

Evangelization — yes, it's a Catholic 'thing' to do — and a ministry

In a Peanuts cartoon years ago, Sally says to Linus: "I would have made a good evangelist. You know that kid who sits behind me at school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion." Intrigued, Linus asks: "How'd you do that?" Sally, without hesitation or remorse, responds: "I hit him with my lunch box." This cartoon illustrates what we should not do in our evangelization efforts, what evangelization is not.

Pope Benedict XVI explained that while aggressive proselytizing by evangelical sects has drawn many Catholics from the church, for Catholics evangelization does not mean proselytizing: "The church does not engage in proselytism," he said to the general conference of the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM), gathered in Brazil last May to discuss the theme of being "Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ, So That Peoples May Have Life In Him." Rather, the church "grows by attraction" — just as "Christ 'draws all to himself' by the power of his love... so the church fulfills her mission to the extent that, in union with Christ, she accomplishes every one of her works in spiritual and practical imitation of the love of her Lord." So, what is Catholic evangelization, how is it different from proselytism, and how and when is it done?

WHAT IS PROSELYTISM?

The definition of proselytism varies much from one person and entity to another. Likewise, views on the propriety of various types of proselytism differ radically. As a result, the difference between "legitimate" and "illegitimate proselytism" may not be entirely definable. What one person considers legitimate, another may consider improper or even illegal. For Catholics, proselytism usually implies a lack of genuine respect for another person's God-given right or freedom of thought, conscience and religion, exhibited by making unjust or uncharitable references to other ecclesial communities' beliefs and practices or ridiculing them; employing physical coercion, moral compulsion or psychological pressure to make a convert; using manipulative attitudes and practices that exploit people's needs, weaknesses or lack of education, and fail to respect their freedom and human dignity, especially in situations of distress; or otherwise exhibiting a less than Christ-like attitude in our desire to make Christ and his church known and loved.

Some well-intended, but overly-zealous or poorly-trained Catholic evangelizers may at times border on proselytism in their attempts to evangelize, as do



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many other Christians, pseudo-Christians and non-Christians. It would be good if we all prayed for a "holy balance" that will enable us to share Christ's love and plan with others clearly and openly, while also exercising the genuine care, respect, patience and love modeled to us by Christ himself. This in fact is what distinguishes evangelization from proselytism in the Catholic Church's understanding.

WITNESS OF LIFE AND EXPLICIT PROCLAMATION — THE TWO SIDES OF THE EVANGELISTIC COIN

If Catholic evangelization does not permit banging someone on the head with your lunch box — or with the truth; if we must respect people's religious freedom and evangelize primarily by attraction; if evangelization is not "sheep-stealing" and Catholics are committed to ecumenical dialogue and initiatives, then: Is explicit proclamation permissible and even necessary? Absolutely! But, isn't St. Francis of Assisi often quoted as saying, "Preach always, and when necessary use words"? And didn't Pope Paul VI say that "modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses"? ("On Evangelization in the Modern World," No. 41)

Indeed. Be at all times a credible witness. Don't neglect for a second your ongoing conversion and personal growth in holiness, your love of God and neighbor, expressed in concrete service and goodness — for without these you cannot be saved nor effectively help others find and follow Christ. However, don't stop there.

Though Pope Paul VI aptly stated that "this wordless witness... can stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how (Christians) live" and though "such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the good news and a very powerful and effective one," he also said that it is only "an initial act of evangelization" which "remains insufficient, because even the finest of witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified... made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus... There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of



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Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed." ("On Evangelization in the Modern

World, No. 21-22)

We do not impose the truths of the faith on others, but rather

'Disappearing' sin

Get a nice clean piece of white paper, and a big black marker. Draw a big X on the paper. The X represents the worst sin you can think of, and its effects on you. Now turn the paper, and what do you see? A cross. Jesus bears our failures on His cross and turns them into means of grace. How can this be?

One of the biggest burdens carried by the post-abortive is the guilt they feel over a sin they believe is un-fixable. They believe they have done something that can't be salvaged. But the pope said, "Nothing is definitively lost." How can this be?

Evil is a negative, a "privation of being" as they used to say in school. Evil is not some big hairy monster that stalks the world. Everything that is, is good, insofar as it is. Evil lies in what is lacking.

Physical evil comes from a lack of harmony in the physical universe. Moral evil comes from a lack of harmony between our will and God's, between our will and the good we were created to choose. The Scriptures speak of sin as an arrow that misses its mark, a bad aim. The bow is good, the arrow is good, your arm is good, and what we hit might be good in itself but the aim is bad. Our will turns toward things that are not good for us. We choose food over health, drink over sobriety, self over others, self-will over God's.

Now, what happens to a wrong aim when the bow and arrow are turned to the right target? Other than having happened in the past, the wrong aim disappears. What happens to a bend in a rope when you straighten it? It ceases to exist! What happens to a hole



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when you fill it? No more hole.

God told Isaiah that he will make our sins white as snow, no matter how bloody red they are — if we are willing and obedient. He didn't say he will make us white as snow in spite of our sins, covering us over, as some believe. He actually said, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow." How can this be?

We are damaged by the sins we commit, and so are others. Since God has a plan for us, and God loves us, God has a plan to fix what goes wrong with us. He can fix sin, any sin. He fixes the break between us and him, by the perfect obedience of his son. He fixes the deviation in our will by helping us turn our heart back to him. When we aim our heart at him, voila, the sin disappears!

He fixes the damages of sin in a very special way. He will heal every effect of sin. He will wipe every tear, either in this life or the next. We can ask him now, and trust that he will. Some effects he will let us keep for a while, but even these he transforms so that they are no longer damages, but gifts.

For instance, let's say I attack you and cut off your arm. Barring a miracle, you will never have an arm again. I can repent, and be restored to grace. You

propose to their consciences the truth of the Gospel and salvation in Jesus Christ, with complete clarity and with a total respect for the free options it presents. By doing so, rather than disrespecting other faith traditions or overlooking people's religious liberty, we are fully respecting it in recognition of every person's right to receive the proclamation of the good news, so that they too may study the evidence, and prayerfully and thoughtfully arrive at a conclusion.

There is a need for words, for a loving and accurate explanation of the reasonable of the claims and promises of Christ and of his church, in a world so confused about God and church. How we proclaim will vary depending on our audience.

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can forgive me, and we can be restored in our relationship — and maybe even become friends. But you still don't have an arm, and I still have the memory of doing a terrible thing. Your lack of an arm can become a gift to you — we all know how disability can become opportunity, and privation can become grace. You can offer up the effects of sin on you in union with the suffering obedience of Christ, and these effects become powerful means of grace for yourself and for the world.

What do I do with the memory? If I have met Jesus Christ as savior, I am so happy that he has rescued me, and so aware of his love, that every time I think of the sin I committed, it is swallowed up in the awareness of his mercy! The awareness of my sin only serves to remind me of my weakness, a very good thing to remember; and of God's love, a very pleasant thing to think about.

For the post-abortive, all the wounds can be healed or transformed. And even the losses, our topic next time, can be restored. "Your children shall return to you," says the Lord.

So that, my friends, is how God makes sin white as snow. The deviation is "disappeared," the effects are transformed, the memory is made an occasion for rejoicing and death is swallowed up by eternal life. If you find yourself still trapped in remorse over sin, then you haven't yet found your way to the childlike glee of abandoning yourself to God's love. Jump in, the water's fine!

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