

Gearing Up for the New Evangelization

Martin Pable, O.F.M. Cap.

Not long ago Pope Benedict XVI established the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization. The concept of “a new evangelization” is not new. It was proposed as an urgent task for the Church by Blessed John Paul II a few years before he died. But the concept has remained largely vague and undefined. So I was pleased to read recently some very helpful clarifications. They were proposed by “the papal preacher,” Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, who gives a series of retreat-like conferences to the pope and his household every Advent and Lent.

In his four-week series for Advent 2011, Father Raniero presented an interesting history of evangelization over the centuries. The first phase of evangelization took place from

the time of the apostles to around the fall of the Roman Empire in A.D. 476. It was carried out mainly by the bishops, pastors and apologists who had the daunting task of bringing the message of the Gospel to both Jews and pagans of the Roman Empire. In some times and places they, along with the lay faithful, were persecuted and even martyred for their witness to Christ. But the faith continued to grow. The Christian preachers and writers made a strong case for the reasonableness of the faith, while the laity won people over by their loving and joyful spirit.

When the Roman Empire collapsed under the onslaught of the barbarian invasions, the Church turned

its evangelizing effort toward these new pagans. The task was carried out mainly by the monks. Their monasteries became centers of education for the barbarian peoples of northern and western Europe, and the monks themselves left their monasteries in order to proclaim the Gospel to these new peoples. As many of the kings and chieftains became Christians, their people also embraced the new faith.

The third phase began with the discovery of the New World. This was the era of the great missionary activity of the active religious orders: Franciscans and Jesuits in the Americas, and various missionary societies evangelizing Africa. Included were many communities of women reli-

IN BRIEF

- History of evangelization
- The ‘New’ Evangelization
- Felt needs of the unchurched
- What’s the point?
- Connecting with unchurched Harry and Mary
- Making a difference beyond the parish



The challenge of the New Evangelization? We need to be convinced that our Catholic faith is a treasure that we are able to share with seekers of the Truth — Jesus Christ.

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gious, who evangelized through their schools, hospitals, and various works of charity.

The "New" Evangelization

These first three phases may be seen as the "old" evangelization. It was wonderfully effective and fruitful, in that it succeeded in bringing the light of Christian faith to millions of the world's population. There was a dark side, of course. Sometimes the evangelists became agents of the colonial powers and joined in the exploitation of the native peoples.

But now: what is the fourth phase — the "new" evangelization? Father Raniero sees it as bringing the Gospel message to the newly secularized people of our own time:

- those who see religion as a barrier to the progress of science, art and technology;
- those who once were Christians but now have rejected their beliefs;
- those who still identify as Christian (and/or Catholic) but no longer practice their faith;
- those who profess belief in God, but want nothing to do with churches or "organized religion";
- those who claim they are "spiritual but not religious."

And who will be the evangelists to this vast population? Father Raniero answers: *the laity*. Women and men who are strongly committed to their faith in Christ and the Church, are positive and joyful in their attitude, and radiate a genuine warmth and care for other people.

I heartily concur. But I would add another crucial quality: they must be formed and trained. I recall a book I read some years ago: *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, by Lee Strobel, one of the pastors at a highly successful evangelical church in Illinois. I took the book down from my shelf and reclaimed many of the insights I had learned when I first read it in the 1990s. In the first chapter, Strobel gives a vivid description of typical unchurched, secularized people who inhabit our workplaces and

neighborhoods:

- Harry is the science teacher at the local high school who thinks that all religion is for intellectual weaklings.

- Mary is the extroverted neighbor who's perfectly happy without God in her life.

- Harry is the husband who thinks his wife's faith is a waste of time.

- Mary is the entrepreneur who's so busy dealing with her success that she doesn't have time for spiritual matters.

- Harry is the auto mechanic who goes to church religiously — every Christmas and Easter.

- Mary is the government bureaucrat who was turned off on God by an early church experience that left her convinced that Christianity is at best boring and irrelevant.

If this analysis has some validity, it presents a serious pastoral challenge. The lamentation of every parish I have encountered is the same: "Where are our young adults, our young couples with children?" They are conspicuously absent. How can we reach them with the good news of the Gospel? We already know that scolding and shaming will be of no avail. We believe that they truly need to have God in their lives and to have a connection with a faith community. But these are not felt needs for them. They say, "We're doing just fine, thank you."

Felt Needs of the Unchurched

So, what are some of the felt needs of unchurched Harry and Mary? One of them, certainly, is the need to deal with their pain. I have often quipped that young people don't feel the need for religion because they haven't suffered yet. But now I would qualify that: they have suffered, but the pain has not become sharp enough, or they have found ways to numb it: think alcohol, music and sex for openers. But the pain is there, not far

below the surface. Some are carrying scars from growing up in dysfunctional families. Others have suffered rejections

and failed relationships. Still others are living in loneliness. Some have succeeded in finding good-paying jobs, but they are dismayed at the infighting and political backstabbing they experience in the workplace. Others have gone through the pain of job loss. Those chilling words still ring in their ears: "Our company has to downsize, and there's no longer a place for you."

Then there are those who have suffered blows to their idealism. They have sacrificed pursuing lucrative careers in order to work for less pay in humanitarian fields such as agricultural or environmental aid, human rights legislation, anti-poverty programs and the like. To their dismay, they sometimes find that the work gets sabotaged by personality conflicts and power struggles among staff members. Or governmental and sponsoring agencies withdraw funding. The pain of disillusion sets in. Similar setbacks can occur among those who pursue careers in the arts.

Experiences of loss, failure, rejection and disillusionment can awaken people to the need for some kind of spiritual belief system that will provide an anchor for turbulent times.

But, even when lives are proceeding smoothly, that need can surface. Mormon author Stephen Covey in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* made use of a now-famous image to highlight this reality. Some people, he says, have worked so hard to climb the ladder of success, only to find it is leaning against the wrong wall. When they get to the top, they find nothing on the other side of the wall. Except the haunting question: "Is this all there is?"

My point: one of the felt needs for unchurched young adults is the need for a sense of meaning for their lives. "Why am I doing this? What's the point? What gets me up in the morning? What is my mission? What helps

me deal with life's frustrations?" These are the "existential" questions that psychiatrist Viktor Frankl wrote about in his classic *Man's Search for Meaning*. More recently, evangelical pastor Rick Warren wrote passionately about this need in *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

Connecting with Unchurched Harry and Mary

Granted that the need to deal with life's pain and to find meaning in one's life are felt needs of the people absent from our churches, how can we reach them with the hopeful message of the Gospel? After years of working with parishes to develop an evangelizing ministry, I have reluctantly come to this conclusion: There is very little that pastors and parish staffs can do directly to regain the vast numbers who have walked away from our churches. But the operative word here is "directly." Indirectly, a number of structures — as well as attitudes — have to be in place.

One is a welcoming attitude. This includes attractive outdoor signs with an upbeat message; an attractive parish website — where most young people go when they are searching — one that makes unchurched people think: I'd like to check that place out! Welcoming includes a friendly, helpful parish receptionist; greeters and ushers at Mass who are warm and welcoming without being gushy; presiders who create a sense of welcome and inclusion by their whole manner. The Liturgy itself needs to be prayerful, the music tasteful and inspiring, the homily relevant to the needs and real-life situations of the people. There is nothing more deadly for an unchurched person hesitantly checking out the parish than to walk into a Mass that is lifeless, boring and irrelevant.

But even more, we need to connect with the unchurched in their own life-spaces. This means, in practice: the evangelizing parish should invest its energies and resources in training the laity to reach out to the inactive Catholics and other un-

churched people whom they meet. Over the years I have developed a training course that is described in my book *Reclaim the Fire: A Parish Guide to Evangelization*. I call it "How To Share Your Faith Without Being Obnoxious." It is a skills-based course built around three steps:

1) **Listening.** Listen to a friend, a co-worker, a stranger — anyone who starts talking about their concerns: a health problem; a parent upset about a child's behavior; a spouse troubled by marital tensions; a job loss; break-up of a relationship; loss of a loved one in death. Instead of giving out some easy advice or pious cliché, we just respond in an empathic, non-judgmental manner, perhaps ask a few questions for clarification.

2) **Sharing Your Story.** When you sense the right moment, you can say something like: "I've been through something like that in my own life. What helped me most was my faith in God and being part of my church community." Then you go on to share briefly what happened. I tell the participants: All of us have had experiences of being in some kind of negative state and were able to move through it with the help of our spiritual resources. You don't argue; you don't talk theology; you simply share your own experience. As Lee Strobel says: unchurched people don't usually ask: "Is Christianity true?" But rather: "Does it work?" Does it help you to live your life better and happier? The truth questions may arise later, and they can be dealt with then.

3) **Inviting.** If the seeker is still engaged and appears to be open, you may invite them to take one step, whatever they are ready for, to reconnect with God or with the Church. It may be as basic as to begin praying again. They may not be ready to attend Sunday Mass; but if they are, offer to go with them or meet them at the church. Usually a smaller step is needed first: invite them to your Bible class, or to an adult education program at the parish, or to a Christian music concert or drama. In any case, accompany them and introduce

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them to people. Interestingly, some research has shown that as many as one-third of inactive Catholics said they are

interested in reconnecting with the Church, but they are reluctant to make the first move. But they would welcome someone who reaches out to them.

The purpose of this course is to empower ordinary lay people to do the front-line work of parish evangelizing. The response I often get is, "You know, I think I can do this!" But, as I said earlier, the whole parish has to be ready to welcome the unchurched and have something life-giving to offer them. They need to see that the parish is about "making a difference" in the world beyond itself. That it is reaching out to the poor and neglected of society; is partnering with community organizations to improve education, housing, and health care for everyone, and is an agent of healing for people who

are hurting from the wounds of life.

We Catholics keep hearing that we need to move beyond our reticence and our habit of "keeping our faith to ourselves." We are called to be more mission-driven, more willing to risk some degree of discomfort in order to further the message of Christ. Perhaps we have not realized that there are large numbers of people who, while not practicing any particular religion, are nevertheless searching for some higher purpose, for something to believe in and hope for.

We need to be convinced that our Catholic faith is a treasure that we are able to share with such seekers. Despite all the Church's problems, Catholicism continues to have an appeal, almost a fascination, for many people. This is true even of non-practicing Catholics. While some

want nothing more to do with the Church, the majority have just lost their connection.

The faith still slumbers

within them and may be reawakened. But they are waiting for an invitation, for some sign that they will be welcomed. That is something every active Catholic can provide.

It has been more than 35 years since Pope Paul VI issued his passionate document "On Evangelization in the Modern World." And now our present pope is calling us to "a new evangelization." When and how will we answer their call? **P**

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REVISITING (from page 43)

ceses of the United States, the Holy Father framed a series of questions on faith and culture, wondering aloud about the state of evangelization. These questions give all Catholics in America, not just bishops, a chance to examine their own consciences concerning faith's formative role in the development of culture. Admittedly, it is not easy to answer these questions in a single moment, for we must take into account many assorted variables over time. Nevertheless, if we use Niebuhr's types, it is hard to draw a conclusion different from the one suggested here. Were we not to employ Niebuhr's types and instead use some other template or model, the data are not going to be different. Whatever schema we choose to classify the data, the picture is going to be ineluctably the same.

We all live under the same judgment St. Paul directed against himself when he wrote: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1Cor 9:16).

Our preaching — whether by word or by the way we live — is a witness. Our witness is personal and communal, and it is always carried out within a definite cultural setting. Every cultural setting, we know, has its own challenges. Ours just happens to be a stifling secularism. Overcoming this handicap can only be accomplished with a faith which acknowledges Christ who is above and transforming culture. May our participation in the new evangelization be like the light breaking on the shadows of the Christ of Culture. **P**

¹ Pope John Paul II, "Meeting with the Bishops of the United States of America," *Origins*, Vol. 17, No. 16, p. 263.

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers), 2001.

³ John G. Stackhouse, *Christianity Today*, Vol. 46, No. 5, p. 80.

⁴ Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (New York: Harper and

Row Publishers, Inc.), p. 17.

⁵ Avery Cardinal Dulles, "The Impact of the Catholic Church," *Evangelizing America* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), p. 18.

⁶ Avery Cardinal Dulles, "Catholicism and American Culture: The Uneasy Dialogue," *America*, Vol. 162, No. 3, p. 58.

⁷ James V. Schall, "The Culture of Modernity and Catholicism," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, Vol. 107, No. 9, p. 9.

⁸ Charles J. Chaput, *Render Unto Caesar* (New York: Doubleday Publishers, 2008), p. 181.

⁹ Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition* (New York: Routledge Publishers, 2003), p. 22.

¹⁰ Extraordinary Synod of 1985, Final Report, C3.

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