



CATECHUMENEON

Spring 2024

Quarterly

Where Do Catechumens Come From?

Do random people show up on your doorstep, announcing that they'd like to learn about becoming a Catholic? Sure, it happens. But if we all just sit around and wait for the next random person to populate our catechumenate, we could be in for a very long dry spell. Fortunately, the Church has a better idea. "The apostolate of the church therefore, and of each of its members, aims primarily at announcing to the world, by word and action, the message of Christ and communicating to it the grace of Christ. . . . Nourished by their active participation in the liturgical life of their community, they engage zealously in its apostolic works; they attract people towards the church who had been perhaps very far away from it; they ardently cooperate in the spread of the word of God" (Vatican II, *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, 6, 10). In other words, people are drawn to the Church by the evangelizing efforts of every member of the community.

This issue of *Catechumeneon Quarterly* focuses on the task of evangelization—who does it, how they can be encouraged to do it, and how we can welcome the people they attract. In our feature article, Michael Clay stresses the importance of establishing the task of evangelization as central to the identity of a parish, offering from his perspective various ways to invite parishioners to make that vision their own.

Once parishioners buy into that vision, what next? How do motivated Christians share their faith with others in such a way as to pique their curiosity about living as Catholic Christians? Katherine Coolidge offers her pastoral reflections on how parishioners can, like Ananias in Acts 9, reach out in concrete ways to those around them, becoming true evangelizers.

Having now surfaced interested individuals, we need to be ready to respond to them in a timely and fruitful way. Mary Patricia Storms shares some strategies for making sure the "Catholic-curious" feel welcome and engaged even before they ever come to a precatechumenate session.

In our featured resource, Michael Connors, csc, underscores the importance of the community as evangelizer and highlights the role of preaching in the evangelizing endeavor.

Evangelization doesn't end with the beginning of the formal catechumenal process. As the RCIA states, "[The faithful] should therefore show themselves ready to give the candidates evidence of the spirit of the Christian community and to welcome them into their homes, into personal conversation, and into community gatherings" (RCIA, 9.1). Once the task of evangelization begins, it never ends.

In Christ,
Michael E. Novak
Editor
Liturgy Training Publications



Preparing for the ORDER OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF ADULTS

The newly translated *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* has been approved for use in the dioceses of the United States.

LTP will continue to update you on the status of the rite and the timeline for implementation.

As we prepare to implement the new translation of the *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults*, you can visit www.ltp.org/ocia to learn about updates, training opportunities, and other resources.

Making Evangelization a Parish Priority: A Pastor's Observations

MICHAEL CLAY

(This article was previously published in the November-December 2015 issue of *Pastoral Liturgy*.)

There is a lot of buzz in the Catholic world these days around the word *evangelization* and the phrase the *new evangelization*. Books, articles, blogs, etc., abound with theological insights, sociological studies, and humble but correct opinions regarding what evangelization is and how we should go about it. Forty years after the blueprint provided by Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *On Evangelization in the Modern World*, it would be safe to say we have only begun to implement this renewed vision for the Church.

The three parishes I have served as a pastor in my home diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina, and the seminarians and undergraduates I teach at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, testify to this. How I evangelized in my first pastorate is very different than the way I prepare millennials to evangelize today. These experiences have provided wonderful opportunities to explore evangelization. The thoughts I present here have been honed by both failures and successes in these settings.

The parishioners of my first pastorate were living in the waning years of the first post-Vatican II generation. Most adults knew the essentials of their Catholic faith, many weaned on the *Baltimore Catechism* as children. The focus of the Church was on the education of children through the Catholic school or the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD).

To a significant extent, the students I currently teach are millennials. Their profile looks very different than the parishioners of my first pastorate. They are the future of the Church and, if the research is to be believed, we have reason to be concerned about our future, since an increasing number of them are either dropping out or want nothing to do with the Church.

What has changed and the importance of paying attention to those changes is beyond the scope of this article, but I would like to suggest that Sherry Weddell's insight in *Forming Intentional Disciples* provides an important clue about what needs to change for significant inroads to be made with those who are the future of our Church.

Weddell posits that, historically, we have focused much of our energy on sacramentalizing Catholics. Today, we must be intentional about evangelizing them first.¹

Her significant insight affirms the priority on evangelization we have been hearing about since Pope Paul VI reminded us in 1975 that the "Church exists to evangelize."² Popes John Paul II,



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Evangelized Catholics need to witness the joy of their relationship with the Lord to others coming to Mass.

Benedict XVI, and Francis have continued to offer much in the way of teachings and resources to emphasize this point. The restored catechumenate reflects this priority as well. The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* states that evangelization is the primary agenda during the initial period of initiation formation.³ Catechetical documents from the Holy See since the promulgation of the restored catechumenate have suggested that all models of catechesis follow the initiation model, leading one to conclude that evangelization is likewise a priority.

This article will describe what one priest has discovered as a pastor and as someone preparing future priests and lay ecclesial ministers to be generally more successful than not in evangelizing individuals and communities. It will focus on how we can bring individuals into a living relationship with the Lord (who is the initial focus of evangelization), incorporate them into a deeper connection with their parish community, form them around the foundational teachings of the Church (the *kerygma*), and equip and commission them to live out their commitment to love and serve the Lord and neighbor, especially those who live on the margins, spiritually, economically, and relationally.



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For parish evangelization to be taken seriously, pastoral leaders need to reflect on their willingness to witness to the Lord.

Witness

On Evangelization in the Modern World captures a key dimension of a successful evangelizer in its statement “Modern people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (41). It is a truism that you cannot give what you do not possess. One of the most important dynamics to successful evangelization is witness. But the witness must be authentically evangelized. This is especially true when encountering millennials, who have a seemingly inherent acuity to smell a phony. They are the skeptical generation, and authenticity is important to them.

Although more likely to be indifferent when it comes to faith, millennials, and I would dare say anyone who is searching for truth, do not necessarily shirk from a witness who deeply and personally believes in Jesus Christ and is willing to tell others the difference it has made in his/her life, unless the witness is proselytizing or overbearing. Since witness by lifestyle is an example of evangelization, the Church calls Catholics to speak up intentionally about their faith in Jesus Christ and why that makes a difference in their lives and potentially in the lives of those who do not yet know Christ. This is not a common experience in the Catholic world, at least in the Western world.

This is due somewhat to an inherent reluctance to witness to one’s faith in such an intentional manner, especially at the risk of being labeled a fundamentalist or perceived as self-righteous. Increasingly, though, there is a sense that it also may have something to do with the fact that Catholics have yet to encounter Christ in such a way that the difference he makes in their lives is worth telling others.

If the parish is to take evangelization seriously, I would invite pastoral leaders to reflect on their willingness to witness to the Lord and the importance of such witness.

Retreats

In my last parish, I came to understand that retreats are a significant ally in evangelizing a parish. A growing immigrant Hispanic presence was part of that parish, and movements such as Cursillo and Alvernia became transformational experiences in the lives of many Hispanics participating in these retreats. As more individuals attended these retreats, there was an increased willingness to witness to a sacred encounter with Christ and the transformation that encounter brought. Such witness motivated more parishioners to attend the retreats. As a result, participation at Mass increased quantitatively and qualitatively. More and more people were gathering in parishioners’ homes to pray. Commitment to serve the parish, including service to those beyond the parish, increased. Lives were changed for the better.

But these types of intensive retreats are not for everyone. As an alternative, spiritual evenings of recollection during Lent or in the fall can help others move forward on their journey of encountering Christ. Another option is the parish mission. Both must be evangelical in nature, inviting people over several mornings/evenings to meet Christ as their Lord and Savior and to encounter his powerful message.

At one such successful mission in my last parish, the numbers attending on the last day/evening were much larger than on the first day/evening. The missionary’s secret was that he preached Jesus, spoke to people’s hearts, witnessed to what his relationship with Jesus had done for him and others, and invited people to hand their lives over to Christ if they wanted to experience the peace the world cannot give, joy that cannot be adequately expressed, and calm that will see them through the dark night of the soul.

By contrast, previous missions were aimed more at the head than the heart. These consistently bore little fruit after the missionary departed, and numbers tended to decline over the course of the mission itself. The heart-directed mission became a game changer for the parish and created a momentum that brought more people to Mass, to adult Bible study, and to outreach to those living on the margins, especially the materially and spiritually poor and hungry.

Good liturgy

The Sunday Eucharistic liturgy brings the largest number of Catholics together on a regular basis in the parish. I am absolutely convinced that providing a quality experience of the liturgy is a great evangelization tool. But I am increasingly of the opinion that Sunday worship is mediocre, at best, in the majority of Catholic parishes in the United States. Catholics from other parts of the United States who have resettled in the three North Carolina parishes I served have told me consistently that they never knew Sunday Mass could be so life-giving. They attribute the reasons for the life-giving nature of the parish to four areas: (1) a welcoming community, (2) good musical choices and musicians, (3) a prayerful celebration of the Mass, and (4) a good homily. Several studies on parish life have validated this.

A Welcoming Community: If evangelization is foundationally about establishing a living relationship with the Lord, that relationship must be seen among those who belong to a parish community. Those who are evangelized know that Jesus' offer of salvation has set them "free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness."⁴ It has brought them joy, as Pope Francis tells us in *Evangelii gaudium*. And such joy is meant to be shared with others. Sharing the joy of knowing Christ is seen in the parking lot before and after Mass, is conveyed by those who stand at the threshold of the church to welcome all coming to and leaving Mass, and is expressed in the friendly face in the pew that acknowledges the arriving person who is sitting or kneeling down. It is conveyed by someone asking visitors to stand before Mass and be acknowledged and welcomed by the community, even in those communities that practice a sacred silence before Mass begins.

I am advocating for evangelized Catholics to witness the joy of their relationship with the Lord to others who are coming to Mass, especially to a stranger or a parishioner not known by face or name. It only takes a moment to welcome someone but it may create a lasting memory that brings someone back to the parish again because they experienced the presence of Christ in the face of a parishioner.

Good Liturgical Music and Musicians: When training pastoral musicians, a well-known pastoral musician likes to say that most people do not go home humming the homily. As a priest who travels to parishes to fill in and assist on weekends, it is too often the case that the people do not go home humming the music either. Creating a good music ministry is a lot of work and takes much practice on the part of the musicians. Choosing music that is liturgically appropriate and reflective of the weekly scriptural texts and liturgical season is hard work. Training vocalists to accompany the assembly rather than entertain requires patience. Creating a sense of music as sung prayer requires the musicians to perform pieces as sung prayer. Providing a community with a solid repertoire of songs, canticles, hymns, and psalms takes time and an investment of effort to plot out an entire liturgical year of music and see how a repertoire is being developed over time.

One of the strongest words of advice I would offer is to those who are the priest celebrants, the presiders of the Church's prayer: Sing! Too many priests never sing the music or even pick up a hymnal. More than a few musicians have told me that their pastor wants the Entrance Song/Hymn to conclude when he reaches his chair and that he bolts out of the church as soon as the Closing Song/Hymn begins, forcing the accompanist to end the music early or compete with a dispersing assembly. Vocal quality is not the issue. Even the tone-deaf priest can pick up a hymnal and mouth the words (or at least make joyful noises to the Lord). If the assembly sees that the priest is not invested in the sung prayer of the community, they justifiably wonder why they should be.

Music is symbolic language and reaches places in the heart and soul that the spoken word cannot. It evangelizes people when performed well and prayerfully and is among the main reasons cited for staying with or leaving a parish.

Praying the Liturgy: This may seem like a redundant phrase but, as a concelebrant, I have experienced more than a few Masses with a principal celebrant who reads the prayers of the Mass as if they are the names in a phone book. He fumbles over the recently revised propers of the Mass as though he is seeing them for the first time. These texts can be prayed, but they require practice and a careful praying of the texts.



Photo © John Zich

Reverently praying the liturgy evangelizes the assembly.

The greatest prayer we pray as Catholics, the Eucharistic Prayer, can sound boring to the congregation if it is recited in a rushed manner. To pray the liturgy requires effort and a sense that what we are doing is first, and foremost, prayer.

When the priest rushes through his personal reception of Holy Communion, and that of the ministers of Holy Communion assisting him, the assembly may have a sense that what it is about to partake of is not a sacred meal, communion with divinity itself, but a carry-out meal.

Praying the liturgy evangelizes people. The assembly is drawn into the prayerfulness of the leader and can truly become a community at prayer when reverent prayer is the consistent experience in the liturgy.

The Homily: Pope Francis has spoken and written about the plague of boring homilies that afflict the Church. To be honest, good preaching requires much work, and with so much ministry

on a priest's plate these days, I can see how lack of preparation time would yield a homily that fails to connect with the listener. Nevertheless, I also would say that prioritizing homily preparation, with standing appointments scheduled over the course of the week, can safeguard time to ensure a homily can be crafted that feeds people spiritually. Connecting the Word of God to the real lives of the people with a homily that is exegetically sound, spiritually inspiring, and alternately consoles and challenges will speak to hearts and minds and will bear good fruit.

For years, the words of author Joseph Campbell have served as a reference for homiletic preparation. He said, "Preachers err by trying to talk people into belief; better they reveal the radiance of their own discovery." This requires that, as a first task, the preacher explore the Scriptures and their meaning in his own life and find what consoles and challenges him on his faith journey. This requires the homilist to be disciplined to the hard work of scriptural study, seeking connections that speak to the real lives of the people they address, and writing the homily (even if they don't deliver one using a text). Most important, it requires that the homilist himself be evangelized.



Photo © John Zich

When performed prayerfully, music evangelizes the congregation.

As the premier opportunity for the homilist to evangelize, to preach about God, Christ, salvation, grace, forgiveness, redemption, hope, courage, and faith, the homilist has to take seriously both preaching and the implications of the topics just mentioned. The people may not go home humming the homily, but they should be discussing it in the car on the way home as the disciples on the road to Emmaus did after they broke bread with the Lord. When this happens, evangelization occurs.

When a community is welcoming, sacred music is liturgically appropriate and performed well by music ministers, the liturgy is prayed by the priest celebrant and other ministers, and homilies touch the heart and imagination as well as provide inspiration to take one step closer to a relationship with Christ, the liturgy has done its part as a form of evangelization.

Faith Formation

Several years ago, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops produced the pastoral plan for adult formation, *Our Hearts Were Burning within Us*. Its emphasis on adult catechesis echoes *On Catechesis in Our Time* (1979) by Pope John Paul II, and the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997). As adults, especially parents, are largely uneducated in the faith, and as our secularized world blurs the sight lines of religious beliefs and values, focus on adult formation is critical for any long-term efforts in evangelization. The good news is that, when done effectively and in keeping with adult formation methods, adults of all ages find this formation helpful and respond to it enthusiastically.

Adult Formation Methods: In my pastoral experience, a significant key to evangelization has been when adult formation methods are used effectively. Adult learning methods show us that, when used, adults come away being spiritually and intellectually fed and more often than not, thirsting for more. Experts, such as Malcolm Knowles⁵ and Thomas Groome⁶, provide us with important insights on effective ways to teach and form adults. Their andragogical approaches provide proven techniques for facilitating the learning experience of adults. Among the principles they espouse, I have found the following particularly helpful: (1) the matter to be presented and discussed reflects the learners' needs prior to the catechists' needs; (2) what is presented and discussed is experientially relevant to the learners and directly connects to their reality; and (3) the process is participatory.

This means that a textbook will likely be of less value than a chapter from a book written in simple theological language, a magazine article, or a visual presentation that incorporates images, video, music, etc. Visual resources are especially engaging for millennials.

The formation should be twofold. Increasingly, an initial emphasis on evangelization is critical. Pope Benedict XVI describes the goal well when he tells us that "being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but an encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and decisive direction."⁷ Emphasizing the importance of an encounter with Christ and his Paschal Mystery is of paramount importance. In addition, inviting people to explore how that encounter can take place is essential. Doing these two things are at the heart of evangelization. The first provides the "what" and the second facilitates the "how." Pope Francis speaks of this priority in *Evangelii gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*) when he invites the reader to a "renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them."⁸

Done Effectively: Secondly, the formation "cannot remain abstract and unincarnated."⁹ This is where the principles of andragogy (adult-focused teaching strategies) become so important and where, too often, catechists, especially priests, fail. The theologically sophisticated language learned in a seminary or graduate school setting needs to be translated into simple theological language for adults with minimal formation to grasp not only the content but be grasped by the presence of the Spirit, who leads

the adult learner into a deeper encounter with the Lord. When done well, this method will result in the learner's fruitful encounter with the Lord.

Asking parishioners to identify topics of interest will give them reason to choose an adult formation series over events competing for their attention.

The Kerygma: The catechist casting about for topics to facilitate should consider those connected to the *kerygma*. These topics are at the heart of all evangelization, and when these conversations are allowed to unfold using adult learning methods, they frequently awaken or reawaken faith. Kerygmatic topics would include: (1) God loves you more than you'll ever know this side of eternity; (2) everything God creates bears an eternal imprint; (3) the world was meant to be God's Kingdom on earth; (4) sin is a reality in our world; (5) the Incarnation is God's definitive decision to move the world back in the right direction; (6) Jesus Christ embraced the Cross to forever take away anything that could keep us from a relationship with God; (7) God manifests power over the greatest evil and our greatest fear, death, by raising Jesus from the dead; (8) those who believe are called to be baptized; and (9) the baptized are called to missionary discipleship.

Forming Parents: Forming children in the faith, especially around sacramental preparation, needs to provide opportunities for the parents and guardians of these children to grow in an adult appreciation of what their children are learning. I discovered the value of this when we began to offer formation for parents as we were forming their children. As the parents grew in their understanding of the faith and of the sacraments, their presence and participation at the liturgy increased. We required this presence of parents at formation sessions because we sensed that an optional invitation would not result in the desired outcome. While there was some resistance and problems with absenteeism, the overall result was positive.

In the case where families speak another language than English in the home, bilingual materials were important for helping the parents learn along with their children and allowed the children to be educated by catechists in a group setting where English is the common language.

Missionary Disciples

When I was about to be ordained a priest, I came across a saying about the Church that has stayed with me: *The mission of the Church is less about serving those assembled and more about assembling those who will serve*. Pope Francis describes this as creating a Church of missionary disciples, and he is keen on promoting this value as visible head of the Catholic Church.

In many ways, I think this describes the fruit of evangelization: a Church that collectively consists of millions upon millions of people who are missionary disciples. This vision is one thing; the reality is another. Evangelizing an immigrant Hispanic family is a bit different than evangelizing a highly secularized American millennial. Nevertheless, if pastoral leaders are serious about making evangelization a priority, those being



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When pastoral leaders make evangelization a priority, the congregation will increasingly become ministers of good news to others by the witness of their words and lives.

assembled who are evangelized will increasingly become ministers of good news to others by the witness of their words and lives.

When you meet someone who changes your life forever and for the better, you do not keep this to yourself because it is too good to keep quiet. This is good news. This is evangelization.

Notes

1. Sherry Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2012), 46.
2. Pope Paul VI, *On Evangelization in the Modern World* (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*), 14
3. *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 36
4. Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii gaudium*), 1.
5. Malcom Knowles and Associates, *Andragogy in Action* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1984).
6. Thomas Groome, *Will There Be Faith: A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).
7. Pope Benedict XVI, *God Is Love*, (*Deus caritas est*), 1.
8. Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii gaudium*), 3.
9. *Our Hearts Were Burning within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Formation in the United States*, 70; *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 23.



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Becoming Spiritual Friends

Katherine Coolidge

In his article, Msgr. Michael Clay outlines an excellent plan to form missionary disciples. In my work at the Catherine of Siena Institute, I work with many parishes and dioceses developing similar approaches. As they plan, organize events, revitalize parish ministries, and renew liturgies, I observe that teams can lose sight of what John Paul II proclaimed is the single end the Church exists to serve, “that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life” (*Redemptor hominis*, 13).

Surveying the Landscape

Since 2015, our religious landscape has changed, and our times call for new methods. Numerous studies document the fact that fewer people are likely to come to a faith community. Gallup noted in 2020 that adults in the United States who are congregational members dropped below 50 percent for the first time.¹ In Gallup’s annual study of confidence in institutions, US adults who say they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence dropped from 42 percent to 32 percent.² This decline is also reflected in the drop in weekly Mass attendance over the intervening years.³

While confidence and participation is waning, the hunger for spiritual conversations is not. In 2019, Barna Group found among nonbelievers and non-practicing Christians that over 70 percent of those surveyed found casual one-to-one or small group conversations evangelizing. However, less than a third of those surveyed knew a Christian with the skills to hold such a conversation!⁴

Capable Disciples Needed

In short, an evangelizing parish today needs disciples capable of engaging people both inside and outside the Christian community. My question is: are we equipping them for the 2024 mission field?

Very much like Ananias in Acts 9:11–19, Jesus calls us to meet people wherever they are, listen to their story, and help them meet Jesus and hear his invitation to follow him. I am part of one effort to address this need. At the Institute, we created a program we call Ananias Training. We help Catholics from all walks of life develop the skills to accompany others in our post-Christendom world. “Ananias,” as we call them, are trained not as formal spiritual directors or counselors but as ordinary, casual spiritual friends, equipped to listen lovingly and ask open-ended questions

to guide their friends to the Jesus already standing by their side, “to enlighten, strengthen and free” them.⁵

Breaking the Silence

Within the parish community, they can help “break the silence” about Jesus, a key ingredient to an evangelizing culture. Pastors and other parish leaders often say that parishioners will not talk about Jesus for fear of saying something wrong. We have learned that casual, spiritual conversations within parish life foster an evangelizing spiritual climate that brings people closer to Christ. Out in the world, they can build bridges of trust with the mistrusting, inspire hope in the hurting, and arouse the curiosity of the casual seeker.

In one Southern diocese where we worked, a middle-aged man approached me in tears. He had come to become a better RCIA team member. What he did not expect was that this training would help him reconcile with his estranged son. His son eventually returned to the Church.

No matter how they are trained and formed, we need evangelizing spiritual friends in our parishes and in our world. Frequently a missing ingredient in our evangelization plans, they are nevertheless often in place, at the ready to meet seekers where they are, to listen and guide them to the person they seek—Jesus.

Notes

1. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>
2. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/245474/confidence-of-americans-in-organized-religion/>
3. 23 percent (2015) to 17.3 percent (2022), <https://cara.georgetown.edu/faqs>, although early indications are that attendance continues to recover post-COVID, possibly as high as 20 percent.
4. Barna Group, *Reviving Evangelism*, 2019, 44–45.
5. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 164.



After over two decades in parish ministry, **KATHERINE COOLIDGE** joined the staff of the Catherine of Siena Institute in 2014. As the Director for Parish and Diocesan Services, she works with and presents for laity, religious, and clergy internationally.

What can be done to welcome inquirers into the precatechumenate?

Merely five paragraphs in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* describe the period of evangelization and precatechumenate. This time is set aside for those who have expressed interest in learning more about Jesus and his Church but are not sufficiently catechized to make an informed decision about baptism. Familiarly known as inquirers, they are often drawn to Jesus by their relationship with someone who fully lives their faith, personal study and prayer, or a desire for a fulfilled life.

Greeting and Meeting

The reception will be held at a meeting or gathering of the local community, on an occasion that will permit friendly conversation. An inquirer or “sympathizer” is introduced by a friend and then welcomed by the priest or some other representative member of the community. (RCIA, 39.3)

We often meet inquirers for the first time in the Church narthex before or after Mass, a funeral, or a wedding. A robust hospitality ministry that consistently welcomes those entering and wishes those leaving a friendly farewell should be trained to facilitate an introduction to a staff member, priest, or deacon. Ideally, someone will routinely be available at Masses to take the person aside, speak to him or her briefly about the next steps, and exchange contact information. Others may reach out through the parish website or a phone call. Train those who receive these messages to respond in a welcoming manner and pass the messages on quickly.

Prompt Contact

As promptly as possible—preferably within a day—the pastor or other staff member contacts the individual by phone or email using these or similar words: “Hello, [name]. This is [name] from [name] parish. I was told you want to learn about Jesus and the Church. How can I help?”

Active listening helps in directing the individual to the next step: a one-to-one meeting or invitation to attend an upcoming parish event with you. At the event, connect the inquirer with a parishioner. Is the inquirer a young parent? Introduce him or her to another young parent. Is he retired? Connect him with a retired parishioner who shares similar interests.

Come and See

During this period, priests . . . catechists, and [others] . . . are to give the candidates a suitable explanation of the Gospel. The candidates are to receive help and attention so that with a purified and clearer intention they may cooperate with God’s grace. Opportunities should be provided for them to meet families and other groups of Christians. (RCIA, 38)

Invite those interested to conveniently scheduled drop-in sessions: offer sessions at various times—after Sunday Mass, weekday evenings, or lunchtime. Advertise to the entire parish, encouraging those interested to stop by. Prepare simple reflections on the day’s Gospel; as you learn more about each other, you can tailor your conversations to meet the needs of individuals.

Year-Round Catechesis

A well-planned curriculum for Christian initiation operates all year. Construct it in layers so that your parish is ready to respond regardless of when someone inquires. Avoid grouping inquirers, candidates, and catechumens into single learning groups; each individual is beginning the journey from a different place and deserves suitable catechesis. Relying upon community events is one way for inquirers and parishioners to get to know each other. Train parishioners at various stages of life to be ambassadors at these events, with the intention of integrating the inquirers into parish life. Some inquirers want to attend Mass but are hesitant to do so because they don’t know what to do or say. Team any such individuals with a friendly parishioner who will join them at Mass, helping with the prayers and postures and answering questions. Perhaps, when the inquirers are ready to move to the catechumenate, some of these parishioners will be sponsors.



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Searching for best practices? Email training@ltp.org if you have a question that you would like answered by one of the Catechumeneon team members.

For Your Ministry

Preaching for Discipleship: Preparing Homilies for Christian Initiation

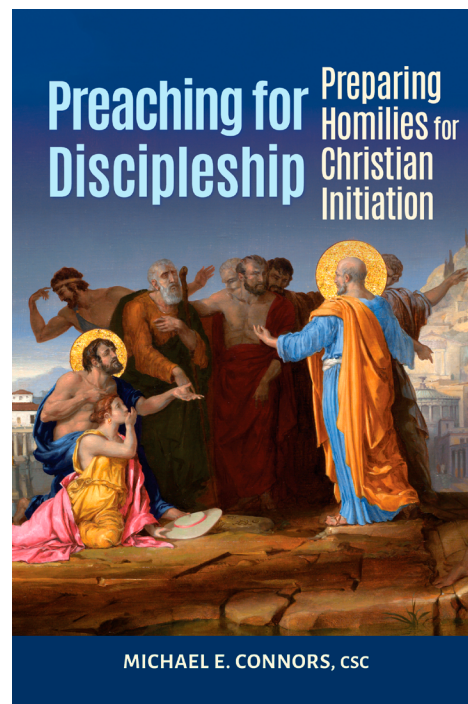
Michael E. Connors, csc

The homily is a primary way that pastors and deacons can communicate how the whole parish community forms the catechumens. Many parishioners are not aware of their role in the Christian initiation process.

In *Preaching for Discipleship: Preparing Homilies for Christian Initiation*, Michael E. Connors, csc, provides homilists and catechists with the tools to evangelize not only the catechumens present, but also to capture the imagination of the parish community so that they too realize their own role in the Christian initiation process.

This resource will help the homilist:

- Build a homily
- Foster a deeper appreciation of the call to discipleship on the part of the assembly
- Instruct the assembly on their role in the rites of Christian initiation so that right from the outset the catechumens may feel that they belong to the people of God
- Bring the baptized and catechumens into a deeper personal relationship with the Lord
- Provide specific insights during the period of mystagogy



Sample pages ➔

What people are saying . . .

“Fr. Michael Connors has provided here a wonderful guide to preaching the rites of Christian initiation of adults, including sample, illustrative homilies for each of the periods and steps of those rites. More than that, he has given us an excellent commentary on the pastoral celebration and theology of those rites. This little gem should be required reading for pastors, homilists, catechists, deacons, RCIA teams, indeed, for all – and that means the entire Christian community – who are involved in helping catechumens and the elect prepare to share in this great mystery of initiation into Christ and the Church. Attention to this book will help make sacramental-liturgical preaching better and there is no one more worthy to learn this from than Fr. Michael, who is himself truly a master of the homiletic craft.”

—Maxwell E. Johnson, PhD
Professor of Liturgical Studies
University of Notre Dame

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community, looking for gifts of leadership and service that have not yet been recognized and tapped. He is a courageous, visionary leader in the sense that he relies upon the Spirit to help him see needs to be addressed, gifts to be affirmed and called forth, a more abundant life for the community and each of its members.

The Evangelizing Parish

Wherever the initiation process is being implemented in a conscientious way, it raises the question, “What are we of Saint X Parish doing to welcome others into our life?” The RCIA is the most powerful driver for a renewal of evangelization that the Catholic Church has seen in a long while. Not only does the text formally assert that initiation of new members is among our most important tasks as Church, it places responsibility for that task broadly on *all the baptized*. It also gathers momentum as it develops in a parish. As parishioners begin to see candidates and catechumens standing before them at the Sunday liturgies, finding something in the Christian life that they want to join, inevitably the fully initiated faithful are personally touched and moved, too, and in small or large ways they begin to take more seriously the Christian life and their own baptismal call to give witness and invitation to others.

Still, even today thirty years into the implementation of the Rite, there are relatively few of our parishes that can truly be described as actively and intentionally evangelizing communities. The promotion of a parish culture of evangelization faces some strong headwinds in a culture that is highly secularized and individualistic. Moreover, generations of Catholics, many of them deeply faithful, have been nurtured in a style of spirituality that has stressed ethical living but a fundamental privacy about essential matters of one’s personal faith, rendering them passive in the public forum. They may care deeply about Christ, the Blessed Mother, the Catholic Church, and their own parish affiliation. That care may be amply demonstrated in their love of their families, their generosity in contributing time, talent, and treasure to the parish, and the quality of their citizenship in the wider society. But they find it exceedingly difficult to know how to speak of these things, to articulate what they mean, and how and why they may be of interest



for others to consider. Contrast this with the religious style of some evangelical Protestants, who are so prominent on the American religious landscape. For them personal witness and outreach are high priorities. Whatever may be the limitations of their theology and approach, they do have a language for this mission ready at hand. In contrast, Catholics often appear meek and mute about their faith, even when they have personally discovered its treasures.

Under the influence of the RCIA and other developments, and given the considerable and increasingly obvious attrition of Catholics to secularization or to the evangelical and pentecostal churches, the situation seems to be slowly changing. Recent popes have urged Catholics to a renewed understanding and reinvigorated practice of evangelization. In fact, beginning with Vatican II's *Ad Gentes*, continuing through Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, through the repeated calls to "new evangelization" in the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and most recently in Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Catholic understanding of evangelization has undergone an exciting period of theological recovery and development. These developments are now reaching Catholic parishes and ministries through such programs as Cursillo and its several offshoots, RENEW International,³ Christ Renews His Parish,⁴ the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS),⁵ the *Rebuilt* series of Fr. Michael White and Tom Corcoran,⁶ Fr. James Mallon's *Divine Renovation*,⁷ and others. A succession of popes and a number of dioceses have named evangelization as one of their current pastoral priorities. Sherry Weddell's recent book, *Forming Intentional Disciples*,⁸ seems to be generating some energetic discussion and pastoral planning.

3. See <http://www.renewintl.org/>.

4. See <http://www.mycrhp.org/MYCRHP/Welcome.html>.

5. See <https://www.focus.org/>.

6. See Michael White and Tom Corcoran, *Rebuilt: Awakening the Faithful, Reaching the Lost, and Making Church Matter* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2013). Also by these authors: *Tools for Rebuilding: 75 Really, Really Practical Ways to Make Your Parish Better* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2013); *Rebuilding Your Message: Practical Tools to Strengthen Your Preaching and Teaching* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2015); and *The Rebuilt Field Guide: Ten Steps for Getting Started* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2016).

7. James Mallon, *Divine Renovation: Bringing Your Parish from Maintenance to Mission* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2014).

8. Sherry Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012).



The parish that is a fit home for the RCIA will be a parish that sets evangelization as one of its highest priorities. Such a parish will set aside generous resources for its outreach efforts and devote clergy and staff time and talent to them as well. At the same time, such a parish will resist making evangelization the province of religious professionals alone. Competent leadership of evangelization is necessary, but the evangelizing parish will seek to motivate and equip all of its members to play their roles in the apostolic mission of their local church. Such a parish will also strive to avoid making evangelization just a specialized set of activities and programs, but seek to integrate the concern for outreach into all of its activities and structures.

The Role of Preaching

At the heart of the evangelizing parish, in which a vigorous initiation ministry takes root, one is almost certain to find a pastor who is a good, effective preacher. Truly outstanding preachers are as few in contemporary Catholicism as they have been in any age or in any church denomination. The charism for preaching is not given to all, but its discernment is undoubtedly one of the touchstones of the call to priestly and diaconal ministry. As the Second Vatican Council said, “the first task of priests . . . [is] to preach the Gospel of God to all.”⁹ Yet, while the John Chrysostoms, Fulton Sheens, and Walter Burghardts are rare in any age, consistent effectiveness in preaching is a bar to which every pastor and every associate pastor and deacon can and should aspire.

So what is effectiveness in preaching? The question deserves a longer answer than is possible here,¹⁰ but a few basic points can be mentioned.

1. *Effective Catholic preaching leads the hearers to an encounter with a living God.* The first and most important goal of preaching is to bring people to God. As Pope Benedict XVI put it, “Being Christian is not the

9. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4. Flannery revised translation.

10. For a more extensive treatment of effectiveness in Catholic preaching see the following four-part series by the author in the online *Church Life Journal* (Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame), September 2016 through January 2017:

<http://churchlife.nd.edu/2016/09/28/effectivecatholicpreachingpart1/>

<http://churchlife.nd.edu/2016/10/12/effectivecatholicpreachingpart2/>

<http://churchlife.nd.edu/2016/11/09/effectivecatholicpreachingpart3/>

<http://churchlife.nd.edu/2017/01/25/effectivecatholicpreachingpart4/>



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.”¹¹ Thus, it is not entertainment, eloquence, erudition, nor good humor that people need from preaching, but a way to find God. There are teaching moments within preaching, but they are within a larger aim to forge a love relationship between the hearer and God. Effective preaching is unitary—it has one and only one central message, a single thread of discovery and insight. It leaves the listener with a sense that God is near, reaching out a hand of friendship to the hearer. Shallow preaching doesn’t cut it; people want substance, something that matters to their lives. Effective preaching is appropriately “spiritual,” which does not mean ethereal nor remote but a word from God addressed to the deepest core of human longing. Liturgical preaching leads to worship and thanksgiving at the eucharistic table, and inspires private prayer and personal commitment. We long to hear people say to us, “Your preaching today brought me closer to God.”

2. *The effective preacher conveys a lively interest in, and love for, the Scriptures.* Preaching has been described as a “breaking open” of the Word, a metaphor that harkens back to the Luke 24 story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus; as the Risen Christ broke bread with the confused disciples, he also “broke open” their understanding of the Scriptures. Within a few lines, the attentive hearer can tell whether the preacher has wrestled with the scriptural text out of an authentic love for the Word of God. The preacher not only has a message that matters, he conveys personal investment and a sense of urgency. All preaching involves personal witness. This does not mean the preacher talks about himself, but that his own faith and desire for deeper faith is on the line. He is preaching to himself as really as he is preaching to the congregation. Good preaching includes but goes beyond the past meaning(s) of a text and dares to suggest its meaning for us today. The preacher listens for the ancient meaning(s) but also listens for the text’s possible meanings today, in order to provide what the US bishops called for:

. . . a scriptural interpretation of human existence which enables a community to recognize God’s active presence, to respond to that presence

11. *Deus Caritas Est*, 7.



in faith through liturgical word and gesture, and beyond the liturgical assembly, through a life lived in conformity with the gospel.¹²

3. *Good preaching inspires mission to others.* The effective preacher leads us to the Table and out the church doors through the parking lot to the world, where we serve our families, our places of employment, our society, our world. Effective preaching stimulates the will to do something with the message, to enact it in the challenges of daily life in all its various settings. One of the most profound compliments I ever received on my preaching came from a middle-aged man who stopped in the back of church one Sunday to say, “You know, Father, I listened to what you said last Sunday, and I went home and made up with my wife.” Others have heard preaching that stimulated them to volunteer to teach catechism, ladle soup at the parish soup kitchen, run for the local school board, or get involved with an organization working for international economic justice. The Christian message is one of intimacy with God, but this intimacy is not purely inward looking; it clamors within us to be shared with others. The Sunday homily can be a means for strengthening and emboldening the community to give witness, serve unselfishly, and stand up for a more just world.

4. *Effective preaching is holistic: it deploys both discursive and imaginative language, and appeals to mind, heart, and will.* However theologically accurate it may be, preaching that is couched in purely discursive terms runs the risk of being received as abstract and dry. There are dimensions of the human personality that can only be reached and enlivened through the use of well-chosen imagery, metaphor, music, the arts, and story. Jesus himself was ingenious at this in his use of parables and in the most powerful narrative of all—his own life, suffering, death, and resurrection. Our faith rests on the paradox of the Paschal Mystery, and the preacher’s task is to use all available means to help us find our true home there. It is that mystery that takes seriously, and sheds light upon, all human experience. If we aim for conversion and transformation of the whole person, then we need to appeal to both the “left brain” (rationality, logic, discursive language) and the “right brain” (image, story, intuition, creativity). And we need to heed the ancient advice of none other than

12. *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* (United States Catholic Conference, 1982), 29.



St. Augustine of Hippo, who counseled his clergy and catechists to teach, delight, and persuade or move to action,¹³ reflecting an understanding of the human person as composed of mind, heart, and will.

5. *Effective preaching creates, nourishes, and calls others into Christian community.* Just as the Scriptures themselves are inherently communitarian, so good Catholic preaching avoids mere “me and Jesus” spirituality to open a life-giving vision of who we can be for one another, and who we can be together for others. The effective preacher is mindful of the ecclesial aspects of the text, and of the needs of the concrete community within which he speaks. He is sensitive to the shared life of his parish community, with all its joys and challenges, lights and shadows. His preaching suggests both personal and communal avenues of response to what God is saying. Community life itself is evangelizing and helps people toward Christian maturity in discipleship.

The astute preacher in an initiating parish will be aware of the many rich homiletic possibilities that come his way each week, not only in the Lectionary but in the rites themselves. While the Scriptures hold the central place in liturgical preaching, the ritual components may also be regarded as homiletic texts. This includes the various rites of the initiation process, from the Rite of Becoming Catechumens through the Easter Vigil. The texts, the gestures, the physical elements, and the people involved in the rites all present opportunities for preaching that can assist in deepening Christian discipleship. We will explore some of these homiletic opportunities in the chapters ahead. Moreover, even in the absence of a special initiation rite, the texts, gestures, physical elements, and participants in any ordinary parish Sunday liturgy present many possibilities themselves for homiletic reflection. Utilizing these symbolic and sacramental elements in preaching need not overshadow the biblical quality of preaching; indeed, preachers and faithful alike might be reminded that those very liturgical texts and elements are themselves rooted in scriptural narratives and injunctions. Good preaching often has a mystagogical quality, either foreground or background, retrospective or prospective.

13. See his *De Doctrina Cristiana* (*On Christian Doctrine*), especially Book IV.



Training and Events Calendar

In-Person Events

An Introduction to the RCIA: The Vision of Christian Initiation Ministry

Saturday, June 8, 2024 | St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish, Las Vegas, NV

Hosted by the Archdiocese of Las Vegas

Una introducción al RICA: La visión de la iniciación cristiana

Saturday, June 8, 2024 | St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish, Las Vegas, NV

Hosted by the Archdiocese of Las Vegas

An Introduction to the OCIA: The Vision of Christian Initiation Ministry

Saturday, September 14, 2024 | Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, Atlantic, IA

Hosted by the Diocese of Des Moines

Una introducción al RICA: La visión de la iniciación cristiana

Saturday, September 14, 2024 | Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, Atlantic, IA

Hosted by the Diocese of Des Moines

For more information or to register for any of these events:

<https://catechumeneon.org/events>

National Gathering on Christian Initiation® (NGCI 2024)

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