

A Call Unheeded: Walker Percy and the New Evangelization

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A BENIGN gray spirit broods within the Church. This spirit bears within it the term “new evangelization.” It seethes and oozes with ambiguity and unfocused goodwill. It has produced ardent conversation, but only sporadic action. It is a reflective spirit, an open spirit, but not a decisive spirit. It awaits guidance.

On October 11th, 1962, Bl. John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council, invoking a “New Pentecost” upon the Church.¹ Now, if the first Pentecost is any guide, a “New Pentecost” should logically flower into a “New Evangelization.” And certainly the past fifty years have borne witness to various attempts to spark such a new evangelization. Ven. Paul VI, Bl. John Paul II, and Pope Benedict XVI have all put their hands to the plow. We can expect Pope Francis to follow suit. And yet, despite all this, there is a hazy air that seems still to plague the new evangelization. I believe some words from a member of my family sum it up admirably: “We want to help the new evangelization, but what *is* it? What are we supposed to *do*?”

Walker Percy (1916–90) was a novelist, amateur philosopher, former physician, enthusiastic bourbon drinker, and Catholic convert. He was neither saint nor apostle. As far as I know, the phrase “new evangelization” nowhere appears in his writings. And yet, his novels and essays are filled with the idea, the reality of the thing. His reflections are poignant

¹ For the place of the concept of the “new Pentecost” as the hermeneutic key to Pope John’s actions, see Thomas Hughson, S.J., “Interpreting Vatican II: A ‘New Pentecost,’” *Journal of Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 3–37.

and worthwhile. Even if his example has gone unheeded, I believe there is still a treasure to be found in the fields of his pages. It is my conviction that Percy can help us out of the muddle of the present time by teaching us two things: first, what evangelization is, and, second, why in our time it must be *new*.

Eu-angelion: Evangelization as News

Before one can engage in the new evangelization, one must have a clear concept of what evangelization itself *is*. After all, one cannot hope to play piano if one is liable to mistake a piece of a motor for a piece of music. This seems obvious. Walker Percy, however, thinks such a mistake about the fundamental character of evangelization is widespread. He addresses this case of mistaken identity in his essay "The Message in the Bottle,"² nestling his view between the two pillars of Thomas Aquinas and Søren Kierkegaard.³

In this essay, Percy provides the following parable. A man is shipwrecked upon an island and loses his memory. Discovering himself in a new land, he finds employment, education, and entertainment. "He becomes, as the phrase goes, a useful member of the community."⁴ Having attained all this, he picks up the hobby of walking upon the beach. As he does so, he begins to discover upon the beach a number of bottles with messages within them. The messages are, to say the least, strange. To offer some examples: "Lead melts at 330 degrees," "The market for eggs in Bora Bora [a neighboring island] is very good," "Being comprises essence and existence," "A war party is approaching from Bora Bora," and "The pressure of a gas is a function of heat and volume."⁵ What is the poor castaway to do with all this?

The castaway begins to order the messages. But what system to use for classification? Discounting a number of systems that arise from linguistic theories, Percy asserts that the castaway will arrive at a rather common-sensical one: some messages are true everywhere and always, and are independent of the present moment; other messages deal with the here and now, and impinge directly upon the present moment. The first group of messages can be called science. The second can be called news.

There is a strong distinction between these two groups of messages. "Each has its own constraints and empowerments, its own verification

² Walker Percy, "The Message in the Bottle," in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, And What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Picador, 1975), 119–49.

³ As is shown from his proffering their definitions of faith at the beginning of the essay.

⁴ Walker Percy, "The Message in the Bottle," 119.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 120–21.

procedures and canons of acceptance.”⁶ Scientific messages receive their value from their abstraction and objectivity. The statement “Lead melts at 330 degrees” is valuable if and only if this is true everywhere and always.⁷ When one deals with scientific messages, one takes one’s own particularity out of the picture. It is not so much important that lead melts for *me* at 330 degrees, as that lead has the essential quality of melting at 330 degrees. It must be known *sub specie aeternitatis*. Faced with scientific messages, the castaway becomes an observer, a watcher. He himself is abstracted from the situation, and the knowledge he arrives at is abstract.

News is different. News receives its value from its particularity and relevance to the subject. Having distinguished news from science, Percy further divides news itself into two categories: “island news” and “news from across the seas.”⁸ “Island news” would be that news which is part of the working out of daily life. Percy offers the following examples: “there is fresh water in the next cove; the price of eggs is fifty cents a dozen; Nicaragua has invaded El Salvador; my head hurts; etc.”⁹ “News from across the seas” would be that which comes from elsewhere and erupts into, or at least interrupts, daily life—“A war party is approaching from Bora Bora.” For Percy, the Gospel is a type of “news from across the seas.”

Walker Percy holds that the gremlin that bedevils attempts at evangelization is the mistaking of the Good News for either island news or science *sub specie aeternitatis*. When the Good News is mistaken for island news, the Gospel becomes another aspect of living a rich and productive life in this world. One is alerted to the Gospel in the same manner as one is alerted to the dress code for a party or the price of admission to a movie. It is a tool to fit into society, a help to human fulfillment. One thinks of Uncle Jules in *The Moviegoer*:

Uncle Jules is the only man I know whose victory in the world is total and unqualified. He has made a great deal of money, he has a great many friends, he was Rex of Mardi Gras, he gives freely of himself and his money. He is an exemplary Catholic, but it is hard to know why he takes the trouble. For the world he lives in, the City of Man, is so pleasant that the City of God must hold little in store for him.¹⁰

⁶ Patricia Lewis Poteat, *Walker Percy and the Old Modern Age: Reflections on Language, Argument, and the Telling of Stories* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 123.

⁷ Under the correct conditions, of course.

⁸ Poteat, *Walker Percy and the Old Modern Age*, 140.

⁹ Walker Percy, “An Interview with Zoltán Abádi-Nagi,” in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Picador, 1991), 388.

¹⁰ Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998 [1st edition 1960]), 31.

For Percy, this plague of seeing the Gospel as island news was the sickness that runs rampant through the evangelical South. In such a view, being a believer is of a piece with living successfully in this world.

Perhaps worse than confusing the Good News for island news, though, is confusing it for abstract science. Then, as Percy frequently says, Christianity becomes “a member in good standing of the World’s Great Religions.”¹¹ Christianity devolves into a theory before which one constantly stands as an observer and judge, but never a participant. Percy repeatedly makes the point that this lets the Gospel fall right back into modern man’s already overly abstracted view of the world—a view Percy satirizes mercilessly with Dr. Thomas More’s diagnosis of angelism-bestialism in *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*. An abstracted person who hears the shouted warning, “Fire!” is likely to contemplate the kindling temperature of drywall and concrete. This is the danger of confusing news for science, or science for news.

What does this have to do with evangelization? Simply this: evangelization is relaying news, not science. It is not *sub specie aeternitatis*. It states a singular happenstance of history. God chose the Jews. God the Son became man in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He died outside Jerusalem under the rule of Pontius Pilate. He rose from the dead. He saves sinners. He has saved me. He can save you. Note here that there is no discussion of the divine nature, nor of the metaphysics of the Incarnation. These things are important. They are science. They are, in fact, objects of the science of theology. But science is not news, and theology is not evangelization.¹²

One of the great problems with the new evangelization is that too often the ministers of the Church confuse evangelization with catechesis, apologetics, or theology. One begins trying to explain the faith before announcing the news of the faith. Upon meeting an unbeliever, one compares Catholicism to Protestantism, Christianity to the other World Religions, faith to science. Of what use is this to one who does not yet believe, does not yet care? It is all theory; it is all science. News has not been offered. Is it surprising that people seem willing to study the subject “religion” and even the “teaching of the Church” without being moved

¹¹ E.g. “Message in the Bottle,” 141, but also in *The Moviegoer* and elsewhere.

¹² This is not to deny the place of the theological tradition in the broader work of the new evangelization. Certainly Christian wisdom and Christian doctrine are essential to Christianity. In my mind the deepening of the seed of evangelization almost certainly must rest on the work of an Augustine, a Bonaventure, an Aquinas. However, evangelizing is a different act from teaching theology, and it must be acknowledged that studying theology will not replace having the Good News proclaimed. (Of course, evangelization cannot replace theology either. Both are necessary. But my focus here is on evangelization.)

in the slightest in their own subjective commitments? The common practice today is for the evangelist to approach another as a fellow observer and lay the Gospel on the dissecting table, saying “Here, let us look at this together and theorize. Perhaps your views of the world will change based on this evidence.” Altogether different from this is that cry which shook Palestine, “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel,”¹³ or the cutting proclamation, “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”¹⁴ Such news is not in the least abstract. It burns with immediacy.¹⁵

But, once the news is announced, how does the hearer judge news? Will he or she accept it? Why, or why not? What are the canons for acceptance? The scientist has the experiment, or some form of verification, for the validity of scientific knowledge. What does the castaway have to judge news? Percy lists three canons for acceptance of news: relevance to one’s predicament, the credentials of the newsbearer, and the possibility of the news.¹⁶ Of these three, I wish to examine only the first. This is because the credentials of the newsbearer and the possibility of the news are perpetual problems. They are not new. But relevance? How will contemporary man judge the relevance of the Gospel? It is in treating of this that we will discover why today the news must be “new” as well.

The End of the Old Modern Age— Why Evangelization Must Be New

Walker Percy is convinced that contemporary man lives in a peculiar state. The Old Modern Age is over. Both Christendom and the Enlightenment have been played out. We walk through their ashes, still influenced by their categories, but with the silent recognition that they are anachronisms. We maintain them simply from lack of anything to replace them. In this time the evangelist faces a particular challenge. His hearers do not so much disbelieve him as regard his news irrelevant. “We’ve heard this before— tell us something new!” Why is this? I draw three reasons from Percy’s works: the loss of the sense of sin, the present malaise, and the exhaustion of religious terminology.

¹³ Mark 1:15, Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (RSVCE).

¹⁴ Acts 2:36 RSVCE.

¹⁵ Percy offers an insightful critique of mistaking apologetics for evangelization in *The Moviegoer*. Here Binx has a list of things to remember for his search. This list includes the following: “The only possible starting point: the strange fact of one’s own invincible apathy—that if the proofs were proved and God presented himself, nothing would be changed. Here is the strangest fact of all” (146).

¹⁶ Walker Percy, “The Message in the Bottle,” 134–36.

The first reason the Gospel seems irrelevant is the loss of the sense of sin. Walker Percy portrays this in his novel *Lancelot*. In this novel, a cuckolded lawyer named Lancelot is in a psychiatric ward as a result of actions which he took on a “quest” to find that most mythical of beasts: a sin. Lancelot makes this clear in his words to his friend, the priest psychologist Percival:

We’ve spoken of the Knights of the Holy Grail, Percival. Do you know what I was? The Knight of the Unholy Grail.

In times like these when everyone is wonderful, what is needed is a quest for evil.

You should be interested! Such a quest serves God’s cause! How? Because the Good proves nothing. When everyone is wonderful, nobody bothers with God.

[...] But suppose you could show me one “sin,” one pure act of malevolence. A different cup of tea! That would bring matters to a screeching halt. But we have plenty of evil around you say. What about Hitler, the gas ovens and so forth? As everyone knows and says, Hitler was a madman. And it seems nobody else was responsible. Everyone was following orders. It is even possible that there was no such order, that it was all a bureaucratic mistake.

Show me a single “sin.”

[...] The mark of the age is that terrible things happen but there is no “evil” involved. People are either crazy, miserable, or wonderful, so where does the “evil” come in?

There I was forty-five years old and I didn’t know whether there was evil in the world.¹⁷

The news of a Savior from sin is not terribly relevant if one no longer acknowledges sin. Without a sense of sin, it will not be accepted. If I throw a life preserver to someone sitting on a bench in Central Park, he or she would understandably look at me with befuddlement and perhaps a measure of anxious concern. If one is neither drowning nor in danger of drowning, a life preserver is rather irrelevant. If one does not seem to sin, and one has no thought of hell, then a Savior from sins is rather irrelevant.

The second reason for the seeming irrelevance of the Gospel is closely related to the loss of a sense of sin. It is the malaise of contemporary society. Percy draws his ammunition for this attack from the existentialists. His thought can be seen to be rooted in Kierkegaard, Marcel, Jaspers, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, to name a few.¹⁸ Like them, he sees contem-

¹⁷ Walker Percy, *Lancelot* (New York: Picador, 1977), 138–39.

¹⁸ Cf. the chapter “Some Light from the Existentialists,” in Martin Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy’s Diagnosis of the Malaise* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 19–63.

porary dull and satisfied man to be horrific. He displays this especially in his books involving the character Will Barrett: *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*. In the first, Will cannot find what he is looking for from beautiful Kitty, philanthropic Rita, successful Mr. Vaught, or even religious Sister Val. No, only sardonic, failed, dark Sutter seems to have any answer. The ones who have everything have nothing; only the exile is on to something.

By the time of *The Second Coming*, it is Will who is successful and philanthropic, involved in religious pursuits and in possession of every good thing, and yet subject to falling down on golf courses and disappearing on quests for days at a time. He has everything modern man could possibly want, and his life is utterly empty. A deep “deprivation” has occurred.¹⁹ He suffers that ultimate homelessness that comes into Percy’s writings when he deals with this malaise,²⁰ and so takes to living in caves and greenhouses.

What is the malaise? It is in some sense a spiritual dullness. What is at issue here is not sinfulness *per se*, but rather moral frigidity, a deadness that allows neither sin nor salvation. Contemporary man is numb. (One is reminded of the souls outside the gates of hell in Dante’s *Inferno*, who were neither good enough for heaven nor bad enough for hell. One gets the sense that Judas being munched by Satan suffers a lesser fate than these ambivalent souls.) To quote Binx from *The Moviegoer*:

Christians talk about the horror of sin, but they have overlooked something. They keep talking as if everyone was a great sinner, when the truth is that nowadays one is hardly up to it. There is very little sin in the depths of malaise. The highest moment of a malaisian’s life can be that moment when he manages to sin like a proper human.²¹

When one can choose neither good nor evil, the call to reject Satan and follow Christ seems about as useful as the attempt to teach a hound to sing opera. Before news of a Savior can be acknowledged, one must acknowledge not only that one is a sinner, but also that one actually has sufficient power of will to sin or be saved.

The third reason for the seeming irrelevance of the Gospel is the impoverishment of the language of salvation. In the novel *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the priest Fr. Smith has retreated to a watchtower in the forest.

¹⁹ Walker Percy, “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise,” in *Signposts in a Strange Land*.

²⁰ Farrel O’Gorman, *Peculiar Crossroads: Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 41.

²¹ Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 200.

Dr. Thomas More goes to evaluate whether he can return to the parish. Part of their conversation points to this problem of language:

“Were you, are you, able to say Mass?”

“Mass,” he repeats, frowning mightily. “Yes,” he says at last in his musing voice. “Oh yes.”

“Could you preach?”

“Preach.” Again the cocked head, the sly near-smile. “No no.”

“No? Why not?”

“Why not? A good question. Because— it doesn’t signify.”

“What doesn’t signify?”

“The words.”²²

This same Fr. Smith had appeared earlier in *Love in the Ruins*, complaining that the signal could not get through. His preaching was blocked and locked and silenced.

Percy himself faced the dilemma his character faces. “Christendom seems in some sense to have failed,” he writes. “Its vocabulary is worn out. This twin failure raises problems for a man who is a Christian and whose trade is with words.”²³ The same problem faces the would-be evangelist. “For the traditional defense of the Catholic claim, however valid it may be, is generally unavailing for reasons both of the infirmity of language and the inattentiveness of the age. Accordingly, it is probably a waste of time.”²⁴

Why is this? Due to the passing of the Old Modern Age, the death of both Christendom and the Enlightenment, the old terms for salvation have been twisted, overused, battered, and rendered little more than white noise. They no longer signify. They cannot be heard. What to do with this? In various places, Percy seems to be arguing that we may well need a new vocabulary to communicate the message of salvation.²⁵ The message, of course, must remain the same, no matter the expression. If new words and images are minted, it is the same gold of faith that is used.

To sum up, then: contemporary man is in danger of finding the Gospel irrelevant because of his absent sense of sin, his moral malaise, and the worn-out poverty of the words. What must be “new” about the new evangelization is its need to address these three barriers to relevance.

²² Walker Percy, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (New York: Picador, 1987), 117.

²³ Walker Percy, “Notes for a Novel about the End of the World,” 116.

²⁴ Walker Percy, “Why Are You a Catholic?” in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, 308–9. Though Percy writes often about what we would call the new evangelization, he cannot be termed sanguine about it.

²⁵ Cf. the parable of the priest and the scientist in “Notes for a Novel about the End of the World,” 114–16.

Without this the Good News will not be heard. How would one go about addressing them?

Percy states that what is needed is diagnosis. A patient must be diagnosed before he is open to receiving treatment. It is in fact how Percy saw his vocation. "The physician, insofar as he is a novelist, is in the business of diagnosis, not therapy."²⁶ But such a diagnosis is valid only if the patient agrees with it, for if he is unconvinced, he will not undergo treatment. The patient too must acknowledge his sickness, his need. He must acknowledge his sinfulness and malaise.

How did Percy seek to accomplish this? What were his diagnostic tools? He frequently used two: the novel, and the question. In the novel, he sets forth an engaging story which simultaneously forces one to reflect on one's own life and, perhaps, shatters one's own self-security. I am presuming that most recipients of this essay, however, do not share Percy's novelistic skills, and so are not able to employ this tool.

His second tool was the question, used to such great effect by Socrates, and this tool can be used by many. Percy fills his essays and his novels with questions. He enters through the door of abstract questioning to open a door for news. One observes and reflects, and becomes able to hear and act. His odd but brilliant work *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* is peppered with questions and quizzes. (To give one example, "What does the saleslady mean when she fits a customer with an article of clothing and says: 'It's you'?"²⁷ A set of multiple-choice answers follows.) In an age perhaps shaped more by a shared educational system than anything else, such an approach can be highly effective. We may no longer be able to assert to contemporary man, "You are a sinner," or "You need Jesus Christ." But the new evangelist can ask questions. "Why do people like to look at car wrecks?" "Why are so many people depressed, when never before have the needs and wants of mankind been so easily met?" "Why do people suffer such loneliness in the age of social media?" Such questions can tear down the barriers to the Gospel. They can be one of the greatest tools of the new evangelization. They help people diagnose their sin, their malaise, their emptiness, and their need for a Savior.

And so, what must be done is diagnosis through inquiry, and treatment through news. What is necessary is rejection of sin, Satan, and self-sufficiency, and belief in Christ.

That is why it causes me such distress, as it seemed to cause Percy such distress, that in some quarters evangelization seems to hide sin, salvation,

²⁶ Walker Percy, "Physician As Novelist," in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, 195.

²⁷ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Picador, 1983), 24.

and ransoming from hell under the rug. In pushing aside these questions, one neglects *both* the relevance of the Gospel *and* its character of being news from across the sea. Such an approach, which neglects the very need for salvation, makes the new evangelization neither “evangelization” nor “new.” The more evangelists attempt to present the Gospel as another part of the good life, or another religious theory, the more and more people will be deaf to it.

No, if evangelization is to be evangelization, it must be news, and news from across the sea at that. If it is to confront contemporary man, and so be “new,” it must strike root in relevance exactly by reviving the sense of sin, breaking the chains of malaise, and minting words of power and freshness suitable to the message of eternal life. Only when the Gospel is announced as news, and contemporary man is convicted of its relevance exactly because he is convicted of his sin, will the new evangelization be fruitful.

The challenges are great. As of right now, the Gospel is a call largely unheeded, at least in the West. Percy’s call to reflection on this matter, decades old now, has gone unheeded as well. But a new Pentecost has been invoked, and so the opportunities too are great. The gray spirit needs only one breath of authority and direction to become blazing and seraphic. And behind all the challenges lies the conviction that looks to the kindly providence of God “who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”²⁸ For if the challenges are great, the Good News is greater. And so I close with the surprisingly optimistic words of Walker Percy to the graduates of St. Joseph Seminary-College in 1983:

I have mentioned the challenge only to emphasize the opportunities. The opportunity is simply this: that never in history has modern man been in greater need of you, has been more confused about his identity and the meaning of his life. Never has there been such loneliness in the midst of crowds, never such hunger in the face of satiation. Never has there been a more fertile ground for the seed and the harvest the Lord spoke of. All that is needed is a bearer of the Good News who speaks it with such authenticity that it can penetrate the most exhausted hearing, revive the most jaded language. With you lies the future and the hope. You and the Church you serve may be only a remnant, but it will be a saving remnant.

I salute you and congratulate you. God bless you.²⁹

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²⁸ 1 Tm 2:4 RSVCE.

²⁹ Walker Percy, “A ‘Cranky Novelist’ Reflects on the Church,” in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, 325.