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Pastoral Letter on Evangelization

I. You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth

“The good diffuses itself”: It’s an old theological principle. But you don’t have to be a theologian to know what it means. When we find a good restaurant we want to share it with our friends, and we do. When we hear a good song we want to share it with our friends, and we do. When we see a good movie or read a good book or find a good recipe we want to share it with our friends, and we do. The good diffuses itself. The good wants to be shared, and anyone who resists the desire to share it is rightly called selfish.

It’s a curious fact about many Catholics, however, that there is one good thing that we are reluctant to share: the good news of faith in Jesus Christ. For one reason or another, our culture tells us that it is selfish to keep good things to ourselves, but rude to share the good news of Jesus Christ. And, for one reason and another, we have grown comfortable with this double standard. We have believed what our culture has told us.

The time has come to challenge our culture, and ourselves. The time has come to stop following our culture, which tells us to keep God out of the public square, and start following the Lord, who tells us that we will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). If sharing the good news about worldly things is an expression of joy and an outpouring of love for the people with whom we want to share that joy, then it just makes sense that we would show our love for those same people by sharing with them the joy of following Jesus Christ.

It’s time for us to stop conforming to the world, and start transforming it. It’s time for a new springtime of evangelization in the Catholic Diocese of Saginaw.

+ Most Rev. Robert J. Carlson, Bishop of Saginaw
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PROCLAIMING JESUS CHRIST

The transmission of the Christian faith consists primarily in proclaiming Jesus Christ in order to lead others to faith in him. From the beginning, the first disciples burned with the desire to proclaim Christ: “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”

(Acts 4:20) And they invite people of every era to enter into the joy of their communion with Christ:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete. (1 Jn 1: 1-4)

- Catechism of the Catholic Church, #425

II. When in Rome ... Bearing Witness to the Faith in a Hostile Culture

Think about the values of contemporary culture, and compare them with the values of the Gospel. Perhaps there was a time when culture supported the values of the Gospel, or at least appeared to do so. But we now live in a culture that is not particularly friendly, and is sometimes actively hostile, to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel invites us to choose life; the culture tells us that death is an equally legitimate choice. The Gospel tells us that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life; the culture tells us that there are many equally valid ways, truths and lifestyles. Jesus himself tells us that the path to Heaven is narrow while the path to Hell is broad (Mt 7:13-14); the culture tells us that the path to Heaven is broad while the path to Hell is narrow.

Not everything in our culture is hostile to the values of the Gospel. But, at the same time, the list of contradictions could be multiplied. Let's get right to the bottom line: If we can't point to a number of issues on which the values we live by differ from the values of our culture, then we have to wonder about the depth of our commitment to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

So what are we to do with this situation, in which faith and culture clash? It's actually not as new as we sometimes tend to think. The good news and the bad news is that we've been here before as a Church. And because we've been here before, we have a roadmap.

Our situation is remarkably like that of the early Christians who lived in the heyday of the Roman Empire. For the first three centuries of Christianity, Roman culture and law provided a climate that was not particularly friendly to the Church, and was openly hostile to it at certain points. In fact, the early Church was subjected to periodic outbursts of violence against her members.

How did the early Church survive and thrive in a hostile culture? How did it come to pass that the Roman Empire is now only a subject for history books, while the Church is still a living reality? It was the witness of believers, their faithfulness in word and deed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their witness to faith, in word and deed, won the day then. Our witness to faith, in word and deed, can win the day again.

The Greek word for witness, by the way, is martyr. And ‘bearing witness to the faith’ in the time of the early Church did sometimes take the extraordinary form of what we call ‘martyrdom.’ More often, though, it took the ordinary form of sharing the Gospel through words of truth and deeds of love. But both the ordinary and the extraordinary ways of bearing witness to the Gospel are genuine forms of martyrdom. That’s why the Church tradition distinguishes between the “red martyrs,” who bore witness to the faith through their deaths, and the “white martyrs,” who bore witness to the faith through their lives. The ordinary, everyday faithfulness of the white martyrs, combined with the heroic sacrifice of the red martyrs, gave the Church the strength to survive and flourish under hostile cultural conditions, to convert and transform a hostile culture, and ultimately to outlive it.

This is our roadmap. The Church today, like the early Church, needs people who are ready for martyrdom — people who are willing to let their words and deeds bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, people who are willing to make sacrifices so that the truth of the Gospel can be heard, our culture challenged, and our world transformed. Most often the sacrifice required of us will probably be the white martyrdom of a life that is faithful to the Gospel, rather than faithful to the culture. But we must be prepared for extraordinary sacrifices as well. The world has always demanded extraordinary sacrifices from those who wish to follow the Lord. And, after all, that’s precisely what Jesus himself promised us and told us to expect: a share in his cross.

If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. (Lk 9: 23-24)

MANY KINDS OF MARTYRDOM

As there are many kinds of persecution, so there are many kinds of martyrdom. Every day you are a witness to Christ. You were tempted by the spirit of fornication, but feared the coming judgment of Christ and did not want your purity of mind and body to be defiled: you are a martyr for Christ. You were tempted by the spirit of avarice to seize the property of a child and violate the rights of a defenseless widow, but remembered God’s law and saw your duty to give help, not act unjustly: you are a witness to Christ.

Christ wants witnesses like this to stand ready, as Scripture says: Do justice for the orphan and defend the widow. You were tempted by the spirit of pride but saw the poor and the needy and looked with loving compassion on them, and loved humility rather than arrogance: you are a witness to Christ. What is more, your witness was not in word only but also in deed.

Who can give greater witness than one who acknowledges that the Lord Jesus has come in the flesh and keeps the commandments of the Gospel? One who hears but does not act, denies Christ. Even if he acknowledges him by his words, he denies him by his deeds...The true witness is one who bears witness to the commandments of the Lord Jesus and supports that witness by deeds.

- From a commentary on Psalm 118 by Saint Ambrose, Bishop.

III. Preach the Gospel Always ... If Necessary Use Words

If I preach the Gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it! If I do so willingly, I have a recompense, but if unwillingly, then I have been entrusted with a stewardship. (1 Cor 9: 16-17)

In Jesus Christ we have found the ‘pearl of great price,’ a treasure too rich to keep to ourselves, a good that longs to be shared with others. So we are called to announce the Good News, and to do so in a culture that doesn’t always want to hear it. How do we meet this challenge that the Lord and the culture combine to give us? How do we announce the good news of Jesus Christ in the world in which we live today?

First of all, we should take our cues from God’s own method of communicating the truth. If we look to the pages of Scripture we can see that God always speaks through a combination of words and deeds. All through the pages of the Old Testament we see the same pattern: the words and the deeds of God shed light on each other. Every prophet who is sent with a message is also given signs as a token that the message is from God. Jesus himself is the supreme example of this. His words give us something to believe in, while his deeds give us a reason to believe him.

Our proclamation of the Gospel must be patterned on this method: it must be a proclamation in word and deed. This is the method by which God led people to faith in the Old Testament. It is the method by which Jesus led people to believe in him in the New Testament. Through our words we can offer the world something to believe in. But it’s our deeds that give the world a reason to believe — or not believe! — the good news that we proclaim. That’s why I’m fond of the famous saying usually attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel always ... If necessary use words.” It’s a wonderful reminder of the same truth articulated by Saint James: “Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works...just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.” St. Francis’ memorable saying reminds us of the need to proclaim the Gospel more with our lives than with our lips.

At the same time, however, I think that people sometimes use Saint Francis’ lines as an excuse not to proclaim the Gospel with words, as if deeds alone were enough. I feel compelled to remind us of this truth: sometimes words are necessary. In Old Testament times God used words to communicate with the Israelites, speaking to them through the prophets. And Jesus is the eternal Word, who spoke to us in human words so that we could understand the Father’s will. We know that words alone are cheap when it comes to faith. But we are sometimes prone to forget the value—even the necessity — that words sometimes have. How will people get to know the Gospel if we never speak of it? Words are one of the primary ways human beings communicate with each other.

When it comes to the Gospel there is no doubt that actions speak louder than words, and that faith without works makes a poor case for belief. Yet, at the same time, actions alone are not enough. In a world that is hungry for meaning, the clarity of words is a necessary part of our proclamation of the Gospel. And in a world saturated with false words, the challenge of the Word of the Lord must be verbalized again and again.

Two thousand years ago some men came to the Apostle Philip with the request: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” (Jn 12:21) The Jesus they wanted to see revealed himself to the world in both words and deeds. Two thousand years later, men and women come to us with the same request: “We wish to see Jesus.” If we want to show them Jesus we will have to do so in words and deeds.

WORDS AND DEEDS

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Indeed someone might say, "You have faith and I have works." Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works. You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe that and tremble.

For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

- James 2: 14-19, 26

The men and women of our own day — often perhaps unconsciously — ask believers not only to "speak" of Christ, but in a certain sense to "show" him to them. And is it not the Church's task to reflect the light of Christ in every historical period, to make his face shine also before the generations of the new millennium?

(John Paul II, Novo Millennio Ineunte #16)

IV. Put out into deep water, and lower your nets for a catch.

After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch." Simon said in reply, "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets." When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their nets were tearing. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come to help them. They came and filled both boats so that they were in danger of sinking. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him and all those with him, and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon. Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." (Luke 5: 4-11)

Jesus' words to Peter speak to the Church in every age: "Put out into deep water, and lower your nets for a catch." This is the call to evangelization, the call to go forth and make disciples of all nations (Mt. 28:19). I ask the Church of the Diocese of Saginaw to heed these words again today! It is time for us to put out into the deep water of our culture and become fishers of women and men.

In making this call I have no special program in mind. Evangelization means announcing the good news of Jesus Christ. That doesn't require a special program. The late Pope John Paul II said:

It is not therefore a matter of inventing a "new program." The program already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its center in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem.

(Novo Millennio Ineunte, #29)

Evangelization means bearing witness to our faith in the Lord every day — sometimes through our deeds and sometimes through our words, sometimes in small matters and sometimes in large ones. This is how, today, we become fishers of women and men.

Instead of announcing a formal program of evangelization, let me share with you a simple piece of advice that I have learned in my experience with vocations to the priesthood: ask. This is one of those times when words are necessary. Let me explain what I mean. When I ask a young man if he has ever thought about becoming a priest, I'm not imposing my will on him. I'm simply raising a question. In fact, often I'm only taking a question that has already been implicit in his mind and making it explicit. My words hold up a mirror in which he glimpses his own thoughts: "Yes, I have thought about this. Now what am I going to do about it?" By raising the question out loud, I have lowered the nets.

I think that much the same is true of inviting people to follow Jesus Christ. This is another area where words are necessary. The words need to be rooted in a deep relationship with the Lord, or they won't bear any fruit. But we also need, at some point, to verbalize the invitation, to make it concrete. Whether we're talking about inviting someone to consider the priesthood or to think about entering the Catholic Church, whether we're talking about inviting someone to take up the practice of their faith again or to make the Lord a more central part of their lives, the same simple piece of advice applies: ask. To ask someone "Would you like to come to Church with me?" isn't imposing your will on them. It's simply raising a question — maybe a question they've already been asking themselves. To talk openly about our faith in the Lord may be a little beyond our comfort zone. But it places the Lord openly at the center of our lives, and invites others to do the same.

The story of the call of Simon Peter teaches some important truths about being fishers of women and men. First, the story makes it clear that if the Lord does not prepare it, there will be no catch. Remember that the fishermen had worked hard all night, and without the Lord they had caught nothing. But the story makes a second point clear as well: when the catch is ready, the Lord wants us to lower the nets, and help him bring it in.

When I ask a young man whether he's ever considered the priesthood, I don't know what's in his heart, or what God is calling him to be. But I do know two things. First, if I'm not living a vibrant relationship with the Lord myself, then my words of invitation will ring hollow in his heart. And second, even if I am living my vocation vibrantly and joyfully, if I don't ask him—in words—then the witness of my life, all by itself, probably won't lead him to consider the priesthood as a viable option. When I ask, and my words are rooted in a life lived in the Lord, I lower the nets. The catching of a man's heart is the Lord's job, not mine. But he invites me to share in the labor.

The same is true of inviting people to have faith in Jesus, and to express that faith openly in their lives. We have to be living the life of faith, or our words will ring hollow. But even if we're living the life, we still have to ask, in words. When we ask, we issue an invitation. Whether any hearts will be caught is up to the Lord. Our job, like Peter's, is to lower the nets.

As I've found with the priesthood, you might be surprised to find how many people are waiting to be asked whether they'd like to come to Church, or whether they've ever thought about becoming Catholic. So invite a friend or neighbor to come to Church, especially if you know that they have fallen away from the faith. Then if they come, have them over for lunch and let them tell you their story. It's true that there is a time when we need to speak, but there's also a time when we need to listen!

DO NOT BE ASHAMED OF YOUR TESTIMONY TO THE LORD

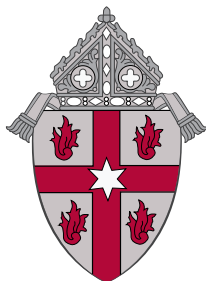
For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control. So do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord...but bear your share of hardship for the Gospel with the strength that comes from God.

- 2 Timothy 1: 7-8

You might also be surprised to find how many people are waiting for a chance to talk about the Lord's role in their lives, or how they are searching for the Lord, or where they're struggling to walk with the Lord. If we remain silent about our relationship with the Lord — how He has blessed us, how our own journey with Him is progressing, or where we are struggling — then we encourage others to do the same. Most of us don't want to be the first to say something that might be awkward. So we wait for someone else to take the risk. But have you ever felt badly because you had an opportunity to speak about the Lord, and didn't? Have you ever felt like you missed an opportunity to encourage someone who was struggling? Or have you ever missed an opportunity to share a struggle, and be encouraged by someone else? Next time, take the risk! Do not be afraid! Set out for deep waters!

We don't need a magic formula for evangelization. We simply need to let God's Word — Jesus Christ himself — use our words and deeds to knock at the door of people's hearts. The process begins with God's initiative, and it can only be brought to fruition by God's grace. But He invites us to share in the labor. Our job is to let the Lord's invitation to "Come and see" flow through us in all that we say and do.

Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest." (Mt 9:37-38.)



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