

## New Evangelization Forum, Krakow

### Talk 1: The Good News of the Kingdom - What is the biblical kerygma?

#### The Content of the Kerygma

##### **1. The kerygma announces an event.**

The announcer is the herald, the *kerux*, proclaiming good news. Something truly amazing has happened. This event changes world history. No other message is more important. This event demands a response.

##### **2. The event proclaimed is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.**

It is not teaching a doctrine. It is not saying that Christians believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is shouting **“He is risen.”** “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.” (Acts 2:32)<sup>1</sup>. The witnesses have to tell the world. They cannot remain silent: Peter and John tell the Sanhedrin: “we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:20). It begins with testimony.

##### **3. The kerygma is Good News.**

It is not enough to say that a man who was put to death has been raised to new life. Its **core meaning** is part of the message. It is **good news about a person (Jesus), and about what he has done for us (first, forgiveness of sins, gift of Holy Spirit - new life Acts 2:38).**

The good news focuses on a person; so Philip the evangelist proclaimed “the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35) to the Ethiopian eunuch. While the event proclaimed is first the resurrection of Jesus, the Good News has then to include something about the identity of Jesus and why he came. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16). This introduces the **why**: God saves us through Jesus out of **love**. The sacrifice of Jesus is the supreme act of love: “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8).

The kerygma brings good news of **salvation**. Peter preached about Jesus “whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 4:10). Then “filled with the Holy Spirit” Peter says: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12). We see the same in the preaching of Paul at Antioch in Pisidia: “through this man forgiveness of sins is preached to you” (Acts 13:38).

##### **4. The Good News announces that each person can become a son or daughter of God.**

The Good News announces a new birth, regeneration. Jesus said to Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3). The Gospel declares that in and through Jesus we can be children of God, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (see Rom. 8: 16-17).

##### **5. The kerygma proclaims promises and fulfilment.**

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<sup>1</sup> See also Acts 3:13-15; 4:10; 4:33; 5:30; 10:39-41; 13: 28-34; 17:31; 26:8,23.

This good news has a **context**. The context is God's covenantal promises to the people of Israel.<sup>2</sup> In Antioch in Pisidia, Paul proclaims: "we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus" (Acts 13:32-33). What the apostles proclaim and what is now available now was promised to the people of Israel in the Old Testament.

The Good News is not only God's past deeds, for example through Moses, Joshua, and David, and God's past promises, for example to Abraham, to David, and through the prophets. It is God's deeds in and through Jesus (ministry and teaching<sup>3</sup>; death, resurrection, and ascension); so it was a condition for the new apostle chosen to replace Judas that he was with the Twelve "during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us" from the time of the baptism of John until his ascension ("he was taken up from us") Acts 1:21-22. It is also God's promises in and through Jesus (our resurrection on the Last Day<sup>4</sup>, eternal life, the fullness of glory). So the kerygma announces not only the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the forgiveness of sins, but also the resurrection of the righteous on the last day.<sup>5</sup> The good news is that at the end all who receive God's gift will be made whole - physically, psychologically, spiritually, personally and communally. The promises extend beyond humanity to the whole of creation (Rom. 8:19-21). God promises the total overthrow of Satan, death, and evil<sup>6</sup>, and the final and total fulfilment of his plan of salvation in Jesus.

#### 6. The kerygma is the **Good News of the Kingdom**.

At the heart of what was promised in the Old Testament was the **coming of the King-Messiah**, who inaugurates a Kingdom of righteousness and peace. The Good News is that this Kingdom has already begun, and we can enjoy its firstfruits. Even now, the Good News makes possible a different kind of society. But the Good News is also that this Kingdom already begun will be brought to a full completion when Jesus comes in glory. The Kingdom of God is the concept that brings together all the blessings poured out through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Signs and wonders accompany the preaching of the Good News. When some disciples of John ask Jesus if he is the one expected, he replies: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them." (Luke 7:22). These are all signs of the coming of the Kingdom, of the inauguration of the rule of the Messiah.

#### The Effects of the Kerygma

#### 7. The gospel message is a message of **power**.

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<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament there is a difference between evangelizing Jews, who already believe in the promises and the God of the covenant, and evangelizing Gentiles, pagans, with whom there is no such foundation.

<sup>3</sup> See Acts 10:36-38.

<sup>4</sup> "he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:54). "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ... for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ." (1 Cor. 15:20, 22-23).

<sup>5</sup> I do not mention the resurrection of the wicked, as that cannot be seen as Good News.

<sup>6</sup> See Rev. 20:10, 14.

“And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33). Paul tells the Romans: “I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Rom. 1:16).

The signs and wonders that accompany the preaching of the Good News are precisely signs that follow from the preaching of the message; they are not first the message. They confirm the message. “They went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it.” (Mark 16:20).<sup>7</sup>

#### 8. The kerygma has the power to elicit **faith** in the hearers.

Or better the power of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation has the power to produce supernatural faith in the hearers who accept the message. “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching [word] of Christ.” (Rom. 10:17). We cannot argue people into faith. We cannot persuade people to buy the Gospel like buying a product from a salesman. Our explanations do not produce faith. They can help to remove obstacles, but they cannot produce faith. Faith in the Gospel message is not just saying “I agree with it,” because the Gospel is a transforming message. To believe is to surrender to the Lord. To receive this salvation requires repentance for sin and a change of life.

#### 9. The Initial Proclamation (Kerygma) Produces an Initial **Conversion**.

There is a direct connection between the newness of the resurrection and the newness of the new birth. Preaching the kerygma of death and resurrection produces in the hearers a death to sin and a rising to new life, that is to say, a definite conversion of life. Without this message of death and resurrection as a foundation, people think that being Christian is trying to live a better life, making more effort to improve ourselves, of course with God’s grace. This misunderstanding produces great frustration and can lead to unbelief.

#### 10. Faith is always acceptance of God’s deeds and faith in God’s promises.

This point follows on from point 5 above under Content. In Romans 4, Paul presents Abraham as the father and model of faith. Paul makes it clear that Abraham believed God: he believed that God was speaking to him, he obeyed what God told him to do (to go to the land of Canaan), and he believed in God’s promises (descendants and land). It is interesting that in Romans 4 Paul says that the God in whom Abraham believed “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” (Rom. 4:17). So he then speaks of Abraham’s faith in relation to the conception of Isaac (“he did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body ... or ... the barrenness of Sarah’s womb” Rom. 4:19), and draws the conclusion: “No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” (Rom. 4:20-21). This passage ends with a key statement for evangelization: “It [faith] will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.” (Rom. 4:24-25). Notice the two elements here: first, faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead; second, the statement that Jesus died for our sins and rose for our justification, being made righteous.

Because Christian faith is above all faith in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, it is faith that God can do what is humanly impossible: **God can raise the dead**. Opinion polls concerning

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<sup>7</sup> These elements of the kerygma can all be found in Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, paras 8 - 10, which speak of Good News, salvation, and the kingdom of God.

the faith of a population sometimes ask what percentage believe in the existence of God, what percentage believe in Jesus, and what percentage believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. In these polls we always find that more believe in God than believe in Jesus and more believe in Jesus than believe in his bodily resurrection. More believe in some kind of after life than believe in the resurrection. This should concern us. It is the result of not preaching the kerygma.

### Proclaiming the Kerygma in Practice

The proclamation of the kerygma has to happen in Christian contacts with the unevangelized, whether baptized or not. We should not start from the model of someone giving a lecture or a course, but with the model of conversation. This conversation may take place over a period; a conversation involves listening as well as talking.<sup>8</sup>

But the big question in practice is this: how much is to be included in the kerygma (proclamation)? Some people ask: where does *didache* begin and *kerygma* end? It is a bit like the question of courting couples: how far can we go? The question reveals a wrong approach. I hope my outline of the content of the kerygma indicates that it is impossible to draw a clear line between kerygma (proclamation of the good news) and didache (teaching, catechesis). So what guidelines can be given?

1. Evangelization begins with sharing the kerygma, the event of Jesus.
2. The kerygma is spreading the Good News, not a presentation of doctrine or theology.<sup>9</sup> It is the gospel of the God who sent His Son out of love and who died for us while we were yet sinners to bring us new life.
3. The resurrection of Jesus is the core event in an extraordinary story with huge implications. We begin from the core event and then work out through the major implications.
4. There is a difference between evangelizing churchgoers, who have never been properly evangelized, between evangelizing nominal Christians, and between evangelizing complete atheists or pagans.
5. There can be no total blueprint that avoids the need to seek the light and the leading of the Holy Spirit for each situation. What is right to share on any particular occasion can only be received from the Holy Spirit. Do not look for a rule book. Pray to the Holy Spirit.
6. The kerygma aims at conversion, an initial conversion in faith. The need for didache (teaching) begins when there is a response of faith.<sup>10</sup> Then begins the process leading in baptism to a solid conversion, a death to sin and a rising to new life.
7. The introduction of a budding convert to didache (teaching) does not mean that they do not need to hear the kerygma any more. We always need to hear the Gospel, even after deep conversion. No Christian progresses to the point where it is

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<sup>8</sup> It is a strength of the Alpha course that it includes proclamation and discussion.

<sup>9</sup> This is why it is a pastoral mistake to use RCIA (catechumenate for the initially converted) as a way of interesting adults in the Catholic faith. This is not its purpose, and using it in this way does not produce deeply converted lives.

<sup>10</sup> The first teaching required needs to be practical, how to live this Gospel message being received. But as this is a talk on the kerygma, it is not developed here.

not necessary to hear the Gospel. Christian worship always begins with the Word of God, and moves to the actualization of the Gospel in the sacramental signs. In fact, the summit of Christian worship in the eucharist is a proclamation: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Cor. 11:26).

### A Big Question for Catholics

Does the Church belong to the kerygma? In the way that we have been accustomed to in Catholic apologetics, I think the answer is No. That results in presenting the Church rather than Jesus: this is to fall into the trap of the “self-referential” Church that Pope Francis has criticized as sick - looking to itself rather than to Jesus. But in a more fundamental sense, the fact that the promises are given to a people, that salvation is not just the rescue of individuals, in this sense the Good News includes Church. The Good News includes the Kingdom of God, of which the Church is sign and herald.

There is a process all the time from proclamation to teaching, from initial non-reflective faith to reflective theological faith. The preaching of the kerygma begins with specific events and it opens out from there to the full context of these events (who is Jesus? the mission of Jesus), to the background history (the covenants of promise with Israel), to the present context (Church that celebrates Word and sacrament, and that serves in love) and to the coming fulfilment (eschatology and final Kingdom). This is already beginning to move from kerygma to didache.

It is not helpful to think of kerygma and didache in terms of what is primary and what is secondary, but in terms of right order, of what comes first and what has to follow.<sup>11</sup> Teaching on the sacraments does not belong to the kerygma. But it would be wrong to call it secondary; rather it is central to the catechesis that follows the initial proclamation (the catechumenate is not to interest people in the Catholic faith, but to move them from initial faith and conversion to preparation to participate in the Eucharist (the mysteries)<sup>12</sup>.

### The Catholic Dilemma

We Catholics do not find it easy to start from the kerygma. We are so accustomed to presenting the whole Catholic faith. Even when we understand the difference between kerygma and didache, we find it hard not to present too much! We are more afraid of not presenting “the whole truth” than we are of overloading our hearers.

This dilemma is present in Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, paras. 27-29. In the extracts cited below, Paul VI was moving outwards from the core event to its meaning and on to wider implications that would not normally be included in an initial proclamation. The Pope started with the core proclamation: “Evangelization will also always contain - as the foundation, center, and at the same time, summit of its dynamism - a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy.” (EN, 27). He then moved to the future dimension, speaking of “a salvation which exceeds all these limits in order to reach fulfillment in a communion with the one and only divine Absolute: a transcendent and eschatological salvation, which indeed has its beginning in this life but which is fulfilled in eternity.” (EN, 27).

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<sup>11</sup> This distinction between primary and secondary has its proper application in the area of teaching.

<sup>12</sup> The GDC says that only those are to be admitted to the catechumenate (to a systematic teaching) who have experienced an initial conversion as a result of the initial proclamation.

The following paragraph extends the scope of evangelization to “the preaching of hope in the promises made by God in the new Covenant in Jesus Christ; the preaching of God's love for us and of our love for God; the preaching of brotherly love for all men - the capacity of giving and forgiving, of self-denial, of helping one's brother and sister - which, springing from the love of God, ... the preaching of the mystery of evil and of the active search for good.” (EN, 28). From this Paul VI moves on to the role of the Church: “For in its totality, evangelization - over and above the preaching of a message - consists in the implantation of the Church, which does not exist without the driving force which is the sacramental life culminating in the Eucharist.” (EN, 28).

But there is more as the ripples from the Gospel extend outwards: “But evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social. This is why evangelization involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realized, about the rights and duties of every human being, about family life without which personal growth and development is hardly possible, about life in society, about international life, peace, justice and development- a message especially energetic today about liberation.” (EN, 29).

Perhaps this extract shows why it was necessary to change the terminology from RCIA to that of the General Directory on Catechesis, that is to say to single out “initial (or primary) proclamation” as the first stage, and use “Evangelization” to refer to the whole process of proclamation, teaching and formation from first proclamation to the end of life.