

Catholics and the Call to Evangelize

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Introduction

Good evening and welcome to this presentation. I thank you for taking time to be here this evening. I wish to express with deep sentiments of joy my profound gratitude to God for the privilege of this annual presentation. I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Margarita and St. Michael's Adult Faith Formation for making it possible for me to make this presentation every year.

This presentation examines the meaning of evangelization and reflects on the *Great Commission*. It then underscores the salient teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the post-Vatican II Church on evangelization. It further focuses on Catholics and evangelization and offers some suggestions on how to fruitfully and effectively foster evangelization at St. Michael's and St. Jerome.

The meaning of the word 'evangelization'

Evangelization is the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ to those who do not know Christ in view of eventually receiving them into the Church. Evangelization also includes the revival of the faith of weak Catholics. The term 'New Evangelization' has recently emerged in the Church. The understanding of the 'New Evangelization' is three-pronged. First, evangelizers should begin with themselves by continually seeking to deepen their faith and commitment to Christ. Second, to focus on weak, lukewarm, and lapsed Catholics. The Church should help them rediscover the joy of the Gospel and the joy of being Catholic. Third, is the proclamation of the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ and those who have always rejected him. It should be categorically stated that evangelization is the primary duty of the Church. Evangelization is at the heart of the Church's life and mission.

The *Great Commission*

After his resurrection, Jesus Christ summoned the disciples to meet with him in Galilee. It is worth asking: Why was it important for the disciples to return to Galilee to meet Jesus? Returning to Galilee was very important because it was in Galilee that most of Jesus' teachings and miracles took place. The Sea of Tiberias and the surrounding Galilean region were the focal point of the ministry of Jesus. The Galilean ministry of Jesus Christ was a build up to eventually going to Jerusalem for the Paschal Mystery. Thus, it was fitting for the disciples to see the Risen Lord in Galilee where they had witnessed his teachings and miracles. In a way, Jesus summoned the disciples to Galilee in order to bring to completion what he started with them in Galilee.

Jesus' address to the disciples, after summoning them to Galilee, was a command to preach the Good News to the ends of the earth: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am

with you always; yes, to the end of time” (Matthew 28:18-20). This famous passage of scripture is known as the *Great Commission*.

Jesus Christ summoned the disciples to Galilee to assure them that he was alive, and also to commission them, to proclaim the Good News to the ends of the earth. All Christians should realize the gravity of this great mandate and take it seriously. The Acts of the Apostles tells us how the disciples obeyed this mandate as they boldly, courageously, and vociferously proclaimed the risen Christ. For his part, the great apostle to the Gentiles, the greatest preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, St. Paul echoed: “If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:15-16). In this regard, it is incumbent on all Catholics, especially here at St. Michael’s and St. Jerome, to grasp the gravity of this mandate and do something about it.

Vatican II and evangelization

The Second Vatican Council revived the Church’s mandate to evangelize. It emphasized the importance of adhering to the *Great Commission* in our time. According to the Second Vatican Council document on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, “the Church on earth is by its very nature missionary” (*Ad Gentes* no. 2). And it is the responsibility of every member of the Church to participate actively in the Church’s mission of evangelization. As *Lumen Gentium* has clearly stated, “each disciple of Christ has an obligation of spreading the faith to the best of his [or her] ability” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 17).

The question for each Catholic is: To what extent do I spread the gospel of Christ? Each disciple of Christ is called to evangelize, to be a witness of Christ, and to preach the gospel message. Undoubtedly, the mission of evangelization is not the exclusive domain of priests and religious but of the entire Christian community. Unfortunately, this call to evangelize has not always been taken seriously by Catholics, and oftentimes, evangelization has not been accorded the significance it deserves in parish life. As Catholics, we seem to be quite contented with attending Mass and that is it. While it is admirable that we go to Mass every Sunday, there should be that desire to share our faith with others. There should be that sense of urgency to preach Jesus Christ to others and bring new members to the Church.

What occurs in many Catholic parishes is maintenance ministry. There is no outreach to new frontiers. There is no serious challenge apart from the day to day or week to week routine of attending Mass as Catholics. There is got to be something more. Perhaps, we can ask ourselves at St. Michael’s and at St. Jerome: What more can we do as a parish with regard to evangelization?

St. Paul exhorts his true child in the faith Timothy not to be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord (2 Timothy 1:8). What about ourselves as Catholics? Are we ashamed of witnessing to the Lord? Are we ashamed of telling people that we are Catholics? Are we proud to be Catholics?

Evangelization since Vatican II

The post Vatican II Church has heeded the clarion call of Vatican II to give priority to evangelization in order to fulfill the *Great Commission*. Hence the theme of evangelization is a recurring decimal in the Church at both universal level and particular levels. Pope Paul VI gave to Catholics a renewed focus and impetus to the missionary mandate in his post-synodal Apostolic

Exhortation on “Evangelization in the Modern World,” *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, issued on December 8, 1975. Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* underscores the first proclamation of the gospel to non-Christians since there are still many people who have not heard the good news preached to them. He then insisted that evangelization is not only to those who have not heard the good news, but also to children (some of whom were baptized as infants), and adults who have abandoned the faith they received as children; **they need to know the faith in a new light**. Paul VI gives a pride of place to *witness* with regard to evangelization (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* no. 41). He also emphasizes the need for personal contact towards effective evangelization.

Evangelii Gaudium of Pope Francis

The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*) was issued by Pope Francis on November 24, 2013, to mark the end of the Year of Faith (October 11, 2012 to November 24, 2013), which was declared by Pope Benedict XVI.

Pope Francis notes: “The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus ... With Christ joy is constantly born anew” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no 1). The good news is a joy that once received should be shared with others. The Christian faith is meant to be shared with joy. The Christian faith is not a burden to be lived with but a joy to be shared with others. Pope Francis calls on Catholics to preach the Gospel with joy: “an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come from a funeral! Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 10). The Holy Father continues this line of thought with a citation from *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI: “delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow ... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes in anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 75).

Pope Francis challenges all Catholics to be actively engaged in person to person preaching “on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 127). Furthermore, in order to truly evangelize, the parish should live as one Christian family. The parishioners should first show love for one another and bond as one family in Christ. We cannot preach to others to join our parish if parishioners do not get along with one another. Pope Francis frowns and laments at parishioners warring against one another: “It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities ... can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts. Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 100).

Pope Francis calls for the formation of the laity for evangelization. If lay persons are to be true evangelizers, it becomes imperative to train and prepare them for such a great task. The Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops directed that “the whole community needs to be trained, motivated and empowered for evangelization, each according to his or her specific role within the Church” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 53). The African Synod Fathers also noted that “there should be a formation of the laity for their indispensable role of the evangelization of Africa” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 53). It is absolutely necessary for the Christian community to deepen its awareness of the call to evangelization and the onus lies on pastors to achieve this. Hence, in a

parish setting, there should be a deliberate effort towards evangelization. Since the parish is the locus for the exercise of ministry in the Church, it should also be the locus for missionary activity. The pastor and the parish pastoral council should design pastoral programs that will make the parish to be mission oriented.

Catholics and evangelization

Oftentimes, many Catholics shy away from preaching the gospel. In fact, they do not see it as their responsibility to make Christ known to others. On the other hand, our protestant brothers and sisters, especially the Pentecostal Christians, are unabashed in preaching the Lord Jesus to anyone who comes their way. Sometimes, they do this quite aggressively. Perhaps, as Catholics we can learn from their enthusiasm and eagerness to win converts. While it is praise worthy that some parishes have evangelization team, there is a need for pastors and parishioners to foster effective and dynamic collaboration of the mission of evangelization in parishes.

Catholics have a tendency to be complacent and lukewarm with regard to evangelization. Some Catholics don't see it as their duty to bring people to the Church. One main reason why the Pentecostal Churches are at the fore-front of evangelization is because their survival as a Church depends on membership. But for Catholics they can always switch to another parish if their parish is closed down due to insufficient membership.

One renowned Pentecostal Bishop in Nigeria once described the Catholic Church in Nigeria as a sleeping giant. He urged the Pentecostals to hurriedly win members to their Churches before the sleeping giant wakes up. By and large, the Catholic Church continues to grow worldwide especially in Africa and Asia despite the seemingly lackadaisical attitude of most of its members to evangelization. Can you imagine what the outcome will be if the Catholic Church were to be dogged in evangelization? Our Church has much to learn from the dynamism and enthusiasm of the Pentecostals. Have you ever experienced a Catholic who is a convert from a Pentecostal Church?

Evangelization at St. Michael's and St. Jerome

As they say, in politics think globally but act locally. It is pertinent to link all that has been said about evangelization to St. Michael's and St. Jerome. As noted earlier, the primary duty of the Church is to evangelize. Without evangelization, there will be no Church, no Sunday Mass, no parish pastoral council, no ministries in the Church, etc. It is crucially necessary for the parish pastoral council, and indeed the entire parishioners of St. Michael's and St. Jerome, to discern the most effective ways to evangelize. Hence, you need to ask yourselves as parishioners: What have we done so far with regard to evangelization? What more can we do with regard to evangelization? The question, 'what more can we do?' takes you as parishioners out of your comfort zone to explore the numerous ways that can foster evangelization and growth in membership of your respective parishes. The importance of evangelization in the Church challenges Catholics in general, and parishioners of St. Michael's and St. Jerome in particular, not to be satisfied, contented, and comfortable. For one person that comes to your Church, there are probably two or three persons that don't come; they need to be reached out to and brought into the fold.

It is indispensable for evangelization to be placed at the front burner of the priorities of the parish life. The vision for evangelization should be shared by all the members of the parish. First,

members of St. Michael's and St. Jerome should take the practice of their faith seriously. The manner you joyfully witness to the faith will inspire others to want to join you. Oftentimes, you see people drive a long distance to go to their Church. They pass several parishes before they get to their parish. They do this because of something that is special to them in their parish. Hence, it is worth asking: What kind of parish is St. Michael's? What kind of parish St. Jerome? Is our parish a warm and welcoming parish? When visitors worship with you for the first time, do they want to come back? Do they want to change their parish and join yours because of their positive experience?

Furthermore, I wish to emphasize the power of prayer in evangelization; prayer is an indispensable aspect of evangelization. It is important for every parish to construct a prayer for evangelization and increase in membership. This prayer should be recited at every Mass and parishioners should pray it daily in their private prayers. The parishioners of St. Michael's and St. Jerome should pray constantly and act decisively in order to evangelize. Once you have done this, you can leave the rest in God's hands.

Conclusion

Perhaps, I can ask myself: Am I happy to be a Catholic? If the answer is yes, then, I should be bold, eager, and excited to tell people about the Catholic Church. With joy and excitement, you can share with people that you belong to the Church founded by our Lord Jesus himself over two thousand years ago. Tell them that you belong to the Church that has an impressive list of saints and witnesses: the apostles, prophets, martyrs, confessors, etc. It is the Church that has produced evangelizers, pastors, teachers, the Great Fathers of the Church, the Doctors of the Church, virgins, monks and nuns, Abbots and Abbesses, missionaries, countless holy men and women from all walks of life, and so on.

Evidently, what I have shared with you this evening is merely *the tip of the iceberg* with regard to evangelization. I hope what I have shared with you this evening is enough to stir up discussion within the parish on evangelization. I may have raised more questions than answers on how to evangelize here at St. Michael's and St. Jerome. This is quite deliberate. It is my fervent hope that you will mutually discern and strategize on how best to exercise evangelization within your local setting. There is no substitute for zeal with regard to evangelization. I urge all of you at St. Michael's and St. Jerome to be on fire for Jesus Christ our Lord, for to him be praise and glory forever and ever! Amen.

Thank you for listening and God bless you.

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