

THE THING

Evangelization!

The Pope's theme of the decade has received but scanty treatment in most Catholic circles because of several interesting factors. Here are a few suggestions.

1. **Postmodernism** This, for the culturally uncorrected, means the complex of attitudes which represent all truth as *personal*. "It may be true for you, but it isn't true for me" is a line peddled in every possible tonality, from the depressive to the seductive. We can express quite important and (to us) undeniable central truths, and elicit this response. "Killing people is wrong", "Lying harms relationships", "Freedom is essential for human life" - you name it, and I'll find someone to say it doesn't apply to them. We used to say such people were immoral; now we say that they are *themselves*, and this inviolably protects them from attack.

This very influential complex of beliefs has "privatized" religious faith. Everyone needs a sacred personal centre where they enshrine the things that they find central, and from which they draw the motives to carry on, the guidance for steering, their hopes, fears, and values. This is the religious realm. What is in question is: *Can this religious dimension any longer be shared, so that people can meet and become united in their religious capacity - and is such a unity desirable?*

The Church says this uniting of people is vital. The post-modern world says it is undesirable, unnecessary, and probably impossible.

2. **Cynicism** The fashion for despising commitment is very much in vogue. We are understandably slower than our forefathers to follow charisma, because we are getting very mistrustful of it. We know it can be manufactured, and that certain people have a capacity for wearing it like a cloak: Adolf, Joe, Khomeini, Saddam, Pol, in nationalistic/political terms, and Branch Davidic, Mooney, Scientological, and other various horrific cult leaders in religious terms, have taught us to mistrust instant leadership. Religious experiences like being accosted by Mormons or space-invaded by Jehovah's Witnesses have given evangelism an almost indelible black mark. It is dangerous to listen to believers - they may prove to be fanatics.

Is it possible to find the way to speak of faith in a way that does not turn others off?

3. **Pessimism** According to Catholic social teaching, a tremendous number of people, in an economically-determined world like ours, have been refused their rightful respect. People are sacked and impoverished, sidelined and marginalized, rubbished on the basis of things quite beyond their control, forces which are by their nature indifferent to human beings and their fate. It is a new kind of fatalism: the market turns against you, there is nothing to be done.

In a world where personal morality is not founded on unquestioned principles, people find themselves further consistently and regularly betrayed (*it may be wrong for you, but it's not wrong for me*) by those they have trusted. Huge numbers of people are abandoned, divorced, unfathered or unmothered, abused, swindled, robbed, mugged, deceived, raped, and so on; there always have been such victims, but people have usually found a majority of the public to deplore their suffering, to help them and to vindicate them. We are not now so sure that such evil can be redressed by a society unsure of its values. Many people find that disappointment breeds an unreadiness to hear good news about themselves or their future. It is wiser, they feel, to hope for little, and so to be disappointed less often or less radically.

4. Ludicrous Responses By the Church In these circumstances, the Church appears with what passes for appropriately postmodern responses. People find it difficult to believe in God, so vicars are ordained and set in place to deny the existence of God. True, you destroy the faith, but at least the Church keeps going. The world is sold into commercial slavery, so the Church begins to speak in jingles, establish brand identity, and “sell itself in the market-place”. People are inured to anything deeper than the back of the matchbox; so the Church retreats to soundbites and slogans with which it hopes to capture the attention of the indifferent. All of this turns people off very effectively, and gives a bad name to the real task of addressing the hearts and minds of humanity.

5. The Gospel Is A Charge - as in electricity. It is of the nature of the Church to carry the Gospel into the world. The word *euangelion* means the announcement of good news; the Gospel is the (good) news which the world needs to hear in order to survive, in order to fulfil its existence. If the Gospel becomes a dead letter in our pigeonholes, it is no longer the Gospel. *Good news which nobody hears* is no news at all.

The question: *How can we be evangelists where we are?*

A few thoughts towards an answer: embodying the Gospel, studying the Gospel, speaking the Gospel in life-situations; forgiveness/understanding/decency; valuing the poor/love for the suffering; willingness to express values at risk of mockery....

Please add more to taste.