Evangelisation is not the work of specialists but of the entire people of God

"As members of the college of bishops, you must always have particular care for the universal Church, especially by promoting and defending the unity of the faith. ... This is a particularly important in our own times, which call on you courageously to invite mankind of all degrees to meet Christ and to strengthen the faith". These words were addressed by the Pope to bishops participating in a congress currently being promoted by the Congregation for Bishops and the Congregation for the Oriental Churches.

The bishops' pilgrimage to the Tomb of St. Peter is or particular importance this year, the Holy Father noted, in light of the forthcoming Year of Faith marking the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican Council II and the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the theme: "The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith".

The bishops' first concern, then, must be "to promote and support 'stronger ecclesial commitment to new evangelisation in order to rediscover the joy of believing and the enthusiasm for communicating the faith'. You are called", the Pope told his audience, "to support and nourish communion and collaboration between all parts of you dioceses. Evangelisation is not the work of a small number of specialists but of the entire People of God under the guidance of their pastors. Each member of the faithful, with and within ecclesial communion, must feel the responsibility to announce and bear witness to the Gospel".

Benedict XVI then went on to recall how, during the opening of Vatican Council II, Blessed John XXIII had affirmed the need for '"this certain and unchanging doctrine, which must be faithfully respected, to be developed and presented in a way that responds to the necessities of our time'. We could say that new evangelisation began with the Council, which Blessed John XXIII saw as a new Pentecost that would make the Church flourish in her interior richness and here maternal outreach towards all areas of human activity. The effects of that new Pentecost, despite the difficulties, have extended to every expression of Church life: from the institutional to the spiritual, from the participation of the lay faithful, to the growth of charisms and sanctity".

This heritage has been entrusted to the pastoral care of bishops, the Pope explained, and he encouraged his hearers "to draw from this patrimony of doctrine, spirituality and sanctity in order to educate your flock in the faith, that their witness may become increasingly credible. At the same time your episcopal office requires you 'to give reasons for the hope that is in you' to everyone seeking the faith or the ultimate meaning of life. In them too 'grace works in an unseen way, for Christ died for all men, and

the ultimate vocation of man is one, and divine'. I encourage you, then, to work to ensure that everyone, in keeping with their age and condition, be presented with the central contents of the faith, systematically and completely, in order to respond to the questions raised by our technological and globalised world. ... The Catechism of the Catholic Church is vital to this end, a sure norm for teaching faith and communion in the one Creed. The world in which we live requires Christians to have a solid formation".

The faith calls for "credible witnesses, people who trust in the Lord and entrust themselves to Him 'to become a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord in the world'. The bishop, who is the first witness to the faith, accompanies believers on their journey offering them the example of a life lived in faithful abandonment to God. ... It is not, in fact, possible to serve mankind without first being servants of God", the Holy Father said.

He concluded by reminding the prelates that "your personal commitment to sanctity must involve daily assimilation of the Word of God in Prayer and in the Eucharist. ... Charity must impel you to remain close to your priests. ... They are your first and most important collaborators in bringing God to mankind and mankind to God. The charity of the Good Shepherd will also make you attentive to the poor and suffering, bringing them consolation and support, and guiding those who have lost touch with the meaning of life. Remain particularly close to families, ... that they may build their lives on the solid rock of friendship with Christ. And have particular care for seminarians, ... so the community may continue to have mature and joyful pastors, sure guides in the faith".

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