

THE EVANGELIZING CATHOLIC SCHOOL

Over the course of the last decade there has been intense attention given to maximizing our efforts and enthusiasm to make sure that our schools are Catholic. Catholic identity will continue to demand a considerable amount of time and attention. However, the next important and imminent challenge for Catholic schools is that they be *evangelizing* Catholic schools.

The four evangelists tell us that God sent *His Son* into the world to save all people. The catechetical message, then, is a *Person, Jesus Christ of Nazareth!* Pope Benedict XVI said that the first service Christians are called to offer their brothers and sisters is the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the only Savior. “The first apostles, like today’s, would not have to be heralds of an idea, but witnesses of a person. Before being sent to evangelize, they would have to ‘be’ with Jesus, establishing a personal relationship with Him” (Vatican City, March 13, 2006). It is our duty, as baptized followers of Christ, to help others come first of all to know Jesus and then His Way.

There is no doubt that students are growing in their relationship with the Lord, so evangelization is taking place. However, the challenge for administrators and teachers of our Catholic schools, who minister in a culture growing more and more secular and relativistic, is to be much more conscious of how they evangelize and realize that everyone needs to be evangelized. All teachers and all administrators need to be much more enthusiastic and intentional about sharing their faith in Jesus Christ and His Church with the school community before effective catechesis can occur..

The *National Directory for Catechesis* tells us that there are many times when we attempt to catechize children and youth who have never been evangelized. This makes catechesis, if not impossible, certainly most difficult.

There are four classic documents that help us understand the content, the process, and the purpose of evangelization: *Evangelii Nunciandi (Evangelization in the Modern World*, Pope Paul VI, 1975); *Catechesi Tradendae (On Catechesis in Our Time*, Pope John Paul II, 1979); *The General Directory for Catechesis* (Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, 1997); and the *National Directory for Catechesis* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).

Pope Francis and His predecessors Pope Benedict XVI and Pope John Paul II made the new evangelization a constant theme in their writings and in their papal conversations. In the aforementioned documents and in their papal pronouncements, evangelization is defined as preaching the person of Jesus Christ, His life, His teachings, His promises and His kingdom which He gained for us by His death and resurrection.

The term evangelization in its early stages meant the art of “making new Catholics.” As Catholics, it is still our desire to invite people into the true Church which possesses the fullness of God’s revelation. However, the above documents present evangelization in a much broader context.

The evangelizer and the evangelizing community, not separate from the Church but in union with the Church, seek to lead others to accept the person of Jesus and His Way. Evangelization means helping people develop an intimate relationship with the Lord. Catechesis, as seen through the lens of evangelization, builds on this initial relationship, deepens it and brings it to maturity, ultimately in the adult person. Catechesis is the “preeminent moment” in the process of evangelization.

Through the lens of evangelization, catechesis calls people to conversion and discipleship. Conversion and discipleship mean making the necessary changes in life so that with Saint Paul we can say that it is “no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Jesus’ way and teachings become not only a part of each individual but also a part of society.

Catechesis, when understood as part of the larger work of evangelization, is a complex process. It calls not only for the conversion of the individual but also for the transformation of society. This personal and societal transformation is brought about through catechetical instruction, the development of a personal relationship with God, participation in sacramental worship, participation in the Church and the development of a mature moral and social conscience. None of this can be accomplished except in and through Christ and His Church.

Catechesis is that particular form of the ministry of the word which matures initial conversion and brings it to a living, explicit and fruitful confession of faith. It aims to bring about in the believer an ever more mature faith in Jesus Christ, a deeper knowledge and love of His person and message, and a firm commitment to follow Him.

In many situations, however, for those who are on the threshold of faith, catechesis must also be concerned with arousing initial faith and sustaining the gradual conversion toward complete adherence to Jesus Christ. Within the whole process of evangelization, the aim of catechesis is to develop a mature relationship with Christ, endeavoring to help the baptized know better this Jesus to whom he has entrusted himself. Having entrusted himself to Jesus, the Christian comes to know the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus, the requirements and promises contained in His Gospel message, and the paths that Jesus has laid down for anyone who wishes to follow Him.

Evangelization, then, is a series of conversions, encounters so to speak, with the Lord. Evangelization means change. Growth in Christ is not a one-time event. We do not receive Baptism, make our First Holy Communion, receive the Sacrament of Confirmation and now we are finished. Evangelization is a lifelong process. It means continually deepening our faith. It means intimacy with the Lord. It means for those involved in Catholic education, calling faculties, students and families to a deeper conversion to Jesus Christ.

Further, evangelization also means reaching out to inactive and non-practicing families: to those Catholic parents who no longer attend Mass on Sunday; to those parents who do not live

up to their marriage promises of ensuring that their children will be raised in the Catholic Faith. It means inviting those seeking a faith community to explore the richness of the Catholic tradition. Ultimately, it means transforming our culture by introducing it to the ways of Jesus Christ. Evangelization is all this and more! It continues throughout all of life.

Evangelization is not just for non-Catholics, or for those who are un-churched, but for all children, youth, and adults. All people must be invited to accept Jesus and to share their belief in Jesus with others. To evangelize is a mandate given to every baptized Christian: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you.” (Mt. 28:19-20)

Jesus Christ was the first and greatest evangelizer. He evangelized a variety of people: Peter, Matthew, the Samaritan woman, the Roman centurion, and the thief on the cross. The Catholic school, like Jesus, must reach out to a variety of people using, as Jesus did, a variety of methods. The Church that Jesus founded, and therefore the Catholic school, must evangelize. This is its essential mission! If the Church does not evangelize, it cannot be Church. Is it not legitimate, then, to say that if the Catholic school, which exists to carry out the mission of the Church, does not evangelize, it cannot call itself a Catholic school?

Evangelization is the Church’s deepest identity. She exists to evangelize and therefore, the Catholic school which carries on that mission exists to evangelize. It becomes the umbrella for everything that we do in the Church and, therefore, everything we do in our Catholic schools. If we are doing something in a Catholic school that does not evangelize or pre-evangelize, then we must question whether it should be done.

Pope John Paul II said: “I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church’s energies to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*” (On the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World, 17, 34). We experience a society that is more and more “me” centered and less and less God centered. The term used to describe this is secularism. We have become a secular society that thinks it no longer needs God. The new evangelization is all about making Jesus the center of human history now.

The catechetical process, a preeminent moment in evangelization, involves the active participation of every baptized Christian in the proclamation and demonstration that “the Christian faith is the only fully valid response to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society” (Pope John Paul II, Vatican City, May 29, 2004). Therefore the Catholic school must be a center for evangelization so that it may effectively catechize the young in the privileged environment of the Catholic school. If we are good evangelizers, if we have helped others to accept Jesus in their hearts, then catechesis becomes much easier and more effective, not only for the young but for everyone.

It is the spiritual leadership of the principal that arouses in the faculty the enthusiasm to share their faith with children and youth. While principals play a crucial role in achieving the evangelical and catechetical objectives of the parish, the effectiveness of the Catholic school’s ability to evangelize also depends to a large extent on the teachers of religion.

The National Directory for Catechesis tells us that catechists receive a special grace from the Holy Spirit to make Jesus known. They are special voices who articulate “the Word.” It is equally important to note that the mission of the Catholic school depends on the efforts and example of the whole faculty. Ongoing catechesis must seek to deepen and integrate faith into all areas of the student’s life. It is not enough to fill their heads with knowledge, religious or secular. We must evangelize them and lead them to Jesus.

A Catholic school cannot evangelize or catechize if it is not building a loving, compassionate and just community of faith. Without a strong and loving faith community the Catholic school cannot accomplish much in the way of evangelization or in catechesis. “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). We cannot bring others into a deeper relationship with the Lord unless they are socialized by and into a loving, faith-filled community.

The new evangelization directs the Catholic school to be missionary: to the baptized who were never effectively evangelized; to those who have never made a personal commitment to Christ and the Gospel; to those formed by the values of the secularized culture; to those who have lost a sense of faith; and to those who are alienated. The Catholic school is to be missionary to all who catechize and are catechized. It is to be missionary to all human cultures in order to “inculturate” them, to harmonize them with Christian values, so they might be open to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. According to our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, the implementation of the missionary command “calls for patience, a long term view, courage and humility, listening to God and vigilant discernment of the ‘signs of the times’” (Vatican City, March 13, 2006).

Thus it bears repeating that evangelization is the essential mission of the Church and, therefore, the Catholic school must be an evangelizing institution! Every faculty member, every student and every family have the right to be evangelized and the obligation to evangelize. Catechesis as seen through the lens of evangelization is entrusted with bringing that relationship with Jesus to maturity and calling others to conversion and discipleship.