

Getting a Grip on Parish Evangelization

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours... and yours are the hands by which He is to bless us now.” (St. Teresa of Avila) The human hand is an amazing gift. By one count, there are 29 bones in the hand, 34 muscles (just to move the fingers and thumb), 48 named nerves, and 30 named arteries. It takes ¼ of the human brain just to run our hands alone. If the fingers and thumb of our hand are not working correctly, it is difficult to write our name, pick up a piece of paper, type on a keyboard, button or zip a coat, or softly touch a loved one. Sir Isaac Newton observed, “In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence.”

An appreciation of how the hand works can help us get a better grip on parish evangelization. Evangelizing parishes seem to grow where the leaders intentionally stretch their vision to include five complimentary functions, like fingers, to grasp and continue Jesus Christ's mission: a “commission,” a team, a school, evangelization projects, and a coordinator/director. When these five functions or roles are recognized and empowered, even just in rudimentary form, evangelization begins to move forward. As the parish exercises and balances these five fingers of evangelization, the Gospel of Jesus begins to have a greater and greater impact on active and inactive Catholics and the unchurched.

However, in parishes where only one or two of these fingers are at work, evangelization seems to become easily sidetracked and is inevitably marginalized. There is a very great temptation to say, “Evangelization? Oh, that's the pastor and staff's job, or the evangelization committee's job, or the evangelization coordinator's job!” And the rest of the parish take a free pass from sharing our Catholic faith with others (and breathe a long sigh of relief).

Let's explore each of these five functions or roles in our parishes:

1. Evangelization “Commission”

An evangelization “commission” is like the thumb on the hand. Without a thumb it is almost impossible to pick up and use tools to build things. Without a recognized parish evangelization “commission,” getting a grip on evangelization is almost impossible. But this does not mean that the parish must start a new evangelization “commission.” It means discerning what already-existing-leadership-group has the “commissioning” role—the capacity to call the parish into the mission of evangelization and to provide resources, volunteers, and personnel for evangelizing. This “commissioning” role is a visioning role and may be fulfilled by different leadership groups in different parishes. Sometimes the “commission” is the pastor and priests, or the pastor and staff, or the pastor and a few trusted advisors, or the pastor and the parish pastoral council. Among the responsibilities that a “commission” might have are:

- To remind us that “Evangelization is **EVERYONE'S** Job!” and to “commission” others to serve in the Church's mission of evangelization
- To discover ways to make what we are already doing more evangelistic—
 - How is each society, committee, ministry, or service already evangelizing?
 - How is each meeting or event an evangelizing experience?
 - If the above are not evangelizing, how can we make them more evangelizing?
 - If any of the above cannot be made more evangelizing, why are we doing it?
- To serve as a catalyst in evangelization throughout the parish.

- To provide resources (training, materials, finances, and personnel) for evangelization.

2. Evangelization Team or Working Committee

An evangelization team is the second finger of the hand needed to grasp evangelization effectively. They are a specially trained, hands-on, working group for evangelization in the parish. They are not meant to do all the evangelizing. Their role includes:

- Developing a strategic plan for implementing evangelization in the parish.
- Helping all ministries, committees, and service groups to receive training in one-to-one evangelization.
- Constantly challenging us about who is missing from the parish—
 - How can we reach inactive Catholics, and Catholic ethnic groups?
 - How can we invite unchurched people in the area into Christ's Body?
- Training all active parishioners in ways to evangelize in daily life.
- Recruiting parishioners to engage in evangelization projects.
- Model what it means for all ministries and committees to be "Evangelizing Ministerial Communities."
- Evaluating the results of evangelization efforts, training, and projects.

3. School of Evangelization

The parish school of evangelization is not a building. This third finger of the hand is a core of trained and/or degreed evangelization trainers. Evangelization will only thrive in the parish if such a core is recruited, trained, and resourced. These trainers may come from the evangelization working committee, the parish staff, or other leadership groups. Their primary ministry is constant study of Catholic evangelization and the skills needed so that they can:

- Train all parishioners in ways to share their faith with others in daily life.
- Train ministry leaders, so that they can, in turn, train the members of their groups in ways to evangelize.
- Guide evangelization projects, by offering supervision, mentoring, or internships.

4. Project Evangelization

A Catholic evangelization project or program is the fourth finger of the hand. Projects and programs are tools we may select from to reach specific groups of active and inactive Catholics or the unchurched. Each program/project has a specific intended audience. Programs/projects have a beginning, middle, and an end. They produce measurable outcomes. They can be evaluated, and improved upon over a period of time. Some steps in implementing a project/program are:

- Parish evangelization team, in consultation with the evangelization "commission" and parish staff chooses a population they wish to reach more effectively.
- Evangelization team explores appropriate pre-packaged tools available (i.e. *Awakening Faith, Catholics Com Home, Catholics Returning Home, Christmas Carol Festival, Landings, Why Catholic? etc.*) to reach the intended population.
- Team might also decide to develop its own parish project or program.
- Team proposes one or two selected projects/programs to the evangelization commission and parish staff in order to secure resources.

- A steering committee and helpers for the evangelization project/program are recruited and given the training and resources they need.
- Completed project/program is evaluated. Did it create a "pocket of success" in evangelization? What were the successes and shortcoming in reaching out to the intended population?

5. Director/Coordinator of Evangelization

The fifth finger of the hand is the director/coordinator of evangelization. Someone needs to be appointed by the pastor to guide the development of evangelization in the parish. The director/coordinator might be either a (part or fulltime) volunteer or staff person. He or she is the go-to person in evangelization, accountable to the pastor. The director/coordinator should be a trained and/or degreed and experienced resource person in evangelization. The director/coordinator does not do all the evangelizing. His/her primary functions are to:

- Advocate for Catholic evangelization.
- Be a catalyst for engaging parish leadership and everyone else in the parish in evangelization.
- Offer training and supervision for evangelizers and trainers in evangelization.
- Plan, organize, and coordinate evangelistic efforts in collaboration with the parish staff.
- Provide guidance, direction, and support to numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 above.

There is a story told from World War II that while on leave some soldiers gathered the scattered pieces of a statue of Jesus that had been shattered during a bombing raid. They were able to reassemble the statue from the fragments—all except for the hands, which they were unable to find. One of the soldiers put a sign beneath the restored statue, "He Has No Hands But Yours!" We are the hand of Christ as we grasp the mission of evangelization and point the way forward, especially by developing the above five fingers: "commission," team, school, projects, and director/coordinator.

Reflection Questions—Small Groups (25-40 mins.)

1. Which of the five fingers of Catholic evangelization do you see as **most developed** in your parish? Why?
 - "Commission"
 - Team or Working Committee
 - School
 - Projects
 - Director/Coordinator
2. Which of the five fingers are **least developed** in your parish? Why?
3. What can you do to help your parish recognize and develop the five fingers of parish evangelization?

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