

Leaving the Counting to God

The Easter season provides the media with the opportunity each year to report on the state of the Catholic Church, Christianity and basically all-things-religion. This Easter was no different. The Easter-week edition of Newsweek contained an article entitled, “The End of Christian America,” based largely on the recently released 2009 American Religious Identification Survey which revealed that the number of Americans claiming no religious affiliation doubled over the past 20 years from 8 to 15 percent. Though the Church remains the largest U.S. denomination, the survey’s authors concluded that “these trends ... suggest a movement towards more conservative beliefs and particularly to a more ‘evangelical’ outlook among Christians.”

Just a few days before Easter, several national media outlets reported on another widely reported survey – this one by Le Moyne College and Zogby International – which found that 73 percent of Catholics were optimistic about the future of the Catholic Church.

The local media also gets into the act, seizing the “news hook” that Easter provides by reporting on the happenings in our Church. In addition to the usual – and much appreciated – coverage of liturgical celebrations, the local media this year also reported on the growth in the number of new Catholics entering our Church this year. The most detailed such report appeared in The Sun, which called this year’s record number of catechumens and candidates a “surge” and caused many people who learned of the findings of the American Religious Identification Survey, to scratch their head in confusion, I suspect.

The survey results are disturbing and speak to the growing secularization that Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope John Paul II before him, warned against for many years. However, here in our Archdiocese and in dioceses throughout the country, people are also recognizing something in our Church, something in us – the way we radiate our faith and God’s love for us, which has sparked a flame that now burns in them.

The number of new Catholics in the Archdiocese of Baltimore this year, 984 to be exact, comes on the heels of the successful Lenten Reconciliation program which

saw well over 5,000 people return to the confessional, and an annual youth pilgrimage that saw its highest participation in the 16-year history of the event. Coupled with the promising interest in vocations that we are seeing, these exciting developments have the media and others wondering what is happening here in our Archdiocese and elsewhere. As many as 150,000 new or returning Catholics are expected to join the Catholic Church this year in the United States.

So why, in the midst of this seeming national indifference toward religion, are we finding more people wanting to join our faith? While we can't be precisely certain of the reason(s), we can offer some suggestions for why this is the case, and I suspect they all tie into one powerful act - evangelization, a growing movement in this Archdiocese for a generation or more.

Defined by our Catechism as "The proclamation of Christ and His Gospel by word and by the testimony of life," evangelization was a major focus of Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to the United States one year ago. Following the Holy Father's visit in which he spoke of "A New Pentecost, A New Evangelization ? a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church in this country," I echoed this call, saying that if the Pope would "call upon the spirit of John Carroll and the nation's first diocese as an example for the New Evangelization of our whole country, how incumbent it is on us, Baltimore Catholics ? to again set the example of a local Church on fire to spread the Gospel."

I challenged all Catholics of the Archdiocese, most especially those working at the Catholic Center, the administrative offices that provide the support that allows the outstanding work of our parishes, schools and other institutions, "to achieve a vision of what they do daily as much more than a job, but as a ministry and as a vocation." It has become clear to me over these many months that this is indeed the case for the vast majority of my colleagues at 320 Cathedral St. I am pleased to report that there are monthly discussions about evangelization at the Catholic Center and the communication "silos" that too often exist are beginning to give way to regular sharing of ideas and planning efforts at all levels of the administrative offices.

Indeed similar efforts are being made outside the Catholic Center, on the "front lines" in our parish councils and their evangelization committees. We have to be

heartened by the evangelizing work of our schools and Catholic Charities agencies which, by their word and action, give testimony to our faith and the fullness of God's love.

This evangelizing spirit shone through one recent day when a woman came to one of our parishes in search of a lost wallet and left with a faith she hadn't realized she desperately needed. The woman lost her wallet, with no money or ID, in the parking lot of one of our churches. She checked around all the places she had been at the parish but could not find it. Later, she called the parish and was told that someone had found the wallet and turned it into the office. A deacon at the parish greeted the woman when she came to collect her wallet and began talking to her. She told Deacon Nick Feurer that she was not a parishioner and that she didn't belong to any particular faith. She then shared that she was being treated for a brain tumor. Deacon Nick then asked the question that proved the turning point in the conversation: "Isn't it about time to turn to God for help?" That simple but powerful question opened this woman's heart and mind to accept the life-giving faith she had previously eschewed. The conversation ended with the woman asking if the parish would accept her into their RCIA program. She begins this fall.

Deacon Nick was simply proclaiming Christ and His Gospel by word and by testimony. He testified to the power of God's love and to the importance of faith when he chose not to simply hand her the wallet and wish her a good day or ask someone else at the parish to do so. There are no doubt countless similar stories of people in our parishes, schools and charitable outreach centers being God for others through their words or their good works.

Evangelization is not limited to adult members of the Church. This was evident to anyone present in downtown Baltimore on the Saturday before Palm Sunday, when approximately 1,300 Catholic young people joined me for a day of prayer and witness. The day is patterned after the 1991 World Youth Day in Denver, when Catholic youth carried a giant cross in a moving demonstration of love for the Church and the Holy Father. Though our youth could just as easily gather in a church or a local school or college, they walk, as Christ did, amidst the people and bear public witness to their faith and their love of God. Answering His call to "Go and teach all nations," these youth are evangelizing not only themselves and each

other, but those who witness their powerful demonstration – whether personally or through the local media.

Ms. Kristin Witte, of our Division of Youth and Young Adult Ministry, witnessed firsthand the evangelizing power of the pilgrimage this year. “At one point about five of us were standing outside St. Jude’s while the gospel concert was going on. The kids were standing and dancing and singing inside, and people were drawn in from the streets near Lexington Market and asked: ‘What is going on? Is this really a Catholic Church?’ Then, with tears in their eyes, they said: ‘We need this. Things are so hard right now. These young people loving Jesus, we need this.’ ”

Evangelization takes time and it takes effort, and it has not always and everywhere been seen as a strength of our modern Catholic Church. However, if earnest and expanded efforts to share our faith can touch the lives of others in ways such as we are seeing, then maybe more of us Catholics can get the hang of this evangelization thing and we can leave the counting to God.