

SETTING HEARTS ON FIRE

[October 7, 2013](#) [1] | [Thomas P. Sweetser](#) [2]

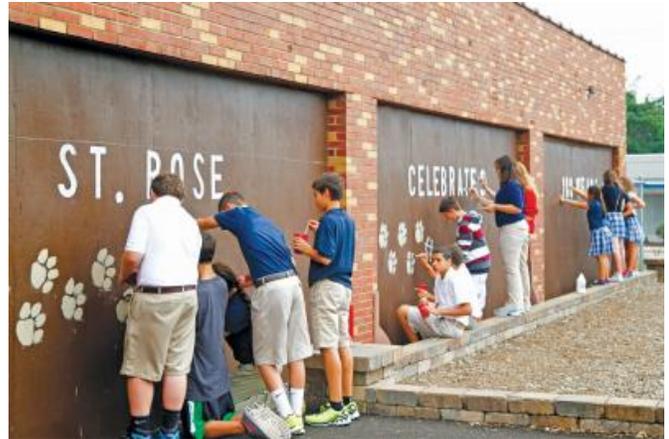
A pilot project for evangelization

Evangelization needs to be practical, if it is to succeed in inviting people to embrace Christ and live the Gospel more wholeheartedly. A working definition might be: Evangelization is a radical call to do things differently, in very concrete and practical ways, in order to set people's hearts on fire. In order to best reach out to people, it can be helpful to view individuals as belonging to one of four groups of Catholics, each in need of a different approach. Effective outreach depends on adapting the style of evangelization to fit the needs of each group.

The first group are those who are active, interested and attending. They come to church regularly and are involved. But they may have gotten stuck in a ministry (lector, usher, choir) or are leading an organization (Women's Club, St. Vincent de Paul, Funeral Luncheons) and have remained there for years. Practical evangelization means giving them a new purpose, a new energy, a new way of being engaged, a radical call to expand their horizons. Lectors, choir members, greeters might be asked to train new people to take their place as a way of freeing them for a new task or ministry. These veteran ministers might then be trained as listeners for those not coming to church in order to hear their story, or inviters for those attending Mass but not involved elsewhere in the parish, or motivators for those like themselves who are engaged but have been stuck in one ministry for a long time or who are set in one way of doing things.

The second group includes those who attend Mass more or less regularly but are not active in any parish ministry or activity. They need to be named by those who are involved as having a gift or an ability that could be used "for others." One practical way to encourage their involvement is to ask those who are engaged whether they know of others who would make good ministers, committee members or project workers. These "named individuals" are then personally invited to an information night. Those attending are divided into areas of interest, including liturgy, community-building, formation, service/pastoral care and administration. They learn about available openings for involvement and are asked to take the risk of joining a ministry or performing a task. It is up to the inviters to help them become engaged in some parish function besides attending Mass.

The third group includes registered parishioners who come to church only on rare occasions, like Christmas, Easter, funerals or weddings. This third group includes a large number of young adults in their 20s and 30s. Evangelizing this group might begin with a listing of names obtained from the parish membership files. Once identified, they are contacted by trained listeners. Begin with 10 listeners who each have five people to contact. Once contacted, they arrange a time to listen to the story of why the person pulled back from going to church. The one contacted is usually surprised that there is no request for financial contributions, no effort to pull them back to church, no proselytizing of any sort; just a time to share their life story if they so wish. If there is a desire to learn more about the Catholic Church or the parish, this information is offered, but only after a request is made. The listener is trained not to push the person toward regular church attendance but only to hear what the individual is willing to share and to answer any questions.



Youngstown Diocese celebrates St. Rose's centennial with a group project

The fourth group is made up of baptized Catholics who are not registered in any parish. Because there is no way of discovering these people's names from parish rosters, the emphasis must be on reaching out to them through other means, including advertisements, social media and Web sites. The intent is to show them that they are valued and loved by God and are always welcome to join the parish community to the extent they might feel comfortable, whether for liturgy, a prayer experience, reconciliation or counseling, a parish social, a group for spiritual growth involving bible study, a book club or discussion group, or a service project to help people in need.

The Youngstown Project

As a means for putting evangelization into practice, nine parishes and the chancery offices of the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio, are now involved in a six-month pilot process that runs from April through November 2013. Each parish, as well as the departments of the chancery, was asked to choose one target group from the four listed above and to try out something different that might "set people's hearts on fire." Starting with a two-week period in April, I joined the Rev. Nick Shori, head of the Office of Evangelization in the diocese, in visiting each of the 10 groups to help them plan creative ways for spreading the good news and getting people's attention.

As they made their plans, one common theme emerged in six of the nine parishes. Rather than begin by trying to draw people back to the Eucharist, they decided on an activity that included some aspect of service to others. This approach, they felt, had more chance of enticing inactive and unengaged parishioners to take part in the project. Each parish, in its own way, planned a one-time event that they hoped would be nonthreatening, of short duration, include people of all ages, both families and singles, and would offer time for fellowship, reflection, sharing and refreshments.

One example is St. Anthony/All Saints Parish in Canton, Ohio, that planned a Service-Mass-Social Day on the first Saturday of September. The process began with a personal, one-on-one contact with young adults, inviting them to participate in an afternoon service project, like helping the elderly, cleaning up litter or feeding people at a soup kitchen. Afterward, everyone gathered for an outdoor Mass in a city park followed by a social, complete with food and music.

A few parishes decided to target students in Catholic schools and religious education programs, especially those who have just received first Communion or Confirmation. Usually there is a drop in attendance the year following these high-interest, high-participation events. To offset this trend, Blessed Sacrament Parish in Warren, Ohio, will be holding a Reunion Service Day in October targeting those who received first sacraments in April and May. Entire families, parents and children together, will assemble at the parish hall for a send-off that includes prayer, music and directions. Groups of two or three families will head out into the neighborhood on a three-hour service project, returning to the parish for refreshments and a chance to reflect on their experience. The only requirement is that they must share their stories with those who went on a different service project than their own.

Christ Our Savior Parish in Struthers, Ohio, and Holy Spirit in Uniontown, Ohio, are planning a similar approach, while St. Patrick's, located in central Youngstown, is expanding the target group to include parents who have had a child baptized within the last six months and couples who have gone through marriage preparation. Often, after the wedding takes place, they are rarely seen again at their church. To counteract this tendency, the parish is sponsoring a Service to the City experience for a few hours on a Saturday, pairing people up with local residents to help beautify the central city. This is followed by time for everyone to give witness to what they experienced and to share refreshments, music and conversation.

Using the draw of a service project, St. Joseph's in Mantua, Ohio, decided to target young adults between the ages of 20 and 45. To reach this somewhat elusive group, they set up a booth at their parish festival just for this age range. Visitors to the booth were given information about a Saturday event during which small groups will fan out to various service areas. When the young adults inquired at the festival booth, they were asked what projects would interest them and the names of other people their age to contact—in other words, what service projects might fire up these young adults and make it a rewarding experience?

Answering Questions

A few other parishes decided to use the "curious Catholics" approach developed by Dr. Kate DeVries and the Rev. John Cusick at

the Young Adult Ministry Office of the Chicago Archdiocese. St. Edward's Parish in Youngstown, for example, hosted an evening gathering for all comers but targeted especially the inactive and unaffiliated Catholics. The process was to share questions people might have about the church or Catholic faith. Each person had the opportunity to write down a question or concern on an index card and give it to those running the one-hour session. A man and a woman led the event, both well-trained, resourceful, entertaining individuals. What followed was a lively discussion about issues related to the church, ranging from the new pope to church morality, from new Mass responses to the saints in the church windows.

Expanding on this approach, St. Joseph's in Austintown, Ohio, decided to sponsor a four-hour open house on Saturday. The parish is blessed with a large parking lot and ample grounds, so they decided to host a festival-type gathering filled with booths and fenced-in enclaves that offered a variety of information and resources. Called Discovering Francis and Freedom, one spot featured pictures and videos of the new pope; another had a priest available for confession; a third had counselors for personal issues and problems. One booth was a Q-and-A station, while other volunteers provided tours of the church. There were activities for young children and a band that provided live music. An outdoor Café Bistro with a French atmosphere supplied lunch. The planners hoped that those attending experienced a sense of freedom and new insight as they discovered various aspects of the Catholic faith.

Renewal of Spirit and Joy

One ambitious parish, Our Lady of the Lakes in North Jackson, Ohio, planned a full week of events, including a Saturday evening liturgy, cookout and bonfire to kick off the week, the dedication on Tuesday of a new meditation walk through the woods behind the church, an Answer Night on Wednesday based on questions collected the previous weekend at Masses, a Blessing of the Animals and wiener roast on Saturday after the Feast of St. Francis, and a coffee house for informal conversation at various times throughout the week. The celebrations culminated with a combined liturgy from the two Sunday morning Masses, followed by an appreciation brunch and a special talent show put on by the children.

The chancery, in an effort to improve and renew the way it is perceived and used in the diocese, planned a two-pronged strategy. Part One was a brief survey going out to all the pastors and a sampling of staff and leaders in each parish, asking about attitudes toward the various departments of the chancery and how the relationship between the chancery and parishes might be improved. Part Two, based on the survey results, was a dialogue session with a sampling of pastors, parish representatives and chancery staff to discuss the findings and plan ways in which the departments of the chancery might be more effective in offering resources to the parishes and Catholics of the diocese as a whole.

On a Saturday in November, representatives from the nine parishes and the chancery will gather to share the outcome of their efforts, celebrate what was accomplished, learn from one another's successes and shortfalls, plan new ways to continue their efforts at evangelization, and most important, mentor another set of parishes to implement the same process during the coming year. In this way, the effort to do things differently in concrete and practical ways to set people's hearts on fire for Christ and the people of God will make its way around the entire Diocese of Youngstown and, it is hoped, beyond.

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