

St. Matthew's Lenten Retreat - Evangelization

I would posit that there are two ways in which we can respond to the theme for your parish this Lent, "We Thirst for you, O Lord", namely, through our efforts to evangelize and through our implementation of our Church's social teaching.

During presbyteral council meetings and parish episcopal visitations over the past 40 years I can attest to the fact that there is no issue that is more surfaced, discussed and of greater concern to our people than that of evangelization. Lay people often do not use that word evangelization, which is still a puzzle for many in our Church's lexicon, but our people universally express a concern about the growing number, especially under the age of 40, for whom faith and religion are no longer part of their agenda.

I'm sure we all have some awareness of how many have drifted from the Church – to join other faith communities or more likely to reject religion itself, either because of an unhappy experience with someone in the church, or because of a conviction that organized religion is no longer relevant to their lives. A survey conducted by Bishop David O'Connell, shortly after his installation as the Chief Shepherd in the Diocese of Trenton, New Jersey, sought to ask Catholics why they had left the Church or are not participating in the Eucharist regularly. The answers weren't all that surprising: tepid liturgies, uninspiring homilies, unwelcoming parishes; the refusal of priests or deacons to celebrate the sacrament of marriage with couples who have strayed from the practice of their faith or to baptize their children; dissatisfaction with the church's stance on divorce, human sexuality and exclusion of women from ordained ministry were cited frequently. One disaffected catholic complained: "ask a priest or deacon a question and you get a rule; you don't get a let's sit down and talk about it response."

Two years ago there was the release of a comprehensive study about religious practice in the United States conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Their data revealed that more than a quarter of Americans (28%) have left the faith of their childhoods for another religious denomination, or claim no faith tradition at all.

Between 2007-2014, the number of nones in the US (not nuns but nones), namely, those who claim to be agnostic, atheists, or spiritual but not belonging to any religious denomination, rose from 16% to 23%.

Meanwhile, in that same period of time the number of Christians in the United States declined by 3 million from 79% - 72% of the population. The headline in USA Today for this story read "Nones Soar, Christians down."

Sadly, Catholics are the religious group with the largest loss of adherents, with former Catholics making up almost 10% of the United States population. For every adult entering the Catholic Church today, six are leaving.

The Pew Research shows that while 31% of United States citizens indicate they were raised Catholic, only 24% identify themselves as Catholics today.

Some have joined other religions denominations (mainly Evangelical Churches), some say they are spiritual but unaffiliated with any specific religious tradition, and others describe themselves as atheists or agnostics.

Regarding these last two categories of unaffiliated, and atheists or agnostics, the editors of America Magazine have suggested that this may reflect more apathy or indifference than a deliberative exodus from the church because of institutional anger or for a more emotional experience of faith. They note, “Suddenly Catholicism in the United States finds itself assailed not by the bigotry of ages past, but by the indifference of our current milieu.”

On a more positive note, the data indicates that the Catholic Church has retained 68% of those who grew up Catholic – more than any other faith group in the United States except members of the Mormon, and Jewish communities.

Certainly these studies reinforce our firsthand knowledge that many of our Catholic people are either not practicing their faith regularly (only about 25-30% worship weekly) or are joining other churches. Indeed, some studies have indicated that the largest Christian denomination in the United States today is Roman Catholicism and the second largest is lapsed Roman Catholics.

How do we account for this hemorrhaging membership and what can we do about it? Speculation about why our numbers are dropping is widespread. Many cite the failure to assimilate new immigrants who don't feel comfortable with the more formal structure of our liturgies, the declining number of priests and religious, the clergy sex abuse scandal, the alienation of women, the dissatisfaction with church teachings, especially regarding the issue of human sexuality, and poor attempts at evangelizing.

I have no doubt that all these factors, and others which could be cited have contributed to the phenomenon which the Pew study discloses.

A recent Public Religion Research Institute study entitled, “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back,” contains further grim statistics about the ever-growing religiously unaffiliated population. The study indicates that the so-called nones constitute the single largest “religious group” in the country (25 percent); and among those 18 to 29, they number nearly 40 percent.

The study included interviews about why respondents left their childhood religion. The top three reasons were: no longer believing in their religion's teachings (60 percent), lack of family religious practice as children (32 percent) and negative religious teachings about gays and lesbians (29 percent).

This data can be disheartening, and lead us to wonder, “How can we reverse this trend?” While this is an understandable reaction, perhaps we are asking the wrong question.

The truth is that institutional affiliation in our nation has been in decline across the board for decades. This affects not simply religion; people are also not affiliating with political parties, civic organizations and societal institutions like marriage where cohabitation is rampant – over 50% of marriages terminate in divorce and single parent households have become the norm.

Are these institutions doomed? Is our communal life irrevocably dead? I would argue that the relationship to these communities is not dead but changed

and that there is insight to be found here by looking at what I believe is our nation's greatest contribution to contemporary religious thought: the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

A.A.'s meeting rooms are where postmodern men/women gather regularly, not because they are "supposed to" but because it is a matter of survival. The miracle they rediscover in A.A. is that by telling their own story of brokenness and by listening to others' stories they are somehow moved toward healing. It is a communion of people who recognize that in moving beyond themselves and serving others they find greater peace and wholeness. Sounds a lot like church to me.

Core to that experience is the fundamental insight underpinning the 12 steps that I believe is best summed up by the realization, "I am not God." This is the foundation of any authentic adult faith journey because it compels us to ask the questions: Who is God? Where is God? What is God? Is there a God?

One of the co-founders of A.A., Bill Wilson, put it starkly: "We must find some spiritual basis for living, else we die." His co-founding partner, Dr. Bob, framed it in terms of mutual sharing. "The spiritual approach is as useless as any other if you soak it up like a sponge and keep it to yourself."

In other words, we don't do God alone. The program these two self-described "drunks" founded began with their meeting in Akron, Ohio, one day in May 1935. Since then their fellowship has grown from two active members to 2.1 million today in 181 countries around the world.

In the A.A. -inspired book, The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchum frame it this way: "Those wrestling with spiritual dilemmas do not need answers but presence—the permission to confront the dilemma and to struggle with it aloud." Seems a lot like Pope Francis vision of "the church as a field hospital for the wounded.

However, I would suggest that before developing strategies to address this pressing issue of evangelization, we must first understand more fully the many currents within our culture which have formed the seedbed for this attrition or defection.

Let me cite several factors in the contemporary milieu which, I believe, must be understood both if we are to nurture our own spirituality and be responsive to the spiritual needs of our people.

The first is a loss of a sense of sin. This is evident in a variety of ways, most notably, for us as Catholics in the decline of the numbers of those celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation. While penitents have dwindled to a corporal's guard, those receiving the Eucharist at Christmas and Easter, or at weddings and funerals, even when they haven't darkened the doors of the church for years, other than on such occasions, is all too frequent.

I am not proposing that we revert to the sin-dominated culture of the pre-Vatican II church, with its emphasis on weekly confessions or not receiving communion unless preceded by confession. But I am suggesting that for many contemporary Catholics and others, sin is no longer a reality which is significant in their lives. I

mention this as an obstacle to contemporary spirituality, because if there is no sin, then, there is no need for a Redeemer.

Maybe I'm all wrong in this regard. Maybe sin really doesn't exist in today's world. Maybe sin was the result of a Jansenistic piety or an antediluvian approach to control the masses, which is no longer relevant in our enlightened, post-modern culture.

But the fruits of sin are certainly evident all around us. We see it daily in domestic violence, family breakdown, child physical and sexual abuse, addiction to alcohol, drugs, sex and pornography, in gambling, street crime and school violence . . . as well as in the social sins of racism, sexism, ageism, militarism, homophobia and xenophobia.

But unless there is a willingness to acknowledge the existence of sin and evil in the world, to assume responsibility for it and to bring about the conversion of mind and heart which alone can rectify it, then, there remains only a social approach to these ills, which is inadequate to respond to what is primarily and essentially a spiritual problem.

A second issue in the contemporary milieu is, as I have already alluded to, the bifurcation between spirituality and religion. More and more, people, especially, young adults, make the distinction between spirituality, which is conceived as private, subjective and individualistic, freeing one to be in touch with the authentic self, with one's true inner core, and religion, which is viewed as an ascent to a self-limiting creed which can lead people to become dogmatic, rigid and intolerant.

As Father Drew Christiansen of Georgetown University notes: "Their standard for belonging is not adherence to the religious authority of any church as the repository of revelation, but rather, it is the satisfaction of their own inarticulate searching."

This subjective, unaffiliated character of their searching does not necessarily mean they are shallow. Many live disciplined spiritual lives characterized by daily meditation, fasting, spiritual reading and serving at soup kitchens, food pantries and so on.

What they reject, however, is conformity to a rules-bound institution. They don't understand why they need to be married in a church building rather than under the vault of heaven or why they can't have a "destination wedding."

They resist the reinforcement of ritual distinctions between the ordinary faithful and the ordained. Further, they seek a synthesis of insights from all the world religions.

These spirituals don't label themselves agnostics, nor are they necessarily looking for a faith community but, they want some of the virtues, the emotional grounding and the psyche space associated with religion.

This tendency to embrace a "spirituality only" or a "Catholic lite" approach to faith fails to appreciate, however, the importance and value of tradition and community. Tradition, and the rituals which sustain it, is not traditionalism (or what the late theologian Jeroslav Pelekan called "the dead faith of the living"). Tradition is the living faith of the dead.

Unlike a spirituality only approach, with a religious tradition we don't have to start out from scratch. We not only have a time-tested and track-proven perspective on life and its ultimate purpose, but we have a community that can challenge us to examine our biases and self-centered habits, and that can sustain us emotionally, esthetically, intellectually and morally through all the dry days and dark nights that inevitably occur on our life's journey.

In other words, the spiritual but not religious folks fail to appreciate the central theme interwoven throughout the sacred scripture, namely, that God calls us to salvation not as individuals but as members of a faith community, as members of the People of God.

In his 2015 New Year's Day homily, Pope Francis put it this way: "Without the Church, our relationship with Christ would be at the mercy of our own imagination, our own interpretation, and our own moods."

"To separate Jesus from the Church would introduce an 'absurd dichotomy', Francis said, "It is not possible to love Christ but without the Church, to listen to Christ but not the Church, to belong to Christ but outside the Church.

Without the Church, Pope Francis states, Jesus Christ ends up as an idea, a moral teaching, a feeling," Francis concluded by saying, "Christ and the Church are inseparable."

Another major obstacle to evangelization is secularization, which I will reflect upon in tomorrow's conference about the social teaching of the Church. This, then, brings me to the theme with which I began this presentation: evangelization.

There are all kinds of experts willing to extemporize on the topic and all kinds of programs and materials available as parish and diocesan resources. Yet so often we seem paralyzed in our efforts to translate the concept of evangelization into a lived reality. Why? Let me suggest a few reasons.

First, as Catholics we tend to be very privatized in our approach to faith. The old adage that you never talk about religion and politics in polite company has been deeply ingrained in our Catholic genes. For example, when I was growing up our family generally attended Mass on Sunday as a family, went to confession regularly, said grace before meals and prayed the rosary as a family during the Marian months of May and October but rarely, if ever, did we talk with one another about religion, God, who Jesus is for us and how faith influences our life. Faith was just expected to be transmitted by osmosis if you will, as from Catholic schools or faith formation programs and as well from the catholic culture, which in my boyhood was omnipresent. And I don't think my family was unique in this regard.

Second, when I was serving in the inner city of Albany at Providence House, a social service center and Hope House, a drug treatment program, I had no problem at all celebrating Mass and the sacraments in Church; no problem at all speaking to any group that would invite me about the theological imperative of the social Gospel; and no problem at all responding to people's social and material needs. But when it may have been appropriate to speak to another person about our Catholic faith and the Christian life, especially if the person had not initiated the topic, I literally froze, feeling that this would be coercive or

unprofessional or rationalizing that I didn't want to fall into the trap of "rice Christianity", that is, of offering assistance to another on the condition that the other accept our faith. But in my heart of hearts I realized that I was allowing my own self image and my own fear about human respect to get in the way of my baptismal commitment and ordination responsibility to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ both in season and out of season.

Thirdly, we are living in a society which has adopted an attitude of "live and let live." We are afraid that if we share our faith with others, it will be offensive to them or we are afraid that we may come across as overly pious and fanatical and, thus, become ourselves the butt of ridicule, scorn, rejection and ostracism.

However, I would suggest, we can fulfill our baptismal call to be evangelists, to help people connect or reconnect with the church only insofar as we have sought to befriend and love them. After all, God didn't appear in our world to talk to us. God came down in the person of Jesus and lived among us: washed our feet, cried with us, laughed with us, drank our wine and touched our world. He especially touched the people on the edge, the poor, who today are those with no meaning in their lives and, therefore, are the poorest of all.

Thus, in addressing the challenge of evangelization, I believe it's not so much a lack of programs or resources that is at the heart of the problem, but a lack of relationships, both in terms of our willingness to engage others in their search for meaning and of being confident that such an engagement is not so much a matter of providing programs for people's information and edification, but evangelization is primarily a matter of our being willing to listen, to understand and to walk with people on their spiritual quest. We don't have to be saints or scholars to evangelize or to have all the answers to questions others may have – we simply must have a love for Jesus and willingness to share that love with others, confident that the Spirit whom Christ has sent forth is there to guide us.

In saying this I am not unmindful of the problems, difficulties and challenges that confront us in our efforts to evangelize. We are a sinful people and live in a church that is ever in the process of reformation and renewal. Because of such, there are some who maintain that the time is not ripe for evangelization, especially in the wake of the clergy sexual abuse scandals; therefore we should wait until either we personally or the church at large are in exemplary spiritual condition, with all questions and doubts resolved and all living in full harmony. But as Father Alvin Illig, the great promoter of evangelization in the 20th Century, so rightly said, "For 2000 years the church has never been in perfect order and never will be. Christ told us to preach the Good News of hope and salvation, but he also told us that there will be obstacles to plague our steps. If we wait for the perfect time, either for ourselves personally or for the church as a whole, we will wind up doing nothing at all."

Echoing similar sentiments, the late Cardinal Hume, the Archbishop of Westminster, England, said, "There is always the danger of speaking about and emphasizing what we believe to be wrong with the church, instead of celebrating the good and encouraging one another. There is a further danger of concentrating too much on life within the church, of being too inward-looking. I

suspect it is a trick of the devil to divert good people from the task of evangelization by embroiling them in endless controversial issues to the neglect of the church's essential role, which is mission. The church does not exist for its own sake. We have a job to do."

In his remarkable 1976 Encyclical Evangelii Nuntiandi Pope Paul VI told us about the key ingredient we must bring to this task: "The world is calling for evangelizers to speak to it of a God whom the evangelists themselves should know and be familiar with as if they could see the invisible" (EN 76). Ten years later Pope Saint John Paul II echoed these sentiments when he said that we need heralds of the Gospel who "are experts in humanity, who know the depths of the human heart, who can share the joys and hopes, the anxieties and the stress of people today, but are at the same time contemplatives who have fallen in love with God."

To do so, however, we must realize that we are ministering to fragile people who first and foremost need compassion, rather than restrictions placed on God's unconditional love.

This reminds me of a discussion that took place among a group of priests shortly after the Second Vatican Council. One of the priests was pushing for a wider use of general absolution and a more generous attitude toward many of those who are prohibited from receiving Holy Communion, like the divorced and remarried who don't have a Church annulment.

In the heat of the discussion another priest blurted out "sweet Lord, if we go down that path our churches will be crammed with sinners every Sunday morning." And your point is?

In an article which appeared in the London Tablet, Father Dennis O'Leary, a priest of North Yorkshire, stated that one of his regrets and, he believes that of many clergy today, is that of being too hard-nosed in dealing with people, especially around the celebration of the sacraments. While there needs to be canonical guidelines and diocesan policies and procedures about pastoral practice, too often O'Leary laments we bishops, priests and deacons can shrink divine mercy to the size of our own timidity and fear. We fail to appreciate that God's extravagant love and compassion reaches far beyond the boundaries and categories of our personal knowledge and certainties. O'Leary points out that a few years ago even the bishops of England and Wales admitted in that they were probably excluding from the Eucharist the very sinners to whom Jesus would have given pride of place.

O'Leary worries about losing the reassuring invitation of a beckoning God; which is so necessary for evangelization, an invitation which is revealed so unambiguously in the life of Jesus.

As the poet Emily Dickinson put it, the delight of Jesus is, "to dwell in the potential of human beings." This is what Jesus was doing on the road to Emmaus: clarifying for his friends what they already half knew. He didn't berate them for their slowness, but, because he loved them, he was prepared to wait for their hearts to understand. Like all true teachers Jesus could recognize the butterfly in the caterpillar, the eagle in an egg, the saint in a sinful human being. That is why, just like the sun coaxes open the petals of a daisy on a bright spring

morning, so the love of Jesus continues to reach into the uncertain hearts of those who find themselves drawn to him.

If, therefore, we are to be evangelists in the midst of the ignorance, confusion and brokenness which surrounds us, we must recover this tenderness of Jesus; we must cease to alienate people by too much projected control and too little graced trust.

The theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar wrote, "after a mother has smiled a long time at her child, the child will begin to smile back. The mother has awakened love in the child's heart and in this awakening love she awakens also recognition."

As disciples of Jesus we need to recover that maternal attitude – that coaxing, patient and captivating presence with which our own mothers, and before that Jesus, made us aware of our own amazing mystery and welcomed us home.

Is this not the same sage advice offered by the saintly Pope St. John XXIII in his celebrated opening address to the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962? Confronted with the need for reform and the opposition to such renewal by Curial hard-liners and others, John XXIII noted that ours is not a perfect church but a struggling one; that our leaders and members are less than perfect.

Hence to those prophets of doom who saw the modern world only as "prevarication and ruin" and who sought to stifle the winds of change blowing throughout the church, John 23rd urged that we confront the errors of the day by making "use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity."

In other words, Pope John 23rd insisted that things which are wrong should be cured by caring concern, not by cynical condemnation; that the best way to love our world and the God who made it is to live in the world with optimism and expectation. If we would do this, then, I am convinced our efforts at evangelization in the 21st century would be truly successful.

Unfortunately, though, I'm afraid that our initial approach tends to be programmatic. In our diocese of Albany, for example, we have had Follow Me, RENEW, Go Make Disciples, Amazing God and our own diocesan tailored prime time television evangelization initiative all of which provided excellent methodologies and content, but all of which presume some commitment on the part of participants to engage in a structured program -with teaching, peer mentoring and socialization - usually conducted at determined times and places. And God forbid if you are not free on a Sunday morning or Tuesday evening or whenever the "program" is held. As a matter of fact, the Paulist Father Frank DeSiano, an expert on evangelization, has suggested that the biggest obstacle to evangelizing is the inability to meet the preordained parish schedule for receiving new members or for linking up with those who have drifted away.

Perhaps an answer to the problem Father DeSiano cites can be found in a project launched last Fall at the University of Notre Dame on the occasion of the university's 175th anniversary entitled the "Grotto Network". It seeks to offer a platform for video storytelling, social media campaigns and conversation to foster spiritual development. However, it is also designed to provide practical support

to its users, including resources for financial management, career development, health and wellness.

The president of Notre Dame, Father John Jenkins has stated that the Grotto Network is an effort, especially in partnerships with parishes, to employ the technology with which this generation is conversant in order to help millennials live richer lives, experience the joy of the gospel and use their talents in the service of others.

The target audience, in other words, is Catholic young adults who identify as Catholics but who are away from the Church and not finding themselves at Sunday Mass. This network seeks to meet them where they are on line through moments of inspiration and, hopefully, through an invitation to foster a greater sense of trust.

Pope Francis has spoken frequently about “a field hospital for the wounded”. The organizers of the Grotto Network see the digital highways as being one of those places which is a field hospital ministering to young adults who are in search of meaning.

As you may know, this coming October, Pope Francis will convene a synod of Bishops around the theme of young people, faith and vocational discernment. During the summer, the Vatican launched an interactive online survey to better understand the lives, attitudes and concerns of 16-29 year olds around the world.

While the results of this survey have not yet been made public, other research has shown that it's not necessarily personal experiences within parishes that are driving the young away, it's just that a lot of them simply don't believe in religious teaching anymore.

Bishop Robert Barron, the chair of our own Bishops Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis has said that this challenge will be a major focus of the committee's efforts.

Based on my experience, however, I would suggest, that in evangelization it is not so much a lack of programs or resources which is at the heart of the challenge: it is connection, empowerment and a sense of belonging that are key. In this regard I would note the fastest-growing Christian churches in our nation are the evangelical denominations. There are many features of their attraction to people which I do not believe we in the Roman Catholic community would want to emulate: a "God and me" approach to spirituality; a failure to recognize complexity in moral decision making; a tendency to engage in shrill and righteous denunciations of those with whom they disagree; and, a rather simplistic ABC approach to salvation, just to mention a few. But we can learn much from our evangelical friends about creating an environment of welcome and hospitality; of fostering lively community of giving members a sense of belonging and ownership; of making stewardship of time, talent and treasure a genuine way of life; and of motivating members to engage in outreach to and recruitment of new members.

If we could incorporate these elements in our evangelization efforts, I think they would be well received.

A few years ago, I had Mass with the seminarians at our discernment house where four candidates for the priesthood were residing while doing college studies in philosophy. The house itself is the former rectory for a parish which closed a few years ago. The church was sold to an evangelical Lutheran community. As I sat in the living room of the rectory in the midst of an ice and sleet storm, I watched 30 to 40 young people and three adults troop into the church basement across the street for an evening experience of Bible sharing. The seminarians told me there are activities in the church every evening, seven days a week, and that the collection from their congregation of 30 families (approximately 120 people, including children) averages \$3,000 per week!

Further, the pastor, his wife and half the congregation are former Roman Catholics who probably would have been outraged if their Catholic parish had made such financial demands on them. What's wrong with this picture? What is very wrong, I believe, is that our lay people are afraid to engage in the evangelizing process because they associate evangelization with the pushy tactics of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the God-on-my-sleeve approach of some born-again, or the blatant hucksterism of some of the televangelists - all of which coalesce to give evangelization a bad name among Catholics. And this has led to a lack of energy, zeal and an enthusiasm for sharing our faith heritage with others.

This awkwardness or uncomfortability, I believe, is why our efforts at evangelization have generally been unsuccessful. It is also why our response to the call for a new evangelization is so urgent and critically important.

Yes, the insights of our Holy Fathers, coupled with that of documented research, reveal conclusively that many people today are longing for someone to share faith and spirituality with them; for someone to be open and vulnerable, willing to take the time and to run the risk of initiating the evangelizing process. And we challenge our lay people to do this.

I am convinced that you our lay people are called to do this. You all know someone, a family member, friendly neighbor or co-worker, who fits into this category of fallen away Catholic, unchurched or spiritual but not religious. And you can reach out to them, for example, by inviting such to attend Mass with you, or becoming involved with a parish service project like Family Promise for the homeless or by attending a diocesan program like Spring Enrichment or the Fall gathering. That we can break the quiet, reserved, privatized posture and the programmatic response to evangelization that have tended to characterize American Catholicism and offer a dynamic new approach to evangelization - one that is not coercive, one that is not flamboyant or hysterical, one that does not engage in spiritual mugging, if you will, but an approach that respects the dignity of the person to be evangelized, that emanates from the love of the God and the movement of the Spirit within us, and that responds to the call to discipleship that has been given to each of us.

May this be our future.