

Keys for Welcoming Catholics Back to the Lord's Table

by John and Therese Boucher

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Ever wonder why the path from religious education sessions to Sunday liturgies is too complicated or uninteresting for many parents? Ever wonder what we can do to help? We are not alone. The 2008 *Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among U.S. Catholics* study reports that only 23 percent of American Catholics regularly attend Sunday Mass

(cara.georgetown.edu/sacraments.html).

This means that 77 percent are missing and are in need of invitations to come back and see themselves as invaluable members of our local parishes. We propose seven doors that lead to the Lord's Table and that we can help unlock for those who do not regularly attend church. Together we hold many keys to faith, if we choose to use them in the name of Jesus, the Christ.

The Universal Church encourages us to reach out to all the baptized. "The time has also come for a new

evangelization in the West, where many of those baptized lead totally un-Christian lives and more and more persons maintain some links to the faith but have little or a poor knowledge of it . . . "This particularly concerns countries and nations of the so-called First World, in which [conditions promote] a life lived 'as if God did not exist'" (Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, Lineamenta*, no. 9, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineamenta-xiii-assembly_en.html).

Seven Doors into Parish Life

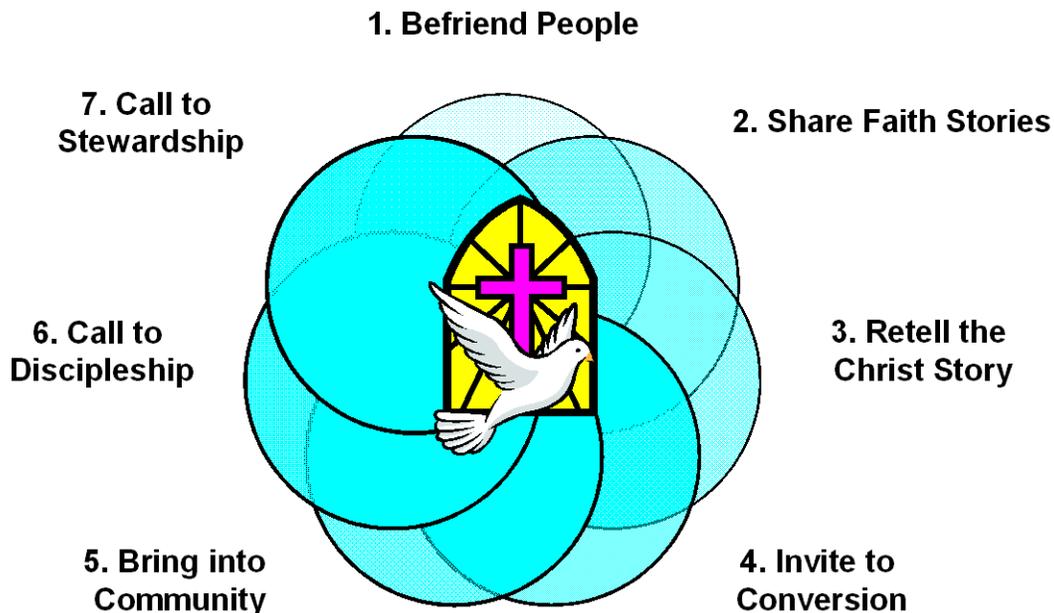
Simply put, evangelizing means consciously opening doors that can lead to new faith for inactive Catholics. It means identifying, strengthening, and successfully using seven doors into parish life, or seven complimentary

stages in the parish evangelization process. These stages are not new, and they are rooted in the New Testament and in the teaching of the Church:

1. Befriend people.
2. Share faith stories .
3. Retell the Christ story.
4. Invite to conversion.
5. Bring into community.
6. Call to discipleship.
7. Call to stewardship.

others, the proclamation of the Gospel, a call to conversion, the catechumenate, and formation of community through reception of the sacraments (see Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, nos. 10-18, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]). Pope Paul VI also referred to these stages when he wrote in an apostolic exhortation, “Evangelization, as we have said, is a complex process made up of varied

Stages in the Evangelization Process



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On the Church's Missionary Activity, a decree in the documents of Vatican Council II, describes these steps as part of a dynamic process of evangelizing that includes Christian witness, dialogue, a charitable presence to

elements: the renewal of humanity, witness, explicit proclamation, inner adherence, entry into the community, acceptance of signs, apostolic initiative. . . . [We must] relate these elements rather than place them in opposition, one to the other, in order to

reach a full understanding of the Church's evangelizing activity" (*Evangelization in the Modern World [Evangelii Nuntiandi]*, no. 24, www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html).

And finally, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* assumes an appreciation of this entire process when it states, "The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church: it must be preceded by evangelization, faith, and conversion. It can then produce its fruits in the lives of the faithful: new life in the Spirit, involvement in the mission of the Church, and service to her unity" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 1072).

1. Befriend People

Welcoming and befriending inactive Catholics is at the heart of reaching out. It happens at the doors of the church, through parish programming, at picnics, through an Internet presence. The list is endless. Befriending means building quality relationships in families, in parishes, and when we serve others through works of charity and social justice.

2. Share Faith Stories

We encourage faith sharing when we listen in a caring way to life stories and ask, "What does this mean for you?" or "What roles does faith play in your life?" We also encourage faith when we share similar experiences and the ways that God has been present in our own lives.

And we affirm faith when we acknowledge new steps toward God or toward the Church.

3. Retell the Christ Story

We can help open the door to Jesus. The Good News of the Gospel is that we are not alone. When the time is right, we can share our understanding of Jesus, who is Shepherd, Lord, Brother, and Redeemer. By sharing this news, we put flesh on the tenets of the Apostle's Creed, our baptismal vows, and even the Sign of the Cross. Our confidence in God's love becomes contagious.

4. Invite to Conversion

When someone's lifelong journey of faith gets sidetracked or halted, we can offer inactive Catholics an awareness of Christ's loving presence. We can facilitate new encounters with Jesus Christ. We can invite someone into reflective silence or into praying aloud with us, asking the Holy Spirit's help to rediscover Jesus and to welcome the embrace of the Church.

5. Bring into Community

Jesus is already present to all the baptized. But we can affirm the actions of the Holy Spirit who draws us all together. When the time is right, we can invite someone to a small or large gathering of our faith community or to an evangelizing parish event. If our invitation is rejected, we refocus on God's unconditional love for those we invite.

We may also invite inactive Catholics to return to the Eucharist, as we seek God's guidance about engaging

them in the fuller, deeper life of discipleship within the parish. For example, we might seek meaningful ways to include inactive Catholics whose marriages are not recognized by the Church and cannot receive the Eucharist.

6. Call to Discipleship

We can open the door to more meaningful Catholic discipleship by extending ongoing, open-ended invitations to let Jesus transform every part of our personalities, actions, relationships, and choices. We can call them to a life of love and faithfulness through the vocations of marriage, single life, religious life, or the priesthood. We can help them explore faith in daily life as the key to transforming the world. We can assist them in exploring ways to apply Gospel values at home, in the community, and in society at large.

7. Call to Stewardship

We can invite others to service in God's name, to consecrate gifts and resources by laying them at the apostles' feet just as the early Christians did (see Acts 4:35). We can encourage stewardship as a normal flowering of discipleship. Stewardship is not the same as philanthropy. One hundred percent is given to God. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' document *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* speaks of stewardship as the fruit of intentional discipleship to Jesus Christ, lived out in the Church and the world (www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/stewardship/).

Promote the Evangelization Process

Engaging inactive Catholics in this process can help eliminate the revolving door experience they have with the Church. The evangelization process is a dynamic spiral and an ongoing journey toward the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It gradually draws inactive Catholics deeper into the larger parish community, echoing the RCIA/catechumenate process. So we need to examine each stage as it happens in our parish, realizing that stages might happen simultaneously and in no particular order. Then we might ask these questions: How can a particular stage be more deeply rooted in the Gospel and reflect life in Jesus Christ? How can each stage become a more successful doorway to fuller participation in our parish? Which stage needs the most attention? Which stage gives a particular person the best opportunities to use his or her gifts, according to the prompting of the Holy Spirit?

And finally, this process is most fruitful when we use our gifts alongside all the members of the Body of Christ. Evangelizing is not just the ministry of a few individuals. It is everyone's call! Jesus addresses everyone when he says, "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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:19-20).

Bear Witness to Jesus, the Word of God

Pope Paul VI explains this challenge further. “Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelization: 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” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 24).

So let us encourage each other to proclaim Jesus, evangelize, and seek

training in everyday faith-sharing skills, so we might open doors to faith and to the Lord’s Table. Let us open all the doors for reaching inactive Catholics. And let us imitate St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, who prayed, “This will be my main interest, the purpose of all my steps, my comings and goings; . . . to love Jesus, to seek Jesus, to speak of Jesus and to make Jesus known” (Mary Louise Sullivan, MSC, *Mother Cabrini, “Italian Immigrant of the Century”* [New York: Center for Migration Studies of New York, 1992], 164).

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