

Becoming an Evangelizing People

The first pastoral letter of Francis Cardinal George, Archbishop of Chicago

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

It has been over six months since I moved from a rainy city, Portland in Oregon, to this windy city, Chicago. More than the physical climate is different, of course, and I have been busy learning about Cook and Lake Counties and about the Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Chicago. I am grateful to the many people I have met, in parishes and Catholic institutions, in offices, on the streets and at civic events. All of them have helped to introduce me to themselves and to the Church and society here.

A Welcoming People

The warmth which has welcomed me is humbling, a result of the faith of the people and, to a great extent, of the impact made by Cardinal Bernardin's life and ministry and his faith-filled death. On the first anniversary of the Cardinal's death, let us remember him affectionately in prayer and renew our faith in the Lord who has given Himself for our salvation.

Many times in the past six months the media and others have asked me about my plans for the Archdiocese of Chicago. Each time I have answered that God has plans for us, and my job is to help the Catholics of Lake and Cook Counties come to a deeper understanding of God's will for us. God's will is that we be, first of all, faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, gathered into unity in his Body, the Church, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This particular Church, the Archdiocese of Chicago, has spent much time and effort in discerning God's will for us at this time. The Decisions Document, which I fully endorse, set out guidelines and goals which make our lives and my ministry more specific. The first of these goals is to become an evangelizing Church: "Every dimension of the Church's life and ministry, whether directly or indirectly, must have evangelization as its goal...Everything else is secondary. Unless our efforts – at every level, but especially that of the parish – are consciously aimed at conversion, both inward and outward, through the power of the message entrusted to us, we will only spin our wheels."

This passage from the Archdiocesan Decisions Document makes local the call to evangelize first given by Christ, proclaimed anew in the Second Vatican Council and sounded insistently by Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II. The continental Synods of Bishops now being called are meant to make us an evangelizing Church for the next millennium.

Pope John Paul II writes: "The Synods are an expression of the strength which Christ has given to the entire People of God, making it a sharer in his own Messianic mission as Prophet, Priest, and King...The preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000 is thus taking place throughout the whole Church, on the universal and local levels, giving her a new awareness of the salvific mission she has received from Christ." (Tertio Millennio Adveniente #21)

The Synod for this hemisphere takes place in Rome from November 16th to December 12th, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

As I leave for the Synod for America, I ask that you remember me each day in your prayers. I thank those on my staff who have helped me prepare for this meeting, as well as those in the Archdiocese who have contributed to preparing its content.

An Evangelizing People

What does it mean to evangelize?

It doesn't mean beating people over the head with a Bible or a Catechism or our own spiritual experience stridently repeated; but it does mean more than the quiet witness of Gospel living and Christian service.

Pope Paul VI spoke about relying solely on the power of God's word to introduce people to God's Word, Jesus Christ, who is our Savior. A Catholic evangelizer therefore knows and trusts Jesus Christ. Evangelizers must be evangelized themselves.

Repentance is the beginning of conversion to Christ. Sometimes we can tell our people how truly great they are without pointing to the cause of their greatness: the power of the healing Spirit sent to us by Christ. Jesus can be reduced to a role model who shows us the way to an ethical Kingdom of peace and love constructed by us on our own insights. But Jesus is much more than a model or a source of personal inspiration: he is our Lord.

Conversion is therefore a call to change, to live life on his terms, to surrender, to submit to God's holy will made visible in Jesus. The power to surrender is itself a gift from the Holy Spirit. We are people filled with hope precisely because God's kingdom isn't ours; it's Christ's.

A Catholic evangelizer also knows that the Holy Spirit is always at work in the world and in the life of the person the evangelizer is talking to. The Catholic evangelizer therefore listens for the movement of the Spirit in a friend's heart. With great respect, the evangelizer will look for opportunities to tell others who Christ is, because it is impossible for us not to speak of someone we love. But we know the appropriate moment for speaking because we have discerning hearts.

This Jesus we love wants us to introduce people to him so that the gifts he left his Church – the Gospel and divine revelation, the Sacraments and other means of sanctification, the pastoral governance which continues the ministry of the Apostles – can be shared universally.

Sharing these gifts brings us into the mind and heart of Christ and makes us God's agents to change a divided and sinful world into something which resembles at least a little bit more the Kingdom of God.

Obstacles to Evangelizing

Often when I have spoken to Catholics about evangelizing, I have heard about two fears which are obstacles to our becoming an evangelizing Church. First, people do not want to impose upon others or imply that they are superior to them in some way. This hesitation should tell us that we have to consider carefully our own hearts and speak only from a sense of gratitude for the gifts of God, with humility and love. Discussions about how to evangelize as Catholics will, I hope, give us courage in facing this first obstacle.

Secondly, some Catholics fear to evangelize because they are afraid of being asked questions they cannot answer. If we open up the subject of religion, many feel we are opening a can of worms. Overcoming this obstacle, I believe, means helping one another learn more about Christ and the Bible and the Church's teachings and history.

The second objective of the Decisions Document highlights the importance of Catholic education not only in schools but in religious education programs of all sorts, including adult education. The publication a few years ago of The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives a sure guide, a clear point of reference, for all our study of the faith.

A Guide for Evangelizing: St. Therese of Lisieux

I look forward to discussing Catholic evangelizing with you in the months and years to come and to moving together with you as we become an evangelizing Church.

Along this path, we have many companions, teachers and guides. On October 19th, the Holy Father declared St. Therese of Lisieux a doctor of the Church because she helps us to read the Gospel in a more profound way. She is also the patroness of missionaries, and I place the evangelizing efforts of the Archdiocese in her hands and under her care.

St. Therese had the heart of a missionary. She possessed a great and consistent desire, even through her final illness, to go where Christ was not yet well known. In her case, she desired to go to one of the recently established Carmelite monasteries in Vietnam.

St. Therese remained in prayerful solidarity with missionaries, holding them up to God and offering her own sufferings on their behalf. At the request of her religious superior, she “adopted” two missionary brothers, Father Maurice Belliere and Father Adolphe Roulland.

Most profoundly, she is a missionary because of her vocation “to be love in the Church.” She wrestled with the various callings that came to her from her study of God’s will and came one day to an insight: “I understood that love comprised all vocations, that love was everything, that it embraced all times and places...I cried out...my vocation, at last I have found it...my vocation is love. Yes, I have found my place in the Church.”

Because she found her place, we can find ours – to be signs and agents of God’s universal love here in our Archdiocese. That is my prayer for myself and all of you; I hope it will be your prayer for me. God bless you.

Sincerely yours in Christ,
Francis Cardinal George, OMI
Archbishop of Chicago
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