

Catholic Review Column: The Joy of the Gospel, Part 7 of 9

Not long ago, I visited with a fellow bishop who oversees a very large diocese. By all appearances it is bustling. It has many parishes, schools, social service agencies and hospitals. Vocations to the priesthood are on the uptick. Fundraising is at record levels. But that bishop is not content.

“This is mission territory,” he told me, as he spoke of the many people the Gospel no longer reaches or is yet to reach.

His comment accurately tracks Pope Francis’ message to all of us in “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” “The Joy of the Gospel.” The pope wants us all to see ourselves as missionaries in mission territory. Echoing the thought of St. John Paul II, he challenges us to make “the joyful, patient and progressive preaching of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ” our absolute priority. This isn’t just my priority. It is our priority.

In the same breath, Pope Francis reminds us that evangelization is a task for the whole church. More than a mere partnership, the task of spreading the Gospel requires a deep spirit of communion among those in consecrated life, the laity and the clergy. Together, we must trust in the power of God’s grace without which we can do nothing. Together, we must reach out, repeating the invitation of Pope Francis: “To those who feel far from God and the church, to all those who are fearful or indifferent, I would say this: the Lord with great respect and love, is also calling you to be a part of his people!” He adds, “The church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 112).

Missionaries go forth to bring the Gospel to people who speak different languages and who belong to differing cultures. And without diluting or compromising the Gospel, missionaries must learn to speak those languages and understand those cultures. In this way the faith takes root in an amazing variety of cultures. This is how “the church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the ‘beauty of

her varied face' " (EG, no. 116, quoting St. John Paul II). The Archdiocese of Baltimore continues to grow in its diversity as parishioners come to us from almost everywhere. Let us not see this as a threat but as a source of hope and strength.

In reflecting on our common mission to spread the Gospel, I am drawn to the example of Bishop James A. Walsh, a Maryknoll Missionary bishop born in Cumberland. He came to know, love and understand the Chinese people and bore witness to Christ in their midst by his willingness to endure 20 years of imprisonment for his work of spreading the Gospel. He not only learned the languages of those he served, he also strove to understand their culture. This required of him and his co-workers a readiness to enter into dialogue with people whose culture differed greatly from their own. Pope Francis tells us we must have similar qualities if we would be "missionary disciples" right here at home.

Certainly it takes patience and courage to continue bearing witness to Christ even when our efforts seem fruitless. But it also takes patience, courage and love to try to understand people who are part of a culture that seems to be less and less open to the Gospel. We need to reflect on the culture of which we too are a part. Our task is not only to critique it, but also to see its strengths and to find in it openings to the Gospel, so that faith and life can mesh.

So too, we need to listen to people who have drifted away from the church. We also need to open the door to them. For example, it's important for us to invite people who no longer practice their faith to start attending Mass on Sunday. But it's equally important for us to ensure that they will be welcomed and that someone will take the time to listen to them and walk with them. For some, popular piety is key. For others, small faith groups are the way back home. For almost everyone, it's person-to-person dialogue.

St. Paul tells us that "faith comes from hearing" (Rom. 10:17). So you will not be surprised that Pope Francis devotes a good deal of space in his exhortation to the homily. Next time, we'll look at what he says about good preaching. In the meantime, as the Solemnity of the Ascension approaches, let us start praying and reflecting on the missionary mandate that Jesus gave to his church before ascending into heaven: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in

the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19).