

Ways of Witnessing: How Catholics can regain their footing when it comes to spreading the faith

By: Emily Stimpson. Our Sunday Visitor

According to Dr. Tim Gray, president and professor of the Augustine Institute, in Denver, that about sums up the attitude of most American Catholics' toward evangelization.

“To lots of Catholics, the word ‘evangelization’ is a strange, foreign thing,” Gray told Our Sunday Visitor. “It makes them uncomfortable.”

It also makes them think of Protestants, added Father James Wehner, rector of the Pontifical Seminary Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, and author of the forthcoming book “The Evangelization Equation” (Emmaus Road, 2010).

“When Catholics hear the word ‘evangelization,’ they almost automatically think of Protestant preachers standing on street corners handing out tracts,” He said. “And when they hear they’re supposed to be evangelizing, they retreat because that’s what they think evangelization is.”

Inculturation Mentality

Evangelization is not simply about street corner preaching, although that is much more a hallmark of American evangelical Protestantism than of American Catholicism. Most evangelicals sponsor missions and missionaries, are intentional about inviting friends and family members to Bible studies and church events, and feel perfectly comfortable asking strangers if they know Jesus—all things from which most, but not all, Catholics shy away.

Accordingly, when the former Protestant (and current Catholic Answers apologist) Tim Staples entered the Catholic Church, he was shocked by the attitude toward evangelization that he found among his fellow Catholics.

“As a Southern Baptist and later as a Pentecostal, we were all about evangelization,” he said. “We wanted to take over the world for Jesus. Then, when I became Catholic, I came into a culture where, in some quarters, evangelization had a bad name.”

Protestants' corner on the evangelization market, however, has been a relatively recent phenomenon. In the early centuries of the Church, fervor for evangelization spread the faith throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Later, Catholic missionaries were among the first to arrive on America's shores.

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But as soon as lay Catholics began settling the American East Coast, a distinct minority amongst the Protestant majority, that forthrightness disappeared.

In fact, according to Gray, as a way of showing their Protestant neighbors how nonthreatening they were, the first American seminary- St. Mary's in Baltimore-actually removed the traditional course on evangelization (then called "mission") from its curriculum. Other seminaries, as they were established, followed suit.

With their priests lacking any understanding of the importance of evangelization (let alone how to go about it), Catholics in the pews didn't fare much better.

"They wanted to inculturate themselves into American society," said Father Wehner. "And in the process, they almost forgot what it meant to be both Catholic and American. Many ended up thinking the two were mutually exclusive, and often American was put before Catholic."

Although the Church today is no longer an immigrant church, the attitude lingers. And it has been made worse, said Stella Jeffrey, by prevailing cultural values.

Jeffrey, who ran the Office of Evangelization in the Diocese of Fargo, N.D., for nine years before leaving to do doctoral studies at the John Paul II Institute in Washington D.C., explained: "So much of it goes back to the way we've been brought up. We've been taught that religion is private, that it's not an appropriate topic of conversation, and that if we say Christ is the savior for everyone, we're being intolerant."

"Tolerance is considered a great virtue in our society," she continued. "And too many Catholics have bought into the idea that to evangelize it to be intolerant."

Staples believes that the internecine conflict within the Church in the years since the Second Vatican Council hasn't helped either.

"Catholic spirituality turned in on itself, and there's been lots of navel gazing," Staples said. In the process, we've lost the sense that the Church is both Marian and Petrine. There is a certain primacy to the notion that we must receive-be the Bride of Christ-before we can give, but we've lost the balance between the two. What is supposed to be a feminine spirituality has become effeminate, and we've lost the Petrine dimension, the masculine spirituality that wants to take over the world for Jesus."

That dimension, however, is a vital part of the Church's identity. "In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* [a 1975 apostolic exhortation by Pope Paul VI], Paul VI made it clear that evangelization and missions work aren't just one of many activities the Church does; they're at the very

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heart of who the Church is. The Church can't be Church without evangelization," said Gray.

Nor can Catholics be Catholics without also being evangelists.

"*Evangelii Nuntiandi* tells us that evangelism is not an option for individuals. It's part of the essence of who we are," said Staples.

Part of what it means to evangelize is to be a living witness to the faith. Pope Paul and other pontiffs after him reiterated that if the words with which we proclaim the faith are not backed up by a life that testifies to the truth of those words, the message proclaimed will lose its power. But that doesn't mean the words don't need to be said.

The second Vatican council's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity names four ways in which the laity is to proclaim the Gospel: through the witness of their lives; through works of corporal and spiritual mercy; by renewing the temporal order as responsible citizens; and by speaking about Christ.

That fourth action is necessary, Staples said, "because even the finest witness will prove ineffective if it's not explained and justified."

Attitude adjustment

There are consequences to being an "ineffective" witness.

There are consequences for individual Catholics: "If we're not being witnesses, we're cutting off the grace and power of God in our lives," say Staples.

And there are consequences for the Church as a whole: "Too many Catholics aren't even evangelized themselves," said Gray. "They've been catechized but never told the importance of committing their lives to Christ, and so they, in turn, fail to catechize as well as evangelize their children."

Then, there are the consequences for non-Catholics.

"Every person has been made by God for God," said Jeffrey. "Religion is not a nice little thing that good people do. We need to be part of the family of God. People need to hear that. But, because of our failure to share the Gospel, there are people who won't hear it."

And as Father Wehner pointed out, the more the culture is made up of people who haven't heard the Gospel the more the culture will suffer.

"Evangelization is what allows for a healthy, fruitful, holy culture," he said.

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The Church Catholics, non-Catholics and the culture need Catholics to evangelize. But how? How can Catholics break a habit nearly two centuries old of keeping the faith to themselves?

It starts with an attitude adjustment.

“Catholics don’t want to come off as arrogant,” said Gray. “They worry that they’ll insult people by sharing their faith with them. What Catholics have to understand, however, is that sharing the faith can really be an act of humility. We’re all sinners, but Christ has left us with the fullness of the faith. When we share the faith we need to think of ourselves as beggars who’ve found bread and who want to share it with other beggars.”

Tools of the trade

Catholics also need to take advantage of all the resources available today to improve their understanding of church teaching.

“Without knowledge of the faith, a spirit of wimpiness comes upon us,” said Staples. “When the Mormon comes knocking at the door, we hide the kids behind the couch and shut the baby up until they stop knocking because we’re not prepared to engage in a dialogue with them. If you don’t have an intellectual knowledge of the faith, you become a coward.”

Becoming a better evangelist also requires getting your prayer life in order. To do that, Father Wehner recommends regularly spending time with the Blessed Sacrament in the Eucharistic Adoration.

“When we adore the Lord, he generously blesses us with the graces we need to live and proclaim his Word,” he said.

There is also a great deal parishes can and should be doing to spread the faith locally. “Evangelization needs to be structured into a parish’s life,” said Jeffrey. “Nobody ever asks, ‘Should we do religious education this year or shouldn’t we?’ What we ask is, ‘We know we’re going to do religious education this year, so how are we going to do it?’ the same should be true of evangelization.”

During her nine years in Fargo, Jeffrey helped the diocese’s parishes find ways to make evangelization a normal part of their routine. Some parishes did that by making a concerted effort to invite people to RCIA or other parish events. Others formed accountability groups that met regularly to talk about people’s experiences with sharing the faith. A few parishes even formed teams that went door to door in different

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neighborhoods. They would introduce themselves, say which parish they were from, and ask people if they had questions about the faith. The response, said Jeffrey, was overwhelmingly positive.

“Most people thanked us for coming,” she said.

In addition to the parish-based efforts, the diocese also formed a “Young Disciples Team,” inviting the young people from across the country to come to North Dakota every summer and spend 10 weeks catechizing and evangelizing in the diocese’s small towns and Native American reservation. The program will celebrate its tenth anniversary this summer.

Jeffrey’s work, as well as the work of Fargo’s parishioners and the young people who’ve given up their summers to evangelize in North Dakota, are signs that slowly but surely, some Catholics are overcoming their reservations about evangelization. According to Gray, many of these Catholics are part of the “John Paul II Generation” and, like others across the country, found their faith in the midst of his call for a “New Evangelization.”

For them, he said, “evangelization is part of an exciting, new, if still somewhat mysterious, moment in the church.”

Father Wehner sees the same growing enthusiasm for evangelization among his seminarians and younger members of the clergy.

“They’re excited about talking about Christ in Starbucks or using social-communications tools like Facebook or blogs to share the faith,” he said. “And I’ve seen the Holy Spirit bless their efforts.”

Those seminarians and priests are discovering what Jeffrey discovered going door to door in North Dakota: People want what Catholics have to share.

According to Gray, the reason for that positive response (and something Catholics need to keep in mind when the fear of evangelization takes hold) is that “most human beings have a desire for spirituality.”

He explained: “The modern media and the cultural elites make it seem like people aren’t interested in hearing about religion, but that’s simply not the case. When you start sharing your faith with people, you’ll be surprised by just how interested they are.”

Do’s & Don’t’s

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Do be humble: “Evangelizing is not proselytizing,” said Tim Gray, president and professor at the Augustine Institute, in Denver. “It’s important to evangelize in a way that is winsome and not arrogant.”

Don’t treat people like projects: “The last thing you want to do is beat somebody over the head with some formula for evangelization that you’ve heard about,” said Catholic Answers apologist Tim Staples. “Build a friendship. Jesus didn’t launch into a discourse on Trinitarian theology as soon as he met the Samaritan woman at the well. He asked her for a drink of water, then he talked with her about her life. Evangelization is about getting to know people, talking, entering into a dialogue. Then you build on that.”

Do talk about your own experiences: Explained Gray: “Instead of starting off by telling people you want to make them a Catholic, share with them instead how the Eucharist is an important part of your spirituality. Whatever your experience is, use it as a springboard for conversation.”

Don’t shy away from talking about faith at work: “Just share little things at a time about what you believe,” said Gray. “Over time, people will come to you with questions. You don’t have to wear your faith on your sleeve, but you’re not supposed to hide your light under a basket either.”

Do invite people to events at your parish such as RCIA, Bible studies and faith-formation classes, as well as social events: “If we aren’t inviting people, we can’t complain about them not coming.” Said Stella Jeffrey, former director of evangelization for the Diocese of Fargo, N.D. “That would be like me saying: ‘I don’t know why people don’t come to my house for dinner. I keep waiting and waiting for someone to invite themselves.’ That would be ridiculous. Well, the same goes for something like RCIA. In fact, the first moment of RCIA-the pre-catechumenate-is all about going out, letting people know we’re here and inviting them in.”

Do study your faith: “There are lots of great resources for learning about the faith and lots more that are devoted to apologetics,” said Staples. “Catholic Answers, Catholics United for the Faith, St. Joseph Communications, plus all the Catholic media outlets-print, radio, TV, online. Take advantage of what they offer so that you can become more confident talking about the faith.”

Don’t fall into the trap of thinking you need to be an expert before you can evangelize: “We’re a culture of experts and think only experts can do things,” said Gray. “But [Pope] John Paul II said you only need two things to evangelize: to know and love Jesus, and to know and love modern man.”

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Don't expect instantaneous conversions: "Evangelization doesn't happen in a moment," said Jeffrey. "It takes time."

Do back up your words with actions: Explained Father James Wehner, rector of the Pontifical Seminary Josephinum, "If you're living a fractured lifestyle where you have not allowed the Gospel to impact your heart, you become part of the problem."