

# Pass It On: Renewing One's Own Faith Is the First Step to Evangelizing Others

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In spite of the genuine and sometimes heroic efforts of parents and teachers in Catholic schools and parish religious education programs, sometimes the Gospel message simply is not heard the first time around. In today's culture, it cannot be assumed that baptized Catholics will embrace discipleship and become active followers of Christ. Many Catholics are affected by the secularism, materialism, and individualism of our society, as are many of their friends, families, and neighbors who do not profess the faith. It is difficult for the Church to be heard through the pervasive noise.

Many Catholics have embraced a postmodern mentality that rejects belief in a universal and objective truth, leading to a rise in relativism. Many mistrust institutions, including the Church, and do not turn to her for guidance. A self-referencing individualism evaluates in terms of what is best for the self rather than what is best for the common good. There may be an interest in spirituality, but it is often without humble submission to truth beyond the self. The sense of individuality is so strong that many have lost a desire for community and living in solidarity with others.

Clearly, many Catholics do not know their faith well, nor have they accepted the invitation from Christ to follow him as disciples. So what can be done? In a recent pastoral letter, "Disciples of the Lord: Sharing the Vision," I wrote that Christ still calls us to conversion and discipleship, "but, for many, the invitation has lost its appeal." It seems that "for some

who initially heard this incredible proclamation, the message has become stale. The vision has faded. The promises seem empty or unconnected to their lives."

A recent survey conducted by the Archdiocese of Washington concluded that nearly 50 percent of Catholics between the ages of 25 and 34 attend Mass no more than a few times a year, if at all. Nearly as many, however, consider prayer and spirituality to be very important in their lives. The hunger is there, but the message of the Gospel has been eclipsed.

At the other end of the spectrum, one sees great signs of vitality. In the past year, as I have met and talked with pastoral leaders across the archdiocese, I can see that the Church in Washington, D.C., is doing many things right and well, or at least it is making strides in a positive direction. There is room for improvement and growth, but the spark is there. Each January, for example, 20,000 young people from across the United States gather at the Verizon Center in Washington for a rally and Mass for Life. This year we added a second venue with space for an additional 10,000 young people to cheer, pray, and stand up for the culture of life. The free tickets for both locations—30,000 seats—were claimed within minutes, and requests continued to pour in. School enrollment has stabilized as communities become more engaged with their Catholic schools; a new archdiocesan seminary will open in the fall to accommodate an increased interest in vocations to the priesthood; and groups ranging from those who are

a part of the new movements to those with special needs are increasingly engaged with their Church. The archdiocese held its first White Mass recently to celebrate the giftedness to our Church and society of those who have special needs. At the same time, parishes have started to actively embrace evangelization efforts, including door-to-door invitations to Invite-A-Friend Sunday and visits by parishioners to those members who have stopped coming to Mass, to invite them back.

The transformation of society begins with conversion, not with another new program. The antidote to our spiritual malaise is for each of us to know and deepen our knowledge of the crucified and risen Jesus. For people to hear the Gospel, the tellers must be credible and alive in their experience of Christ.

This conversion essentially involves discernment. Each of us Catholics must stop and see where the Lord is working and where there is room for growth. Following this basic principle, and understanding that parish life is at the heart of the church experience, the Archdiocese of Washington is introducing a new tool to help parishes discern where they are most vital and where the Spirit is calling them to grow. The "Indicators of Vitality" make up a self-assessment tool that gives pastors and parish leaders a way to plan for the future by looking at the health and vitality of their parishes in five areas: worship, education, community life, service, and administration (which includes the leadership, stewardship,

management, and decision-making processes of the parish).

The process of parish self-assessment brings pastoral planning to a level where it is going to be lived. Parishes self-identify their vision and their needs. The staff of the archdiocese is available to help the parishes achieve their goals, not to impose a new program. This vision implicitly recognizes that the people and their pastors are the experts on their parish, and diocesan support must be oriented to supporting pastors, not the other way around.

This vision of evangelization recognizes that listening is inherent to preaching. When those who preach know how the world is listening, they can, in the words of Pope John Paul II, preach the unchanging truth with “new ardor, new methods and new expression.” That truth needs to be proclaimed in a way that the world can comprehend, whether from the pulpit, in conversation, or through contemporary music or social media.

#### **Encounter with the Risen Christ**

Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI teach that, especially

in this culture, the faith must still be taught in all its fullness, richness, and transforming power. Entry into this truth brings entry into the life and love of God.

If there is anything we Christians should know, it is that human beings yearn for life and love and will turn just about anywhere to find it. The Church ministers this life and love in the most beautiful and complete way. Many today are not open to the message the Church teaches because it is often presented in a way that does not penetrate the postmodern mentality. But there is and has always been power to transform lives in the love of God, the truth of Christ, and the gentle work of the Holy Spirit. This is the heart of our message, and it does not change.

An encounter with Christ makes all the difference, which we cannot forget. This is the ageless message of the saints, and it continues to inspire and challenge in our own day. In encountering Christ, we share in God’s life and love in a dynamic way and are enlivened by the Holy Spirit to share this message with others. Our primary encounters with Christ come in the Eucharist and the other

sacraments, especially the sacrament of reconciliation. We meet him, too, in reading Scripture, in our prayer and in the community of believers, including when we reach out to those around us, especially the poor and vulnerable, through works of charity and justice.

That is why, as we “repropose the Gospel” (Pope Benedict’s term) through the new evangelization, we are called to do even better what we already do. Good liturgy is important. Prayer is important. Reading Scripture is important. Our life in community is important, especially as manifested in our social ministries. As Pope John Paul taught, “Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves; they must proclaim him” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, No. 49).

This is the heart and challenge of the new evangelization: reinvigorating our own faith so we then can invite others to rediscover Christ.

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