

CULTIVATING ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS CHRIST IN PARISHES

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The Church proclaims the centrality of Jesus Christ as both the content (the *who?* and *what?*) and enabling power (*how?* and *why?*) of our faith, and thus of all evangelization. While this is not a new idea, the presentation of the New Evangelization has made it abundantly clear that the Gospel is “ultimately identified with Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:24)” (*Lineamenta of the 2012 Synod Assembly*, §11). This Gospel is not merely a book, set of teachings and moral precepts, articles of faith, or political statements, but Jesus Christ, a person to be met, to be encountered (*Lineamenta*, §11). Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is also the “promoter” and the power of this Gospel (*Lineamenta*, §11). Thus, personal encounter with Jesus Christ is the fundamental start, center, and prerequisite for any transmission of the faith, for any evangelization. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI wrote that it is this encounter and “fundamental decision” of one’s life that gives life “a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 2005, §1).

Our discussion of how to transmit the faith, then, is not at its center a conversation regarding curriculum or content, but an examination of how we create conditions for individual encounter with Christ, how we cultivate readiness to make a fundamental decision, and how we nourish this decision so that all believers realize its full power and force, the fruits of this life changing encounter. Jesus Christ is *the who* and *what* of the New Evangelization. Through

the Holy Spirit, Christ is also the *how* and *why*. The questions for us then are *where* and *when*. Where are the places that those to whom the New Evangelization is directed can encounter Jesus Christ? When is this encounter likely to happen, and when would a fundamental decision ever become a reality? If we as the baptized faithful, called to mission and called to evangelize the world cannot answer these questions in a concrete, local setting, then the far-reaching vision

Andrea Solario Christ Blessing

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of New Evangelization will not become a particular reality in our parishes and in our communities. This is not because God needs us to imagine the places and times where meaningful encounter with Jesus can occur, but because without naming at least some definite times and places, we the baptized may fail to show up—missing out on being used by the Holy Spirit to facilitate encounter and cultivate life-changing decisions, depriving both ourselves and those around us of opportunities to receive God’s graces anew.

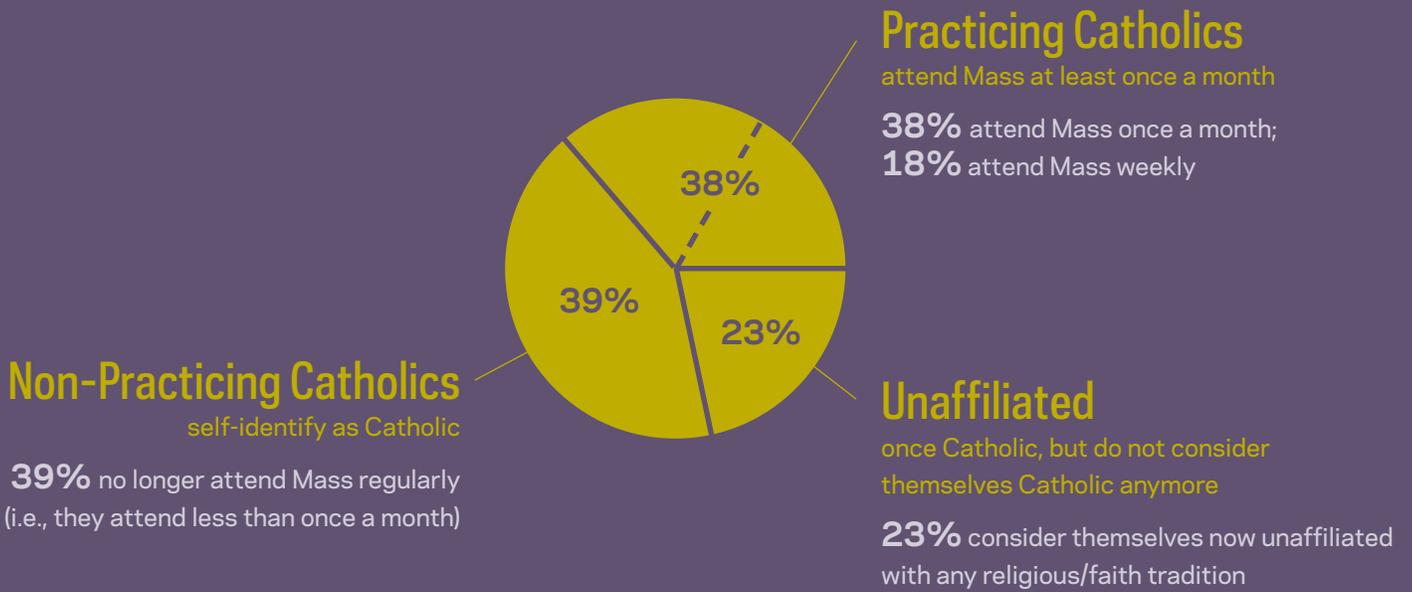
Whom Are We Inviting?

Before exploring the *where* and *when* of the New Evangelization in our parishes and ministerial settings of the United States, we must first get acquainted with the intended recipients of this New Evangelization.

Over twenty years ago, Blessed John Paul II identified the audience of our New Evangelization as the baptized who have lost a living sense of the faith, who no longer consider themselves members of the Church, or who simply live a life “far removed from Christ and his Gospel” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 1990, §33). I’m sure each of us could name many people who fit this description—those who have slowly drifted from explicit Christian faith over time; those who identify with the Catholic Church yet have little or misunderstood knowledge of the faith; family members who encounter Catholicism

as a culture more than a faith; those who were never baptized and yet possess a vague sense of Christian identity; those who attend Mass weekly and yet have little sense of a relationship or encounter with Christ, and more. While we can wonder, “is someone who attends Mass weekly *really* the intended recipient of the New Evangelization?” or “is a generally indifferent, cultural Christian who is unbaptized part of this?”, John Paul II reminds us that “the boundaries between pastoral care of the faithful, new evangelization and specific missionary activity are not clearly definable, and it is unthinkable to create barriers between them or to put them into watertight compartments” (*RM*, §34). In “doing” the New Evangelization, we will probably also provide pastoral care for the faithful and find ourselves engaged in missionary activity to those who have not yet truly heard the Gospel—this is not a problem for us, but instead an opportunity for multiple blessings.

Beyond the potential hearers of the New Evangelization who are personally known to us through family, work, or friendship, what do we know about this broad population in the United States? We’ll examine three groupings: baptized Catholics in parishes (“practicing Catholics”), those who self-identify as Catholic yet do not regularly attend Mass (“non-practicing Catholics”), and those who do not self-identify as Catholic (“unaffiliated”).



Source: Gray, Mark M., "A Micro-scoping View of U.S. Catholic Populations,"
Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), 11 May 2012.

Implications

We can find Non-Practicing Catholics.

78% of Non-Practicing Catholics
are registered in parishes;

68% attend Christmas or Easter Mass

Source: "A Micro-scoping View of U.S.
Catholic Populations"

**Unaffiliated does not mean
uninterested.**

Among all unaffiliated U.S.
adults (not just former-Catholics),
36% are religious but unaffiliated.

What does this mean?

94% believe in God or a "universal spirit;"

65% pray weekly,
44% pray daily;

78% believe in miracles

Source: Pew Research Center's Forum
on Religion & Public Life, "U.S. Religious
Landscape Survey," 2008, 26; Weddell,
Sherry A., *Forming Intentional Disciples*,
2012, 20-21

The Unaffiliated even visit us.

30% of the religious unaffiliated
are formal members of religious
congregations, attend religious
services (46% at least yearly,
11% weekly);

17% are involved with
congregational activities outside of
worship at least once a month

Source: Weddell, 20-21

Where and When Can the Unevangelized Encounter Christ? Examining Common Responses

At first, our question of *where* and *when* one can ordinarily encounter Jesus Christ, the content and enabler of evangelization, and make a fundamental, life-changing decision to enter into ongoing relationship with Him seems obvious—it happens in our Catholic parishes. But where, exactly? I’ll explore three primary responses.

Response 1:

“People can encounter Jesus in the liturgy, of course.”

Jesus Christ is “always present in His Church,” especially in liturgical celebrations and sacraments – in the Holy Scriptures, in the Eucharist, in the gathered People of God, in the minister acting as Christ Himself, and more (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1963, §7). Yet, although Jesus Christ is so present in the liturgy that it is indeed “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed” and “the font from which all her power flows,” encounter with Him is not automatic (SC, §10). A fundamental decision to become a follower of Christ does not happen in the abstract, simply by attending a liturgical celebration or being in the sanctuary. Our Church recognizes this, as the fathers of the Second Vatican Council noted:

before men can come to the liturgy they must be called to faith and to conversion: “How then are they to call upon him in whom they have not yet believed? But how are they to believe him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear if no one preaches?” (SC, §9; cf. Rom 10:14-15)

And we know this through our experiences in the United States. If attending Mass or receiving sacraments guaranteed that every individual present actually entered into a personal encounter with Christ and prayed with the intent of making a life-changing decision, we would not be wondering why so many Catholics do not participate in weekly Sunday Mass or why such a large minority (nearly a quarter!) no longer even self-identify as Catholic.

While liturgy offers the source and summit of our faith, a privileged setting for encounter with Christ, the initial call to faith and conversion is a prerequisite. Attempting to convince practicing Catholics to come to Mass weekly, persuade young non-practicing Catholic couples to marry in the Church, or encourage an unaffiliated family member to have their infant baptized are well-intentioned, yet not synonymous with cultivating a setting for each of the individuals within these groups to encounter Jesus Christ as a person and enter into relationship with Him. The New Evangelization is not simply equivalent to getting more people at more liturgies. Mass alone, in a vacuum, is not the *where* and *when* of the New Evangelization.

Response 2:

“Well then, that’s why we have catechesis.”

From initiatory catechesis through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, to weekly children’s catechesis, parish schools, and opportunities for on-going, permanent catechesis for the fully initiated, we’ve got lots of catechesis going on in our parishes. This is great news. Yet, having a catechetical program does not necessarily mean that individuals are guided and encouraged to encounter Jesus Christ as a person with whom they can enter into relationship. Nor does the presence of catechetical programs in a parish imply that readiness to make such a fundamental decision is cultivated among those who attend. Bishop Christopher Coyne of Indianapolis writes,

We can talk about the Church, we can talk about the *Catechism*. We can talk about the Liturgy, and the Sacraments, the Holy Father, the Rosary, the Saints, and all those other truths that are so much a part of our Catholic life, but faith in these must first be predicated on the individual’s faith in the person of Jesus Christ. (“Jesus Christ and the Digital Culture,” 10 Oct 2012)

This is the difference between knowing Christ, as in a relationship flowing from encounter, and merely knowing *about* Christ and the Church. Encounter with Christ and decision to follow must precede a focus on catechesis.

John Paul II writes that while there is no opposition or division between the initial conversion in Christ and later catechesis, these stages of evangelization are not the same—not interchangeable (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 1979, §18). Catechesis in our parishes is no substitute for cultivating the space for every individual

to encounter Christ. Additionally, there exists the practical problem that the vast majority of catechetical programming is geared toward youth and located on parish property—this is not truly creating a space for the New Evangelization’s focus on adults and those not currently active in parish life. While pre-evangelization, initial proclamation, and catechesis can blend (without replacing each other), the effort must be widespread in parish life. Catechesis in most parishes is a large but compartmentalized enterprise, directed to niche populations of children, “especially spiritually interested adults,” and (unfortunately only at select times of the year) to “inquirers” who are ready to consider the process of RCIA. Our current reality shows that the effects of this compartmentalized style of catechesis are limited at best. For example, adults who received Catholic religious education as a child are nearly as likely to be unaffiliated with any faith tradition or identify as Protestant as they are to still self-identify as Catholic (Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Faith in Flux,” 2009, 22). The same holds for those who participated in Catholic youth groups. The U.S. bishops’ study of the implementation of the RCIA concludes that “few parishes have a period of mystagogia, whether for the Easter season or longer” and most of the newly baptized and confirmed note that key weaknesses of their RCIA experience include “a let-down, a lack of follow-up after Confirmation” as the community and formation seem to fade away (USCCB, *Journey to the Fullness of Life*, 2000, 11-12, 23, 30). A 2001 Barna Group study of religious practices in the U.S. revealed that among Catholics, 14% attend “Sunday school” or a “small group” and 10% had explained their beliefs or shared their faith with someone in the past year (Barna Group,

“Protestants, Catholics and Mormons Reflect Diverse Levels of Religious Activity, 9 Jul 2001). John Paul II’s exhortation that “formation is not the privilege of a few, but a right and duty of all” is not a reality in our parish catechetical programs (*Christifideles Laici*, 1988, §63).

Catechesis has a critical role to play in fostering ongoing discipleship so that the evangelized can become evangelists. However, in its current form, data reveals it is not an effective agent of evangelization. In practice, catechesis is not the typical *where* and *when* of the New Evangelization—the place where conditions for encounter with Christ are cultivated—nor is it intended to be.

Response 3:

“Encounter with Christ just happens for Catholics. They evangelize quietly, in their daily lives.”

This is undoubtedly true. In asking *where* and *when* a typical person might be led towards personal encounter with Christ, we do not restrict or limit the workings of the Holy Spirit. We know that “the person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize others”—and this can happen seamlessly, without intentional preparation (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, §24). Yet the evidence points to the reality that in our setting for the New Evangelization, we need to be more intentional about this. If only 18% of self-identified Catholics are in a relationship with Christ that leads them to worship at Mass weekly, then what percentage can we reasonably assume are responding to the call to evangelize? A Barna Group study reveals that among Mass-attending Catholics, 72% report feeling “a real and personal connection with God” and 29% agree with the statement “attending church affected my life greatly” (Barna Group, “What People Experience in Churches,” 9 Jan 2012). These statistics are considerably lower than non-mainline Protestants who respond 88% and 43%, respectively. This is not a new phenomenon—over twenty years ago, Gallup research indicated that of all bodies of Christians in the United States, baptized Catholics polled the lowest in agreeing with the statement, “God loves you a great deal” (Dunning,

James B., “Conversion: Being Born Again and Again,” 1988). Sherry Weddell, Co-Director of the Catherine of Institute for the formation of lay Catholics for mission, assesses the Pew Research Center’s U.S. Religious Landscape data and concludes, “huge numbers of self-identified Catholics are not certain that a personal relationship with God is even possible, and their actions reflect it. The majority of Catholics in the United States are *sacramentalized* but not *evangelized*” (Weddell, 46).

Thus, the reality of Catholicism in the United States today reveals that if there is not an ordinary place where this encounter with Jesus Christ is cultivated, then in many cases, it may not occur, just as we cannot hope to, as Paul exhorts the Thessalonians, “pray at all times, without ceasing” (1 Thes 5:17), if we do not have deliberately chosen times and places for prayer. If choosing to leave unanswered the questions *when* and *where* encounter with Jesus Christ can ordinarily occur was an effective way of responding to our call to evangelize, then we would not be in our current situation, where so many of the baptized have fallen away from the Church, likely never having experienced an encounter with Christ that led to a life-changing decision.

Finding the Missing Pieces: Where and When Encounter Will Occur in Our Parishes

From this discussion of *who* the unevangelized are and *where* and *when* we assume the fundamental encounter with Jesus Christ will occur in ordinary parish settings in the United States, we see that in most instances, such an encounter with Jesus Christ that will give one's life "a new horizon and decisive direction" is not cultivated, recognized, or developed. We are not doing our part to be instruments of the Holy Spirit in setting the conditions for this all-important encounter. The faith our Church has professed throughout the ages is that this encounter with the person of Christ is normative; it is the way one begins the journey of discipleship. Encounter with the person of Jesus is not an automatic effect of self-identifying as Catholic or living in a Catholic culture. Relationship with Christ changes everything.

Yet, there is a chasm—a breakdown between our faith and the consistent articulation of need for encounter with Christ and initial conversion, and our pastoral reality in the United States. In many ways, we do not practice what we believe. Addressing this gap is at the heart of our readiness to live into the calls and challenges of the New Evangelization.

The Urgency to Re-envision Parish Life

Examining our pastoral practices through the lens of the New Evangelization means recognizing changing conditions, and avoiding being inhibited by "the inertia of routine activities of the past," assuming that even in a different setting they guarantee "goodness and success in the Church's activity" (*Lineamenta*, §18). To take a genuine, fresh look at our practices, we must recognize the urgency and gravity of the situation. Paul VI commented,

it would be useful if every Christian and every evangelizer were to pray about the following thought: men can gain salvation also in other ways, by God's mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them; but as for us, can we gain salvation if through negligence or fear or shame...or as a result of false ideas we fail to preach it? (*EN*, §80)

Taking part in the fullness of evangelization—not just catechesis, but the critical stages of pre-evangelization and initial proclamation as well—is not optional for Catholics. Our salvation is indeed connected to the act and process. John Paul II highlighted the internal logic, stating, "faith is strengthened when it is given to others!" (*RM*, §2). Not only is the situation serious as demonstrated by the overwhelming number of self-identified Catholics who have not responded to a personal encounter with Christ, but it is serious because it pertains to our salvation, our openness to living into the fullness of God's grace.

The next step towards developing concrete answers to the *when* and *where* of encounter with Christ in the New Evangelization is acknowledging our weaknesses in this area, our need to re-imagine how parishes can become centers of community, prayer, and action for the New Evangelization. A study conducted by CARA, “Perspectives from Parish Leaders: U.S. Parish Life and Ministry,” reveals that 69% of parish leaders believe their parish is “good” or “excellent” at spreading the Gospel and evangelizing, while at the same time 43% believe the parish has “some” or “very much” success with outreach to inactive Catholics (Gray, Mark M., 2012, 4-5). Given the evidence we’ve examined, these assessments seem unrealistically positive—it is difficult for us to acknowledge our shortcomings in the New Evangelization, when we seemingly have so many programs, activities, and opportunities for worship.¹

A 2008 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey revealed that only 13% of Catholic parishes with steady membership contact “lapsed attendees” (McMullen, Mike, “Insights Into: Attracting and Keeping Congregational Members,” 2008, 11). Though this is certainly not the only indicator of our participation in the New Evangelization, it does not point to effort or interest in success in this area. Bottom line, we have a weakness in making sure our pastoral practices match our theology, our belief in the centrality of evangelization—the importance of seeking the lost and inviting them anew to relationship with Christ. Re-envisioning how the organization of our parishes impacts the New Evangelization is an urgent need as we respond to the stark reality that “parish life as usual” is not creating the spaces for encounter, nor providing the formation of evangelists necessary to respond to our calling.

Starting to Re-Envision a Parish Designed for the New Evangelization: Intentional, Makes No Assumptions, and Open to Outsiders

Developing multiple avenues for encounter with Jesus in parish life is critical in creating the spaces where the broad, diverse audience of the New Evangelization—those in the pews, nominal Catholics, and those who claim no Catholic affiliation at all—can come into relationship with Jesus, seeing the new horizon that opens up when a decision to follow Christ begins to come alive.² Designing a parish built for evangelization in our times will look different in the diverse settings across the United States. When it comes to details, there is no one right answer. However, I offer the following fundamentals for responding with urgency and vigor to the call of the New Evangelization.

NOTES

¹ Interestingly, millennial parish leaders (born 1982 or later) do not find parishes successful in this outreach, with 75% responding that their parish is a little or not at all successful in outreach to inactive Catholics (Gray, 96). Due to their having a larger number of family and friends who were Catholic but are now not practicing or unaffiliated, these millennial leaders may be in a better position to see the severity of our position, resulting in this disparity in perception.

² One of the most visible examples of invitation to Catholics and unaffiliated Americans in recent years has been the multimedia advertisements and information creatively and effectively put forth by Catholics Come Home. The question for us is, what are these Catholics (or other interested hearers) coming home to? What are we doing differently in terms of reception, of creating a space for encounter with the person of Jesus, the center and force of the New Evangelization?

The Intentional Parish

Believing, as Paul VI declared, that the Church exists to evangelize, means that each individual parish exists to evangelize (*EN*, §14). The question “how does an unevangelized Catholic or unaffiliated person come to our parish, encounter Jesus, and grow as a follower of Christ in the Church, becoming an evangelist and lifelong disciple?” should be answerable by nearly everyone. Why is this so important? First, studies show that congregations experience growth in attendance (a reasonable output of the New Evangelization) not just because of “official programs and events,” but,

from the behavior of members who promote the congregation and invite others to attend and join...the primary way people first connect with a congregation is through someone who is already involved...Where “a lot” of members are involved in recruitment, 63% of congregations are growing. By contrast, where very few members are involved in recruitment, hardly any of those congregations are experiencing substantial growth (“FACTs on Growth,” 2010, 14).

If parishioners cannot identify the opportunities in their parish to invite others to because there is no tangible *where* or *when* for the New Evangelization, how can this all-important recruitment occur? If we cannot name how the New Evangelization is likely to happen in our particular parish—how we are formed into evangelists and how the unevangelized meet Jesus in our midst—what are the chances it will bear fruit? Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, pursues with a love beyond all human love, and can work with or without our participation. However, our lack of intentional participation should **not** be the goal, ideal, or norm of parish life!

Thom S. Ranier and Eric Geiger observe that congregations that grow and retain members tend to have a simple process for spiritual growth (*Simple Church*, 2006, ix). It starts with clarity about what the church is doing—imagine if nearly everyone in a parish (not just the leaders) understood the typical or ordinary pathway of spiritual growth offered in the parish. We have seen that the answer to the question cannot simply be liturgy, sacraments, compartmentalized catechesis, or hope in a general sense of evangelization. This may have been the ideal and easily understood pathway to lifelong faith in previous decades or centuries, when a Catholic culture might have provided the other, critical supporting pieces—but the statistics today show that in the United States, parish practices as we know them are not sufficient, not yet properly adapted to the evangelization needs of our time and place. Given the evidence we’ve observed about the state of Catholics in the United States, to be an intentional parish today takes a willingness to prioritize preparing evangelists and ministering to the unevangelized.

What might this look like? Maybe it means placing the bulk of parish resources in on-going formation, in permanent catechesis instead of in children’s catechesis, so that we can create disciples ready to evangelize, ready to share their story of meeting Jesus in the Church. Maybe it means integrating the wide array of existing fellowship groups, sodalities, service organizations, prayer groups, and more into an intentional movement within the parish. Maybe it means deliberately scheduling parish events away from them, in order to create an opening for those wary of coming to a church for *anything*. There’s no one right answer—but the key is intentionality. Are the routines of the parish in place because they support evangelization? Or, are they in place due to inertia—this is the question in each parish’s discernment of intentionality.

A Parish That Makes No Assumptions

A parish designed for the New Evangelization resists two main assumptions. First, in our pastoral practices, we must avoid assuming that every person who attends Mass, comes to an occasional parish activity, receives sacraments in the parish, or registers with the parish has experienced the encounter with the person of Jesus at the heart of evangelization. This entails incorporating initial proclamation of the Gospel into many typical parish functions thought to be for “believers,” such as children’s catechesis and sacramental preparation, adult faith formation, works of mercy and justice, fellowship, stewardship and fund-raising campaigns, and even homilies. In 1982, the U.S. bishops described the homily as addressed to a congregation of believers, without need for “conversion from radical unbelief to belief” (USCCB, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, 1982, 17). Today, research shows that this is not the case—there are many in our pews who identify as Catholic, yet have much “unbelief.” Catholics who have never experienced an encounter with Jesus or realized a change of direction or horizon are nevertheless involved in parish life. Parishes can participate in the New Evangelization by not assuming a pre-existing relationship with Christ due to having certificates of sacraments on record or longtime registration with the parish, and instead offering the pathway of discipleship—of growing in love for Jesus—in a clear, habitual, and methodical way.

Secondly, parishes must avoid the assumption that those who are not involved with parish life—the religiously unaffiliated in our neighborhoods or non-practicing Catholics registered with our parishes—are completely closed to meeting the person of Jesus Christ, anew or for the first time. God, who is love, “wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). God never gives up. As we pray in the Eucharist, God “never [ceases] to gather a people to

[Himself]” (cf. Eucharistic Prayer III).

We, the baptized, participate in this gathering. The cycle of evangelization—from pre-evangelization, to initial catechesis, to permanent catechesis, to sending forth as disciples called to witness and evangelize—is envisioned so that all of the baptized, not just a select few, are evangelists. In *Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization*, leaders describe widespread reticence among the faithful to evangelize due to concerning questions such as, “Who am I to welcome people back?” and “Am I actually capable of explaining what the Church teaches?” (USCCB, 2012, 20). Many parishioners (maybe even a majority) are often afraid to invite family, friends, and co-workers to come participate in parish life.

In parish life, we cannot assume that outreach to the inactive, to those who do not yet know Jesus, will be fruitless. This sharing of love, this “person-to-person” transmission of the Gospel, is not just present in the Church in an intangible collective sense, but it is a concrete responsibility for parishes (*EN*, §46). By resisting these two assumptions and adjusting our practices, a wide variety of specific places and moments of *when* and *where* people can encounter Jesus begins to emerge. The New Evangelization may become a reality, not by launching a new program in addition to what the parish already does, but by re-envisioning what already exists, redesigning current offerings to make initial proclamation to those inside and outside the parish a deliberate aspect of as many parish functions as possible.

What's at the Parish for Outsiders? For the Unevangelized?

Re-envisioning parish life for evangelization means thinking beyond the registered parishioners who regularly attend Mass and other activities. What does the parish offer that would be appealing or approachable for someone who is unaffiliated, unsacramentalized, or unevangelized? Are there opportunities for prayer, worship, and teaching that offer a *where* and *when* for encounter with Jesus outside of the typical places an evangelized Catholic might experience such encounter, like Mass or formal catechesis? Do parishioners know the *where* and *when* so they can be attentive to the Holy Spirit working in their lives to invite others?

In many cases, redesigning a parish so that it may answer “yes” to these questions means noticeable change. For youth and adult programming, it means deliberately crafting opportunities to encounter Christ that appeal to the spiritual and socio-cultural needs of a community. This does not just mean having the occasional “Coming Back to the Church Q&A Night,” but boldly extending the opportunity to encounter the person of Jesus Christ. Arousing this interest in turning towards Jesus comes before the other, more informational forms of outreach we jump to so quickly.

In our society, many unaffiliated individuals and families search for a place for weekend worship. A parish might execute a purposeful vision of offering one less weekend Mass (most parishes are not at maximum seating capacity for all Masses), so that resources can be redirected towards offering a worship service filled with the riches of our faith tradition that are more suited for those who do not yet have the faith, conversion, or sacramental initiation to encounter Christ in the Mass the way an evangelized Catholic might. In a well-designed context, services of prayer, Eucharistic adoration, music, preaching, Liturgy of the Hours, and more can provide an entrance point for those who are away from the Church. These services can be primarily evangelistic, focused on cultivating conditions for encounter with the person of Jesus Christ and facilitating the movement towards discipleship.

In worship, catechesis, and prayer, we must desire to offer the best to our unevangelized brothers and sisters. We must provide not poorly resourced or occasional sideshows, but routine opportunities that convey real parish life in ways that are accessible and appealing to those outside of the parish.

Conclusion

To fulfill our call to live out the New Evangelization in each of our parishes, we must concretely identify places, times, spaces, and moments where all of the unevangelized—whether self-identifying as Catholic or not—can encounter Jesus Christ. The person of Jesus is the center of the Gospel, the center of all we proclaim, and through the Holy Spirit, He is also the power behind all of our human efforts. Our examination of the current socio-cultural setting in the United States reveals that it is a critical mistake simply to hope or assume that everyone who self-identifies as Catholic will have this encounter by virtue of “being Catholic.” While relying on culture or other intuitions to cultivate this encounter may have been effective in the past, today we must be intentional, naming the *where* and *when* of encounter with Christ in our parishes, the primary place of contact with the visible Church for most Americans. Devoting resources and effort to those who are not in our pews, the “invisible flock,” is as vital and essential as the pastoral care parishes provide to those who regularly attend and actively involve themselves in parish life. Our love for our unseen brothers and sisters compels a sense of urgency in re-envisioning every parish as a place of encounter with Christ for all. Our belief in the centrality of Jesus Christ in the New Evangelization is solid; the next step is applying this—creating and naming the *where* and *when* of encounter with Jesus Christ in our parishes.

