

# PRAEDICA VERBUM

## Template for Pastors on the Evangelization of Young People in Canada Today

EPISCOPAL COMMISSION FOR DOCTRINE  
CANADIAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS



## INTRODUCTION

1. From the Church's earliest days, followers of Jesus Christ have not ceased to go forth to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). For the first disciples, just as for us Christians today, this mission arises from an uncontainable joy and passion that comes from encountering the Lord. As the two disciples who had met the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus eloquently expressed, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" (Luke 24:32). Throughout history, Christians with hearts ablaze have brought the Good News of Jesus Christ to peoples across the world. This is true also here in Canada, as this fire spread by the living witness of fervent believers like Saints François de Laval, Jean de Brébeuf, Marie of the Incarnation, and Kateri Tekakwitha.

2. Although nearly two thirds of Canadians continue to identify themselves as Christians, the active practice of the faith has been declining in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Today, almost one quarter of Canadians indicate that they have no religious affiliation whatsoever.<sup>2</sup> In his second letter to Timothy, Saint Paul urges him to "proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable" (2 Tim. 4:2). In viewing the social and religious landscape of Canada today – in particular, among young

people – it would be difficult to describe the situation as "favourable" to evangelization. The decrease in religious practice has been particularly acute among the younger generations of Canadians. Our present situation corresponds to one described by Saint John Paul II over 30 years ago when he spoke of a situation "in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well":

entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a "new evangelization" or a "re-evangelization."<sup>3</sup>

3. Yet, there is reason for hope. Evangelization of the young is still happening today in Canada. As Pope Francis points out, "The rise and growth of associations and movements mostly made up of young people can be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit, who blazes new trails to meet their expectations and their search for a deep spirituality and a more real sense of belonging."<sup>4</sup> To obtain an updated, practical, and realistic perspective on the evangelization of young people in Canada today, the Doctrine Commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops received information from

1 Louis Cornelissen (Statistics Canada), "[Religiosity in Canada and Its Evolution from 1985 to 2019](#)" (October 2021). According to the most recent data, 63.2% of Canadians identify as Christian, while 32.0% identify as Catholic. With respect to the practice of the faith, the study points out that in the province of Quebec, monthly attendance by Catholics in religious services fell from 51% in 1985 to 14% in the 2017–2019 period.

2 Cornelissen, "[Religiosity in Canada and Its Evolution from 1985 to 2019](#)".

3 Saint John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 33.

4 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 105.

# THE RISE AND GROWTH OF ASSOCIATIONS AND MOVEMENTS MOSTLY MADE UP OF YOUNG PEOPLE CAN BE SEEN AS THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. — POPE FRANCIS

several of these movements.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, we asked them about two areas: (1) *What message* do you proclaim? (2) *How* do you proclaim it, i.e., what methods have you found to be effective?

4. We received information from groups representing both the English-speaking and French-speaking realities in Canada; the responses, deriving from their own experiences, revealed a strong convergence with respect to the message and the methods used in proclaiming it. As a result of this consultation, we have developed this “pastoral template” consisting of a synthesis of the central themes in the evangelization of young people in Canada today, along with a development of the scriptural and magisterial underpinnings of each of these themes.<sup>6</sup>

5. It should be noted that these themes are focused on what the Church calls “the initial proclamation of the Gospel,” as is appropriate given the current sociological and religious situation of young people.<sup>7</sup> Connected themes such as catechesis, ongoing formation, discipleship, service, and the liturgy are all immensely important but are not the focus of this brief template. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has also recently issued a [\*Pastoral Letter to Young\*](#)

[\*People\*](#), which aims to encourage and support young Catholics as they grow in their faith. While complementary to that pastoral letter, this pastoral template has a different audience and purpose: it is intended to provide helpful information on the “how” and “what” of evangelization to pastors and others in the Church who work with young people.

6. This template will begin by describing the “what” of the message that is proclaimed,



Stained glass window, Saint Peter's Basilica (Rome)  
Photo: © Perseomedusa/Dreamstime.com

5 These included the Companions of the Cross, Catholic Christian Outreach, the Emmanuel Community, and Alpha.

6 It should be noted that these themes are remarkably similar to those identified in the Doctrine Commission's 2013 letter [\*The Essential Elements of Evangelization Today\*](#), which spoke broadly of four themes: *Martyria* (the witness of a personal encounter with Christ); *Koinonia* (the witness of communal life); *Diakonia* (the witness of service); and Joy as the style of ecclesial witness. In this sense, this pastoral template can be seen as complementary to the Commission's earlier document.

7 According to [\*Catechesi Tradendae\*](#), n. 18 (cited in the [\*Catechism of the Catholic Church\*](#), n. 6), “the initial proclamation of the Gospel or missionary preaching to arouse faith” is one of several elements of the Church's pastoral mission that is related to, but distinct from, catechesis.

outlining four basic themes:

- the recognition of God’s love;
- the proclamation of Christ as dead and risen for our salvation;
- an invitation to a relationship; and
- repentance and conversion.

It will then present three themes connected to the “how” of evangelization:

- the action of the Holy Spirit;
- person-to-person relationships; and
- joy.

## RECOGNIZING GOD’S LOVE

7. All that is exists because of God’s love, and his love is the goal of all things. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* begins by telling us that God freely created us not out of any necessity but “in a plan of sheer goodness” so that we might “share his own blessed life.”<sup>8</sup> The purpose

## THE PRIMARY REASON FOR EVANGELIZING IS THE LOVE OF JESUS WHICH WE HAVE RECEIVED, THE EXPERIENCE OF SALVATION WHICH URGES US TO EVER GREATER LOVE OF HIM.

— POPE FRANCIS

8 [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), n. 1.

9 [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), n. 1.

10 Paul VI, [Evangelii Nuntiandi](#), n. 26.

11 Francis, [Evangelii Gaudium](#), n. 264.

of our existence is to “seek him, to know him, [and] to love him with all [our] strength.”<sup>9</sup> As Jesus himself said in what is now one of the best-known passages of Scripture, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

8. The God of the universe, perfect in all ways and lacking nothing, is in himself love (1 John 4:16); a Trinity of Persons whose inner life of self-communicating love overflows into creation and in particular toward the people he created in his image (Gen. 1:26). It is therefore fitting that a primary and fundamental point in the message of evangelization concerns the deep and personal love that God has for each human being. This love is an indispensable component of the Good News proclaimed by the Church, as Saint Paul VI points out: “to evangelize is first of all to bear witness, in a simple and direct way, to God revealed by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, to bear witness that in His Son God has loved the world – that in His Incarnate Word He has given being to all things and has called [people] to eternal life.”<sup>10</sup>

9. Simultaneously, God’s love is not only the content of the message, but also the impetus behind its proclamation. Christians who have experienced the richness of divine love naturally desire to share that love with others: “The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him. What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known?”<sup>11</sup>

## PROCLAIMING CHRIST: DEAD AND RISEN FOR OUR SALVATION

**10.** When it comes to evangelizing young people, we consistently heard of the importance of a clear and simple proclamation that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again for our salvation. This is not surprising, since this essential content has always been the heart of the Church’s proclamation of the kerygma: “Evangelization will also always contain – as the foundation, center, and at the same time, summit of its dynamism – a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all [people], as a gift of God’s grace and mercy.”<sup>12</sup>

**11.** Indeed, Christ’s death and resurrection for our salvation is central in all the preaching and proclamation of the New Testament. Saint Paul emphasizes as “of first importance ... that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures ... and that he was raised on the third day” (1 Cor. 15:3-4), driving home that “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:17). Saint Peter writes that Christ “bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:24). And Saint John eloquently describes what real love is: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

**12.** Although the concept of sin can seem difficult and unrelatable for today’s young people, they are keenly aware of the existence of evil in



“Anastasis” or “Resurrection”, fresco on the ceiling of the Chora Church in Istanbul, Turkey. Photo: Joel Carillet/iStock.com

the world. This evil can be the result of natural disasters or disease, but it can also be the result of human choices, manifesting itself in the forms of war, violence, broken relationships, the destruction of the environment, or institutionalized and systemic injustices. “Sin” is a way of describing what happens when human beings choose evil instead of good. While it can be difficult to admit, we all can recognize sin within our own hearts; we all experience times when we fail to do good and do evil instead (cf. Rom. 7:19).

**13.** Young people today still innately recognize that they often fall short of who they know they ought to be. In this sense, the central message of the Gospel resonates with what they recognize deep in their conscience: we are fallen, yet we are called to something much greater; something divine. And God does not leave us in this fallen state: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.”<sup>13</sup> Sin holds us captive, but Jesus sets us free.

12 Paul VI, *Evangeliij Nuntiandi*, n. 27.

13 Francis, *Evangeliij Gaudium*, n. 164.

## AN INVITATION TO A RELATIONSHIP

14. The importance of a personal response is an essential element to evangelization. “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Rev. 3:20). The invitation is itself personal because it consists in accepting a personal relationship with the Holy Trinity through Jesus Christ. This relationship is often described as friendship.<sup>14</sup> It is important to underline that the invitation to become a Christian is not primarily about assuming a moral code or following a set of rules but about entering into a relationship with a Person.

15. Given the loneliness and emptiness experienced by many young people today, it should not be surprising that the offer of a personal and loving relationship is so compelling. The beauty of this relationship was articulated in a moving way by Pope Benedict XVI in his first homily as Pope, in which he expanded on the well-known message of Saint John Paul II when he called out, “Do not be afraid!”

If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom? And once again the Pope said: No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful

and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life.<sup>15</sup>

## THE CALL TO REPENTANCE AND CONVERSION

16. Responding to the message of the Gospel is and ought to be a joy-filled response to God’s free gift. But a deep, personal encounter between the all-holy God and sinful human



Photo: doidam10/iStock.com

14 Pope Francis speaks of “the fundamental message: the personal love of God who became man, who gave himself up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship.” *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 128.

15 Benedict XVI, *Homily for the Inauguration of his Pontificate*, 24 April 2005.

THE BEAUTY OF CONVERSION LIES  
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HIMSELF FOR ME”. — GAL. 2:20

beings will always entail a complete renewal and transformation of our fallen nature. This process begins with a turning away from sin (repentance), which results in conversion (literally, turning one’s life around). In the words of Saint Paul VI, responding to this invitation demands “a total interior renewal which the Gospel calls metanoia; it is a radical conversion, a profound change of mind and heart.”<sup>16</sup>

17. This call to repentance is always present when the Gospel is proclaimed. When Saint Peter proclaimed the message of salvation in Jesus on the day of Pentecost, his hearers responded with a very practical question: “what should we do?” (Acts 2:37). His response was clear and unequivocal: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Indeed, the entire New Testament is filled with admonishments to Christians to turn away from sin and embrace the life offered in Christ, to “put away your former way of life, your old self” (Eph. 4:22), and to “not be conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2). Just as Christ died for us, so our old selves have died and we now “walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4), living “no longer for [our]selves, but for him who died and was raised for [us]” (2 Cor. 5:15).

18. It is not helpful or honest to present this conversion as an easy or undemanding task. Rather, the beauty of conversion lies in its all-demanding totality, wherein we offer our entire lives in return to the one “who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). As Saint John Paul II writes:

From the outset, conversion is expressed in faith which is total and radical, and which neither limits nor hinders God’s gift. At the same time, it gives rise to a dynamic and lifelong process which demands a continual turning away from “life according to the flesh” to “life according to the Spirit” (cf. Rom 8:3-13). Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple.<sup>17</sup>



“The Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew”, 1308-1311, Duccio di Buoninsegna (painter) Sienese, c. 1250/1255 - 1318/1319, tempera on panel

16 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 10.

17 John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 46.

19. Having considered briefly several principal and practical components of the “what,” or the message, of evangelization, we now consider three aspects of how evangelization is carried out. In brief, evangelization requires the action of the Holy Spirit, it takes place through person-to-person relationships (particularly in community), and it must be lived out in a spirit of joy.

## RELYING ON THE ACTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

20. Although it is not in itself part of the content of proclamation, we consistently heard of the importance and centrality of the Holy Spirit in evangelization. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is “the principal agent of evangelization”<sup>18</sup> without whose action evangelization “will never be possible.”<sup>19</sup> The action of the Holy Spirit is fundamentally important in at least three ways. First, “the Holy Spirit ... grants the courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness (*parrhesía*) in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition,”<sup>20</sup> even putting on the lips of the evangelizer “the words which he could not find by himself.”<sup>21</sup> Second, “It is the Spirit who opens people’s hearts so that they can believe in Christ and ‘confess him,’”<sup>22</sup> “who in the depths of consciences causes the word of salvation to be accepted and understood.”<sup>23</sup> We see an example of this in the conversion of Lydia, when “the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Third, the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of

18 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 75.

19 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 75.

20 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 259.

21 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 75.

22 John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 46.

23 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 75.

the conversion and sanctification that necessarily take place in the life of everyone who accepts the Gospel. The life according to the Spirit to which all Christians are called can only take place by the action of the Holy Spirit.

21. No method of evangelization can take the place of the Holy Spirit. In fact, we consistently heard that, regardless of the method of outreach or evangelization being employed, it is essential to explicitly call upon the Holy Spirit’s help since without his action, every effort is bound to fail. When the early Christians lacked courage, they prayed and “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). We must continue today to call on the Holy Spirit to direct and animate all our evangelistic efforts.



Modern painting of Pentecost in the church Santuario Nuestra Señora del Sagrado Corazon by Navarro Perez Dolz (1990). Photo: Renata Sedmakova/Shutterstock.com



# A PERSON-TO- PERSON SHARING OF ONE'S OWN EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S LOVE AND SALVATION IS ESSENTIAL IN EVANGELIZATION.

## BUILDING PERSON-TO-PERSON RELATIONSHIPS

**22.** While all groups involved in successfully and effectively evangelizing young people have particular programs and methods, common to all is a focus on the building of interpersonal relationships and community. Evangelization is not simply delivering a product; nor is it communicating “fixed formulations learned by heart or ... specific words which express an absolutely invariable content.”<sup>24</sup> Rather, it involves an exchange between persons. As Saint Paul writes:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Rom. 10:14-15)

**23.** As Pope Francis teaches, “the first step is personal dialogue ... This message has to be

24 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 129.

25 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 128.

26 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 41.



Photo: pcess609/iStock.com

shared humbly as a testimony on the part of one who is always willing to learn, in the awareness that the message is so rich and so deep that it always exceeds our grasp.”<sup>25</sup> The importance of personal witness over the teaching of doctrinal formulations is critical because, as Paul VI points out, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”<sup>26</sup> A person-to-person sharing of one’s own experience of God’s love and salvation is essential in evangelization.

**24.** With respect to the specific methods employed, a variety are currently being utilized effectively in Canada, and all rely on building interpersonal relationships and fostering community. Many organizations and movements successfully carry out small-group gatherings over a predetermined time period, often with a specific Scripture-based theme discussed during each session. Sometimes, weekend retreats are occasions for a clear exposition of the Gospel and provide opportunities for a personal response. We heard frequently of the value of

music – particularly songs of praise to God – as a powerful way of reinforcing the message and eliciting a personal response (through singing). In some cases, special Masses dedicated to young people and containing an evangelistic homily are offered, as are times of Eucharistic Adoration and communal celebrations of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.<sup>27</sup> Always, the fostering of community is important. These communal celebrations may also include traditional cultural expressions when these are genuine manifestations of the enculturation of the Gospel.

## SHARING JOY

**25.** We began by speaking of the superabundant love of God, and we will conclude by speaking of another fruit of the Spirit: joy. As Christians, we have the immense joy of knowing that we have been redeemed by Christ and that we are loved infinitely by God. This is the reason Saint

## WE HAVE TRULY GOOD NEWS TO SHARE – AND OUR Demeanour SHOULD REFLECT IT.

Paul tells the Philippians to “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4:4). Given the beauty of our message, how can we not be joyful? “A committed missionary knows the joy of being a spring which spills over and refreshes others.”<sup>28</sup> This joy arises from recalling what God has done for us in our lives, for “the joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance.”<sup>29</sup>

**26.** We have truly good news to share – and our demeanour should reflect it. As Pope Francis emphasizes, “Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, [we] should appear as people who wish to share [our] joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet.”<sup>30</sup>



Photo: Aimee Tavares/iStock.com

27 These approaches are consistent with Pope Francis’ outline of some aspects of youth ministry: “youth ministry should always include occasions for renewing and deepening our personal experience of the love of God and the living Christ. It can do this in a variety of ways: testimonies, songs, moments of adoration, times of spiritual reflection on the sacred Scriptures, and even an intelligent use of social networks.” *Christus Vivit*, n. 214.

28 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 272.

29 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 13.

30 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 14.

27. Let us therefore reflect ever more deeply on the beauty of God’s mercy and grace toward us, asking the Lord for an ever-greater joy and

boldness as we proclaim the Good News. We will conclude with Saint Paul VI’s moving description of the centrality of joy in evangelizing:

Let us therefore preserve our fervor of spirit. Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow. May it mean for us – as it did for John the Baptist, for Peter and Paul, for the other apostles and for a multitude of splendid evangelizers all through the Church’s history – an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench. May it be the great joy of our consecrated lives. 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.<sup>31</sup>



Photo: Michal Collection/Canva

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31 Paul VI, *Evangeli Nuntiandi*, n. 80.

## DISCUSSION / REFLECTION

### Questions for Pastors and Pastoral Workers

1. In your diocese, parish, or ministry, what opportunities exist for young people to hear and respond to what the Church calls the “initial proclamation of the Gospel”? If these opportunities do not exist, how could they be offered?
2. This pastoral template outlines seven aspects of evangelization: God’s love, Christ’s death and resurrection, the invitation to a personal relationship with Christ, the call to repentance and conversion, reliance on the action of the Holy Spirit, the necessity of person-to-person relationships, and sharing joy. Which of these resonates most with you in your own ministry with young people?
3. Many young people today either have not heard the teachings of the Catholic Church or reject those teachings as they understand them. In your own pastoral situation, which should happen first: “initial proclamation of the Gospel” or catechesis?
4. Does the documented decrease in the rates of religious affiliation and practice match your experience? If so, how? If not, how does your experience differ? What factors may be contributing to this different experience?
5. In your experience, how does the concept of sin resonate with young people today? How can we help translate their experiences of the existence of evil in the world to a deeper understanding of sin?
6. How can the invitation to a personal relationship with the Holy Trinity through Jesus Christ be made clearly and personally?
7. Have you observed examples of *metanoia* (conversion) in your ministry? If so, what did this *metanoia* look like?
8. What are some practical ways we can rely on the Holy Spirit as the decisive inspirer of our plans and activities in evangelization (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 75)?
9. What opportunities exist for person-to-person relationship building in your pastoral situation? Are there any barriers (structural, cultural, legal, etc.) to be considered?
10. What role have you seen joy play in connecting with young people?

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*Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe  
World Day of Youth*



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