

The New Evangelization: New and Improved or Just New Packaging?

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“Consequently, the new evangelization is not a matter of redoing something which has been inadequately done or has not achieved its purpose, as if the new activity were an implicit judgment on the failure of the first evangelization” (*Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*; Mar 12, 2011).

REALITY CHECK

Seriously? Catholics have done a good job in evangelizing others? Evangelization has successfully achieved its purpose? Then the purpose of the old evangelization must have been to drive Catholics from the pews in record numbers. Regular Mass attendance is at its lowest point in history. Catholics are more divided than ever on several issues, including gay marriage, women’s issues, and abortion. If evangelization efforts have been successful, we would be building many more churches and schools rather than closing them.

If we make the statement that past evangelization programs were not failures, then we should see evidence of success. Hard statistics and measurable results do not bolster claims that Catholics have done a good job in evangelizing. Young families do not populate our pews on Sundays; many parishioners have not attended a faith formation event since their confirmations; in some neighborhoods, parish outreach efforts are barely making a dent in the overwhelming need to assist the poor, homeless, or unemployed.

THE BLAME GAME

Who, then, is to blame for the lack of successful efforts to evangelize? Some may want to place blame on their parish priest. However, our priests speak about the Good News of the gospel every week; whether they do it brilliantly or poorly, what they do is still evangelization. Some priests might do more in the way of outreach, both within and outside the parish community, but it is hardly the sole responsibility of the priest to evangelize.

If we want to blame someone for the failures of evangelization, we also cannot look to the Bishops. The USCCB has made substantial efforts to establish criteria and implementation plans for evangelizing parishioners and renewing parishes since Vatican II. Much of the laity is both more informed

and more formed than ever before. Programs such as *Welcome Home Catholics*, *The Light is On for You*, and *RENEW*, among so many others, have brought the Good News to Catholics and non-Catholics alike in a new and enthusiastic way.

Where then, does that leave us as catechetical leaders in the blame game? Unfortunately, it leaves us too close to home for comfort. As diocesan and parish catechetical leaders, we have a duty to evangelize our catechists; in turn, we must ensure that every catechist is evangelizing his or her students. “Frequently, many who present themselves for catechesis truly require conversion. Because of this, the church usually requires the first stage in the catechetical process be dedicated to ensuring conversion” (The General Directory for Catechesis, #62). This GDC reference is not only to those who attend catechetical sessions; it also refers to those who volunteer as catechists and aides. If teachers have not been evangelized themselves, they will not be able to offer their students — children and adults alike — opportunities for initial and on-going conversion.

HARD QUESTIONS

“Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20).

Without an in-depth understanding and lived praxis of the command Jesus gave us, can we ever succeed at evangelizing our charges? The very first word that Jesus uses in this Scripture passage is “Go.” I don’t recall any Bible verse which instructed disciples or potential disciples to come to the temple from 6:30-7:30 on Thursday nights to hear about the kingdom of God. Yes, Jesus did preach in the temple; but that was only one of many places where the Good News of salvation was proffered. We tend to forget that the arena for evangelization extends far beyond church classrooms.

Do we have in place in every program, every week, a time for faith-sharing? These are opportunities for on-going conversion. We must insist that our catechists witness to the gospel and share their personal stories of faith on a regular basis. And we must lead by example, continually witnessing to the gospel — both with and without words — to our catechists.

No one expects Catholics to knock on doors or proselytize at the Saturday morning soccer game. However, Catholics are not exempt from sharing with others the blessings and comforts God gives them on a daily basis. Many of us have adopted the secular attitude that being religious is embarrassing. We have a tendency to suffocate the Holy Spirit within us when prompted to speak about Jesus Christ because we don't want to appear foolish to our friends or non-religious family members. I have often heard Catholics say that you don't need to mention Jesus by name; that living a good life is enough. Don't kid yourself. Many atheists are good, kind people who do the right thing.

"Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (Lk 9: 26).

When *Go and Make Disciples* was published in 1993 – almost 20 years ago – many dioceses undertook study and implementation strategies to renew their parishes. How many of your catechists are still in place from 20 years ago? Were you in the position you now hold 20 years ago? We often teach a document to our catechists once, but rarely refer to it again. Yet, *Go and Make Disciples* is a foundational document for all evangelizing efforts. The tenets of this document are clearly reflected in the GDC. (Have you been annually teaching new catechists in your parish or diocese *this* document?)

"The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ. All evangelizing activity is understood as promoting communion with Jesus Christ" (GDC, #80).

The goals of evangelization as outlined in *Go and Make Disciples* are as follows:

Goal I — Conversion Within the Individual

To bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others.

Goal II — Conversion to the Church Community

To invite all people in the United States, whatever their social or cultural background, to hear the message of salvation in Jesus Christ so they may come to join us in the fullness of the Catholic faith.

Goal III — Conversion of Society

To foster gospel values in our society, promoting the dignity of the human person, the importance of the family, and the common good of our society, so that our nation may continue to be transformed by the saving power of Jesus Christ.

HARDER QUESTIONS

Are our evangelizing efforts as catechists promoting communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ or are our students still taking turns reading out of a textbook? Are our classrooms

quiet and orderly instead of vibrant, messy, and exciting? Do we discuss, along with the tenets of our faith, the current issues that families face in this increasingly isolationist and secular society and relate them to God's Scriptural promises? Do we even know which of our families is in serious crisis — whether financial, emotional, or spiritual — so that we can remind them of the promise of salvation through their baptisms? Are we offering adults a systematic program of formation classes in Christology, Scripture, ecclesiology, pastoral ministry, and apologetics?

Unless we're answering "Yes" to the above, we cannot hope to respond to the new evangelization in a way that connects our families, our community, or the world to the person of Jesus Christ.

BEYOND OUR BACKYARDS

Nor is the new evangelization taking up the first evangelization again, or simply repeating the past. Instead, it is the courage to forge new paths in responding to the changing circumstances and conditions facing the Church in her call to proclaim and live the gospel today (The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith).

The paths of former evangelization programs were clear: first, the on-going conversion of the individual followed by the on-going conversion and renewal of parishes; next, a deeper appreciation of Eucharist, sacraments, Scripture, prayer, and spirituality. As the faith and spirituality of the person and the parish community deepened, the parish reached out as a welcoming community of faith-sharing active Catholics to inactive Catholics, those unchurched, those of other cultures and those of other denominations and faiths. Our witness took us from our families to our workplaces. The implementation strategies for these goals were straightforward: organize parish focus groups, workshops, catechetical sessions, and finally develop outreach ministries.

Once we understand and live the guidelines outlined in *Go and Make Disciples*, we can better understand the new evangelization, the synod for which is scheduled for October 2012. And how will this new evangelization be different from the "old" evangelization outlined in the 1993 document *Go and Make Disciples*? For the most part, it is not different. The goals remain the same; the strategies have changed.

In 1993, most of us did not have personal computers and certainly did not have pocket cell phones. It was unheard of to have an instant global access to a community of like minds. In 1993, we were not the targets of growing numbers of secularists who oppose our beliefs and way of living. Our efforts to promote conversion to Catholics and non-Catholics have been a continuing effort from the time of Jesus Christ. So while our evangelizing activities must continue, they must reflect this very fast-paced and technologically minded society.

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

If we are doing catechesis the way it was done ten years ago, we are not succeeding to the extent we might in our evangelizing efforts. Are your teachers using the new social media to catechize and evangelize youth and adults? Are *you* using the new media to teach?

A PERSONAL STORY

In preparation for our fall 2012 Professional Days for Catechists (an annual practical day for learning how to teach and apply curriculum standards using multiple intelligence theory and creative teaching techniques), I recently asked my PCL's to prepare lesson plans for our catechists on two standards, prayer and spirituality. My PCL's were spot on in their approach to various spiritualities and in how to incorporate the different forms of prayer. However, when I searched the e-mailed draft plans for the use of technology, there was a glaring void. No one proposed asking catechists to assist students in creating a Scriptural re-enactment for YouTube or producing a music video about their faith. When I brought this point up at a recent PCL meeting and asked why the void, my mostly baby boomers were silent. This is as much my failure as theirs.

The Catholic Church understands the power of the new social media and the formidable use of technology to sway people in a way of thinking. The Pope has a Twitter page; the Vatican has a Facebook page; there are blogs and anti-blogs enough on Catholicism to choke a horse (just joking, PETA). We must get into the mindset of our students and get our heads out of stale lessons long enough to look up and see that our captive audiences are on the whole bored and unenthusiastic. We are missing goal one of the "old evangelization" completely. "To bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others."

The new evangelization begins where *Go and Make Disciples* left off. Our efforts need to be more concerted, more technological, more global, and more persistent. We are not winning the battle to evangelize others for Christ, to spread the Good News of salvation in our isolationist and secular society. It seems like the more things change, the more they stay the same. Christ came to convert the Jews to the new covenant. Paul travelled the old world to convert the Gentiles to Christ. Was it easier when the world was smaller, societies were fewer, means of communication was simpler? Maybe. But there is strong evidence that the new evangelization can lead us to a place where we can proclaim the Good News of salvation faster, bolder, and better to more people than ever before. And that truly is good news if we can adapt and adopt the new methods of teaching and learning.

CREATING A NEW PARADIGM

Prior to the 1960s, the United States was considered a country based on Christian-Judaic values. No one questioned whether or not *In God We Trust* should be on our money; no one argued whether or not the Ten Commandments shouldn't be listed inside of a state courthouse; prayer in schools was not an issue of discrimination. All of this has changed. American society has become blatantly anti-Christian and specifically, anti-Catholic. The Marxist mantra, *religion is the opiate of the masses*, has become a theme permeating today's newspapers, movies, television, and music.

We need the new evangelization because the world has become a much darker place... but it is not without great hope. We need to bring our lights out from under our bushel baskets and let them shine, despite ridicule or humiliation. We are in the world, but we are not of the world. Now more than ever, we need to "Go and make disciples of all nations..."

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