

ECHOES OF CHURCH LIFE

BY ALEXA SIFUENTES, M.A.



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The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. (Rom 8:26)

When I read this Scripture passage, I also hear: *“for we do not know how to evangelize as we should, but the Spirit himself intercedes in our weakness...”*.

Evangelization is difficult; we often question how even to begin.

Furthermore, evangelization requires from us a sizeable amount of both fortitude and humility. Add to this the frequency of our human fumbling, and evangelization almost seems hopeless. Yet – the Spirit comes to our aid! *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes it very clear that the Church does not exist separately from the Holy Spirit: “The Holy Spirit, whom Christ the head pours out on his members, builds, animates, and sanctifies the Church” (§747). In a beautiful phrase used by the Church Fathers: the Church is the place “where the Spirit flourishes” (§749).

I want to share a story, which almost didn't happen. One fall Sunday as I was strolling the halls of St. Pius X Catholic School during Sunday Religious Education, a catechist on her way to get supplies stopped me outside her room.

"Alexa, I know you work with RCIA, and my daughter Anna is engaged to a young man who is not Catholic. I don't even think he's been baptized. Anyway, they were at the parish office last week for marriage preparation, and they asked the receptionist about Justin becoming Catholic. I told Anna to ask for you. Well, apparently she told them: 'Alexa only works with Catholics.' So they left. And now I don't know what to do."

Speechless. Sputtering. That was my response to this woman. And a wave of relief that the Holy Spirit had planned our encounter that Sunday morning so I could thankfully do damage control. I called her daughter, Anna, the very next day. She was shy, uncertain, and confused, but she seemed glad that I had called. I heard the whole story again, in Anna's words. As painful as it was to believe, the volunteer receptionist (not our regular secretary) had in fact used that phrase: "Alexa only works with Catholics." After our phone conversation, Anna and Justin began attending RCIA. Justin, never baptized, never raised with any sort of faith, a child of a split home, simply soaked up the love of God in the Catholic Church. To overuse an analogy, he was a sponge that held much more water than you would expect upon first glance. Living water, at that!

Truly, that was the easy part. Justin was ready, and once our Church opened the doors, he ran in, and his *metanoia* (conversion) also brought his cradle-Catholic fiancée with him. This great (now married) couple are stalwarts of young adult ministry in the parish and beyond! They have become good friends to my

husband and me, frequently offering to babysit our toddler so we can have a date night.

The tedious part of this situation was in responding to the bigger problem: figuring out how to help the everyday parishioner evangelize. For I *never* wanted a situation like that to ever happen again! And part of me felt as though I had failed – wasn't the parish supposed to be our biggest and best RCIA team member?

So with the support and encouragement of our Associate Pastor (my supervisor), we converted the "Faith Formation Commission" into the "Evangelization and Faith Formation Commission." I felt like a broken record at staff meetings, using the word *evangelization* whenever and however possible! Our "new" commission spoke at Parish Council meetings, where we realized just how far we had to go – people nearly shuddered at the word *evangelization*, pigeonholed it as a turn-off, and discouraged us from including it in our commission name. Unfazed, the Evangelization and Faith Formation Commission forged on to teach this new language to the staff and leaders of the parish.

We didn't feel it taking hold until about six months later, when St. Pius X began a parish strategic planning process. The beginnings of this process involved several parish "retreats" which spent the better part of a day discussing three questions:

- 1) What is important to you about being Catholic?
- 2) How do you experience that at St. Pius X parish?
- 3) What do you wish for St. Pius X in the future?

As responses to these questions poured forth, I began to jump up and down (internally), for they were defining evangelization, straight out of the apostolic exhortation of Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN, 1975): "celebrating the Eucharist..." "passing on the faith..." "living as a Christian..." "having



**Creation of the World, detail,
13th century,
St. Mark's Cathedral, Venice**

our children baptized..." "hearing the Word of God..." "bringing new people into our Church..." One of the Evangelization and Faith Formation Commission members caught my eye and mouthed the word "evangelization!" and I knew he realized it too. We must preach Christ, proclaim Christ, bear witness to Christ, teach Christ, and celebrate Christ's sacraments (EN, §17). These are the essential elements of evangelization – our Church's identity! The most amazing part was realizing that our parish could already speak the language of evangelization; they had been well equipped by their participation in Church life!

In this experience was the reassurance I so (humanly) needed – God was showing me, "Remember evangelization is a process and my Spirit is in the life of the Church, until the end of the age." Regardless of a receptionist's misspeak, or the doubt of parish leaders, or my own lack of faith, the truth of the Church is continuing on, as the breath of the Spirit draws God's people in, and, exhaling, sends them out as evangelists. The everyday parishioner is *already* evangelizing – praise God! However imperfect our evangelization efforts may be, we call on the intercession of the Holy Spirit to perfect it. Then we trust. For as we hear in Philippians 1:6, "*I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*"

