

Guest columnist: Exist to evangelize

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien has asked four individuals to serve as guest columnists in August. The first is Paulist Father John Hurley, the executive director of the archdiocesan Department of Evangelization.

I arrived in our archdiocese on July 1st to begin a new chapter in the long history of evangelization in the premier see. I have known Archbishop O'Brien for quite some time and we all know how he wants pastoral leaders and all of us to be more focused on the essential mission of the church, evangelization.

In 1975, after the Synod on Evangelization, Pope Paul VI wrote his great exhortation "On Evangelization in the Modern World." He said, "We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize."

What powerful words, "She exists to evangelize." These power words challenge each of us in the church to ask ourselves, why do we do what we do? For instance, why does our parish exist? Why do we have a school?

One of the primary challenges for us in the church today is to move from maintenance to mission. Very often we get caught up in tasks. Evangelization is about how we do these tasks. And, why do we do these tasks. Do they proclaim the presence of Jesus Christ? Do they announce Good News? In many ways, we must see evangelization as the lens through which we look at all we do as disciples and as a church. We must not just see ourselves as members of the church but more importantly as disciples.

When was the last time you thought of yourself as a disciple of Jesus? Just thinking of this question can be a profound experience. Yet, we are called to do this each day of our lives.

One obvious place that I have experienced this discipleship alive and well since my arrival was at our Archdiocesan High School Leadership Institute (High LI), founded

in 1979. Forty-eight high school students, chosen from their parishes and school communities were sent to High LI to fine-tune their prophetic leadership and communication skills. It was a wonderful experience (see article on Page 3).

Their enthusiasm, zeal for our faith and great witness in the midst of diversity was an animating experience for all gathered including myself. In a dialogue session with me, they expressed great eagerness to witness to our faith. They spoke highly of their in-service day with the poor and disadvantaged and the profound impact it had on their lives and will shape their future perspective. They spoke of their hopes for our church and their wanting to be a significant part of its ministry. I was awestruck and on a high for the rest of the weekend and as you can see, I am still talking about it.

However, these young leaders in our church are not living in an isolated world. They know full-well that there are challenges in our church and society and how they have to make choices to be caught up in the malaise of public opinion or make a difference. Our High LI leaders have enthusiastically chosen to make a difference.

I shared with our young leaders in our dialogue session that these are indeed challenging times for our church and society. However, they are exciting times for us as disciples, called to be messengers of good news. The essential mission of the church is fermenting in our young leaders and that is just what this priest needed to experience.