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The New Evangelization as a Theological Boundary Concept: An Interpretative Reconstruction of Papal Emphases

Abstract: The article offers an interpretative reconstruction of the functions of the concept of the new evangelization in selected texts of four successive popes, treating it as a theological boundary concept situated between fundamental, pastoral, and social theology. It argues that under the pontificate of John Paul II, the term functioned primarily as a mobilizing category intended to rekindle the Church's missionary zeal. Benedict XVI offered an intellectual deepening of the concept, focusing on the relationship between faith and reason and on the defense of objective truth in a secularized world. In Pope Francis's approach, the concept acquires an existential dimension, emphasizing the witness of mercy and outreach to the social peripheries. The article also advances a hypothesis concerning Leo XIV, suggesting a shift towards a socio-structural recontextualization in which poverty becomes a key locus of discernment. Ultimately, the new evangelization is defined as a boundary concept whose future depends on maintaining a balance between theological precision and social relevance.

Keywords: boundary concept, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, Pope Leo XIV, faith and reason, secularization

1. Introduction

Since its introduction by Pope John Paul II into the Church's teaching, the idea of the New Evangelization has aroused considerable interest and enthusiasm. This, in turn, led to a rapid expansion of initiatives under this heading. Numerous movements, communities, events, and pastoral projects emerged, all appealing to the New Evangelization as a sign of ecclesial renewal. In many

contexts, there was a prevailing sense that the New Evangelization offered an almost universal remedy to mounting pastoral challenges and opened up the prospect of renewed missionary dynamism for the Church. At the same time, however, the concept was not immune to being reduced to a compelling pastoral slogan, which, while mobilizing, did not always go hand in hand with sustained theological reflection.

It may be said that pastoral practice outpaced systematic analysis and a more profound hermeneutics of the New Evangelization. An apparent asymmetry began to emerge between the critical, theoretical-theological assessments of the concept articulated by some theologians (Greinacher 1991, 248–50; Küng 1992, 83), and its inspirational role in pastoral practice (Biela 2011, 136; Pawlina 2011, 123; Kasper 2011, 21–38; Buhlmann 2012, 21; Makowski and Pabiś 2020, 125; Weron 2002, 109; Stępnia 2019, 191; Przybyłowski 2018, 361; Kusior 2018, 145; Sepiolo 2018, 293; Sobczykowa 2018, 67; Hahn 2017, 45; Willits 2012, 78; Barron 2014, 112; Martin and Williamson 2006, 59; Kim and Grogan 2015, 201; Cantalamessa 2014, 134). It was likely this very asymmetry that prevented the New Evangelization from ever entirely freeing itself from misunderstandings that developed alongside its enthusiastic reception. Paradoxically, however, this same tension – its location at the intersection of theory and practice – made the New Evangelization the subject of an intense and multifaceted debate.

Over time, this dynamic began to weaken noticeably. After a period of vigorous development in both reflection and practice, a certain quieting set in. This phenomenon became particularly evident during the pontificate of Pope Francis, who used the term New Evangelization relatively infrequently. Although his teaching and pastoral activity in many respects realized the core intuitions of the idea, it could give the impression that the concept had receded into the background or even lost its original discursive force. As a consequence, questions arose concerning the contemporary relevance of the *New Evangelization*, its significance for the Church today, and whether it had been merely a transient pastoral phenomenon.

This article proceeds from the assumption that the key issue is not so much the continuity or rupture in papal teaching on the New Evangelization as the theological status of the concept itself. The question thus arises as to whether the New Evangelization ceased to function as a precise theological category before it ever fully became one. Was the idea given the opportunity, on the one hand, to achieve conceptual solidity and, on the other, to preserve its inspirational pastoral character? Or was it from the outset destined to undergo a gradual transformation into a slogan of high mobilizing power but diminishing analytical capacity?

This article aims to reconstruct the theological function of the concept of the New Evangelization under changing cultural conditions, rather than to provide an exhaustive history of the term or to assess the effectiveness of particular pastoral models. Since such a reconstruction necessarily moves across doctrinal, pastoral, and socio-cultural layers, the New Evangelization is treated here as a boundary-type concept: a notion whose meaning and function remain partially fluid and context-dependent, yet sufficiently coherent to orient theological reflection (Varzi 2025). In this sense, the article advances a heuristic thesis: in selected papal texts, the New Evangelization may be seen as functioning according to changing dominant emphases – mobilising and prophetic in John Paul II, theological-epistemic in Benedict XVI, existential and performative in Pope Francis, and possibly socio-structural in the initial emphases of Pope Leo XIV. These distinctions do not imply strict separation or rupture between pontificates, but serve to identify dominant theological and pastoral accents within a broader continuity of ecclesial teaching.

To clarify and substantiate these claims, the study proposes a hermeneutical and systematic analysis of selected texts of the papal magisterium and their theological reception, combined with a reconstruction of the functional significance of the concept of the New Evangelization across successive pontificates. The study has an interpretative and systematic character. It is based on selected representative texts of the papal magisterium and their theological reception. Its aim is not to map all occurrences of the term New Evangelization, but to identify the principal theological and pastoral

functions assigned to the concept in successive pontificates. The selection of sources is therefore representative rather than exhaustive. Priority is given to texts that either explicitly employ the concept of the New Evangelization or reveal the theological logic through which the Church's evangelizing mission is interpreted in a given pontificate.

The first part of the article examines the understanding of the New Evangelization in John Paul II's teaching, followed by its theological reinterpretation under Benedict XVI. In the concluding section, possible directions for further recontextualizing the idea and practice of the New Evangelization are outlined in light of the initial emphases of Pope Leo XIV's pontificate.

2. John Paul II: The New Evangelization as a Mobilizing Category

The concept of the New Evangelization occupies a central place in John Paul II's teaching and constitutes one of the key interpretive frameworks of his pontificate. The Pope consistently presented evangelization as the Church's fundamental mission, deriving directly from Christ's mandate and not subject to relativization in light of historical circumstances. The New Evangelization was not conceived as an alternative to the Church's traditional missionary activity, but rather as its creative continuation amid profound cultural, social, and spiritual transformation in the contemporary world. From the very beginning of his pontificate, John Paul II emphasized that the Church cannot content itself with the mere historical rootedness of Christianity within a given society, but must continually undertake the effort of proclaiming the Gospel in a manner capable of reaching the contemporary human person (John Paul II 1979a, no. 14). In this sense, the New Evangelization in John Paul II's teaching fulfilled, above all, a mobilizing and prophetic function. This does not mean that it lacked theological or philosophical depth, but that its dominant use was pastoral and missionary: it served to awaken the Church to renewed responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel amid rapid cultural change.

2.1. The Genesis and Fundamental Intuitions of the New Evangelization

The first explicit use of the term New Evangelization in papal teaching is associated with John Paul II's 1979 pilgrimage to Poland. In the homily delivered in Nowa Huta (John Paul II 1979b), the Pope invoked the symbolism of the Cross as a sign of God's presence in history and as the foundation of the nation's Christian identity. The ideological context of this location – designed as a space deliberately stripped of religious reference – confers particular significance upon this address. On that occasion, the Pope presented the New Evangelization as a courageous and prophetic proclamation of the same Gospel under new historical circumstances, uncompromising in the face of ideologies that reduce the human person to a purely material dimension (John Paul II 2005, 187). This event demonstrates that, from the outset, the New Evangelization was conceived as a symbolic and mobilizing act capable of activating the religious imagination and galvanizing the community of believers in response to dominant ideological narratives.

A decisive moment in clarifying the meaning of the New Evangelization was John Paul II's 1983 address to the bishops of Latin America. On this occasion, the Pope formulated the well-known definition according to which new ardor, new methods, and new forms of expression must characterize the New Evangelization (John Paul II 1983). This formulation makes clear that the novelty of evangelization does not concern its doctrinal content, which remains unchanged, but rather the manner of its transmission and the disposition of the evangelizers themselves. While this definition possessed considerable mobilising power, it did not yet provide a fully systematic account of the theological status of the New Evangelization, thereby facilitating a broad and heterogeneous reception of the concept. At the same time, this very indeterminacy contained theological potential, as evidenced by Benedict XVI's subsequent effort to deepen the notion of the New Evangelization.

John Paul II firmly rejected interpretations of the New Evangelization as a re-evangelization understood in terms of the failure of earlier proclamation. In his view, the weakening of faith

in traditionally Christian societies does not signify the defeat of the Gospel, but rather reveals the need for a deeper rooting of its message within a changing culture. The New Evangelization thus presupposes a dynamic fidelity to Revelation, expressed in the Church's capacity to engage in dialogue with the contemporary world without relinquishing the truth of Christ (Wilczek 2004, 57).

2.2. The Context of Secularization and Pastoral Logic

John Paul II presented the most comprehensive theological account of the New Evangelization in the encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (1990). This document situates the New Evangelization within the Church's missionary nature, grounded in its essence as a community sent to proclaim Christ to all people. The Pope distinguishes three fundamental spheres of evangelizing activity: the *missio ad gentes*, ordinary pastoral care, and the New Evangelization, directed toward the baptized who have lost a living connection with the faith (John Paul II 1990, no. 33).

The New Evangelization primarily concerns societies with a long Christian tradition that have undergone secularization, resulting in the marginalization of religion in both public and private life. The Pope emphasized that the Church cannot abandon the proclamation of Christ in these contexts, even when it encounters indifference or opposition. On the contrary, such circumstances render the evangelizing task all the more urgent (John Paul II 1990, no. 34–37). The placement of the New Evangelization between the *missio ad gentes* and ordinary pastoral care highlights its intermediary function while leaving its precise theological status unresolved, suspended between the pastoral and the missionary categories.

Within this framework, John Paul II analyzed the necessity of the New Evangelization in light of the profound socio-cultural transformations of the late twentieth century. He attributed particular significance to the experience of totalitarian systems – especially communism – which sought to eradicate religion from social life systematically. The collapse of these systems did not automatically lead to a revival of faith; rather, it often exposed spiritual emptiness and vulnerability to new forms of enslavement, such as materialism

and consumerism (John Paul II 1991, no. 24–25; Martin and Williamson 2006, 15–48).

One of the central challenges addressed by the New Evangelization is secularization, which John Paul II described as the gradual elimination of God from the horizon of human thought and action, resulting in moral relativism and a crisis of meaning. In this article, secularization is understood as a socio-cultural process involving the transformation of the role of religion in individual and public life. Secularism, by contrast, denotes an ideological or normative position that tends to exclude religion from the public sphere or reduce it to a purely private matter. From the perspective of contemporary theories of secularisation, this process encompasses not only a decline in religious practice but also – following Casanova – a reconfiguration of the role of religion within the public sphere (Casanova 1994, 3–22) and, in Taylor's terms, a transformation of the very conditions of belief (Taylor 2007, 537–40). Against this backdrop, the primary addressees of the New Evangelization are the baptized who live as if God did not exist, maintaining only external forms of religiosity or abandoning religious practice altogether (John Paul II 1990, no. 2). Such an understanding of the New Evangelization's audience necessitated, above all, the reawakening of religious consciousness and the reconstruction of the most basic structures of faith, thus favoring forms of proclamation with a distinctly mobilizing and pastoral character.

The Pope also linked this process to the growth of sects and new religious movements, which often respond to a need for belonging and spirituality in ways that are simplified or manipulative. The appropriate response of the Church, he argued, should consist in deepened catechesis, solid theological formation, and the building of authentic communities of faith (John Paul II 1988, no. 34).

In John Paul II's teaching, the New Evangelization appears as the work of the entire Church, with the Holy Spirit as its first and most essential agent. It is the Spirit who enables believers to proclaim the Gospel and prepares human hearts to receive it. The Pope repeatedly stressed that without openness to the action of the Holy Spirit, all pastoral strategies remain ineffective (John Paul II 1986, no. 25).

Responsibility for the New Evangelization rests with all the baptized, albeit in distinct ways, particularly with the clergy, consecrated persons, and the laity. The primary means of evangelization are the witness of life, the proclamation of the Word of God, and the liturgy, lived as an experience of mystery. John Paul II famously emphasized that the contemporary human person listens more readily to witnesses than to teachers; consequently, the authenticity of Christian life constitutes the foundation of effective evangelization (John Paul II 1990, no. 42). This emphasis on personal witness and authenticity reinforced the practical dimension of the New Evangelization, while simultaneously encouraging its reception primarily as a pastoral program rather than as a fully elaborated theological category.

2.3. Limits and Tensions of the Concept

The ultimate goal of the New Evangelization is not merely the revitalization of religious practice, but the leading of the human person to a personal encounter with Christ. In this encounter, the individual discovers the fullness of truth about oneself and the meaning of one's existence. John Paul II was convinced that only in Christ is it possible to build a culture grounded in human dignity, solidarity, and hope. The New Evangelization thus aims to form mature Christians capable of responsible participation in the life of the Church and the world (John Paul II 1979a, no. 10). This articulation of its goal endowed the New Evangelization with a distinctly existential and personalist dimension, while leaving open the question of the relationship between the experience of faith and its rational justification. At the same time, this personalist and existential orientation should not be separated from John Paul II's broader reflection on truth and reason. In *Fides et ratio*, the Pope articulated a robust vision of the unity of faith and reason, showing that the act of faith does not stand in opposition to rational inquiry but presupposes and elevates it. For this reason, the mobilizing character of the New Evangelization in John Paul II's teaching should be understood as a pastoral dominant, not as the absence of epistemic or philosophical grounding (John Paul II 1998).

In the teaching of Saint John Paul II, the New Evangelization constitutes one of the central challenges facing the Church in the contemporary world. He approached it primarily from a pastoral perspective, focusing less on its systematic theological elaboration and more on concrete ecclesial actions and attitudes in response to a changing reality. For him, the New Evangelization did not signify the proclamation of a “new” Gospel, but rather a renewed commitment to communicating the unchanging message of salvation.

Although John Paul II’s reflection on the New Evangelization does not take the form of a strict theological treatise, his pontificate fundamentally shaped the concept and endowed it with dynamism. In this sense, the New Evangelization functioned above all as a mobilizing and prophetic category: remarkably effective in activating the Church’s pastoral energy, while at the same time remaining open to further systematic clarification.

Understood in this way, the New Evangelization – despite its undeniable effectiveness in mobilizing pastoral energy – remained in John Paul II’s teaching an open and polysemous category whose theological status was never definitively specified. The tension between its strong prophetic-pastoral dimension and its lack of systematic theological anchoring does not indicate a weakness of the concept, but rather delineates a space for further reflection. It is precisely within this space that the thought of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI may be situated. His contribution should not be understood as a correction of John Paul II, but rather as a more explicit theological articulation of questions already present in the background of the New Evangelization: truth, reason, Revelation, and the conditions of possibility of faith in the contemporary world.

3. Benedict XVI: The Theological Deepening of the Idea of the New Evangelization

In the reflection of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, the New Evangelization receives a more explicit theological and epistemic articulation. The emphasis falls not simply on the intensification of pastoral activity, but on the conditions under which faith can be received as a meaningful and rationally credible proposal. In this

sense, the pontificate of Benedict XVI may be read as an attempt to root the New Evangelization more clearly in the question of truth, Revelation, and the relationship between faith and reason (Ratzinger 1985, 1996a, 1996b, 2000).

Ratzinger's (Benedict XVI) reflection on the New Evangelization is marked by a high degree of methodological and theological coherence. Compared with John Paul II's teaching, the source material is less dispersed and, at the same time, more systematic. The unity of style, clarity of argumentation, and explicit grounding in dogmatic and biblical theology make Benedict XVI's thought a compact and coherent vision of the New Evangelization, which can therefore be analyzed more synthetically.

3.1. Definition and Theological Foundations

An analysis of the New Evangelization in the teaching of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI must begin with a precise determination of the term's meaning. The key text in this regard remains the address of December 2000, in which Ratzinger distinguishes between permanent evangelization (*dauernde Evangelisierung*) and the New Evangelization (Ratzinger 2000, 1232). Permanent evangelization refers to the Church's ordinary pastoral activity. In contrast, the New Evangelization is directed toward those who, despite being baptized and rooted in Christian culture, no longer find in the Gospel answers to fundamental existential questions.

A further clarification of this definition appears in the apostolic exhortation *Africae munus* (Benedict XVI 2011, no. 161–64), where Benedict XVI clearly distinguishes among the *missio ad gentes*, ordinary pastoral care, and the New Evangelization, understood as concern for the baptized who have ceased to practice the faith. In this way, the New Evangelization constitutes neither an alternative to mission nor a simple extension of pastoral ministry, but a specific form of proclaiming Christ under conditions of advanced secularization. This distinction indicates that for Ratzinger, the New Evangelization is not primarily a matter of intensifying pastoral activities, but rather a response to a crisis in the capacity to perceive faith as a meaningful proposal of truth (Babiński 2020, 29–32).

Although Benedict XVI did not formulate a separate treatise devoted explicitly to the relationship between theology and the New Evangelization, his writings clearly indicate that theology plays a decisive role in this process. Its fundamental task is the faithful and competent transmission of the content of Revelation, without yielding to the pressure of relativism or to transient cultural expectations.

Ratzinger emphasizes that theology must serve truth and thus support reason in its striving to know reality in its full depth (Benedict XVI 2012a, no. 2–4). Of particular importance here is the relationship between faith and reason, which Benedict XVI describes as a process of mutual purification and completion. Without this harmony, the New Evangelization would risk either fideism or reducing faith to purely sociological categories. In this sense, Benedict XVI shifts the focus of the New Evangelization from pastoral mobilization to the fundamental question of truth, without which all pastoral activity remains secondary.

3.2. Europe, Culture, and the Rationality of Faith

In Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's view, Europe occupies a privileged place, perceived as a continent with deep Christian roots that are gradually being forgotten. Processes of secularization and laicization lead to the reduction of faith to the private sphere and to a crisis of European culture as a whole. This crisis has its source in a crisis of faith, which, in turn, leads to moral relativism and the loss of a sense of absolute truth.

A symbolic expression of this diagnosis is the choice of the name “Benedict,” referring to Benedict of Nursia, the patron saint of Europe (Benedict XVI 2010). The Pope repeatedly emphasized that without reference to its Christian heritage, Europe loses its identity. The New Evangelization thus appears to be an attempt at the spiritual reconstruction of the continent through the rediscovery of the relationship among faith, reason, and culture. For this reason, Europe is not for Benedict XVI merely a field of particular pastoral action, but the place where the question of the rationality of faith and its capacity to shape culture is ultimately decided (Szewczyk 2013, 101–10).

The theological deepening of the idea of the New Evangelization in Benedict XVI takes place through its explicit rooting in Sacred Scripture. The structure of the New Evangelization is expressed in the parable of the mustard seed, which points to the necessity of patience, humility, and readiness to begin with what is small and seemingly ineffective (Ratzinger 2000, 1231–35).

With regard to content, Benedict XVI distinguishes four fundamental themes: conversion (*Bekehrung*), the Kingdom of God (*Reich Gottes*), the person of Jesus Christ, and eternal life (*ewiges Leben*). These themes are not abstract; they address the existential questions of the contemporary human person. The New Evangelization should lead to a personal encounter with Christ, which gives meaning to life and opens a horizon of hope that transcends the limits of temporal existence (Ratzinger 2010, 1239–1241). The selection of these themes demonstrates that in Benedict XVI, the New Evangelization is primarily kerygmatic and existential-cognitive in character, rather than methodological or marketing-oriented (Pagacz 2024, 233–35).

3.3. Institutional and Dialogical Forms of the New Evangelization

An analysis of the homilies, addresses, catechesis, and occasional speeches of Benedict XVI clearly indicates that the New Evangelization belonged to the central tasks of his pontificate (Benedict XVI 2005). This is confirmed not only by numerous programmatic statements but also by concrete institutional and pastoral initiatives undertaken by the Pope to revive the Church's missionary dynamism in the contemporary world. Among the most significant of these initiatives are: the establishment of the *Cortile dei Gentili* initiative, the creation of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization (21 September 2010; Benedict XVI 2010, Introduction), the proclamation of the Year of Faith (11 October 2012 – 24 November 2013; Benedict XVI 2012, no. 2), and the convocation of the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops devoted to the theme The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith. These initiatives stem from Benedict XVI's concern for the Church's fidelity to its missionary vocation and

for adequate means of proclaiming the Gospel amid advanced secularization.

One of the most serious challenges facing the Church in the twenty-first century is reaching nonbelievers or religiously indifferent individuals with the message of the Gospel. Benedict XVI recognized that among them are not only those raised outside a religious tradition but also baptized persons who have lost their connection to faith and the ecclesial community (Ratzinger 2000, 1240). In this context, the Pope emphasized the importance of dialogue as both a space for questioning meaning, truth, and God and a form of witnessing to faith.

The inspiration for the *Cortile dei Gentili* initiative was drawn from the symbolism of the Jerusalem Temple, especially the so-called Court of the Gentiles, which served as a space of encounter between Israelites and pagan nations. This court, accessible to all, constituted a space of openness and dialogue, even if it did not directly lead to full participation in worship (Benedict XVI 2009). Benedict XVI referred to this symbolism in his address to the Roman Curia on 21 December 2009, pointing to the need to create an analogous space within the Church in which seekers could “draw near to God, even though they do not yet know Him” (Benedict XVI 2011b).

The realization of this vision took shape in the *Cortile dei Gentili* initiative, entrusted to the Pontifical Council for Culture under the leadership of Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi (Ravasi 2011). Its inauguration took place in France on 24–25 March 2011, a choice that was not accidental, as the country is often regarded as a symbol of modern secularism. Although the *Cortile dei Gentili* does not constitute a direct form of kerygmatic proclamation, it fits within the logic of the New Evangelization as a stage of pre-evangelization, preparing the ground for subsequent proclamation.

By virtue of the apostolic letter in the form of a *motu proprio* *Ubicumque et semper* of 21 September 2010, Benedict XVI established the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization as a dicastery of the Roman Curia (Benedict XVI 2010, no. 1). Its purpose is to deepen theological and pastoral

reflection on the New Evangelization and to support initiatives to implement it in particular Churches.

The founding document also defines the structure of the new dicastery, headed by an archbishop assisted by a secretary, undersecretary, and consultors (Benedict XVI 2010, no. 4). The first president of the Council was Archbishop Rino Fisichella, who interpreted his appointment as a call to translate years of theological research into concrete pastoral action (Fisichella 2012, 30). The goals of the New Evangelization to be pursued by the Council include, among others, demonstrating the relevance of Christianity, integrating faith and reason, and inspiring renewed missionary zeal.

Another important initiative of Benedict XVI was the proclamation of the Year of Faith through the apostolic letter *Porta fidei*, issued on 11 October 2011. Celebrated in the universal Church from 11 October 2012 to 24 November 2013, the Year of Faith was closely linked to the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and the twentieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Benedict XVI 2012a). Its aim was to deepen the personal relationship with Christ, rediscover the content of faith, and renew the evangelizing responsibility of all the faithful.

The inauguration of the Year of Faith coincided with the sessions of the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops devoted to the New Evangelization. Benedict XVI emphasized that this synod constituted a privileged space for reflection on the transmission of faith under conditions of the contemporary “spiritual desert” (Benedict XVI 2012b). The symbolic presence of representatives of other Christian Churches at the inauguration of the Year of Faith underscored the ecumenical dimension of the New Evangelization as a shared witness to the world.

These initiatives should be interpreted not as pastoral programs in a technical sense, but as institutional expressions of Benedict XVI’s conviction that the New Evangelization first requires the reconstruction of the conditions of possibility of faith as a rational and free act. In this context, the New Evangelization, as articulated by Benedict XVI, also acquires a distinct ecumenical dimension (Benedict XVI 2011a).

The Pope repeatedly emphasized that divisions among Christians constitute a serious obstacle to the credible proclamation of the Gospel. The New Evangelization can become a space of common witness to faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. In this context, particular importance attaches to initiatives undertaken by Benedict XVI in cooperation with other Churches and Christian communities. The shared concern for renewing faith in a secularized world emerges as a point of convergence that can foster deeper ecumenical dialogue (Benedict XVI 2011a). The ecumenical dimension of the New Evangelization strengthens its epistemic credibility by presenting Christian truth not as the property of a single tradition, but as a shared witness to the world.

3.4. Summary

From the perspective of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, the New Evangelization may be interpreted as placing stronger emphasis on theological-fundamental reflection than on pastoral mobilisation alone. In this sense, for Benedict XVI, the New Evangelization becomes a question concerning the conditions of possibility of faith in a world dominated by epistemic and cultural relativism.

A characteristic feature of this reinterpretation is the firm grounding of the New Evangelization in the relationship between faith and reason and in theology's responsibility for the integral transmission of the content of Revelation. Benedict XVI consistently emphasized that, without theological deepening capable of engaging in critical dialogue with modern forms of rationality, any pastoral renewal remains superficial and short-lived. For this reason, the New Evangelization cannot be limited to the sphere of religious experience or communal practice, but must also encompass cognitive, cultural, and ecclesial dimensions.

In this sense, the pontificate of Benedict XVI does not so much develop the idea of the New Evangelization in quantitative or organizational terms as it undertakes a critical theological reconstruction. The New Evangelization is not abandoned as a mobilising category, but it is more explicitly connected with the diagnosis of the crisis of faith and the question of its transmission in the contemporary world. At its center stands the question of truth – a question without

which, according to Benedict XVI, any pastoral renewal loses its lasting foundation and is reduced to ad hoc strategies of adaptation.

The theological deepening of the idea of the New Evangelization undertaken by Benedict XVI thus clearly shifts its center of gravity from pastoral strategies to the fundamental question of truth and the rationality of faith. At the same time, however, this pontificate leaves open the question of how such a reconstructed vision of the New Evangelization is to be translated into the everyday practice of the Church's life in a world marked by cultural and social pluralism. This tension between theological reflection and the existential form of witness serves as the point of departure for the pontificate of Pope Francis, in which the existential and performative dimensions of evangelization become more visible.

4. Pope Francis: The New Evangelization as an Existential Practice

In the pontificate of Pope Francis, the idea of the New Evangelization shifted from theological-fundamental reconstruction toward an existential dimension, in which the emphasis falls less on the conceptual justification of faith than on its practical embodiment in the Church's style of life and action.

The pontificate of Pope Francis introduces a distinct shift in emphasis in how the Church communicates and carries out its mission in the contemporary world. His humble manner, simple preaching style, strong focus on poverty and sensitivity to human need, and openness toward those who think differently mark a direction of renewal that the Church today requires. One can even speak of a new way of proclaiming the Gospel that does not limit itself to verbal transmission alone, but embraces the whole person. In this sense, Francis's pontificate may be interpreted as giving concrete pastoral expression to several core intuitions associated with the New Evangelization.

At the same time, the relatively infrequent direct statements by Pope Francis on the New Evangelization – especially in comparison with John Paul II and Benedict XVI – raise questions about the future of this idea. Does Francis intend to continue the work initiated by

John Paul II and developed by Benedict XVI? If so, will he remain faithful to their line, or will he give the New Evangelization a new direction? Or does he propose a different logic of ecclesial renewal, a different path of renewal for the Church, not directly tied to this concept?

Although Pope Francis does not often speak explicitly about the New Evangelization, this does not mean that he has abandoned the idea. Based on his statements to date, one can infer the fundamental direction of his development. Three texts are of decisive importance here. The first is his address to participants in the assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization on 14 October 2013, which constitutes Francis's first official statement on the matter and is programmatic (Francis 2013a, no. 7). The second important document is the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (Francis 2013b), which summarizes the synod of bishops devoted to the New Evangelization, convened still by Benedict XVI. The third source is the brief address delivered by Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio to cardinals before the March 2013 conclave, as recorded by Cardinal Jaime Lucas Ortega y Alamino (Zenit 2013).

4.1. The Definition of the New Evangelization according to Pope Francis

The most synthetic definition of the New Evangelization in the teaching of Pope Francis appears in his address to the participants in the assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization on 14 October 2013, in which he defines it as a "reawakening of the life of faith in human hearts and minds (Francis 2013a, no.7)." This formulation, lacking direct reference to John Paul II's classic formula of "new ardor, methods, and means of expression," points to Francis's characteristic way of speaking about evangelization: less conceptual and more existential and relational. The difference concerns, above all, language and emphases rather than a break with the content of the Church's teaching to date.

A clear continuity with the reflection of previous popes is confirmed by the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, which constitutes the programmatic document of Francis's pontificate with regard to evangelization. The text makes numerous references

to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and to Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. Particularly evident is the continuation of John Paul II's intuition that returning to the sources of the Gospel does not lead to a repetition of earlier forms, but to the discovery of new ways of proclaiming it in a changing world. Francis also affirms the strong connection between the New Evangelization and mercy (Francis 2013b, no. 30), as emphasized by his predecessors, making mercy the primary language of the Church's communication with the contemporary human person (Francis 2013b, no. 30). References to Benedict XVI appear less frequently, but they are significant, as exemplified by the assertion that the Church does not grow through proselytism but through attraction (Francis 2013b, no. 14).

A characteristic feature of Francis's language is the priority given to encounter, affective receptivity, and relational witness. This does not negate the significance of doctrinal content, but indicates that, in Francis's pastoral vision, the credibility of proclamation is closely linked to the form of ecclesial presence. Evangelization begins with the witness of life, capable of moving the heart, and only subsequently leads to the proclamation of the word, which forms the mind. This order does not negate the significance of doctrinal content, but shifts the center of gravity toward the experience of encounter, dialogue, and relationship. In this context, Francis more rarely uses the term New Evangelization, emphasizing that every authentic missionary action of the Church bears within it a dimension of newness. Hence, in *Evangelii gaudium*, expressions such as "a new stage of evangelization" or "the freshness of the Gospel" appear more frequently, and joy becomes the central motif as the fundamental sign of authentic proclamation of faith (Francis 2013b, no. 17; Cavadini and Wallenfang 2018, 45–52).

The shift of emphasis from conceptual language to the language of witness and experience, however, raises the question of the limits of an evangelizing strategy understood in this way. If the New Evangelization is primarily identified with attitude, a style of life, and the practice of mercy, this raises the question of how the existential and relational mode of evangelization is to remain connected with explicit theological articulation and critical dialogue

with modern skepticism toward revealed truth. In this sense, the New Evangelization, as manifested by Pope Francis, exhibits a distinctly existential character, which – though pastorally effective – does not, in itself, settle the question of its epistemic and theological foundations.

4.2. The Church That Goes Forth

The vision of a Church capable of undertaking the New Evangelization was already clearly sketched in Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio's address delivered before the conclave in March 2013 (Zenit 2013).¹ It was subsequently developed in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*. The central motif of this vision is the call for the Church to "go forth" toward the peripheries – not only geographical, but above all existential – connected to the experience of sin, suffering, injustice, and exclusion (Francis 2013b, no. 20). The New Evangelization is here understood as the Church's dynamic presence among those who find themselves on the margins of social and religious life, rather than as an activity conducted exclusively from the secure center of ecclesial structures (Zenit 2013).

In parallel, Bergoglio formulates a critique of a Church closed in on itself, focused on its own identity and institutional self-preservation. The image of a Church afflicted by theological narcissism, which keeps Christ for itself, is set against the vision of a Church open to the world, going forth and ready to bear the risk of being wounded (Zenit 2013; Francis 2013b, no. 49). In *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis unequivocally declares that he prefers a Church bruised and wounded by going out to people rather than a Church closed in, safe, but spiritually barren. Only such a Church – present within

¹ The provenance of this address warrants brief comment. Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio delivered it largely *ex tempore*, drawing on previously prepared notes. After the address, Cardinal Jaime Lucas Ortega y Alamino requested access to Bergoglio's handwritten notes, judging them to offer a particularly clear and concise diagnosis of the contemporary Church. With Bergoglio's consent, the notes were subsequently made public. Ortega later recalled the core theses of the address during a Mass celebrated in Cuba, at which he gave thanks for the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI and prayed for God's blessing upon the newly elected Pope Francis.

the world and capable of dialogue – can become a credible witness to the Gospel under conditions of advanced secularization.

This vision shifts the understanding of the New Evangelization from the question of the content and truth of the message toward the question of the form of the Church's presence in the world. The style of Pope Francis's pontificate has indicated how he understood this presence, consistently embodying in practice the guidance he formulated (Zenit 2013).

4.3. Summary

In the pontificate of Pope Francis, the New Evangelization undergoes a clear shift toward an existential dimension. Its principal bearer becomes the Church's style of life: witness, closeness, mercy, and readiness to go forth toward social and existential peripheries. In comparison with the dominant accents identified in previous sections, the emphasis is placed less on systematic theological reflection and more on the practical embodiment of faith in the Church's relationships and actions vis-à-vis the world.

Understood in this way, the New Evangelization effectively addresses the crisis of the Church's credibility and the need for authenticity and closeness in the communication of the Gospel. At the same time, however, the shift of emphasis from conceptual language to the language of witness and experience leaves open the question of the limits of such a model of evangelization. While it enables the rebuilding of trust and restores the existential intelligibility of faith, it does not by itself resolve the problem of its theological articulation or its relation to the question of truth.

In this sense, Pope Francis's pontificate signifies neither a rupture with the idea of the New Evangelization nor its theological closure. On the contrary, it reveals a new tension: between practice and reflection, between the Church's style of presence and the need for a systematic interpretation of the meaning and content of faith. This tension renders the question of the future status of the New Evangelization newly salient.

5. Pope Leo XIV: A Preliminary Hypothesis of Socio-Structural Recontextualization

At this stage of Pope Leo XIV's pontificate, any attempt to reconstruct his approach to the New Evangelization must remain provisional and interpretative. The duration of the pontificate is still too short, and direct programmatic statements explicitly devoted to the New Evangelization remain limited. For this reason, the following remarks should not be read as a definitive account of his teaching, but as a cautious hypothesis concerning possible directions of development. The initial emphasis of his pontificate may suggest that the social and structural conditions of evangelization will play an important role in future reflection.

5.1. Intercultural Experience and Social Sensitivity

A significant point of reference for this reconstruction is Pope Leo's own biography, which reveals an experience of life and ministry in radically different cultural and social contexts. Originating from the United States, the Pope brings with him the experience of a society strongly shaped by market logic, efficiency, and competitiveness. At the same time, his many years of episcopal ministry in Peru introduced him to the realities of structural poverty, exclusion, and social vulnerability characteristic of many regions of Latin America.

This experience may be interpreted as formative and pastoral in character, insofar as it draws attention to the ways in which economic conditions, social relations, and unjust structures affect the possibility of living the faith and participating in the life of the Church. This perspective was further complemented by his long-standing experience of work in Europe and by his service as superior general of the Augustinian Order, which involved regular contact with local Churches on different continents.

In this sense, Pope Leo emerges as a pastor with high intercultural competence, capable of discerning how the Gospel may be inculturated without imposing a single, homogenizing model of Christianity. The experience of living "between worlds" fosters an understanding of the New Evangelization not so much as a problem of communicating the content of faith, but rather as a question

concerning the social and cultural conditions of its credible realization (Nothelle-Wildfeuer 2025, 9).

Although in his first document, *Dilexi te*, Pope Leo does not explicitly employ the term New Evangelization, the document reveals fundamental intuitions that may be read as its theological and pastoral foundations. Evangelization is not reduced to doctrinal transmission; instead, it is presented as a process of forming a relationship with God that leads to a transformation in how individuals and communities live (Leo XIV 2025, no. 11).

A central motif of the document is a critical engagement with dominant social and economic logics based on competition, profit maximization, and individualism. In this context, the Gospel appears as a proposal for an alternative vision of the human person and society, rooted in relationality, solidarity, and responsibility. From this perspective, the New Evangelization may be read within a broader reflection on social structures that either foster or hinder the authentic living of faith.

5.2. Poverty and Social Structures as the Locus of the New Evangelization

One possible distinctive accent in Pope Leo XIV's initial teaching is the central significance attributed to the category of poverty in reflections on the New Evangelization. Poverty is understood here not exclusively in material terms but in a multidimensional sense: as a phenomenon encompassing relational, cultural, and spiritual poverty, manifesting as weakened social bonds, isolation, and the loss of meaning and belonging (Leo XIV 2025, no. 10).

An important novelty of this perspective lies in the emphasis on the active role of the poor in the life of the Church. The poor do not appear merely as recipients of pastoral action, but as subjects and witnesses of the Gospel, capable of revealing its critical dimension vis-à-vis unjust structures of the world. The preferential option for people experiencing poverty is thus presented not only as a moral postulate, but as an instrument of theological and social discernment.

In this way, poverty may be interpreted not only as an object of pastoral concern, but also as a hermeneutical category that enables the evaluation of social structures in light of the Gospel. The New

Evangelization thereby acquires a critical dimension, oriented toward the formation of consciences capable of recognizing and transforming structures that perpetuate exclusion and inequality.

In Pope Leo's teaching, the Gospel serves as a critical criterion for dominant social and economic logics grounded in accumulation, competition, and the protection of particular interests. Without reference to the Gospel – as the Pope emphasizes – the world becomes increasingly polarized, with some benefiting at the expense of others and social relations progressively eroding (Nothelle-Wildfeuer 2025, 10).

In this interpretative perspective, the New Evangelization would not be understood primarily as a project of institutional expansion of the Church, but as a process of transforming social relationships through presence, solidarity, and accompaniment. Its goal is not merely a change in religious convictions, but the formation of a style of life capable of resisting the logic of exclusion and indifference. In this sense, the New Evangelization assumes the character of a social formation in which faith becomes a source of responsibility for shaping the shared world.

5.3. Summary

In the initial emphases of Pope Leo XIV's pontificate, one may cautiously discern the possibility of a socio-structural recontextualization of the New Evangelization. This does not mean that its previous dimensions – pastoral, theological-epistemic, and existential – are superseded. Rather, the social and structural conditions of living and transmitting faith may become an increasingly important locus of theological reflection. Its essence is no longer limited to pastoral mobilization, the epistemic reconstruction of faith, or purely individual, existential ecclesial practice, but instead consists in critical reflection on the social and cultural structures that shape the conditions of human life and the possibility of living faith.

In this sense, the New Evangelization becomes an instrument for diagnosing the world and for proposing an alternative vision of social relations grounded in the logic of gift, solidarity, and shared responsibility. This shift does not supersede earlier approaches but integrates them at a new level, indicating that, without accounting

for the structural dimension, both theological reflection and pastoral practice remain incomplete.

6. Conclusion

The interpretative reconstruction proposed in this article suggests that the fundamental problem associated with the idea of the New Evangelization is neither its alleged obsolescence nor a simple rupture in continuity within papal teaching. What remains decisive is the question of the theological status of this concept and the manner in which it has been functionally reconstructed in response to changing cultural, social, and ecclesial challenges. The New Evangelization has proven to be a dynamic category whose meaning was never fixed once and for all, but was subject to significant shifts of emphasis.

An analysis of the teachings of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis, and of the initial emphases of Pope Leo's pontificate, allows us to distinguish four analytically separable, though historically overlapping, modes of functioning of the New Evangelization. In John Paul II's approach, it functioned primarily as a mobilizing and prophetic category, activating the Church's pastoral energy amid rapid cultural transformations. Benedict XVI subjected the concept to a critical epistemic-theological reconstruction, shifting the emphasis toward truth, the rationality of faith, and the relationship between faith and reason. In the pontificate of Pope Francis, the New Evangelization was moved toward the existential realization of faith, emphasising the style of life, witness, and the Church's presence within the world. Finally, in Pope Leo's initial statements, an attempt at a socio-structural recontextualization of the New Evangelization emerges, in which the Gospel serves as a criterion for the critical evaluation of social relations and structures. These modes should not be understood as mutually exclusive stages, but as dominant emphases that coexist to varying degrees within the broader continuity of Catholic teaching on evangelization.

The reconstructed functional shifts allow for a better understanding of the ambivalent status of the New Evangelization as a theological concept. On the one hand, its broad scope enabled

it to respond to the Church's real needs in changing historical contexts. On the other hand, that same breadth exposed it to the risk of semantic inflation and reduction to a pastoral slogan lacking precise systematic-theological grounding. The proposed reconstruction supports the view that the New Evangelization functioned as a boundary concept, situated at the intersection of fundamental, practical, and social theology, rather than as a fully articulated doctrinal category.

In this sense, the future of reflection on the New Evangelization does not depend on its further expansion or on replacing it with new terminology. What remains crucial is whether – and in what way – it can be systematically clarified in a manner that preserves, at once, its mobilizing capacity, epistemic credibility, existential intelligibility, and social relevance. This question appears today to constitute the most significant contribution of the New Evangelization to contemporary theological reflection. Whether and how the opening pontificate of Pope Leo XIV will develop this direction remains an open question that can at present be formulated only in a preliminary manner.

Nowa Ewangelizacja jako pojęcie graniczne w teologii: interpretacyjna rekonstrukcja papieskich akcentów

Abstrakt: Artykuł proponuje interpretacyjną rekonstrukcję funkcji pojęcia Nowej Ewangelizacji w wybranych tekstach czterech kolejnych papieży, traktując je jako pojęcie graniczne funkcjonujące między teologią fundamentalną, pastoralną i społeczną. Autor wskazuje, że za pontyfikatu Jana Pawła II termin ten służył głównie jako kategoria mobilizacyjna, mająca na celu ożywienie misyjnego zapału Kościoła. W nauce Benedykta XVI wyraźniej uwidacznia się wymiar teologiczno-epistemiczny tej idei, związany z relacją między wiarą a rozumem oraz problemem prawdy. W ujęciu Franciszka na pierwszy plan wysuwa się wymiar egzystencjalny i performatywny, związany ze świadectwem, miłosierdziem i wychodzeniem ku peryferiom. Tekst formułuje ostrożną hipotezę dotyczącą początkowych akcentów pontyfikatu Leona XIV, wskazując na możliwość społeczno-strukturalnej rekontekstualizacji tej idei. Ostatecznie publikacja definiuje Nową Ewangelizację jako pojęcie graniczne, którego przyszłość zależy od zachowania równowagi między teologiczną precyzją a społeczną relewancją.

Słowa kluczowe: pojęcie graniczne, Jan Paweł II, Benedykt XVI, Franciszek, Leon XIV, wiara i rozum, sekularyzacja

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