

A Word About Evangelism

The Church cannot elude Christ's explicit mandate, nor deprive men and women of the "Good News" about their being loved and saved by God. "Evangelization will always contain--as the foundation, center and at the same time the summit of its dynamism--a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ...salvation is offered to all people, as a gift of God's grace and mercy." Newness of life in Christ is the "Good News" for men and women of every age: all are called to it and destined for it. The Church is thus obliged to do everything possible to carry out her mission in the world and to reach all peoples.
Redemptoris Missio

We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize. Evangelii Nuntiandi

With those words Pope John Paul II in his encyclical the Mission of the Redeemer and Pope Paul VI in his encyclical Evangelization in the Modern World called Catholics throughout the world to renew our commitment to evangelization. Their message, plea actually, is both compelling and inspiring. But, it is also intimidating. If we are perfectly honest with ourselves, we have to admit that Catholics, in the main, do not understand evangelism. The word itself makes us apprehensive and uncomfortable. We are not sure what evangelism is, we do not know how to do it, and far too many of us are not certain that we should evangelize at all.

My hope here is to reacquaint Catholics with our own evangelistic history, and to help Catholics reacquire the zeal, the passion, and the skills needed to carry out our most essential mandate, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

Historically, Catholics constituted the most powerful and effective evangelistic force on earth, leading millions to Christ through their bold and courageous preaching and teaching of the Gospel. Missionaries dotted the globe with the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The announcement of redemption and reconciliation with God through Christ brought conversion and hope to millions. The Gospel changed the world and we, at one time, were its most intrepid of heralds.

Contemporary Catholics, however, are far more timid about proclaiming the Good News. Called to confidently share our faith in Christ, we have instead become insecure, bashful and introverted, obviously confused about what to do and clearly confounded by how to do it. Consequently, the very notion of evangelization evokes in many of us a fear and anxiety not unlike that which is experienced by a visit to the dentist, or a letter from the IRS. The truth is we Catholics have developed proclamation paralysis. We are afflicted with an evangelism phobia.

The first step in the cure and treatment of any malady is proper diagnosis. One has to recognize a problem before he or she can remedy it. In other words, where evangelism is concerned, Catholics have to define it before we can do it.

Evangelism, quite simply, is the process of bringing people into a personal and ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. Its objective and its effect is initial and continuing conversion into Christ. That is, we come to him and we grow in him.

Evangelism can be divided into two equally indispensable parts: declaration and demonstration. Declaration is a vital component of evangelism because faith, which is essential for conversion, comes from hearing the Word of God. *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But, how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And, how can they hear without someone to preach? Thus, faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:13-15,17)* Therefore, evangelization quite naturally must include teaching and preaching and sharing. But, there is more still.

The Gospel must be demonstrated, as well. Evangelism also consists of works of mercy, expressions of compassion, acts of generosity, and demonstrations of God's power. Hearts must be prepared to receive the message of the Gospel. They must be tilled and watered as one would the soil of a garden before planting precious seed. It is genuine Christlikeness that softens the human heart and readies it to receive the seed of the Word of God. Catholics are very good at preparing the soil. We are clumsy and awkward, however, at planting the seed, at proclaiming the Word. What good, though, does it do to cultivate a field and never sow anything in it? How could we ever expect a harvest?

The best model of fruitful evangelism is Jesus, himself. He declared the Good News of the Kingdom with his words, and he demonstrated that Good News with his works. He exclaimed the Kingdom in his message, and he exemplified it in his ministry. From Jesus we learn that the Gospel, to be effective, to be believed, must be both professed and personified. It must be illuminated by what we say and it must be illustrated by what we do. We, like Jesus, are to relay the faith with our words and we are to reveal it with our lives. It is not enough to merely tell people about Jesus. They must experience him. Nor, on the other hand, is it enough to extend our Lord's compassion to people, but never tell them who he is. Evangelism is the full presentation of Jesus in word and deed.

A thorough and comprehensive examination of the causes for our decline in evangelistic fervor would be of great benefit to us as Catholics, but this article is not the forum for that. However, one brief explanation for our reluctance to evangelize is worth mentioning here. We think that the most serious reason for our failure as Catholics to evangelize is the insidious effect that relativism and secularism have had upon us. A broad segment of Catholic Christian thought has passively succumbed to rather than actively sanctified these prevailing cultural paradigms. Far too many Catholics have adopted and embraced an entirely relativistic and secularized world view.

An astonishing number of Catholics actually believe, for example, that God exists only within the subjective experience and private interpretation of every individual. They believe that objective truth is unknowable or that it simply does not exist at all. They believe that Christianity is equivalent to, and interchangeable with the other great religions; that Jesus is merely one of several notable, but comparable spiritual leaders, all equally good, all equally salvific in their own right. A significant number of Catholics now view morality as situational and conditional. They regard the Church's teachings on faith and morals as anachronistic, regressive and irrelevant. It is heartbreaking, for example, to see how many Catholics support abortion believing it not the termination of a life, but, rather, the liberation of a woman.

In our desire to be inoffensive we have essentially entered into a Gospel non-proliferation treaty, a truce with the world which is antithetical to Jesus' command to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to do all that I have told you." We have subscribed to the notion that 'religion is a private matter,' which it is not. (Preaching to nations, shouting from rooftops, and rocks crying out are not exactly images of discreet behavior.)

The Church is most healthy when she is most actively and fearlessly carrying out her mandate to evangelize all peoples and all nations. She is most robust when she is most completely and confidently fulfilling the Great Commission conferred upon her by Jesus himself. All Christians, and especially Catholic Christians, have a clear and continuing mandate from Jesus to preach and teach, to declare and demonstrate, to exclaim and exemplify the Kingdom of God, and to do so unambiguously and unabashedly. We need to sift the relativism of our culture out of the content of our faith and we need to shake the timidity we have developed off of our proclamation of it. We need to be restored to the apostolic, evangelistic and missionary zeal of the early Church, not just for ourselves, but for the sake of the whole world. "How can they believe in Him in whom they have never heard?"

— Sr. Brigid O'Mahony