

Reclaim the Fire

A Parish Guide to Evangelization

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WHERE IS THE PASSION?

A few years ago I wrote an article for an archdiocesan newsletter which I titled “Can the Sleeping Giant Wake Up?” I shared two recent experiences which had jolted me into thinking about the urgency of evangelization. One was an article in *Milwaukee* magazine, a glossy upscale monthly describing interesting happenings in and around the city. The article was by a Unitarian minister, George Ezoo, who calls himself “The Church Man” (a take-off, I suppose, on “The Church Lady” of Saturday Night Live fame). Ezoo attended weekend services at various churches and temples in the area and wrote up his impressions. He also gave a numerical rating to each one. It was fascinating reading.

How did the Catholic churches rate? First, the good news. It was a Catholic parish, Our Lady of Lourdes, that received the highest rating. But there were two pieces of bad news. When Ezoo attended one of the thriving non-denominational megachurches, the pastor told him that 31% of the members are former Catholics. This is consistent with other reports I have seen about the steady loss of our Catholic people to fundamentalist churches. The other disturbing statistic Ezoo quoted was that the number of Catholics in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee had actually declined between the years 1980 and 1990. Note that these are not just people who still consider themselves Catholic but are simply not practicing their faith; they have stopped calling themselves Catholics. They have abandoned the Church. This was the first time I had ever seen clear evidence that the number of Catholics has actually gone down in a given area.

It saddened me, and I had no reason to doubt that the same thing has been happening in other dioceses.

The other experience was my attendance at a “ministry leadership seminar” in Michigan sponsored by Promise Keepers. As many readers may know, this is a national movement of Christian men who commit themselves to prayer and spiritual growth, to build strong marriages and families, to put their faith in Christ into daily action, to support their local church and pastor, and to support each other through faith-sharing with other men. I had long been involved in directing retreats for men, so I wanted to learn more about this group. I expected to meet 30-40 pastors at most. What I found was a throng of men—of all ages and occupations—nearly 800 in all. They had given up their Friday night and all day Saturday to come to this conference. The two speakers were positive and inspiring, and each session began with a good half-hour of prayer and song. The enthusiasm of these men was contagious. I don’t know if there were any Catholics besides myself in the group, but I found myself thinking: “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen this kind of spiritual energy in our Catholic Church, especially among men.”

Urgency for Evangelizing

These two experiences created in me a renewed sense of urgency about evangelizing. I believe we need to ask ourselves some tough questions: Why are we losing so many of our people, especially our youth and our young families? Why are other groups stealing our fire? How can we start reclaiming the Gospel vitality that is the very heart of our Church?

I was ordained at the end of the 1950s. During our theology studies we would hear about the decline of the Church in France, Germany, Holland, Belgium—most of Western Europe. Theologians like Pierre Liege at the University of Paris were calling the Church to a rediscovery of the importance of evangelization. After World War II the Church tried to maintain “business as usual”—baptizing, confirming, sharing communion, marrying and ordaining. But the Church’s ministers, by and large, were out of touch with what was happening culturally. The sacraments and rituals were not touch-

ing people where they were living. Preaching, catechesis and liturgy were not proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, not awakening people to conversion and discipleship, not connecting the Gospel message with their human longings, joys, anxieties and sufferings. The Church had become a cultural institution with little concern for changing lives toward the vision of Jesus, toward genuine community, or dialogue and critique of the secular culture. And the people were walking away. I remember thinking, “I hope that never happens here.”

Disturbing Data

By all appearances, at least, it has not. In March of 2007, Catholic News Service reported that once again, tens of thousands of people will be received into the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil, and it gave figures from a number of different dioceses. The service also noted that in 2005, the U.S. bishops’ national evangelization office released a survey that showed that over 150,000 people had been received into the Church at the Easter Vigil nationally. That is a clear index of the continuing appeal of Catholicism to a great many people. But it is not a cause for complacency or triumphalism. For the figure ignores the number of faithful who have left the Church. For all we know, the number of “front-door entrants” may have been equaled or surpassed by that of “back-door exits.”

It is now nearly twenty years since George Gallup did his famous sociological study on “The Unchurched American.” He found that nearly half (44%) of Americans were unchurched; that is, they may believe in God but they either claim no religious affiliation or they do not attend church. Among Catholics, the number of “inactives” was found to be 27%. Remarkably, the criterion for “active” was very broad: If you were baptized Catholic and attended Sunday Mass more than twice a year (excluding Christmas, Easter, weddings and funerals), you were counted as “active.” By that minimal definition, 27% of baptized Catholics were no longer practicing their faith, though many still identified themselves as Catholics.

More recently, Fr. Robert Rivers believes that the number of inactive Catholics today is considerably higher than the Gallup survey

showed: “It is impossible to count all the inactive Catholics in this country, but sociological research helps us to estimate the number at about 21 million people—41 percent of the nearly 51 million adult Catholics in the United States. At these levels, active Catholics constitute the single largest Christian denomination in the country (31 million) *and* inactive Catholics constitute the second largest. Southern Baptists come in third, at an estimated 16 million members. These are staggering estimates that demand the attention of Catholic evangelization” (*From Maintenance to Mission*, p. 112-13). I always say: If a business or company was losing more than one-third of its customers, it would not ignore the data. It would call for an analysis and create some action strategies.

My point is that many thoughtful people are coming to realize that we cannot simply keep doing things as we’ve always done them. It is not working. Apart from the priest shortage, another reality is confronting us: We are no longer a growing Church. We are a declining Church and a graying Church. Some years ago George Gallup (an Episcopalian) used the image of “a sleeping giant” to describe the Catholic Church. He was trying to say: You Catholics have so much potential for good in this society. You have the largest membership of any church in America (some 60 million). You have clear teachings, a rich spirituality, visible organization and leadership. But you are asleep. You are not having the spiritual impact on the society that you could have—and the nation is poorer for it.

Part of the problem, I believe, is that we Catholics have become entangled in our own internal squabbles. These are consuming the energy and vitality that could be turned outward for mission and impact on our world. The figures cited above can be seized upon by both liberals and conservatives to further their own agendas. Liberals can say: “Of course people are leaving the Church and refusing to connect. This is because of undemocratic structures of authority, outmoded teachings on sexual issues, insistence on mandatory celibacy for priests, and refusal to include women in priestly and leadership roles. What is needed is obvious: a new agenda that will bring about meaningful reform.” And from their corner, the conservatives can reply: “The real problem is that the American Church has sold

out to the spirit of relativism and individualism in the wider culture. Who would want to join a church that is so riddled with controversy and allows everyone to pick and choose their own beliefs and moral choices? What is needed is obvious: a return to traditional teachings, forms of worship, and structures of authority.”

There may be some truth in both these positions. But this is not a time for blaming. Some of us remember the 1950s debates over who lost China to the Communists? Similar debates over who’s driving people away from the Church would be a total waste of time and energy. Certainly, the grand vision of Vatican II must continue to unfold and become enfolded in our Church’s life. This is not a time for stagnation or retrenching. But the Church will never be all that it should be. If we wait for it to become perfect before we begin evangelizing, we will never begin. Too often our parishes remain stuck in a “maintenance” mentality. Parish life is seen as maintaining the buildings and programs that served people’s needs in the past. Important questions do not get asked:

- Have the needs changed so that we have to devise new programs and ministries to meet them?
- Are we totally preoccupied with “saving the saved,” taking care of our own—but ignoring those many people who are not gathering with us?
- Are we making any efforts to reach out to the inactive Catholics and unchurched people in our midst?
- Are we even thinking of those many people who are searching for something to believe in and hope for, but are reluctant to make the first move to seek us out?
- In a word: Are we trying to move from a maintenance parish to an evangelizing, mission-driven parish?

At the Center: Jesus Christ

I want to be perfectly clear on this next point: The purpose of the Church is not to increase its membership rolls. The purpose of the Church is to make known the person and the message of Jesus Christ. The Church is not the center; Jesus is. I will never forget what I once heard Bishop Raymond Lucker say: “Too many Catholics have been

catechized and sacramentalized—but never evangelized. They have never formed a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And I don't blame them. We taught them for years that you become a Catholic by learning a set of truths and obeying a set of rules. But we never taught them *to know the Lord.*"

If this is true—and I believe it is—would it not explain what we said above about the defection of so many Catholics in post-war Western Europe? Would it not help us understand the disaffection of many American Catholics today? Doctrines, sacraments, rituals—wonderful and necessary as they are—will not of themselves capture the human heart or nourish its spiritual hungers. It is the personal relationship with Jesus Christ that gives doctrines, sacraments and rituals their meaning. How else can we understand the following anecdote? Some good Catholic parents once told me that their young adult son had joined an evangelical church. When they asked him why, he replied, in all sincerity, "I had to leave the Catholic Church in order to find Jesus Christ." How sad. Even if he is being dramatic and self-justifying, doesn't the question have to be asked: "How do we go off track like this? How can we insure that Jesus will always be the center of our teaching, preaching, and worship?" If Jesus is not a real person for us, if his life and teachings do not thrill us with joy, people will always find our religion disappointing.

Insights from the New Testament

With that in mind, I would like to make a brief excursion into the New Testament. How did the early Church understand its mission to proclaim the good news of Jesus? Luke's Gospel portrays Jesus himself as the original "good news" (Lk. 4:14-21). He came to Galilee, Luke says, "filled with the power of the Spirit," just as earlier he was "full of the Holy Spirit" and "was led by the Spirit in the wilderness" to be tempted by Satan (Lk. 4:1). He came to his home town of Nazareth and entered the synagogue on the Sabbath "as was his custom" (vs. 16); or, as another translation reads, "as he was in the habit of doing." I like to reference that phrase when people ask why they should bother attending church on Sunday: "I can pray better at home or out in the woods," they say. To which I reply: "Well,

we know Jesus prayed alone too; but he also made sure he joined the community for worship together. He needed to hear the Hebrew Scriptures proclaimed and interpreted, he needed to praise God in prayer and song with his people. If anyone could have separated himself from communal worship, it would have been Jesus; yet he chose not to. Isn't there an important lesson there for all of us?"

But on with the story. "He stood up to read and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place [i.e., he knew what he was looking for] where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor'" (vv. 17-19). Every devout Jew was familiar with that passage. It gave them hope during their years of exile in Babylon that God would some day restore them to their homeland. But how were they to understand this passage in their own time, when their homeland itself was under domination by the Roman powers? Would Jesus promise to lead them to a victorious overthrow of their oppressors? It was a dramatic moment. "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him," the text says, waiting for his next words. "Then he began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'" (v. 21). A murmur of excitement rippled through the crowd. Could this be the Messiah? Will he call us to unite behind him, be ready to take up arms for our freedom?

But soon disappointment set in. Luke does not give us Jesus' words, but we can infer the main content of his message from the rest of the Gospel. What Jesus held up for his listeners was a spiritual vision and fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. The "glad tidings" are: I have been sent by God to assure you that he has not abandoned you. Even in your oppression, you remain God's beloved sons and daughters. Nothing can take that away from you. If you believe in me and my words, you will be inwardly free, no matter your external condition. You will be spiritually rich, no matter your material poverty.

But his message was resisted. It was not what they wanted to hear. Disappointment turned to hostility as they dismissed him as no more than one of their own. Who does he think he is, claiming

he is “sent by God?” Just another deluded paranoiac, puffed up with his own self-importance. Finally, hostility turned to violence: “They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way” (vv.29-30).

A lesser man would have withdrawn from the public eye at this point and settled for a more conventional way of life. But the Gospels show Jesus continuing his mission. His teachings affirmed the worth and dignity of every person, even as they challenged the complacency of the political and religious elites. His miracles, particularly his healings, revealed the compassion of God for his suffering children. His promise of eternal life for God’s faithful ones gave hope to those who saw the unjust prosper at the expense of the just. And he assured the unjust that they would have no part in God’s kingdom unless they reformed their ways.

Sent to Evangelize

Besides teaching and healing, Jesus spent much of his time forming his chosen disciples for the continuation of his mission. When he felt they were ready, he sent them out. I picture that initial sending as sort of a “trial run” or “getting their feet wet.” Matthew describes the scene this way: Jesus has been passing through the towns and villages of Galilee, “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom [of God], and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harrassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt. 9:35-36). The Old Testament prophets, particularly Jeremiah and Ezekiel, had also pictured God’s people as sheep who were “scattered” or “wandering aimlessly.” The image is that of people who are spiritually hungry and desolate. What did Jesus do? Two things: First, he asked the disciples to pray that God may send “laborers” (evangelists) to help them; and second, he empowered the disciples themselves to bring the good news of the Gospel to those who are spiritually exhausted (Mt. 9:37-10:7).

But the definitive “sending” took place at the Ascension, the

last words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. According to Matthew, Jesus gathered the disciples together and addressed them in solemn words: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:18-20). The words are similar in the gospel of Mark (16:15-16) and of Luke (24:46-49). This scene is often called “the great commissioning.” Jesus makes it clear that the Church does not exist for its own sake. It has a mission, a purpose. It must not let the world forget Jesus Christ. It must continue to make him known and to proclaim his teachings everywhere in the world until time is no more.

The Acts of the Apostles is the story of how the first disciples carried out the mission entrusted to them. Transformed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter and the others spoke powerfully to the assembled crowd. You all remember, they said, how Jesus of Nazareth went about doing good among the people and healing them of their afflictions. Yet he was condemned unjustly by the authorities and handed over to be crucified. But—incredible as it seems—God raised him from the dead and made him Lord and Savior of the whole human family. The apostles spoke with such conviction that those who listened “were cut to the heart and said to Peter and, the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2:37-38). In other words: Turn away from sin, commit yourself to Jesus Christ and his way of life, and receive baptism as the sign of rebirth into the new family of God. “So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added” (2:41).

“Added” to what? To the community of believers, later to be called “the Church.” This was an important piece. Believers in Jesus were not a group of independent individuals. They were connected to a visible community of people who “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teach-

ing and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42). They formed a community committed to growing in their knowledge of Christ and his teachings, to communal prayer and worship, and to caring for one another—to the point that “there was not a needy person among them” (4:34). Non-believers were struck by the joy and love rippling through this new community, with the result that “great grace was upon them all” (4:33) and “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (2:47).

It is clear that the first Christians were converts from Judaism and that they saw themselves as a sect within Judaism. As time went on, however, they separated more and more from the Jewish mainstream and began to think of themselves as a new religion, but in historical and theological continuity with Judaism. One of the most dramatic developments in the early Church’s awareness of its mission was the decision to extend the proclamation of the gospel and invitation to discipleship to people of Gentile origin. First, Peter had his famous vision whereby he understood that no person should be in principle excluded from the Christian community. This development is fully described in chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles. Not long after, some in the community reasoned that not only should Gentiles be welcomed, they should be told the story of Jesus and actively invited to faith and baptism (Acts 11:19). Next, the Holy Spirit inspired the community at Antioch in Syria to send Barnabas and Paul on a mission to spread the Gospel of Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles beyond the borders of Palestine. Thus the Church became, consciously, a missionary, evangelizing community.

An interesting question: What was the process whereby new members connected with the community? My own speculation goes something like this: The first Christian converts from Judaism lived their newfound faith, not in an ostentatious way but in a way that was convincing. Their Jewish and Gentile neighbors observed how the Christians were devoted to their families, were conscientious in their jobs, did not go along with the immoral sexual practices of the time, and reached out in care to those who were poor or sick. Moreover, they did all this with a spirit of joy and peacefulness. At some point the Jew or Gentile would say, “You know, you’ve

changed. What's happened to you?" And the new Christian would say, "You're right—I've come to know Jesus Christ, and it's made all the difference." "Well, tell me about him." And the Christian would tell the story of Jesus. If the other person was ready (and touched by divine grace) he or she would say, "That's what I'm looking for. What do I need to do?" The Christian would then introduce the person to the community and (later) to the catechumenate. I just don't think there were many "mass conversions" after Pentecost. Rather, most people found their way into the Church through the authentic witness and one-on-one connections with believing Christians.

Early Lay Evangelizers

I like to think of the Woman of Samaria (John 4:1-42) as the first lay evangelist. After being both accepted by Jesus for who she was and challenged by him for her lifestyle, she ran to tell the townsfolk about him: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (4:29). One suspects she would not be considered the most credible person in town. Yet her earnest and dignified manner convinced a good number of Samaritans to come and see for themselves (vs. 39). After meeting with Jesus they did the unthinkable: they invited this Jew, with whom they would ordinarily never associate, to stay with them for a few days. Some, at least, became convinced of what the woman was daring to claim. They said to her, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (vs. 42). We don't know how deep or lasting these "conversions" were. But the story is meant to reveal the spiritual impact one person can have through the force of his or her testimony. Interestingly, the Book of Acts tells how a disciple named Philip, some time after the Pentecost event, went to Samaria and began speaking about Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah. Once again the Samaritans were receptive, especially when his preaching was accompanied by healings and expulsion of demons. The result: "There was great joy in that city" (Acts 8:4-8).

Philip is not named as one of the twelve apostles, so he may

well have been another lay evangelist. We find him next on the road from Jerusalem toward the Gaza desert (Acts 8:26-40). The Holy Spirit directed him to catch up with an Ethiopian man riding in a chariot. The man appears to be a minority on at least two counts: He is (most likely) dark-skinned, and the fact that he is described as a “eunuch” indicates that he suffers from some kind of sexual dysfunction. Whether the cause was physical or psychological, the man is sexually impotent. It is not hard to imagine him as the butt of jokes and put-downs in his cultural environment. Being in charge of the queen’s treasury, he is probably quite a wealthy man. However, he is also a lonely man.

But spiritually he is a seeker. He “had come to Jerusalem to worship,” the text says. He may have been a convert to Judaism, but more likely he was a Gentile “God-fearer”—one who accepted Jewish monotheism and morality, but did not become a full convert. He was obviously searching for something more, something to help him find meaning in his life. He makes a religious pilgrimage. He is reading the Jewish Scriptures. He asks Philip to help him understand the passage from Isaiah about “the suffering servant.” Philip uses the text as a springboard to tell him “the good news about Jesus” (vs. 35). The Ethiopian is deeply touched by the grace of God and asks Philip for baptism. So here again we have that remarkable combination: one person who is searching for God’s truth and love, and another who is filled with enthusiasm for sharing that very message with others.

Let us consider one final example of lay evangelizers in the New Testament. We read in Acts 18 about a married couple, Priscilla and Aquila, who were banished from Rome, along with other Jews, by the emperor Claudius. They came to Corinth, where they met Paul and became Christians. Later they moved to Ephesus, where they instructed a Jewish man named Apollos who had come to believe that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. But he had not been fully catechized or baptized into the Christian community. So Priscilla and Aquila completed the initiation process with him. The community recognized his remarkable gifts of Biblical knowledge and eloquent speech, sending him on to Greece to continue his evangelizing ministry. Paul held Priscilla and Aquila in high regard.

In one letter he publicly thanks them because they “risked their necks for my life” (Rom. 16:4), and in several others he sends special greetings to them and to “the church” that meets at their house (1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19).

It is evident, then, that the early Church understood itself as called by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring the good news of Jesus to all peoples in all parts of the known world. Clearly also, this was seen as the mission of the entire Church community, not just the apostles, “elders,” and other authority figures. Every Christian, by virtue of his or her baptism, was to make Christ and his saving message known and loved. Christians were to do so first of all by the quality of their life, their good example, their “wordless witness,” to use a later expression of Pope Paul VI. But secondly, they were to witness to Christ also by their words, their verbal testimony. They were not to hesitate to speak to others about what they believed and why they chose to live as they did. The First Letter of Peter takes this evangelizing activity for granted when he reminds his readers: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). The assumption was: Jews and Gentiles would sometimes be curious about what Christians believed and why; so Christians ought to be able to speak about this with joy and conviction. But they are to avoid any kind of arrogance or coercion, for the Letter adds, “yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (vs. 16).

And so the Christian Gospel spread, even amid harassment and persecution. The Church of the early Christian centuries was unmistakably an evangelizing community, proclaiming belief in its Lord and Savior with fervent passion. We turn now to look at what happened to that energy in the centuries that followed.