

Go and Make Disciples!

The call to a New Evangelization

As you begin reading this article, take a few deep breaths. Breathe in deeply, then try to exhale all of the air out of your lungs. It feels good, doesn't it?

Now try something a little different. Take another deep breath, but this time don't exhale. Just breathe in until you can't take in any more. Then hold your breath for as long as you can. If you're lucky, you may last a little more than a minute before you have to exhale. That's because of the way God made you. He created you to breathe in and to breathe out.

This little exercise can teach us something important about the Christian life. As Catholics, we have many opportunities to "breathe in" all that God has for us: in prayer, in Scripture, in the friendship of our fellow believers, and most of all in the Eucharist. But just as much as we need to take in all these blessings, we need to exhale as well. And that's what this month's articles are all about: "breathing out" the love and mercy of the Lord by sharing our faith with the people around us.

The Call to a New Evangelization. It's only in the past few decades that the word evangelize became a regular part of our Catholic vocabulary. Traditionally, evangelization was something that our Protestant brothers and sisters did, knocking on doors and preaching on street corners. That is, until Pope Paul VI issued his apostolic exhortation *On Evangelization in the Modern World*. In that document, Paul VI made it clear that the Church exists to evangelize and that God calls each and every one of us to take a part in this mission.

Continuing the legacy of Paul VI, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have told us that our age is in desperate need of a "New Evangelization." They have called us both to bring back our Catholic brothers and sisters who have fallen away and to invite those who have never heard about the Lord to receive him and embrace his salvation. Benedict XVI went so far as to establish a whole new office in the Vatican dedicated solely to promoting this New Evangelization.

All this talk of popes and Vatican offices can make the call to evangelization seem daunting—or at least a matter for professionals. "What do I have to offer?" we may think. "I'm no theologian or trained speaker. I don't even know where to begin." Well, let's take a look at that.

The Starting Point: *You!* Probably the best place to start is to take a look at your own life and see just how much you really do have to offer. Try dedicating your prayer this week to reflecting on God's goodness to you. Make it a point to write down the most important ways you have seen his blessings at work in you.

First, think about the fact that before you were even created, God knew who you were going to be—and he loved you deeply. From the very start, he chose to bless you "with every spiritual blessing in the heavens" (Ephesians 1:3), and he mapped out a plan for your life, a plan to bless you and draw you into his love and presence (Jeremiah 29:10; 2 Peter 1:4-6).

Think about the way that God has been with you every day of your life. Even in your darkest hour or your deepest sin, he stood by you, eager to help you. He has given you reason after reason to join the psalmist in crying out, "His faithful love endures forever!" (Psalm 136:1).

Now think about how that love—God's personal love for you—is so strong that it moved him to give his only Son for you. Think about how Jesus freely gave up his life so that you could be redeemed and filled with his Spirit (John 10:10).

Think, too, about all the gifts your Father has given you, and none more amazing than his own Holy Spirit. Think about all he gave you in baptism, all he continues to give you in the Eucharist,

in Reconciliation, in your family, in your parish family, and in your friends. Think of the way he continues to pick you up when you fall, to forgive and forget, and to heal all your wounds. Even in your challenges and trials, he pours out wisdom, strength, and comfort!

Every good gift comes from your heavenly Father (James 1:17). Simply knowing this truth will make it that much easier to tell the people around you about their good and gracious God. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, we are simply sharing “the inestimable gift that God has wished to give us.”

Just Take the First Step. This may be a good starting point, but it may not be enough to send us into the world full of confidence. Objections may still remain: “Isn’t it a priest’s job to preach?” “I don’t have the gift of sharing my faith.” Or “I’m too old/young/shy/nervous to evangelize.” “I’m not attractive/smart/outgoing/holy enough to do it.”

True, each of us has different strengths and weaknesses. Each of us could be a better Christian or a more eloquent speaker. But none of that really matters in the final analysis. What matters is that Jesus has called us, and he knows what he is doing. What matters is that God likes to choose the “weak and foolish of this world” to do his will, so that it will be clear that he is the One behind it all anyway (I Corinthians 1:27)! No matter what you think you can or cannot do, God has chosen you to be his witness!

Think about how parents will do anything for the good of their children. They never stop loving; they never give up. Even when the job calls for something uncomfortable or unpleasant, they do it simply because they must. Sometimes, in fact, the only reason they do it is because it’s their role as parents. And God blesses them for it!

In a similar way, you may be a reluctant evangelizer. That’s okay; God can still work with that. He is prepared to bless you, even if you take just the smallest of first steps. Just get out there and do something. Most likely, you’ll find it easier to take the next step. And the next one. And the next one.

An Unequal Partnership. One day, early in his public ministry, Jesus told a fisherman named Simon Peter to put out into deep water and lower his nets for a catch—even though the man had just come back from a fruitless all-night fishing excursion. After objecting at first, Simon Peter did what Jesus said, and the catch was miraculous (Luke 5:1-11).

Now, we know that Luke didn’t tell this story to teach us about good fishing techniques. He wanted to give us two keys for anyone wanting to become a “fisher of men”: our persistence and our ability to trust in the Lord. He wanted to show us that evangelization is really an unequal partnership with Jesus. Yes, we must take the time and use our creativity to find ways to share our faith. Yes, it can feel like hard work sometimes. And yes, it can get discouraging at times. But at its heart, evangelization is primarily God’s work.

It may seem like hard work to us. We may even feel that our efforts are bearing no fruit. But we have to remember that we are only the messengers. In the end, it is the Lord who changes people’s hearts and brings them to living faith. We have our part to play, but God’s part is far bigger—and far more wonderful. So if you ever feel discouraged, as Peter did that morning on the Sea of Galilee, remind yourself that evangelization is not primarily about your work. It’s about Jesus’ work. It doesn’t all depend on you. So try to relax. Give the Lord room to work. You may find him blessing your efforts far more as you do.

I Am with You. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples that they were “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). He also told them, “Without cost you have received; without cost, you are to give” (10:8). These words apply just as much to us today as they applied to the first disciples. We are Jesus’ disciples. He has called each of us to go into the world and make

disciples of all nations (28:19). And just as he promised the disciples on Easter Sunday, he promises us that every time we step out and share our faith: “I am with you always” (28:20).