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CATECHETICAL
LEADER



Culture, Community, Invitation

IN THIS ISSUE:

Born Into a Culture,
Shaped by a Culture

“For the Forgiveness of Sins”

The New Evangelization and
Disseminating the Good News

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IS ANYBODY THERE?

Bill Miller



National Conference For Catechetical Leadership

As you read this letter, it is important to understand that it was written back in October 2014 for this January edition of *Catechetical Leader*. By now, you (hopefully) know who has accepted the position of Executive Director for NCCL, yet as I'm writing this, we are still very much in the midst of conducting the search and trying to help keep the organization alive, active, and healthy. A wise man once said, "It is the in-between times that are the toughest." Today, I realize what he meant.

The months since Lee's passing have been some of the hardest in recent memory for me. When I say this, I am not looking for sympathy or remuneration; I am fulfilling this role out of love for NCCL and for the Lord. My wife, who sometimes asks me when I am really going to retire, is also quick to remind me that I am where the Lord has called me. She is my number one fan and my greatest support. She is one of the most meaningful expressions of the love that God is constantly and lavishly showering upon me.

SURVIVING THE DARKNESS

In a touching scene from one of my favorite musicals, John Adams sings, "Is anybody there? Does anybody care? Does anybody see what I see?" The year is 1776, and he is referring to his dream of independence for America... freedom from the repressive rule of England. It appears his dream will die because he does not have the votes he needs from Congress in order to declare independence. Through a series of conversations, stories, and revelations, John discovers that there are indeed many people working behind the scenes to help bring the dream to reality. In the process, he learns that amazing things happen when one demonstrates faith, lives in hope, and chooses to love the dream rather than to abandon it. John Adams survives the darkness and lives to usher in the light.

Here in October 2014, I see light at the end of our dark "in-between time." I believe it is the Light of Christ — the flaming passion and energy of the Holy Spirit. And, in

this particular case, the flame is being fanned by our Holy Father, Pope Francis. It is no coincidence that, during the difficult journey over these past few months, I have been reading, reflecting on, and discussing *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*) with my small faith community. It is a source of hope and a constant reminder that we are all involved in a wonderful mission, a most fulfilling ministry of evangelization and catechesis. We are living the dream. It is a challenging dream, but so very worthwhile.

SET FREE FROM SORROW

Pope Francis has given us a gift for the ages. If you don't already have a copy, buy one, or download it from the Vatican website. If you are looking for a gift to give your catechists, give them this book. *The Joy of the Gospel* is profound, yet easily read and understood. In a word, it is compelling. I believe it has changed and will continue to change many lives and bring many people closer to God. It is a work of art, God's handiwork delivered through the mind, the heart, and the hand of Francis.

In one of the many beautiful passages from this document that have touched my heart, Pope Francis writes, "The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew" (1). Reading those words I am reminded of who I am and whose I am. I feel free and full of life and eager to love.

Is anybody there? Does anybody care? The answer is a resounding yes! God continues to work through all who lovingly offer their lives to him. I continue to witness living proof of the words of Pope Francis as I make my way through each day. And I am ready to live, truly live, another day by the grace of God's Holy Spirit. ■

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SYMBOLS OF HOME

Joanie McKeown

It started as a small thing. I'd been home for a couple of days from my latest trip to the NCCL Offices in Washington, DC, just enough time to start to get caught up on sleep and to refocus on my Wisconsin ministry. I picked up my porcelain pill-box, the one that my husband bought for me in Vienna ten years ago. It contained my daily vitamin and thyroid medicine — nothing major — but having a beautiful pill-box was a good reminder to take them each day.

MISSING MY FOCUS

That's when it hit me. I'm used to working long days with little sleep, but all the days in DC were starting to get to me. The pill-box reminded me why.

I've never been one who pays much attention to material things. But, day in and day out, eating, sleeping, and living in someone else's space was wearing on me. My porcelain box, my favorite coffee mug, my own pillow — all those familiar items that make my house into my home, that surround me with the familiar so I can focus on the challenges — were missing in DC. The Paulists and other priests living at St. Paul's College couldn't have been more welcoming and couldn't have been doing more to make me feel at home, but the surroundings still weren't "home."

Midway through my next stay in DC, I decided to take a stretch break and walk a circuitous route around the building to the dining room (and coffee!) My path took me to the hallway by the chapel, so I went in. As I glanced around the chapel, I found myself taking a long, deep breath, and I felt myself starting to relax. Though I'd never been in the chapel before, standing among the stained glass windows, the altar, candles, and pews, I knew I was home.

What do your parishioners feel like when they walk into the parish church? Are they at home? Or are they guests in someone else's space? Can they relate

to the signs, symbols, music, and décor in the church? What are we, as catechetical leaders, doing to help them feel that the church is their second home?

Whenever I lead preparation sessions for parents seeking baptism for their babies or young children, one of the "assignments" that I give them is this:

Tonight, when you get home, look around the rooms of your house. What symbols of your Catholic faith do you see? Are they visible or hidden away on the backs of shelves or in drawers? Baptism begins your child's journey of faith. One way you can help that journey to be a fruitful one is by marking their path with the signs of their faith. It will help them to realize that, at every turn, it is their faith that grounds their lives.

My journeys to DC continued for many months, but after those few moments in the chapel that day, I always knew where to go when I needed to spend some time at home. ■



Editor's note: In the previous issue, I incorrectly identified Sara Blauvelt's occupation. She is the Director for Catechesis for the Archdiocese of Washington. I apologize for the error. —NW

Living the Life! Parish Life as the Curriculum

Denise Utter



“We seek to form parishes that are vitally alive in faith. These communities will provide a parish climate and an array of activities and resources designed to help adults more fully understand and live their faith” (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*).

Vitally alive. Is that how you would describe your parish?

Unfortunately, most would not. According to recent Pew Studies, only 30 percent of Americans who were raised Catholic are still “practicing,” meaning they celebrate Mass at least once a month. More than 30 percent no longer consider themselves Catholic at all, and almost 40 percent personally claim Catholicism, but seldom or never celebrate Mass. If we want to form intentional disciples, we must change the way we are forming our faith communities.

More than a decade ago (1999), the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops gave us a pastoral plan for forming communities that are *full* of life, communities that are designed to help adults “more fully understand and live their faith.”

The plan outlines three major goals:

- * Invite and enable ongoing conversion to Jesus in holiness of life.
- * Promote and support active membership in the Christian community.
- * Call and prepare adults to act as disciples in mission to the world.

One of the first suggestions from *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* asserts that we must begin by focusing on adult faith formation:

Adult faith formation, by which people consciously grow in the life of Christ through experience, reflection, prayer, and study, must be ‘the central task in [this] catechetical enterprise,’ becoming ‘the axis around which revolves the catechesis of childhood and adolescence as well as that of old age.’ This can be done specifically through developing in adults a better understanding of and participation in the full sacramental life of the Church (5).

To make this vision a reality, we, as the Catholic bishops of the United States, call the Church in our country to a renewed commitment to adult faith formation, positioning it at the heart of our catechetical vision and practice (6).

Most parishes have not yet embraced adult faith formation as the “axis” or the “heart” of our catechetical vision and practice. We are still spending the majority of our time, effort, energy, and resources on the catechesis of children. All of our recent studies tell us this is not working. Why do we persist? Especially when studies tell us the formation of adults in our parish will also benefit the young people. The truth is, most parishes are structured to teach children, but aren’t sure how to begin developing an approach that forms adults and creates disciples of its parishioners. And it’s not about programs; it’s about creating a culture that invites people into relationship with Christ and others.

IT’S ABOUT THE LIFE OF THE PARISH

Begin with the invitation; offer radical hospitality. Create the opportunity for exploration of ritual and meaning, and encounter. Encountering Christ, others, and self leads to conversion of the heart. Connect people to one another and to the faith community, to the church. Allow the beauty of our Catholic faith to speak for itself.

INVITATION AND HOSPITALITY

How do you currently invite people to learn about, grow in, and live out the Catholic faith? Most of us tell people when registration for religious education classes for children, preschool to 8th grade, or maybe even high school, begins. Most tell people what’s expected, where to be, when to be there, and what the consequences are for not attending or participating. What’s mandatory? What’s minimally required to belong, to receive the sacraments?

The number of people who walk away from religion will continue to increase unless we intentionally set out to accompany people on their faith journey — until we practice the radical hospitality of Christ. What if we modeled our invitation and hospitality after the gospel example of Jesus Christ?



Photo by Nic McPhee

In the Gospel of John we witness Jesus' first encounter with two of the disciples. Jesus asked them a question, "What are you looking for?" A simple, but profound question. He invited the two to "come and see," and then asked them to "stay awhile."

What if we asked adults what they were looking for (and listened)? What if we invited adults to come and see? What if we invited them on a journey, and promised to accompany them? What if we offered a sacred space that encouraged adults to explore their faith in a manner that allowed them to ask questions, to share their struggles, a space that encouraged them to search for and seek answers or seek experience where they most feel called, or where they most need accompaniment?

The word hospitality has lost some of its meaning in recent years, but real hospitality is at the core of Christianity. To transform our parishes into engaged communities where people grow in their faith, where their witness of faith attracts others, we need to practice hospitality to the "other," to self, and to God.

ENCOUNTER AND COMMUNITY

People are hungry for connection, for encounter, for purpose. We search for meaning. We long for union with others and with God, but in today's society, we don't always put that desire at the center of our lives. So what does it mean to be Christian today?

Fr. Ronald Rolheiser wrote a piece a few years ago based on Karl Rahner's statement that the Christian of the future would either be a mystic, or nothing at all. In the article, Rolheiser ponders what might be implied by this comment: "At one level it means that anyone who wants to have faith today will need

to be much more inner-directed than in previous generations. Why? Because up until our present generation in the secularized world, by and large, the culture helped carry the faith. We lived in cultures...within which faith and religion were part of the very fabric of life. Faith and church were embedded in the sociology. It took a strong, deviant action not to go to church on Sunday. Today, as we know, the opposite is more true, it takes a strong, inner-anchored act to go to church on Sunday... We have few outside supports for our faith."¹

At a time when the number of "Nones" in America, those "who do not identify with any religion, continues to grow at a rapid pace"², Rahner appears to be correct. In his apostolic letter, *Dies Domini*, John Paul II asserts the importance of Sunday.

Unfortunately, when Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of a 'weekend,' it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see 'the heavens.' Hence, though ready to celebrate, they are really incapable of doing so.³

Catechetical leaders are called to create environments, communities, and structures that encourage people to see the heavens. I propose that if we point people to the life of the parish, offer opportunities for people to explore the dynamics of the ritual and symbols of our faith, together in community,

1 Ronald Rolheiser, "Mystic or Unbeliever", <http://ronrolheiser.com/mystic-or-unbeliever> (2008), last accessed November 18, 2014.

2 <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/> (2012), last accessed June 26, 2014.

3 John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, no 4.

they will enter into Sunday liturgy as “the very heart of Christian life.”⁴

In the life of the parish, we explore rituals and symbols. We create environments that help people sense something special in what we do as church. Ritual is what we do as a people, to honor who we are, what we believe, where we come from, and to whom we belong. People need to belong. We live in a fast-paced society, and often are too caught up in the busy-ness of our lives to take the time to share our stories, or to listen to others. We are encouraged to be strong, and are told we can go it alone. Any reliance on another person, or institution, is considered weak. This independence creates widespread cultural loneliness. When we no longer think we should depend on one another, when we think we can do everything without the help of God or others, we live in isolation. In the void of real personal contact, we become more and more disconnected from those around us: our family, our friends, our neighbors, our communities. In the life of the parish, we give people an opportunity to encounter Christ, in each other, in the community, in prayer, in God’s word, and in the Eucharist.

In the Emmaus story, it took the breaking of the bread for the disciples to recognize Christ. Where are we failing to see Jesus in our midst? How can we help each other recognize God in all things? As faith formation practitioners, we aren’t called to show people who God is, as though they are meeting him for the first time; rather, we help them to recognize where God is already working in their lives. When we point people to the life of the parish, we prepare them to encounter Christ in community and in the Eucharist. We create networks of people who support adults on this journey, and we empower adult leaders to give witness to their own faith.

How can parishes possibly offer enough activities and resources to do these things?

We invite people into community and allow the beauty of the Catholic faith to speak for itself.

BEAUTY

Fr. Robert Barron says to evangelize this culture we must start with the beautiful. We have an inclination toward the beautiful; it moves us, speaks to us, helps us encounter that which is larger than us, that which is the Divine. He encourages us to begin with the beautiful. “The pattern is more or less as follows,” says Fr. Barron, “first the beautiful (how wonderful!), then the good (I want to participate!), and finally, the true (now I understand!).”

Think of all that is beautiful in your own parish. Prayers? Liturgy? Sacraments? Devotions? Service to those in need? The faithful witness of your patron saint? Each parish must assess their own dynamics. What is the life of your parish?

THE LIFE OF THE PARISH

⁴ Ibid.

The bishops’ pastoral plan, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, says that the parish *is* the curriculum. The parish “provides the place, persons, and means to summon and sustain adults in lifelong conversion of heart, mind, and life.” The parish is, in their words, “the most important locus in which the Christian community is formed and expressed.”

Parishes using a “Life of the Parish” approach to faith formation encourage and expect parents of the children in religious education to grow and learn as their children do. They explore the four pillars of our faith, as defined by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Profession of Faith, Sacraments and Liturgy, Christian Living, and Christian Prayer), through the things that are already happening in the parish. For example, we learn about Catholic Christian prayer through experiencing and participating in various forms of prayer, both personal and communal: rosary, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Stations of the Cross, Liturgy of the Hours, and more. We learn through experiencing the rituals, and having an opportunity to understand the symbols, such as developing a greater reverence for the cross when we participate in the veneration of the cross, seeing the faith of others, witnessing their reverence. We learn about Christian living when we accept the challenge to live the gospel by participating in service, by attending learning events sponsored by ministries such as Respect Life, Peace and Social Justice, etc.

Most parishes are surprised at what they have to offer. The parish is the curriculum. Take a close look at yours. What do you offer? Retreats, service opportunities, men’s groups, women’s groups, church tours, parish missions, mission trips, celebrations of special feasts? Often catechetical leaders are even more surprised at the network they create when they link parishioners to those already committed to intentional discipleship in the parish.

We’ve spent years teaching our faith in a manner that isolates it from the liturgy and that separates it from the community. Parents who would never think of allowing their child to miss a religious education class regularly miss the Sunday Mass. We need to break that pattern and create connections. We need to focus on conversion of hearts, on nurturing in every member of our parish a desire for the nourishment provided by God’s word and Jesus in the Eucharist.

“The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God.”
- Saint Irenaeus

Prayer

Holy Spirit, we ask you to empower us to create vitally alive parishes that promote full human flourishing, so that we may grow closer to our Lord Jesus, and that we may better give glory to our God. |

Denise Utter is the Director of Parish Faith Formation at the Catholic Community of St. Jude in New Lenox, Illinois.

Born into a Culture, Shaped by a Culture

Daniel S. Mulhall



In their 1996 document on racism, *Who Are My Sisters and Brothers?*, the US Bishops define culture as: “The sum total of a people’s social and psychological organization which shapes the way they perceive, relate to, and interpret themselves and the world, including values, language, customs, food, child-rearing practices, educational systems, history, political structure and religious expressions.”

The key concepts presented here (and that are found in all the varied definitions of culture) are (1) that it involves everything that shapes and influences people within a particular setting, time, and place, and (2) that it shapes the way we see, think about, and choose to act. The broad definition provided by the bishops opens a fascinating door into the exploration of the role that culture plays in faith and faith formation.

This article will provide a general introduction to the meaning and importance of the word, “culture,” and set the stage for the series of articles that will follow in future editions of *Catechetical Leader*.

For nearly ten years, I had the honor and privilege of serving as the Assistant Secretary for Catechesis and Inculturation in the Department of Education at the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. In that role, I was given the gift of working with people from a variety of national and ethnic groups who make up the church in the United States. I immersed myself in literature about culture and enculturation. What follows is a reflection of what I have learned during these years.

Sometimes I think that my involvement with the topic of “culture” shows God’s ironic sense of humor. I mean, I’m a monolingual, Anglo male who grew up in a “white” suburb of Louisville, Kentucky, that was founded by families who had fled the city to avoid living with African-Americans. All my playmates looked and spoke like me. The first time I had any real contact with a person from a different ethnic or cultural background was when I was a sophomore in high school and had Mr. Wood — an African-American (who I would later learn played a major role in the integration of the Louisville school system in the 1950s) — as my history teacher. What did I know about culture?

What I was to learn and appreciate is that all people are born into a culture; we are not born with a culture, as all culture is learned. The culture we are born into is our *native* culture.

As we grow, cultural forces that we experience mold us. The values, beliefs, practices, attitudes, and decisions of our parents (guardians) and other family members shape us, as do the communities in which we grow (including the religious community) and the various communication media that touch our lives. This process by which we learn to live in our native culture is called *enculturation*.

So, I am a product of the time and place where I was born. My attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors were shaped by the culture in which I lived. I was also shaped by the culture of my parish and archdiocese that existed at that time. A child of the 1950s and 1960s, I learned the Mass in Latin, participated in fasts, novenas, May and Corpus Christi processions, and nightly rosaries around the statue of Mary. Like a fish swimming in water, I was immersed in my culture but was clueless that the culture even existed. I feel somewhat embarrassed to admit that I wasn’t aware of how I had been shaped by those various cultures of my youth until much later in life.

Fortunately, cultures are dynamic, always in transition, forever changing. And, again fortunately, while we are shaped by our native cultures, we are not determined by them. As we move out of our native cultures and begin to swim in new waters, we come into contact with other cultures. With those new experiences we begin to become aware that other cultures are different, and if we are open to growth, we begin to recognize that some cultural practices are much better than those learned in our native cultures. And, as Libia Paez-Howard notes, “We also begin to value and determine which cultural practices that we learned in our native cultures we consider important and worth passing on to our children.”

COMMUNITIES OF CULTURE

The word used by sociologists to describe the process by which we learn a new culture is *acculturation*. Because humans are adaptable, we constantly learn how to move between and live among various cultures. We are different with our families of origin than we are with our in-laws, different at home than at work, different at church than at the bowling alley. Most people learn to easily and effortlessly move between these various cultural groups with little effort because we have so much practice in doing so. Moving people between religious, national, and ethnic cultures is much more difficult because it requires us to make major changes in our attitudes, beliefs, and values.

(As an aside, the process of faith formation for children is an example of enculturation. The process by which adults become Catholic requires acculturation: adult catechumens not only need to learn what the Catholic Church believes and teaches, but they must also become a member of the Catholic Church's culture.)

Because cultures are constantly developing, we may be shocked by the experience we have when we return to our native culture after years of being apart from it. For those who leave the culture, the culture remains in our minds the way it was when we left. For those who stayed, the culture continued to develop, probably unnoticed. This experience is especially acute for some immigrant communities, who attempt to preserve the cultures they brought with them from their native lands, holding their cultures in reverence, not allowing any deviation from what was done in the past. They can succeed in this to some degree, but because the culture is not open to change, it usually becomes brittle and stale. Back home, their native culture continues to change and flourish because there is no need to protect or preserve it. This can apply just as much to racial and ethnic cultures, work or team cultures, or family or religious cultures.

By the way, while national, ethnic, or racial groups may have their own cultures, those cultures are not dependent upon the cultures' nationality, ethnicity, or race. What that means is that a child with Norwegian parents will not be Norwegian unless he was raised as a Norwegian. As Dr. Tom Groome states, "If you want an Irish child, raise him/her in a Irish community." If you want a Catholic child, raise him/her in a Catholic community. In this case, as in most cases, communities are the carriers of culture.

UNDERSTANDING RACE AND ETHNICITY

Webster's online dictionary defines "race" as "people united by shared interests, habits, or characteristics" and ethnicity as sharing "the common racial, national, social, religious, cultural, and linguistic characteristics of a group of people." Race and ethnicity play important parts in how people are judged in the United States. Much of this can be traced to the sin of slavery that infected our country's first 200 years and the sin

of racism that continues to affect our attitudes and practices even today.

While it is natural to feel uncomfortable in unfamiliar cultural settings, a person's race or ethnicity should not play a role in that discomfort. If you react negatively to a person's skin color or country of origin, you have been shaped by racism. That doesn't mean that you are a racist or that you act like a racist, only that you have been influenced by racism. I know this from personal experience as I was infected with racist fear from an early age. That does not make me a racist, although it does mean that racism is and always will be a part of my cultural background. I am not a racist today because of the personal choices I make not to be.

The issues of race and ethnicity, and their impact on culture are far more complex than can be addressed adequately in this brief article. For our purposes here, as it pertains to culture and catechesis, it is enough to know that cultural issues are not determined by race and ethnicity. We need to be aware of how WE respond personally to people from other racial or ethnic groups — be aware of our own personal biases — and understand that others may or may not have a cultural background similar to our own, regardless of the person's skin color or ancestry.

STRIVING FOR MULTICULTURAL AWARENESS

Assimilation, the process by which we become part of a foreign culture while losing essential aspects of our native culture, occurs all of the time. One of the reasons that many immigrant groups strive so hard to preserve their own native cultures is because they don't want to be assimilated into the dominant American culture. They are deathly afraid that they will lose their children, their faith, and all they value — often times the only things they were able to bring with them from their native country — to the dominant culture. And they have every reason for their fear; all they have to do is look around to see what has happened to every other cultural group that has come to the United States. (The dominant culture is the culture within a society that tends to assimilate other cultures; the culture that tends to have the greatest influence to shape a society.)

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For many years American culture was described as a melting pot, where all cultures became blended together through assimilation. Today, we realize the weaknesses in that analogy. Rather than blending together into one culture, what actually is preferred, according to Alejandro Aguilera-Titus of the USCCB's office of Cultural Diversity within the church, is *integration*, where all cultures live together sharing aspects of their cultures freely between them, but each culture remaining unique and whole. (Some people consider integration to be a concept difficult to achieve and so prefer to work toward interaction.)



Photo by Nesster

We will often hear the word “multiculturalism” used when referring to the meeting of various cultures within a given setting. The word itself, however, has a different meaning than what people intend: It generally implies the politically correct attitude of accepting the behavior of others without question or judgment, no matter how unacceptable it may seem to us personally. So focus on working for multicultural awareness or interaction and avoid the use of “multiculturalism” unless that is the appropriate word you seek to use.

In order to understand another culture, a person needs to start by doing an assessment of his or her cultural formation. Only then can you identify the gifts from your native culture and recognize the weaknesses your culture possesses. This can open you up to seeing other cultures through the same critical lens and help you to recognize that every culture has something of deep value to offer, and that every culture has been affected by sinfulness — even our own. The church teaches that God is already present in some way within every culture. To paraphrase Fr. Ron Rolheiser, every culture already bears the fingerprint of God. The task of anyone ministering within a culture is learning to recognize God's presence within a culture and seeing that as the starting point for preaching the gospel within the culture.

FIVE WAYS THAT CHRIST INTERACTS WITH CULTURE

While there are many books and articles written on the topic of culture, the one that I still find most valuable is H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work *Christ and Culture* (1951). In it, Niebuhr identified five ways that Christ (Christianity, the church) interacts with culture. These ways are listed below, along with my brief explanation of what each means.

Christ against culture

Christianity stands outside of the existing culture, judges it, and finds it wanting. Christianity tries to bring truth to a misguided culture.

Christ of culture

Christ is found within all cultures, although it may sometime seem that Christ is present more in some and less in others. No culture has an exclusive claim on Christ. We should look for Christ's presence within all cultures and build upon what's good in order to purify it and challenge those aspects that are detrimental to faith.

Christ above culture

Christianity stands above culture, neither caring for it nor holding it in disdain. The church is not identified with any culture, but preaches the gospel in all cultures.

Christ and culture in paradox

What is good for a culture may not be good for the church and vice-versa. We cannot assume that church and culture will support each other or that they won't. Christ and culture are both supra-rational (above reason).

Christ transforming culture

The church is seen as leaven within a culture, constantly changing it from within.

Niebuhr's work points out that there is no exclusive way for the church to interact with culture. There are times when the church must stand against an aspect of a culture, times when it must rise above a culture, and times when it must try to change a culture from within.

If you have not done so already, I encourage you to become aware of the culture in which you live, along with the various cultures of the people you serve. Reach out to members of your faith community who come from different ethnic or cultural groups and engage them in conversation. Invite them into your groups and even into your home and accept invitations into theirs. Learn to appreciate the beauty of your culture and the gifts that people from other culture bring to the table. That is the beginning of cultural awareness and cultural literacy, not to mention all the positive benefits it brings.

Back in the late 1800s Horace Bushnell, a Protestant theologian, wrote a book that began the conversation of whether nature or nurture played the larger role in faith formation. This article and the ones that follow will continue that conversation. Future articles will address many aspects concerning culture and the role it plays; this article merely sets the table for what will surely be a fabulous feast. ■

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“For the Forgiveness of Sins”

Frank DeSiano, CSP



We almost instinctually think of forgiveness as some kind of reprieve — reprieve from a punishment that we deserve. It’s rather like the image of children who disobey their parents, then are told they cannot have pizza and must go to their rooms; but the parents eventually relent and invite the children down for hot slices covered with pepperoni.

With this view of forgiveness, the energy is mostly on the part of the one who forgives, trying to get someone offended to get over his or her offense, so that punishment will not happen. The one who forgives lets go of a grudge; the one who is forgiven feels a sense of relief because some impending punishment will not happen. For centuries, our thinking about forgiveness was punishment-centered. Not only did we have the actual forgiveness of punishment, but also an accrued idea of “temporal punishment” which was yet due, even after we were forgiven.¹ While the teaching on “temporal punishment due to sin” carried a crucial insight — that sin has residual effects in our lives — the teaching basically helped the Catholic imagination profusely populate purgatory.²

On this view, forgiveness basically got rid of punishment which was due to sin. How inevitably, then, did God become the chief punisher, the enforcer of a divine justice that had rules so severe that not even God could suspend them! How stunningly the image of a merciful, generous God became one of a God who could control the universe, but could not get anyone off the hook. Spiritual life became a court scene where sentences were metaphorically handed out, and forgiveness became a back door way to skirt the punishment that was due.

Such images, which can easily be derived from ways of understanding the Deuteronomistic view of Israel’s covenant (if you keep my commandments, you will live; if you do not, you will suffer and die) became ways of interpreting the history of the ancient Jewish people.³ They also became the prism through which we looked at the crucifixion of Jesus. God’s justice demanded punishment; who was going to undergo the punishment? Wait, let’s send Jesus to be brutally murdered by foreign invaders, and maybe God will be appeased.

I only partially apologize for the caricature of the previous paragraph because, while painting the picture in pretty bald

terms, it is not too inaccurate. Theologians have historically interpreted Anselm’s “Why Did God Become Human?” (*Cur Deus Homo?*) in fairly crude terms, with God demanding “satisfaction” which only a divine being could provide in order to make up for the infinite disruption of divine justice.⁴ Certainly, Anselm need not be read as crudely as this — Jesus can be seen as God’s gift to repair the brokenness of human existence — but this cruder reading has dominated the popular Christian imagination, both Catholic and, to an even greater extent, fundamentalist Protestantism which sees “substitutionary suffering” as one of its major tenets.⁵ Am I the only one who cringes when I see teenagers with t-shirts showing a graphically brutalized Jesus, with red blood drops all over the picture, and the words, “He paid the price”?

I would like to present other images of forgiveness, which move away from notions of “punishment” and “reprieve” — with their inherent coloring of the divine-human relationship — into something that might do greater justice to broader notions of forgiveness which the New Testament gives us. I think a broader reading of forgiveness can yield a very cohesive picture between forgiveness, conversion, and discipleship and, in the process, help us see the catechumenal process more clearly.

FORGIVENESS AS A NEW REALM

In the consecration of the Mass, we hear the phrase “for the forgiveness of sin.” In both Latin and Greek, the idea behind the phrase “for the forgiveness of sin” is represented by a sense of motion, of movement. “Unto” the forgiveness of sins would be better, but “into” the forgiveness of sins more accurately captures the Greek “eis” and the Latin “in” followed by the accusative case. This kind of “movement” imagery helps situate forgiveness as a kind of new place that is set up, a space into which a person moves; or, perhaps better, a realm which a person enters that changes his or her total state.

We initially see the idea of forgiveness as it is given in our formula (“the forgiveness of sin”) in Luke’s Gospel, as part of the ministry of John. In Zachariah’s canticle, John is described as one who will “give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins” (Lk. 1:77).⁶ So there is a relationship between salvation and forgiveness of sin. The word used for forgiveness in Greek — *aphesis* — basically means “a taking



Photo by Dave Larson

away.” The Latin translation of this word — *remissio* — has the idea of overlooking, or not taking into account, a more juridical, or even a banking, notion than “taking away.” In any event, in this canticle verse, the whole idea of forgiveness of sin is to bring about a consciousness of salvation, an awareness of what God is doing in the world to bring it to fullness. The sense of salvation and forgiveness correlate with each other. Salvation has to mean more than being saved from the fires of hell; rather, it has to mean being part of God’s work to transform humankind and the world. Forgiveness is related to this realization of, and becoming part of, God’s transforming work.

We next see this idea (“the forgiveness of sin”) in the opening verses of Luke’s third chapter: “[John] went into all the regions around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for [into] the forgiveness of sins...” (Lk. 3:3). The next sentence relates John’s baptism ministry to the vision of Isaiah the prophet, making straight the way of the Lord with the result

that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Lk. 3:6) — a catholic theme that runs through Luke’s Gospel. We have in these few verses several words that have structured Christian thinking from the beginning: repentance, forgiveness, and salvation.

“Repentance” translates the Greek word *metanoia*, which in itself would take many monographs to unravel. Here it will suffice to mention that *metanoia* certainly means more than “repent” and “do penance,” which is how this word has long been translated into Latin and other languages. The roots of this word, *meta* and *noia* mean the “change of one’s mind” or the transformation of one’s thinking.⁷ In Luke’s Greek, John is proclaiming a “baptism of transformation” which brings one *into* the forgiveness of sins. People are moving from one realm into another, and conversion is the means of transit.

Luke give us more language about forgiveness — *aphesis* — in the book of Acts, the second part of Luke’s arranging of the

events in the life of Jesus and his early followers (cf. Lk. 1:3). Here we see Peter addressing the crowd at Pentecost, a crowd that Luke goes out his way to show as multi-national, Jews and Jewish converts from everywhere (Acts 2:8-11). Peter narrates the kernel of what we call salvation history, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). The Book of Acts will unfold the two-fold title of Jesus — “Lord” because he acts with the power of God, “Messiah” (*Christos* in Greek) because Jesus was anointed to bring salvation. The response of the people who have heard that Jesus, God’s chosen One, was crucified but now has been raised, leads to their question: “Brothers, what should we do?” and Peter’s response, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:37-38).

Of course, Acts does not follow up this discourse with people going home, happy that they’ve been saved from punishment. Rather, the whole book of Acts shows exactly what repentance (conversion) and forgiveness mean: the disciples undertake a new way of life. Forgiveness of sin, in the Book of Acts, does not mean reprieve from punishment. Rather, simultaneous with the forgiveness of sin is reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. All that the Spirit will accomplish in the lives of these early disciples of Jesus is the space into which the converted are led.

The salvation that people enter into is a way of life led by the Holy Spirit who both transforms individuals and, as part of this transformation, brings them into a new way of life. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people” (Acts 2:44-47).

Something of this broader notion of forgiveness — being brought into a new state of life — is implicit in the formula of consecration over the chalice, which comes, of course, from the gospels and includes the formula “for [into] the remission of sins.” The statement itself is called “the mystery of faith.” Before the reforms of Vatican II, the formula contained these words itself: “*novi et eterni testamenti: mysterium fidei*” — “of the new and eternal covenant: the mystery of faith.” In other words, there is a mystery of faith, its inner secret, which is tied to the covenant that Jesus establishes. Blood — the selfless gift of Jesus for the establishment of the kingdom — confirms the nature of the covenant. God gives us Jesus to establish a new relationship for “you and for many” — and all of this is “*in remissionem peccatorum*,” “into the remission of sin.”

The image of forgiveness which I propose for our consideration comes to this: forgiveness is the removal of someone from a system-of-sin, in which God is not the center of one’s life, into a new kind of system in which believers, transformed by

the Holy Spirit, adopt a way of life as a sign of their entrance into the kingdom of God. The emphasis is not on one or another particular sin. This obsession with particular sins resulted from the collapse of an ancient system of exclusion into a monastic system of doing penance. In earliest centuries of church history, major sins of exclusion — adultery, apostasy, murder — demanded a long, external process of penance and re-admission into the community. This gradually drifted over centuries into a concern for multiple sins of all kinds for which one “had to go to confession.”⁸ It certainly is obvious, in recent decades, that the goal posts of what is a “mortal” sin, have moved dramatically, even if the official language of the church has not fully endorsed this movement.⁹ Rather than this obsession with being perfect by having “no sin on one’s soul” — as the widespread phrase had it — a broader understanding of forgiveness of sin can have us talking about states of life, discipleship, which believers are living.

Proof for this underlying notion of forgiveness is right under our noses: the catechumenal process. Here, people move from a one state to another state as disciples in a gradual process of movement from darkness to light. Catechumens become the elect; the elect become the newly enlightened; the newly enlightened become the neophytes and mystagogues that will continue the transformation of the Christian community. Notice that we do not celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation for catechumens; rather, we celebrate the triple sacraments of initiation — of entrance — into the people of God. The *whole process* is one of “forgiveness of sin.” Forgiveness is a movement from being away from God, unaware of God, unsure of God into a state of being part of the kingdom of God through the people God has formed. Part of being in God’s People involves living a new way of life in which the forces of sin continue to be overcome by the practices of discipleship. The realm of forgiveness, directed by the mercy of God, begins to transform the believer through the agency of the Holy Spirit leading, and empowering, the faithful to fuller participation in the kingdom.¹⁰

PASTORAL SENSES

If forgiveness of sin involves undertaking the path of discipleship, entering a new space where the grace of God holds sway, then this has implications for the pastoral approach the church takes toward reconciliation. Obviously the church cannot revert to earlier forms of reconciliation, before the substantial changes that emerged at the end of the first millennium; but the church can help put its current practice of reconciliation into a broader, pastoral context of discipleship.

Somewhat embarrassingly for the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the term “conversion” appears mostly in the section on the sacrament of reconciliation — and hardly at all in the celebration of baptism.¹¹ This means that, although the adult Catechumenate is the “norm” for religious catechesis, it is not the assumption of the Catechism when it thinks about baptism. The church would greatly benefit from understanding its entire life in terms of conversion; infant baptism should not

prevent this — rather it should help identify the key issue. Children are not baptized and then, later, converted. Rather, children are baptized in order to grow in an environment of conversion, set up for them by their families and the wider community of faith.¹²

Nevertheless, the pronounced appearance of conversion in the context of reconciliation may give a good clue as to its potential in our understanding this sacrament. The external form of the sacrament of reconciliation includes elements that should shape the sacrament more clearly toward discipleship. Certainly the call to examine conscience and make a clear indication of repentance is analogous to the experience of conversion; and the imposition of a penance is a seed that can be understood better in terms of discipleship.¹³

What the church is doing in reconciliation is celebrating, in the life of an individual, the salvation won for us in Jesus Christ, a salvation that inserts people into the kingdom of God as disciples. The sin of a Christian is the recognition that something significant has cancelled or contradicted the following of Jesus as a disciple. Reconciliation is the acknowledgement that, having turned again to a life of discipleship, a follower of Jesus is now restored by grace to a way of life that otherwise was seriously compromised by sin.

The point of reconciliation, then, is the resumption of the way of life that the Holy Spirit began in us when we were transformed by grace and began our lives as disciples. Sin is overcome not by the internal process of feeling differently about our sin, but rather by the whole array of elements of discipleship. Forgiveness brings us to a life of prayer, of submission to the word, of sacramental celebration, of unity with our brothers and sisters, of growth in grace, and of service to others as a way of life. Forgiveness is the work God does through divine mercy to overcome the power of sin inside of us, above and beyond justice and punishment, so that we can begin to experience the breadth of divine life again. This breadth of divine life is far more than relief because a punishment has been removed; it is restoration to a graced way of life.

The church, then, would have to frame Catholic life much more explicitly as discipleship, as a continuation of what is shown to us in the Book of Acts, and in the rest of the literature of the first followers of Jesus which we see in the Pauline and Petrine letters, in the communities of John, in Hebrews, and reflected in a different way in the Book of Revelation. The implications of discipleship underlie every passage of the gospels, though in the form of narration rather than the exhortation that we find in the apostolic letters. In the New Testament, we are not dealing with individuals struggling with inner feelings, as so much of Christian life has come to seem, particularly in the United States. Far more than being a state of mind, Christianity is a way of life, walked with others on a journey which is bringing the kingdom of God into being. It is a new space, an arena of grace and new covenant, which the forgiven are privileged to occupy once again.

Talking discipleship would allow the church to frame all of parish life in a different way — how we come together to support each other as disciples — and affect how we thought about religious formation in general. For all our talk about having to reframe religious education, we still in actual practice frame it in terms of classes needed to receive sacraments rather than formation in discipleship. For all our talk about being a people of God on a journey, parish life still often comes down to people celebrating Mass, with only secondary thoughts about anything religious happening during the week. We still do not think of ourselves as a people formed by the Holy Spirit to be harbingers of the kingdom who, by the structures and practices of discipleship, are showing God's new life in the world. The pious struggle more with guilt or shame than with what we, as a people, are bringing to the world.

In a broad descriptive section of *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis writes:

The salvation which God offers us is the work of his mercy. No human efforts, however good they may be, can enable us to merit so great a gift. God, by his sheer grace, draws us to himself and makes us one with him. He sends his Spirit into our hearts to make us his children, transforming us and enabling us to respond to his love by our lives. The Church is sent by Jesus Christ as the sacrament of the salvation offered by God. Through her evangelizing activity, she cooperates as an instrument of that divine grace which works unceasingly and inscrutably (121).

In a stimulating book called *Sin: A History*, Gary Anderson showed that two images of sin emerged in the Scriptures. One image, earlier in Jewish history, thought of sin as a burden that had to be lifted. The other, emerging later, saw sin as a debt that had to be paid. We can, of course, elaborate sin in other ways, thereby nuancing what we think reconciliation looks like. If sin is distancing oneself, then reconciliation is drawing near. If sin is rebellion, then reconciliation is like a truce. If sin is a rupture, then reconciliation is a repair. If sin, finally, is stepping outside the gracious space that the new covenant creates for us, then reconciliation is entering that covenantal space once again, ready to undertake the way of life which the covenant entails. I believe it is this final vision of sin and reconciliation which amplifies the meaning of “for the forgiveness of sin.”

Pope Francis wants to transform parish life. One way to express this is that he wants our parishes to look more like the New Testament than they usually do. In his apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, he sees each parish as a space of faith, conversion, joy, and outreach. Yet he knows parishes — and *a fortiori*, catechesis — still have a ways to go. In #28 of his apostolic exhortation he says: “We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them

environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.”

If we understand mercy as a space, a field, or environment in which God’s repair of human brokenness happens, then a parish can be seen as a physical location of this field. Pope Francis writes: “Such a community [i.e., the Church] has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy. Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved” (24).

Adopting a much broader sense of what forgiveness means, and how it fits into the overall sense of discipleship, and the mission of today’s parish, can move Catholic pastoral life forward in directions toward which both culture and church leadership are pointing. **I**

Frank DeSiano, CSP, has extensive experience with Catholic evangelization on the national level and continues working on developing pastoral outreach tools.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), #1472. Also *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd Edition (CE 2), v. 11, 817.
- 2 *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1911 edition, v. 12, p. 578.

- 3 So, for example, in the Books of Kings, summaries of each king’s life, usually disappointing, were linked to his sins and their consequences.
- 4 See *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice*, Robert J. Daly (T&T Clark, 2009).
- 5 CE 2, v. 6, 27.
- 6 All scriptural citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
- 7 *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, v. 4, 999.
- 8 CE 2, v. 4, 475.
- 9 CCC, #1845-1861.
- 10 Walter Kasper, *Mercy*, in an upcoming English translation by Paulist Press, p. 29: “[Mercy] creates a space for life and human freedom.”
- 11 CCC, #1425-1433.
- 12 *Catechesis in Our Time*, #19, deals with the notion that children must be evangelized as they are being catechized. Might it be dangerous for Catholics to implicitly think that conversion does not happen in Catholic life until some further point well beyond baptism? See my discussion of conversion in *Mission America* (Paulist Press, 2012), the first two chapters.
- 13 CCC, #1460 relates the deeds of penance to a proportion of the gravity of the sin. It references Trent’s teaching that the penitent’s penance is a share in the satisfaction that Jesus made in his death. One can argue, however, on the basis of forgiveness and discipleship, that the penance given by the priest is the sign of being restored to a way of life now shown by deeds of the re-converted sinner.



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Adult Faith Formation: A plan for parishes

Matthew Pinto



I have a confession to make: When I am on a flight, I usually mentally check out during those few minutes when the flight attendant gives the safety presentation. I think this is because I have heard it many times and tend to think nothing dangerous is really going to happen, so the information will not be needed. (Hopefully.)

I am sure you know the drill. In fact, you could probably finish this sentence: “In case of a sudden drop in cabin pressure...” We are further told that adults traveling with children should put on their own masks before helping their children with theirs. The reason is obvious. Adults who are incapacitated cannot help their children.

Several years ago, when preparing a talk on adult faith formation (AFF), I read the pastoral letter from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops entitled *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* (OHWB). As I read the bishops’ words, an image of this airplane oxygen mask came to mind — and the message became clear to me: We need to first prepare our Catholic adults in faith and discipleship if we have any real hope of effectively forming our Catholic young people.

THE 30,000-FOOT VIEW

Although numbers do not tell the whole story, the rate of Mass attendance in the Catholic Church in the United States reveals that it is struggling in this regard. Only 30 percent of American Catholics regularly celebrate Mass on Sundays. Worse, the rate of Mass attendance drops to ten to 13 percent of adult Catholics aged 46 and younger.¹ This indicates that most adult Catholics are simply not engaged in the life of the church, nor are they raising their children to be engaged. Jeff Cavins, Director of Evangelization for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, expresses it this way: “Many of us who raised kids after Vatican II added an eighth sacrament to the church in the hope that our children would grow up strong Catholics — we can call it the Sacrament of ‘Holy Osmosis.’ The idea here is that if you just drop your children off at religious education classes once a week they will quickly and

quietly absorb the faith and grow up to be mature Christians. Of course, it doesn’t work that way, any more than standing in your garage will somehow turn you into a car.”

What has caused our young Catholics, in large numbers, to be disengaged from the faith? What has led an even larger number of adults to leave the church or to live out their faith with only a rudimentary understanding of its essentials? In a recent meeting of bishops, Pope Francis noted that the church must strive to “make sense of the ‘night’ contained in the flight of so many of our brothers and sisters from Jerusalem; a Church which realizes that the reasons why people leave also contain reasons why they can eventually return.”²

I would suggest that a primary reason people leave the church is that we have not exactly been very intentional as a church in the area of adult faith formation. While the homily we hear on any given Sunday may be engaging and effective in unpacking the essential message of the Scripture readings, this alone is not sufficient to form Catholics in their faith; intentional adult faith formation efforts are needed.

ENGAGING CATHOLICS TODAY

We currently have our parish formation plans backwards. We spend the bulk of our resources on the formation of our children, but very little on the training of catechists and the parents with whom the kids go home. The U.S. bishops articulate this very point in *OHWB*: “While most Catholic parishes place a high priority on the faith formation of children and youth, *far fewer treat adult faith formation as a priority.*”³ They go on to say that “adult Catholics must be mature in faith and well-equipped to share the gospel...grounded in a deep commitment to the person and the message of Jesus.”⁴ The bishops go even further by stating that adult faith formation must be “the central task in [this] catechetical enterprise...the axis around which revolves the catechesis of childhood and

1 Pew Research, as appearing in *Forming Intentional Disciples* by Sherry Weddell (Huntingdon, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2013).

2 Address of Pope Francis to the Bishops of Brazil, Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro on the Occasion of the XXVII World Youth Day, 28 July 2013.

3 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* (OHWB) 43; emphasis added.

4 OHWB 2

adolescence.”⁵ Wow. That is a game-changing statement if ever there was one, as it completely turns the current modality of parish formation upside down.

According to Daniel Cellucci, vice-president of the Catholic Leadership Institute, which consults with dioceses on best practices for parish life, “The great news is there is a hunger by adults to know Jesus more and be formed as his disciple. The challenge is converting that hunger into a greater sense of discovery and personal ownership on the part of those adults for their own formation. It is no small task for parishes — they need to cut through lives of busyness and overstimulation in order to show just how relevant the teachings of Christ and the Church are in today’s world.”

Lay witnesses especially play a role in portraying this relevance. In the words of Pope Paul VI, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is *because* they are witnesses.”⁶ These two elements, witness and faith formation, must work in tandem. Since the Catholic faith is rooted in the Incarnation, such formation is not accomplished *solely* through programs or formulas. They are ultimately found in a person — Jesus.⁷ Nonetheless, adult faith formation resources and programs can bring people to encounter the person of Jesus Christ and help them deepen their relationship with him.

A UNIVERSALLY CATHOLIC APPROACH

One thing I love most about the Catholic faith is its universality — and the various ways people respond to it. Some are captivated by the church’s social teachings and outreach. Others are compelled by its strong moral stance and its systematic theology. Still others are drawn to its sublimely beautiful art and architecture. Given this, the only meaningful way the church will engage Catholic adults in the third millennium is through a multi-pronged, holistic approach. In short, our parishes must seek to engage the mind, body, *and* spirit of modern spiritual seekers.

First, we must *minister to the mind* through catechesis and personal witness. As humans, our highest faculty is our intellect. Catholics who are not engaged intellectually with the faith may indeed be faithful and holy, but they are missing out on something to which they are called. Such intellectual “disengagement” makes Catholics especially vulnerable to the sentimentality and allure of our present age. We cannot love and effectively live that which we do not know.

Second, we must *minister to the body* to address the entirety of the human person. Because we are “enfleshed” souls, a ministry that appeals only to the intellect is usually insufficient. Our ‘wired’ need for communion with other people, for community, is best served through our parish family.

Third, we must *minister to the soul*, which entails providing a rich and meaningful sharing of the sacraments and the word of God. Some 50 years after Vatican II, we are still struggling for the proper balance between the sacred and the secular in our presentation of the liturgy. Since the liturgy is the primary way Catholics engage with the faith, we must make *how* we worship a top priority in adult faith formation. I would contend that, because Catholics are “in the world” from Monday through Saturday, our Sunday worship should take us to another world — i.e., the focus should more be on the “vertical” orientation rather than the “horizontal.”

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As Sherry Weddell insightfully points out in her seminal book *Forming Intentional Disciples*, “An old saying captures our situation as Catholics vividly: *God has no grandchildren.*” Assuming the meaning here is not obvious...simply because a child is raised in a Catholic home and baptized does not necessarily mean he or she is a believer. Weddell explains, “One of the deepest convictions of evangelical culture is that every person, whether raised inside a Christian tradition or not, has a personal decision to make about whether he or she will live as a disciple of Jesus Christ.”⁸ If, as Catholics, we seek to encourage this personal decision, we need to consider what challenges we face and what opportunities we can seize in this regard.

A primary challenge to presenting the faith today is our noisy, intoxicating culture, which is full of distractions and much confusion. The many “isms” of the modern world — secularism, materialism, relativism, etc. — make it difficult for many of our contemporaries to recognize the truth when they see it. More troubling from a Catholic perspective is the limited understanding — if not outright ignorance — many have of the basic tenets of the faith. New religious movements abound that promote ubiquitous attitude of being “spiritual but not religious.” Since these movements offer such a mushy, feelings-based philosophy, they can be hard for many to resist — and difficult for the church to offer an effective response.

Despite such challenges, many opportunities exist today for us to proclaim the faith in a way that will bear much fruit. The widespread spiritual hunger of our culture, due in no small part to the comfort and endless diversions brought about by modern technology, have been tried and found wanting by many. Then again, this same technology makes it possible for high-impact, faith-based content to be readily available and widely circulated. Catholic publishers and apostolates are rapidly improving the quality and effectiveness of their resources. One can see an increasing level of boldness and savvy in marketing and packaging of many Catholic organizations, which is effectively attracting more adults to the church and deepening the faith of those already involved.

On a grassroots level, lay movements and apostolates continue to grow in their number, effectiveness, and enthusiasm.

5 OHWB 5.

6 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 41.

7 See OHWB 29.

8 *Forming Intentional Disciples* 27.

Groups such as the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS), Dynamic Catholic, Lighthouse Catholic Media, Alpha for Catholics, Word on Fire, Renewal Ministries, and Christ Life are carrying out their baptismal call to be witnesses to the world.

A PLAN FOR PARISHES

The following six steps are not intended to be comprehensive. They are offered as an initial, integrated approach to creating a culture of adult faith formation in our parishes.

1. *Give a long and honest look at the true effectiveness of your parish's overall pastoral ministry.*

With some reflection, I believe most parishes would conclude that they are not carrying out a comprehensive pastoral ministry that engages the mind, body, and spirit of their parishioners. They may indeed sponsor religious education programs that reach a respectable number of children and teens and may offer Bible study or an occasional talk by an outside speaker, but so much more can be done. Quite simply, if evangelical Protestant Christians can build mega-churches and offer a seemingly endless array of ministries for their people, why can't we Catholics do the same?

The leadership of our parishes needs to make an intentional choice to consider all aspects of pastoral ministry — i.e., liturgy and sacraments, faith formation programs for adults and children, other pastoral outreaches — and seek to set the bar much higher than in the past. We need to get serious about the business of building more engaging and effective pastoral solutions.

2. *Evaluate your parish's current AFF needs and past programs.*

Take a careful look at the studies and programs that your parish has done in the past and evaluate

their effectiveness. Identify your parish's particular dynamics: size, demographics, current faith formation offerings, logistical resources, and "human resources" (e.g., catechists, facilitators, leaders that might be available). Find creative ways to encourage people to attend the faith formation programs being offered. Acknowledge obstacles that may exist to running a successful study or program in your parish and strive to overcome them in creative ways. (See the sidebar for a list of popular AFF programs.)

3. *After determining the number of families registered at your parish, set a goal for one-quarter of your parish to receive ongoing adult faith formation.*

When it comes to our AFF programs, I think we too often set our sights too low. Parishes with 1,000 or more registered families should certainly seek to have more than 20 people participating in a weekly faith-sharing group. Imagine the energy that would come to a parish if just 25-30 percent of registered parishioners attended at least one, rich AFF program, let alone such programs on a recurring basis. If these same people became intentional, well-formed disciples of Christ, the parish would become a very bright light to the larger community. Even if your goal is 25 percent and you only achieve a participation rate of seven or eight percent, you have still doubled or tripled the number of people in your faith formation program.

4. *Think broadly in developing a long-term parish faith formation plan.*

Even with a dramatic growth of AFF programs in parishes in the United States and Canada over the past seven to eight years, our first forays have been good, but still generally modest. For example, in a



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majority of parishes we work with, one leader will run a single program at a time, with about 20-40 participants — and they will then move this same group from program to program. This, of course, is good, and represents substantial progress from just a few years ago, but so much more could be done. In our efforts with approximately 4,000 parishes in a given year, my team has found that less than 20 percent of parishes offer multiple adult faith formation programs at the same time (e.g., a parish in the Houston area has eight to ten adult faith formation offerings each spring and fall).

I would suggest that parishes look at a multi-year plan involving a variety of different programs. A three-year plan is recommended, and it should involve running successful programs over and over until a sizable percentage of a parish's membership has gone through them. I think the parish should also strive to run several different programs at once. Your parish plan should appeal to the parish's various constituencies, interests, and needs for healing. Such groups could include mothers-with-young-children to art enthusiasts to those who are experiencing bereavement. Many programs simply need good leaders and facilitators, as well as effective marketing. Training programs are often available for a particular study, so more leaders can be equipped and trained to run programs more effectively.

5. Ask for the support of your pastor.

Even if your pastor cannot be personally involved in the parish faith formation plan, his support is often the key to a successful faith formation initiative. I know of a pastor of a rural parish in the Diocese of Harrisburg who rallied his parishioners with a vision for a particular adult faith formation program. In this parish of approximately 600 registered families, more than 475 parishioners signed up for a Lenten Bible study. The

program was offered 11 times throughout the week, with options during the day and evening. So a supportive pastor often makes the difference, especially when it comes to motivating parishioners to participate.

6. Get started!

As you plan, do not let perfection get in the way of progress. Do not let your agenda be driven by the fear of failure. It is better to attempt and fail than to not attempt at all. In many cases, it is better to start *sooner* rather than *perfectly*. Just get started! Your parishioners are in great need of your parish's pastoral and adult faith formation solutions. "Think big, even if you move prudently" is a motto I often share with parishes and dioceses. Be comfortable with mistakes; learn from them and move on. Echoing the words of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, "We have only today. Let us begin."⁹

The bishops of the United States offer a confident assurance to you at the end of *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, "Awakened and energized by the Spirit, let us strengthen our commitment and intensify our efforts to help the adults in our communities be touched and transformed by the life-giving message of Jesus, to explore its meaning, experience its power, and live in its light as faithful adult disciples today... In the power of the Spirit it will not fail but will bear lasting fruit for the life of the world."¹⁰ ■

Matthew Pinto is the founder and president of Ascension Press, a leading Catholic publisher of adult faith formation and youth learning systems. Ascension's family of 36 learning systems includes the acclaimed Great Adventure Bible Study Program, A Biblical Walk through the Mass, Mary: A Biblical Walk with the Blessed Mother, Momnipotent, Theology of the Body for Teens, and Chosen: A Journey Towards Confirmation. You can reach Matt at mpinto@ascensionpress.com or visit AscensionPress.com.

9 <http://www.ewtn.com/MotherTeresa/words.htm>.

10 OHWB 183.

POPULAR ADULT FORMATION PROGRAMS

- * **Catholicism**
WordOnFire.org
- * **ENDOW (Studies for Women)**
EndowOnline.org
- * **Little Rock Scripture Study**
LittleRockScripture.org
- * **33 Days to Morning Glory**
Marian.org
- * **United States Catholic Catechism for Adults**
USCCB.org

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- * **A Biblical Walk Through the Mass (8 parts)**
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- * **MARY: A Biblical Walk with the Blessed Mother (8 parts)**
- * **Momnipotent (A program for Catholic mothers, 8 parts)**
- * **Oremus: A Catholic Guide to Prayer (8 parts)**
- * **Walking Towards Eternity (A program on the virtues, 8 parts)**

These programs can be found at AscensionPress.com

The New Evangelization and Disseminating the Good News

David I. Fulton



The new evangelization has become one of the hot topics of the past several years. Having its origins in the public statements of St. John Paul II and resonating in the statements of Popes Benedict and Francis, evangelizing has become a major focus in the life and ministry of the church universal as well as the church in America.

This article is a digested version of a longer address I gave at the 2014 MAC Conference. In it, I ask you to consider a way of disseminating the gospel — activating the Christian gospel anew in our time — by looking at three important messages.

1. POPE FRANCIS' TAKE ON NEW EVANGELIZATION

Pope Francis made two significant statements in his address to CELAM in July 2013. Referring to what was said at the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis stated, “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

In this first statement, we find the basis for our dialogue with the contemporary world. Pope Francis does not consider the Christ against culture or the Christ of culture models to be an appropriate grammar for the new evangelization.

Responding to the existential issues of people today, especially the young, listening to the language they speak, can lead to a fruitful change, which must take place with the help of the gospel, the magisterium, and the church's social doctrine. Pope Francis reminds us that the scenarios and the areopagi involved are quite varied. “If we remain within the parameters of our ‘traditional culture,’ which was essentially rural, we will end up nullifying the power of the Holy Spirit. God is everywhere: we have to know how to find him in order to be able to proclaim him in the language of each and every culture; every reality, every language, has its own rhythm.”

This second significant statement tells us that for Pope Francis, Christ in dialogue with culture or Christ transforming culture are the grammars in which the new evangelization needs to be parsed.

2. DISSEMINATING THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

Consider how innovations — even new moves to evangelize — are successfully disseminated. In his book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, sociologist Everett Rogers examines how certain new projects are met, accepted, and applied in a community. Rogers begins by noting that some community practices and traditions can block progress, and often enough can result in a refusal or failure to adapt new methods.

Rogers offers a number of striking, similar examples of his thesis. I would like to offer two of these: one dealing with hybrid corn, another with clean water. In both of these examples, an “expert” was sent to explain why an innovation would be advantageous:

In the first, the US Department of Agriculture sent a bevy of PhDs to Iowa farmers. The farmers were told that the hybrid corn would increase productivity by 20 percent; it was shown that hybrid corn could resist certain diseases, and it was demonstrated that hybrid required less maintenance and produced a more homogenous crop. Yet, the farmers resisted.

- * It meant that new hybrid seeds would have to be purchased each year (the farmers did not buy seed, but took seeds from their best-looking corn plants).
- * It meant that technology should be trusted to end plant pathology, rather than using seeds that had developed immunities to such pathologies.
- * Thus, despite the lectures by the PhDs and the spiels by the salesmen, the Iowa farmers were initially very resistant to make changes in their traditional way of doing things.

The change to hybrid corn resulted not from the lectures from the experts, but from the social relationships with neighbors. A respected farmer would tell his friends that he tried hybrid on a couple of acres, and it worked. Then another, and another, and another would try it — and soon enough, a critical mass of innovators had been formed, the innovation had been diffused, and hybrid corn became the ordinary way of production in Iowa.

In Roger's second example, the attempt of public health officials to encourage boiling drinking water in Peru, acceptance of innovation was not so successful.

A two-year campaign by public officials resulted in only 11 housewives adopting the process of boiling water. Why did the project fail? Because boiling water was perceived as culturally inappropriate by the villagers. According to their custom-based understanding, boiling water made water less "cold" and thus appropriate only for sick persons; if a person is not sick, he or she is prohibited from boiling water. Moreover, the person sent to "sell" the innovation was more interested in the innovation — was more "innovation-oriented" than she was in the traditions of the villagers — and thus was less "client-oriented." As a result of unswerving allegiance to community practices and the government agent's inability to orient to the client, the innovation did not take.

Four models of acceptance

Examples such as these led Rogers to develop a series of models to describe how an innovation gets adopted or rejected.

The first of these models considers the persons who decide to innovate. In the Rogers paradigm, innovation begins not as the direct result of an expert who shows up in a community but from an individual who is embedded in a community — usually a visible and influential community member. This community member chooses to innovate; he is followed by a few more who join in his choice, and eventually large numbers adopt the innovation.

The second model looks at the stages of the diffusion process. This model imagines that certain individuals will become interested in some of the basic information connected with a proposed innovation, and are persuaded to learn more. These individuals will weigh the relative advantages and disadvantages included in the proposed innovation, and may or may not decide to adopt it. Finally, each individual of this group will confirm his or her decision by checking out intra-personal consonance and inter-personal community support.

A third model looks at the categories of those who adopt an innovation. There are, first, innovators, who are the first individuals who adopt the innovation. They are willing to take risks, and are socially easy to identify. Next are the early adopters, who have the highest degree of opinion leadership in the community. These are followed by later adopters, then by an early majority, and a late majority, with the laggards — who never adopt the innovation — bringing up the rear.

A fourth model looks at the intrinsic characteristics of innovations that influence the decision, by individuals or group, to adopt or reject an innovation. Determining whether to adopt an innovation seems to depend on issues such as how an innovation will improve life, how the innovation is compatible with what has gone before, how easily an innovation can be used, whether one can test out an innovation and then take their toe

out of the innovative water, and whether the innovation and its adoption will be visible to others.

Innovation can be about hybrid corn, or it can be about the gospel of Christ. The processes and population for adoption remain pretty much the same. This is to say that the presentation of the "innovation" of the Good News will probably best be disseminated not by the circuit preaching of a guy in a black suit, but by the adoption of the gospel by significant members of the community. And it falls to the pastor and the pastoral minister to identify these significant members, to evangelize them, to recruit them and to empower them to serve as part of a critical mass through which the Good News, the great joy, is shared.

3. ACTUALIZING THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

A central tenet of the gospel is that, as a result of Jesus, you and I, who have been recreated in the image of the Son, thereby have become adopted children of the Father and radically new creations. As such, we have been called to image Jesus, the Image of God *par excellence*, in three ways: by *martyria* (witness), by *leiturgia* (worship), and by *diaconia* (work, the work of service). Witness, worship, and work result in *koinonia* — the communion of God's peaceable kingdom.

As the influence-leaders of a community are identified and become convinced of the validity and viability of the Good News, and as they disseminate this conviction by their witness, worship, and work, then it seems to me the new evangelization begins to get actualized in a community. This is not far from what George Weigel has suggested in a piece he wrote for *First Things*:

Evangelical Catholics enter mission territory every day, leading lives of integrity and charity that invite from others the question, "How can you live this way?" That question, in turn, allows the evangelical Catholic to fulfill the Great Commission by offering others the Gospel and the possibility of friendship with Jesus Christ. Having responded to the Risen Lord's call to meet him in Galilee, evangelical Catholics go into the world in witness to the Christ who reveals both the face of the Merciful Father and the truth about our humanity.

Strong truths generously lived. That's Evangelical Catholicism. ■

Msgr. David I. Fulton, JCD, STD, is Director of Continuing Formation Programs for Priests, at Saint Mary Seminary & University in Baltimore.

Good, Old-Fashioned E-mail

Claire M. McManus



When Pope Benedict XVI encouraged the church to plant its flag on the digital continent, parishes began ramping up their social media. There is no shortage of workshops, conferences, and books teaching parishes to improve their websites and find any possible way to have a virtual presence in the community. After learning all of the latest web 2.0 tools and gadgets, a participant at one of these workshops raised her hand and made this conversation-stopping statement, “We can build all kinds of websites, blogs, and social media, but how do we get people to visit them?” The question placed a new twist on the “they just won’t come” complaint that surfaces whenever a parish attempts to reach beyond its walls. It also uncovered a deep frustration among parish evangelizers: not only won’t they come to church, they won’t even go to our website.

The truth is, attracting people to media tools is not in our control. Brandon Vogt talks about this in his book, *The Church and the New Media*. “Most parishioners regularly use email and text messaging to communicate in their personal and professional lives. But most of them do not read the parish bulletin. Most of them are not officially registered in the parish. Many are not inspired about their parish. And sadly, most do not think about their parish in between Sundays.”

Parishioners are in control of their participation, but so were the people back in Jesus’ day. The solution might be found in Jesus’ own methodology. They will come only if you are willing to go. While we are not being asked to go to lakesides, watering holes, and mountaintops, we do need to go to the virtual communities where people gather.

IMPORTANCE OF E-MAIL

No matter how sophisticated a social media tool is, it always starts with an e-mail address. E-mail, that good, old-fashioned web tool that “nobody uses anymore,” is still the foundation on which a parish can build their social media presence. A brief e-mail message can direct parishioners to go to the parish Facebook page to see pictures from the latest event. An e-mail to the young parents who bring their children for baptism can direct them to the parish blog that contains Christian parenting advice. A message can be embedded on your weekly e-mail that reminds parishioners to follow your parish on Twitter where they can see re-tweets of helpful Catholic blogs or others’ accounts, including Pope Francis’ own “@Pontifex.”

Building this e-mail foundation takes time and effort. In his book, *Transforming Parish Communication*, Scot Landry offers step-by-step advice on building a solid e-mail base in

the parish. “Beginning with a parish e-mail communication initiative allows parishes to form its parishioners to expect that parish communications will now be delivered to them outside of the church on a regular basis.” They should have a place where they can subscribe by e-mail to parish mailings, including the weekly bulletin. Over time, parishioners will expect weekly e-mails from the parish. More than once a week is risky, though. When people feel overburdened by unsolicited e-mails, they scramble for the “unsubscribe” button.

Scot Landry suggests that a parish purchase a professional e-mail service such as Constant Contact, MailChimp, or FlockNote to get their e-mail campaign underway. These services have a cost, but their benefits are worth the small amount of investment. The e-mails that are generated by these services have a professional look to them and can be personalized with various designs that allow the parish to incorporate their own graphics. FlockNote is interesting because it combines many forms of communication, including e-mail newsletters, text messages, phone calls, and social media updates.

Building the parish e-mail list should be done with the kind of zeal that goes into a capital campaign. Wherever people interact with the parish there should be an opportunity to share their e-mail address. Every place a parishioner finds parish information — website, bulletin, or bulletin board — there must be a message to sign up for the parish e-mail. E-mail address should be part of every registration form, but the parish can also conduct an e-mail sign-up campaign over a few weekends to reach unregistered members. There should also be an e-mail sign-up sheet available in the vestibule of the church or the religious education center. Important announcements can be sent by e-mail to add greater incentive for subscribing to the parish list. Don’t worry too much about those members of the parish who do not “do” e-mail. These exceptions can be dealt with individually, and they usually are people already sitting in the pews and are not the target of the parish e-mail evangelization effort.

The first step toward evangelization is the invitation. Parishes may have wonderful websites or blogs that are brimming with evangelization, but without a strategy for inviting people to visit, they will stagnate in a cyberspace vacuum. Whether one uses email, text message, or print media, we must be relentless and enthusiastic inviters. ■

Claire M. McManus, STL, is the Director of Faith Formation for the diocese of Fall River, Massachusetts.



Here are two memoirs by two incredibly different people with particularly unique perspectives and experiences who end up at the same place: the Roman Catholic Church. What a statement about the church! It is catholic because it is open to

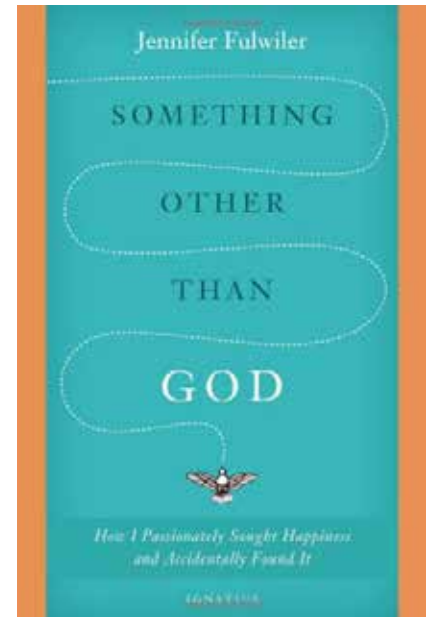
the diversity and variety that are both our history and our present circumstance. Discover these two “youngsters” as they explore where God is leading them. Google each of their names and you will find how engaging their journeys continue to be.

Something Other Than God: How I Passionately Sought Happiness and Accidentally Found It

By Jennifer Fulwiler

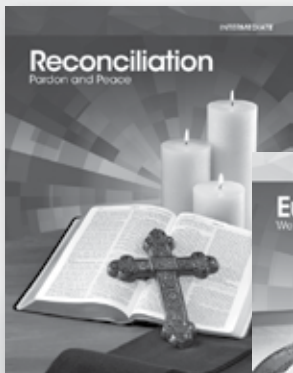
Jennifer Fulwiler is a programmer-turned-writer, a columnist for Envoy magazine, a regular guest on the Relevant Radio and EWTN Radio networks, and a contributor to the books The Church and New Media and Atheist to Catholic: 11 Stories of Conversion. Her personal blog is entitled ConversionDiary.com. She and her husband, Joe, live in Austin, Texas with their six young children.

Her memoir, *Something Other Than God*, is her story of how C. S. Lewis' famous quote (“All that we call history...[is] the long, terrible story of [humanity] trying to find something other than God which will make [it] happy”) is demonstrated by her life. Her Catholicism is one of acceptance of the authority of the church and its



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bishops. As she puts it: “Jesus chose twelve disciples, gave them authority...promised the Holy Spirit would protect them...they had successors, more successors...same line of successors today” (113).

This is the story of a woman who experienced religion as totally absurd, but journeyed intellectually, emotionally, and profoundly from atheism to Roman Catholicism. Her non-believing parents taught her to question everything, especially the myths of religion. That ability to question led ultimately to her questioning herself into the Catholic faith.

Here are several quotes from the book that capture its tone:

Can you believe that God can convey perfect truth through imperfect people, or not? (115)

A God-guided Church (122).

To realize that nothing — absolutely nothing — in this world will last is to realize that seeking the transcendent is the most important thing you could do with your life (127).

No spiritual teachers ever said you could access divine truths without transforming yourself first (130).

I’d come to see that the only way for people to shut down the power of rationalization is to adhere to an external moral code, one that they don’t have the power to change on the fly when it gets inconvenient. If God did become a man and did personally found a religion that he continued to guide in its doctrines, one mark it would surely bear is a clear view of right and wrong that did not change over the centuries (140).

Joe [her husband] said, ...“That’s Christianity’s whole message: The more you love, the more you’re going to have to give up — you can’t hold anything back. And that’s going to mean suffering. But it’s also going to mean joy and peace” (198).



Radical Reinvention: An Unlikely Return to the Catholic Church

By Kaya Oakes

Radical Reinvention is a memoir about Oakes’ journey to God, the Catholic Church, and the dialogue between her new/old faith and contemporary culture/feminism. She is a progressive Catholic, who shares the views of many of the “nones,” yet is deeply moved by the sacramental and social justice commitments of today’s Catholic Church. Her return came from her search for meaning that resulted in her going through RCIA and committing to a homeless women’s center in Berkeley

Her language is “salty,” but often profound. In an article in *America* (The ‘Nones’ Are Alright, June 17, 2013), she summarizes the book with these words: “I am a returned Catholic. Raised in the religion and the product of Catholic schools, I left the church with a lot of bitterness and resentment only to return in my 30’s. It has been a rocky but life-altering transition.” The last two paragraphs of the book capture succinctly her journey:

In my years as a returned Catholic, I’ve learned that it’s impossible to arrive at a metanoia alone. Yes, there is a role for the priests, bishops, and popes who run the show, but ultimately, living a life of faith is not about following marching orders. It’s about finding God in other people, feeling the movement of the Spirit, living the compassion of Christ as best we can. There is a reason Catholics return again and again to the idea of conscience, that deep, secretive part of ourselves that secular life makes it easy to ignore. A neglected conscience will shrivel and curl into itself in a manner that can feel impossible to unfold. But it will unfold with the help of others. It will grow. Mine does, every day (239).

Faith is part of my identity, and it’s not going away, even if it’s not always a perfect fit. Maybe the sense of rebellion felt by those of us who envision a better version of the Church is the same as the anger the Psalmists expressed. A better version of the Church, after all, is where we will ultimately find a better version of ourselves. All the saints whose examples I follow — alive and dead, believers and not, secular and holy — are agitators for reinvention: of the Church, the self, the world. And they never give up. We are all ready for a metanoia. Maybe we have already seen it begin (240). ■

Daniel Thomas was a director of religious education for 30 years in four different parishes in the Dayton area of the Cincinnati Archdiocese. He retired in 2010. He has been married to Eileen for 35 years, and they have two adult sons. Contact him at danlthomas@sbcglobal.net.

At Work in the Vineyard: Recharge Your Spiritual Batteries

Sandra Dunn



When I first received the flyer for the NCCL conference last May in St. Louis, I put it aside because I figured that I was way too busy in my parish to be traipsing off to an out-of-town conference. But then the name of one of the speakers, an old acquaintance, caught my eye. Opening the flyer, I was pleasantly surprised to see the names of several other people I have known or have known of over the years.

EVERYTHING FELL INTO PLACE

I checked my calendar, saw that the conference was after the end of faith formation classes and first Communion celebrations, and decided that my parish really could get along without me for a few days. The distance to St. Louis allowed me to drive, giving me some time away from the phone, email, and other interruptions. I hadn't used continuing education funds for awhile, so funds were available. Everything seemed to fall into place for me to get away for a few days and recharge my spiritual batteries. It took little effort to register for the conference, reserve a hotel room, and plan my little trip.

When I arrived in St. Louis, I had time to walk to the famous Gateway Arch and enjoy a delicious meal at an Irish pub. After signing in at the conference, I attended the First Time Attendees Meeting. The speakers spoke about NCCL and explained how it is a national support system serving the needs of catechetical leaders in the Roman Catholic Church throughout the U.S. They explained what would take place at the conference and offered tips for getting the most out of it. With the keynote speakers and variety of workshops, there is something for everyone. There are offerings for catechesis with children, youth, and adults. There are sessions for small, rural parishes and large, urban parishes.

While all of the information and insights were wonderful, one of my best discoveries was I am not alone in facing the challenges of parish ministry. Over lunch and dinner or side-by-side at a workshop, I met people experiencing the same trials as me. Parish catechetical leaders across the country deal with families who are pulled in many directions and still get

their children to faith formation classes. Budgets are tight everywhere. Pastors may not always see eye-to-eye with us.

In the exhibit hall, major publishers display and give samples of their products. It's good to hear about products directly from publishers because they offer personal tips of how their resources may be used in the parish. It is a good opportunity to check out various resources to see what might work best for a particular program.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

There is also time for socializing. The publishers love to have a good time, so there are events with wine, cheese, and delicious desserts. Having lived in various parts of the country, it

was good to see people I have worked with in the past. It was fun catching up and even hearing some fun stories. I also met new people with whom I discovered some commonality. At one of the dinners, I met someone from the parish where my nephew and his family live;

this gentleman knew my nephew and his family because they had worked together frequently. Also at the table was a nun who remembered my daughter-in-law from when they taught at the same Catholic high school years ago. I also surprised a gentleman when I told him that I had heard his announcement at Mass the previous Sunday because I celebrated Mass at his parish on my way to St. Louis. Meeting and talking with old and new friends is very enjoyable.

By the end of the conference, I happily realized that my spiritual batteries really had been re-charged, and I had the joy of meeting with old and new friends. I almost didn't want it all to end. I'm looking forward to the next NCCL conference when I won't be the "new kid on the block," but someone who is looking forward to meeting with these wonderful colleagues once again. Maybe I'll see you there! ■

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While all of the information and insights were wonderful, one of my best discoveries was I am not alone in facing the challenges of parish ministry.

Breaking Catechetical Programs From Summer Passivity: Planning for Outreach and Growth

Thomas S. Quinlan



Has the number of students in parish faith formation been on the decrease in your parish or diocese? Certainly, the national data shows that the trending is downward and that has been the case in the diocese I serve.

As diocesan and parish leaders, we should spend time considering the factors that go into this trend.

For a while now, I've been encouraging our parish catechetical leaders to do more outreach, and in particular, to use the summer as a *season of invitation*. The summer is a time of tremendous opportunity for the marketing of catechetical programs that begin in the fall. And yet, it seems that often little outreach is done during the summer.

FIVE PRACTICAL STEPS

Here are five ways you can reach out.

1. Do an early-summer follow up mailing and/or e-mailing campaign that includes all families who were in the program last year *and* in recent years and have not yet registered.
2. Scour the parish data base to see if there are families who have never registered their children for RE. A special targeted mailing should go to them, one that is especially invitational and personal in its tone. (Or better yet, contact them by phone and try to visit with them in person.)
3. Get marketing flyers, posters, etc., out in the entire community. Wherever parents go, try to get something in front of them that communicates the desire of your parish to serve their family's religious needs, whether they are Catholic or not!
4. Enlist your families to be your best evangelizers. Ask them to invite and encourage other families in the community to try your parish on for size — for faith formation *and* for worship. They can become your best agents for growing your program and introducing families to the parish.
5. In the mid-late summer, call parents to encourage registration and to hear what their questions and concerns are. Take on the posture of *pastoral listening*. The fact that you and your outreach team are actually calling to hear how things are with the family and to share that their families are valued at the parish will make a difference.

Happily, a number of our parishes here have become more aggressive in their use of various summer strategies to reach marginal Catholics and seeker families in their communities. I hear hopeful stories of families having come to a deeper faith relationship with Jesus and the church as a result.

In August we began a campaign called the *September Initiative*, calling on our parishes to dial up the outreach throughout the month of September. (See my August blog post at 21stcenturycatholicsevangelization.org for greater depth and practical resources.)

Ideas utilized for September outreach from this past season included:

- * E-mailing and personally contacting unregistered families in the parish.
- * Posting invitational program information in community newspapers, websites, businesses (grocery stores, daycare locations, etc.) and public settings like libraries, village halls, etc.
- * Encouraging parents and parishioners to become agents of outreach to both Catholic families and potential seeker families they know.
- * Offering tuition discounts/rebates to families that refer new families into the parish faith formation program.

AGGRESSIVE MARKETING TO RAISE AWARENESS

We can no longer sit back passively and assume that families will seek out parish faith formation ministries. We need to respond with an invitational posture and aggressive marketing approach that takes concrete action for raising awareness of the blessings of a Catholic parish and faith formation for all in our communities.

Let's use this spring for planning to do great outreach this summer and into the fall. Let's beat the bushes and shake the trees to find families so that Jesus Christ can bear great fruit in their lives. And let's change our mindset and mode of operation from *institutionalized* to *evangelizing*.

In such a reality as ours today, it takes only passion, imagination, and grace to turn challenge into opportunity. Let's go! ■

Thomas S. Quinlan is the catechetical director for the Diocese of Joliet. He can be reached at tquinlan@dioceseofjoliet.org.

Creating a Welcoming Parish

Michael J. Martocchio



When we think about our society in general — youth, young adults, parents — one word comes to mind: busy. We are all busy for a variety of reasons, some good and some not so good. Our youth are (over)-committed with extracurricular activities, young adults are often juggling school and careers, and

many parents work outside the home or are pulled in several directions, delicately balancing the commitments of their children with their own commitments. Let's face it: we are all people on the move. Yet somehow, if we are to be an evangelizing people, we must cut through the culture of busy. We must demonstrate that what we as the church have to offer in Christ is more important than any other commitment any of us might have. In fact, it is *the* commitment that helps us to prioritize, organize, and face all the other commitments we have.

Unfortunately, we generally both over-think and under-think the topic of welcoming those who are on the move. We over-think it because we contrive elaborate plans without addressing the root of the matter: our identity as Christians. We under-think it because we take this identity for granted rather than articulating it and planning to spread it. A welcoming parish is not something we create; it is something we *become*. The more our parish is suffused with the presence of Christ, the more we strive to be like the one who shared a table with societal outcasts.

IT STARTS WITH CLIMATE CHANGE

Because being a welcoming community is bound up with our identity as Christians, we must begin by thinking about 'climate change' — not global warming, but rather, 'ecclesial warming.' Instead of avoiding it, we need to be seeking it. Many of those we encounter have left a parish because they felt no connection to it; they did not feel like they belonged. Changing the climate of the parish to overcome this detachment is not easy. It is difficult because a parish is not simply comprised of its pastor, staff, or leadership; it must affect the whole parish. In order to create a welcoming parish, we must *become* a parish that actively welcomes.

The pastor and staff must set this tone, a tone which involves a willingness to work with others with due respect for all of the 'busy' that they experience through flexible scheduling and

a demeanor of genuine love and joy rather than one of condemnation. This entails using the discretion necessary to walk the delicate line between challenging in name of the gospel and making reasonable accommodations. When the pastor and staff have set the tone, it is time to formulate a plan to empower others in the parish to welcome in Christ's name. The best place to begin is with the volunteers. As those who lead and participate in ministries are briefed on the need for parish climate change, many of those who give a face to the church will be striving to ensure that this face is that of Christ. This warmth is contagious; soon all others in the parish will also exude the love of Christ.

The key is to see this task primarily as an attitudinal shift and not necessarily a shift in programming. While a shift in

programming may follow, the first thing we must consider is our identity as the church. It is important to constantly remember that as the church, we are a community of people that is charged with the task of sharing the Good News and making disciples. As we analyze

the particular things we do, we must constantly ask the question: *how does this serve the gospel?* Only by becoming truly attuned to this concern can we really make an effective evaluation of our methods. We may also find that it is not necessarily *what* we must do differently to change our parish climate, but *how* we do it.

IT IS NOURISHED AND PERPETUATED THROUGH AUTHENTICITY

Cutting through the chaos of our world requires authentic witness. The *joy* that comes with the love of Christ must be shown forth to everyone that we meet. As we practice showing forth this joy, it will soon become a habit and will spread. It is the authenticity of this joy that will nourish this growth. The more that we, as both a parish and as individuals, allow ourselves to fall deeper in love with Christ, the more this love (Christ's love) will be apparent in our actions. By exuding the love of Christ and showing the joy that comes with life in Christ, we can cut through the 'busy' of our culture. Others will then see that what Christ offers us through the church is not simply something that is worth our time, but is something that *gives our time worth*. ■

Michael Martocchio, PhD, is the Director of Catechesis and Christian Initiation for the Diocese of Charleston.

We must demonstrate that what we as the church have to offer in Christ is more important than any other commitment any of us might have.

Creating Vitally Alive Parishes of Faith

Leisa Anslinger



Over the past few years, I have had many conversations with people about the research and study that have been carried out by organizations such as the Pew Forum, Gallup, Dr. Christian Smith, the Barna Group, and others. We learn from these studies in order to more effectively evangelize, and we recognize that, to build “parishes that are vitally alive in faith,”¹ we must develop strategies that blend this desire to reach people with the good news of Jesus Christ with a deeper understanding of what we believe and how it is to shape our lives. In other words, there is a dynamic relationship between evangelization and adult faith formation.

Both point people toward a life of Christian discipleship: forming people as disciples necessarily leads them to a life of ongoing conversion, in the various ages and stages of their lives, and as they grow in living faith, they naturally reach out to others with the love, care, forgiveness, and mercy of Christ.

A VISION FOR PARISHES

I have long been struck by a simple, yet powerful paragraph in *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*:

We seek to form *parishes* that are vitally alive in faith. These communities will provide a parish climate and an array of activities and resources designed to help adults more fully understand and live their faith.

We seek to form *adults* who actively cultivate a lively baptismal and Eucharistic spirituality with a powerful sense of mission and apostolate. Nourished by word, sacrament, and communal life, they will witness and share the Gospel in their homes, neighborhoods, places of work, and centers of culture. (17)

This compelling vision needs much unpacking. In fact, many of us have been thinking about this for 15 years, since the initial publication of OHWB. Now, we as catechetical leaders see how the vision of the parish in OHWB resonates deeply with the description of the evangelizing community Pope Francis presents in *The Joy of the Gospel*:

The evangelizing community:

- * Knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first;
- * Has an endless desire to show mercy;

- * Gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances;
- * Is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way;
- * Is always concerned with fruit, because the Lord wants her to be fruitful;
- * Is filled with joy; it knows how to rejoice always (24).

FOUR THOUGHTS

Where does this lead us? Let me offer a few thoughts:

Parishes that are vitally alive in faith engage people in living faith. This is the key take-away from the engagement research many of us have been studying; as people become engaged in the community, they open their minds and hearts to Christ and to gospel living.

The more deeply people are invited to explore their faith through the daily circumstances of their lives, the greater the likelihood that they will share their growing faith with others. The engaged reach out to the not engaged, touching them with the love of God, and drawing them to Christian discipleship through the church.

This is not about activity for activity’s sake. Note that OHWB speaks of a parish climate as well as activities and resources to guide adults toward living and growing faith. This climate must be one in which each person recognizes the call to a life of discipleship. The activities and resources provide the means by which people make vital connections with one another and between their faith and their daily lives.

Missionary discipleship does not happen by accident. Such life in community will be fruitful when we make it clear that discipleship leads to living in mission. Forming adults as disciples who live their lives in the mission of Jesus Christ requires a multi-dimensional approach to faith formation, not only through the six tasks of catechesis, but even more fundamentally, as we help people discern their individual call as a person of faith, with gifts and talents, resources, and circumstances, recognized, developed, and lived within the community of faith, and sent out in mission. ■

Leisa Anslinger is the director of Catholic Life & Faith, an online resource for helping leaders engage real people in real faith, catholiclifeandfaith.net. Contact her at leisaanslinger@gmail.com.

¹ USCCB, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, 17.

Books, websites, and media for the enrichment of the parish catechetical leader

Compiled by Dan Pierson

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Excerpt from *The Vocation of Children*:

What would you say to pastors, congregations, or religious communities about the vocations of children in their midst?

Sometimes our ability not to see children is striking.

I would encourage them to enhance the visibility of children and to include children more fully in religious communities. In the last 50 years we’ve created children’s wings of Christian education that often take children out of congregational life. I’m not just talking about logistics and practices, but also a cognitive shift of seeing children as full participants. Sometimes our ability not to see children is striking. We miss how deeply they think, how much they’re engaging major life issues, how profound their insights can be, and how much they can contribute.

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*Dan Pierson served as director of religious education for the Diocese of Grand Rapids for 17 years and is the founder of faithAlivebooks.com and eCatechist.com. He is co-author with Susan Stark of *What Do I Do Now? A Guide for the Reluctant Catechist* (Pflaum Publishing). Please send suggestions and recommendations to pierson.dj@gmail.com.*

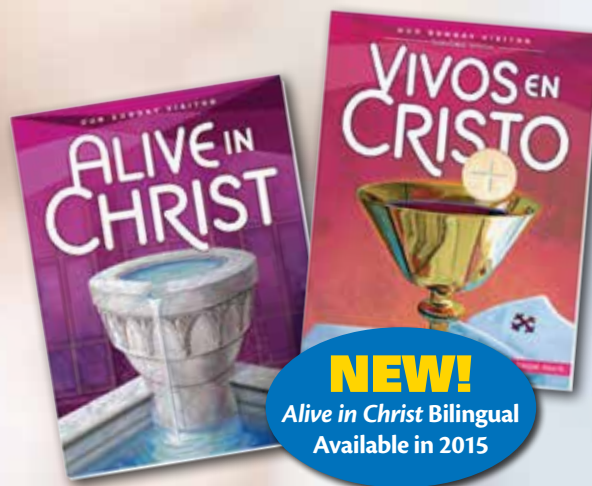
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