

Clean Out the Old Alienation, Bring on the New Evangelization

Claire M. McManus



Most dioceses are working hard to address the exodus from the church that has occurred for the greater part of the last decades. As one priest put it, “We can’t begin the new evangelization until we address the old alienation.”

The new evangelization has been given a shot of adrenaline since the election of Pope Francis, whose style of evangelization is to *be* the gospel. While Pope Francis projects his message of simplicity, mercy, and love, we must prepare to welcome back the people he brings home.

Reaching out to Catholics that no longer occupy our pews requires a multi-faceted strategy that employs media, cyberspace, and warm hearts. There are several organizations that have made it their mission to seek out and welcome back lapsed Catholics.

CATHOLICS COME HOME

Catholics Come Home (catholicscomehome.org) may be familiar to those of you in the 35 dioceses with whom they have partnered. Founder and president, Tom Peterson, has brought his years of experience as a corporate advertising executive to reach out to fallen away Catholics through the media.

The “evangomercials” are aired in television markets that reach directly into the homes of those people who have left our churches. This requires a large financial investment on the part of partner dioceses, most of which is used to buy the most lucrative television air times that have the best chance of hitting the target group. These “evangomercials” are professionally produced and employ multiple strategies to address lapsed Catholics in the audience.

Some commercials remind the viewers of the rich history of pastoral care and education that has been such an important part of our Catholic heritage throughout the world. Other

commercials touch on more personal experiences that may produce a visceral response that leads the viewers to introspection about their lives. The hope is that the commercials will elicit a return to the local parish, or a search of the Catholics Come Home website.

The Catholics Come Home website is busy and filled with information, but the real value of the ministry lies predominantly with the commercials that draw in the visitors. It offers answers to frequently asked questions about church teaching, explains the necessity of the sacraments, and invites a renewed involvement in the Mass.

The presumed path through the Catholics Come Home process is into a parish that is geographically close, and indeed they report some initial rise in Mass attendance after the commercials air. It is the responsibility of the partnering diocese to make sure that parishes are prepared to be welcoming.

ONCE CATHOLIC

The Franciscan Friars of the St. John the Baptist Province in Cincinnati, Ohio, have developed another strategy for reaching out to lapsed Catholics. Their “Once Catholic” website (oncecatholic.org) is a ministry that flows from the Franciscan charism of reconciliation. The website has a very welcoming approach that seeks to get to the heart of the issues that may have driven people away in the first place.

Exploring this website brings a person home through the “front door.” On this page, there is a list of stories that may speak to the individual searching the site. Among these stories are “Marriage Issues,” “Drifted Away,” “Not Fed,” “Quarrel with Staff,”

“Felt Excluded,” “Abortion/Post-Abortion,” “Church Teaching,” and “Other Stories.” A click on one’s story leads to the “Story Room” where the topic is expressed more fully. From there, one enters the “Living Room” where a welcome sign is displayed and the church’s response to the issue is discussed.

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The next step is an invitation to have more conversation about this issue with others who have the same experience. This is done by way of the “Conversation Corner” which is the heart of the Once Catholic ministry. It is here that the person is given a companion for the journey home.

Once Catholic uses a relational process to help a fallen away Catholic return to the church. Their stories are held sacred and their concerns are addressed with compassion. What is most interesting about the process is that people who seek to return to the church are not sent to the nearest parish, but are asked to explore various programs for returning Catholics in their area so as not to become a lost soul in an unwelcoming parish. They can find such programs on the site’s “Help Room,” stating, “Here you’ll find real people, hopefully close to home. Jesus Christ is a real person, who walked in faith with real people. Those who follow Jesus always find him in community. We want to help you find a place to continue your journey face-to-face.”

LANDINGS

The third component of the strategy to welcome back Catholics is preparing parishes for the homecoming. The Paulists were at the forefront of evangelization, and for more than 25 years have reached out to returning Catholics through their ministry of reconciliation. They have re-launched their “Landings” program for parishes to address the need of securing “a safe harbor,” or “landing place for returning Catholics.” Their website, landingsintl.org, provides resources for parishes, and also has a place for lapsed Catholics to begin their inquiry about the journey back home.

No one strategy alone can lessen or stop the flow of Catholics exiting the doors of the church until we rededicate ourselves to the gospel. The old alienation ends with us. |

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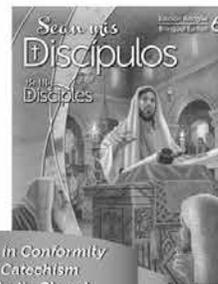
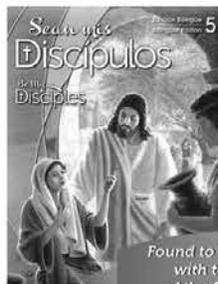
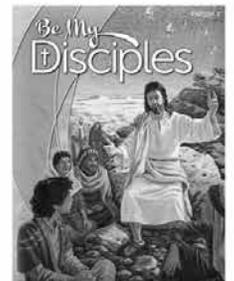
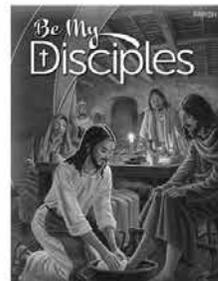
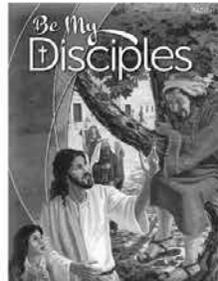
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