



CATECHETICAL UPDATE

A publication of the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership

THE NEW EVANGELIZATION FOR THE TRANSMISSION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Tom Rinkoski



It seems clear enough that there is a call for a *new* evangelization. We have papal statements as well as a stream of bishops' letters on the subject. With more ink spilt, there is less agreement about the defining adjective, "new." Some would suggest that because this is a new time, marked by new circumstances,

they require us to respond in a new way. There is much to be said for that. As a teacher, I am witnessing a new generation of students who actually think differently than my own, and previous models do not work. It is also intriguing to examine those who hesitate about the implementation of a "new" evangelization. I think some of it has to do with future fears and painful memories. I am one of the many catechists from the 1970s and 1980s who implemented a "new" approach to catechesis, which today remains the bad child contemporary catechists like to blame and shame. History can be a harsh judge, and despite the maxim that the church moves slow, it has been swift in its judgment about the "love movement" of that period of catechesis. Some of us remain hesitant to welcome a "new" catechesis because being innovators in the Roman Catholic Church is a harsh risk.

Nonetheless, I concur a need for a "new" evangelization evidences itself in the front lines of catechesis in parishes across our country. I do believe the times have significantly changed and not all to the detriment of the dynamic of history or faith. In fact, I think it is part of our writing a new chapter in our continuing story.¹ My challenge for a "new" evangelization is a call for a deeper listening. I believe the essence of the new evangelization does not lie in any novel insights or technologically savvy approaches on how to proclaim the gospel, but rather in how we hear the gospel in the story of one another. As I journey through my catechetical ministry, I often wonder if we would be more "successful" in ministering to the people of God, if we listened to them with our whole hearts, minds,

and souls. As I continue my work with people in poverty, I am becoming convinced that if, instead of marching into their neighborhoods with bags of aid, we first sat in their encampments and listened to their stories, we would be much further ahead in breaking the cycle of poverty than we are. Attentive listening requires strong action both on the part of the listener and the listened. As Dr. Karl Menninger stated, "Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand."

Pope John Paul II was quoted in a recent article in the National Catholic Reporter by Christie Billips as saying, "For the disciple of Christ, the duty to evangelize is an obligation of love. 'The love of Christ impels us' (2 Cor. 5:14)."² I propose that listening is an act of love. This is the title of a book by Dave Isay who is one of the co-founders of the StoryCorps Project, which is an enormously successful venture of listening to people's stories all across the United States.³ My contention is that by listening better — deeper — to the "joys and hopes, griefs and anguish of the people of our time"⁴ we can better build Christian community, reinforce the idea of holiness in everyday life and living, and build a stronger Christian identity. If we can do that, the people may not feel such a vast canyon between them and religion; they may not feel the need to make distinctions between spirituality and religion. They may feel the connection more solidly between God and their lived reality.

However, we need to significantly alter the way we listen. I suggest that we examine the impediments that hinder effective listening between the People of God and we who represent the institutional church. There are four steps we need to take. First, we must become more aware of the lens through which we see and judge each other. In the past, we have named these paradigms, lenses, or frameworks. Instead, I would like to use

1 "We continue in our day to write the next chapter of that story by serving people in these various ways — we call them ministries — not because they are Catholic, but because we are Catholic and this is what Christ wants." Excerpt from America Magazine (March 5, 2012), written by Most Rev. Blasé Cupich, Bishop of Spokane, Washington. The article is titled "Staying Civil."

2 "New Evangelization and True Evangelization" by Christie Billips. National Catholic Reporter, March 2-15, 2012. She is citing a quote from Ecclesia in America.

3 Isay, Dave; *Listening is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life* from the StoryCorps Project; 2007; Penguin Press; New York. Also see <http://storycorps.org>.

4 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Preface #1



Photo by Kirainet

the term, “mental models,” coined by Ruby Payne.⁵ Mental models are rules that operate underneath consciousness, which affect not only our perspectives, but the judgments we make about each other.

Second, we need to become more aware of how our language differences block effective communication. Often groups on each side hurry to snap judgments about the intentions of the other based on reactions to language differences; I am not talking about the variety of tongues we use across the world like Spanish, English, and Tagalong, but the differences in register within in each of those languages.

Third, I think we need to re-evaluate and alter our listening skills. Thankfully, we have access to huge amounts of research in this area that we can use to critically examine the ways in which we pretend to listen, but really don't.

Finally, it is worth spending time checking out theories of change and motivation which drive people to move from one position to another, whether it has to do with economic status, family life decisions, or spiritual advancement. This brief article cannot fully justify each of these four steps, but it is important to critically examine ourselves so that we can move

forward in a “new” evangelization that is both meaningful and effective.

Because it is difficult to examine this proposition with an all-encompassing perspective, I am going to apply these four points to the listening gap between the domestic church and the institutional church. Not only do I have personal experience in family life ministry and catechesis, but there are also considerable church documents in the field. Although this is limited in scope, I think most will immediately see applications in other areas.

STEP #1: MENTAL MODELS

We begin by drawing a map of our mental models of both the domestic and institutional church in order to expose ourselves to ourselves. Currently, families, as well as educators, cry out for partnership, but each insist on their own terms so as to meet their agendas. Bringing our mental models to the light of day is important because no effective change can happen until we acknowledge these frameworks, and willingly set them aside in order to facilitate moving toward the common good.

I suggest clearly imaging our mental models as a small group exercise. Because I am a teacher/trainer, I would begin by passing out color markers and a large sheet of newsprint. Draw a large circle; inside the circle, identify the many places, jobs, and tasks that take up the energies and time of members of that circle. Let's begin with the domestic church, the family.

⁵ Payne, Ruby and Philip E. DeVol and Terie Dreussi Smith. *Bridges Out of Poverty, Strategies for Professionals and Communities*. See also <http://www.bridgesoutofpoverty.com>

(See addendum 1.) This is very general and may well vary according to economic demographic, ethnic background, and education. But it provides a generalization useful for our purposes. Each of the categories placed within the circle are necessarily broad; each has been expanded and studied in social science research. Generally speaking, what this does is paint a word picture of where the contemporary family spends most of its energies and time. Addendum 2, illustrates the same mental model for the institutional church. In beginning to brainstorm the categories, I utilized Cardinal Avery Dulles *Models of the Church* as a starting place, substituting “evangelization” for Dulles’ term “herald,” and “administration” for “institution.” I tried to focus on the idea of parish church when performing this analysis. Again, any one of the categories in this model can be broken down into many sub-parts, but basically the model speaks of the complexity of the contemporary parish’s goals, puzzles, and hopes.

My hope in making these maps was to assist people in clearly identifying the differences in the two worlds of family and parish. Lots of dialogue needs to happen about what we draw. Between these worlds huge jumps are required that folks traverse on a daily basis. Because these mental maps reflect models we hold dearly in our subconscious, we make judgments about the effectiveness and meaning of others who reside in a different mental model, based on our own. Often we lapse into judgments about the family as being non-cooperative or non-affiliated because they do not meet the hidden rules of our mental model. All mental models have hidden rules that govern their dynamics. In order for us to move forward, we need to recognize our mental models and place them aside. No genuine change can happen without that action.

STEP #2: REGISTERS OF LANGUAGE

Every culture develops a language to facilitate its operation; this not unusual or surprising. Even though our doctor may

speak English or Spanish (like we do), we usually end up interpreting his or her analysis of our condition. In this step, I will build on the work of many socio-linguist scientists whose research names *registers* within language as key differences.⁶ They state that institutions generally speak in the “frozen” or “formal” register. Frozen register is what the Catholic Church uses in its sacramental rites. It is language that is set and usually remains the same. Formal register is the language of business and “professional” exchange. The institutional church, primarily operates in both “frozen” and “formal” registers. Families, however, primarily move in what is called “casual” register; this is also the language of friendship. This happens when we speak without complete sentences, often with gestures. Think of any typical morning in most households as kids are going to school and adults are off to work. The intimate register is even “casual” with depth and intensity, usually limited between lovers or extremely close partners.

Too often we lapse into judgments about each other because of register differences in language. As a catechist, I spend a large amount of time teaching my charges the vocabulary and syntax of the Catholic Church, which they believe they will minimally use in the world in which they live. Calls to holiness are usually situated in a formal register that employs a theological framework which is basically inaccessible to folks who live in casual register. The most successful youth ministers have been those who are bi-lingual in several registers. We in the institutional church may rail against the “new age” religions, but they are successful because they speak in a language that people can hear.

We have a long and storied history in the Catholic Church of saints and sinners speaking in casual register. That is why their

⁶ For instance, see Montano-Harmon, M. R. “Developing English for Academic Purposes.” California State University, Fullerton. Or Joos, M., *The Five Clocks*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World



Subscribe now to *Catechetical Leader*

As an NCCL member you receive *Catechetical Leader* as a part of your membership.

Rates:

One year: \$24.00 Two years: \$42.00 Three years: \$54.00
(Foreign addresses) One year: \$48 Two years: \$86 Three years: \$114

Please indicate the number of years you wish to subscribe.

One year Two years Three years

Amount Enclosed or Charged \$ _____

Please send the subscription to:

Name _____

Parish _____

Street Address _____ PO Box _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Credit card:

Fax information to NCCL at (202) 884-9756

Visa MasterCard American Express

Card no. _____

Signature _____

Check:

Mail to: National Conference for Catechetical Leadership
3031 Fourth Street NE, Suite B, Washington, DC 20017

stories remain so loved and cherished. There are places where we can meet in the middle, and we need to listen to find where those are. We discover them by listening attentively.

STEP #3: EXAMINING OUR LISTENING SKILLS

Living in an era of amazing communication devices does not seem to have revolutionized our ability to listen. Thanks both to the gifts of the social sciences and the contemplative tradition, we have access to strategies and techniques that have the potential to improve our listening abilities. Because the world has changed, we have to learn to listen differently. As a family life minister and marriage educator, I have been blessed to study interpersonal listening skills. There are an abundance of techniques from which more of us could learn, such as the Speaker-Listener technique laid out by PREP⁷, or *Prayerful Listening*⁸ as JustFaith calls us to do. Within the contemplative tradition, masters such as Thomas Keating labor hard at opening us up to listen well to the voice of God. I am fascinated in how the StoryCorps project has facilitated people's willingness to share intimate stories of their wishes, dreams, and hopes. We have much to learn, and there is a wealth of information to guide us.

For this to be a “new” evangelization, we need to re-learn the basics and change our approach so there can be significant change for all of us. Couples and families are learning and practicing these techniques in the midst of marriage and parenting. We, on the institutional side, need to make them necessary elements of our training and practice.

STEP #4: STUDYING WHY PEOPLE CHANGE AND MOTIVATIONS FOR CHANGE

There are some in the Catholic Church who believe its theory of change has not changed over the course of its story. That may be true, but I am not sure it matters because people's motivation for change and perception of change has shifted. Msgr. Jack Egan tried hard to teach me that Saul Alinsky and other community organizers did not try to change people, but rather listened carefully to their desire and reasons to change, and walked with them from that point. He framed that as a respect for basic human dignity. I do believe it is true that people seek God, and that they fully realize that to “come closer” to God, they need to change. But we need to listen more carefully to their perception of what this means *in their context*, and facilitate the change in a way that is meaningful for them, not us. We will know we are successful when we hear them argue for the change, not us. I point your attention to the success and stories of the base Christian communities in Latin and South America as testaments.

7 *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving Lasting Love*; Howard Markman, Scott Stanley and Susan L. Blumberg; Jossey-Bass Inc; 2010. See also prepinc.com

8 JustFaith. I came in contact with this method in JustFaith's Engaging Spirituality component. For more information contact Just Faith at <http://www.justfaith.org>.

There are many significant theories of change that should be studied. Many of them arise from the business world. We should not dismiss their ideas just because they deal with the world of capitalism and commerce. In fact, the parallels between their language and ours are eerie! “For change to occur, we must suspend our mental models” (Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*). “Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt. 10:39).

It is not necessary to adopt one theory of change. It is important for us to be willing to be attentive to the fact that just being Catholic does not mean we all share a common motivation or willingness to change. No increase in the amount of preaching or teaching will critically affect that. I do believe, however, a greater leaning into listening may.

CONCLUSION

This listening project is not meant to gather new data, but to build meaningful and significant relationships. No change can happen without that. I am not suggesting we abandon all traditional catechetical practices and just listen to each other; although I do believe this listening strategy needs to take a privileged place in the course of the new evangelization, it cannot be a sole approach. In this, I propose we return to core elements within our tradition. Our world is filled with thousands of people like the blind beggar at the gates screaming (at least inside), “Jesus have mercy on me!”⁹ It is our first task to walk over to them and listen to what it is they want. I know well how many things stand in the way of our taking time to listen. Church work is not what it was when I started just shy of 40 years ago. I spend an ocean of my appointed hours doing paperwork, background checks, as well as the mundane work of cleaning blackboards and sweeping floors. Caught in the tyranny of this and that, I understand that no significant learning can happen without a relationship. In order to have a relationship, you need, as the Little Prince said so well, to be willing to “waste” time on the people you love.¹⁰

In another passage on curing a blind man, this time in the Gospel of John (Chapter 9), it ends with a warning about the state of our listening skills. Jesus unabashedly renders a judgment about false “seeing” that I think may equally apply to false listening. “You say you listened? If you did, you would not be guilty, but since you proclaim it, your guilt remains” (line 41, adapted).

To summarize, a prime movement of the “new” evangelization should be listening. I suggest it be a “new” listening — not burdened by our mental models — done with new skills and open to a “new” outcome. ■

Tom Rinkoski is the Director of Religious Education and Marriage Ministries at St. Augustine Church in Gainesville, Florida. Contact him at tomrinkoski@yahoo.com.

9 Mark 10:48

10 *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

MENTAL MODEL OF THE DOMESTIC CHURCH/THE FAMILY



MENTAL MODEL OF THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH/THE PARISH

