

Characteristics of  
**THE NEW  
EVANGELIZATION**

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A CALL FROM OUR REDEEMER

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By Dave Nodar



**SECOND EDITION**

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EVANGELIZATION**

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ChristLife is a Catholic ministry for evangelization founded in 1995. ChristLife is an apostolate of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, MD.

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# Introduction

Since the Second Vatican Council closed in 1965, all of our popes have emphasized the urgent need to make the Church better fitted for proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to our contemporaries. Pope John Paul II preached the need for a “new evangelization.” Pope Benedict XVI created the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, and Pope Francis has continued to call every Christian to personally embrace the mission of evangelization. As a result, nowadays it is not uncommon to hear Catholics talking about the “new evangelization.” But from conversations with clergy, religious and lay people, it is evident that many are not clear on what the new evangelization is. This confusion hinders people from taking the actions that are desperately needed to fulfill the essential mission of the Church. As one Archbishop commented, “There is so much talk about the new evangelization that we ought to have it emblazoned on T-shirts and coffee mugs! The trouble is, not many of us are actually doing it.”<sup>1</sup>

To help clarify the meaning and characteristics of the new evangelization, this booklet will look back at the source of the term as developed by Pope John Paul II in his speeches and writings, especially his 1990 encyclical *Mission of the Redeemer*, a revolutionary call to embrace the mission of Jesus in our current cultural setting.

# The Call to a New Evangelization

According to Pope John Paul II, Pope Paul VI popularized the expression “new evangelization” in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelization in the Modern World*, “as a response to the new challenges that the contemporary world creates for the mission of the Church.”<sup>2</sup> Citing the “great importance” of this document as “the interpretation of the Council’s teaching on the essential duty of the Church,”<sup>3</sup> Pope John Paul II saw the need for a “great re-launching of evangelization.”<sup>4</sup> In *Mission of the Redeemer* he presented a new synthesis of the Church’s teaching on evangelization in modern times.

Pope John Paul II’s call to a new evangelization was a prophetic and revolutionary call to the Roman Catholic Church. He wanted to redirect and refocus the Church’s priorities for the third millennium. He proclaimed, “the moment has come to commit all of the Church’s energies to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes* [to the nations]. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.”<sup>5</sup>

For the Catholic Church to commit all of her energies to a new evangelization and mission to the nations is a radical change in emphasis. The reality is that the vast majority of Catholics (clergy and laity alike) are not inclined to evangelization. For many Catholics the term “evangelization” itself sounds Protestant. Additionally, the Catholic Church is understood by many of her

members, as well as those outside her life, to be primarily liturgical, pastoral and hierarchical. One might argue, "Aren't evangelization and missionary activities something Protestants do?"

Yet the Church teaches that she is missionary by her very nature and that evangelization is the duty of every Christian.<sup>6</sup> Pope Paul VI in *Evangelization in the Modern World* states,

We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.<sup>7</sup>

While the notion of evangelization may seem foreign to Catholics, the nature of the times we are living in—the changing world scene, the moral and spiritual deterioration of western civilization, the weak condition of the Church in many parts of the world—makes the urgent call to a new evangelization imperative. The entire Church must come to embrace this calling and make it a normal part of Catholic life.

When Pope John Paul II used the term "new evangelization" he did not mean a new message. "Evangelization cannot be new in its content since its very theme is always the one gospel given in Jesus Christ."<sup>8</sup> In her writings about evangelization, the Church means most fundamentally the proclamation of the

basic Christian message: salvation through Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> On this foundation of the basic message of eternal life in God, Pope John Paul II extends the notion of evangelization. He notes, “there is a diversity of activities in the Church’s one mission.” He states that evangelization should not be directed only to individual unbelievers but should also be addressed to non-practicing Christians and to entire cultures –those that need re-evangelizing and those who do not yet believe in Christ.<sup>10</sup> When the Pope talks about evangelization that is “new” he states that “evangelization can be new in its ardor, methods and expression.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, it must be adapted to the people of our day.

In *Mission of the Redeemer*, Pope John Paul II sketched out some of the characteristics of the new evangelization. Without attempting a comprehensive review, I would like to point out six characteristics that I consider most important.

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## **The new evangelization is Christ-centered.**

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The new evangelization, like all evangelization, must be founded on the person of Jesus Christ and His Gospel. “Evangelization will always contain—as the foundation, center and, at the same time, the summit of its dynamism—a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ... salvation is offered to all people, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy.”<sup>12</sup> “The new evangelization,” according to Pope John Paul II, “is not a matter of merely passing on doctrine but rather of a personal and profound meeting with the Savior.”<sup>13</sup>

Pope John Paul II taught that personal encounter with Jesus Christ is most important to the Church's proclamation. It is very easy for us as Catholics to be distracted with the riches that God has given to the Church: her history, apostolic succession, her liturgy, her theology, the church fathers and saints, her art, and more. With so many wonderful treasures it seems we can be distracted from "the pearl of great price."<sup>14</sup> But from the beginning of his papacy Pope John Paul II proclaimed with conviction, "The Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is the center of the universe and of history."<sup>15</sup> Both in his encyclicals and in his life, he helped us to see what is most important.

Upon the foundation of Jesus Christ and His Gospel, which Pope John Paul II established clearly in all of his encyclicals, we can see other characteristics that distinguish the new evangelization from previous times in history.

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## **The new evangelization is the responsibility of the entire People of God.**

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In the past (and even presently) for most Catholics, evangelization was perceived to be the work of a special group within the Church, i.e., those with a special vocation—missionaries or priests. In the new evangelization, however, it is clear that the call is to the entire People of God. When reading *Mission of the Redeemer* it is striking to see the

number of times Pope John Paul II states that missionary evangelization is the responsibility and calling of all Christians.<sup>16</sup> Referring to his earlier Apostolic Exhortation *The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People*, Pope John Paul II says,

I spoke explicitly of the Church's 'permanent mission of bringing the gospel to the multitudes... who as yet do not know Christ...' and of the responsibility of the lay faithful in this regard. The mission *ad gentes* is incumbent upon the entire People of God... Missionary activity, which is carried out in a wide variety of ways, is the task of all the Christian faithful."<sup>17</sup>

Again, the Pope says, "Missionary activity is a matter for all Christians, for all dioceses and parishes, Church institutions and associations."<sup>18</sup>

This is a remarkable shift in emphasis, one that I believe necessitates a pastoral plan by the bishops of the Church for helping the faithful to share in the responsibility of evangelization and the mission *ad gentes*. In order for all the Christian faithful to participate in this calling to the new evangelization, the reality of the life-changing Gospel message must be experienced as "Good News" in each of our lives. The message of the Gospel must be heard, understood, embraced, lived and shared by all members of the Church! For this radical shift in emphasis to occur, priority must be given to proclaiming regularly and clearly what the message of the new evangelization is.

Within this calling that is proper to all of the Christian faithful, Pope John Paul II makes distinctions of responsibility for bishops, priests, members of religious congregations, missionaries, and the laity.<sup>19</sup> Bishops, as successors of the Apostles, are the first evangelists and are responsible for the work of evangelization in their dioceses and throughout the world. Priests, by vocation, are responsible to stir up the missionary consciousness of the faithful. Members of religious congregations, because of their consecration, give testimony to the values of the Kingdom of God. Lay people, in their daily environments of family life and the marketplace, have excellent opportunities to be witnesses of the Gospel.

With declining numbers of priestly vocations in countries such as our own, the importance of the laity's responsibility in evangelization must not be underestimated. In his address to the Latin American Bishops at Port au-Prince, Haiti in March 1983, Pope John Paul II noted three fundamental aspects of the new evangelization. The second aspect had to do with the laity. He noted,

**"Not only the lack of priests but also and above all the self-understanding of the Church in Latin America, in light of the Second Vatican Council... speaks forcefully of the place of the laity in the church and in society... the bishops together with their churches [ought to be] engaged in forming and increasing the number of laity who are ready to collaborate effectively in the work of evangelization."<sup>20</sup>**

The laity must be trained and released into society as missionaries of the new evangelization. The Holy Spirit, as the principal agent of evangelization and mission, is calling all of God's people to enter the harvest fields.

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## **The new evangelization is directed at the baptized who are not living the Faith.**

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In *Mission of the Redeemer*, Pope John Paul II says that in today's world, from the viewpoint of evangelization, we can distinguish three situations that need to be addressed differently. The first is the situation of the mission *ad gentes* in the proper sense of the term: bringing the Gospel to peoples, groups and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known. "To preach the Gospel and to establish new churches among peoples or communities where they do not yet exist... this is the first task of the Church."<sup>21</sup>

Second, there are healthy, mature Christian communities that are fervent in their faith and have a sense of the universal mission in which the Church carries out her activities and pastoral care. Here the Pope seems to describe a situation that requires pastoral care and not evangelization.

Third, there is what the Pope calls an "intermediate situation." Within formerly Christian countries there are

entire groups of the baptized who have lost a living sense of the faith, or no longer consider themselves members of the Church. "In this case what is needed is a 'new evangelization' or a 're-evangelization.'"<sup>22</sup> In this third situation people need to be socialized into communities of vibrant faith.<sup>23</sup> Some need their faith to be renewed and enlivened. Others have had little or no training in the Christian faith and essentially need to be evangelized with the basic Gospel and receive catechesis.

In *Mission of the Redeemer*, this re-evangelization seems to be primarily what Pope John Paul II means when he talks of the new evangelization. This is no small undertaking for the Catholic Church in the United States and in other countries, such as those in central and eastern Europe as well as in Latin America. In the United States it is painfully clear that many Catholics (and other Christians) have not been effectively incorporated into life in Christ. Baptized as infants, many have never made a personal commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and the Gospel. As adolescents and adults, many drift away from the Church. Evangelization must be directed to the Church itself.<sup>24</sup>

In the face of directly anti-Gospel statements that are constantly being directed towards Christians in many countries, there needs to be the clear proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as Lord. People need to be regularly inspired, encouraged and formed in their faith in order to live a Christian lifestyle.

Pope John Paul II helps us to distinguish between those situations needing primary evangelization (*ad gentes*), re-evangelization, or pastoral care. These distinctions are critical to recognize at this point in history. His summons

to re-evangelization is an honest and essential assertion by the successor of Peter that must be heeded by the Church.

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## **The new evangelization is aimed at the transformation of culture.**

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Pope John Paul II teaches that not only individuals but whole cultures need to be transformed by the influence of the Gospel. In her missionary activity the Church encounters different cultures and becomes involved in the process of inculturation. By inculturation the Pope means, “the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.”<sup>25</sup> The new evangelization must strive to incarnate Christian values and open the Gospel message to human cultures. Evangelization according to Pope John Paul II should lead to “a civilization of love.”<sup>26</sup>

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## **The new evangelization is most essentially about conversion.**

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Pope John Paul II tells us in *Mission of the Redeemer*, “The proclamation of the word of God has Christian conversion as its aim.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, we don’t proclaim the Gospel to just impart information, but with the

goal of conversion. And what is conversion? The Pope clearly states, "Conversion means accepting by personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple."<sup>28</sup> The New Evangelization calls for a personal response. We must not only proclaim the Good News, but also invite people to place Jesus Christ at the center of their lives and follow him as disciples.

While God asks for our cooperation in the work of evangelization, conversion is God's initiative. The Pope states, "Conversion is a gift of God, a work of the Blessed Trinity. It is the Spirit who opens people's hearts so they can believe in Christ and 'confess him.'"<sup>29</sup> Conversion then is God's initiative, to which we must personally respond with "faith which is total and radical, and which neither limits or hinders God's gift."<sup>30</sup> It empowers us for a lifelong process, which demands a continual turning away from sin and surrender to God.

This call to conversion is a critical need within the Church. Many Catholics and other Christians do not know that they can have this personal encounter with Christ that the Pope talks about. Large numbers of adult Catholics were baptized as infants and confirmed as teens; however, they are not living as disciples of Christ. They have either stopped attending Mass regularly or still attend for merely social reasons. The Church needs to find new and innovative ways to evangelize its own members and invite them to make a personal response to Jesus Christ, renewing the power of the sacraments of initiation.<sup>31</sup>

Evangelization must also be directed at non-Christians. There is some confusion as to whether Catholics should

evangelize those who are not Christians, or no longer living the Christian faith. Pope John Paul II responds to this confusion, "every person has the right to hear the 'Good News' of the God who reveals and gives himself in Christ, so that each one can live out in its fullness his or here proper calling."<sup>32</sup>

This call to conversion of non-Christians is linked to Baptism. In *Acts of the Apostles*, on the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed the Gospel to the crowds, who were cut to the heart and cried out, "what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you for the forgiveness of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."<sup>33</sup> Baptism is necessary because it "effects rebirth in the Spirit, establishes real and unbreakable bonds with the Blessed Trinity, and makes us members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church."<sup>34</sup>

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## **The new evangelization is a call to holiness.**

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The basis for sharing Christ with others is our personal holiness. We are called to know Christ and to make Him known. The fundamental activity, therefore, of those called to be missionaries is receptivity to God, of complete docility to the Holy Spirit. Receiving Christ is the pre-condition for doing the work of an evangelist. "It is not possible," Pope John Paul II states, "to bear witness to Christ without reflecting his image, which is made alive

in us by grace and the power of the Spirit."<sup>35</sup> In order to pass on the Gospel to others, it must have first permeated our lives. "An essential characteristic of missionary spirituality," the Pope tells us, "is intimate communion with Christ."<sup>36</sup>

Pope John Paul II mentions other elements of personal spirituality that are essential for all those called to be missionaries. Reception of the gifts of fortitude and discernment are essential. "The missionary must 'renounce himself and everything that he considered as his own up to this point, and make himself everything to everyone.'"<sup>37</sup> This spirituality calls us to apostolic charity, which enables us to "feel Christ's burning love for souls, and love the Church as Christ did."<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, Pope John Paul II exhorts all to the way of holiness:

**"Holiness must be called a fundamental presupposition and an irreplaceable condition of everyone in fulfilling the mission of salvation in the Church. The universal call to holiness is closely linked to the universal call to mission. Every member of the faithful is called to holiness and to mission."<sup>39</sup>**

He also notes, "The future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation. Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way."<sup>40</sup> The missionary is called to be a "person of the Beatitudes... poverty, meekness, acceptance of suffering and persecution, the desire for justice and peace, charity."<sup>41</sup>

He closes his call to a genuine Christian spirituality by telling us that “the characteristic of every authentic missionary life is the inner joy that comes from faith... the one who proclaims the ‘Good News’ must be a person who has found true hope in Christ.”<sup>42</sup>

## **A New Missionary Age**

Pope John Paul II aimed the call and the challenge of a new evangelization at each of us. He practiced what he preached. “Missionary activity,” he tells us, “renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive.”<sup>43</sup> The Pope’s own missionary activity was to renew and revitalize faith among the faithful. Pope John Paul II preached the Gospel to the Church and to the nations. The calling he proclaimed – is the calling of Jesus to his disciples: “Come follow me.” The Pope proclaimed the fundamental truths of our faith. He invited us to join him on the journey in Christ. Those who would participate in the new evangelization are called to personal encounter with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Those who would be missionaries in the new evangelization must first be disciples of Christ, in living relationship with the Lord and His Church.

Pope John Paul II helps us to see how we as Catholics can enter into a new evangelization in a way that is consistent with the Church’s teaching and tradition. He also offers us spiritual perspective that enables us to respond in humility and hope to the difficult times that we live in.

In his call to a new evangelization, Pope John Paul II, following the directives of Vatican II, helped to focus the Church on some of the crucial priorities necessary for the strengthening and renewal of the Church. Furthermore, he proclaimed God's call to the Church in our day in such a manner as to both address the Church's past and present difficulties, and to prepare her for the third millennium.

**"How many internal tensions, which weaken and divide certain local churches and institutions, would disappear before the firm conviction that the salvation of local communities is procured through cooperation in work for the spread of the Gospel to the farthest bounds of the earth!"<sup>44</sup>**

In describing the main orientation of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II declared in Mexico City on May 6, 1990, "The Lord and Master of history and of our destinies has wished my pontificate to be that of a pilgrim Pope of evangelization walking down the roads of the world bringing to all peoples the message of salvation."<sup>45</sup> During his pontificate the Pope took over 80 missionary trips! He was personally committed to the priority of evangelization and the mission to the nations. He believed that this new evangelization would help us enter "a new missionary age, which will become a radiant day bearing an abundant harvest, if all Christians, and missionaries and young Churches in particular, respond with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our time."<sup>46</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI continued his predecessor's clear summons to a new evangelization. And now Pope Francis has captured the attention of the Church and the world

with his compassion and radical witness to the Gospel. In his message for World Mission Day 2013, Pope Francis challenged every Christian to share the Gospel, "If we want to keep [the gift of faith] only to ourselves, we will become isolated, sterile and sick Christians. The proclamation of the Gospel is part of being disciples of Christ and it is a constant commitment that animates the whole life of the Church."<sup>47</sup>

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**May this short booklet inspire you and your parish to embrace the mission of evangelization. Your efforts can help the Church enter a new missionary age! God wants to use you right where you are to proclaim the Gospel of our Lord Jesus by your words and witness of life!**

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Dave Nodar is the Director of ChristLife, a Catholic Ministry for Evangelization and Apostolate of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Maryland USA. For more information, visit [www.christlife.org](http://www.christlife.org).

# End Notes

1. Most Rev. William Lori, Archbishop of Baltimore, private conversation, 2013.
2. John Paul II, *Crossing The Threshold of Hope* (Knopf: New York 1994), p. 114.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p.105.
5. *Redemptoris Missio*, 3.
6. *Lumen Gentium*, 16-17; *Ad Gentes*, 2, 23-35.
7. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.
8. "The Task of the Latin American bishops," *Origins* 12 (March 24, 1983), p. 659-62. This speech may have been the first time that JP II used the term "new evangelization."
9. *Redemptoris Missio*, 2-6, 18; *Dives in Misericordia*, 7; *Lumen Gentium*, l.
10. *Redemptoris Missio*, 33, 37.
11. "The Task of the Latin American Bishops," *Origins* 12 (March 24, 1983), p. 661.
12. *Redemptoris Missio*, 44; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 27.
13. John Paul II, Commissioning of Families of the Neo-Catechumenal Way, Jan. 3.1991, *L'Osservatore Romano* (Eng. ed.), Jan.14, 1991, p. l2 (noted in Dulles Avery S.J. "JP II and the New Evangelization," *America*, Feb. 1, 1992).
14. Matthew 13:45-46
15. *Redemptor Hominis*, l.
16. *Redemptoris Missio*, 1, 2, 3, 11, 23, 27, 30, 32, 37, 42, 47, 49, 71, 72, 92.
17. *Ibid.*, 71.
18. *Ibid.*, 2.
19. *Ibid.*, 63-76.
20. John Paul II, Address to CELAM (Opening Address of the Nineteenth General Assembly of CELAM, March 9, 1983, Port-au-Prince, Haiti), *L'Osservatore Romano* (Eng. Ed.), April 18, 1983.
21. *Redemptoris Missio*, 34.

22. *Ibid.*, 33.
23. *Ibid.*, 51.
24. *Ibid.*, 36; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 52, 54, 56.
25. *Redemptoris Missio*, 52 (quoting the Extraordinary Assembly of 1985, Final Report, II, D, 4).
26. *Redemptoris Missio*, 51.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, 46
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. See ChristLife's resources at the end of this booklet
32. *Redemptoris Missio*, 46.
33. *Acts of the Apostles 2:37-38*
34. *Redemptoris Missio*, 47.
35. *Ibid.*, 87.
36. *Ibid.*, 88.
37. *Ibid.*, 88 (quoting *Ad Gentes*, 24).
38. *Redemptoris Missio*, 89.
39. *Ibid.*, 90 (quoting *Christifideles Laici*, 17).
40. *Redemptoris Missio*, 91.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, 2.
44. Paul VI, Message for World Mission Day, *Insegnamenti X*, (1972), 522, quoted in *Redemptoris Missio 2*, fn. 1.
45. Text in *Origins* 20 (May 24, 1990).
46. *Redemptoris Missio*, 92.
47. Francis, Message for World Mission Day 2013, retrieved September 25, 2013 from [vatican.va](http://vatican.va)

# About ChristLife

ChristLife's story began with Dave Nodar, a Catholic layman, who during the 1990s regularly presented schools of evangelization in Poland and Slovakia for young adult Catholics from the former Soviet Bloc. Inspired by the call of Pope John Paul II to a new evangelization, Dave approached Cardinal William Keeler, Archbishop of Baltimore, about beginning an evangelization ministry. The Cardinal was enthused and recognized ChristLife as an apostolate of the Archdiocese in 1995.

ChristLife's mission is to 1) help others to discover, follow, and share Jesus Christ as members of the Catholic Church; and to 2) equip dioceses, parishes, small faith communities, and young adults to evangelize. We accomplish our mission by training and equipping leaders to use our 3-part ChristLife Series. We work directly with parishes and other Catholic organizations helping them to make the Church's mission of evangelization a reality in their communities.



Learn more about ChristLife at our website: visit [www.christlife.org](http://www.christlife.org).

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## *Discovering Christ*

Discovering Christ is a 7-week experience that invites people to explore the meaning of life and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. A typical session includes a meal, video teaching, and small group discussion. A day retreat follows the 5th session. To learn more visit: <http://christlife.org/discover>

## *Following Christ*

Following Christ is a 7-week journey that builds upon Discovering Christ and invites those who have encountered Jesus Christ to follow him as Catholic disciples. The course focuses upon the disciplines of the Christian life essential to discipleship. A typical session includes prayer and worship, video teaching, and small group discussion. A day retreat follows the 5th session. To learn more visit: <http://christlife.org/follow>

## *Sharing Christ*

Sharing Christ is a 7-week mission that teaches Catholics how to personally evangelize in our daily lives. A typical session includes prayer and worship, video teaching, and small group discussion. A day retreat ends the course as the 7th session. To learn more visit: <http://christlife.org/share>

# What are the characteristics of the new evangelization?

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With conviction and clarity, Dave Nodar gives an easy-to-understand explanation of the new evangelization. Nodar looks back at the source of the term as developed by Pope John Paul II in his speeches and writings.

With a special emphasis on the Pope's encyclical *Mission of the Redeemer*, he presents six key characteristics that will help you understand and enter more fully into the mission of evangelization. The new evangelization is...

- 1. Christ-centered**
- 2. The responsibility of the entire People of God**
- 3. Directed at the baptized who are not living the Faith**
- 4. Aimed at the transformation of culture**
- 5. Most essentially about conversion**
- 6. A call to holiness**

Dave Nodar is the founder and Director of ChristLife. He oversees program and training development and is a speaker in dioceses, parishes and other Catholic organizations in the USA and internationally. Dave is the main teacher for the Discovering Christ, Following Christ, and Sharing Christ DVD series. His passion is to help others to know the love of God the Father in Jesus Christ through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Dave and his wife Ely live in Ellicott City, MD, and have seven adult children.