cannot be detached either from Christ or from the Church” (18); theocentrism and ecclesiocentrism demand a nuanced critique which is consistent with Church teaching (17-18).

Currently, the theology of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) is of particular interest to missiologists and missionaries alike. “The Holy Spirit is indeed the principal agent of the whole of the Church’s mission of evangelization. The Holy Spirit’s action is preeminent in mission *ad gentes*” (21). The Spirit’s centrality is emphasized because the Holy Spirit’s “presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions” (28). Ask any missionary and you will receive an eloquent personal testimony of the presence and power of the Spirit active in peoples, cultures, and religions—renewing the face of the earth! The acts of today’s apostles continuously write the Gospel of the Holy Spirit!

3.7 Transmitting the Urgency of Mission

The English subtitle of *Redemptoris Missio* is: “On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate.” Thus, mission is always and everywhere essential; it is “not considered a marginal task for the Church but is situated at the center of her life, as a fundamental commitment of the whole People of God” (32). Mission is “the greatest and holiest duty of the Church” (63). The pope’s affirmations resonate throughout the work: “I have chosen to travel to the ends of the earth in order to show this missionary concern” (1); “mission *ad gentes* is still in its infancy” (40); “I see the dawning of a new missionary age” (92).

No one seeks to minimize the pope’s assertions about the centrality and urgency of missionary evangelization; however, it is a valid question to ask about strategies for implementation. Words of exhortation must give way to programs of concrete actualization. In the considered judgment of this author, the encyclical is strong on the *why* of mission, but is only moderately successful on the *how*. Mission animation—the *how* of mission—requires continued discussion. While it is best accomplished locally, within the local Church, one can highlight some creative suggestions found within *RM*.

The Christian family is a key and irreplaceable force in evangelization (42); this insight is consistent with the teaching of Vatican II which termed the family the “domestic church” (*LG* 11). Promoting Christian family life should redound to mission awareness and animation. Material and financial donations are gratefully received, yet families are challenged to offer “a special contribution to the missionary cause of the Church by fostering missionary vocations among their sons and daughters” (80).

Saint John Paul challenges Christians: Do you wish to promote mission? True disciples are urged to “carry out a sincere review of their lives regarding their solidarity with the poor” (60). As followers of Jesus, “we should reassess our own way of living” (81); “Fight hunger by changing your lifestyle” (59); “We cannot preach conversion unless we ourselves are converted anew every day” (47).

The role of missionary institutes and societies is crucial in worldwide evangelization; missionaries themselves should continue their “radical and total self-giving,” initiate “new and bold endeavors,” and “not allow themselves to be daunted by doubts, misunderstanding, rejection or persecution” (66). Diocesan seminarians and priests “must have the mind and heart of missionaries” (67). The Church must seek to expand the spheres “in which lay people are present and active as missionaries” (72). Missionary dynamism should become contagious!

Youth involvement is essential to mission and evangelization. They should be offered opportunities to visit overseas missions, to meet and offer hospitality to non-Christians and migrants within their own country (82). The idealism of youth is a potential resource—their rejection of violence and war, their desire for freedom and justice, their rejection of racism and closed nationalism, their affirmation of the dignity and role of women (86). The vision of Charles de Foucauld (as a “universal brother”) can fire the imagination of youth (89) and can be a path toward missionary commitment.

3.8 Additional Major Emphases

In composing a popular overview of a papal encyclical one faces the challenge of providing a balanced presentation. This writer sees several other major emphases on evangelization within *Redemptoris Missio*; he devotes a paragraph to each theme (indicated by the italicized words

found in each paragraph).

Around the world *local Churches* are the central actors in mission today; all evangelization necessarily is harmoniously accomplished in, with, and through the local Church which is responsible for the totality of mission. This is a sea change in the dynamics of mission; both local Churches and missionaries alike must explore the ramifications of this new reality. Many leads are found in the encyclical (26, 30, 39, 48-52, 62-64, 71, 83-85, 92).

Authentic evangelization is a *freely-offered gift*, not an external imposition which violates human dignity and freedom. Or again, witnessing and proclaiming Christ are not at odds with people’s dignity as persons or their freedom of conscience (7-8). Genuine mission does not restrict freedom, but rather seeks to advance it; RM is clear: “*The Church proposes; she imposes nothing*” (39).

The Church needs *missionary vocations*. Individuals who receive the permanent, life-long vocation to foreign, transcultural mission are a treasured resource of the Church. Their vocation is necessary for the Church (32); it is a unique calling (27, 65); it is the model of the Church’s missionary commitment (66); it is to be assiduously cultivated (79, 84), particularly by mission institutes themselves (65-66).

The encyclical looks positively upon *interreligious dialogue*, devoting several sections to presenting it

comprehensively (55-57). Interfaith dialogue “is part of the Church’s evangelizing mission, ... is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*, ... [and] *does not dispense from evangelization*.” This same section (55) speaks of God’s call to all peoples and his presence to them “of which their religions are the main and essential expression.” The Church’s reverence for the followers of other faiths and religions is clearly affirmed by the encyclical.

In *RM women* receive the Pope’s praise and gratitude for their outstanding contribution to evangelization: “I extend a special word of appreciation to the missionary Religious sisters” (70); “How can we forget the important role played by women”? (71). “It is necessary to recognize—and it is a title of honor—that some Churches owe their origins to the activity of lay men and women missionaries” (71).

The process of *inculturation* and its relationship to mission receives extensive treatment (25, 52-54, 76). Authentic evangelization involves the Church in the inculturation process, an “intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.” This task is never finished and today it encounters new challenges—especially in large cities, “where new customs and styles of living arise together with new forms of culture and communication” (37). Mission

and inculturation demand fresh initiatives and creativity in the complex age of the megalopolis!

The entire final chapter of *Redemptoris Missio* treats *missionary spirituality* (87-91). Four elements characterize Jesus’ disciples-become-missionary: the missionary is to be led by the Spirit, to live the mystery of Christ who himself was sent, to love the Church and humanity as Jesus did, and to desire the holiness of saints. In a word, mission spirituality is “a journey towards holiness” (90) and the success of renewing the urgency of the Church’s missionary impulse “demands holy missionaries” (90).

3.9 Precious Details—Not to be Lost

In a work as long as *RM* one expects to find several details that demand further reflection. This synthesis presentation takes note of five additional themes and their importance for evangelization (the specific theme is identified by the italicized words).

The *personalist philosophy* and orientation of John Paul II is manifested throughout the work. The person is always central in evangelization and all mission apostolates: in work for justice (42), in fostering interreligious dialogue (55-57), in promoting development; the human person “is the principal agent of development, not money or technology” (58). In uniquely personalist terms, the missionary is described as “a person of the Beatitudes” (91) and it is personal love that is always “*the driving force of*

mission” (60).

The encyclical profusely expresses the *Church’s gratitude* to its missionaries (2, 57, 60, 70). The Church’s theologians provide an important service to the cause of evangelization (36) and should promote the study of world religions and science of missiology (83). The Church needs a renewed commitment to ecumenism within mission (50).

In looking at today’s world from the viewpoint of evangelization, the document distinguishes *three situations*: “non-Christian” peoples, Christians requiring pastoral care, and the so-called “post-Christians”; all require special approaches (32-34). Geographically, the pope emphasizes the missionary demands within Asia (37, 55, 91).

Significant and surprising is the fact that *one unique quote* appears verbatim no less than three times in the text (6, 10, 28): “we are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God.” Certainly, one cannot mistake the Pope’s assertion that God’s loving plan for salvation includes each and every person!

Evangelization as “God’s work” (24) is clearly affirmed; it is based “not on human abilities but on the power of the Risen Lord” (23). Missionaries are conscious that they owe their faith and vocations “not to their own merits but to Christ’s special grace” (11). They must believe that “it is not we who are the principal agents of the

Church’s mission, but Jesus Christ and his Spirit” (36). A missionary’s faith journey “proceeds along the path already trodden by the Virgin Mary” (92).

Fifteen years earlier (1975) Paul VI wrote that “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (EN 41). This passage is recalled in *Redemptoris Missio* (42). It must continue to remain a central focus if the Church wishes to respond “with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our time” (92).

3.10 Reflection Points

What topics in *RM* are particularly relevant to you personally and to your local community? Why are diverse gifts and charisms essential for a local church to be authentically missionary? Name the persons who have been “missionaries” to you in your life; how did they foster your growth in faith? How are you planning to be a missionary and evangelizer to others?

3.11 Implication to the Church in China

Preaching the Kingdom and promoting its values are the evangelizing tasks of the Church. In reading the signs of the time, there are many social ills and the challenges proposed by today’s society in China, and there is a demand for dialogue by Chinese intellectuals. The root cause of the social problems is the poverty of humanity and the spiritual vacuum, lacking a sound foundation of ethical norms. The Church should promote the Church’s values, especially the

social teachings in China in different ways in order to help both Catholics and non-Catholics in cultivating moral and ethical values, forming the conscience, and putting faith into practice in daily life.

4 Living in a Remarkable Era

As Catholics today we are truly privileged to live in a fascinating time of the Church's history. We recall that it is over six decades ago that Saint John XXIII was elected pope (October 28, 1958). In less than 100 days after his election, he announced the Second Vatican Council on January 25, 1959, the feast of the conversion of Saint Paul. Certainly, the Council, considered by many as the most significant Church event since the Council of Trent in the 1500s, opened an age of marvelous transformation in the Church—all guided by the action of the Holy Spirit. In addition, this “Vatican II Era” has been characterized by several holy popes: Saints John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II.

How did these saints regard Vatican II? John XXIII said that he was offering “to the world the gift of a new Ecumenical Council” and prayed to the Holy Spirit: “Renew your wonders in our time, as though for a New Pentecost.” Paul VI said: “One may say that the Council leaves itself as a legacy to the Church that held it.” He asserted: “The first need of the Church is to always live Pentecost.” John Paul II noted: “The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council

has been a gift of the Spirit to his Church.” He affirmed: “The Conciliar documents ... have not lost their value nor their brilliance.... In the Council we have received a sure compass to guide us.”

5 Conclusion

Our hearts overflow with gratitude for God’s abundant blessings, showered upon the contemporary Church through two very special gifts: Vatican II itself and the three “pope-saints” of the Council. Indeed, the Spirit has renewed the Church in our times; undoubtedly, we have experienced a “New Pentecost”!

[NOTE ON SOURCES: All quoted material in this presentation comes from the Vatican website and the personal writings/publications of the author, James H. Kroeger.]

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