

Becoming An Inviting Church

A Pastoral Essay



Paulist
Evangelization
Ministries



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Introduction

Paulist Evangelization Ministries offers this essay to Church leaders as a way to help us all reflect on the importance of becoming an inviting Church.

Many parishes have gotten better about welcoming people.

But some of these parishes are welcoming fewer and fewer people each year.

Christ calls us beyond welcoming; *he calls us to invite*—to reach beyond ourselves with the Word of God, offering every human an opportunity to experience God’s love in Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis, in his stirring exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* laid it out very clearly:

The Church which “goes forth” is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. *1 Jn* 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy. Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved. (#24)

We cannot be a church locked up in itself; we must be a church that, of its very nature, reaches out to others. And we cannot be reaching out unless we become an inviting Church.

This booklet results from a series of essays that appeared as part of the *Evangelization Exchange* program of Paulist Evangelization Ministries—mostly monthly updates about evangelization and its opportunities. While I am responsible for most of the essays, I had the help of Fr. Jimmy Hsu, CSP, Fr. Rene Constanza, CSP, and Mr. Michael Bayer in the respective areas of young adults, Latinos, and youth. I am grateful for their acceptance of the invitation to help the Church reflect on its mission today.

Each section deals, in a concise way, with key issues and basic points involved in reaching one or another cohort in today’s world. Together, the essays amount to an array of ideas and resources that every parish can use in its ordinary pastoral life.

May the Spirit of God guide us to become a Church that more fully reflects the inviting heart of Jesus as it continues to beat in love for every person today.

Frank DeSiano, CSP
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“We cannot even preserve the faith among Catholics in any better way than by advancing it among our non-Catholic brethren. Indeed, simply to preserve the faith it is necessary to extend it.”

Isaac Thomas Hecker, Founder of the Paulist Fathers, July, 1886

1. Inviting Our Parishioners

With weekly-attendance rates dropping below 25%, and “once a month” becoming the new “once a week,” most parishes (and churches and synagogues as well) have seen a fall-off in church participation, particularly in worship. To some extent this fall-off has stabilized from the large drops in the 60s, and then again in the 80s, so that most parish leaders can predict the approximate numbers of people at Mass on a given Sunday. Studies show, however, that future generations have a very different approach to life in general, and faith in particular, so that participation patterns in the future may well be even thinner.

In the face of this, parishes have to take the initiative. If people draw distant from institutional expressions of faith, then these institutions need to think of ways of drawing closer to their membership.

Parishes cannot presume on the involvement of folks listed in their databases. In fact, parishes should look upon these lists as pointing to the very people they should aim to invite. With 60% of Catholics mostly not going to Sunday Mass, and many of them identifiable by parish leaders, parishes need to start making connections with their registered members in a consistent way.

Some of the avenues to do this are, of course, email, “snail” mail, social media, and good old word-of-mouth.

Redundancy doesn’t hurt, since people delete and toss received items every day. So send your message in print and in electronic form. Think out your message from the point of view of your recipient—what is it that they are looking for? What might interest them? Keep the message short, up-beat, and packaged in an attractive way. Focus on what involvement would do in the life of your parishioner, not what your parishioner can bring to your church. Keep away from mentioning money; we are already stereotyped in this regard.

My initial suggestion would be to identify specific times to contact parishioners. Here are some starters:

1. **Late summer, early fall:** emphasize start-up in the parish, opportunities to get involved, particularly for the children.
2. **Thanksgiving:** here strike the themes of home, family, togetherness, peace, joy. Mention things your parish is doing around this time, particularly your own outreach to poor people, and ideas for making Thanksgiving more special. You might even compose a Thanksgiving Prayer for families to use around the table.
3. **Christmas:** here’s a time for greeting people, wishing them joy, emphasizing themes of home-coming and family togetherness, generosity, and cheer. Tell people when your parish is having Christmas parties, and the Mass times. If you can think of it, maybe have a simple Christmas gift for everyone—refrigerator magnet, pen, calendar, holy card—use your imagination!

4. **January-February:** now we can connect around Lent, Ash Wednesday, special activities of devotion or sacrifice. Mention opportunities for faith formation, small groups, Friday Stations, Bread-and-Soup meals; reconciliation celebrations; activities for the poor.
5. **Easter:** here we can wax about the end of winter, the beauty of spring—and the glory of the Lord’s Resurrection. Show pictures of those who are entering the Church, tell some of their stories. Mention other sacraments of initiation and their schedules—First Holy Communion, Confirmation. If sporting programs are starting up, throw that in as well.
6. **May-June:** at this time we can emphasize continued contact at Mass, any summer programs for children (or adults), Theology-on-Tap types of programs, and any changes in Mass schedules.

This will cost the parish a little money. My bet is that parishes that invest in continually inviting their parishioners will more than recoup what they spend dollar-wise, and, far more importantly, in terms of enriched parish life.

2. Inviting Families

All the studies of demographics show that younger generations tend to be less invested in a parish—or in organized religion—than older generations. Unfortunately, this includes one of the most important constituencies of any parish—families. These people, whether older Gen X-ers, or younger Millennials, have grown up with very different relationships to all organizations (and not just church).

Yet parishes must bring more of this generation into relationship with the parish. These parents are transmitting attitudes about faith to their children—just as they are reflecting attitudes of their Baby Boomer parents. No matter how many children make First Holy Communion, or First Confession, if these families do not develop a consistent involvement in parish life—in patterns of discipleship—then what they pass on to their children will be watered down even more.

1. Parishes should look at those points when they naturally intersect with families and inventory them for ways to offer deeper connections. Obviously enrollment in a Catholic school is a major point, but so is enrollment in parish religious education for children. How can these moments be maximized in terms of building relationships with families?
2. Parishes should develop some programming specifically for families and parents. It could be parent-help workshops, or discussions of neighborhood concerns; but parents naturally want to do what is best for their children, and they appreciate the opportunities to share with other parents.

3. Religious education leaders should think of ways to involve parents in the formation of the children, and into peer sharing groups. On the one hand, one hears horror stories of parents dropping off children, then going for coffee instead of going to Mass, and then picking children up after the sessions are over. On the other hand, one hears, more and more, delightful stories about parishes that have offered some kind of formation to parents, and the parents appreciated it enormously.
4. You can't lose with family events in the parish. Whether it's a certain Mass on Sunday, or holiday-inspired events for children and parents, or children's choir, or some other cultural event, parents will come with other children to be part of events like this. All of this helps fortify the connection parents have with worship and other parish activities.
5. Using the Internet might provide ways for parents in the parish to share information about sports, children's activities, cultural opportunities, or even common concerns through some message system on the parish's website. Of course, someone will have to monitor the conversation, but to have parents sharing their interests and concerns on the parish website can only be something good.

Parishes that extend an inviting hand to families have to be aware of the diversity of families. Rarer today are families headed by two Catholic parents. When there are two parents, one of whom does not belong to the Catholic Church, parishes need to help both integrate the values from the different religious traditions, even as the child is raised in the Catholic faith. Parents who belong to another faith tradition need to be made to feel welcomed and included. Some of today's two-parent families will have non-believers as one of the parties; again, these people are supporting the raising of their child in the faith and deserve gratitude and consideration.

More and more we find single-parents families. How the Church supports these parents, understands the often-heroic efforts they make, and helps them see how faith resources can lessen their burden—this will be crucial in helping single-parents pass on faith to their children. Often these parents have to contend with the trauma of divorce or separation; they, in particular, might be disposed to seeing the Church as unwelcoming or even hostile to them. Hospitality and welcome has to be part of the effort to reach out and inviting all families to relate to the Church as much as they can.

Of course, children should never be deprived of the ministrations of the Church because of the state of their parents. The love and care we should give children will do more evangelizing than reciting church dogma and making families feel unwelcomed.

(For further reflection on this issue, see my little book "Faith and Education in the Catholic Church," Paulist Press, 2012.)

3. Inviting Young Adults

Jimmy Hsu, CSP

Perhaps one of the more challenging groups to minister and invite to the parish is that of the young adults. In a way, this demographic group in their 20's and 30's is unlike any others in the parish. And it is a group unlike young adults in the past.

Today, young adults are often still in the stage of exploration, still settling into a career, still establishing a group of peers. Often young adults would have just moved into a new city after college graduation in pursuit of a new job. It is often the first time young people experience the world on their own, without the influence of parents or a college structure. This reality makes young adults ideal targets for outreach—at the same time as making them a difficult target because of the enormous competition for that same energy, that same commitment, and that same allegiance.

What it all comes down to is what the young adults today are seeking. First, friendship: young adults seek a sense of connection and being emotionally and interpersonally fulfilled. Secondly, young adults seek a sense of personal comfort. Having finished college, many young adult are moving beyond a diet of pizza and instant Ramen noodles. They are also able to move beyond couch surfing and living with their parents. They seek to incorporate some sense of comfort and accomplishments, even on limited resources. Thirdly, young adults seek to make a difference. They want a sense that they matter, a sense that they are wanted.

In the parishes and the areas where I have been assigned as a Paulist, I have noticed a few trends regarding young adult ministry:

- In many places, there are parishes that simply dominate the young adult ministry scene. In Washington, DC, examples such as St. Matthew's Cathedral or St. Thomas are located in prime locations for this type of outreach. This also is the case with St. Monica's Church in Santa Monica, CA, whose young adult group is gathered from the entire archdiocese. Sometimes, it's the location. Sometimes, it's because there is already a critical mass of young adults.
- There are locations where young adult ministries are not parish based. While stationed in Grand Rapids, MI, I noticed that there were indeed many young adult ministry groups, but most were based on spiritual interests rather than parishes because there was no one parish with a large enough critical mass to establish a substantial group.
- Some groups are very heavily staff-led, such as at St. Monica's, while others are very heavily peer-led, such as at St. Matthew's. There doesn't seem to be a consistency on which model works best.

Given the above, what I've concluded is that one of the major points of outreach to this group is the need for flexibility. There is no one model that would work for every given group, geography, or region to ensure a strong young adult ministry. Some important points to keep in mind though:

1. The need for strong leadership:
 - a. However a group is lead, either by staff or by peers, the leaders need to possess persona that is attractive to other young adults.
 - b. This means that leaders have to be carefully selected, groomed, and supported.
 - c. At the same time, the leadership needs to be fluid enough given the transient nature of young adults.
2. The need to make the young adults feel wanted:
 - a. In many parishes, the young adults are simply viewed as a demographic group where there is an abundant source of free labor. Every group that wants to put on an event wants young adults present to provide muscle or bodies or energy which is unique to them.
 - b. While it is important to utilize the young adults and to incorporate them into a bigger part of the community, they also have be given a sense of autonomy.
 - c. At St. Matthew's Cathedral, young adults are given leadership positions beyond the young adult ministries:
 - i. Many serve as liturgical ministers, being treated as equals to their older counterparts. In doing so, the young adults are given a place at the table, which is very important.
 - ii. There is always a young adult representative on the parish council and finance council.
 - iii. They are also given direct access to parish leadership:
 1. They are advised by the rector himself.
 2. In this way they don't have to deal with the red tape that comes with parish bureaucracy and politics.
3. Good communication:
 - a. What good communication means is different from group to group. This has to be adapted to what works for a given group of young adults. Some groups use Facebook or other social medias; others work best through "listserves." For some, text messages are the only way to reach someone. Websites, forums, and maybe even a voice call might all come into play.
 - b. This differs from place to place. Even within the same parish, different sub-generations of younger disciples use different means of communication. It is thus important to find out what is the best way and to adapt based on that.

Even with all of the above, there isn't a single way that works when inviting young adults. What really matters in the end is a sense of personal connection: a place to invite them, a place where they feel they can make a difference and be fed—emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

4. Inviting Seekers

The term “seeker” has undergone a little transformation over the past several decades. It used to refer to people who were religiously restless, i.e., always looking to go from one Christian experience to another, from Baptist to Episcopal, then Episcopal to Catholic, and eventually migrating to one of the Orthodox Churches, or elsewhere.

Now the term aptly describes wide currents in American society—all those who have never attached to a church family or who, in growing numbers, have detached from a church family and not assumed a new one. “Detached” means more than “taking a leave.” All of us pastoral types continue to try to penetrate the patterns of belonging of younger generations. Whatever observations we might make, we know it’s not Grandma’s Church anymore. Seeker, however, means more than erratic church attendance; it refers to people who have no explicit religious identity.

These people deserve a great deal of attention from us Catholics. I think Pope Francis has people like these in mind when he talks about us becoming an open, welcoming Church where people can come and talk, inquire, get to know us. I note his image of the parish in “The Joy of the Gospel”:

The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. . . . It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented. (# 28)

“A sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach” . . . these are powerful, and challenging words.

We might move toward being this kind of Church and parish by looking at the following points:

1. It is time to recognize just how much we have to offer people today, and stop thinking of the Church as a cluttered attic of antiques. Precisely because of our huge and nuanced tradition, we have an array of gifts to offer modern people. Catholics uniquely combine one strong foot in the Scripture-Tradition heritage of the Church, and another strong foot into the intellectual and personal struggles of people. We have the unique gift of being religiously passionate and engaged in the modern world. Even before the Second Vatican Council we were able to involve ourselves in modern questions and issues; Vatican II has pushed us even further in this direction. Let’s not be afraid to hang out our shingle.
2. Parishes have to get beyond the school year model of faith formation. Even though most parishes do not have Catholic schools, the parish year seems to begin in September and end in May. As a result, many of our catechetical

processes—including the Inquiry phase of the RCIA—is held only once, usually in the fall. What happens to people who begin to express curiosity in January, or March? Parishes need to develop a coherent practice of ongoing inquiry. This probably has to be an adjunct arm of the RCIA team because RCIA ministry, once the inquirers are gathered, has a pretty hefty agenda.

3. We have to get far more innovative in inviting people to consider faith today. We have to stretch beyond the classroom, information-giving model. The “thirsty”—to use Pope Francis’ language—come in many forms. Catholic parishes have to think of many ways to engage these kinds of people. Some of it may be social—concerts, parish productions, sports events; some of it may be variations on inquiry, such as the Theology on Tap formula for reaching young adults, or larger questions offered to the neighborhood (“Does God Exist?” or “Does Religion Harm People?” or other provocative titles). What we are ultimately doing is helping people get into a position where they can begin to have “a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.” It’s the encounter that’s key; our invitations need to be geared to making this possible for seekers today.
4. Somewhat untapped and under appreciated by church professionals are seekers who might be drawn to Jesus Christ through social outreach ministry. Seekers may not be very keen on church things, but they might well enjoy helping in a soup kitchen, or sorting clothing for distribution to homeless people, or helping to push a social need in the political arena. People who see us Catholics in service may well begin to ask, “Where does your motivation come from? How is it sustained?” This is an opening to dialogue.
5. Parishes also need to respect and reverence the tentative nature of younger generations—many of whom are seekers—today. People may not be ready to eat the main course; they may have to nibble on a few appetizers, or sample a salad or two. Being comfortable with dialogue, with open-ended inquiry, with the searching that happens in peoples’ lives today, will help parishes gather seekers.
6. All our efforts have to be done with humility, with a “we-want-to-hear-your-story” attitude, and not from a position of “here it is, take it.” This was a strong emphasis at the Synod for the New Evangelization in 2012; Pope Francis has picked it up from there, and from the meeting of Latin American Bishops in Aparecida. Along with this “mutual sharing” attitude, parishes need to be strong on hospitality, on making people comfortable, or giving them a feeling of belonging.

Apart from embarrassingly weak invitations that parishes haphazardly dish out in August “before the RCIA begins in September,” parishes have barely begun reflecting on ways to invite and attract seekers. This is a field ripe for development. We cannot lay all of this on an RCIA team. Parishes would be well served to develop evangelization teams, or invitation teams, that can utilize ever-new materials being developed in innovative ways. (Our resource, “Neighbors Reaching Neighbors,” would be one place to start.)

We all have to remember that faith is not about us; it’s about what God has given us to give to others . . . and to give, especially, to seekers.

5. Inviting Inactive Catholics

I do not think there is any area that receives more discussion than that of “inactive Catholics.” Just about every sociological research book goes through the numbers from different angles, but they all tell the same story: if you use sociological and statistical methods, you see nothing but erosion in church attendance among non-Latino Catholics, particularly in the younger generations. Latinos themselves, by the way, are no sure bet because other studies show erosion, and potential erosion, of their identity with the Church—but more about them in the next segment.

Christian Smith surveyed “emerging Catholics” between 18 and 25, a cohort he has been following with his other researchers for years (*Young Adult Catholics*, Oxford, 2014). William D’Antonio continued his periodic (every 5 years) study of Catholics and sees the decline in church attendance, particularly among younger cohorts, but the level of drop appears to have slowed down (*American Catholics in Transition*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2013). These studies confirm what Robert Putnam and David Campbell pointed out in their wonderful book, *American Grace* (Simon and Schuster, 2010), about the significant decline in attendance among European-derived Catholics in the United States.

What seems very clear to me is this: if we use the yardstick of considering an active Catholic as one who goes to Mass with some frequency, then attendance numbers will inevitably look bad. We hear it said that “monthly is the new weekly” in Mass attendance, and there’s probably a lot of truth in this. It’s safe to say that on a regular basis, a parish sees 40% of its parishioners—“regular” meaning once or month or more. So, evidently, on a regular basis Catholic parishes do not see 60% of their parishioners.

One implicit, and erroneous, attitude that comes from this way of posing the question is this: concluding that people who do not regularly go to church have no faith life. This, however, would be a false conclusion. Studies show that, by other standards, Catholics have various and regular religious activity, particularly praying, upholding Catholic social teachings, and a solid core of belief. As D’Antonio and his associates put it, in their chapter on Conclusions, “. . . [W]e think it is important to point out that there is a solid sociotheological basis to how Catholics construe what it means to be Catholic” (*American Catholics in Transition*, p. 153). In other words, attending liturgy remains fundamental to Catholic life, but we cannot let this importance lead us to define the whole picture.

Another immediate conclusion is that in future years we will be dealing more and more with people who have what I call “episodic” involvement with coming to church—a few weeks attending, a few weeks away, then returning back again. Younger people exercise their worship life in an environment of constant pressure and travel. We are less and less in neighborhoods within walking distance of a church; we are more and more suburbanites or new urbanites with options galore in front of us. An important strategy, long term, is increasing the likelihood of people to attend Mass until it becomes an ingrained behavior—not in the “I-have-to-go” model of former days, but in the “I-want-to-go” model which probably is the only effective one in the decades ahead.

Apart from all these considerations, it is almost scandalous how terribly little parishes do to reach out to less-than-active Catholics. We seem to operate with the assumption that “if we get enough people to pay the bills” then parish is successful. But this will only lead to smaller congregations—we can see that now. We have to convert our paradigm, our assumptions: our basic task is to reach every Catholic, whatever the attendance rate, and ever potential inquirer. This is the least that Jesus, and our Church, is asking of parish leadership.

So what might parishes do?

1. Inventory your own registered parishioners. Try to find out who is very active, who is little active. See if there are patterns. Pay particular attention to families that seem to be quite inactive. Get a sense of who your parish regularly reaches, and how.
2. You can design a specific outreach to the names you actually have registered who seem not to be active. Think here of general communication but also of particular events you might design to connect with these people. Of course, should you be able to develop a visiting team to drop in on some of these folks, then you would have hit the jackpot. Parishes actually do these and find it successful. (Whenever we write, we should never use the “shame” and “blame” approach; it will not work today.)
3. You can try to “cast the net a little further out.” Using social media, email blasts, and other channels that are effective in your neighborhood, inviting people to “come and see.” Some neighborhoods have local papers that everyone reads. Others have storefronts where owners let organizations put up fliers. Talk to parishioners in real estate and other heavily public relations kinds of businesses to get ideas.
4. At least once, but preferably more, run a particular program to reach inactive Catholics. Parishes do this and feel that, if they’ve reached only 6 or 8 people, they then worked hard for small pickings. But this kind of ministry is cumulative. Not only the 6 or 8 people each time (which can add up over 5 years), but the way people notice that inactive Catholics are being welcomed. Create a little buzz. People are drawn by that. We can see this from those parishes in almost every diocese that seem to draw young adults.

At Paulist Evangelization Ministries, we have “Awakening Faith” which over a thousand parishes have ordered. The Paulists also offer Landings International (www.paulist.org/landings) as another approach to less-than-active Catholics. Another program that has been used for years is Catholics Returning Home (www.catholicsreturninghome.org/). And Mr. Tom Peterson has developed a diocesan media outreach program called Catholics Come Home (www.catholicscomehome.com).

Nothing is clearer from the profile of Pope Francis than this: to be a less self-centered church, hanging on to past positions and privileges, and a more other-focused Church of welcome is a key part of our being the Church that Jesus called us to be. Certainly, building bridges with our own people through outreach has to be high on the list of what Christ is calling us to do.

6. Inviting Latinos

Rene Constanza, CSP

Easter is a time for *familia* and *fiesta* to celebrate the new life given to us by our Lord's Resurrection. Our family's merriment at our very large Easter family gatherings, despite its chaotic nature at times, was our way of being thankful for God's gift of salvation. *Fiestas* were our expression of renewing trust in each other and creating a space of mutuality that allowed us to celebrate, question, and reflect as a community of believers. Much of the time, our family reflection led us to an awareness of those less fortunate, of those on the margins, of those who are unable to partake in *fiestas* as we did.

Whenever we have *familia*, we have thanksgiving, and whenever there is thanksgiving, there should always be room for the guests. I grew up reminded of this important aspect of life by my parents. So when a stranger stopped by our gatherings unannounced or when one of us nine siblings brought friends over to our family gatherings, *mami* would ensure that we extended the highest form of hospitality to guests. This would mean offering our seats at the gathering, or turning a meal for 30 into a meal for 35 or even 40. Being thankful to the God who gave us new life and gathered us as a family helped us to learn at an early age that *fiestas* are only real *fiestas* when there is hospitality, sharing of resources, and a true sense of community; where everyone partakes in the *fiesta*—from the crying toddlers to the elderly, from our teenagers to the adults in the family. Because time for us is measured by the quality of time and not the quantity of time spent together, *fiestas* usually had no end time.

This brief reflection on the meaning and values espoused by a Latino family *fiesta* can help us in our analysis of practical ways in which our Catholic Church in the United States can be a welcoming spiritual home to Latinos. According to the latest report from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (C.A.R.A.), Latinos are 40% of the U.S. Catholic population but only 25% of our parishes in our nation serve Latinos. In addition, 54% of Catholics under 30 years of age are Latinos. If Catholic churches do not meet the needs of Latinos, one of the fastest growing populations in America, our people will seek to have them met elsewhere.

Another sobering report coming from the latest Pew Survey estimates that nearly one in four Latinos are former Catholics. Between the years 2010 to 2014 there was a drastic fall of 12% in the number of Latinos surveyed who identified as Catholic, from 67% to 55%, respectively. If this trend continues, the Church in the US will have to confront the reality of a future where the majority of Catholics are Latinos despite the fact that the majority of Latinos are no longer Catholic.

In the face of this, how do we make our churches inviting to Latinos. It is important to start with those who can effect change in local communities. Our diocesan church leaders must take note of the population trend and dynamics in their diocese and start developing, in conjunction with Latinos in the local church, a pastoral plan that addresses the needs of the community. This should not be seen only as a problem to be addressed but as a mandate by our Lord for all disciples to bring the Good News to those in the peripheries of our society, to those who are not in our thanksgiving *fiestas* on Sundays.

Based on my pastoral experience in the Archdiocese of Washington, the Diocese of Grand Rapids and, the Diocese of Austin, I have found that the most inviting and welcoming parishes to Latinos are those that address the following areas:

- 1. Liturgies in the language of the people** – This may mean celebrating Masses in Spanish every Sunday if the community has a substantial presence of foreign-born and first generation Latinos. Acceptance of one’s language is an acceptance of the person. If the community is comprised mostly of second or later generations of Latinos, it would be beneficial to celebrate liturgies in Spanish during the two most attended liturgical celebrations by Latinos: Good Friday and the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. For many of the latter group, though their first language is English, they maintain a distinct Latino spirituality.
- 2. Homilies** – Latinos get more from homilies that speak to the lived reality of the community and provide a vision of hope and salvation. Generally, Latino homilies are longer since they express stories of struggles and joys of individuals, families and the community, which find meaning in the Good News of salvation found in Jesus Christ.
- 3. A parish focused on social outreach** – One of the most effective ways to evangelize is to have other Latinos at the forefront in providing for the basic needs of the community. This may be in the form of a parish outreach program that addresses needs such as affordable housing, medicine, English as a Second Language, immigration, and employment.
- 4. “A home away from home.”** – The parish is one of the first places Latinos seek for appreciation and recognition as members of Christ’s household, where their gifts and talents find recognition and value. Parish bulletins and announcements with Latino sensibilities in mind can provide an avenue for the expression of a spirituality that is unique to our culture. Having framed pictures or paintings that affirm Latino spirituality and culture, and having plenty of chairs in gathering spaces at the office and parish center help provide a sense of belonging and welcome.
- 5. “Mi casa es su casa.”** – The Latino home is a sacred space where much of our religiosity and spirituality is lived. Many homes are adorned with several crucifixes, an “*altarcito*,” statues of saints – usually giving preeminence to an image of *nuestra Virgencita* (our Lady). As a pastoral seminarian at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Grand Rapids, my pastoral supervisor and I made it a priority to attempt visiting the homes of all the families that had children baptized the previous month. Having the priest visit their sacred space, sharing a meal with the family, and blessing the house, sent a clear message that the particular family was part of a bigger family. From one home visit, their view of church was expanded. What had been seen primarily as a dispenser of sacraments was now understood as a grace-filled community of believers that understood the Latino realities and cared for them. Most families visited would not hesitate to reintegrate themselves into our worshipping community at Sunday Mass and would maintain a vibrant connection to the larger family—the parish.

Realizing the challenges and opportunities for outreach to Latinos is just half the solution. Having pastoral leaders and ministers develop an acute sense of intercultural competence makes a world of difference. How do we become more understanding and appreciative of the “other” among us who thinks and makes sense of the world in a different way than we do? This goes farther than a workshop or a staff development day. This hits at the essence of Pope Francis’ summons to pastoral leaders to have the heart of a shepherd and smell like the sheep. The good shepherd is able to take risks to address the needs of the lost and the wounded and is able to make decisions based on particular situations and context.

To understand Latinos as individuals, one must understand the joys and struggles of the family and community since for many of us, *la familia* and *la comunidad* give us our identity. The church is more than a worshipping space for Sunday Mass. The church is understood as *mi casa* (my home) and *mi comunidad* (my community) that supports our families in our pilgrimage here on earth. Therefore, an inviting church is one that not only values family, community, and culture but one that makes visible the needed accompaniment, in the joys and struggles, of a pilgrim people *en route* to our greatest fiesta—an experience of life in God at the great eternal banquet.

7. Inviting Youth

Michael Bayer

Part 1

We’ve all seen the data. 50% of youth who were raised Catholic no longer self-identify with the faith of their Baptism by the age of 25, and if “former Catholics” were a religious denomination, it would be the second largest in the country (Pew Forum). Though such statistics are ubiquitous, they are no less unsettling for their familiarity. Little wonder that many in the Church perceive an existential crisis on the horizon.

And yet the Church in North America has at its disposal an unprecedented range of tools for inviting youth. Instead of descending into despair over empty pews, we ought to see this moment as one of great excitement and opportunity. The omnipresence of mobile devices allows us to reach teens far beyond the walls of the worship space and confines of a CCD classroom. Instant access to information on the internet, coupled with a normalcy of pluralism in public schools, compels young people to ask questions about their faith that previous generations would never have imagined.

Nevertheless, it is this same explosion of new technologies from which the Church can, and must, provide relief. Being in constant communication with friends and family allows teens to feel connected at all times—but it paradoxically contributes to an increasing sense of isolation. Fewer human interactions take place face-to-face, as texting, digital photos, video games, and mobile apps become the predominant form of contact with others. At the same moment in human history when young people are ceaselessly linked by technology, they have never felt more alone, nor so potently craving membership in a community. The Psalmist exclaims, “My soul is thirsting for you!” (cf. Ps. 63:2), and it would be just as true that today’s teenagers might say as well that their souls are thirsting for authentic human relationships—the precise sort of relationships that the Church can facilitate

through the person of Jesus and the other members of the Body of Christ. With this paradigm in mind, here are some ways that parishes can be intentional about inviting youth to fuller participation in the life of the Church:

Listening. The Gospels tell us very little about Jesus' life between infancy and adulthood, but undoubtedly it involved a great deal of listening and attentiveness to the community that would become his targeted audience. Without first understanding their daily experiences as fishers, farmers, and first-century Jews, he would not have been able to craft parables and formulate metaphors that would communicate the truths of his teaching. The same is true today. So many pastors, youth ministers, and Church leaders, filled with zeal to share the Gospel, focus exclusively on the content of their message, i.e. what they have to tell teens, rather than on understanding their audience. Listening is essential to effective teaching.

Teaching. Pedagogical styles have evolved dramatically over the past decades, as emerging models of education have emphasized instruction as a dialectic process, rather than a one-way street. Many who work in parishes grew up at a time when classroom education involved a teacher lecturing in front of a room, with students dutifully taking notes. The catechetical process was seen as a unidirectional transmission of information from a learned authority figure to a group of passive receptacles. But step into a classroom today, and you will see tablets, smartboards, clickers, and other devices that allow students to participate actively in the learning process, and to be engaged on multiple levels of cognition. We need to keep this in mind as we construct courses of sacramental preparation, youth programs, and other parish-based offerings meant to form young people in the faith.

Involving. It's one thing to invite teens to participate on a youth retreat; it's a whole other thing to recruit leaders to help with the planning process, and to empower the teens as servant leaders among their peers. When the disciples told Jesus that the crowds were hungry and tired, Jesus turned the identified need around on his selected followers, charging *them* with the task of feeding the crowds (Mk. 6:37). Not only will you benefit from the ideas that the youth bring—after all, no one knows the other teens like they do—but you will have inculcated a different level of buy-in among the teens who are tasked with outreach. No number of pulpit pitches or bulletin announcements will ever be as effective at recruitment as a single invitation from one high school student to another.

Forming. Specifically, forming them first as disciples, then as leaders. Building a robust, long-term program of youth formation requires moving past catechetics and into the more challenging work of imbuing teens with the principles necessary to live as an adult follower of Jesus. The Greek word for disciple, *mathetes*, doesn't mean student—at least not the way we think of a student, who sits in a classroom, memorizing and regurgitating data. Rather, it more nearly means *apprentice*. In ancient times, a disciple, be it of Socrates, Pythagoras, John the Baptist, or Jesus, did not simply learn about a particular way of life. They adopted it entirely. A teacher's exhortations (like the Sermon on the Mount) were not meant

to be memorized, but to be assimilated. Studying the Gospel is akin to learning a foreign language or playing a sport. You don't memorize verb charts merely so that you can demonstrate your skills of conjugation at social gatherings; nor do you learn to throw a bounce pass so that you become proficient at that one skill in isolation. Rather, you memorize verb endings so that you can *speak* a language, and you learn how to throw a bounce pass so that you can *play* the game of basketball. Similarly, you don't memorize passages of Scripture so that you can cite them on the spot—but so that you can integrate into your daily routine things like forgiving your enemies and doing good to those who hate you.

Missioning. Once formed, the teens are then missioned out, to spread the Gospel by the way they live their lives. Jesus had about three years with his closest followers in which to form them in this new Way of living. Think of the high school years as that concentrated period of formation, just prior to the commissioning outward. Except that, in the case of your teens, God willing, they will attempt to continue their formation throughout their young adult years.

Inviting Youth

Part 2

Some tips for parish-based youth ministry:

Be practical. That is, try to relate everything you do to the real, lived experiences of their week. If you're going to watch a film about the passion and death of Jesus, make the link with suffering and death as they have experienced it. Have they lost a loved one to illness? Has there been a natural disaster or recent event in the news that caused them to question how a loving God could allow such evil? The liturgical year provides us with a rich treasure of topics that pertain to the lives of every developmental demographic. Teens, in particular, are just becoming aware of injustice. Seasons like Advent and Lent provide an excellent opportunity to discuss materialism, consumerism, and what we, as Christians, owe to those who have less than us.

Invest heavily in your middle school students . . . and keep them mostly separate from your high schoolers. Many middle school students are still participating in parish-based religious education or sacramental preparation; capitalize on this time to the best of your ability. But it's important not to combine middle and high school youth offerings, except on a once-in-a-while basis. Seventh-grade students and high school seniors are at such dramatically different places in their lives that it not only does a disservice to group them together, but it makes it nearly impossible to get buy-in from older teens. And if you're going to be discussing topics like relationships, drug use, eating disorders, and mental health—to name just a few—you'll find that 12 year olds and 18 year olds are worlds apart.

Create a safe space. When asked, many young adults who no longer identify with a particular denomination report that, in their experience, organized religions are judgmental, unwelcoming, and hypocritical. In their sincere desire to make sure that teens possess well-formed consciences and are prepared to go out and make

good decisions, many parish staff and adult volunteers emphasize the Church's moral teachings. It's important to foster an atmosphere in which teens feel—first and foremost—loved and accepted. Recruiting the right adult volunteers to assist with cultivating this environment of hospitality is crucial.

Recruit young adult volunteers; limit the amount of time that parents are present. Part of creating a safe space is establishing a place where teens feel comfortable to share their honest feelings without fear of punishment. A teen who is struggling with a body image disturbance, is cutting to relieve anxiety, or has begun engaging in sexual activity with a peer, is far less likely to share any of that if one of the people sitting in the youth room is a friend's mom. There's an appropriate way for youth ministers and pastoral staff to handle the disclosure of sensitive information—particularly as it pertains to the health of minors—but it's far less probable that any such information will even be shared in the first place if the core team of adults is made up of people's parents. Local college students and young professionals are an exceptional pool of volunteers (and it has the added bonus of involving them in the parish as well!). Provide them with some formation as well, too, though, or you risk burning out your volunteers and potentially putting people in difficult pastoral situations, for which they lack adequate preparation.

Think of a youth program as having three core components: Spiritual, Social, and Service. Many programs end up only offering one of the aforementioned pieces, and it is difficult to sustain a long-term ministry without all three. Some youth programs offer Eucharistic Adoration and Theology of the Body study groups, but they don't do any service trips or schedule any social outings like ski trips, cookouts, or movie nights. By contrast, others devolve into a sort of recreation center, in which teens are free to come, hang out and play games, but rarely are they challenged to go deeper in their faith.

Inviting Youth

Part 3

So what might a parish-based youth program look like?

Let's take a look at what an ideal year's sequence of youth ministry might look like. Of course, every parish is different, but here are some highlights:

Late August: A welcome back cookout, followed by games and time to hang out. Gatherings such as this should be purely social, and teens should be encouraged to invite their friends. At the cookout itself, resist the temptation to ask teens about their faith or talk incessantly about the fall retreat. Just feed them, let them hang out, and show them that the church can be a place they begin to form a community.

September: Between back to school events and fall sports, this is an especially challenging time, but you want to keep the momentum going. Launch small groups and begin the formal course of "formation" for the year, whether it's a topical series, book/film study, or Scripture based faith sharing. Be sure to have at least one purely social event per month, all year long.

October-November: Hold a fall retreat. Hold it off-site, and make sure it's at least two overnights. Cost is always a factor, but this is where pastoral staff need to convince those in charge of the budget that youth ministry is a parish-wide priority. In addition to a retreat, this is a great time to schedule service events, like a Trick-or-Treat for Canned Goods on Halloween. The teens want to dress up and be with their friends anyway, why not stock a local food pantry and help them get service hours for their schools?

Thanksgiving through Christmas: The holiday season is chaotic, but it's also one of the most fertile periods for youth ministry. Thanksgiving provides the opportunity for a large group meal, but it also offers natural service programs, like food drives and hunger banquets. Advent and Christmas are rich with topics for discussion, and service opportunities likewise abound. Does your parish do a toy drive of any sort? Perhaps teens could wrap the presents. Blanket and coat drives, collections for the homeless, all are excellent opportunities to get the teens together. Fun events like Christmas movie nights and gingerbread-house-building competitions are also a great idea.

January through March: Many students hit their semester exams, and winter sports are in full swing, so this is a tough stretch. Upperclassmen are taking standardized tests, and seniors are waiting to hear back from colleges. But this is also a good time to keep small groups going, interspersed with socials and service opportunities. Valentine's Day provides the perfect opportunity to discuss love, relationships, and dating. But it's important to allow the teens to share their own experiences with these topics, and not simply use it as a chance to lecture them about the Church's teachings. This is also a great time to do a Winter/Spring retreat if your program can support more than one per year.

Lent and Easter: Generally speaking, teens really like Lent. Perhaps it's because the notion of giving something up fits well with the sort of viral challenges that light up social media, but the idea of taking on some sort of sacrifice is something that resonates particularly well with youth. Encourage them to undergo a period of discernment, not only as to what they will "give up" or do, but why they are doing it. Along with Lenten sacrifices, meatless Fridays can be a chance to offer some sort of cooking class or group meal, and the prayer practices of our Church, be it Stations of the Cross or the solemn liturgies of the Triduum, are good times to invite teens to cultivate a deeper spiritual vocabulary of prayer.

April-June: The end of the academic year brings final exams, graduation parties, and, in many parishes, an uptick of sacramental offerings like Confirmation. But these activities actually sync very well with the liturgical season, as we come through Easter to Pentecost and emerge at the time when Jesus missions his disciples outward and empowers them with the Holy Spirit. As teens are preparing to say goodbye, be it for the summer, or as friends head off to college, this is the perfect time to talk about what it means to be a missionary disciple.

June-August: The summer months are tough in many parishes. Vacations, summer jobs, and all manner of camps, mean that attendance is hit or miss. But it's also a great time to schedule some informal social events, along with planned service opportunities. Many local agencies lose some of their volunteer groups over the summer when school is not in session, so it's a good time to call up food pantries, soup kitchens, and other social services, to see if they can use any help. If possible, you may want to consider a week-long service trip. Immersion experiences can take many forms, but when they're done well, few things are as life changing.

8. Inviting Seniors

Clearly one of the largest blocks of active Catholics in parish life is that composed of seniors. These would be all people born before 1946, the year that designates the start of the Baby Boomer generation. This group would include those born in the early part of the twentieth century, including those who belong to the “greatest generation”—old enough to have fought in, or lived through, World War II.

This is a group whose participation parishes assume. They are the group, educated well before the Second Vatican Council, where church attendance was very high. (Reception of Holy Communion in those pre-Vatican II years was never as high as Mass attendance itself.) This generation mostly grew up in Catholic enclaves, in small towns or in urban districts, attending Catholic schools at a time when Catholic identity meant as much a *social* identity as a religious one. In Catholic schools, people in this cohort accepted the discipline of thousands of religious sisters and were educated in their faith through the *Baltimore Catechism*. Likewise this generation received the ministrations of a swelling number of priests; rectories from that era have rooms for four or five priests. Highways which would cause this Catholic density to spread out (and dilute) had not yet been built. Suburban Catholic life loomed in the future.

Nevertheless this group, aged seventy and higher, presents distinct pastoral issues for a parish that wants to be an inviting community. This group faces important religious questions which arise from their life circumstances—all the way from health, through deaths of loved ones, through the birth of grand- and great-grandchildren, to the increasing likelihood of one's own death sometime within a decade or so. In addition, people in this group, which had the strongest social identity with the Church, are the ones to feel most alienated if they are not active in the Church.

Here are some points to think about when trying to invite seniors.

1. Seniors often have a surfeit of time. Therefore, they are most readily available for ministry, particularly with and for each other. Try to utilize the time and generosity of this group to plan for various outreaches to seniors—outreaches of a variety of types to appeal to different interests and needs.

2. Seniors have time during the day for Scripture study and small group sharing. They are also very social. Encourage seniors to set up Scripture sharing or small groups and to particularly invite their friends and neighbors. This might be an excellent time for ecumenical sharing, or, even more, a time for seniors who have been away from the Church to find a way to more active Catholic life through their friends.
3. Emphasize ministry to seniors who are physically or otherwise limited. A large number of seniors end up in assisted-living settings—or outright nursing homes. These people can often be isolated from family members, who might live in another part of the country or who might have had a difficult relationship with the senior. Parishes should have organized ways to visit seniors who are homebound or in communal living situations on a regular basis. Seniors can be trained to be Extraordinary Eucharistic Ministers. They also can bring religious items such as prayer books or small pamphlets from the parish to the seniors. Have the seniors use their own imaginations in designing this ministry.
4. Seniors appreciate social contact and parishes can facilitate this. Either tied in to an existing group (such as a Sodality or Women’s Club) or under some new umbrella, seniors can regularly plan social events for themselves. These can happen on site at the parish or through various excursions. Pastoral leaders can help seniors make this outreach even more effective by urging them to look for older folk who have just moved in, or who are otherwise unconnected, for them to have more contact with active, believing Catholics.
5. Seniors may well have questions about faith and their spiritual lives. They can set up a “Question and Answer” forum in which they submit questions to parish leadership or to each other for discussion and sharing. Needless to say, these can easily be made into social events. In line with this, seniors might welcome a program for Catholics who want to reconnect with their faith, such as “Awakening Faith” or “Landings.” These might be conducted a few times a year, in connection with “Question and Answer” forums.
6. Obviously, seniors need pastoral care, from the growing illnesses they face to their final days. These can be opportunities for seniors to find reconciliation with God and deep peace of mind. Pastoral leaders have to design ways to celebrate the healing ministry of the Church, and be attentive to those moments of “Viaticum” when seniors know their lives are coming to their completion.

Many parishes now have seniors as the major proportion of their regular attendees. Statistics show that this older group attends Mass at two, or even three, times the ratio of other cohorts. Nevertheless, it is obvious that this is a diminishing richness for the parish; the numbers, and intensity, that this age group is contributing to the Church is limited by time, illness, and energy.

Yet there is still a great harvest for the Kingdom to be reaped by consistent commitment to seniors in our parishes. As much as “the great generation” has given to both Church and country, their lives will be even richer with more opportunities to give and to share in their twilight years.

9. What Are We Inviting Them To?

Of all the disheartening questions, designed to take the air out of any evangelization balloon, this one is the most devastating—what are we inviting them to?

The assumptions behind this question are shocking because people use these words as if the whole tradition of Catholic life and worship were worthless and hopelessly unappealing. The implication is that there is nothing attractive or compelling about Catholic faith, as if were some near-dead patient with no energy or health.

We hear it all the time. Mass is boring. Catholics don't take their faith seriously. Priests are just fulfilling their job. The Church is all about preserving the institution. The Gospel isn't preached. Ceremonies are done unceremoniously. The Church is too liberal; the Church is too conservative. Catholics are catechized but not evangelized. Catholics are not catechized. It's all external form: obligation and fear motivate Catholics, not the love of Jesus. What does the Church have to offer people of today? Younger generations are just walking away from the Church.

We hear it all the time—what are we inviting them to—the slogans we use to undermine the very faith and life we have, the language we use to bad-mouth ourselves, to demonstrate that we do not even believe in ourselves, let alone believe in inviting others to discover Jesus Christ in our Catholic tradition. How shocking is this?

Of course, what makes a litany-of-failure like this so compelling is that, for sure, there is some kind of truth in almost every statement people make about the Church. Catholics are far from perfect and we wear our flaws sometimes way too overtly on our sleeves. Sometimes I come out of church after Mass shaking my head at the desultory way Catholics celebrated liturgy, or the automatic-pilot pace of the Mass.

Nevertheless, no Church has what the Catholic Church has to offer: a universal communion, gathering all of humankind into a community of grace and love, celebrating sacraments that go back to the first gestures of Christianity, proclaiming a Gospel that still changes lives because it brings Jesus Christ to the world, with a moral and social vision that both deepen and grow. And we do this without fear of the modern world, of human thought and progress—showing an openness to embrace all culture, and teasing from that culture those directions that lead to God. No Church embodies the vision of the Kingdom of God as does the Catholic Church. No Church has transcended nationalism and tribalism in its expression of Christian life as has the Catholic Church.

Sometimes I think we Catholics feel we are teenagers with too many pimples, or men too skinny to show up at the beach, or women who see themselves only as overweight. We focus so much on the blemishes that we cannot see the brilliance, the joy, the grace, and the power of the way of life we have to offer people. None of these beautiful traits come from us: rather, they come from Christ shining upon us with his Holy Spirit. Our Catholic life is a work of grace; to acknowledge that is to acknowledge God's goodness.

One frequently finds "solutions" to the Catholic "problem" that seems like radical lobotomies—wholly different ways of doing parish, or wholly different ways of conceiving of

Catholic life, as if the fundamental task were not to unpack what the Spirit gives us on a regular basis. We do not have to re-invent God's gifts; we need to live them more fully and freely. The whole Catholic evangelization movement, engendered by Pope Paul VI at its best, states that none of us are completely evangelized, that Catholic life is a constant growth in faith: the Church "seeks to deepen, consolidate, nourish and make ever more mature the faith of those who are already called the faithful, or believers, in order that they may be so still more." (*On Evangelization in the Modern World*, #54) So something is always lacking in Catholic and Christian life.

But these defects do not eliminate what the Church has to offer—and what every human being is invited to receive—the life of Christ Jesus given to communities of disciples to advance the Kingdom of God and continue the transformation of humankind. We Catholics have no need to apologize for what we are inviting people to: Christ, the Spirit, relationship with God, reception of God's Word, participation in God's life through sacred signs and sacraments, a moral vision grounded in God's love, a social vision elaborated in the hope of God's Kingdom, and a world-wide community of grace.

Ideally these qualities would shine forth in every parish; actually, they can only be partially realized in any parish because they are such high ideals. But the Catholic project is broad and bold: not to develop a congregation of fervent people here or there, even if they have memberships of thousands; that's the Protestant megachurch model. Rather, Catholicism wants to instill the ideals of Christian life broadly and deeply across over a billion people, in thousands of dioceses, and in tens of thousands of parish communities. Catholics aim high. Perhaps, for this reason, they seem to fail more. But aiming lower is not an option.

Of course, parish communities need to embody this visionary ideal with some basics which have become clearer to us since the Second Vatican Council: good worship, good preaching, good religious formation (adults and children), and good service of others (parishioners and, even more, those in need), and strong invitation. It is hard to invite people to religious communities where the worship, preaching, religious formation, and care of others is impoverished. Attending to these basics is the primary obligation of pastors.

But if we are trying to embody these ideals, and striving to provide these basics, then a parish has no reason to hang its head low. It has plenty to invite others to. It has nothing less than the Gospel, and a modern-Gospel-way-of-life, to offer.

Indeed, the indictment of modern Catholicism in Europe and America is not that it has totally failed. Rather, the indictment reads like this: the Spirit has given us so much, and we kept it mostly to ourselves and didn't think to share it, through invitation, as we should. Poverty can be financial, of course; but it can be primarily cultural, relational and religious. As popes call us to serve the needy, those without a community of faith certainly fall into this category.

Paulist Evangelization Ministry Resources for Invitation

Awakening Faith—a resource to help Catholics reconnect with their Catholic Faith through conversation in safe and accepting environments.
(www.awakeningfaith.org)

Living the Eucharist—a resource for parish renewal, offered over three Lents, to help parishes connect celebration of the Eucharist with daily life, parish community, and mission.
(www.livingtheeucharist.org; www.vivelaucaristia.org)

Neighbors Reaching Neighbors—a set of resources to help parishes imagine how they can invite people in their own neighborhoods.

Paulist Comprehensive Evangelization Training—12 video presentations, 40-minutes each, on 3 DVDs that teach the theory and the practice of Catholic evangelization in a parish setting.

Seeking Christ—a resource that allows a parish to invite people to the RCIA at any time of the year because parishes can engage seekers at any time of the year.

The Journey—a resource to help Catholics, and others, have a personal experience of Jesus Christ in his richness.

www.pemdc.org

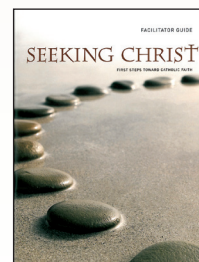
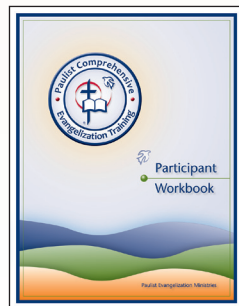
Becoming An Inviting Church

is a pastoral essay from Paulist Evangelization Ministries that helps dioceses and parishes see opportunities, and methods, for inviting people in many different pastoral situations to encounter Jesus Christ in the depth of our Catholic faith.

With a range of short essays, filled with practical tips, pastors can challenge their staffs and pastoral councils to think concretely about how they can expand their ministry of invitation.

Paulist Evangelization Ministry Resources

See the inside back cover for descriptions of these resources.



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