

A group of young women are sitting on a green lawn, seen from behind. They are gathered in a circle, engaged in a discussion. The woman on the right is wearing a white lace dress with a colorful floral pattern. The woman in the center is wearing a black top. The woman on the left is wearing a blue top. The background is a blurred green lawn.

EVANGELICAL FREEFALL

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*
ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

BY JOHN PAUL LICHON, M.A.

Participants of Notre Dame Vision
gather for a small group discussion.

Photo: MayaJoy Thodé (2014).
Courtesy of Notre Dame Vision.



Unless you have been living under a rock since March 2013, you have witnessed Pope Francis shaking up the Church and the world with his bold yet humble leadership. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis invites us to a “renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §3)—an encounter which compels us to “go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all races, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear” (*EG* §23). This is no small task, but we trust in the Holy Spirit, who “knows well what is needed in every time and place” (*EG* §280). None of us are exempt in this call to evangelize the nations.

Evangelization is especially needed on college campuses today. Young people are leaving the faith in droves, and the departure often occurs during college. Reflecting on *Evangelii Gaudium*, I offer three pastoral implications for college campus ministry which might lead our ministries to a more vibrant, relevant, and joyful evangelization of our students and campuses. It is time to make the leap of faith into a creative, contemplative, and evangelical freefall.

1) SNAP OUT OF AUTOPILOT AND JUMP OUT OF THE PLANE

So often in ministry we take the safe and quick road. We stick with what works . . . well, because it works! Often I witness myself, colleagues, and student leaders choosing paths in ministry that we or others have trod before. Planning a retreat? Whip out last year's schedule and make minor adjustments. A new retreat? Brainstorm memorable experiences from other retreats and combine them. Or better yet, import that innovative retreat from another campus.

In many cases, we fall into the trap of a formulaic ministry, one which either runs on autopilot or stands as a “one-size-fits-all” solution. On the one hand, we find a working formula and run the senior retreat with the same theme, schedule, and activities for over ten years. Why? “Because we have always done it this way!” When this is our answer, we are on ministerial autopilot. Alternatively, we have “one-size-fits-all” solutions which import generic formulas that have found success elsewhere. We assume these solutions will work anywhere, so we replicate them exponentially in new locations. Take free food paired with weekly Mass. After one dorm on campus gave away milkshakes following Thursday night Mass years ago, several more followed suit: now you can enjoy chili, root beer floats, or nachos at alternate locations throughout the week.

This quick and easy approach hums along like a well-oiled machine. However, these pre-set formulas stifle creativity and individuality. Ministry becomes stagnant, robotic, or generic. Rather than prioritizing individuals, it emphasizes a mechanic process. In many situations, the formula allows campus ministers and student leaders to cruise along on ministerial autopilot. We either know the roadmap because we have done it before, or we assume the adopted formula is perfect the way it is.

When Pope Francis states in *Evangelii Gaudium* that “every form of authentic evangelization is always ‘new’” (*EG* §12), he reminds us that we cannot solely rely on “best practices.” We cannot overuse formulas or blindly import them from campus to campus. What worked yesterday might not today, and what worked over there might not over here. The temptation is to “hold fast to a formulation while failing to convey its substance” (*EG* §41). In other words, a formula forsakes the Gospel message. True evangelization, Pope Francis teaches, is creative and unique to each particular situation. “Today’s vast and rapid cultural changes demand that we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness” (*EG* §41). The most effective and dynamic evangelization, then, is not about following the same recipe for ministerial programming month after month, year after year. Evangelization seeks a constantly creative and discerning spirit which recognizes the distinct and changing needs of the local community.

Therefore, the first step in following Pope Francis’ exhortation is to snap out of autopilot and jump out of the formulaic plane. Leap into an evangelical freefall that has no safety nets—no generic, “one-size-fits-all” strategies. No formulas that are tired, dated, or irrelevant. Jettison dead weight, and do not be afraid to re-examine all ministries, new and old. Create space in which new life can emerge. Stop implementing the formula and joyfully proclaim the Gospel anew every day!

2) RECOVER A CONTEMPLATIVE SPIRIT WITHIN OURSELVES AND OUR STUDENTS

“We need to recover a contemplative spirit” (*EG* §264). Central to this evangelizing freefall is a contemplative spirit which trusts the Holy Spirit and continually renews a loving friendship with Jesus Christ. Before we can begin evangelizing, we must ourselves be evangelized. As Pope Francis states,

What is needed is the ability to cultivate an interior space. . . . Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervor dies out. The Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer. (*EG* §262)

Through our daily prayer, we find steadfast hope, meaning, and energy for our ministry, and while this contemplative spirit begins within ourselves, it must also pass on to our students.

Our students need to engage the world with a contemplative heart. I often observe students so busy and distracted that they walk about like zombies, marching aimlessly from class to meals, activities to meetings, going everywhere but nowhere all at once. With such rigorous demands from academics, vocational discernment, socializing, and more, prioritizing time and values is nearly impossible. Slowly, trivialities block out true priorities, and the latest iPhone app becomes more important than having an actual conversation.

However, a contemplative, prayerful spirit is essential to our evangelizing ministry. The building blocks of evangelization are formed by recognizing true beauty—

what genuinely motivates and captivates—and by thoughtful discernment of the signs of the times (*EG* §51). For “whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world” (*EG* §11). These kernels of captivation, wonder, and beauty are true encounters with the living God, which compel us to share God with others.

We must also find paths whereby we can live in authentic communion with others. “True love is always contemplative” (*EG* §199), and we need spaces to have “face-to-face encounter[s] with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction” (*EG* §88). Only when we cut through our distractions can we share life and communion together.

To cultivate this habit, we need to lose our cell phones for a while. Read more. Imagine more. Unplug from constant stimulation and allow the mind to wander, wonder, notice, listen, think, and create. Challenge yourself and your students to share quality time together. Trash the icebreakers and focus on facilitating real conversations. Open your students’ eyes and hearts to real world issues and tap into their future plans and dreams. Make sure you spend enough time focusing on what is most important, rather than dodging the tough questions. For if we do not recapture this contemplative spirit, Pope Francis warns us that “God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades” (*EG* §2).

3) NO STUDENT, STAFF MEMBER, FACULTY MEMBER, ALUMNUS, VISITOR, OR ANY OTHER PERSON CAN BE OVERLOOKED

Most of us have a bandwagon mentality to follow the crowd, especially students. This mentality stems from a well-intentioned place—our innate desire to seek communion with others. However, a grave danger arises when one way of “being Catholic” is elevated to overshadow any others. The formula creeps in again, as it promotes a “one-size-fits-all” model. No matter what one’s unique background, interests, or skills are, one is molded to a particular way of expressing faith. In turn, what develops is a group of like-minded Christians who push all those who do not “fit in” to the margins.

The Church is not a mechanized factory; it is an artisan’s workshop where each product is custom-made. We cannot offer generic formulas that catch many but not all. Our evangelical freefall must develop unique, particular, and localized systems that are capable of receiving (and dare I say, even celebrating!) each individual person.

As Pope Francis proclaims, “Every person is worthy of our giving. Not for their physical appearance, their abilities, their language, their way of thinking, or for any satisfaction that we might receive, but rather because they are God’s handiwork, his creation” (*EG* §274). On our campuses, no student, staff member, faculty member, alumnus, visitor, or any other person can be overlooked. Campus ministry’s evangelical freefall must reach out to every heart on its campus, from the freshman to the professor to the groundskeeper. This is not done to boost the minister’s ego, but because each person is worthy and deserving of God’s loving care through our humble, faithful, and joyful witness. We must cultivate a “loving attentiveness” (*EG* §199) to every person we encounter and compel our students to do the same. “If I can help at least one

person to have a better life, that already justifies the offering of my life” (*EG* §274), Pope Francis says. So open your office door to be interrupted. Seek out the reserved student in the corner. Engage the attention-seeking boy who has come for the free food. Know your students and let them know you.

Receiving the Gospel is inherently a sending forth, so our campuses must educate both the mind and heart. It is not enough to send graduates forth with a fabulous job but without a charitable heart. Therefore, we must seek out partnerships across campus. All faculty, staff, and other administrators can be authentic partners in creating an evangelizing environment.

Most importantly, we must invite students to take the lead. Campus ministry’s greatest colleagues in evangelizing campus are students. What better source of knowing the hearts and needs of our students than the students themselves? Students are creative, energetic, and compassionate. They have the skills to be effective, so long as we step out of the way. Greater student leadership is not simply a recommendation; Pope Francis says it is an “urgent need” (*EG* §106). So give students real, authoritative leadership. Let them run your meetings. Unleash them to tackle your campus’ most complex problems. Empower your students to reach all edges of campus. Meanwhile, help to train, mentor, and evangelize the students before, during, and after they are sent forth.

OUR TASK: LEAP INTO A CREATIVE, CONTEMPLATIVE, AND EVANGELICAL FREEFALL, WITH STUDENTS AT THE HELM.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis snaps us out of ministerial autopilot and encourages a leap into an ever-changing, creative, and local evangelization which knows the true hearts of our students. Through loving attentiveness and contemplation, we invoke the Holy Spirit to boldly move us forward in proclaiming the Gospel passionately and joyfully to all peoples.

Our task is to jump out of the formulaic plane and leap into a creative, contemplative, and evangelical freefall, with students leading the way. Remove all safety nets and be creative! Rather than following last year's retreat schedule, scrap it and start over. Invite students to join a leadership team and get to know them as real people who have individual, fascinating stories. Take away all artificial barriers and distractions from re-imagining a retreat which appropriately addresses the changing needs of the students. Create a unique retreat in which all involved might genuinely encounter Jesus. And finally, follow Pope Francis' lead in going boldly, yet gently. Do something no one has ever done before. Try something that might cause other people to call you crazy. But always invoke the Holy Spirit and trust God with an "interior certainty" (*EG* §279), for God will not disappoint.

The time is now. The door is open. Pope Francis asks, "So what are we waiting for?" (*EG* §120).



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