

Evangelization for Our Times

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As with any crisis there is also opportunity, especially when viewed from the perspective of faith. The challenge, as well as invitation, that remains before the Christian of every era is truly to embody Christ. Faced with hypocrisy and moral inconsistency in the early Church, St. Paul presented himself as a model. In Galatians he said, "If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2: 17-20) St. Paul knew that the way to bring Christ into the sphere of daily activity in his time and place was to embody Christ through his behavior and his speech. This is the role of the Christian of every era.

There was once a well-known artist who wanted to paint a scene that would portray salvation in Christ. He decided to utilize a setting of a turbulent looking ocean along a rocky coastline. He set about his work painting feverishly for days. As he neared completion, his work depicted a huge bay along a rocky coastline. The winds over the bay were fierce and the waves were frightful. Out in the bay was a badly battered ship and dotting the turbulent waters around the ship were numerous shipwrecked sailors. They were struggling and close to drowning except one sailor who had been carried to the coast by the current and was now clutching a rock with both hands which, in turn, prevented him from drowning and would allow him to eventually climb to safety. The shipwrecked sailors represented all of humanity close to drowning in the sin of the world. The rock that the one shipwrecked sailor was clutching represented Christ who provided a way out of the chaos caused by sin.

Stepping back to gaze upon his nearly completed work, the artist began to feel as if something important was missing. So he sat down in front of his painting and pondered the scene. After a good period of time, he realized what was missing. So, he went to the canvas,

wiped out a section of the painting and began to work on it again. Once he had finished the painting, it looked remarkably like the original but there was one important change. There was still the scene of the turbulent waters in the bay along the rocky coastline. And there was still the shipwrecked sailors drowning in the turbulent waters. The one sailor was still clutching the rock along the coastline. There was a difference, however, with the one shipwrecked sailor. Before he had been clutching the rock with both hands; now he was clutching the rock with one hand, while extending his other hand toward another shipwrecked sailor.

Salvation in Christ is a gift from God that is offered to everyone without exception. There is no person that is not a beloved of God. We exist because we have been in the mind of God from eternity. We accept as a matter of faith that God desires to share eternal life with any and every person who has ever come into existence. According to the *Catechism* God "...calls together all men [and women], scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent the Son as Redeemer and Savior. In his Son and through Him, he invites men [and women] to become, in the Holy Spirit, adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life." (#3)

God desires to share his life with all people but God is not coercive. The nature of God is to invite and expect a free response. To share the life God desires to share with us requires a personal response. The invitation is God's but requires human cooperation with God's initiative. As God freely invites, we must freely respond.

The aspect of response applies both to the uniquely personal response each person must make and a shared experience of the whole Church. While there is a deeply personal dimension to salvation in Christ, it is never solely an individual enterprise. The individual, deeply converted to Christ, loves with Christ in his or her heart then collectively and collaboratively with others embodies the love of Christ in our world. Pope Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, "It is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn." (#24)

For instance, when I am attuned to those whom God loves, I love them as God loves them and try to reach out to them with the Good News of God's love. It is nothing more, but nothing less than to adhere to the two great commandments of Jesus to love God and neighbor. If I want to demonstrate how much I love God, I must look how concretely I love my neighbor.

And not merely the neighbors of my choosing, but the neighbors that God sends into my life, who happens to be the person closest to me on any particular occasion. To embody God's love in this way is to do the mission of evangelization because it is always outward looking with the intent of being an instrument of God. The love of which I speak is the love manifested on the cross. Often, the subject of our love lies before our feet unnoticed or disregarded.

Some years ago, I was in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala studying Spanish. One Sunday I went to the cathedral for Mass. The cathedral was full, the liturgy was well planned and the music was beautiful. The bishop presided and preached and seemed to give an inspiring homily. And at communion, the majority of parishioners received. As the Mass concluded, people were cheerfully speaking with one another as they slowly walked out of the cathedral. As I walked out into the plaza and toward the gate that opened out to the zocalo (the town's central plaza), I noticed a man lying across the gate opening. I was shocked at what I then experienced. People merely stepped over him and went on their way as if he were not there. I stopped a man next to me and asked in very broken Spanish what was happening and expressed concern about the man lying in the gate. He informed me that the man was a boracho (i.e., a drunk). People evidently knew the man and over time had become insensitive to him and many others like him who filled the zocalo. At any rate, not being sure what to do, I did like everyone else and went home. And yet, I was very troubled the rest of that day. In reality, there really didn't seem to be much that any one could have done to help the man who was an alcoholic. Still, we had just received the Body of Christ at the Mass and seemingly failed to see Christ lying at our feet, a Lazarus figure.

The concern of evangelization is wide and includes people of all shapes and sizes both saint and sinner alike. Some people we encounter in life are easier to love than others and some closer to us than others. The concern of evangelization, however, must include those who are difficult to love because God loves them.

We obviously are to love our blood sisters and brothers and the members of our extended families (often times the most difficult to love). We are to love our spiritual sisters and brothers from the parish faith community and the faithful we know in the diocese. Many of these are easy to love because of our shared values and beliefs. However, we may discover intense dislike for others because they are shallow, untrustworthy or mean spirited. Likewise, they may have some character defects and lifestyle behaviors that are very troubling. Or,

they simply may think and believe differently than we do on matters we consider to be vital and essential to the faith. Nonetheless, they are still our sisters and brothers in faith and it is our responsibility to extend God's love to them.

Oblate Fr. Ron Rolheiser says it this way in his book *The Holy Longing*, "...For Jesus, loving one's neighbor is not an abstract thing. ...[He] tells us that anyone who claims to love God who is invisible but refuses to deal with a visible neighbor is a liar, for one can only really love a God who is love if one is concretely involved with a real community on earth. ...Without the church, we have more private fantasy than real faith... [R]eal conversion demands that eventually its recipient be involved in both the muck and the grace of actual church life."

It is important not to forget our alienated brothers and sisters in the Church who are on the fringe. Some may remain at the margins, barely seen, others may rarely darken the doors of a church, while others have just removed themselves altogether. And they have done so for any one of a number of reasons. Sadly, it has been noted that there are about 17 million inactive Catholics in the United States. Too often they are not a concern. Though they may be inactive, they are still my sisters and brothers irregardless of the reason that led to their inactivity. Reaching out in love to those who are wounded, hurting and angry as well as those who simply have become indifferent must be a normal part of the Church's activity.

There is likewise the dynamic of ecumenical interaction and inter faith dialogue in the spirit of Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter, *Ut Unum Sint*. The prayer of Jesus was that all might be one. This must be a concern for every Catholic. Our vision of heaven envisions all the followers of Christ gathered around the Lamb as a great Communion of Saints. It is a vision that includes the membership of the Churches and ecclesial communities with whom we currently are separated. According to the Vatican II *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*, "...the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as a means of salvation." At the same time, the decree makes it clear that it is through the Catholic Church that "...the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained..." Thus, it is important to enter dialogue. Our vision is also a vision that hopes for the salvation of all the peoples and nations who make up the many religious expressions found among the human community. Because there is one God who revealed Himself definitively through His Christ, there can be but one means of salvation - Christ. The Gospels speak of Him as the way, the truth and the life. God gives everyone the grace necessary to be saved. At the same time, it is important that people who

have yet to hear the Good News of his Gospel, hear it. As Romans states, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!" (Rm. 10:15) Anyone who is saved is saved because of what God did in Jesus Christ, whether they know it or not.

Finally, what are we to do with all the unaffiliated and un-churched millions who are seemingly without faith in their lives? One survey I read a year or so ago about religious membership in the US showed that the number of people in this country unaffiliated with a religious body are about the same as those who are. Many in today's society look for a spirituality without religion. As such, many individuals have a level of faith, but it is imperfectly formed. Others, of course, seem more intent on moving through life without rhyme or reason or in pursuit of goals that, in reality, cause personal harm, especially in the spiritual realm. And yet, in their restlessness, they search for that one thing, unaware that the one thing is really some One.

The mission of the Church is expansive. And each one of us plays a central part in it. Of all the people who have ever been created since the beginning of the world, not one of us is exactly alike. Not one of us has the exact same circumstance in life or shares the exact same time and place in history. Each one of us can share Christ in only the way that we can. Each one of us can bring Christ to another in the unique way that we can. In a very real sense, God depends upon us all to do our part to bring Christ into the sphere of day to day activity.

It would be an understatement to say that the mission of the Church in the present times has been hindered by the scandal of priests who have abused children. So too has the mission of the Church, our mission, been hurt by the misguided protection of some priests who should not have been protected. In this regard, the Church has experienced what *could* be called minimally a public relations disaster of major proportions. While I believe there is a place for an effective public relations effort, what is needed here are not efforts to make the Church "look good", but a genuine effort to demonstrate a commitment to holiness. We all want to look good in the eyes of the public. Sadly, it appears that some have placed too great an emphasis on "looking good". More important is being responsive to the will of God and striving for holiness. If some of the members have sinned, then that needs to be admitted and dealt with. What is needed is penance, humility and conversion. Correct words will not effectively assist the Church to confront this present obstacle. Only a believable commitment to holiness and a transparently lived life in Christ - from top to bottom and side to side, from

the person in the pew to the person in the *cathedra* - will likely provide the power truly to lead others to Christ. This has been the case in any century that has known crisis.

When I was in the seminary in the late 70's, I took a course in evangelization. It was one of the earlier attempts at implementing *Evangelii Nuntiandi* which was released in 1975. As a focus for the course, we concentrated on a central passage from the Gospels, Mark 1:14-15: "The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Good News." It ought not be too surprising since it sums up the whole of Jesus' preaching. Toward the end of the course, the twenty or so members of the class participated in a weekend mission at a local parish. As a part of the mission experience, faith sharing sessions, led by one or two of the seminarians, were held in the homes of parishioners concentrating on this one passage. Our mission was to preach conversion. Many of the parishioners were certainly a lot more converted than we seminarians, nonetheless, I recall the impact made on some who were not so converted. The hosts of each household had invited their own guests, some who were on the fringes and marginal in their faith practice. Other attendees were downright alienated in some way or unchurched. Though a short weekend, there were experiences of conversion. Conversion is always at the heart of the Gospel and at the heart of the message the Church must both embody and preach. It must be preached to those already on the journey as well as those yet to begin the journey.

Conversion of heart must always be the starting point as well as an ongoing dynamic in our lives. Basically, you cannot give what you yourself do not have. Do you recall the story of the devout rabbi? In his youth, fired with the love of God, he thought he would convert the whole world. Soon he learned that it would be quite enough to convert the people who lived in his village. He tried for a long time, but was unsuccessful. Then he realized that his program was still too ambitious, so he concentrated on reforming the members of his own household. But, he couldn't convert them either. Finally, it dawned on him that he must work only upon himself. But he continued to stumble in his attempts to accomplish even that. The way to conversion is a long one. The person who truly is on the way, however, makes an impact in the lives of those around them. What we say and do becomes a positive influence for what is holy.

Conversion does not mean perfection but that we honestly are striving to embody the holy and seeking pardon for our failures. Holiness is the call of every Christian and the *sine qua non* of evangelization. It is not just a calling for those seemingly extraordinary people in

life who we later find in the canon of saints. Nor is it suited only for those seemingly rare individuals who are willing to be martyred for their faith. Each one of us is called to be a saint. It is why God made us. And, in reality, it is possible that some here could be canonized some day. In reality, we do not know whether or not we would surrender ourselves to suffer martyrdom for the sake of our faith until we actually are faced with that choice.

Those who most fully model life in Christ are the saints. There is a parish hall next to my cathedral in Juneau, Alaska. The hall is on the second floor and has a wide stairwell climbing up to it. On the wall along side the stairwell is a display of photos and drawings of 30 or so holy women and men of different time and places with a brief narrative describing what caused others to consider them as holy. Some are canonized, such as St. Francis and St. Claire of Assisi, St. Katherine Drexel, St. Maximillian Kolbe, St. Josephine Bakita, St. Thomas More. Others, while not canonized, are recognized as having manifested a high degree of holiness in their lives and as having witnessed to the Gospel in some profound way, such Dorothy Day, Miguel Pro, Franz Jaggerstater, Mother Teresa and Archbishop Oscar Romero. All were converted people on the way to an ever deeper level of conversion. They were able to grasp what so many Christians fail to grasp, i.e., what it means to embody Christ or, in other words, what it means to be Eucharistic. Not only did their spiritualities cause them to focus on Christ in their prayer and worship, it led them to en flesh His life through Eucharistic service. They recognized Christ in their brothers and sisters, especially their sisters and brothers most physically and spiritually in need. Such holy people showed how much they loved God by how concretely they loved God's people. As such, they became convincing evangelizers and credible witnesses to the Gospel. As is often quoted from Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, "[M]odern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." (#41)

Such holiness can and ought to be sought by each of us, anyone who claims to be a follower of Christ. Obviously it must be done within our own time and place in history and with the particular gifts with which God has blessed us. What is required is to respond to the grace of God available to us always and everywhere through the Spirit of Jesus. Take for example, the Patron Saint of missions and the Diocese of Juneau, St. Therese of Lisieux. As has been pointed out more than once, she did nothing all that extraordinary in her life. What she did do was to seek holiness within the ordinary circumstances of her convent and did so with great

fidelity, practicing her "Little Way". The "secret" of her holiness was living her faith in an exceptional way. She responded to the grace of God within the circumstances of her time and place in history as best and as fully as she could. Is not this what each of us is to do with our lives?

Some years ago, I was in Guayaquil, Ecuador. The priest with whom I was traveling had a friend he wanted to visit. We stopped in for a visit at the hospital where she worked. She was a nurse in a leper ward. Once I overcame my hesitancy and after I had been assured that I was not going to contract leprosy, I entered the ward. I was able to observe the staff at work and their interactions with the patients, about 50 in number. We located the nurse friend in the room of a man who had been eaten up by the disease. What I encountered, surprisingly, was not sadness or anger or despair, but joy and peace. The nurse was a faith-filled person who not only took care of the man's health, but made it known that she deeply cared for the man. While we were in the room, the man kept expressing his thankfulness for having someone in his life who truly cared for him. I was touched by the interaction of love and caring between them. Not only was she a Christ to her patient, he was a Christ to his nurse. In their interaction I saw God. Having received the gift of life and salvation from God in Christ, there is a corresponding obligation to share the gift of this life with others. When we do this, we are Eucharistic.

The foundational dynamic of our faith is baptism in Christ. That, at least, is the claim of faith. It is a celebration of new life in the risen Lord. It expresses that we have in fact died to sin and embrace a transformed life. As I speak of baptismal life, I obviously mean more than merely having been washed in a water bath during a religious ceremony at some time during our lives. I mean a sacramental ritual that expresses a faith-filled relationship in Christ announcing that we have died to sin and have arisen transformed. Baptism is not solely about our initiation into a system or into an organization we call the Church. It is that, but more deeply, it celebrates a relationship meant to be, (or at least *become* in the case of an infant or a child) one that is intimate and personal. People who are baptized into Christ are expected to know more than just information about Jesus, His life and what he taught. They live differently because they have discovered the Lord of life. Those who would effectively proclaim Christ are those who manifest the reality of His life through their own.

As I alluded earlier, the manner of lifestyle that best reflects this is called Eucharistic. It is what holy women and men have modeled for centuries. Individuals who have a faith and lifestyle that is based in a real relationship with the Lord, are individuals who are Eucharistic. Appreciating the gift of life and salvation they have received in Christ, their desire is to lead lives that bear fruit for the Kingdom of God. Catholics ought deeply to appreciate this given the importance we place on sacramental worship. Eucharist truly is the summit toward which the Church's activities are directed and the font from which the Church's ministry flows. As members of the Church, we need regularly to refresh our memories about who we are (or better yet, Whose we are) and what we are to be about.

Called and formed as disciples, we are sent into our day to day worlds that Christ may be present through us. As we were reminded by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Inuente*, the Church in the Third Millennium must "...put out into the deep for a catch." *Duc in Altum!* In the area of the world where I live in Southeast Alaska, this biblical metaphor of fishing is a bigger than life image. Fishing in Alaska, goes well beyond the image of recreational or sport fishing that most people think of. It is a way of life and a way to provide a living. To catch fish means hard work. Likewise, it is dangerous work. There is also no guarantee that fishing will lead to the catching of fish. As any fishermen will tell you, there is much difference between fishing and catching. As we fish for people, we would do well to remember that fishing is difficult, hard work and guarantees no success. And yet, a fishermen goes out to sea confronted with all its dangers, knowing that there is no guarantee of fish yet confident in his or her skills to catch fish.

Our role, the role of each Christian, is to influence the day to day worlds in which we live and to be a Christ presence in this day to day world. As we embody Christian values it will often involve going against the current of the society in which we live. We know that there are many positive elements in American society. We know as well that there are many destructive influences that present a barrier to the Church's mission. Some elements found in contemporary American culture such as materialism, relativism and individualism, can prevent real conversion from happening. It is why an ongoing conversion of life as well as an enduring renewal of our discipleship is necessary. Like salmon that swim upstream against the current and only then are able to spawn and create new life, the Christian who values her or his faith must struggle against the influences that could lead them to infidelity.

My presumption is that we are all people who take our faith quite seriously. We are people who are trying to grow in wisdom, age and grace. We try to walk faithfully in the way of the Lord and seek to grow in our relationship with Christ. I realize, at the same time, that we all are affected in some degree by the influences of our day and age. The counter-Christian values found in culture and society often entice us to make choices contrary to the interests of our faith. If we would remain faithful to Christ, we must commit to doing what is necessary for the relationship, not only to persevere, but to remain strong. What He taught, how He lived, the standards and principles He valued must be the measure for what we believe, the lifestyles we lead and the values we hold. The more truly He is at the center of our lives (and at the center of all the members of the Church, from top to bottom and side to side), the more fruitful and effective will be our witness, both individually as His disciples and collectively as a Church.

It is why I emphasize the need of conversion, both in the sense of an initial opening to Christ as well as the daily surrender required to establish a pattern for life. Conversion to His Gospel is like a blind man who sees for the first time. Viewing life through the prism of faith produces in us a desire to share Christ. It helps us to appreciate, not only why we must evangelize but also what we must do in order to evangelize. It is people who have been convicted by the Gospel of Christ and know His power and presence in their lives who will use their resources and energies to accomplish the Church's mission of proclaiming Christ to the ends of the earth.

We know that the word *evangelization* is not a commonly used word among most Catholics, though it is much more common than it used to be. Little by little, we seem to be learning. I believe Catholics have come a long way in the last 30 years in their understanding of the need of all the members to proclaim Christ. It has a definite place in a typical Catholic's vocabulary. As we know, when Pope Paul VI wrote of evangelization in 1975 in his Apostolic Letter, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, he reminded us that evangelization is the essential mission of the Church. Pope John Paul II throughout the whole of his pontificate has constantly spoken of the "new evangelization" that needs to take place. This "new evangelization" in no way means preaching a "new" Gospel. Rather, it is a call to implement the Gospel anew in new ways for a new millennium with a whole set of new ways of looking at life with a whole new set of problems. It is a responsibility that does not belong to any one group or persons within the Church but to each and every baptized member. It is the role of every Catholic person and community to provide nurture and support, outreach and healing, invitation and welcome to the diverse peoples who make up the

society in which they live. Each person plays a unique and important role in bringing Christ to others.

The pastoral plan for evangelization issued by the US. Bishop's ten years ago, *Go and Make Disciples*, outlines a number of ways that Christ may effectively be brought into the sphere of daily activity. While I suspect many of you have read it and know it well, I would like briefly to review its three primary goals and state it in a more personal way. One: faith communities and persons of faith ought to create a sufficient level of enthusiasm in each of its members that the faith of its members will be lived in a day to day manner. Filled with such enthusiasm for the Lord, the members will freely desire to share Christ with others. Faith is not taught, it is caught. Second: every faith community and person of faith ought to provide a welcoming and hospitable atmosphere and embody a genuine concern for the temporal and spiritual well being of all people. Parishes in particular, ought to be places of light and life where those who search for meaning and purpose, whatever their social condition or cultural background, are invited to hear the message of salvation in Christ. Three: faith communities and persons of faith ought to instill Gospel values in the society of which they are a part, promoting the dignity of the human person, advancing the importance of the family and advocating for the common good.

If the mission is going to be carried out effectively, a significant proportion of its membership must be involved. Baptized into Christ and Confirmed in the Spirit of Jesus, we become members of His Eucharistic Body. As a Eucharistic Body of Christ, we ourselves are bread to be broken and shared for the world; we ourselves are precious droplets of His blood to be poured out for others. What we do with the hours of our day, how we use the abilities with which we have been blessed and how we utilize the material resources over which we have responsibility express how well or how poorly we understand ourselves as a Eucharistic Body. Without a true sense of spiritual stewardship over how we use our time and energies, and by a significant proportion of the Church's membership, the mission of the Church can and does become ineffective. While a small group of individuals can have a tremendous effect (or even one person as is illustrated in the lives of many great saints), it is more profound and fruitful when the entire faith community is involved.

How do we present this message? In addition to efforts to promote ongoing conversion (to which I spoke earlier), there must be a concerted attempt to foster ongoing Christian formation. Where most effective evangelization occurs is on the local level. Parishes in which

parish leaders and membership regularly evaluate their lifestyle choices and choose the *Gospel* over the dominant values found in secular culture provide powerful witness. Rather than fall prey to the influence of individualism and materialism, the parish embodies charity, justice and peace. When this is coupled with a deep devotional life and vibrant worship, people are able to make connections they need to grow in faith.

People need real contact with God. Real connections must be made with what is taking place at worship and what is occurring in people's day to day activity. Parish worship needs to touch not only the mind but also the heart. Members need to have opportunities for significant prayer experiences, retreats and spiritual direction. The point is to lead people to, not only full, conscious and active participation at worship, but a life that is fully alive in Christ, a life that is conscious of the power and presence of Holy Spirit and a life that actively responds to opportunities to serve God at all times. In other words, a person's life becomes an act of worship to God. As members of the Church assume responsibility for their spiritual relationship with God in Christ, they look seriously at their lifestyle choices: how they use their material resources; how they expend their energies; how they spend their time. When people honestly desire to respond to the *Gospel*, they try to make choices that reflect it. Likewise, it is when people are touched by the Spirit of the risen Lord that they desire to share Him with others.

There are no short-cuts to an authentic Christian lifestyle. It truly requires conversion of mind and heart. It requires making the commitment to live in a particular way called Christian as opposed to another way called secular.

Because we have experienced the Lord of life we desire to live in a way that reflects the *Gospel* of Christ. We use whatever God has provided to us to respond to the invitation of faith. We know that it is vital to use the time we have well, and the talents we have effectively. Afterall, it is only through the use of our time and energies that we are able to accomplish the mission. Unless we actively use our gifts, it doesn't matter how many talents we have or how wealthy we are or how important we seem to be, for our gifts will remain useless. God has blessed us with whatever we have so that we might use these gifts for God's purposes and design. Ultimately, this means we use them to share our faith.