

What Sort of Church Should We Be?

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November 24, 2017

Some people do not commit themselves to mission because they think that nothing will change and that it is useless to make the effort. They think: "Why should I deny myself my comforts and pleasures if I won't see any significant result?" This attitude makes it impossible to be a missionary. (*Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), 275).

I begin with this quote that comes from Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*). The reality in our Catholic Church in America, as well as much of the world, is that we are a shrinking church. We continue to baptize new infants as well as baptize adults and receiving adults into our Catholic Church who were baptized in other Christian Churches. Yet, we can't help but be aware of the shrinking number of people who come to church.

This can leave us with the thought that our efforts to evangelize are without fruit. As Pope Francis wrote in the previous quote, some people do not put the needed effort into our mission because they see no benefit from any additional effort. I believe we are at a crossroads in the future of our Church. By "Church" I am not referring to individual parishes or dioceses but as a universal church. We can choose to withdraw ourselves within the Church for our own self-preservation or we can choose to renew ourselves for the mission that Jesus Christ has called us to. The first, self-preservation, may seem easier but it is not the correct choice. Pope Francis writes,

I dream of a "missionary option," that is, a missionary impulse of *transforming* everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world *rather than for her self-preservation* (EG, 27).

We may grow weary and need to regroup but that should not be the same as giving up. As Pope Francis writes later

Yet lowering our arms momentarily out of weariness is not the same as lowering them for good, overcome by chronic discontent and by a listlessness that parches the soul (EG, 277).

The challenge before us in our mission might seem too great but we need to remember the words of St. Paul in Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who can be against us." This can be an important point for us. Pope Francis writes "If we start without confidence, we have already lost half the battle and we bury our talents." (EG, 85)

Many dioceses have closed parishes as well as schools. We blame this on the declining number of priests. I freely admit that the *timing* of church closings often is determined by the declining number of priests. However, it is as much about the declining number of parishioners as it is about the number of priests.

In thinking about the future of our Catholic Church, we need to honestly ask ourselves if we need all the churches and other parish buildings we have. However, this should not be simply based on how many Masses we need for the number of people that currently come. We need to ask ourselves what are we supposed to be doing to fulfill our mission to proclaim the joy of the gospel. How do we change the question from wondering if we need to close churches to how do we fill our pews? The same can be true of increasing participation and enrollment in faith formation for our children, youth, **and adults** (more on faith formation later.)

We also need to reflect on what it means to be a “strong” and “vibrant” Church. Sometimes I get the impression some feel the most important criteria here is to be operating in the black financially. After all, we cannot spend money we do not have. These can lead to the consolidation and sharing of staff between parishes. If this can be done without the loss of *necessary* ministries, then it can be a good thing. On the other hand, if our ministries suffer, then a different approach is needed. What is needed (and has started in some parishes) is a change from a maintenance approach (what do we do to keep going) to a mission church (what are we called to do).

To be a strong and vibrant Church is one that is drawing people in. Even if operating financially in the black is to be our most important criteria (which it isn't), what better way to increase revenue for our parishes than to draw more people into our parishes?

It can be hard to see the possibilities here but, as I already said, we must not grow weary. We are not first in the history of the Church to face adversity. What about Saints John de Brebeuf, Isaac Jogues, and their companions, commonly known as the North American Martyrs? They came to America in the 17th Century less than fifty years after the first colonists. They came to bring the Gospel to America. Was it easy? No, they became martyrs for the faith. Before being martyred, St. Isaac Jogues was imprisoned and then released. After his release he went back to Europe for a short period. He was safe there but he did not choose to remain safe. He chose to return to America to continue to bring the Gospel to the people. We need to do the same.

I'm asking a lot but no more than Jesus does as he gives his life on the Cross for us so that our sins might be forgiven. In John 15:13 we hear Jesus words, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” Again, I turn to Pope Francis' words in *The Joy of the Gospel*

Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth *from our own comfort zone* in order to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel (EG, 20).

I do not like leaving my comfort zone but it *must* be done. For one example, I remember when I first started feeling called to the priesthood, one of my first reactions was that it would require me getting up in front of people to speak. I never liked public speaking but, with God's grace, God helped me to this. If we are answering his call, God will help each and every one of us to move outside our comfort zone.

800 years ago, God said to St. Francis of Assisi, “repair my church.” At first, St. Francis thought God was referring to the local church building but God had something much bigger in mind, to repair the church as it was being lived out. I believe God is saying to us today “repair my church” with the same meaning when he said these words to St. Francis.

What is it that we must do to be a strong and vibrant church? Once again, I turn to Pope Francis’ words in *The Joy of the Gospel* where he in turn quotes Pope Benedict XVI,

I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which take us to the very heart of the Gospel: "Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the *encounter* with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction (EG, 7).

Why are people leaving the Church? Because we have not led them to an “encounter with Christ.” We have not shown them that our faith is relevant today. In the past, we have focused on presenting the doctrine of the Church rather than the love of God. Pope Francis writes

In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without *any concern that the Gospel have a **real impact** on God’s faithful people* and the concrete needs of the present time (EG, 95. italics my emphasis).

Please don’t get me wrong here. I’m not saying that doctrine or liturgy aren’t important. They are **very important**. It is essential for us to be good and faithful Christian disciples, but we have to give people a reason to listen to the doctrine. We need to help people understand what our liturgy is all about so they can appreciate it. If we are going to close churches in rural areas, we need to give them a reason to drive the distance to the next closest church. They are willing to drive twenty or more miles for work, shopping, and sports but not for church. We need to change that.

How did Jesus approach the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4-42)? He met her where she was at. Another way of looking at this is presented by Sherry Weddell in her book, *Forming Intentional Disciples*

One very effective RCIA director summed up her mission this way: “My job in the inquiry period is to help people fall in love with Jesus. My job in the catechumenate is to help people fall in love with the Church” (143).

Before becoming a priest, I was an engineer. I literally worked on building bridges (and highways). One bridge I worked on was over a ninety foot deep gorge. The gorge was between fifty and one hundred feet wide. There was no way for a vehicle to cross that gorge without a bridge. Today, the gorge between the physical world we live in and the Kingdom of God seems to be getting wider. If we are to be a strong and vibrant church, then we need to be, as Pope Francis writes

An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it *bridges* distances, it is willing to *abase* itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the "smell of the sheep" and the sheep are willing to hear their voice (EG, 24. Italics my emphasis).

Balancing doctrine and relationship with Jesus is at the core of who we need to be as disciples. We need to reveal the joy of the Gospel. To do so, we must realize, as Pope Francis writes

Pastoral Ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed...the message has to concentrate on the essentials,...The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing (EG, 35).

We should not force the Gospel on people but we need to attract them by showing them the joy it brings us (see EG, 14).

If we are to build bridges, we cannot keep relying on old methods

In her ongoing discernment, the Church can also come to see that certain customs not directly connected to the heart of the Gospel, even some which have deep historical roots, are *no longer properly understood and appreciated*. Some of these customs may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel (EG, 43. Italics my emphasis).

We cannot and should not change the Gospel message. Yet we need to realize that the world we live in is not the same as it was 200 years ago, let alone 2,000 years ago. We live in an age of communication where information is transmitted across the world in seconds. This gives us new means to spread the gospel but as Pope Francis points out

We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data-all treated as being of equal importance-and which leads to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment. In response, we need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values (EG, 64).

I previously mentioned that we need to develop our faith formation for our children, youth, *and adults*." We need to think about our teaching *methods* for children and youth. We cannot take the approach of just expecting them to memorize prayers and commandments and expect them to follow them. We need to lead them to a relationship with Jesus that leads them *to want to follow the commandments*. The same is true for adults. If we lead people to a deep relationship with Jesus, this could in turn lead to what Pope Francis describes as a "a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political and economic sectors" and "the transformation of society." (EG, 102).

However, the challenge is even greater for adults because we are not used to providing *any* faith formation for adults beyond the Sunday homily. What we are talking about is evangelization. Blessed Pope Paul VI helps us understand evangelization in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*,

Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. *She exists in order to evangelize*, that is to say, ***in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass***, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection (14, italics and bold my emphasis).

To be a “Church” we must evangelize. We must lead people to a relationship with Jesus. Why?

“Because the eternal destinies – heaven or hell – of many millions of our fellow Catholics, not to mention, many millions of countless others, are hanging in the balance.” (Martin, *The Urgency of the New Evangelization: Answering the Call*, 28)

Echoing what I have already said above about meeting people where they are at, Blessed Pope Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*,

Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addresses, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life. But on the other hand, evangelization risks losing its power and disappearing altogether if one empties or adulterates its content under the context of translating it (63).

The challenge before us is not an easy one. Going back to what was said about our comfort zones, we need to find new ways of reaching out to people. We need to think not just about what we do as missionary disciples but why and how we do it for, as Pope Francis writes

The problem is not always an excess of activity, but rather activity undertaken badly, without adequate motivation, without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable. As a result, work becomes more tiring than necessary...” (EG, 82).

We are trying to proclaim the TRUTH of the Gospel in a world where more and more people are relativists. They believe there is no one truth and that people are free to believe whatever they want. People can believe whatever they choose but we must present the Gospel to give them the right to choose. People are not free to choose if they do not know what the choices are.

People may not want to hear the Gospel. In speaking up for what we believe in, we might cause division. If we read Jesus’ own words in Luke 12:49-53

I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on a household of five will be divided, three against

two and two against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

I myself was born and raised Catholic. I was confirmed when I was 12 years old and then did not go to church until I was 28 years old. I did not lose faith. I simply did not understand or appreciate the fullness of our faith. I tell people if I knew then what I know now, I would have never stopped going. That is why it is so important to me that we fulfill our mission of evangelization. My return to the Church awoke a burning heart within me (cf. Luke 24:32). We need to help people understand what faith offers them.

This document is the result of me spending much of the last two months reflecting on what sort of Church we should be. This is something bigger than any one parish or diocese. Actually, it is something that has been on my mind for quite a while. The last two months was prompted by our local bishop asking the parishes in our county to come together to discuss what we are doing in our ministries and how we can best serve our people in the days and years to come. This document is my thoughts on how I think we need to approach discerning the future of our Church. What I hope I have articulated here is a vision that motivates us to action. From here, specific actions need to be identified but here are five areas that I think are the areas that need attention for us to be a strong and vibrant church:

1. Faith Formation – related to what I have already mentioned above we need to adapt our methods for children’s faith formation and youth ministry that lead our children and youth to a relationship with Jesus where they want to learn what our church teaches and why. We need to develop programs for adult faith formation along the same lines.
2. Eucharistic Holy Hours – By some surveys, fewer and fewer people believe in the Real Presence. We need to change this and provide opportunities for people to spend time before the Blessed Sacrament as part of a deeper relationship with Christ. A deeper appreciation of the Real Presence would also likely lead to more regular attendance at Mass.
3. Small Christian Communities – I’ve already spoken some above about leading people to a deeper relationship with Jesus. To do so, we need to be in conversation and relationship with others to help us apply our faith to life in today’s world. To have this conversation, I believe Small Christian Communities are likely an essential part of this. Small groups of six to eight people can lead to a very different type of discussion than large adult faith formation gatherings by themselves.
4. Welcoming presence – we need to find a balance between having a reverent quiet before Mass and offering a warm welcome to parishioners (both new and lifelong members). We need to offer a welcoming presence before, during, and after Mass that tells people we want them to be with us and that we care about them.
5. In the information age, we need to find ways of using social media and the web to reach out to those not coming to church and to offer opportunities for growth and learning for our current members.

Each time we pray the Nicene Creed at Mass, we pray, “*I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.*” I truly believe our Catholic Church is meant to be “one holy catholic and

apostolic church” and I will do everything I can to help our Church be the Church that Jesus calls us to be.

If you would like to know more about my thoughts on evangelization, I invite you to read the evangelization section of my website at <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/evangelization.html>. The most recent page there contains a video of a presentation I did on evangelization and apologetics a few months ago at <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/video---evangelization-and-apologetics.html> (a PDF of the slides used in the video can be found on this same page).

Allow me to end with one last quote from *The Joy of the Gospel*, "Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures." (EG, 6)

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