

Becoming an Evangelizer: Paul's Story and Yours

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On their USCCB website, the Bishops of the United States ring a clarion call for the new evangelization: "The New Evangelization calls each of us to deepen our faith, believe in the gospel message and go forth to proclaim the gospel." This call is to all Catholics. In this article, I would like to reflect with you on how we become evangelizers and, as catechists, on how we help others become evangelizers, too.

The process of becoming an evangelizer involves call, conversion, conviction, witness, and service. As we explore each step of this process, we will turn to Paul, one of the world's greatest evangelizers, as our model. In addition, as an example, I will reflect on my own life in order to demonstrate how a catechist recognizes and names Christ's presence in his or her own personal experience. The goal is to encourage you to share your stories so that you model for others the personal witness that is a necessary component of effective evangelization.

CALL

Paul experienced a very dramatic call while traveling to Damascus. He was not expecting a call; to his way of thinking, he had already been called and had already been converted. As a strict Pharisee, he was so certain of his deep religious convictions that they were the basis for Paul's persecuting those who were following "the Way," those who were disciples of Jesus Christ.

We read three accounts of Paul's call story (Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-16; 26:9-18). While the accounts differ in details, they all tell the same core story: Paul is surrounded by a bright light and hears a voice ask, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul asks, "Who are you, Lord?" The voice responds, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:3-5).

These words deserved deep contemplation on Paul's part, and on ours as well. Jesus did not ask Paul, "Why do you persecute my followers?" Rather, Jesus asked, "Why do you persecute me?" Jesus identifies totally with his disciples. As we will soon see, this identification of Christ with his followers will come to have a profound effect on Paul's understanding of the church

as the body of Christ and on the social justice ramifications of such a belief for those who receive the body of Christ in Eucharist.

After this profound experience, Paul is blind for a while. He is forced to realize that he needs others: the gifts of others are absolutely necessary for Paul to even function. Soon, God sends Ananias, who heals Paul, restoring his sight. It is not just Paul's physical sight that has been restored, but his spiritual insight as well. Paul, now with a very different understanding of who God would have him become and what God would have him do, is filled with the Holy Spirit.

CONVERSION

Paul's experience of call, as well as his subsequent activities and experiences, resulted in a deep, on-going conversion on his part (see Phil 3:4b-12). Before the call, he was sure he was right. He was a faithful Jew, a strict observer of the law. After the call, he no longer persecuted others in God's name, and he was open to new understandings, not just to calling others to new understandings.

As a person who was raised Catholic before Vatican Council II, I can identify with this attitude of certainty that precedes a call to on-going conversion. Like all Catholic children who memorized the Baltimore Catechism, I was taught that there was no salvation outside the Catholic Church. Question 166 of the Catechism asked, "Are all obliged to belong to the Catholic Church in order to be saved?" The answer was: "All are obliged to belong to the Catholic Church in order to be saved."

I was in college during Vatican Council II. Our theology teacher had a guest speaker talk to our class about the changes that were taking place in the church on the subject of ecumenism. The guest speaker said that our posture in ecumenical discussions cannot be, "We are right, and you are wrong. When you see things our way we can have visible unity." I remember raising my hand and asking, "How can our posture be anything else, since we are right and they are wrong?" I, along with our pilgrim church, needed to get over my certainty and be open to an ongoing process of conversion before Christ's will for his Church — that we all be visibly one — could begin to be fulfilled.

Paul expresses his awareness that his conversion will be ongoing in his letter to the Philippians: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection for the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil 3:10-12). Paul expects not only to nourish the faith of others, but to be nourished by their faith as well: “For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you — or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Rom 1:11-12).

CONVICTION

The New Evangelization calls each of us to believe and proclaim the good news of the gospel. What is that core good news? Paul became convinced of the following truths:

- * Jesus Christ is alive and present. Paul experienced Jesus’ presence himself. He knew for a certainty that Jesus had risen from the dead, was still alive, and was with his people.
- * The effect of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection is that Christ has conquered sin and death. Christ offers salvation to both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 3:21-26).
- * This salvation is a gift, not something anyone has or could earn. It is received not by obedience to the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 3: 21-25).
- * These truths result in practical consequences in terms of behavior. We must love one another: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom 13:8).
- * Paul knew that he was called to be a witness to these truths to the Gentiles (Gal 2:7-9).

Paul’s letters are filled with advice about how to live in fidelity to these core truths. That the truths form a single unity, which we call the *gospel*, is seen when Paul teaches the Corinthians about the reality and significance of Eucharist. Paul’s account of Eucharist (56 AD) predates all other accounts that we have. Mark’s Gospel, the earliest of the gospels, was written nearly ten years later (65 AD).

Paul established the church in Corinth on his second missionary journey (51 AD). Now, some five years later, he is writing the Corinthians, reminding them of his past teachings, answering some questions that they have asked, and correcting them for some of their behaviors, behaviors that were unloving and therefore not giving faithful witness to the gospel.

The Corinthians’ behavior at Eucharist was one area that deserved correction. Why? Because when the Corinthians were gathering in each other’s homes to celebrate Eucharist as part of a shared meal, the needs of some poor people in their midst were being ignored. Paul says: “When you come together, it is

not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing” (1 Cor 11:20-22a)?

Paul then reminds the Corinthians of what he had received from the Lord, that Jesus, on the night before he died, took a loaf of bread and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:24b-25).

Paul then goes on to teach the Corinthians the consequences of receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ in regard to their behavior. Paul says, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves” (1 Cor 11:27-29).

As a Catholic who believes that Christ is truly present in Eucharist, what I heard in this passage was an affirmation of what I already believed. I thought that Paul was telling the Corinthians that if they receive Eucharist without recognizing that they are receiving the body and blood of Christ, they eat and drink judgment on themselves. Certainly Paul shares a belief in Christ’s real presence in Eucharist. Earlier in his letter to the Corinthians Paul has said: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ” (1 Cor 10:16)?

However, I now think that Paul is not repeating that teaching here. Rather, Paul is accusing the Corinthians of failing to recognize the body of Christ in the body that is the church. Paul is telling the Corinthians that when they ignore the poor in their midst, thus failing to recognize the body of Christ, they eat and drink to their own condemnation. Paul was well aware that the way in which a person is treating a follower of Christ is the way that person is treating Christ himself. Paul remembers that the question the risen Christ had asked him had been “Why are you persecuting me?” Having persecuted Christians and participated in Stephen’s death (Acts 7:58-8:3), Paul knew exactly what it was to fail to discern the body and so be responsible for the body and blood of Christ.

WITNESS

Evangelizers of the Good News of Jesus Christ need to be able to give witness to their personal experiences of the presence of the risen Lord in their lives. As we have seen, Paul does this constantly. He tells those he is evangelizing the details of his own call, conversion, and conviction. As Catholic evangelizers, we are called to do the same. As catechists we are called to teach



others how to become witnesses, too. Why is the ability to give witness an essential component of evangelization? Pope Paul VI explained the answer to this question in his document *Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi)*: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (par. 41).

As part of my own on-going process of conversion, I asked myself what had happened that had enabled me to understand Paul, to realize that by using the phrase “without discerning the body” Paul was speaking of the body of Christ that is the church. Perhaps part of the answer is that I had, for such a long period of time, failed to recognize the body of Christ in my fellow Christians. That is what Paul was accusing the Corinthians of doing, although for a different reason.

In addition, I think this added insight rests on an experience I had about 20 years ago when my father was dying. My parents had moved to Lexington, Kentucky, where I live with my family, so that I could take care of them in their late years. My father had suffered a series of strokes, with the last stroke resulting in him being unable to speak, swallow, or communicate in any way. My mother was also an invalid. So, it fell to me to be with my father in the hospital.

The doctors asked me to sign a permission form to allow them to provide my father with a surgically inserted feeding tube. I didn’t know what was best. I definitely wanted to prolong life, but I didn’t want to artificially prolong the dying process. I also did not know if we could take care of my father at home with his feeding tube. I didn’t want my parents to have to live apart.

Not knowing what to do, and feeling very alone, I signed the permission.

Immediately afterward I got on the hospital elevator and faced front. A woman’s voice behind me said, “I don’t think you recognized me.” I turned to look at her and said, “I’m sorry, I don’t recognize you.” She replied, “Well, it’s no wonder, because when you give a talk we all know who you are, but you don’t know who we are. I attended several talks you gave for the RCIA on Scripture. I love your work.”

Not wanting to engage in conversation, but not wanting to be rude, I said, “Thank you. What is your work?” She said, “I work for Option Home Care. Have you heard of us?” I said that I had not. She replied, “Well, this is just a for-instance, but say a family member has had a stroke, and say he can’t swallow, and say he has a feeding tube, and say you want to take care of him at home. We teach people to do that.”

I was flabbergasted. I explained to the woman that this was exactly the situation we were facing. I had just signed the permission for the feeding tube. She said, “Now, I don’t want you to worry about this. If your father comes home I will come to his home and teach everyone how to take care of him.” My father did come home, and she did do just that.

However, four weeks later my father was back in the hospital with a high fever. I noticed that his lips and tongue were getting crusty and mentioned that to the nurse. She must have been having a bad day because her response had to do with how demanding families are and how understaffed hospitals are. I again left the room and got on the elevator. However, the



Photo by Matus Laslofi

elevator shook, and I feared I was stuck between floors. When the doors opened I realized that the elevator had not moved.

No longer trusting the elevator, I exited and started to walk down the steps when a woman's voice behind me said, "I don't think you recognized me." I did not recognize the woman, so I said, "I'm sorry. I don't recognize you. She said, "I took a Scripture course from you about 15 years ago. I love Scripture." Remembering what had happened four weeks earlier, I asked, "What do you do?" She replied, "I supervise the nursing care of geriatric stroke patients." I immediately told her my father's situation and she assured me that she would take care of it immediately. She did. My father did not come home again. He died soon after this event. However, that nurse was attentively and lovingly taking care of him the whole time.

On reflecting on these experiences soon after they occurred, I felt overwhelmed with gratitude for God's providence. I had felt alone, had been a total mess, and God had sent his follower's not only to take care of my father, but to comfort me and my family during our time of grief. I did not initially connect these events to any particular Scripture passages. However, the next time I was teaching the post-resurrection appearance stories, I began to wonder if perhaps I was understanding them then for the first time.

What are the authors teaching through those stories in which the people who know and love Jesus — Mary Magdalene, the apostles, the disciples on the road to Emmaus — fail to recognize him? I think the authors are teaching their original readers, and us, what Paul was teaching the Corinthians. The risen Christ is in our midst in and through his body, the church,

but we often fail to discern the body. This has been the case ever since the resurrection. Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35), we Catholics recognize the risen Christ's presence in Eucharist, but do we recognize Christ's presence when two or three are gathered in his name? Do we recognize Christ's presence in the stranger who is a fellow traveler on the road, particularly in immigrants? Do we recognize Christ in Scripture? Do we recognize the presence of the risen Christ in the poor, the marginalized, in those whom we have been taught are sinners? Since this experience 20 years ago, life for me has been an on-going process of becoming aware of Christ's presence all around me. It is now the risen Christ who lovingly says to me, "I don't think you recognized me."

SERVICE

With his keen understanding that the risen Christ completely identifies with his followers, that Christ is present in Eucharist, and that those who receive the body of Christ become the body of Christ, Paul teaches new Christians their responsibilities toward others as members of that one body of Christ. We all have gifts, and those gifts are meant to be used in service to the community (1 Cor 12:12-27). One of those gifts is the gift of teaching. As catechists, may we be open to new understandings, may we be evangelizers, and may we teach others to be evangelizers too, giving witness to the presence of the risen Christ in all of our lives. ■

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