




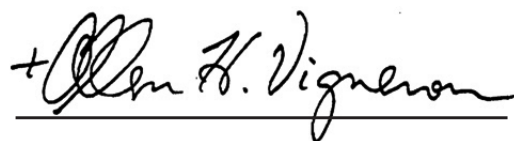

---



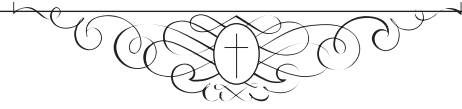
# The Preacher- Servant of the Word of God

A pastoral letter to the priests and deacons  
of the Archdiocese of Detroit

---



The Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron  
Archbishop of Detroit



## PREFACE

### Dear brothers, beloved sons:

On the Vigil of Pentecost in this Year of Grace 2015, the Church in the Archdiocese solemnly began our immediate preparation for our archdiocesan Synod on the New Evangelization: Christ ordained five new priests to work in this part of His vineyard to carry forward the New Evangelization with new energy and youthful enthusiasm; and later in the evening at the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament, representatives from all the ranks of our local Church gathered with me to ask once again for the Holy Spirit, the promised Paraclete, to descend on us in power, so we may make disciples of all nations by proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ.

As the New Evangelization Initiative unfolds, I expect to share a number of letters and other communications on this theme. To mark the launch of the Initiative last month, it seems most appropriate to begin with a letter to you, my closest coworkers in this sacred mission, and to consider with you the topic of preaching, a work of ours indispensable for advancing this mission.

I anticipate those other letters will often find, as this one does, inspiration and direction in Pope Francis' recent letter *The Joy of the Gospel* – what some folks are calling the “playbook for the Church” for the task of the New Evangelization. I have built on *The Joy of the Gospel* in what follows. I take its wisdom and insights as givens. I have also resolved to avoid the temptation to try to cover everything that could be said. My aim is to simply to break open the topic, as a pledge of my communion with you in the service of the Gospel, a service for which we have sacrificed all and to which we dedicate ourselves completely.

As part of my Preface, let me share a point from the Pope's letter that sets us on a sure path in the work of the New Evangelization. In *The Joy of the Gospel*, the Holy Father sets before us a vision about being a joyful community of evangelizing disciples, eager to engage in the work of the New Evangelization called for many years ago by St. John Paul II. This work, clearly, is not only

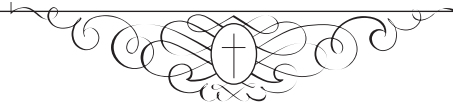
daunting but truly beyond us; it is God's work. And, yet, as with all things in the life of the disciple, it calls for our wholehearted response. God the Father is calling us “*to be all in.*” At the risk of being too pointed, I pose this question: Are we as bishops, priests, and deacons really “*all in?*” That is, are we operating in a maintenance mode or a missionary mode? Are we daily calling upon the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for ourselves and for our flocks, so the joy of the Gospel can be heard and responded to in a world that is longing for God, even though many of our contemporaries and parishioners either outright reject this claim or do not know it? “*You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless, and always will be restless until they rest in You*” (St. Augustine). Like St. Paul, it would be worth our praying daily, sincerely, for an ever greater longing in our people to know Him and to see the God we love and the people we love in each other's arms.

## ON PREACHING THE GOOD NEWS

While Pope Francis' letter received a fair amount of coverage in the press, both ecclesial and secular, especially those parts dealing with issues that touched on the economy, his discussion of preaching in particular has flown under the radar. In section II of chapter three (*The Proclamation of the Gospel*), Francis treats in no small detail the homily as the single moment in which most of us as bishops, priests, and deacons have the best opportunity to be God's instruments on a daily, or at least weekly, basis and help our brothers and sisters to have an encounter with God. This section, which encompasses paragraphs 135-159, deserves our sitting with, thinking over and praying at length with, as ministers in the Lord's service.

In part prompted by this section written by our Holy Father, the following paragraphs are also offered for our prayer as we think in particular about two topics: (1) preaching to evangelize, and (2) preaching the New Evangelization to our brothers and sisters. The following are





short, perhaps too short, and are certainly not intended to be exhaustive on either topic. Rather, they are offered to help us reflect a bit more about the extraordinary gift God has given to us to proclaim His Word in the assembly.

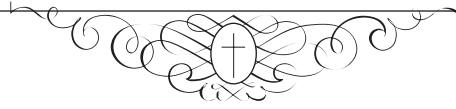
## PREACHING TO EVANGELIZE: 5 SIMPLE POINTS

**1. You can't bend cold steel.** Despite the fact many people in the pews would say they've heard ad nauseam "*God loves you,*" many of them simply do not know it – and will readily admit as much if asked. Sobering recent statistics reveal many Catholics don't even think it's possible to have a friendship with God, so they certainly don't know, with every fiber of their being, that they are loved, infinitely and passionately, by the One who has made it all. And this love, knowledge of this love, an encounter with this love, is what changes lives; it's what leads to a decision to make a response to follow the One who has laid down His life for us. Until a person knows this, the faith simply looks like rules and regulations. Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the Papal Household, reminds us that before you can bend steel you must first warm it; otherwise it will snap and break. But once steel is warmed it can be molded in all sorts of wondrous ways. And so it is with our hearts; until they have been warmed by the love of God, and unless we allow ourselves to be His agents in doing this when we preach, we will be trying to bend cold steel. Many of our people sitting in the pews are afraid, fearful that their pasts somehow disqualify them from this love, thinking the message of this love is for the person sitting next to them. This warming of the heart by the Holy Spirit is why the Gospel truly is good news: we are loved beyond all telling! Our lives matter! My life is in the hands not just of a god but of the good God, who created me, became a man for me, offered up His life for me, rose from the dead for me, and calls me to share in His own divine life and joy forever. Nothing in my past or present disqualifies me from this. There is no

saint, save Mary, without a past, and no sinner without a future.

**2. The Gospel proclaimed at Mass is an event.** As author and scholar Father Jeremy Driscoll said, many of our parishioners tend to look at the Liturgy of the Word as reading and commentary, meaning they first listen to someone read the Scriptures dealing with events from long ago (often events that are hard to understand, especially if taken out of context), and then listen to the priest or deacon offer some comments (hopefully not too long and somewhat funny) on those same often unintelligible readings. But the Liturgy of the Word is not "*reading and commentary*" but "*proclamation and response.*" In other words, because the Word of God is alive, sharper than any two-edged sword, and able to separate joints and marrow (Heb 4:12), what's being proclaimed from the ambo during the first part of the Liturgy, and especially in the Gospel, is actually happening: God is speaking to us and acting again to take us to His Heart. He is looking for faith, a response from each of us who is hearing the Lord speak to us in His Word. For example, when Jesus asks the disciples in Caesarea Philippi, "*Who do you say that I am?*" He is also asking us, gathered here at the 8:00 Sunday morning Mass at St. "*What's His Name*" that same question, and He is waiting for a response. Or, when He asks the disciples in the boat, as they are drowning in the Sea of Galilee, before He quiets the storm, "*Why are you afraid?*" He is asking that same question to us who have come to Mass with our very real problems, fears, and anxieties. Or when He says to Martha, "*I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in me, though he die, will live again; do you believe this?*" He is asking me that same question as I sit there in the pew with my own sadness, worry, and concern. The key is not to offer commentary but to help the people in the pews understand what is happening in the text so that they can understand what is happening now and respond in faith.





**3. Focus on what Jesus is saying to us today or asking of us today.** Our task as preachers is to know intimately both the Word and our communities, so we can hear what this text is saying to us in our concrete situation. This requires that we have wrestled with the text in prayer throughout the week, and with a particular focus on what this text is saying to us as a community given what is happening right now in this place.

**4. Never forget about the all-important place of testimony.** Throughout the New Testament we see that the Gospel spreads most effectively by someone telling others the difference Jesus made in his or her life. We need to tell our story. Of course, this requires us to be vulnerable. The ambo clearly isn't a confessional, let alone the place to work out our own issues in front of the people, so this isn't meant as an exhortation for us to be inappropriately self-disclosing. But if we're seriously wrestling with the Word of God during the course of the week as we prepare to preach, it simply can't be the case that we aren't personally being spoken to and challenged, or comforted, or exhorted, or provoked, or convicted. Just as Jacob forever walked with a limp after he wrestled with God (Gen 32), so too our own lives can't be unaffected after encountering Him in His Word. By our revealing how the Word has spoken to us it can often have the effect of helping others drop their guard, and allow the Lord's Word to penetrate more deeply into their hearts and minds and then consider how they, too, can respond to what they're hearing.

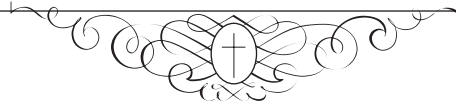
**5. Offer the people some concrete way to respond to what's been said.** A frequent lament from parishioners is that while the homily may have been informative, helpful, or inspiring, it was left in the realm of theory – it didn't leave them with something to do in response. Thus, it can be helpful if we offer a suggestion or two for how we can respond in the next week to what Jesus has said to us. Perhaps after hearing the proclamation of the last judgment in Matthew 25, it will mean going through our closets at home and purging our clothes for donation to a shelter or St. Vincent de Paul. Or maybe, after hearing the proclamation of how often I must forgive my neighbor in

Matthew 18, it will mean making it a point to reach out to that one person most in my mind right now with whom I am not reconciled. Or maybe, after hearing Jesus tell Martha (and us) that Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her, it will mean inviting people to make a more concerted effort to invest time daily in prayer in the course of the week ahead and try to get into the habit of offering to the Lord the first part of our day in prayer and reading Scripture. Or maybe after hearing Jesus give the Apostles the authority to forgive sins, it might be a great time to encourage people, especially those present, who have been away from the sacrament of reconciliation, to come and experience God's great love and mercy and to begin again.

## PREACHING THE NEW EVANGELIZATION: 10 AXIOMS

**1. Know your audience I (“the unevangelized baptized”).** Trying to preach the Gospel to people who have been sacramentalized but not evangelized is like trying to plant seeds in concrete – nothing will grow. Many people have been sacramentalized but never evangelized – and they will tell you this outright. An oft-heard refrain is, “I grew up Catholic but became a Christian and met Jesus Christ at ‘x’ Church.” This is because, while a person objectively was encountering Jesus in the sacraments, they had no, or little, subjective awareness that they were meeting Him in the Eucharist, or reconciliation, or confirmation, or marriage. As a result they knew about God but they didn't know Him. Unfortunately, we have to bear our share of responsibility for this. This needs to be kept in mind when we preach because many or most of the people gathered on Sunday are in this category. Are we facilitating an encounter with the living God through our words?





**2. Know your audience II (“the seemingly dead”).** Many people at Mass on Sunday simply don’t want to be there. This may sound a bit harsh, but how else to explain why so many come late and leave early, or read the bulletin during the homily, or don’t sing or respond aloud? Mass, and perhaps faith for many, is simply not something that is seen as being life-giving. We need to help change that.

**3. Know your audience III (“the spiritual non-religious”).** There is a great hunger among many in our culture for spirituality but not faith. Many in the pews are looking for some sort of inner peace that will help them more or less achieve their agenda for their lives. But faith is an entirely new agenda! It means seeing everything new. And this can only happen upon encountering God.

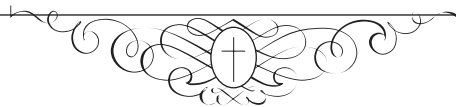
**4. Know your audience IV (“the practical ‘atheist’”).** Many people live as practical atheists. This might sound far too strong but most have spent more time in front of their computer, tablet, smartphone, and TV than they have with God’s Word or spiritual reading. This constant barrage of a secular, consumer worldview simply cannot leave them (or us) unaffected. It is often practically atheistic; it doesn’t outright reject God, but it operates as if He did not exist, or as if He has nothing practical to offer us. Many of our people, for whatever reason, have been programmed to think Mass is a requirement to be met, rather than a potentially life-changing encounter with the living God. It’s common in some Protestant churches for their bulletins to leave the last page blank with “Notes” as its heading. The expectation is people will leave with something – some word, some challenge, some message of comfort, something to do. Rather than dance around this, it can be helpful to simply address it head on. Here is a place where being vulnerable might be helpful. For example, if we ourselves went through a period in our lives either not going to Church, or attending but merely going through the motions, we can witness to our people about what changed for us. Let them know... it might prompt a change for them, too.

**5. Know your audience V (“the bored and the blasé”).** In truth the Gospel is more, not less, but many people on Sunday see the Gospel as less not more. Jesus, and His Gospel, have been so dumbed down and neutered that for many people the message of the Gospel is simply...boring. As Peter Kreeft remarked, the modern day disciples of Jesus have somehow managed to undo the miracle of Cana: we have turned wine back into water. Frank Sheed once wrote that among Jesus’ followers were tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. These were all people who were easily bored. They thought the meaning of life was money, sex, or just living for themselves. Until they met Him. As it was with them, so it is with people now...once they truly meet Him.

**6. Know your audience VI (“everybody”).** They want God, even if they don’t know it. When many of us are young we tend to think we aren’t yet fulfilled because we don’t have the career, the car, the house, the beautiful spouse, or whatever else we might be wanting. But then, when these things come, we find we’re still restless, still hungry, and we wonder why. It’s because none of those things, good as they are (and very good in many cases), are what we’re ultimately made for. We’re made for infinite love. We’re made for God. Nowhere do people hear this in the world they live in. They need to hear it from us in a way in which it is easy to understand and respond. We need to help them understand what they want. It’s the same thing we all want.

**7. Know your audience VII (“the biased”).** Faith is reasonable, but many don’t think so. Our media and entertainment industry, not to mention many in academia, convey the notion that there are basically two types of people: there are people who are educated, who are intelligent, who are rational, who know how to think, and then there are people who have faith (and none of the things the first type has). In truth, faith is a way of knowing; it enlightens the mind and enables a person to understand what he or she cannot understand on his or her own. Faith is not blind; it rests on solid, historical realities: God has acted in time and space in the person of Jesus Christ in an absolutely unique way. Help them to see these things.





**8. Try preaching in an ordered series.** Preaching in a series can be a good use of using new methods. To be sure, the norm is to preach the readings proclaimed at Mass, but many have found it helpful to occasionally preach for three or four weeks in a row more thematically. Topics like discipleship, reasons to believe, the sacraments, and prayer are examples of preaching in a series. This method allows for a bit more depth on a topic and can be very helpful given the makeup of many assemblies (see points 1-7).

**9. God wants this to happen.** It pleases Him to make Himself known. He delights in revealing Himself to us and He delights in our response. We need to trust this and pray that we will simply get out of His way.

**10. Preach Christ and Him crucified.** The cross is the single greatest demonstration of love ever seen. Help them to understand it. Repeatedly call their attention to it. Help them to understand God doesn't simply tell us He loves us; He shows us.

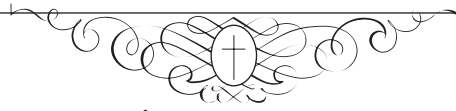
## CONCLUSION

In what to many is a striking summary of the Gospel, The Latin American and Caribbean Bishops Aparecida document from 2007, authored in no small part by now Pope Francis, stated this: *"Knowing Jesus is the best gift that any person can receive; that we have encountered Him is the best thing that has happened in our lives; and making Him known by our word and deeds is our joy"* (29). May our words and our actions reveal this is true for us as ordained servants of the people of God, and may those words and actions help others to be able to say the same!

Let us hold one another in prayer, especially as we stand at the altar for the Eucharistic Sacrifice and during the times of our visits to the Blessed Sacrament. I promise that for you; please do it for me and for each other – asking the Good Shepherd to make us shepherds after His own heart. He can grant that prayer, and so He will begin to give us the New Pentecost we have implored from Him.

**The Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron**  
**Archbishop of Detroit**  
**June 30, 2015**





## i Appendix:

# On What the New Evangelization Is

While I have withstood the temptation to fill or clutter this letter with footnotes, it might be helpful, nonetheless, to offer here some remarks about the nature of the New Evangelization, to ensure, as the Initiative unfolds, we have some clear “coordinates” about the way forward.

### ***Pope Francis’s Description of the New Evangelization in *The Joy of the Gospel* (nn. 14-15):***

The XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops gathered from 7-28 October 2012 to discuss the theme: The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith. The Synod reaffirmed the New Evangelization is a summons addressed to all and is carried out in three principal settings.

**I.** In first place, we can mention the area of ordinary pastoral ministry, [aiming] ... to inflame the hearts of the faithful who regularly take part in community worship and gather on the Lord’s day to be nourished by his word and by the bread of eternal life. In this category we can also include those members of faithful who preserve a deep and sincere faith, expressing it in different ways, but seldom taking part in worship.

**II.** A second area is that of the baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism, who lack a meaningful relationship to the Church and no longer experience the consolation born of faith. The Church, in her maternal concern, tries to help them experience a conversion which will restore the joy of faith to their hearts and inspire a commitment to the Gospel.

**III.** Lastly, we cannot forget that evangelization is first and foremost about preaching the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him. Many of them are quietly seeking God, led by a yearning to see his face, even in countries of ancient Christian tradition. All of them have a right to receive the Gospel. Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone.

### ***Pope Francis’s Identification of the Six Essential Qualities of Evangelizers (*The Joy of the Gospel*):***

- 1) They know how to balance prayer and work (n. 262).
- 2) They have had a personal encounter with Jesus (n. 264).
- 3) They have an enthusiasm for the mission rooted in their conviction that people are looking for the Good News (n. 265).
- 4) They have a “**spiritual taste**” for being close to people’s lives, and they find in this taste a great joy (n. 268).
- 5) They have that hope which is rooted in the interior conviction that God can bring good fruit even from what seems to us to be failures (nn. 275, 277, 279).
- 6) Their compassion for others leads them to offer prayers of intercession for them (n. 281-283).

### ***St. John Paul II on the New Evangelization (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 33):***

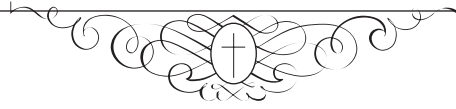
**Looking at today’s world from the viewpoint of evangelization, we can distinguish three situations.**

**I. First**, there is the situation which the Church’s missionary activity addresses: peoples, groups, and so-cio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known, or which lack Christian communities sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups. This is mission ad gentes in the proper sense of the term (52).

**II. Secondly**, there are Christian communities with adequate and solid ecclesial structures. They are fervent in their faith and in Christian living. They bear witness to the Gospel in their surroundings and have a sense of commitment to the universal mission. In these communities the Church carries out her activity and pastoral care.

**III. Thirdly**, there is an intermediate situation, particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire





*groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a “new evangelization” or a “re-evangelization.”* (Emphasis added)

### ***Pope Benedict XVI on the New Evangelization (Apostolic Letter *Ubicumque et semper*):***

**In our own time**, [the Church’s mission] has been particularly challenged by an abandonment of the faith – a phenomenon progressively more manifest in societies and cultures which for centuries seemed to be permeated by the Gospel. I consider it opportune to offer appropriate responses so that the entire Church, allowing herself to be regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit, may present herself to the contemporary world with a missionary impulse in order to promote the new evangelization. Above all, this pertains to Churches of ancient origin, which live in different situations and have different needs, and therefore require different types of motivation for evangelization: in certain territories, in fact, despite the spread of secularization, Christian practice still thrives and shows itself deeply rooted in the soul of entire populations; in other regions, however, there is clearly a distancing of society from the faith in every respect, together with a weaker ecclesial fabric, even if not without elements of liveliness that the Spirit never fails to awaken; we also sadly know of some areas that have almost completely abandoned the Christian religion, where the light of the faith is entrusted to the witness of small communities: these lands, which need a renewed first proclamation of the Gospel, seem particularly resistant to many aspects of the Christian message.

**This variety of situations demands careful discernment**; to speak of a “*new evangelization*” does not in fact mean that a single formula should be developed that would hold the same for all circumstances. And yet it is not difficult to see that what all the Churches living in traditionally Christian territories need is a renewed mission-

ary impulse, an expression of a new, generous openness to the gift of grace.

### ***The New Evangelization as Described by the Faculty of Sacred Heart Major Seminary:***

**The New Evangelization** is the continuation of the Church’s fundamental mission of evangelization, directed now toward many of the baptized “*who have lost a living sense of faith or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and His Gospel*” (Redemptoris missio, 33). The New Evangelization is ordered to “*Christian conversion... a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith... Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple*” (Redemptoris missio, 46).

#### **The New Evangelization is new in:**

- 1) To whom it is addressed
- 2) Who does it (all the baptized)
- 3) Its relation to the post-Christian cultural situation which it must address
- 4) Its “*methods, ardor and expression*” (a “tag line” of sorts from St. John Paul II)

### ***Observation of Cardinal Donald Wuerl:***

**At its heart the New Evangelization** is the re-proposing of the encounter with the Risen Lord, his Gospel and his Church to those who no longer find the Church’s message engaging.

