

**HOLY MASS
FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Vatican Basilica
Sunday, 16 October 2011*

*Venerable Brothers,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I celebrate Holy Mass with joy for you who are involved in many parts of the world on the front of the New Evangelization. This liturgy concludes of the meeting that called you yesterday to an exchange on the areas of this mission and to listen to several significant testimonies. I myself wished to offer you some thoughts, whereas today I break the bread of the Word and of the Eucharist with you, in the certainty – shared by us all – that without Christ, the Word and Bread of Life, we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15:5). I am glad that this congress fits into the context of the month of October, exactly a week before World Mission Day: this reminds us of the proper universal dimension of the New Evangelization, in harmony with that of the mission *ad gentes*.

I address a cordial greeting to all of you who have accepted the invitation of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization. In particular, I greet and thank the President of this recently established dicastery, Archbishop Salvatore Fisichella, and his collaborators.

Let us now come to the biblical Readings in which the Lord speaks to us today. The first, taken from the Second Book of Isaiah, tells us that God is one, there is no other; there are no gods other than the Lord and even the powerful Cyrus, Emperor of the Persians, was part of a larger plan that God alone knew and carried ahead. This Reading gives us the theological meaning of history: the epochal upheavals and the succession of great powers are under the supreme domination of God; no earthly power can stand in his stead. The theology of history is an important and essential aspect of the New Evangelization because the people of our time, after the inauspicious season of the totalitarian empires in the 20th century, need to rediscover an overall look at the world and at time, a truly free, peaceful look, that look which the second Vatican Council communicated in its documents and which my predecessors, the Servant of God Paul vi and Bl. John Paul ii, illustrated with their Magisterium.

The Second Reading is the beginning of the First Letter to the Thessalonians and this is already very evocative because it is the oldest letter that has come down to us of the greatest evangelizer of all time, the Apostle Paul. He tells us first of all that one does not evangelize by oneself: in fact he too had collaborators, Silvanus and Timothy (cf. 1 Thes 1:1) and many others. And he immediately adds something else that is very important: that proclamation must always be preceded, accompanied and followed by prayer. Indeed, he writes: “We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers” (v. 2). The Apostle then says he is well aware of the fact that he did not choose the members of the community, but that [God]: “has chosen you”, he says (v. 4).

Every Gospel missionary must always bear in mind this truth: it is the Lord who touches hearts with his word and with his Spirit, calling people to faith and to communion in the Church. Lastly, Paul leaves us

a very valuable teaching, taken from his experience. He writes: “our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (v. 5). Evangelization, to be effective, needs the power of the Spirit, who gives life to proclamation and imbues those who convey it with the “full conviction” of which the Apostle speaks. This term “conviction” or “full conviction” in the original Greek is *pleroforia*: a word that does not so much express the subjective, psychological aspect, rather the fullness, fidelity, completeness, in this case of the proclamation of Christ. It is a proclamation which, to be complete and faithful, asks to be accompanied by signs and gestures, like the preaching of Jesus. Word, Spirit and certainty — understood in this way — are therefore inseparable and compete to ensure that the Gospel message is spread effectively.

Let us now reflect on the Gospel passage. It is the text about the legitimacy of the tribute to be paid to Caesar which contains Jesus’ famous answer: “render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mt 22:21). But, before reaching this point there is a passage that can be applied to those who have the mission of evangelizing. Indeed, those who are speaking with Jesus — disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians — compliment him, saying “we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man” (v. 16). It is this affirmation itself, although it is prompted by hypocrisy, that must attract our attention. The disciples of the Pharisees and Herodians do not believe in what they say. They are only affirming it as a *captatio benevolentiae* to make people listen to them, but their heart is far from that truth; indeed, they want to lure Jesus into a trap to be able to accuse him. For us, instead, those words are precious: indeed, Jesus is true and teaches the way of God according to the truth, and stands in awe of none. He himself is that “way of God”, which we are called to take. Here we may recall the words of Jesus himself in John’s Gospel: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6).

In this regard St Augustine’s comment is illuminating: “It was necessary for Jesus to say ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’, when knowing the way by which he went they had to learn where he was going. The way led to truth, it led to life.... And where are we going, but to him, and by what way do we go, but by him? (*In Evangelium Johannis tractatus* 69, 2). The new evangelizers are called to walk first on this Way that is Christ, to make others know the beauty of the Gospel that gives life. And on this Way one never walks alone but in company, an experience of communion and brotherhood that is offered to all those we meet, to share with them our experience of Christ and of his Church. Thus testimony combined with proclamation can open the hearts of those who are seeking the truth so that they are able to arrive at the meaning of their own life.

A brief reflection also on the central question of the tribute to Caesar. Jesus replies with a surprising political realism, linked to the theocentrism of the prophetic tradition. The tribute to Caesar must be paid because his image is on the coin; but the human being, every person, carries in him- or herself another image, that of God, and therefore it is to him and to him alone that each one owes his or her existence. The Fathers of the Church, drawing inspiration from the fact that Jesus was referring to the image of the Emperor impressed on the coin of the tribute, interpreted this passage in the light of the fundamental concept of the human being as an image of God, contained in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis.

An anonymous author wrote: “The image of God is not impressed on gold, but on the human race. Caesar’s coin is gold, God’s coin is humanity.... Therefore give your riches to Caesar but keep for God the unique innocence of your conscience, where God is contemplated.... Caesar, in fact, asked that his image be on every coin, but God chose man, whom he created to reflect his glory” (Anonymous,

Incomplete Work on Matthew, Homily 42). And St Augustine used this reference several times in his homilies: “If Caesar reclaims his own image impressed on the coin”, he says, “will not God demand from man the divine image sculpted within him?” (*En. Ps.*, Psalm 94:2). And further, “as the tribute money is rendered to him [Caesar], so should the soul be rendered to God, illumined and stamped with the light of his countenance” (*ibid.*, Ps 4:8).

This word of Jesus is rich in anthropological content and it cannot be reduced only to the political context. The Church, therefore, is not limited to reminding human beings of the right distinction between the sphere of Caesar’s authority and that of God, between the political and religious contexts. The mission of the Church, like that of Christ, is essentially to speak of God, to remember his sovereignty, to remind all, especially Christians who have lost their own identity, of the right of God to what belongs to him, that is, our life.

Precisely in order to give a fresh impetus to the mission of the whole Church to lead human beings out of the wilderness in which they often find themselves to the place of life, friendship with Christ that gives us life in fullness, I have decided to proclaim a “Year of Faith”, which I shall have the opportunity to illustrate with a special Apostolic Letter. It will begin on 11 October 2012 on the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and will end on 24 November 2013, the Solemnity of Christ the King. It will be a moment of grace and commitment for an ever fuller conversion to God, to strengthen our faith in him and to proclaim him with joy to the people of our time.

Dear brothers and sisters, you are among the protagonists of the New Evangelization that the Church has undertaken and carries forth, not without difficulties but with the same enthusiasm as the first Christians. To conclude, I make my own the words of the Apostle Paul that we have heard: I give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in my prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

May the Virgin Mary, who was not afraid to answer “yes” to the Word of the Lord and, after conceiving in her womb, set out full of joy and hope, always be your model and your guide. Learn from the Mother of the Lord and our Mother to be humble and at the same time courageous, simple and prudent; meek and strong, not with the strength of the world but with the strength of the truth. Amen.