

THE NEW EVANGELIZATION and PARISH VITALITY

What is so Catholic about evangelization? Pope Paul VI announced that the Church exists to evangelize (1975). But evangelization is far more than convincing others about a set of propositions. Evangelization is our response to the irresistible affection of God that we find abundant in Jesus Christ. In the national plan for evangelization, *Go and Make Disciples: A Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States* (1992), the U.S. Bishops acknowledge that the vitality of parishes is evident in their commitment to evangelization. For Catholics the goals of evangelization are:

1. foster in Catholics an enthusiastic faith that causes lives of witness
2. invite others to know Jesus through the fullness of Catholic faith
3. transform the world through the power of the Gospel

What is a New Evangelization? In every age the Church fulfills its great commission by responding to the spiritual hungers of God's people. In July of 2010, the Pope announced the creation of a new pontifical council for *New Evangelization* and charged it with the task of re-vitalizing the faith of Catholics who are uncommitted or inactive. According to Archbishop Fisichella, the "Church must ... find adequate ways to renew her announcement to many baptized people who no longer understand what it means to belong to the Christian community... this will require a renewed missionary spirit, one capable of helping them make a forward leap to meet the new requirements which the current historical situation imposes".

Do we really need to do something "new"? The Center for Applied Research Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University puts the urgency of action in sharp relief by reporting that:

- only six in ten Catholics are registered at a Catholic parish
- 34% of these agree strongly with the statement: "*I can be a good Catholic without going to Mass every Sunday.*" and over 2/3 agree with this statement at least somewhat.

Since 2000, non-practicing Catholics in the United States constitute the second largest religious group in the country and make up the majority of those who attend non-denominational churches. According to the National Study on Youth and Religion (2005), the Catholic Church is among the least successful of all the mainline Christian denominations, at evangelizing its young. A significant root cause for this dilemma is that parishes are trapped in old approaches which, for complex reasons, no longer evangelize as they once did. This is one of the reasons why Pope Benedict XVI called upon parish leaders to be missionaries in a brave new, digital world. The *New Evangelization* is a top priority for the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops this year.

Recently, Cardinal Wuerl of the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. wrote a pastoral letter on the subject. In it, Cardinal Wuerl emphasized the importance of being a leaven of faith with those for whom 'the message has become stale, the vision has faded and promises seem empty'. The Church continues the work of evangelization in a religious landscape which is filled with new cultural forces. Some of these driving forces which can affect our efforts to revitalize the parish include:

1. Decline in Church Participation –The percentage of Americans who claim no religious affiliation is on the rise. If this trend continues, only 14.7% of the U.S. population will be attending worship by the year 2020. The challenge to Christianity comes not from another religion but from "no religion".
2. Increase in Diversity (social, cultural and religious) - By 2050 whites will be in the minority in America. If you attend a wedding today you are likely to find that many young Catholics are marrying a person from another religious community. Only one in four young Catholics are set

on marrying another Catholic. The influence of Hispanic or Latino Religious ethos is evident in more spirit-filled worship and devotional practices that emphasize God's ongoing, day-to-day intervention in life.

3. Digital Influence on Life – technology has created a new digital divide in the employment market. Cell phones are considered essential appliances even by those who are poor.
4. Changing Patterns of Family Life – Delayed marriage, smaller families, the decline of two-parent households and demands of caring for children are decreasing the role of religion in the family.
5. High Individualism in Emerging Adults (ages 18-29) – These young people report both great personal confidence, new freedom and feelings of uncertainty about a sense of purpose for life. In their efforts to 'stand on their own two feet', they are distancing themselves from traditional religious participation in unprecedented numbers. As an alternative, many are tinkering together a personal spirituality out of online wisdom circles and a variety of religious persuasions. Some even openly discuss the feasibility of a 'churchless Christianity'.
6. Today *belonging is leading to believing, far more than believing is leading to belonging*. In some ways this is nothing new and it has always been one of the reasons for the success of Catholic schools in forming faithful Catholics. Evangelization is about relationships of faith.

Successful Catholic parishes are beginning to see the importance of working together in response to the audiences that populate an emerging religious landscape. Some parishioners are fully engaged and looking for opportunities to lead in ministry within the congregation. Parishes need to equip these to share their faith. Some parishioners are less involved and unmoved by their participation at church. Parishes need to help those who are merely involved to see the spiritual significance of their lives and highlight the spiritual resources present in the rich tradition of the Catholic Church. Others are spiritual seekers who remain skeptical about the power of the Church to provide them with encounters with the Holy. Spiritual seekers are looking for authentic and compelling witnesses who can take faith into the world. Parishes have a new opportunity to partner with Spiritual Seekers in the corporal works of mercy and work for justice in our time.

These new audiences are attracted to a Church that is engaging and imaginative. They want to grow in faith through conversation and encounter. They expect access to spiritual content online. They desire worship and learning experiences that are inspiring and transformative - head, heart and hands. They want to contribute their talents in a significant way. They want to belong and to grow. In short, people today want to be affected by their participation in church. This is good news because responding to these demands can also transform and revitalize the parish.

What do we have to gain from a *New Evangelization*? This Diocese has experienced what could be the largest restructuring in the history of the American Catholic Church. While the restructuring has formally concluded its ultimate goal is yet to be achieved. That is because the goal is the spiritual revitalization of parishes. In some parishes, re-vitalization ended up being the neglected piece in the puzzle. In some situations where parishes have merged or linked, no real changes were made. Such parishes maintained the status quo without re-vitalizing the community.

Maintenance-oriented congregations can remain faithful, but fail to inspire others to join. They can over-emphasize a *dollars and collars* notion of parish viability without paying proper attention to parish vitality. The focus on *New Evangelization* represents an opportunity to rethink and revitalize the maintenance approach toward parish life. *New Evangelization* represents an opportunity for parishes that want to thrive, and not just survive. To succeed in the years ahead, parishes will learn to be responsive, collaborative and growth-oriented. But because there are no roadmaps into the future, it

will involve blazing new pathways. It will involve rethinking old assumptions. Some people are beyond our reach while others attend church often. Those who come but are unengaged in Catholic parishes represent a key audience for revitalizing the parish.

What can parishes do now? A commitment to evangelization may change the way some parishes operate. But parishes that respond with boldness to the spiritual hungers of people will find them to be vital new partners in the work of the Gospel. No matter what lies ahead, these parishes will thrive.

What would we be doing if we were ten times bolder? Our parishes would:

- re-establish an evangelizing perspective for all pastoral ministries that reorients parish activities from maintenance to mission
- re-orient pastoral priorities and programs in response to the needs of a new religious landscape
- learn how to use strategic methods to set pastoral priorities
- re-examine the functionality of existing parish programs, structures and organizations
- foster collaborative approaches that maximize parish resources
- identify the social and structural divides that must be bridged within the parish (e.g. generational, cultural, schedule) in order to build a parish-wide culture of welcome & belonging

For more help in responding to the call for a New Evangelization, contact the Office of Parish Life at 847-5531 or email parishlife@buffalodiocese.org

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