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# Who *me*, evangelize?

*a Simple Guide*

TO LIVING AND SHARING  
YOUR FAITH



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## INTRODUCTION

# Is This Required?

The five people who were approaching my house looked friendly enough. They were smiling and their gait was light and quick. I had just come back from walking my puppy and so met them as they continued to my door.

I didn't know any of them, and that was unusual, if not impossible, in our small village. My puppy was intrigued by them; I was wary. Seeing they meant to ring my doorbell, I asked, "Can I help you?"

"Oh, is this your house?" one of the men queried.

"Yes. What do you want?" I replied, a bit irritated, I admit, that these strangers were interrupting my day. And they were making me nervous too.

"We would like to share our beliefs with you if we might."

"No, thank you. I am Catholic and have my own beliefs."

"May we leave one of our tracts with you to read?"

"No. I am not interested. And, may I ask, what makes you willing to go to strangers to share your beliefs?"

“We are required to by our church,” the apparent youngest of the group responded.

“Ah, I see. Well, have a good day,” I said, dismissing them as I turned to enter my doorway.

Is that what Pope Francis and, indeed, Jesus, are doing to us? “Requiring” us to impose on strangers’ days, irritate them, and be summarily dismissed having accomplished nothing?

We often think of this sort of behavior as “other-than-Catholic.” In fact, many Catholics find the very word “evangelization” difficult to say—or perhaps to swallow.

This small book will be an opportunity to reflect on what Jesus meant when he said to his followers, “Go and make disciples of all nations...” And we will explore the relevant interpretations and expansions that the church has offered through the years to help its members respond faithfully to Jesus’ call to share the Good News.

Going to make disciples is not, at the heart of it, a mere “requirement” of our following Jesus.

Have you ever loved someone? And having discovered the wonderful qualities of that person—be it relative, friend, boy/girl friend, spouse—did you keep those wonders of your loved one a closely guarded secret? Or did you proclaim the loveliness with abandon? “He is the most generous and kind person I’ve ever met!” “She is such a compassionate person and always ready for fun too!” “Her sense of humor lifts everyone’s spirits, and she bears her own pains with such courage!” And, in love, we could, of course, go on and on—even defending and objecting when someone else disagrees with our assessment of the beloved. “But you don’t know him like I do. You should see him help his little sister.” “That was one

time she got upset, and she had a good reason. The rest of the time she just laughs things off and she is so patient!”

I remember well defending some of my “first loves” to my parents and friends, who were bewildered at my selection of a date.

Now, mind you, I was not required to declare my “findings” of good points in my chosen ones. My motivation was pure in the first case—I loved, and that love just spilled out in declarations of the goodness I saw and experienced in the presence of the loved person. In the other cases, my defenses of my loved person flowed from love, but also from a desire to have the person who doubted my choice of a beloved see what I saw. And, I confess, I wanted to be right about my loving!

It just seems natural to want to share about whom and what we love. We proclaim aloud the goodness we have found—in a person, a movie, a restaurant, a store. We hope others will see and experience the same goodness we have: the warmth of a person, the message of a movie, the quality and atmosphere of a restaurant, the prices and customer service of a store.

What have you recommended to someone lately? To whom did you recommend it and why?

I recommended a pest control guy to a neighbor because she had mice and because the guy got rid of my centipedes and is friendly and fairly priced. Now she uses him too.

I recommended my puppy sitter to strangers because my puppy, Jake, loves her. She loves dogs and is responsible and upbeat, and Jake runs to her and licks her and wags his tail uncontrollably when she comes. You might say it is Jake who proclaimed her goodness to me!

Has anyone recommended someone or something to you lately? Why did they do it? What was the outcome of their sharing?

When we have a good experience, or a positive outcome, or a fulfilling relationship, we want to share it. And it often doesn't matter with whom we share: someone who asks, someone who appears to need what we have found, a stranger we meet on the way in or along the way.

Sharing good news of any sort is a wonderful human behavior! We benefit so much from others' experiences and recommendations. It is not something we are "required" to do. It is something that comes from love and from caring about the "other" having good experiences and relationships too.

That is what sharing our faith is too. It comes from Jesus' loving us and our loving him in response and wanting to tell others about this person whom we love. When we tell others the good we have experienced through our Catholic faith: the comfort of our beliefs, the strength of community, the sense of a purpose in life, we hope they might find such goodness as well.

It is, in the end, that simple and that profound. But, unlike recommending a good restaurant, which may result in a positive but transitory experience, our "recommending" the Catholic faith may well have eternal consequences.

Consider your love for God. What is it you love about God? What do you hope others will see in God and understand about him? I have a wonderful African American friend who constantly, in good times and in hard times, proclaims "God is good!" And every time she does, she reminds me of that truth—especially when I have forgotten.

Consider your love for the Catholic faith. What do you love about it? One time I was leaving a conference and awaiting a shuttle to the airport. A woman who had not been at the conference sat next to me, and we exchanged hellos. A few minutes later, she said, “Can I tell you about my church?” Oh no, I thought, ready for an unwelcome speech. But that was not what came. “I am just so proud of my church. We just did a project to build shelters for the homeless in the city and now people are volunteering to do meals and clothing drives. There are so many homeless people—and lots of them are children. I am so proud our church is trying to make a difference!”

I wondered when the last time was that I heard a Catholic say, “I’m so proud of my church!” When was the last time you said that? What are you proud of? What do you want others to be proud of—to love—about the Catholic faith?

These questions and your answers to them—What do you love about God? What do you love about the Catholic faith?—these are at the heart of proclaiming love to the world.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Impelled *to* Share

I was in love with Jesus and my Catholic parish and all that it offered its members; knowledge, belonging, meaningful Masses with good sermons that inspired us, the sacraments we celebrated.

I wanted to share all of this with Ricky. I was 9, he was 7, and it didn't seem his parents, who were friends of my parents, had any religion. Ricky was their son, and when their family came to visit, I made my move. In preparation, I took my glow-in-the-dark statue of the Infant Jesus of Prague from its special place on my bookshelf and put him under my lighted desk lamp where he stayed all day.

After my parents and I and our guests had finished our meal, the adults went to the den to play cards. And, ah, this was my moment! Having retrieved the Infant Jesus statue from my desk, I brought him along as I took Ricky by the hand and walked him into our coat closet. There I carefully prepared him for something special to happen—a miracle! In the dark and quiet of the closet, the Infant Jesus of Prague, glowing a bright green, appeared to him. The Infant talked

to him about becoming a Catholic and all the benefits he would receive. Not sure what I—I mean the Infant Jesus—emphasized back then. I never considered what Ricky might be thinking or feeling or understanding as he sat attentively across from me. All I knew was that I loved Jesus and wanted Ricky to love him too.

Being Catholic was good, the Good News of God's love was really Good News, and I just wanted Ricky to know about it. I had no notion that this was what my baptism called me to do; I did not think about the church documents that spoke of a mission. I was nine. I was not even aware there were documents, and the word "evangelization" was not spoken in Catholic gatherings and surely not at my Catholic school.

Even without any solid theological underpinnings or papal documents or decrees, I wanted to share what I loved; and I suppose I hoped when I shared, others would grow to love Jesus and the church like I did.

It was fairly straightforward and simple in my nine-year-old mind: I've got something good—want some? As simple as offering some of my favorite candy bar or ice cream.

Somehow, though, I knew it was more lasting than a taste of a favorite treat. So I expanded my sharing beyond Ricky. It was not easy, to be sure, as, in those days, we pretty much existed in a sort of Catholic ghetto—I went to a Catholic school, the Catholic parish was the center of much of our socializing, our friends were Catholic (since we went to school with them), and even our neighbors were Catholic. If everyone already has the same things, with whom can one share? I mused and considered this question for a few years.

At last, though I was years from becoming a teenager, I discovered a publication that was not Catholic: *Teen Magazine*. Clearly this monthly summary of “teen things” had no religious purpose—and while I eagerly awaited each issue to find out what was new and what was “in,” I wondered if other readers knew about Jesus and the Catholic Church. There was a way to find out!

On the final page of each issue there was a list of names and addresses of kids who wanted to have a pen pal. I scoured the list to find the names that didn’t sound Catholic to me. Exactly how I made that determination I do not recall, but scour the list I did with great intent.

Having found a name—and therefore a person—who likely did not know about the Catholic faith, I drafted an innocuous missive. “Hi, I’m Carole and I am in fourth grade. I like reading. What subject do you like? Sincerely, Carole.” And in the mail it went. Once I got a response, then I struck: “Do you go to church? Are you Catholic?” If the pen pal answered yes to either or both queries, I never wrote again. On the other hand, if the person said no to either or both questions, I continued the correspondence.

I can’t imagine now what it was that I would write when I was nine or ten years old, but I know I wanted to communicate about Jesus and the wonders of the Catholic Church. I presume I told the recipient about Jesus being our Savior; maybe I reiterated some of his teachings: love one another, the Our Father, don’t be afraid. The realities of Catholicism would have been limited to experiences in my own suburban parish: the kind and loving priests who were there and would come to visit our classes and even come to the playground to

talk with us. There was the beauty of the Mass and the sacraments—at least those I had received at that point. There were the processions and the saints. So much to tell and I was so eager to share it all!

This was in the 1950s—long before we talked about “missionary discipleship.” I was, however, on a mission, albeit a simple one. I loved my faith and thought it was worth telling people about. I have no recollection about the responses to my “Catholic” letters. I don’t even remember if anyone ever did respond or if they just wrote me off. Those were not days when faith sharing was common or popular.

On the desk in my room, I had a world globe. I bought push pins and marked the places where I had a pen pal. I guess I equated my efforts somehow to the missionaries who came to the parish each year seeking monetary and prayer support for their work.

Do you have any memories of your faith from your early years? Were you, as I was, fairly surrounded by other Catholics or was there more a variety of people? Were there people whom you knew were not churchgoers? Did you ever have the impulse to share your faith? Did you invite a young friend to come to church with you?

There is something about being young and unafraid of rejection and, I’d add, being so excited about what you have that you just share it almost willy-nilly! I grew—not less excited about my faith and its goodness, but—surely more reluctant to talk about it. I marvel at my early courage and naivety. I suppose it is not shocking for a young person, but I was not very concerned about how the message I shared was being received—if indeed it was being received at all!

What was positive about my initial sharing of faith? The fact that I loved Jesus and the church was good. The fact that I was eager and unafraid to speak about this love was good. I shared what I had learned and didn't try to make up information—if someone questioned, I could admit I didn't know. That was good, especially since I didn't know much and could be tempted to pretend I knew more.

What wasn't so good was my lack of attentiveness to those with whom I was sharing. Did I frighten little Ricky? Were my pen pal attempts offensive? To not focus on the listener is to miss the hope of a fruitful outcome.

Maybe it should be “professionals” who tackle this sharing faith in word and deed thing. The church disagrees—do you?

#### TAKE IT FROM HERE...

**PARENTS** ▶ Talk with your child about Jesus. Explain what you love about Jesus. Ask your child to tell what he/she loves most about Jesus. Pray to Jesus, thanking him for the qualities and actions you named.

**CATECHISTS/TEACHERS** ▶ What do you love about Jesus? Find a Scripture story that exemplifies the quality you named. Tell the students you have a Scripture story to share. Tell the story. Ask students to guess what it shows about Jesus that you love. Ask them to share a story that shows what they love about Jesus.

## CHAPTER TWO

# What Is Evangelization, Really?

If you have ever been approached by someone wanting to ask you about your faith, you may recall the questions, “Are you saved?” and “Do you know Jesus?” It may have been a different but similar question.

Catholic evangelization is not about asking these types of questions—although those questions may come up. It is, rather, sensing people’s own questions and responding to them. These kinds of questions may be familiar to you too: Why did my friend have to get cancer? What does my loved one’s death mean? Do you think God is punishing me by sending this job loss? How come I have such joy and others don’t? What is a “blessing” in life?

Of course, no one is going to ask you these questions unless they see something in you. That is why sharing the Good News begins with you and your life—the way you live your beliefs. If I see you handling problems and losses well, I may turn to you when I face these events. If you make deci-

sions wisely, I may ask what influences your decisions. If you reach out to others selflessly and generously, I may wonder why you do this and inquire. If you are able to forgive hurts, show respect for people who have different views, and honor people's dignity no matter what—I want to know what grounds you.

Your witness can be a powerful genesis for sharing the Good News—evangelizing. Your witness opens the door to inquiry when you live your faith. So, we might say that the beginning of evangelizing is reflecting on our own lives.

It reminds me of the time the two preschoolers who lived next door invited me to their dance recital. With the children in the dance classes being so young, the chance of them forgetting the steps was highly possible. Knowing this, the dance instructor had a plan. On the floor in front of the stage was a small box-like area enclosed with curtains. Behind the curtain was the dance instructor. She performed the dance, concealed from the audience, but in full view of the dancers who occasionally got distracted and forgot what movement came next. They could simply look down and imitate what the teacher was doing.

Just as the tiny dancers looked to their teacher, those who interact with you look to you, perhaps saying to themselves, "That's how a person of faith moves. That's what a person of faith does." Unlike the dancers, the people who may watch you don't have to imitate you. But if you are a person of joy and mercy, they may well be inspired to ask why you do what you do, to speak as you do, to make decisions as you do, and to believe as you do. In answering their queries, you are evangelizing.