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Go, make disciples

Bishop John T. Folda

In the summer of 2017, Catholic bishops, priests, and lay leaders from around the country gathered for a convocation, called “The Joy of the Gospel in America,” an event that centered on the Church’s mission of evangelization. Afterwards, Bishop Michael Hoeppner of Crookston and I decided to bring some of what we experienced back to our home dioceses, and to hold our own “Convocation of Parish Leaders” for the Dioceses of Fargo and Crookston. This Convocation will take place on Nov. 30 and Dec. 1 in Fargo, and will involve priests and people from all of our parishes.

One of our priests recently reminded me of something I said at a public gathering: “If we aren’t evangelizing, we’re dead.” That might sound a little extreme, but I believe it is absolutely true. Jesus gave the Church explicit marching orders: “Go, make disciples of all nations.” If we refuse to accept this mission, how can we be the Church that Jesus calls us to be? The newly canonized Pope St. Paul VI wrote, “Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.” And besides, we can no longer assume that the faith is being passed along through family tradition as it once was. People no longer automatically accept the faith of their parents and grandparents, and we as baptized Catholics must therefore step up and offer to others the gift we have received, not with imposition and aggression but with friendship, prayer, and invitation.

Some of our fellow Catholics might feel that evangelizing and witnessing to the faith are outside their comfort zone. The prospect of ringing doorbells and waving a bible in a stranger’s face isn’t very appealing to many of us. But that’s just a caricature of what we are and what we should be doing. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes evangelization as “The proclamation of Christ and his Gospel by word and the testimony of life, in fulfillment of Christ’s command.” It’s true that we take a risk when we give witness to our faith in Christ, but the fact is that every follower of Christ is called to be an evangelist, in one way or another. Early in his pontificate, Pope Francis called upon all Catholics to be “missionary disciples,” believers who are ready and willing to be sent by Jesus into the world as his active followers and witnesses.

In the current time of scandal and crisis, when the credibility of the Church has been undermined by the sins of some of her leaders, the role of the laity is more important than ever. The baptized faithful must embrace their own role in the life and mission of the Church, which is to live fully as disciples of Jesus Christ, and to witness that faith to others in word and action. Each one of us, by virtue of our baptism, has a share in this mission and has the capacity to give the kind of witness that our world needs. One does not need a doctorate in theology to openly live the Catholic faith and to welcome others to share it. The Holy Spirit equips all of us for this mission with the outpouring of his gifts.

One of the most compelling marks of a vibrant Church is a spirit of joy. By this, I don’t mean the passing enjoyment of earthly comfort. I mean the joy that emerges from our life in Christ. Faith that is joyfully lived has the capacity to attract and convince others of the truth, goodness, and beauty of Christ and his Gospel. Where the faith is lived joyfully, souls will come to know something of the joy that our Lord wants us to have, a joy that looks forward and already experiences a hint of the glory of heaven. A faith that is dour and pessimistic, on the other hand, will attract no one. It’s true that we all have daily trials and even sufferings to get through, but Christian joy is not diminished by such things. It endures because it is founded on the person of Jesus, who saves us from all evil. Convinced of his grace, we can joyfully and confidently invite others to share in it.

As George Weigel has written: “Institutional maintenance Catholicism is finished. Purified, mission-driven Catholicism is the Church with a vital future.” I believe he means that we cannot just keep things as they are, but we must launch more fully into the mission that Christ gave to his Church. Of course, no one would assume that a single event will turn everything around, but this Convocation aims to raise awareness among our leaders of the need for evangelization in their own parishes, as well as the fact

that everyone has a part to play in the Church's mission. Hopefully, the participants will come away with a few concrete pointers and some strategies that they can use and share with others to build a culture of missionary discipleship in their own parishes. My hope and prayer is that those leaders who attend this Convocation will become a catalyst for a more vigorous sense of mission in all the parishes of our diocese.

The mission of the Church will always depend on prayer, especially the prayer of the Eucharist. Please pray for your priests and those from your parish who will attend this diocesan convocation. Without the prayer of the faithful, the mission of the Church will limp, but with your prayers, our Lord can accomplish great things among us. Pray also for those you know who are distant from the Church or those who have no relationship with the living God. Pray that God will send you to the person who needs to experience his love, to the person who is open to receiving his Gospel. And let us ask Mary, the Star of the New Evangelization, to lead all of us into the grace of Jesus, her Son.

Convocation of Parish Leaders prayer

*“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”
But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed?
And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard?
And how can they hear without someone to preach?
And how can people preach unless they are sent? –Romans 10: 13-15*

Heavenly Father,

Pour forth your Holy Spirit to inspire us
with these words from Holy Scripture,
so that we might be strengthened to go forth
and witness to the Gospel in our daily lives
through our words and actions.

Give us the grace
that we might hear the call of the New Evangelization
to deepen our faith, grow in confidence to proclaim the Gospel
and boldly witness to the saving grace of your Son, Jesus Christ.

In moments of hesitation, remind us:
If not me, then who will proclaim the Gospel?
If not now, then when will the Gospel be proclaimed?
If not the truth of the Gospel, then what shall I proclaim?

O Mary, our Immaculate Mother, pray for us.
May the Convocation of Parish Leaders,
inspire us to imitate your example
as the first disciple of your son, Jesus,
who is Lord for ever and ever.

Amen.

*Mary, Star of the New Evangelization, pray for us.
St. Joseph, pray for us.
St. Thérèse of Lisieux, pray for us.*

St. John Paul II, pray for us.

Adapted from the USCCB “Prayer for the New Evangelization”