

Catholic Review Column: The Joy of the Gospel, Part 3 of 9

This week marks the one-year anniversary of the election of Pope Francis. Not surprisingly, recent polls have shown what we all have come to know about our new Holy Father: Pope Francis has caught the attention of American Catholics. But those same polls also show that this renewed interest has not yet convinced the unchurched to return to church.

It is one thing for the pope to dream of a vibrant, missionary church – as he does in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) – and quite another for his dream to come true. Pope Francis has presented us with a golden opportunity and God is giving us the grace to dream his reality here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore – in our families, parishes, schools and social-service programs.

The pope's dream is that everyone and everything in the life of the church be transformed by the joy of the Gospel. His waking energies are dedicated to helping you and me open our hearts afresh to the person of Christ so that his saving love may pierce our hearts, cleanse us of sin, fill us with true happiness and make us his witnesses. The pope asks that each of us become the bearers of a life-changing message: "Jesus Christ loves you; He gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you" (EG, no. 164).

Pope Francis is also challenging us to transform parishes and dioceses into mission-driven structures in the life of the church. It's not merely a question of my personal transformation and yours. Rather, it's the grace-filled challenge to make the archdiocese and each of its parishes resound with the joy of the Gospel and welcome people from every walk and condition of life into our midst.

In the Archdiocese of Baltimore the parish remains the principal focal point for evangelization, for hearing the Gospel and for spreading it. In recent weeks, I have been traveling around the archdiocese to meet with small groups of priests and pastoral life directors to discuss how our parishes try to evangelize. We shared

ideas, initiatives and worries. We discussed the very challenge the pope mentions in this section of his exhortation: the need for the parish to be “in contact with the homes and lives of its people;” the need to avoid becoming “a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few” (EG, no. 28).

While parishes can and do welcome parishioners from beyond their borders, they must also ensure that they bring the Gospel into the very neighborhoods where they exist. And they must constantly welcome and form co-workers who can help extend the presence of the parish far beyond the walls of the church. Sometimes that presence is felt in programs of education, charity and social service. Sometimes it’s neighbor-to-neighbor evangelization. Clearly, Pope Francis is intent on sending us forth “to the margins” – to the poor, the unchurched, the skeptical, the wounded and neglected.

A few weeks ago, Carol Pacione, pastoral life director at St. Pius X Parish in Rodgers Forge, spoke at a gathering for parishes preparing to participate in our archdiocesan-wide capital campaign. She encouraged the participants in that meeting to lead and support that campaign by presenting to them the pope’s definition of a parish. Here it is: “The parish is the presence of the church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities, the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach” (EG, no. 28).

If ever there were a parish mission statement, this has to be it! The pope’s description of what a parish is and should be merits the prayerful reflection of priests, parish leaders and every active parishioner. Making this description come to life more robustly is how a parish embraces what the pope calls “the missionary option” or “impetus.”

Pope Francis also tells us that each diocese under the leadership of its bishop is “the primary subject of evangelization” (EG, no. 30). Our archdiocese includes the City of Baltimore and nine counties in Maryland, some 4,500 square miles. This area is not a “branch office” of the universal church, but “a concrete manifestation” of the “one,

holy, Catholic and apostolic church.”

It is “the church incarnate in a certain place, equipped with all the means of salvation bestowed by Christ, but with local features” (EG, no. 30). Sometimes, though, the local church is identified also solely with the central services provided by its home office, but, as you can see, it is the whole local community of faith under the leadership of its bishop. The central services offered by the archdiocese must be at the service of the church’s mission of evangelization. For that reason, all of us who work in these offices are undergoing our own formation in evangelization and reflecting on how we can gear up to help parishes, schools and social-service programs to be robust and joyful agents of evangelization.

This is a bracing challenge for me. It means my waking hours and energies must be engaged in the work of evangelization. My prayers, work and witness must all be channeled toward helping the archdiocese proclaim the Gospel more vibrantly and convincingly. It’s a job that stretches me to listen, to make myself present, to take risks and to go in search of those left behind. It’s a challenge, but it’s also what gets me up in the morning!

Next time we’ll take a look at how Pope Francis is seeking to make the papacy itself the subject of a missionary transformation.