

The Two-Millennium-Old New Evangelization

Joanie McKeown



What's "new" about the "new evangelization?" A lot! Yet, in some respects, there's nothing new at all.

Evangelization is the sharing of the gospel message with those who have never heard it. The new evangelization adds another dimension.

It is a re-sharing of the gospel message in ways that help those who have already heard and accepted it deepen their relationship with God through the Catholic Church so that their faith truly becomes an integral part of who they are, how they live, and the decisions they make.

While the phrase "new evangelization" is relatively new, the concept is not. Pope Benedict XVI, on a flight last spring from Rome to Mexico, linked the new evangelization directly to the Second Vatican Council which noted that "the split between the faith which many Christians profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age" (GS, #43). The effects of that split were evident in the 1970s and 1980s as many "good Catholics" who had been taught the tenets of the faith in the pre-Vatican II years – including many hours memorizing the Baltimore Catechism – dropped out from active participation in the church.

The roots of the new evangelization can be traced back even further than Vatican II: all the way back to the beginning of the church. As Paul and the other disciples were preaching the good news to gentiles who had no understanding of Yahweh or Jesus Christ, they were also preaching to the believers, helping them to understand the new faith that they professed and encouraging them to live by that faith. Evangelization and the new evangelization were active in the early church, appearing side-by-side.

In some ways this should be encouraging to parish and diocesan catechetical leaders; we are not being called to do something in this millennium that has never been done before. In other ways, it can be discouraging. If, in 2000 years, the church hasn't found the magic bullet for helping all Catholics to internalize and live their faith, how can we be expected to do it now? Relying on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we look to church documents and effective methods as our guide.

Familiarity with the General Directory for Catechesis and the National Directory for Catechesis gives a solid foundation for our planning. The NDC (52) states:

All dioceses and parishes, in the efforts and resources they focus on the new evangelization, should pursue the following fundamental objectives:

1. To foster in the heart of every believer an experience of personal conversion to Jesus Christ that leads to a personal renewal and greater participation in the Christian life in the church, the Mystical Body of Christ...

This theme of personal conversion being tied to the heart, not the head, is repeated throughout church documents. This doesn't mean that head-knowledge of Jesus Christ, Scripture, and the teachings of the church are not important. It means that head-knowledge, alone, is not enough. (The difficulty that people have in applying the rules of grammar or the rules of math proves the point. One can "know" the rules in the abstract, but unless one can apply the rules to everyday life, the knowledge remains limited, impersonal, and ineffective.)

The key, then, to effective catechesis is to focus on the heart, on helping people to experience their faith, even while teaching the tenets of the faith. While there is no magic bullet, there are some tried and true processes that PCLs can incorporate into parish catechesis to do this.

1. MAKE SCRIPTURE COME ALIVE AND BE RELEVANT TO PEOPLE'S LIVES

Don't just read from Scripture; tell the story with a dramatic reading, or with individuals acting the parts of the people in the story. Flesh out some of details of what the scene looked like and what the various people in the story were most likely thinking and feeling. Follow up with questions such as:

- ❖ Do you think the people in the story would have been thinking or feeling what we just portrayed?
- ❖ Could they have had different reactions than what we portrayed? What might those have been?
- ❖ What might you have been thinking and feeling if you had witnessed what happened?

- ❖ Can you think of a similar situation today? How did people react in that situation? What difference did it make that Jesus was present in the Scripture story, but not physically present in the modern story?

Have the people work in small groups to write a modern-day story that is similar to the passage from Scripture and has a similar outcome. You could also use Dr. Pat McCormack's "ABCs": Are the Attitudes and Behaviors of each person in the story life-giving or life-blocking? Are the Consequences positive or negative? End the session by having the people quietly bring to Jesus in prayer their reactions, reflections, and feelings from the Scripture passage and discussion.

2. IN DISCUSSING THE SACRAMENTS, DON'T JUST EXPLAIN THE FACTS; GO DEEPER INTO THE FEELINGS

Discuss some of the words of the ritual, not just from the historical perspective of why we use those words, or rational perspective of what those words mean, but from an affective perspective, as well. Ask: What is your reaction to the words, in your mind and in your heart? What are those words saying to you and to your life?

Draw them deeper into the meanings by sharing your own reflections on the words and actions. For example, when discussing the Mass, don't just say, "We stand for the opening song." Instead say,

We don't just stand to wake people up who might be daydreaming. We stand because the opening song gathers us as a community. We entered as individuals, each with our own thoughts and concerns. As we stand, we become aware of this church full of people, who each came with their own thoughts and concerns. But, we're all here for the same basic reason: we want to worship God, to celebrate the relationship we have with God. As we stand together, we realize that we aren't just individuals. We are all connected to each other in and through our relationship with God. We might have arrived

alone, but as we stand we realize we, together, are one Body, one group, who will be praying together, praising God together, participating together in the greatest celebration God has given us, the Mass. The gathering song links us all together in one big invisible chain, ready to worship God together as one.

3. USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Post a question of the week related to the Sunday Scriptures. Start a "What would you do?" column using current news items. Post a quote from the Pope's weekly messages with a pertinent question.

Post short quizzes on the season of the year, saints of the week, etc.

4. USE SHORT FAITH-EXERCISES

Use these when you want to transition to a new activity or give the group a break after a more intellectual or intense presentation or discussion.

A favorite that works well with middle-school students through adults is one that I learned from Lee Nagel nearly 20 years ago. Start by reminding them that God is everywhere, so everywhere we look, we can find God if we look with an open mind and heart. That's obvious to most people when they see the mountains as they remind us of the majesty of God. But, it can also be true of everyday objects.

If you have time to prepare for this in advance, put a variety of everyday objects on a table. Divide the group into pairs and give one object to each pair. Tell them they have one minute to think of a way to complete the sentence "God is like (their object) because..." After one minute, give each group a chance to say their sentence. It's amazing how creative they can be.

If you want to do this activity, but you didn't prepare for it in advance, simply tell them to walk around the room for two minutes, and do the same with any object they see. When doing this exercise, a fourth grader once said, "God is like that



brick wall because God is holding all of us together and God will never let go of any one of us.” Profound!

5. ADD A RELIGIOUS ELEMENT TO OTHER ACTIVITIES

This is especially pertinent in the summer months when most parishes do not have any faith formation gatherings. For example, start a Bible Bike Club. Attend daily Mass together, then bike to a neighboring park, playground, etc. where you'll take a 15-minute break with something light to eat or drink and discuss one of the readings of the day. Bike back to church where each person will write a few sentences on the impact that reading or the discussion had on them. Each week, enter their reflections into a file. At the end of the summer, give them each a keepsake book with all the readings and their reflections. A similar idea can be used with walking, swimming, exercise classes, playground fun, etc.

No matter what the topic is for an individual catechetical session, always include elements of reflection that move the content from head to heart.

For the new evangelization to effectively reach the entire parish, it has to move beyond the parish catechetical program. However, not all PCLs have a lot of input or influence beyond their programs. If you do, share resources from your diocese and others on their plans for the Year of Faith and new evangelization.

If you don't, you can still begin to influence the parish beyond your specific programs by showing the rest of the parish whatever you're doing and the impact that it has on others. Use the parish bulletin and social media not just to advertise the activities of your program, but also to highlight what took place and comments made by those participating.

Move beyond having the confirmation candidates moving tables or busing dishes, etc., as the primary way to work their service hours. Allow them to engage in helpful activities where they are visible to the larger parish. For example: Through the bulletin or social media, post a reminder of the meaning of Holy Saturday to the early followers of Jesus and the reason for the fire at the beginning of the Easter Vigil:

Jesus is dead. His body is in the tomb. God's presence among his people has ended. The world has

been thrown back into the same chaos that existed before creation. This is the feeling that is to be conveyed on Holy Saturday, before the Easter Vigil begins. This is the reason the church tells us that we must wait until after dark to begin the Easter Vigil service. The church wants the people to feel the abyss – the emptiness – felt by the first followers of Jesus. There is something primal in fire that our very beings react to... it provides light and warmth, but it also can be devastating and totally beyond our control. Fire can be chaos. Fire can turn the land into an abyss. The fire that is lit before the Easter Vigil is meant to convey that chaos, the abyss that existed before creation, the abyss that the first followers of Jesus felt they had fallen into after Jesus' death.

Having set the stage with that information, for 30 minutes to an hour before the Easter Vigil begins, have the confirmandi gather around the Easter Vigil fire and proclaim the psalms of despair. As the congregation gathers encourage them to stay around the fire, experiencing the abyss. At the start of the Vigil Liturgy, have the confirmandi, RCIA candidates and catechumens, and congregation follow the presider into church, bringing the Light of Christ with them into the darkness.

The new evangelization calls us beyond the classroom, beyond the textbooks and workbooks, to help people experience the faith of the church so the experience of faith becomes their own. It calls for creativity in showing how the tenets of Scripture and the faith are relevant to people's lives and to take the issues of the day and view them through the lens of faith. When you succeed, the new evangelization becomes a reality. ■

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