

# The Evangelizing Parish Today

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While I have written about this topic before, with Fr. Kenneth Boyack, in *Creating the Evangelizing Parish* (Paulist, 1994), the topic certainly deserves another look. In the past 20 years, the whole world seems to have been turned upside down in terms of Catholic life — and in terms of the environment in

which we are called to be Christ's people. The recent "Synod on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith" underscored the issue in its very title. Is it possible, given the wider culture we have today, even to pass on the faith?

Anyone in parish and catechetical work understands that we seem to have entered into a brave, new world when it comes to attitude toward faith. We once could count on the faith being transmitted through the help of families, cultures, and various religious education programs. Today, families are in various states of health and disarray. Cultures no longer indentify exclusively with a particular religious identity. Children feel a need to reinvent themselves as part of growing up, often throwing off their family and religious identity in order to "find themselves."

We can elaborate some of the unease of modern people, and modern culture, by pointing out two dramatic needs widely felt in contemporary life: meaning and community.

## MEANING

Broader culture sells a very strange scenario to modern people — who swallow this scenario with hardly any awareness. I call this the "molecular" theory of existence. Somehow, in the vastly distant past, a "singularity" occurred in which an infinitely small entity, containing all the potential matter of the universe, suddenly exploded. This was 13 or maybe 14 billion years ago. And from that explosion, the components of molecules and atoms formed, making various kinds of gas which coalesced into stars. Wouldn't you know it? Planets formed around these stars, making them into suns — billions of them all over the universe, with billions of potential planets circling around them. And (who could believe it?) certain planets circling certain kinds of stars just happened to develop in certain ways that simple living cells developed. These simple living cells multiplied and mutated, combined and cooperated, to

make living creatures, from amoeba to plankton, from fishes to frogs, from reptiles to mammals, from monkeys to humans.

So what does this make us? Hmmm. . . . An unplanned accident. An unexplained phenomenon (except in terms of mindless chemical processes). An anomaly of existence? We'll spend billions trying to find other life "out there," so we can explain our absurdity to each other, exchanging information about our mechanical and technological progress, so we can make life better for future generations who will undoubtedly want to explore their absurdity in turn.

I believe Americans walk around today with these images which are really half-digested myths, extrapolations of scientific observations into philosophical and spiritual realms that they cannot explain. This creates one of the key issues that parishes need to address for people today: a coherent sense of meaning and purpose. This also creates enormous possibilities for a parish's various ministries of the word — from preaching, to initial proclamation and invitation, to the Catechumenate, to the formation of children and adults, to Scripture study and sharing.

So, a first step for parishes is to review *how they do the ministry of the word* in its various forms in a parish. Because it is from this ministry that people will begin to form an alternative to the "molecule theory," and come to a vision of an absolutely loving and generous God, from whom the marvel of existence emerges — a marvel that half a moment's contemplation will reveal. And this font of absolute love, flowing from Father through Son and Spirit, surrounds us with beauty; even more, when humans distort existence itself through selfishness and sin, this font of love comes to us as healing, forgiveness, and salvation.

A parish which does the ministry of the word effectively will also be serving the ministry of conversion precisely because it is the word that calls us to respond, love calling to love, in confidence, trust, and faith. Although most Catholics have a sense that this love, confidence, trust, and faith is part of their experience, most of them have not come to think of these human dimensions as an ordinary part of their lives. Catholics have come to think of themselves more in institutional terms (e.g., members of a parish that has buildings and financial obligations, doing what God requires of us in order to escape hell)

than in relational terms (e.g., disciples of Jesus in community, celebrating and sharing his life with the world).

So a check-list is quite easy to develop in this area:

- \* How are the Scriptures proclaimed at Eucharist?
- \* Does the preaching both engage the congregation and further the ministries of the word?
- \* Is the parish cultivating frequent opportunities to experience conversion (through prayer groups, retreats, sacramental experiences)? Does it talk and act conversion?
- \* Is religious education for children geared to the evangelization of families, so they become circles of the word lived in daily life?
- \* Is all religious formation in our parish calling our parishioners to ongoing discipleship?
- \* Are our parishioners studying and sharing the Scriptures?
- \* How vibrant is our RCIA, and an enveloping sense of the Catechumenate (conversion and sacrament) in our parish?
- \* Are our parishioners inviting others to share in their experiences of the word of God, of Jesus, and conversion?
- \* Is our parish reaching out to groups which tend to be tangential to the practice of faith today — youth, young adults, young parents?
- \* Is our parish actively inviting people to experience Jesus in our Catholic community?

These are initial, essential ways to begin addressing the modern question surrounding human meaning.

## COMMUNITY

There is yet another question that modern people have; this one revolving around issues of community. As communication and travel intensify, our connections with each other become quick, coincidental, electronic, casual, and non-committal. Parents worry about this all the time when they look at the cellphone, iPod, hook-up universe in which they are trying to raise their children. Modern life has made it possible for people to enter an extended adolescence, from 16 through 35, prolonging the felt need for any substantial commitment to another, and any substantial dealing with the possibility of children. This prolonged state amplifies the opportunities for young people to connect and disconnect with each other and their families, making relationships frail and tangential.

Of course, I recognize that the picture I have painted is a bit overstated, but only a bit. I know that people develop strong attachments, which often grow into strong commitments. My remarks are only to point to the difficult environment in which people have to form these attachments and commitments. For all the success people find in developing stable relationships, our courts document countless failures in marriage and collapses of family life, with children torn between contending parties. (By the way, the Synod of 2012 talked

extensively of family as providing the essential environment through which people learn the basic human vocabulary of faith — trust, acceptance, generosity, love — which makes the passing on of faith even possible.)

Beyond the family, other structures of community are also frayed, beginning with our ability to discourse civilly about our common political problems, the growing gaps between those with more resources and those with less, the tortured postures around immigration (and immigrants!), the lack of commitment of corporations to workers, and the sheer mobility of people in society today, felt most of all by young adults and young families. If, in fact, people marry ten to 15 years later than they used to, then that is more than a decade of people having the opportunity to postpone those decisions that bring about the greatest cohesion in life — spouse, family, career, ownership of a house, and children.

What is the role of parish in the midst of all this connection and disconnection between people? Obviously, parish should itself be a model of community, and parish should be exemplary in the way it portrays dynamics of community. If community is one of the great searches of modern people (even if they cannot clearly articulate that), the parishes who are not speaking and living community will appear to have little to say to people. Even more, the inability to portray bonds of community between members will inadvertently diminish the capacity of people to experience bonds with Jesus Christ.

Certainly the experience of congregations in America is instructive, those congregations which show Americans coming together to form a church group. (This is a very different ecclesiology than we Catholics have, because our root of community comes from the bishop's role as shepherd and evangelizer of his whole diocese, which happens mostly through our Catholic parishes.) American Protestant congregationalism shows people coming together with community as a huge force of cohesion among the members. Megachurches, which emphasize community and participation, are really a modern form and outgrowth of Protestant churches which formerly dotted smaller communities before suburban life became our default American life. These huge churches evince strong welcome, acceptance, belonging, service, participation in ministry, and outreach to others. Although some studies hint at a slowdown in the growth of these megachurches, there is hardly an area in the country which does not boast of several of these churches, each with thousands of people (many of them formerly Catholic) who feel a strong bond with fellow members, their congregation, and Jesus. These congregations are responding to this primary, American, modern need of community.

How are Catholic parishes responding to this need of community? This would be an excellent second prism for looking at a parish and its capacity to be evangelizing in today's culture. When I talk publicly and vaguely reference how Catholics often are toward each other (when they even notice each other!), people chuckle in painful recognition. I often talk



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about three ladies whom I met at our huge parish in New York over 30 years ago: “Father, we love coming to your church because it’s so big we don’t have to sit next to each other.” This behavior finds echo in all those churches where the back third of the congregation disappears after Holy Communion. What are people saying? With the Body of Christ fresh inside them, by their swift exit, are they not saying, “We love you, but we just cannot wait to get away from you?”

Many parishes, to be sure, have begun some kind of welcome ministry which at least facilitates people through the threshold of the church building. Many, too, have instituted what is comically called the eighth sacrament of the church — coffee and donuts after Mass. But almost all our parishes have difficulty cultivating a sense of warm inclusion and bonding throughout the whole parish experience. We call ourselves the Body of Christ, but we behave like members who are so cold that we often look dead. Part of this might be cultural; not all groups should be expected to express themselves the way, say, African Americans or Latinos do. But when one visits these ethnic groups, one knows that there is no experience of church without also an experience of community.

What might be things that parishes could look at? Here’s a beginners list:

- \* In what ways are we welcoming all people who come to our church? Especially visitors? Especially people who are new to our neighborhood?
- \* How do we cultivate a sense of community in our parish?
- \* How do we identify, deal with, and overcome divisions in our community?
- \* How do we welcome the strange, the foreigner, the homeless?
- \* How effective are we at inviting people to parish events? To school events? To the Mass?
- \* How often do we try to reach out to our registered members (40 percent of whom are probably never or rarely in church)?
- \* How do we help parishioners socialize before and after Mass? Before and after important meetings? At large parish celebrations and events?
- \* How does our parish hospitality extend to nursing homes, shelters, food kitchens, and other places of service?
- \* How does our parish involve itself in neighborhood events? With other neighborhood and civic groups? With broader community efforts of outreach and service?
- \* How ecumenical is our parish? Does it ever gather with other Christians? Do we ever join with people of



other major world faiths for prayer, communication, or service?

In doing this reflection (what a great agenda this would make for a pastoral council over a four or five month period), it is important that parishes keep in mind the difference between communities and clubs. Clubs presume the membership of others, and implicitly exclude non-members either by rule or by behavior. My extremely rare visits to country clubs have all reinforced for me that fact that I am not a member! Communities, on the other hand, explicitly desire to include the other, to bring in new people, to grow by the warm embrace of the other, the stranger.

It is painfully obvious that Jesus' primary ministry was reaching just those people who were excluded from the various religious groupings (clubs) of his day — painful because that is the norm against which our parishes have to be evaluated. How do our parishes look like Jesus? Like his kingdom? Like his gatherings? For many people, the perception is that our parishes pretty much exist for themselves and their own activities (Mass and educating children), making us look like we are focused on ourselves as institutions, and on institutions as property and buildings. This is exactly the wrong kind of signal to be sending out to a society looking for community.

My book, *Mission America: Challenges and Opportunities for Catholics Today*, expands upon these themes and presents an elaborated agenda for Catholic parishes today. Written for parish staffs and leaders, it can help change us from stuttering about evangelization to actually designing parishes that evangelize. Our parish renewal program, "Living the Eucharist/Vive La Eucaristía," reinforces dynamics of sharing and discipleship for three seasons of Lent. Parishes have resources to reflect and act.

### **Evangelizing Parishes**

We have many images of liturgy and religious education in our heads; some of them very good, some of them not so good. But at least we have them. Unfortunately, we have hardly any images of what evangelizing parishes look like. Perhaps in a city there might be one or two Catholic parishes that seem to "be alive" and be places where people flock. But most of our parishes have no imagination when it comes to thinking about growing, reaching out through invitation, and bringing people to an encounter with Jesus Christ.

This is not a good prognosis for us Catholics. Since 1975 we have been talking about evangelization. In some decades, this talk has generated some initial behaviors — bishops had directors of evangelization, and parishes even formed evangeli-

zation teams. But those years came and went, with hardly any of the evangelizing apparatus intact. Bishops merged evangelization with catechesis or simply closed (or defunded) offices; parishes gave up on evangelization teams as soon as the interested pastor or parishioner had to move on. Once again the church is talking about evangelization, but it is considerably diminished (except for Africa) from where we were in 1975: fewer parishes, older Catholics, more marginal Catholics, less energy, much less money. In other words, in terms of evangelization, we have lost 40 years of progress.

Parishes can begin to reverse this decline if they accept the missionary mandate that is inherent in their very existence — to fulfill the apostolic mandate that Jesus gave his Apostles which we Catholics understand as communicated in a direct link with our bishops. Pointing to the obvious theological underpinnings of evangelization, however, will not mean as much as will our orienting Catholic parishes to the two salient needs that people have today: the quest for meaning

and the search for community. Jesus has powerful answers for modern people, answers which our Catholic parishes can make available in strong and viable ways. Meaning and community are what Catholicism is all about.

We are now at a crossroad. We have benefited enormously by

the immigration of Latinos who have swelled our Catholic numbers, allowing us to hide the millions who have slipped out (and continue to slip out) our front doors. If we are almost 70 million strong in the United States, the shame is that we should be 95 million strong. These are millions of people whose lives are poorer because they do not have the word of God and the sacraments of Jesus Christ, the community of the faithful, and the social vision of the church, as resources in their lives. We cannot easily absolve ourselves from our responsibility for the lack these millions of people suffer because of our "automatic pilot" vision of parish.

Rather than rue this huge flaw, parishes can begin to reverse the trend of the past 40 years by retrieving the pastoral vision that modern popes have powerfully laid before us. We have so much to say. We have so much to offer for peoples' richer lives. We have so much to give. On the other side, people have needs that stand like open chasms waiting to be filled. It's a good combination — what we have, what people seek. We should start believing that this is a match made in heaven, what our parishes can be, mated with the deepest longings of Americans today. ■

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