

Catholic Review Column: The Goal, Method and Means of Evangelization

Editor's note: This column was adapted from Archbishop Lori's Feb. 13 homily at the Mid-Atlantic Congress in Baltimore.

Last week, the Mid-Atlantic Congress took place in Baltimore. It provided an opportunity for clergy and laity serving in leadership positions in dioceses, primarily from the East Coast, to participate in various educational sessions aimed at helping them better serve the needs of those we are called to serve. It was also an opportunity to discuss how we can more effectively evangelize the unchurched and those who are no longer active in the life of the church.

The idea of leaving the four walls of our churches to share the Gospel with others mirrors the missionary mandate the Apostles received from the Lord and responds to Pope Francis' invitation to serve others, especially those living on society's margins.

So what is the goal of evangelization and what are the method and means for achieving it?

We need look no further than sacred Scripture and the prophet Isaiah, who witnessed the unprecedented sufferings of God's people who had lost all the tangible signs of God's favor. Yet Isaiah not only sees liberation and restoration for God's people, but also sees them as a beacon of light and hope. "My house," God says through Isaiah, "my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

For many of us, this passage conjures up visions of crowded church parking lots on Sunday morning, with standing room only in our churches as if every Sunday were Christmas Eve, with a festal ingathering of people from every corner of the parish and beyond. Perhaps our hearts burn with the prospect of the return from exile of the 75 to 80 percent of Catholics who no longer regularly practice their faith.

When we hear the words, “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples,” might we also be reminded of the growing diversity of the dioceses, parishes and schools where we serve? We have always been and remain a church of immigrants who should have both a heart and a head for welcoming the newly arrived and for allowing the church to be enriched and strengthened by the languages and cultures that are found in our communities.

And even as we envision a great ingathering of peoples into vital communities of word, worship and charity – so also we recognize how difficult it is for many people to make that journey, where Pope Francis gave us the image of the church as a field hospital where we minister to the wounds of human existence.

And we are keenly aware of the need “for the light of Christ to be brightly visible on the countenance of the church” (“The Joy of the Gospel”) a light that is too often obscured by our sin, by indifference to the poor, and by what Pope Francis calls “a gray pragmatism” that besets pastoral vitality.

If the goal is truly to be a house of prayer for all peoples, then what is the method?

How is this great ingathering of people to be brought about? Once again we turn to Scripture and St. Paul, who shares a vision in which “everyone who calls upon the Lord’s name will be saved.” Paul goes on to ask, how will they call upon the Lord’s name, unless they believe? And how will they believe unless they have heard? And how will they hear until the Gospel is preached? “Faith,” he said, “comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.”

No doubt about it, preaching counts. Parishes grow when the word of God is preached effectively. Effective preaching should be engaging; it should be brimming with the attractiveness of the Gospel. It should engage the faith with the struggles and challenges of daily life while offering hope, vision and fresh strength. And it should draw people not to a set of rules, but to a wholly new way of life that can only be lived in communion with Christ, a communion that is achieved in and through the sacraments, most especially the Eucharist, “the source and summit” of the church’s life.

And what is true of preaching is true of all kinds of formation and instruction. The

church offers these things not merely as programs or as requirements. Rather, they must be offered by disciples who themselves seek to know, love and follow the Lord and who have been sent to bear him witness, not only in what we say but in how we live their lives, including witnessing to the Lord in ways that are decidedly countercultural. As Pope Benedict XVI said, "One who has hope lives differently." So too Pope Francis challenges us to be missionary disciples; and he does so in the very spirit of the words and vision of St. Paul.

So we know the goal and we know the method. But now, like the first disciples who were amazed and a little terrified, we must ask about the wherewithal to bring this about.

Without sufficient ways and means, won't the vision of Isaiah prove a pipe dream? And isn't it the case the effective preaching of Paul is a gift given only to a few? The answers to these questions can be found in the disciple's encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus tells them that the Good News is to be preached to the earth's ends and that they will be his witnesses. How could this little, under-resourced group ever hope to do any such thing? Because Jesus said he would send "the promise of his Father" and because Jesus said they would be "clothed with power from on high" - the Holy Spirit, poured forth on Pentecost.

When the disciples heard this they rejoiced and so should we. As Catholic lay faithful, priests, deacons, consecrated religious men and women, as parishioners and as members of one archdiocese, let us ask the same Holy Spirit to make us one and to reignite in our hearts the joy of the Gospel so that we may go forth day after day as the Lord's witnesses and come home rejoicing, carrying our sheaves, producing "abundant fruit, fruit that will last!"