

Personal relationship with God must precede evangelization, speaker says

By Nancy Menefee Jackson

Special to the Review

A keynote address from Sherry Weddell concluded the 2015 Mid-Atlantic Congress for Catholic Leaders in Baltimore Feb. 14.

Weddell – an author and co-director of the Catherine of Siena Institute, a program dedicated to equipping parishes for the formation of lay Catholics for their mission to the world – brought her powerful message to a receptive audience in a packed ballroom at the Baltimore Hilton.

Her book, “Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus,” begins with a distressing statistic – that less than half of American Catholics are certain they can have a personal relationship with God.

After its publication, she was approached by many people, including a man who told her that until he had read her book, he didn’t know it was possible to have a personal relationship with God.

“This man was in ministry, forming clergy,” she said, which drew gasps from the crowd. He told her, “We just never talked about it.”

“That is the issue,” she said, “breaking that culture of silence.”

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Weddell, who was raised on the fringes of Southern Baptist tradition, said, “I grew up thinking everybody had a personal relationship with God. It never occurred to me there was such a thing as an impersonal God.”

She refuted concerns that that was simply a Protestant tradition with a slide titled “The Popes on Getting Personal,” with quotes from several popes about the importance of such a relationship.

Weddell cited a Canadian study examining why young adults raised in Christian traditions, including Catholicism, stayed in or left their faith. Those who stayed, the study found, “had an experience of God or answered prayer; they were able to ask questions openly and discuss spiritual questions; they understood the Gospel; and

they had older adults living as 'disciples' around them, modeling faith."

"We can't depend on inherited religious identity," said Weddell, who has given seminars on making disciples. The audience laughed as she noted that church leaders tend to separate everyone into two tracks: "the saint track and the rest of us, who were normal." That didn't allow for someone who has begun the journey to discipleship.

Part of the problem, she noted, is that "we never created a safe space for (young people) to wrestle with saying a deliberate 'yes.' We presume the yes," believing it occurred in CCD classes, or youth group, or learning catechism as children.

Weddell noted a huge surge of interest in Catholicism due to Pope Francis, and cited a study that said of the 27 percent of lapsed Catholics considering returning to the church, 75 percent said it was because of Pope Francis.

"That works out to 14 million Catholics, or 800 per parish - how hard can that be?" she said. After the laughter quieted down, she said, "Guess who gets to be the apostles who work with them?"

The first thing that has to be done, she reiterated, is break the silence about a personal relationship with God.

Catholics in parishes will talk about the church, politics, the administration and personalities in the parish, "but the one thing Catholics are not likely to do is talk about their relationship with God."

They need to talk about Jesus, too, she said, adding she has one friend who jokes that Jesus is "he who must not be named." She noted that older Catholics were raised to bow their heads reverently when the name Jesus was spoken, but "if we are silent out of reverence, in a couple of generations people forget what we're being reverent about. What happens if we don't talk about him and make him visible? We are communicating an institutional faith rather than a personal faith."

She advised church leaders to break the silence by asking people to tell their stories about their relationship with God. She urged parishes to expect conversion, and cited the example of a parish in Boise, Idaho, where non-Catholics attended evangelization retreats and intertwined ministries such as "Called and Gifted," a process designed to help Christians discern the presence of charisms in their life; evangelization retreats; RCIA; and mini retreats.

All were connected rather than functioning in silos.

"They expect that non-Catholics may end up in RCIA and expect that those in RCIA will go to an evangelization retreat," she said.

Weddell believes breaking the culture of silence will solve many of the problems plaguing today's parishes.

"There have been other generations like us, they saw their church come out of the ashes," she said. "We can be the generation of saints for the 21st century."

She concluded by asking the audience to spend five minutes discussing among themselves what it would take to break the culture of silence in their community.

"I think it's what the church needs to hear, especially the relationships He calls us to and with one another," said Father Tom Lavin, of the Shrine of St. Anthony in Ellicott City, who is the chaplain for Our Lady of Good Counsel High School in Olney.

"How do we talk about that personal relationship with each other? I think she gave the tools to try to help with that."

John Mitchell, who has read both of Weddell's books, said, "I think she is really turning over the stone and showing us what we have to do."

He attended a Called and Gifted workshop in 2013, was a longtime member of People of Praise community, and decided to become active in his parish, St. Philip the Apostle Catholic Church in Falls Church, Va., when he retired.

"The opportunities to evangelize are front and center. This gave me a chance to do it in my church."

Sue Saumenig, of St. Michael the Archangel Parish in Overlea, said of the keynote address, "I thoroughly enjoyed it," noting that she had been involved in a group at her parish which read Weddell's books. "She's right in that the first chapter is depressing, but then you get into the rest of the book and say, 'Yes, we can do this.' It's a really good jumping off point."

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