

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle C

I used to see them work the neighborhoods of the small town where I was assigned; missionaries of a denomination which I shall not name, but who are familiar to many of us, the ones who go door to door with tracts and magazines, who always begin very politely but then often manage to take a couple of little digs at other faiths, and especially at Catholicism. One summer I watched a pair determined to keep trying to find the family across the street at home, but it seemed that they never made their way to my door, which surprised me because my rectory really didn't look any different from any other houses around and didn't have a big sign out front identifying it as the "Catholic rectory." But one morning, they finally rang the bell; and I was ready for them. It began, as I expected, pleasantly enough; but then they started going after the doctrine of purgatory: bingo! Just the one I was ready for. I tossed out Bible verses, I offered my best Catechism-based explanation; I had 'em where I wanted 'em. They came back two more times after leaving to get more information for the debate; after the third go-round, I finally agreed to take their magazine if they would take a copy of *Life in Christ*. But even though I felt I won the debate, the exchange didn't leave me feeling particularly like a winner. I knew my arguments were sound, but I wondered if my conduct was that of a true evangelizer. I had the words, but they had such zeal, zeal that drove them to give up two years of their lives to go to some small town where they didn't know another soul, and witness to their beliefs.

Most Christian denominations have a model of evangelization. We're familiar with the direct-to-the-door model, the model most Catholics tend to be scared or skeptical of, which is too bad, because I think when done right it can be a useful tool to invite people into the faith. More denominations use what we might call the "invite and welcome" model: always ask people to join them for worship, and when they come, make sure that they feel welcomed and wanted; speak to the desire that we all have for community. Again, not a bad model, but one which Catholics sometimes struggle with, and with good reason: once past the vestibule, we enter a place of quiet prayer; the sanctuary isn't meant to be a place of socialization, and so to any who have been accustomed to the meet and greet model, the Church—and we—can unfortunately come off as being rather cold and unwelcoming. May not be fair, but it is often the reality. But Catholicism, allowing those methods but not exactly embracing them universally—does have a unique way of bringing the faith to those around us. As believers in Christ, we are dispersed out into the world. I spoke to a group recently about how the laity in the Church have a distinct role, that their role is not the same as the priest or bishop or religious, but that it is unique and it is critical for the Church; one lady then made the comment that it should be the job of everybody to go out and spread the faith, priests included. But I don't think that she

totally grasped what I was saying. Certainly, the priest has a distinct role in the evangelical life of the parish, and sometimes that will include going out and inviting the world in. But mostly, I work with the people whom others bring in, that I would have no way of finding on my own; I'll do the teaching, the preparing, the explaining, but I still need all of you to go and throw out the net, so to speak; bring people in here for me to instruct. My not doing this part has nothing to do with reticence on my part in going out there into my own parish, nor does it have to do with the constraints of time. What it is is that you are all out there: *with* family, *with* friends, *in* neighborhoods, *at* job sites; *with* people that you should logically be with; you have the contact with those who may be interested in learning about the faith.

Our Lord, in today's Gospel reading, appointed 72 disciples to go to every town and place that HE intended to visit. Very critical, that they went ahead of him to places where he would eventually go; it's a sign and confirmation of the fact that the conversion of souls is truly God's work—he is the one who showers down graces upon people to be brought to faith, he is the one who freely imparts that gift of grace, the gift of coming to belief. So if conversion is God's work, evangelization can be seen as ours—and it should be seen as what we do as Christians—at our Lord's command—to prepare others to receive those graces, to help bring them to the place where they can be ready to open themselves to what is God's work. In the passage from Luke's Gospel, Jesus gives several specific instructions to those whom he sends out: he orders them to go to a home, and first announce "peace be to this home." If a peaceful person lives there, let them receive God's peace. And so we prepare people for faith by coming to them with a true sense of peace; effective evangelization is not combative and not contentious; we should be armed with the *knowledge* to win arguments, but display the charity which can win hearts. Jesus then told his disciples not to move from house to house. This seems almost counter-intuitive; one might think that the more homes you stayed in, the more lives you would touch over a shorter period of time. But effective evangelization is willing to take the time needed to witness; and it will not be an isolated act of charity, or mercy, or patience which will draw people to Christ, but rather the witnessing of the habit of charity, and the witnessing of so many more virtuous habits over the course of time. Then our Lord commands his disciples to announce that "the kingdom of God is at hand for you." *At hand for you*—for you, for your benefit. People will respond to the Gospel when it's presented to them as the good news of redemption and salvation. But so often, the Gospel is delivered to people not as the good news of redemption but as the bad news of condemnation. This doesn't mean to lie about the fact that there are some teachings of the faith which are difficult or challenging; it means to know how to present those facts, because in truth, the entirety of the Gospel is good news for man. But if presented in such a way that is unappealing; well, what holds no appeal can expect no embrace.

Paul wrote to the Galatians “may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Boasting in the cross; what a strange concept, to boast in something which the world views as so onerous, and which our faith sees as being consequential only because of him who died upon it, and then through that dying, conquered death. But if the cross became the effective means of salvation through Jesus, it retains its importance for each and every Christian; and certainly, we boast not in what we do, but in what Jesus did for us. There are two pieces to the cross: there is the vertical pole, the aspect of being “lifted up.” God’s grace lifts us up; his sacrifice opens the gates to heaven and his mercy draws us in. But there is also the horizontal beam, which gives us the outstretched arms of Jesus: arms outstretched to embrace, to forgive, to give of self; and we are called to that horizontal aspect as well: when we embrace the world through Christian charity, when we give of self, and the world in turn sees an image of Christ, when we offer mercy and forgiveness towards those who sin against us; the power of the cross, which originates in Jesus, flows through us; and the cross becomes “our boast.” And through that cross—and through our embrace of the cross—he will still draw many to himself. In a little over a month, we will be starting the annual cycle of RCIA—the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Again, I will be offering classes explaining the faith to those who are interested, and again I will be relying on all of you to take note of family, friends, people at work—who have expressed an interest in Catholicism, or who seem to be in search of what the church has offered all of us. God is always ready to do his work of conversion; now is the time for us to start issuing the invitations, and to lead the way. “In Jerusalem” wrote Isaiah, “you shall find your comfort.” If you have found comfort in the Church, bring others to that comfort as well; if you know peace through your relationship with Christ, let others know of what peace can be found. And if like Paul we dare to boast in the cross of Christ—and there is nothing else for us to truly boast in—we should let our lives be a constant invitation to others to come and see—approach and learn—the cause of our boasting, and the source of our rejoicing.

Copyright © 2007