

Billy Graham Crusades and Catholic Evangelization

Kristina M. DeNeve



In a recent issue of *Catechetical Leader*, Terrie Baldwin discussed the need, joys, and challenges of family evangelization. Beyond our nuclear family, our parish family, and even beyond our universal Catholic family, the call to evangelization also includes ministry for and with our larger Christian family.

Last year, the Diocese of Green Bay, under the guidance and leadership of Bishop David Ricken, did just that as we participated in a Franklin Graham Festival held in our area.

What did it look like for Catholics to collaborate in this updated version of a Billy Graham Crusade? What lessons did we learn, what contributions did we make, and where might we go from here?

LESSONS LEARNED

When Bishop Ricken was first approached by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), he was assured the upcoming festival would be ecumenical in nature; no congregation involved would be allowed to proselytize or speak negatively against any other religious denomination. The BGEA was more than good to their word. Every aspect of their festival was standardized to assure uniformity in message and approach. From the advance training on how to evangelize one-on-one to the printed invitational materials, and from the kick-off breakfast to the color-coded volunteer t-shirts, the BGEA followed a structured, time-tested methodology.

One great example surrounds the church-going Christians from the Green Bay area who “received” individuals after the “altar call.” Each of these individuals had to provide written proof of their current involvement with an area church. They received specific training and instructions on what to do and what not to do during the altar call. Those receiving others could not wear any religiously identifying clothing or jewelry, not even a pastor’s black (or blue or white) collar. During the event, whatever church/denomination a newly committing Christian identified was to be taken at face value and written down. And, if that was not enough, trained supervisors

combed the receiving area during the event to ensure compliance, removing anyone who ventured off-script.

CONTRIBUTIONS MADE

Church documents indicate there are three “audiences” associated with our new evangelization efforts: ourselves (as we are always in need of further conversion), our Catholic brothers and sisters who have grown tepid in their faith, and the broader culture which is neutral at best and often antagonistic towards Christianity. With Bishop Ricken’s foresight, we were able to work as evangelizers with all three audiences.

First, those of us who participated with the BGEA had several opportunities to deepen our own faith. For example, after attending the evangelization training sessions, area Catholics met and discussed what we’d learned and in what

ways Catholic evangelization is similar to and differs from the Protestant approach. Similarly, any Catholic attending the festival could wear a free t-shirt that said “Catholic Christian” on the front and “Jesus is my Lord and Savior” on the back, offering both a silent witness and a tangible opening to discuss faith matters with other attendees. Facilitating Catholic involvement with this event convinces me that when we

open ourselves to doing the “work” of evangelization, we find ourselves deeply evangelized in return.

The broader culture was also impacted by Catholic participation in the Franklin Graham Festival. For example, at leadership meetings, pastors of other denominations often had spirited conversations with me about why Catholics were involved with this festival and whether or not they thought it was a good idea. Similarly, I participated in several sacred conversations with the BGEA festival director for Green Bay as well as with other individual Christians, grappling with an invisible line that moved from discomfort to full collaboration.

Last but not least are the Catholics who came forward and (re)committed themselves to Jesus during the Franklin Graham Festival. Of the 792 people, 108 identified themselves as Catholic. That is one in eight people who came forward

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during the entire weekend!! Slightly more than half of these Catholics were youth and young adults under the age of 25, with approximately ten additional Catholics for each 10-year age-group up to 75. Each adult received a phone call from a trained, active Catholic after the event. Additionally, area parishes were given the information on all of the newly (re) committed individuals who happened to live within their geographic boundary.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Of the many lessons learned, I offer three suggestions for other dioceses and parishes in locations where large ecumenical gatherings take place. First, show up! Any ecumenical event WILL have Catholics of all stripes and flavors in attendance. If we are not formally and officially present, we risk continued loss of our less active brothers and sisters, particularly our youth and young adults.

Second, develop procedures for responding and reaching out to Catholic youth identified from these events. Even with several months notice, our diocese and area parishes struggled with how to follow-up with our youth. A telephone call or text message is not effective and in-person sessions are difficult due to safe environment considerations. Parish youth

ministers and other teens are well-suited for following up, but they will need special training and specific directives that differ from any other age group.

Finally, use these events to form and evangelize active Catholics in your parish. Of the Catholic adults who came forward, virtually all of them were *already* active in some way with a parish. These adults simply did not know that Catholics commit themselves to Christ every day; every time we go to Mass, every time we pray, study, love or serve others, we re-commit ourselves to our baptismal call.

Catholics are a sacramental, ritual people. Given this, it is not too surprising that so many Catholics came forward during Franklin Graham's altar call. Wouldn't it be great if one day the Catholics coming forward and the Protestants who receive them *both* knew that this response is no more and no less than what we are called to do every day as Catholic Christians? |

Kristina DeNeve, PhD, is the Adult Faith Formation and Evangelization Coordinator for the Diocese of Honolulu. Contact her at kdeNeve@rcchawaii.org.

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