

Evangelical Catholicism

by

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The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe (Romans 1.16), and the Church's mission to the nations begins with Christ's clarion call to conversion: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel." (Mark 1.15)

By our Baptism we are called to receive the Gospel as a complete, coherent, comprehensive Way of Life; in other words, we are called to be disciples, or students, of the Lord Jesus. And to live as true disciples of Christ, everything about us must be measured and guided by the Gospel: our relationships - especially the romantic ones, our professional duties, our political choices, our financial decisions, and our personal behavior in every detail, including how we treat other people - most especially the poor, the despised, and the immigrant. But this total surrender to Christ is not a restriction of our freedom; this is the evangelical freedom of the children of God: not the license to do whatever we want but the liberty to do everything we should. As the Lord Jesus teaches, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8.32)

In 2003 I drafted the eight Principles of Evangelical Catholicism to help shape our common life as a spiritual family, and I offer these principles to help us all become mature Christian disciples who are committed by the grace of conversion to a life of right belief, right worship, and right conduct.

Evangelical Catholicism is not a movement within the Church or a sub-set of Catholicism. Rather, being an Evangelical Catholic is simply a way of understanding the vocation of every Christian to be a faithful disciple of the Lord Jesus and of thinking about the things essential to the Church's life as they have been explained in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the magisterium of Popes Paul VI, Saint John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. During the nearly twenty-seven

years of his pontificate, John Paul the Great summoned the Church to the urgent task he called the New Evangelization, by which he meant the proclamation of the timeless truths of the Gospel in the new circumstances of our time.

Another way of expressing our commitment to the work of the New Evangelization is to say we must become Evangelical Catholics, and this in turn means that we must let go of cafeteria, casual, and cultural Catholicism by accepting the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a complete, coherent, comprehensive Way of Life. These eight Principles of Evangelical Catholicism are offered in the service of helping us understand the demands of living in the truth of the Gospel and of following the Lord Jesus in the Way of the Cross.

Principle One

The First Principle of Evangelical Catholicism states that “The Lord Jesus Christ is the crucified and risen Savior of all mankind, and no human person can fully understand his life or find his dignity and destiny apart from a personal friendship with the Lord Jesus. It is not enough to know who Jesus is; we must know Jesus.”

The first claim made here is absolute and uncompromising: that Jesus of Nazareth is the only savior of the entire human race and that his identity as the Messiah is finally and fully revealed in his crucifixion and resurrection. In an age that prizes individual choice above all else, this claim is often rejected as offensive, but in every age Christ is a stumbling block: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24) The Lord Jesus is either the Son of God, or he is not. He either was conceived without a human father, or he was not. He is either the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, or he is not. And on the answers to these questions turns the entire Christian religion, because Jesus of Nazareth (in C.S. Lewis’s famous formulation) is one of only three things: liar, lunatic, or Lord.

Next, if Jesus is Lord (meaning the eternal Word by whom, through whom, and for whom all things were made) then the next part of the first principle follows: our lives are unintelligible until we know the Lord Jesus and live as his students and his friends. To Catholics of a certain age, this claim will sound strange because at times in our recent history there was insufficient emphasis in catechesis on the necessity of

a personal friendship with the Lord Jesus, and for this reason the very language sounds Protestant and decidedly un-Catholic. But the best of Catholic tradition, taught by the Church and lived by the saints, always puts a true human relationship with Jesus in first place, as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger explained in his homily to the College of Cardinals on the day before he was elected Benedict XVI: “Our redemption is brought about in this communion of wills: being friends of Jesus, to become friends of God. The more we love Jesus, the more we know him, the more our true freedom develops and our joy in being redeemed flourishes. Thank you, Jesus, for your friendship!”

This is why it is not enough to know who Jesus is; rather, we must know Jesus. And we come to know Jesus in the Holy Scriptures, in the Sacraments of the Church, in prayer both alone and with other Christians, in service to the least of his brethren, and - above all - in the “breaking of the bread,” the Most Holy Eucharist. Becoming Evangelical Catholics means that we must seek to know Christ in all of these ways on a regular basis and open our hearts and minds to him as he reveals himself for our salvation and the salvation of the world.

Principle Two

The Second Principle of Evangelical Catholicism states that “The Gospel of Jesus Christ is divine revelation, not human wisdom, and the Gospel is given to us in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition which together constitute a single divine deposit of faith transmitted authentically and authoritatively by the Bishops in full communion with the Bishop of Rome. We must surrender our private judgments in all matters of faith and morals to the sacred teaching authority of the Church’s Magisterium if we are to receive the whole Gospel.”

Suspicion of authority is one of the hallmarks of our time, and the rejection of all authority except for one’s own thoughts and feelings is usually considered an essential condition of intellectual maturity and personal autonomy. Moreover, when this skepticism is married to the cynicism that now suffuses our entire culture, then people despair of the very possibility of a truth we can know with certainty and by which we can shape our lives without irony. But into this chaos the Lord Jesus speaks a divine word of saving truth: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that

I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

In the First Principle of Evangelical Catholicism, we saw that saying “Jesus Christ is Lord” changes our lives in every way, and this Second Principle shows one of the most fundamental ways in which Christians are different from all others. We do not live in radical doubt of the fundamental truths about the origin and purpose of human life because the God who made us from nothing has shown Himself to us and explained His plan for our lives. He began this revelation through Israel and her inspired writings, and He completed this revelation in the life, death, and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The Gospel of Jesus Christ a sure and certain guide that frees us from the skepticism and cynicism that lead so many people into the despair of nihilism. And we receive this Gospel with complete certainty of its truth only in the Catholic Church, in which the Bishops who stand in apostolic succession bear in its fullness the authority of the Savior to teach: “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me.” (Luke 10:16) Jesus gave His messianic authority to the Apostles, who were thus made authentic and authoritative teachers of the Gospel, and the Bishops who succeed the Apostles in every age do not teach from their own authority, learning, or wisdom. Rather, they teach only in the name of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and this is why we can surrender our private judgments about all matters of faith and morals to the teaching of the Church without any loss of our legitimate autonomy and intellectual maturity: the Gospel transmitted in and by the Church is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe.

Principle Three

The Third Principle of Evangelical Catholicism states that “The seven Sacraments of the New Covenant are divinely instituted instruments of grace given to the Church as the ordinary means of sanctification for believers. Receiving the Sacraments regularly and worthily is essential to the life of grace, and for this reason, faithful attendance at Sunday Mass every week (serious illness and necessary work aside) and regular Confession of sins are absolutely required for a life of authentic discipleship.”

In the first chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul teaches us that we exist to live for the praise of God’s glory. This is a bold claim! If we exist to praise God, then

until we worship Him according to the eternal plan of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ, we are not yet living a whole or a holy human life. In other words, a person who does give thanks to God each week in the Most Holy Eucharist does not yet fully understand why he exists or how to find his eternal destiny. From the creation of the world, the Seventh Day was set aside for us from ordinary occupations so that we could share in the covenantal worship which completes and perfects our humanity, and the Passover meal of Israel was set by God as a perpetual remembrance of their deliverance from slavery so that they would never return to the condition of slaves. In his passion, death, and Resurrection, the Lord Jesus transformed the Passover of the Old Covenant into the Eucharist of the New and Everlasting Covenant, and for Christians the observance of the Sabbath moved to the Day of Resurrection, the Lord's Day on which we share each week in the Passover of the Lamb of God. But if all this true, why do so many Catholics not attend Mass every Sunday?

I don't get anything out of it. It's boring. I don't like the music. These are among the answers typically offered by non-practicing Catholics when asked why they don't attend Mass each Sunday. But those answers reveal a much deeper problem. People who don't attend Mass because "they don't get anything out of it" are revealing that they are not yet authentic disciples of the Lord Jesus who understand the cost of discipleship. We are not called to Mass to get anything; we are called to Mass to give something. In fact, we are called to give everything. We must offer our whole lives as a sacrifice of praise in and with the sacrifice of Christ, and in so doing we fulfill the command of the Lord Jesus given at the Last Supper: "Do this in remembrance of me." And when once we have learned to worship God in this fashion, then we find that we do receive something. We receive divine mercy, the forgiveness of our sins, the light of the Gospel to illuminate the mysteries of life, the strength to take up our cross and follow Christ, and the nourishment of the Body and Blood of Christ which is the pledge of eternal life and the medicine of immortality. And going to Confession whenever needed is Christ's Easter gift to the Church and an essential preparation for our worthy participation in the Eucharist. Since we exist for the praise of God's glory, let's use the tools He himself has given us to worship Him in spirit and truth.

Principle Four

The Fourth Principle of Evangelical Catholicism states that “Through Word and Sacrament we are drawn by grace into a transforming union with the Lord Jesus, and having been justified by faith we are called to sanctification and equipped by the Holy Spirit for the good works of the new creation. We must, therefore, learn to live as faithful disciples and to reject whatever is contrary to the Gospel, which is the Good News of the Father’s mercy and love revealed in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

When Protestants want to explain what they perceive as the primary mistake in Catholic teaching on salvation, they often charge that we believe in “works righteousness,” by which they mean that Catholics falsely believe we can earn the favor of God and be rewarded with eternal salvation by doing good works as opposed to being justified by faith. But to frame the conversation in this way presents a false choice between faith and works because we are not saved by either faith or works; rather, we are saved only by Jesus Christ, and his work of salvation is pure grace - the free and unmerited favor of God. The question, then, is how Christ extends to us this offer of salvation by grace and how we respond to that offer. To answer this question we must first acknowledge that in all grace is mediated, meaning that God’s grace is given to us through instruments that correspond to our nature: words that we can hear and read, food that we can eat, the touch of human hands that we can feel. This is what it means to say that “through Word and Sacrament we are drawn by grace into a transforming union with the Lord Jesus.”

The fourth principle goes on to insist that having been justified by faith, we are then called to holiness of life - a call for which we are equipped by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This is what the Lord Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father...” And what is the will of Our Father? We are commanded to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to welcome the immigrant, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and imprisoned. Those who do these things will be welcomed into the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world, while those who do not do these things will be cast away into eternal punishment. (cf. Matthew 25: 31-46)

This is not works righteousness; this is living by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Only because we have first received God’s gift of faith in Jesus Christ

(justification), do we strive to live the life of the new creation in Jesus Christ (sanctification) so that we may inherit everlasting life in Jesus Christ (glorification). Justification must lead to sanctification which is made perfect in glorification; only together do these three moments of grace constitute what we mean by salvation: sharing by the grace of adoption the life and glory of the Triune God through our communion with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Principle Five

The Fifth Principle of Evangelical Catholicism states that “The sacred liturgy, through which the seven Sacraments are celebrated and the Hours of praise are prayed, makes present to us the saving mysteries of the Lord Jesus. The liturgy must therefore be celebrated in such a way that the truth of the Gospel, the beauty of sacred music, the dignity of ritual form, the solemnity of divine worship, and the fellowship of the baptized assembled to pray are kept together in organic unity.”

Since the late 1960’s, the Catholic Church has been convulsed by a great internal struggle that might fairly be described as “Liturgy Wars,” and like all wars, this one has left devastation in its wake. Instead of the renewal of the Church’s interior life which was called for by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council when they set into motion the reform of the sacred liturgy, what most dioceses, parishes, religious orders, and seminaries have experienced for the past forty years has been chaos, division, confusion, and exhaustion. Even now in too many places, the way in which the liturgy is celebrated is not truly sacred, and such worship does not effectively connect us to the mysteries of salvation because our attention is directed not towards Christ but towards the congregation itself. This is among the many reasons why vocations to the priesthood and religious life are so scarce in many places.

Throughout my priestly ministry, I have attempted to celebrate the sacred liturgy according to the perennial mind of the Church and in complete fidelity to the Second Vatican Council, and the practical result of this effort is experienced in the pews of St. Mary’s. Our celebration of Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours is shaped by the conviction that all authentic worship must be Christ-centered and marked by reverence, dignity, and beauty.

For those interested in understanding more deeply why the Church asks us to pray as we do, I recommend three short texts. The first to read is *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,

the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council; it is only a few pages long, and the text is available online. Next should be *The Spirit of the Liturgy* by Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), a beautiful meditation on the nature and purpose of liturgical worship by the finest theological mind of our time. Finally comes *Looking at the Liturgy* by Aidan Nichols, OP, a slender but profound volume which explores in greater depth the themes sounded in the Fifth Principle of Evangelical Catholicism. The psalmist sings that we are created “to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,” and the sacred liturgy is meant always to lead us to the Lord Jesus. An essential part of the New Evangelization is the full and faithful celebration of the sacred liturgy, and that is what we strive for in all our prayer. Let us go together to the source and summit of the Church’s life and find there a glimpse of the New and Eternal Jerusalem.

Principle Six

The Sixth Principle of Evangelical Catholicism states that “Receiving the Sacraments without receiving the Gospel leads to superstition rather than living faith, and the Church must therefore take great care to ensure that those who receive the Sacraments also receive the Gospel in its integrity and entirety. Consequently, before Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion, and Marriage are administered, there must be in those who request these Sacraments clear evidence of knowledge of the Gospel and a serious intention to live the Christian life.”

During the first three hundred years of Christianity, asking to receive a Sacrament of the New Covenant was never done lightly because during most of that time to be a Christian was to be a criminal. When practicing the Christian faith was a crime punishable by horrible penalties, no one asked to receive a Sacrament who was not prepared to live and die as a Christian. But in the middle of the fourth century, those circumstances changed dramatically, and Christianity went from being an outlaw sect to a tolerated minority to the official religion of the Empire in a few short decades. After that, being a European was almost the same thing as being a Christian, and for a thousand years and more the Church could assume that anyone who asked for a Sacrament believed in the Gospel and intended to live the Christian life. But that time has long since passed.

Today we live in the age of the “baptized pagan,” meaning someone who was brought to the font as an infant but then never evangelized, never catechized, never taught

the truths of the Gospel, never formed for Christian living. These poor souls now number in the tens of millions in our nation alone, and they constitute perhaps the larger part of the baptized Catholics in most nations of Old Europe. And in this strange environment of cultural Catholicism, the Church must once again look to the sacramental disciplines of the first Christian centuries to shape our answer to those who ask for a Sacrament (like the Baptism of a child or Marriage) without giving any evidence of a serious intention to practice the Catholic faith by (at a bare minimum) going to Mass each Sunday.

The Sacraments are not a reward for being good Catholics; they are, rather, the means of grace that change us and give us strength to become holy. But to administer the Sacraments to those who give no evidence of faith and who do not seek to live as disciples of the Lord Jesus is a sacrilegious fraud, and this must stop. Following the Sixth Principle of Evangelical Catholicism has immediate and profound consequences for the pastoral practice of a parish, and it is here perhaps more than anywhere that cultural, cafeteria, and casual catholicism collide with Evangelical Catholicism. The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe, and the Sacraments are for those who believe the Gospel.

Principle Seven

The Seventh Principle of Evangelical Catholicism states that “Being a follower of Christ requires moving from being a Church member by convention to a Christian disciple by conviction. This transformation demands that we consciously accept the Gospel as the measure of our entire lives, rather than attempting to measure the Gospel by our experience. Personal knowledge of and devotion to Sacred Scripture is necessary for this transformation to occur through the obedience of faith, and there is no substitute for personal knowledge of the Bible. Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”

Do you read the Bible at home? Do you have a Bible dictionary or commentary to help guide your reading? Do you set aside time even once each week to pray with Holy Scripture? Can you recite any verses of Scripture from memory? Do you know that the Catholic Church teaches that every word in the Bible is inspired by God and contains no errors in matters of faith and morals? Do you believe this to be true? If not, do you understand that you are not in full communion with the Catholic Church? These questions help focus our attention on some of the practical

consequences of the Sixth Principle of Evangelical Catholicism. Even those who desire to surrender their entire lives to the Lord Jesus in the obedience of faith cannot do this unless they read and believe and reverence the Bible, because as St. Jerome (who first translated the entire Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin) teaches us: Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.

The Second Vatican Council devoted one of its sixteen documents to the subject of divine revelation, and it explores the relationships among Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church. This document is called *Dei Verbum* (Latin for “The Word of God”) and is known in English as *The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*. *Dei Verbum* is only a few pages in length and is available online. I heartily encourage all Catholics to study *Dei Verbum* as a means to understanding why there is no substitute for personal knowledge of the Bible.

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16) “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12) The devout reading of Holy Scripture does much more than teach us; it changes us. Reading Holy Scripture changes us in a way that no other form of reading can because when we open the Sacred Page with faith, the Lord speaks to us a word of grace and power unto repentance, conversion, and everlasting life. Immerse yourself in Holy Scripture, and in the Word of God you will come to know, love, and serve ever more perfectly the Word Made Flesh: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Principle Eight

The Eighth Principle of Evangelical Catholicism states that “All the baptized are sent in the Great Commission to be witnesses of Christ to others and must be equipped by the Church to teach the Gospel in word and deed. An essential dimension of true discipleship is the willingness to invite others to follow the Lord Jesus and the readiness to explain His Gospel.”

As He returned to His Father’s glory, the Lord Jesus gave these last instructions to His Church: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go

therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20) This command is known as the Great Commission, and all who fulfill this task are missionaries. But we must not think of missionaries only as priests and religious who travel to distant lands to preach the Gospel to those who have never heard of the Lord Jesus. The mission field is everywhere, and everyone baptized into the death and Resurrection of Christ is a missionary. Your home, your family, your neighborhood, your school, your work place, your clubs and circles of friends, your political activities, your places of play and recreation: all of these are mission territory, and you are a missionary.

Compared to our Protestant brethren, Catholics have historically been considered very quiet Christians; most of us would rather live our religion than talk about it, and the idea of actually explaining our faith to others and then inviting them to follow the Lord Jesus in the Catholic Church is something that usually provokes either nervous laughter or blind terror. But this odd reticence to talk about the Gospel is not of the Church’s design or making; it is in part an unintended consequence of the division of labor in the Church, with clergy and religious on one side of the divide and the lay faithful on the other. But the Great Commission is given to all who are baptized, not just to priests and religious, and so the privilege and duty of making disciples of all nations falls to every Christian of every age without a single exception. You are a missionary.

In the first seven principles of Evangelical Catholicism, we have seen that our lives must be Christ-centered and that this is possible only when we live in the Church, sustained by her sacraments and nourished by her teaching. Now in this eighth and final principle we see that the life of grace is not given to us for our own sake, but for the sake of those to whom we are sent as witnesses. To be a disciple of Christ demands that we be willing at all times to invite others to follow the Lord Jesus and be ready to explain His Gospel. At our Baptism, the Lord Jesus called each of us by name to follow Him in the Way of the Cross. May we heed that call by living as Evangelical Catholics who bear witness to the Savior through radical conversion, deep fidelity, and joyful discipleship.