Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Episcopal Commission for Doctrine

# The Evangelizing Mission of the Church in Canada

Bassano, Jacopo (c. 1510–1592), *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, 1545, oil on canvas, 143.5 × 243.68 cm.
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., United States.

*Jesus answered [Pilate], "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"* (John 18:37-38)

## "What is truth?"

**1.** The question asked by Pontius Pilate almost 2,000 years ago is still the central question of our time. So many other questions flow from it: Are there permanent principles upon which I can build my life? Is there such a thing as right and wrong? Who am I? What is the purpose of my life? These and many more questions cannot be answered without finding the answer to Pilate's question.

**Q.** What are the ultimate questions you ask yourself?

**2.** Pilate did not wait for an answer and may not have expected one. Today, our Canadian society shares this skepticism: people claim that there is no truth, or it is unknowable, or there is only "your truth" and "my truth." Rather than liberating us from the shackles of an oppressive system of thought, this skeptical, relativist view denies us the opportunity and thrill of discovering truth, laying on everyone the burden of constructing from scratch their own individual truth and self-identity.

## "Who is the truth?"

**3.** As Christians, we have the answer to Pilate's question: truth is not only a "what" but a "who." Jesus tells us, "I am the truth" (John 14:6), and says that knowing this truth (that is, knowing him) "will make you free" (John 8:32) by making us like him.[1] When we listen to Jesus' voice and enter a relationship with him, we experience liberation from the

Nikolai Ge (1831–1894), *"What Is Truth?" (Christ and Pilate)*, 1890, oil on canvas. Tretyakov Gallery, Russia.

1 Saint Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 16.1) taught that truth is the agreement between a thing and the intellect (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*). This not only means that truth is always connected to something outside ourselves but has the profound implication that as we come to know God, our minds will be transformed to become like him.

prison of self-constructed meaning and are freed to discover who we were created to be.[2] Knowing Jesus, the Son of God, who made us and loves us, allows us to approach every aspect of our lives in light of this knowledge. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote, "being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."[3]

Deutsche Glasmosaik – Gesellschaft Puhl & Wagner, *Christ and the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus,* mosaic façade. Emmauskirche, Berlin. Photograph © Jozef Sedmak, Dreamstime.com.

**Q.** What is the difference between knowing someone and knowing about someone?

## Knowing the Truth

**4.** Being Christian, then, is not primarily about knowing *something* but about knowing *someone*: Jesus Christ. Knowing Jesus allows us to see ourselves, and everything around us, in a new light so that the answers to our most fundamental questions become visible. This means that knowing him is something that every human being needs; it is not knowledge to be kept to ourselves. How can we get to know Jesus? The answer is both complex and simple, but at its heart it occurs in the same way we get to know any new person: we hear about them, and we are introduced to them. Telling people about who Jesus is, and helping them get to know him, is the central core of what we call "evangelization." When we come to know Jesus and recognize him as "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), we can say that we have been "evangelized."[4] As our hearts become more like his, our lives – both personally and

2 This truth was eloquently expressed by the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear."

3 Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 1.

4 We can be tempted to equate observable phenomena like Mass attendance or knowledge of certain truths of the Faith with being evangelized. There should certainly be a close and strict connection between evangelization and the external "practice" of the Faith, but it would be a serious error to focus our efforts only on these easily verifiable criteria while neglecting the fostering of the relationship with the Lord that animates everything else.

in society – contribute to a world of reconciled relationships and of justice and peace.[5]

## The Need for the Good News

**5.** A quick look at our country today reveals to us that there are many people who live without the meaning and hope that come from knowing Jesus. We can look at the official statistics: in 2001, 77% of the population identified as Christian; in 2021, it had dropped to 53%.[6] The Church's mission, however, is not motivated by numbers but by the dignity of men and women who are called to know the liberation that is in Christ. Our global digital culture has produced isolation and loneliness for many, but we need not be alone. In the words of Pope Francis, "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."[7] Our fellow Canadians need to know this.

Duccio di Buoninsegna (ca. 1250/1255–1318/1319), The Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew, 1308–1311, tempera on panel, 42.7 × 45.5 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., United States.

## Respecting Freedom

**6.** Our society today is rightly concerned about the dangers of manipulation, coercion, and abuse. In this context, we may even wonder whether any attempt to convince others of the truth of Christianity would be a violation of their consciences and freedom. Responding to this question over 50 years ago, Saint Pope Paul VI explained that it would certainly be wrong to impose the Gospel on anyone, but to propose it to them without pressure and to allow space for their free response is actually to respect their freedom. He further pointed out that sharing the truth about Christ is the *duty* of every Catholic, because every human being has the *right* to hear about him.[8]

## Respecting Cultures

**7.** If Jesus really is the way, and the truth, and the life (John 14:6), then knowing him cannot destroy or replace the truth, goodness, and beauty that already lie within people and

5 Francis, Encyclical *Dilexit Nos*, n. 28. "Reconciliation and peace are also born of the heart. The heart of Christ is 'ecstasy', openness, gift and encounter. In that heart, we learn to relate to one another in wholesome and happy ways, and to build up in this world God's kingdom of love and justice. Our hearts, united with the heart of Christ, are capable of working this social miracle."

6 Statistics Canada, 2021, *Religion by gender and age: Canada, provinces and territories.* https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810035301

7 Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 164.

8 Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 80.

cultures; it can only purify and elevate them. Sadly, there have been moments in the Church's history when an ideology of cultural imperialism has been conflated with the message of the Gospel, and new converts were expected to adopt the cultural norms and modes of expression of the missionaries. This has always been wrong. Jesus Christ does not belong to any single culture or nation but to humanity as a whole.[9]

**Q.** How can we ensure respect for the freedom of others when sharing our faith with them?

**8.** There is no culture that does not stand in need of the purification that comes from the Gospel. Yet, at the same time, every culture has something unique that it can contribute to the Church. As Catholics in Canada called to evangelization today, we need to keep in mind at least two things: first, that everyone needs the gift of knowing Jesus, and second, that following Jesus cannot be equated with any particular cultural expression. This requires sensitivity to the different cultural contexts present in Canada – including the online culture – in order to identify the seeds of the Word that are present there.[10]

## Places of Witness

**9.** Once we accept that Jesus is calling us to be his witnesses through our words, our actions, and our whole lives, everywhere we go becomes a potential place of witness.

*Our Lady of Guadalupe (tilma of Juan Diego)*, 16th century, tilmatli in agave fiber, 170 × 105 cm. Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City, Mexico.

9 Second Vatican Council, Decree *Ad Gentes*, n. 8.

10 See *Ad Gentes*, n. 11.

**Q.** Where have you seen the Church enriched by its encounter with a new culture?

Like Jesus' disciples after his resurrection,[11] we can share the truth about him in our places of worship, in public places, in the workplace, in the home, in academic settings, in prisons, and even in hostile environments. Pope Leo XIV recognizes that in many places today, Christian faith is considered absurd: "These are contexts where it is not easy to preach the Gospel and bear witness to its truth, where believers are mocked, opposed, despised or at best tolerated and pitied. Yet, precisely for this reason, they are the places where our missionary outreach is desperately needed."[12] When we know Jesus and the difference knowing him makes, our whole life can become a mission field, offering us the opportunity to share the truth about Christ's love with everyone.

## Everyone Together: Witnessing to Christ

**10.** Every believer – clergy, consecrated, and laity – "must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor. In this way, the holiness of the People of God will grow into an abundant harvest of good."[13] Because there are different offices and states of life within the Church, every Christian is called, in a way unique to them, to contribute to the Church's mission of bringing Christ to the world.[14] This collaboration is at the heart of "synodality." Our mission is not a solitary one: as members of Christ's body, each with our unique gifts and responsibilities, we are part of Christ's own mission as we bring his presence to those around us. As Pope Leo XIV emphasizes, "It is essential to do this, first of all, in our personal relationship with the Lord, in our commitment to a daily journey of conversion. Then, to do so as a Church, experiencing together our fidelity to the Lord and bringing the Good News to all."[15]

11 Examples of these include: in the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 3:11-26; 5:12); in synagogues (Acts 9:20; 13:5; 13:14-52; 14:1; 17:17; 18:4); in the streets (Acts 2); in the home of Cornelius (Acts 10:34-48); in academic settings (the Lecture Hall of Tyrannus – Acts 19:9-10; the Areopagus – Acts 17:22-34); in the workplace (Acts 18:2-4); in prison (Acts 16:25-34); before hostile religious leaders (Acts 5:27-42).

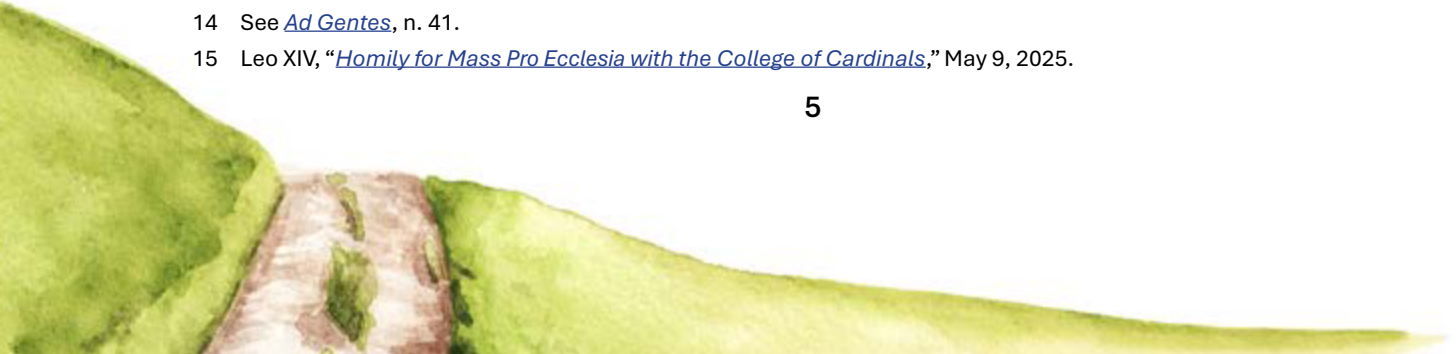
12 Leo XIV, "Homily for Mass *Pro Ecclesia* with the College of Cardinals," May 9, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250509-messa-cardinali.html.

13 Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 40.

14 See *Ad Gentes*, n. 41.

15 Leo XIV, "*Homily for Mass Pro Ecclesia with the College of Cardinals*," May 9, 2025.





## Further Reading

In recent years, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has published numerous texts on the importance of evangelization. They are all available online.

**2024:** *Called to Witness and Proclaim: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization and Catechesis in the Family.* Episcopal Commission for Evangelization and Catechesis.

**2023:** *Praedica Verbum: Template for Pastors on the Evangelization of Young People in Canada Today.* Episcopal Commission for Doctrine.

**2014:** *The Missionary Dynamic of the Parish Today.* Episcopal Commission for Doctrine.

**2013:** *The Essential Elements of Evangelization Today.* Episcopal Commission for Doctrine.

The CCCB Office for Evangelization and Catechesis has created various online resources, including videos and webinars, on various themes relating to evangelization:

*https://www.cccb.ca/evangelization-catechesis-catholic-education/*

Here is another helpful publication:

**2011:** *On Good Soil. Pastoral Planning for Evangelization and Catechesis with Adults.* Office for Evangelization and Catechesis.

In addition to many statements from Popes and various offices of the Holy See, several magisterial texts on the Church's evangelizing mission remain foundational:

**1965:** Second Vatican Council, Decree *Ad Gentes* (On the Missionary Activity of the Church).

**1975:** Pope Saint Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World).

**1990:** Pope Saint John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate).

**2013:** Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World).

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