

Reflections on the Component of EVANGELIZATION



By Frank Mercadante

Introduction

Thirty years ago, many Catholics fumbled to pronounce the term *evangelization* let alone accurately define it. For those who understood it, many attached negative connotations with the word – even questioning whether it was permissible under Catholic canonical law! Eccentric television evangelists or pushy and judgmental Christians were often the primary experiences that birthed a deformed meaning to the word. When encountering zealous evangelical Protestant evangelists, many Catholics felt cornered – like evangelistic prey – only finding their ‘salvation’ once out of their crosshairs. Not surprisingly, these experiences did not help launch the ministry of evangelization into the mainstream of Catholicism. Let’s just say that most Catholics felt that Bingo was more part of being Catholic than evangelization.

In recent years, however, Catholics have become more comfortable with the word “evangelization” and increasingly more open to sharing their faith with others. Vatican II re-introduced the words “evangelization,” “evangelize,” and “gospel” into the Catholic vocabulary¹. With a new emphasis on the kerygmatic² dimension of the gospel, Vatican II called the Church to become more

¹ Beyond the Reformation, the term evangelization was rarely used. Instead, terminology such as “the propagation of the faith” or “missionary activity” was commonplace. The emphasis of this activity tended to be more institutional and authority-based. Instead of preaching the gospel message, it was the authority of the Church as the only true vehicle of Christ’s teaching (as opposed to Protestantism) that was proclaimed. Vatican I documents never used the words “evangelization” or “evangelize.” It used the word “gospel” only once. On the other hand, Vatican II employed the term “evangelization” 31 times, “evangelize” 18 times, and “gospel” 157 times.

² Kerygma is a Greek term denoting the initial evangelistic proclamation of the gospel, emphasizing the salvific message of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection.

evangelical. Furthermore, the responsibility of this mandate went beyond the call of the “professionals”³ to include *all* members of the Church (LG 16-17).

Additionally, Pope Paul VI gathered the 1974 synod of bishops around the theme of evangelization of the modern world. Based on that synod, he offered to the Church the landmark encyclical, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (*On Evangelization in the Modern World*) in 1975.

Evangelii Nuntiandi helped shape a Catholic expression of evangelization by stating, “evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.”(18) Furthermore, Paul VI established the legitimacy and even primacy of evangelization by asserting that the “[Church] exists to evangelize” and that “evangelization is the essential mission of the Church.”(14)

It must be reasoned that if the Church exists for the purpose of evangelization, so does youth ministry. If evangelization is the essential mission of the Church, then it must be the essential mission of youth ministry. In other words, the component of evangelization should be at the heart and center of all Catholic youth ministry.

Defining Evangelization

Evangelization comes from the Greek term *euangelion*. The term was used to describe the action of sharing good news, for example, when publicizing a military victory or announcing a wedding. When early Christians used the word, they were proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom. Evangelization was the invitation to become a member of God’s kingdom of peace – made possible by Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. This message of the Kingdom addresses our insatiable hunger for peace – peace with God and peace with one another.

Today, in a very basic sense, evangelization means sharing the good news of one’s faith in Jesus Christ. This good news is communicated through both our words and actions. The ultimate goal of evangelization is to bring about interior change (conversion). The focus or subjects of evangelizations are individuals, societies, and cultures. The gospel has the power to radically transform an individual and collectively a society. When the message of the gospel is applied to the systems, values, and priorities of an entire culture (in the form of social

³ The truth is Catholics have a long history of missionary activity. For example, Benedictine monks brought Christianity to much of Europe during the early Middle Ages. Beyond the 16th century, however, the extension of Christianity was relegated to those orders that had a specialized missionary vocation. The average church member did not consider the work of evangelization to be their responsibility.

justice), the result is a transformed nation or world. “The fruit of evangelization is changed lives and a changed world – holiness and justice, spirituality and peace.”⁴

Catholic Evangelization⁵

A Catholic understanding of evangelization includes some distinctive elements. First, evangelization is always invitational. It is accomplished in a manner that is respectful of others’ dignity and free choice. If evangelization is done in a manipulative, coercive, arrogant, or unloving manner, that methodology is a contradiction to its very message.

Second, evangelization is always operative in the life of a Catholic. It is not a one-time event, but includes both an initial and ongoing proclamation of the Gospel. As Catholics, we never grow out of the need for ongoing evangelization. For example, the importance of the Liturgy of the Word testifies to our ongoing need to hear, believe, and apply the Good News of God’s kingdom in our lives. We need ongoing evangelization to be spiritually re-energized and renewed.

Third, evangelization is communal in nature. It’s not simply about being evangelized into a personal relationship with God, but also into a community of believers. Evangelization that results in a “just me and God” or “lone ranger” spirituality is missing the mark. This communal dimension includes being nurtured and guided by the teaching and tradition of the Church, and utilizing one’s gifts to build up the body of Christ to serve all humanity.

Fourth, evangelization cannot be contained to a single program; it is more a mindset of which its threads are woven throughout the entire tapestry of parish life. While many parishes have effective R.C.I.A. programs, we must not be satisfied with a few doing the work to which all members are called. All members – priests, religious and laity – are called to make evangelization a priority in daily life. As the water level of evangelization rises in the parish, it will naturally spill over into forming an evangelistic youth ministry.

The Need to be Evangelized

We were born to be evangelized. Whether we call it the “holy longing,” “God-shaped hole,” or “restless heart,” humans possess a universal need and drive to be meaningfully connected to their Maker. This “nostalgia for the infinite”

⁴ *Go And Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*. Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1993.

⁵ Adapted from “Chapter 8: Youth Ministry: The Component of Evangelization” by Frank Mercadante in *The Vision of Catholic Youth Ministry, Fundamentals, Theory, and Practice*. Robert J. McCarty, General Editor. Winona MN: Saint Mary’s Press, pp. 106-107.

expresses itself through restlessness, dissatisfaction, and our hunger for meaning and purposefulness.

Although a theological reality for thousands of years, recent scientific studies suggest that our brains are actually hardwired for meaning and attachment. In the report, "Hardwired to Connect,"⁶ researchers state that our brains are biologically organized for connectedness to others and transcendental meaning and purpose. We are physically wired to ask the ultimate questions and seek ultimate answers. Our need to know what is true about life's purpose and ultimate ends is connected to brain functions underlying many spiritual and religious experiences.

Adolescence: An Opportune Season for Evangelization

This need is especially relevant during the teenage years. Adolescence is characteristically a time in life when young people ask and seek answers to some of the most significant questions of life, such as: "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" "What is my purpose?" "What is important?" "How will I live my life?"

To squander this *kairos* moment is nothing less than pastoral irresponsibility. There are great costs in failing to capitalize on this critical season in life: Catholic teens being seduced by lesser gods, and therefore evangelized and discipled into the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the present day culture. In the past, we comforted ourselves with the assurance that "Missing In Action" teens would sojourn back to the fold when beginning their families in adulthood. However, recent research suggests otherwise. Most do not return, and if they do, many return only to join a different faith tradition.⁷

Parish Commitment to Youth

So what does this mean in light of youth evangelization? First, because teens need connectedness and are asking the ultimate questions, the local parish should recognize and take advantage of this unique evangelistic opportunity. Beginning with the pastor, parish leadership should demonstrate a profound commitment to making ministry to youth a high priority. Building a teen-friendly culture by seeking to understand and address the unique needs of youth

⁶ "Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities," was prepared by the Commission on Children at Risk, a group comprised of 33 prominent children's doctors, research scientists, and mental health and youth service professionals. The Commission details the problems faced by children in the United States, casting the spotlight on the lack of connections in the lives of these youngsters.

⁷ *The Spirit of Youth Ministry: A Study of Congregations with Youth of Vital Faith*. Session One: Research Project Overview, page 1. Referencing research from Martinson 2000; Barna 2001; Olson 2003.

communicates a respect and love that is evangelistic in and of its self. Providing opportunities for teens to get meaningfully involved in the general life of the parish builds a connection and sense of belonging that is key to faith development. Most teens are operating out of an affiliative style of faith, which means that a primary way that they experience God is within the context of community. Because of this, experiencing a strong bond and connection to their parish community is essential to faith and spiritual growth.

General Life of the Parish

Additionally, the successful evangelization of teens is dependent upon how well the adult community is evangelized and enthusiastically embracing discipleship. The parish lacking in spiritual passion is the parish lacking in teenage presence. When young people perceive – through the example of their faith community – that the faith is not worth dying for, they conclude that it must neither be worth living for.

We cannot underestimate the influence of the larger parish community in attracting or distancing teens from Jesus and the Church. Too often, the general life of our parish communities is so sub par that many teens reject the efforts of youth ministry before they ever begin. Cold and unfriendly environments, lifeless liturgies, and irrelevant homilies test the endurance of the most pious of adult believers, let alone callow teens. After a steady, bland diet of church prepared monotony, many teens forge a religious resistance, inoculated from any future parish-sponsored evangelistic efforts.

When it comes to reaching teens, youth evangelization is never effective when quarantined from the larger church community. Expecting a lush, vibrant youth ministry to emerge from a barren, arid, parish environment is unrealistic at best. Even if a youth ministry is able to evangelize teens exclusively through its own programming, it is young people's experience of the larger church that impacts their long-term involvement. *Therefore, the first step to evangelizing teens is to be an evangelizing parish.* It is only within this context that young people will see a credible expression of faith that might hold their interest for the long haul.

Evangelizing Today's Teens

Just when Catholics were losing the nausea associated with the word and even getting the hang of evangelization, the rug was pulled out from under our feet. Here comes the post-modern teens. Highly resistant to our tried and true, but tired efforts, they seem undaunted by our best evangelistic punch. Like a mutated flu virus, they are impervious to the best of our evangelistic prescriptions. Many youth workers are finding the programs of the past aren't working with the youth of today.

The prevailing paradigm for Catholic youth ministry and religious education is programmatic in nature. Whether it is large events, retreats, religious education classes, or youth group meetings, our ministries are founded in and revolve around the programs we offer. Furthermore, the programming tends to be content driven. Teens gather in order to be informed and understand the truths of the Church. The problem is we tend to answer questions teens aren't asking – and in the process making a case for our own cultural irrelevancy. Too often, the church serves its own agenda by focusing on issues that are important to the church, but irrelevant to teens' lives. This especially occurs in confirmation preparation programs. When teens are hungering for something to numb the constant pain of their stress-filled lives, we dish out a plate of seasoned ecclesiology – and youth find it as spiritually appetizing as fried liver.

Second, we dispense our truths in an antiquated manner in which post-moderns do not connect. We offer rational truth when they are searching for experiential truth. For today's teen, truth is what works. Young people experience the reality of God's love by a consistent and practical demonstration that Christianity works and that God's love is real

Third, young people are not looking for programs that instill propositional truth, but credible communities that embody their truth. Teens come to understand who God is and the reality of God's love through the transparency and love of God's people. Evangelization is, therefore, both process and relational.

As much as we Catholics talked about “relational” youth ministry, it never fully ascended the throne of common praxis. In recent years, and in the wake of the sexual abuse crises, relational expressions of ministry are threatened to decline further. In an appropriate pursuit of protecting teens from sexual predators, we may also potentially protect them from any significant impact. Many leaders, primarily operating from a spirit of fear, have sanitized humanity from ministry by prohibiting any meaningful interpersonal contact. Don't misunderstand me – we must vigilantly protect teens through safe, appropriate, and prudent practices – but let's not sterilize our impact in the process. Teens need meaningful relationships with significant adults in order to grow spiritually. This is especially true with today's post-modern teens.

The Post-Modern Evangelizer

Post-modern teens are not attracted to the glare of slick words or polished programming. They prefer genuine people and real community. Young people today don't want an act, they want what's real. Evangelistic practices that emit the slightest whiff of religious arrogance – even with a benevolent undercoat-- are rejected as toxic. Therefore, the evangelizer must be the real deal – an honest

and credible witness – balancing integrity with authenticity by whole-heartedly living their faith, yet transparent about their own shortcomings.

The post-modern evangelizer must be accepting of others, disarming the morally despised with both gentleness and humility. Our attitude towards and how we relate to those we disagree with is often the litmus test that determines our credibility with both those with whom we differ and those who watch from the sidelines. Like Jesus, we must operate with profound humility, treating others with respect and dignity regardless of their lifestyle. We must also adopt a true servanthood approach, understanding the value of people, and laying down our lives for the sake of a soul. In other words, the evangelizer must be like Jesus.

The “great commission”⁸ is all about the church’s call to evangelization. But, great evangelization is all about the church’s call to live the “great commandment.” Jesus distilled the law and the prophets down to loving God with all one’s heart, mind, and strength and loving one’s neighbor as oneself (see Matthew 22:36-40). When the church unleashes all her spiritual horsepower in living the great commandment, she will become an irresistible force to the world.

Furthermore, Jesus stated that his disciples would be known by their love for one another (John 13:35). In other words, the foundation of our identity as a community of disciples is our love for others. That is who we are. The most impacting evangelistic tool the Church possesses is love. When we build a community that is characterized by love, involvement becomes irresistible. This is especially relevant to youth because most teens are operating with an affiliative faith – the faith of belonging.

Communicating the Good News⁹

One of the most difficult aspects of evangelization is what to say to those with whom we wish to share our faith. What is the message of evangelization? In the past, we relied on a series of propositional truths that communicated the basics of the *kerygma*. We spoke of God’s love, sin, repentance, and faith in Jesus Christ. This message will always be central to our faith, but not necessarily our starting point with today’s teen. In order to best understand the process of interpersonal evangelization, let’s observe Jesus’ approach.

⁸ Jesus’ command to preach the gospel to all the world, see Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8.

⁹ This section is adapted and based upon *Growing Teen Disciples: Strategies for Really Effective Youth Ministry* by Frank Mercadante. Winona MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2002. Copyright © Cultivation Ministries.

Jesus was not a one-size-fits-all evangelizer. He did not share the same message with everyone he was seeking to evangelize. By engaging people and relying on the Holy Spirit for guidance, he would spiritually diagnose those he was attempting to reach. Let's compare three interpersonal evangelistic encounters that Jesus experienced.

Zacchaeus the person (Luke 19: 1-10)

As a tax collector, Zacchaeus was not popular or liked by his fellow Jews. Yet his position did make him powerful and wealthy. Since the Scriptures make note of his small stature, maybe Zacchaeus had a "Napoleonic" or short person's complex and felt some level of inferiority or insecurity due to his size. Insecure people often seek positions of power, so that they can prove to themselves and others that they are not in fact inferior in any way. If Zacchaeus had sought out a way to be powerful and wealthy, at least in part motivated by a sense of insecurity, then being a tax collector was a good option. In other words, he was very likely trying to gain a sense of personal dignity through power and riches.

Jesus' approach

Jesus initiated the encounter. He honored Zacchaeus by singling him out and acknowledging him in the presence of a hostile crowd. Perhaps Zacchaeus' greatest need was simply to be endorsed by someone. Jesus expressed interest in Zacchaeus by inviting himself over for dinner. He accepted him for who he was and Zacchaeus was disarmed by that acceptance. No other religious leaders treated Zacchaeus like he was a person.

Zacchaeus' greatest longing was for acceptance, dignity and love. Jesus sensed this need and delivered a message (primarily with actions) that addressed the cravings of Zacchaeus' heart. The result was conversion.

Nicodemus the person (John 3:1-21)

Nicodemus was both a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. In other words, he enjoyed high religious position (like a Catholic cardinal today) and political clout. He was a first century somebody of Jewish Palestine.

Why did he come to see Jesus at night? He was probably not yet willing to fully associate with Jesus, even though he was curious. In essence, Nicodemus was not going to jeopardize his position and reputation.

Nicodemus was affected by pride, which was rooted in religious position and external practice. As a Jew, a son of Abraham, and a Pharisee, he was proud of his heritage and position among his people. In his mind, that was all he needed in order to be right before God. He trusted in the flesh, in external things. He was like a Catholic of today, who goes through the external motions of faith (I

am baptized and attend Mass), but his interior is unaffected (God is distant and in reality has little influence on my daily life).

Jesus' approach

Jesus told Nicodemus that even though he was a son of Abraham, he was missing something essential. Being born into the “chosen people” was not enough to be right before God. God does not have spiritual grandchildren – only children. We have to be born into the kingdom ourselves as children of God. This birth is characterized by an interior change of heart. A change was needed on the inside; external practices would never cut it. In other words, get real, stop going through empty religious motions, and authentically open your heart to God. Jesus’ message to Nicodemus was very different than his word to Zacchaeus. In each case, however, Jesus delivers the strand of the gospel that best addresses the spiritual needs and hungers of the individual.

Samaritan Woman as a person (John 4: 4-26)

She was at the well at noon and alone – a telltale sign that she was not highly esteemed by her female peers. Her lifestyle ostracized her; she had passed through a litany of broken marriages and was presently in an illicit affair. Her heart hungered to be cherished, loved, and cared for. She had a nagging spiritual thirst, but was futilely seeking to quench it through finding the right man. She was thirsting but never satisfied.

Jesus' approach

Jesus broke with custom and honored her by asking for a drink. Not only was it taboo for a man to speak to a woman alone, but even worse – she was a Samaritan, a hated enemy of the Jews. Most of the attention that she had ever had from men was probably based on their selfish desires. Jesus showed respect for her during their interaction.

Jesus uses the well as a powerful image, or metaphor, to illustrate her condition. He offers her Living Water – a substance that would satisfy her restless heart. She was trying to fill a God-shaped hole with temporal relationships, and Jesus offered her the substance that would fulfill her longing.

Jesus related to the Samaritan woman in a very different manner than he did with Zacchaeus or Nicodemus. In each case, Jesus diagnosed their greatest need and brought forth the strand of good news that best addressed their real hunger.

Jesus' style of interpersonal evangelization illustrates an essential evangelistic principle. Instead of using a standard or "canned" approach, we need to identify a person's need and tailor the message to address it. For someone who is lonely, we may present the gospel as a relationship with a Christ who cares and is the

friend of a lonely heart. To another who feels inferior, we may present the Jesus who validated our existence by dying for us. His death establishes how valuable we are to the Father. Another peer may always be anxious and worried about life. We may share how our Lord cares so much about us that he has the hairs on our head numbered.

The good news we share must be based on the Scriptures. We do not have the liberty to make up what *we* think is good news. If our message is contrary to the Scriptures and Church teaching, we are in error. It is important, therefore, to know the Scriptures and Church teaching. The Holy Spirit will then be able to draw from our previous deposits during the present time of need (Mark 13:11).¹⁰

Fostering in Catholic Teens an Evangelistic Spirituality

In the last forty years, the Church has made great strides in both its understanding and praxis of evangelization. As mainstream as evangelization is becoming, it has yet to settle into the every-day spirituality of the average Catholic. Therefore, as we consider the state of Catholic youth evangelization, one of the most important tasks of parish youth ministries and Catholic schools is to form an evangelistic outreach mentality in the next generation of Catholics. For the ministry of evangelization to make true headway in the Church, it has to enter the bloodstream of our Catholic spirituality.

Evangelization is as Catholic as the Eucharist, yet it has not been integrated into our Catholic spirituality in the same way. Catholics do not yet commonly share both the value and practice of evangelization as an essential expression of what it means to live out their Catholic faith. If we hope to change our world, we must become, as an entire Church, an evangelizing people. *Additionally, if we hope to develop a parish youth ministry that has a comprehensive evangelistic approach (instead of an isolated evangelistic program), we need to build a culture of evangelization.* We must integrate into our Catholic spirituality the call to share the good news of Jesus Christ with those around us. The following steps can help us develop an evangelistic spirituality in both our adult and teen leaders.

Model, live, and illustrate an evangelistic spirituality as a leader.

As leaders, we must set the standard for those around us. If we are not evangelizing, we cannot expect others to do so. We should make a point to share our progress in evangelization (both the victories and struggles) with our fellow youth workers and teen leaders during the times we are gathered. By the

¹⁰ This section is taken from *Growing Teen Disciples* by Frank Mercadante. Winona MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2002, pp. 149-151. Copyright © Cultivation Ministries. Used with permission.

example of our own life, we illustrate what it means to intentionally and spontaneously share our faith.

Help foster in teens a personal, meaningful, and real relationship with Jesus.

The Apostle Paul revealed his motivation for proclaiming the gospel when he spoke of being compelled by the love of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14). He also stated that all things previously important to him were but rubbish in light of knowing Jesus (Philippians 3:7-8). Being in a meaningful, personal relationship with Jesus is a natural motivation for evangelizing. The richness of this experience compels us to want others to have it for themselves.

As leaders, we must help foster in teens a personal and intimate relationship with Christ. If we give teens the vocabulary, the tools, and the communal support to truly know and love Christ, they will naturally want to share their experience with others – and that is evangelization.

Teach and reinforce that people deeply matter to God.

The Lord was always looking out for the lost. Jesus invested his entire life for the sole benefit of others. His words, actions, and lifestyle demonstrated his deep love and care for all people. His final act of love on earth – dying on our behalf, was indicative of his entire life.

As cliché as it may sound, the fact is – Jesus loves everyone. He is crazy in love with those we can hardly tolerate, let alone like. The people around us – whom we may love and cherish, find difficult or annoying, or not even know exist – are passionately loved by Jesus. Their eternal destiny is everything to him – and it needs to become a priority in our own lives. We must learn to value a soul beyond anything else, and pass on this value to both adult and teen leaders. People will evangelize when they realize that the Lord loves people, and has entrusted us with the task of populating his eternal Kingdom.

Design outreach programming that is intentional in reaching the unevangelized.

Once our team members have caught the importance of inviting others to hear and experience God's personal love, we must provide programmatic support for their efforts. Too often, teens have very little programming to which they can bring an outside friend and feel confident that their friend is going to hear the gospel in a compelling way. Teens need an evangelistic venue to which they can bring their friends in order to share their faith. We should offer programming that articulates the gospel in a clear and relevant manner that teens can use as a springboard for further conversations of faith with their friends. Any youth ministry that wants teens to both value and practice evangelization must offer programming that is intentional in proclaiming the gospel. Finally, we should continually encourage teens to invite their friends to these events.

Provide teens with the training, tools, resources, skills, and accountability to share their faith with others.

Personally modeling evangelization, instilling a heart for the eternal destinies of others, and providing evangelistic programming support is not enough to fully instill an evangelistic spirituality in teens. To become an evangelizer, teens need training on how to share their faith interpersonally. Both our adult and teen leaders should be equipped to share their faith journey in a way that concretely illustrates the good news. Leaders should be able to invite others into a new or deeper relationship with Christ. The evangelizer should be comfortable and possess the ability to pray with those whom they are seeking to evangelize. In other words, we need to form skilled evangelizers who are capable in sharing their faith at any time, and hold one another accountable to Jesus' call to proclaim the gospel to all creation (Mark 15:16).¹¹

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