

FAITH MATTERS

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EVANGELIZATION IS NOT A PROTESTANT THING

BY COLLEEN DUGGAN

Last spring, my husband and I signed up to take a nine-week class on financial management held at a local Protestant church. We chose a class at this particular place because they offered babysitting for our five children, thereby removing the largest obstacle to our commitment. Without the worry of what to do with our brood while we were off goal planning and budgeting, we could comfortably make the commitment to attend.

At the end of the evening, the adults always thanked us for coming and encouraged us to come back next week. They communicated in many different ways that they were glad we came.

Each week, after we loaded everyone into the van and started the drive home, my husband, John, would comment about how well versed his Protestant brethren were at personal attention and hospitality.



“I would never leave the Catholic Church,” he said, “we have the fullness of the truth and there is no replacement for it, but those Catholics who don’t realize what the Eucharist actually is might find the warm welcome at the doors of the Protestant church very attractive. The Protestants are really good at building community; at welcoming strangers and making them feel wanted. They know how to evangelize.”

I knew exactly what he meant because I felt the same way each week.

Sometimes I think Catholics don’t believe it’s our job to invite and welcome others into the Catholic Church. We leave the “talking about a personal relationship with Jesus” and “inviting others to join us worship” up to the Protestants, who are known for their ability to recruit people to their churches. We Catholics are okay with allowing our Protestant brethren to entice our own Catholic family into their Sunday morning pews because “that’s what Protestants are good at.”

Charles Peguy once wrote, “Jesus has placed Himself at a great disadvantage; He has placed himself at the disadvantage of standing in need of us.”

Yet, how many Catholics recognize Christ’s invitation to us to evangelize? As laypeople, our baptismal call renders us responsible for the salvation of others. We

are called to be like Christ, not for the sole purpose of our own holiness, but to Christianize the world around us. This is an important task and requires we pay attention to and love those people with whom we come into contact. The scriptures remind us that the labor is plentiful and the laborers are few and this is especially true with regard to the work of evangelization. Perhaps we Catholics should recommit ourselves to developing the skills we need to become effective evangelists for Christ.

Below are a few practical tips to help us get started.

1 PRAY FIRST & BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE

In his book *Winning Souls for Christ*, from which I adapted some of the points for this post, Father Raoul Plus, S.J. says, “The most essential preliminary condition for all fruitful missionary work is silent prayer. The world does not need men who are active as much as it needs men who are ready to sacrifice their impetuosity in order to make their activity fruitful by prayer.”

Christians in the modern day world generally are not guilty of excessive amounts of interior silence. We are guilty of the opposite—seeking out the noise and doing too much. We



want to cross things off our lists and attack our daily task lists. So often, we are tempted to skip the fundamental step of apostolic prayer in order to get on with the work of winning souls.

The problem? No one can effectively evangelize anyone without first checking in with God. The scriptures recount the dozens of times Jesus went off by himself to pray. We must follow our Lord's example and schedule daily time to be with God, talk to Him, and discern a proper course of action.

2 BE WELCOMING AND ATTENTIVE

I don't care if you are an introvert or an extrovert or if talking to people drains you or not! Engage the souls Christ puts in front of you. Treat the people you come into contact with on a daily basis like human beings. Look them in the eye and make time to be with them. Ask questions. Sit with them and listen to them in a way that makes them feel loved. Do not think about your to-do list or your handheld device. Think about the soul in front of you and ask God to help you know how best to serve him.

One of the things most needed in our world today is the gift of understanding. People need to know that someone cares about them, loves them, and wants the best for them. Talk less about yourself,

and more about the person sitting in front of you.

You want to be an effective evangelist? Show people you love them.

3 BE HUMAN

In my own spiritual life, I don't have everything figured out and I think it's okay to let others know that. It's okay to share our struggles. Offer honest sentiments about what you love about your faith, but what challenges you as well. Don't pretend you have all the answers. Show people you are human — one who loves and suffers, struggles and succeeds. The Catholic Church is a family, and definitely not a perfect one. It's okay to talk about those ways you are stretched by and within the Catholic family.

4 CONVEY CHRIST, DON'T LECTURE ABOUT HIM

I've noticed a new habit emerging in my prepubescent son. Whenever I gear up for a lecture, I can see him shift his weight in annoyance, roll his eyes, and sigh. His body language reveals a complete rejection of whatever it is I'm saying.

If we lecture potential converts the same way we do our children, it's possible we're going to get the same response. Talking at people is not

going to win them over. Arguing with them about how they are misguided or just plain wrong is not going to inspire them to convert. Arguments do not cause people to change their minds, but showing others we love them? That moves hearts.

Why was Mother Teresa so attractive, even to non-Catholics? We Catholics know why: she possessed Christ, but those on the outside world only perceived some kind of awesome mystique about her they couldn't quite put their finger on.

We must use words to convey the faith, it's true. But our witness is often more effective.

5 BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE

One thing I like to reflect on is how Jesus spent most of his time with people with sordid pasts: prostitutes, tax collectors, and other types of people of ill repute. Next to the Pharisees, Jesus hung out with people who were not up to snuff morally or religiously.

I sometimes think orthodox Catholics forget this important point. We are attracted to groups within the Church where everyone thinks and behaves like we do. We don't make friends outside of our comfortable niche of followers and we certainly don't engage the

struggling mother with an openly gay son or the divorced mother of three.

While we may desire to follow Christ and serve Him, we are guilty of possessing an attitude that conveys we are better than others, that we are part of a special club that only holy people can get into. Instead of engaging those people whose lifestyle is different than ours or with whom we may not morally agree, we avoid them or silently judge them or worse yet, try to convince them they are wrong.

We must come out of the confines of our comfortable relationships if we want to truly evangelize others.

We will never perfectly evangelize the world around us. Sometimes we will make progress and sometimes we'll fail. The important thing is to try to get our hands dirty. If we wait for the "perfect time" to try to reach others, we might never try to spread the gospel, so we might as well jump in and engage those souls God has put on our paths.

What can you do today to evangelize those around you?

For more concrete tips on effective methods to reach others with Christ's message, see Raoul Plus, S.J.'s wonderful book, *Winning Souls for Christ: How You Can Become An Effective Apostle*.



COLLEEN DUGGAN

Colleen Duggan is a popular writer for Catholic media and her work has appeared in both *Catholic Digest* and RTJ's *Creative Catechist* magazine. For almost two years, she was a bi-monthly blogger for CatholicDigest.com and her articles have also appeared online at *CatholicMom*, *Faith and Family Live*, RTJ's *Creative Catechist*, *GeniusMom*, and the *K4J Family Blog*.

Colleen holds a Master's degree in Education from the University of Notre Dame and has spent the last 12 years teaching religious education classes, running Bible studies, and giving talks on Catholic spirituality at the parish level.

Despite any professional and educational accomplishments, Colleen believes her most important job is as a wife and mom to 6 kids. Check out her website (colleenduggan.net) where she pontificates about potty training and the art of messy housekeeping.



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