

# Exploring Essential Underpinnings for the Successful Cultivation of “A Culture of Witness”

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In *Disciples Called to Witness: the New Evangelization*, the Bishops Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis clearly states that “a specific emphasis” of the new evangelization is “to welcome back to the Lord’s Table all those who are absent, because they are greatly missed and needed to build up the Body of Christ” (3). There are many things their absence should bring to our minds like the breaches in the unity of our families, our domestic churches, or the social and cultural circumstances which result in personal voids and are sources of agony. It should stir within us the deep need we have to experience reconciliation in our families, our extended relationships, and in the Body of Christ. *Disciples Called to Witness* recognizes the need for parishes to be places that welcome, nurture, and mentor those on the path to return. It relies heavily upon those who continue their commitment to the church, lived out in parish communities, and stresses the high degree of importance the members of the laity have in the mission of evangelization.

The same document notes that the 2011 CARA study *Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among U.S. Catholics* found “only 23 percent of Catholics attend Mass each week” and that most Catholics stop celebrating Mass because they have busy schedules or a lack of time, have family responsibilities, have health problems or disabilities, have conflicts with work, do not believe missing Mass is a sin, or believe that they are not very religious people (2). In other words, many of our brothers and sisters have simply drifted away from the church. This is due in part to the busyness of modern life and to a changing culture.

While these documents point to the pervasiveness of secularization, materialism, and individualism, there are issues beyond those found in the broader culture affecting the Catholic community. Forces at work in the culture combined with factors in parishes are undermining our effectiveness. These issues may result in those Catholics who do accept the invitation to return to the Lord’s Table and the life of the church, but have simply “drifted away.” Are we willing to focus on the issues behind this? How have individuals developed an image of church, and a religious self-image, in which constraints in time, pressures of family and work, and issues of health

move them away from rather than draw them closer to the celebration of the Eucharist and the Eucharistic community? A willingness to explore the blocks which exist is needed to facilitate full, active, conscious participation in Catholic life. Reliance on those in the pews to act as a conduit of return for “all those who are absent” will only be feasible if we commit ourselves to assuring that those who continue to gather at the Lord’s Table are engaged in and transformed by their experience of church. We must be sure that the possibility of an encounter with the person of Jesus is available to everyone.

## A CULTURE OF WITNESS

*Disciples Called To Witness* also calls for the cultivation of “a culture of witness.” It recognizes that the development of such a culture is dependent upon the living of “explicit lives of discipleship”. It states that the “work of the Holy Spirit within the Christian community” allows the individual to become a disciple, and gives further evidence of the importance of discipleship to the evangelizing process when it states, “a parish must provide formed disciples who can accompany those who are returning to the Church and guide them throughout their journey” (11). The development of such a culture, however, will not occur if the foundations upon which we are building are based upon assumptions about parish life and formation rather than the actual realities as they currently exist. The practices assumed to be in place in the Bishops’ document must be measured against the actual practices within parish life in order for us to ascertain if the presumed pastoral practices which underpin the document’s expectations are a current reality. A willingness to acknowledge and address these issues is essential if this document is to be an effective vehicle in guiding evangelization efforts and the successful development of the “culture of witness” is to be realized.

Additionally, it is assumed that those who remain active in parish life and celebrate the Eucharist have heard and had their lives impacted in a significant way by the core of the gospel message, the *kerygma*. The place where the proclamation of the *kerygma* and the reception of this proclamation have in opening individuals to fruitful participation in the catechetical process is foundational to accepting the invitation to discipleship. A potentially fatal flaw in the spiritual development of the faithful happens when we ignore the

essential role of the proclamation of the *kerygma* as the primary source for introducing believers to the person of Jesus and disposing them to what St. John Paul II described as “the definitive aim of catechesis,” “to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ” (*Catechesi Tradentae*, 5).

In *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus*, Sherry A. Weddell notes:

When Pew researchers asked American adults a series of questions about the kind of God they believe in, a startling pattern emerged: *Nearly a third of self-identified Catholics believe in an impersonal God... Only 60 percent of Catholics believe in a personal God. Twenty-nine percent said that God is an ‘impersonal force.’ Eight percent said that God was ‘other,’ or ‘both’ personal and impersonal, and 1 percent didn’t believe in God at all (43).*

Taking such statistical findings into consideration means that assuming the acceptance of the core of the gospel message lies at the heart of the experience of the average Catholic is a questionable assumption. Without a certain understanding that the God in whom we believe is a God we can personally know, the ability to enter into “communion” with that God is surely compromised and falls far short of the relationship demanded for true Christian discipleship. To assume that our parish communities are comprised of individuals who are secure enough in their relationship with Jesus Christ that they can articulate that relationship and “accompany those who are returning to the church and guide them throughout their journey” is a true leap of faith. The need for the development and implementation of processes wherein the gospel message is preached, and individuals are afforded an opportunity to acknowledge and then grow in a relationship with Jesus Christ is a foundational first step in the development of the “culture of witness” being called for by the Bishops.

In the very opening of his encyclical *Deus caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI stated: “We have come to believe in God’s love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (1).

As a part of the development of a “culture of witness” we must be willing to explore whether we are effective in providing the opportunity for individuals to access this horizon and direction.

## NEW HORIZONS

The use of the term “horizon” by Pope Benedict is reminiscent of the way in which this term is used in the work of Bernard Lonergan. For Lonergan, conversion and horizon are tied. In his lecture, *What Does Bernard Lonergan Mean by Conversion?* Robert M. Doran states:

There is a metaphorical use of the term ‘horizon’ that has occurred in phenomenological and existential philosophy, and Lonergan has adopted this use of the term from these thinkers. In this metaphorical sense, a horizon is the limit of what one *knows* and *is interested in*. What lies beyond the horizon is not only what one does not know but what one has no desire to know and what you don’t even know exists to be known. There can be much within your horizon that you don’t know but want to know.

I may have no knowledge of differential calculus but I may want to learn it, and if that is the case it is within my horizon, within my field of interest. But beyond my horizon is the great realm of what I don’t even care about knowing, of what I pay no attention to, of what if it is called to my attention I simply disregard... But conversion entails a radical shift in horizon. Conversion is not learning, like learning calculus. Conversion is the kind of movement into a

new horizon that entails an about face. It comes out of the old by repudiating characteristic features of the old. It begins a new sequence of events in one’s life that set one’s life on a radically different course.<sup>1</sup>

What in the current parish experience motivates me to look “beyond my horizon?” What can facilitate the “movement into a new horizon” that constitutes conversion? These are certainly fundamental questions which must be addressed before we can assume that we have processes in place within parish communities capable of drawing others to the type of broadening or shifting in “horizon” that will result not only in a welcoming back to the Lord’s Table, but which will trans-

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1 Robert M. Doran, *What Does Bernard Lonergan Mean by ‘Conversion?’*, 2011, available at: <http://www.lonerganresource.com/pdf/lectures/What%20Does%20Bernard%20Lonergan%20Mean%20by%20Conversion.pdf>



form understandings to the point where lives are impacted by the significance of having a place at this Table. Entering into this kind of process of lifelong conversion may well be the only means by which the “drifting away” can be substantially halted.

An assumption in *Disciples Called to Witness* is that “catechetical methodologies” can effectively provide for a “gradual and lifelong process of conversion” which will “foster and sustain an evangelizing culture of witness” (10-11). While “a gradual and lifelong process of conversion” is essential, bringing such a process to life through the use of catechetical methods alone would appear to be questionable, particularly when one considers that for many of those remaining in the parish community the need to engage in such a process lies outside of their “current horizon.” Regarding the relationship between primary proclamation (*kerygma*) and catechesis, the *General Directory for Catechesis* states:

... in pastoral practice it is not always easy to define the boundaries of these activities. Frequently, many who present themselves for catechesis truly require genuine conversion. Because of this, the Church

usually desires that the first stage in the catechetical process be dedicated to ensuring conversion. In the context of ‘new evangelization’ it is affected by means of a ‘kerygmatic catechesis’ . . . directed towards a solid option of faith. Only by starting with conversion, and therefore by making allowance for the interior disposition of ‘whoever believes,’ can catechesis, strictly speaking, fulfill its proper task of education in the faith. The fact that catechesis, at least initially, assumes a missionary objective, does not dispense a particular Church from promoting an institutionalized program of primary proclamation to execute more directly Jesus’s missionary command. Catechetical renewal should be based thus on prior missionary evangelization (62).

In regard to the “new evangelization,” the *GDC* makes it clear that “a kerygmatic catechesis” is needed. In our current situation, a large portion of the participating populations in our parishes are functioning on a purely cultural level of engagement in their faith. If there are numbers of our parish populations who have not heard the primary proclamation and



not been “directed towards a solid option of faith” then this is the place from which we must begin. Only by starting with conversion “can catechesis, strictly speaking, fulfill its proper task of education in the faith.”

The use of catechetical methodologies will in fact be effective once the gospel is heard, once there is “movement into a new horizon” and once “a new sequence of events in one’s life . . . set one’s life on a radically different course.” Proclamation of the *kerygma* confronts the individual with the reality of God’s love, with the existence of sin, with the need to acknowledge personal sinfulness, and presents the choice to turn from sin to embrace the fullness of the salvific love afforded through the Paschal mystery. Being exposed to and receptive of these realities means one’s “standpoint” can change, and through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, one is opened to a new and expanded “horizon.”

The majority of Catholics have formal catechetical formation, which for the most part, ended in late childhood or early adolescence, and is insufficient to sustain them throughout their adulthood. This means that many of the faithful are lacking in

their understanding of the faith and may well have problems integrating the teaching of the church into their daily lives. At the same time, there is apparently a confidence that the catechetical formation received by most practicing Catholics has prepared them to confront the cultural realities within which they are immersed on a daily basis.

Fifty years ago, in his short book, *Life and Holiness*, Thomas Merton made this observation: “We must reflect more deeply than we do on the effect of modern technological life upon the emotional and instinctual development of man. It is quite possible that the person whose life is divided between tending a machine and watching TV is sooner or later going to suffer a radical deprivation in his nature and humanity” (25). How do we attend to the way in which modern technology — which has advanced far beyond the wildest imaginings of the industrial mechanization and telecommunications offerings of 1963 — impacts the “the nature and humanity” of 21<sup>st</sup> century persons? How has this expansion of technology which has thrust us into a seemingly boundless information age impacted our ability to open ourselves to integrating the truth of the gospel message into the sea of a technological culture which engulfs

each of us on a daily basis? Attending to the emotional and instinctual needs of those active in our communities and taking on the additional responsibility of meeting these needs in those who are on the path to returning is a task that transcends the catechetical.

As we give consideration to the tasks involved in the evangelistic enterprise, we must also examine the impacts of the culture and technology on the development of all individuals to whom our ministry is directed. We must prepare those with responsibility for pastoral care to address the way in which our technological culture has impacted “the nature and the humanity” of those we are called to serve.

For some, it may seem that this discussion is taking us far afield. It may cause concern that we are moving beyond the parameters of *Disciples Called To Witness*, and yet, the Bishops clearly state, “Attention should also be paid to the cultural contexts and situations that our missing brothers and sisters face. . . . Many of these societal realities are positive, but when taken to the extreme, can lead to disillusionment and weariness” (9). This statement immediately precedes statements about the need to “cultivate a culture of witness.” In this section of the document, entitled *The Response of the New Evangelization to Today’s World*, the Bishops’ Committee indicates, “there are numerous pastoral programs meant to encourage and support people in their journey back to the faith.”

There is a recognition that programmatic effectiveness in this outreach relies on our ability to “touch the lives of others, interact with them, and show them how the faith answers the deepest questions and enriches modern culture” (9). Among the resources to assist in this task is the cultivation of “a culture of witness.” And so, we come back to the pivotal role of disciples from the community as a focus upon which the success of this resource depends.

With all of this said, questions remain about direction and approaches to lay the foundations for the development of communities of disciples who can apprentice our returning brothers and sisters. What must we address in our parish communities to stimulate growth in discipleship? What will result in our parishes being places where lives are touched, spiritual

growth is stimulated, and the deepest questions are addressed by our faith?

## FOSTERING SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

For a viable community of disciples to be formed and nourished in a parish setting, certain needs must be met. These needs can best be described as: spiritual renewal on every level of the local church, a focus on community formation and stewardship, and immersion in mission.

The path to effective evangelization begins from the foundation of spiritual renewal. To meet and come to intimately know Jesus Christ, to live out our lives as his disciples, and to offer that fullness of life to all those we meet is at the very core of Christian existence. The stark reality is that we cannot offer to others what many among us are unaware they have been graced to possess. It is clear that we must make no assumptions that any among us is beyond the need to deepen our

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relationship with Jesus Christ. We must honestly assess the needs and spiritual condition of our clergy, and our diocesan, parish, and school staffs. We must look to the needs of those who are members of our Catholic family, both those who are actively engaged and the many who are estranged. We must prepare ourselves to reach out to bring the gospel and the reality of an encounter with Jesus Christ to all those who surround us.

Attention must be given to all of our priests and deacons.

This is an essential component to laying the groundwork for a church community that cultivates “a culture of witness.” This will require the development and implementation of a process of spiritual renewal which addresses their personal spiritual development, their growth in the way they function ministerially, and ongoing attentiveness to their spiritual lives as members of the presbyteral community.

Additionally, dedication to the establishment and maintenance of a uniquely Catholic atmosphere in our diocesan offices, parishes, and schools, and providing the individuals who minister there with concrete opportunities for personal spiritual renewal is essential to changing the environments in which they minister. Developing an ethics of work founded on the premise that work is a participation in the creative action of God and removing a mentality which regards staff mem-



bers as little more than commodities is essential for value and belonging to be bolstered among staff members. Encouraging Catholic members of staffs to actively engage in the spiritual renewal opportunities in their parishes is essential if staffs are to assist with and enhance our evangelization efforts. Assisting non-Catholic members of our staffs to actively engage in the faith traditions they practice while fostering openness to and a respect for those who practice these traditions is a window through which all parties can come to a more profound understanding of how the Christian message is interpreted and understood within various denominations.

Particular attention must be given to bringing the members of the faithful to a deeper appreciation of their life in Christ. For many, the richness of faith gifted to them at their baptism has remained fallow as they have not been schooled in using the tools which cultivate a personal spiritual harvest in their lives. The *GDC* states, “Faith is a gift destined to grow in the hearts of believers. Adhering to Jesus Christ, in fact, sets in motion a process of continuing conversion, which lasts for the whole of life.” It defines conversion as a “...first moment of interest in the Gospel (which) requires a period of searching to be trans-

formed into a firm option...Such searching, guided by the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the *Kerygma*, prepares the way for conversion which is certainly ‘initial’, but brings with it adherence to Christ and the will to walk in his footsteps. This ‘fundamental option’ is the basis for the whole Christian life of the Lord’s disciple” (56).

It seems only natural then to provide opportunities for conversion, both initial and ongoing, which can empower the members of our parishes to move forward to fulfill their baptismal call to spread the gospel. Finding an approach that will work most effectively in a particular parish setting will depend on the demographics, the financial and human resources, and the physical environment and space available. The basic purpose is always to provide a meaningful set of experiences to foster conversion and light the fire of spiritual renewal in as large a number in the parish community as possible. A parish community opening itself to personal encounters with Jesus is the base from which an evangelical movement can begin. Wrapping these initial experiences into an ongoing process where the community can nurture their relationship with Christ and the church

is essential to the success of the long-range goals of their evangelization effort.

We must change our minds about what parish membership means. Any effort to evangelize will require building communities in which individuals are consistently presented with opportunities to grow in faith and stewardship. Such opportunities can strengthen our parishes to be communities where the Eucharist is not just celebrated but where a commitment to being formed by the Eucharist is readily exhibited.

Based on the description of the early Christian community as found in the Book of Acts 2:42-47, there are a minimum of four aspects to parish life which define this sort of intentional effort at community development: lifelong teaching/formation, commitment to personal and communal prayer, shared lives directed toward the fulfillment of needs, and active engagement in Eucharist and worship.

The early disciples are described as having “devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles. . .” In our current context, such devotion entails the essential need for ongoing formation of individuals in the Tradition and teachings of the church. It is clear that those who experience conversion hunger to know how to be a disciple of Jesus.

A method is needed which allows the teachings of the faith to be integrated into the lives of believers through an experience of why these beliefs matter in their daily lives. This kind of experiential formation explodes the materials being taught into the context of the world in which they live as it sheds light on the differences between Catholic values and those espoused by the current culture. Assisting individuals to discern these differences and providing them with the skills to grow in living a Catholic life in the midst of the culture is important in strengthening individuals who desire to live out their commitment to Christ.

In conjunction with these ongoing formational experiences there is a need to assist people with continued growth in their prayer lives. Most Catholics have learned prayers; there is a need to assist them to develop their ability to pray. Parish processes should be put into place that school individuals in the art of prayer and provide resources, available in a number of formats, to maintain their prayer lives.

“All who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44). This concept of caring, found in the early Christian communities, which prompted onlookers to say, “See how they love one another,” may well be a key to drawing others to become a part of the Catholic community. Strengthening the bonds of care and concern for the actual needs of those who worship with us is based on an understanding of the connectedness that we have in Christ and should be actively pursued and promoted in our parish communities. Moving beyond civility to a sense of fraternal care for each other should be a hallmark of our parishes. The nurturing within the community of a

practice of care for one another is an expression of genuine stewardship and the deep bonds meant to exist between us because of our baptism and our sharing of the Eucharist. This is certainly not an attitude that can be programmed but it can be modeled and fostered when we are encouraged to recognize and reach out to fill areas of need.

Regular efforts to assist the members of the parish to move beyond accepted attitudes and understandings about worship to seeing their involvement in worship as a work in which they are called to be actively engaged is essential. Engaging in ongoing reflection about what our involvement in Eucharist actually means, and committing ourselves to never settle for less than quality Eucharistic celebrations is a fundamental step in improving the level of full and active participation over the long-term.

Individuals who have heard the call of Jesus “to do as I have done for you” will take on a mindset in which service is a normative part of living out the Catholic faith. The promotion of initiatives to develop the understanding that holiness extends beyond personal piety and must include apostolic activity is a basic requirement for the successful integration of a mindset of evangelization into daily life — initiatives for service and outreach which include an invitation to participate in the life of a community of disciples who are formed for mission to others. A focus on looking outward to answer the call to service is a natural progression in the life of a Catholic who has encountered Christ and has been formed by the teachings of the church. Service, when it is fostered by the support that comes from reflecting upon it with other members of the community, is a transformational activity; it transforms both the individual and the community. Involvement in service helps us grow in the way we perceive ourselves and the world that surrounds us. Making involvement in service and mission a priority helps the believer move their faith-life into the marketplace as it strengthens the bonds of community as members work side by side.

By meeting these needs, a parish community can create disciples “who can accompany those who are returning to the Church and guide them throughout their journey.” As *Disciples Called to Witness: the New Evangelization* is read, studied, and implemented by individuals and parish groups and its principles and strategies are understood, we must find ways for a true “culture of witness” to emerge and enable a resurgence of evangelizing activity. There is a distance that we must travel from our current reality to the realization of this culture. Our church is in transition, and the stress of change pulls on our hearts and minds. Whatever challenges we face, a reliance on the faith gifted to us at baptism and a dedication to growth in our relationship with Jesus Christ is the certain path to fulfilling our mission to go and make disciples. ■

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