

ECHOES OF CHURCH LIFE

BY ERIC BUELL



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Sometimes I wonder what my Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Sikh students think of when they hear the word ‘evangelization.’ In fact, in a school where non-Christians make up a significant portion of the population, I sometimes wonder what my task is for this segment of our population. When I first moved to San Jose, CA I stepped into the most diverse place I have ever lived. I moved here to teach Catholic theology at an all-girls high school, and found an apartment next to a small Mormon church. Within the week, I had a polite knock on my door asking if I have heard of the joy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. To which I (perhaps antagonistically) responded, have you heard of the joy of the Holy Roman Catholic Church?

I invited the man in for a beer and quickly learned a significant difference between our two faiths. After a pleasant forty-five minute conversation as we quoted Paul at each other (and yes, I mean at), the man politely left, refusing to take the copy of St. Augustine’s Confessions which I offered him. I closed the door and thought if that is how I am perceived by the non-Christian population of my school. While the circumstances are quite different (they do after all, knowingly attend a Catholic school), I spend my days not only engaging young women in elements of moral truth and social justice, but in the language of sacrament and doctrine. What does

evangelization look like to non-Christians without sounding patronizing or with the intent to convert?

Pope John Paul II began his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* with the following: “Called to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, “the true light that enlightens everyone” (Jn 1:9), people become “light in the Lord” and “children of light” (Eph 5:8), and are made holy by “obedience to the truth” (1 Pet 1:22)” (§1). We always read portions of this encyclical at the beginning of our Moral Theology course, and most always a common student response (regardless of faith) I bet sounds familiar for most teachers, “whose truth?” I dove in head first responding to the question with “*the* Truth.”

I have heard it said that the one prayer God always answers is the prayer for humility. Amen, amen I say to you, that is the truth.

I learned two very important lessons that class. First, high school students can be incredibly insightful. It is a temptation when living in a Catholic world to assume most people hold very similar worldviews. The lesson took an unexpected turn for me and I spent the next sixty minutes engaging in a dialogue about how different faiths perceive the idea of “truth.”

Soumya, one of my Hindu students, raised her hand during the discussion:

“Mr. Buell, so you believe that Jesus is God?”

“Correct.”

“And this God of yours only incarnated once?”

Brilliant. A question that could only come from a particular perspective, but a question that is incredibly insightful. We began to understand our different positions.

Observation number two: they can be obsessive relativists. “Well, aren’t all religions the same thing anyway?” Sigh. I find this attitude most especially in my Christian students, trying to assert that all faiths are true for the individual person, that everyone’s image of God is just as valid as the next, and one’s image of God becomes God for each one. Whatever one believes is true for oneself. I am caught asking myself if this is a sign of water downed theology or a reflection of a desire to accept and respect all viewpoints. This attitude towards catechesis can lead many to see these classes as one more grade on the report card, and thus the responses to questions will often aim to say what the student thinks I want to hear instead of an honest interaction with the material. I will never forget one of my *non-Christian* students, writing a response about how her *Catholic* parish does service work after Mass on Sunday to connect the Eucharist with acts of justice. It can be a real danger when grades trump knowledge.

As a graduation requirement, we sit down with each departing student for a final interview. One question that I always anticipate asking is “Name a gospel value of Christ.” A common response to this question is, “Love. Christ taught us how to love.” At first, this repeated response drew my ire. I was frustrated as to what I viewed as “Hallmark” theology. Yet in this response I gradually came to see the universality of the Gospel. No matter the faith, I am proud to say that many students walk away from our school understanding that the central message of Christ and the Gospel is to love. I can think of no better message that can be echoed for a generation of young people who are being told that their worth is tied up in what they own, instead of what they are.

Whatever the faith my students call home, the message of the Gospel and the message of the Church has a universal appeal. This appeal is echoed in the opening lines of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the more I teach, the more it rings true. “At every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength.” Students of any faith find this quest for truth and love in any Catholic environment they step into. Over and over, my message to incoming students is that there is value in learning another faith and there is value in religious literacy in a time when misunderstandings divide peoples. For catechesis today must not only seek for our students to understand, but as catechists to understand their faith. And thus, our students’ response of love is a reflection of our current Pope’s first encyclical: “We have come to believe in God’s love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (§1).

