

Dealing with Discouragement in Evangelization

It doesn't take long for Catholics evangelizers to experience discouragement. Diocesan and parish evangelization plans seem to move forward like glaciers and frequently stall. Local programs and projects burst forth with fire and fervor, but over a few months or years seem to sputter or burn out. One-to-one evangelizing encounters with others bubble up with great joy, but can take unexpected turns or seem to go nowhere. Temptations to give up sharing our faith with others swarm around us like mosquitoes and seem to drain our commitment to continue "the essential mission of the Church." (Pope Paul VI, *On Evangelization in the Modern World*, 14) Recall Simon's (St. Peter's) words, "...[Jesus] said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.'" (NRSV Lk 5:4&5)

Pope Paul VI urges, "Let us therefore preserve our fervor of spirit. Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world." (*EMW*, 80)

How can we "preserve our fervor of spirit" in the mission of evangelization? To begin with it is quite normal to experience discouragement. A few years ago, when I was very discouraged that an evangelization project we were working on crashed and burned. My spiritual director said, "In this world with all its problems, pain, and suffering, if you never get discouraged, you are one sick puppy!" There is a secret power in discouragement. It points out to us that something wrong. What we are doing and/or how we look at the situation needs to change.

Individual Activity (5 mins.)

Below are ***eight tips for dealing with discouragement in evangelization***. Place a check mark next to those things you have tried. Draw a circle around two or three tips you want to try in the future. (Do you have another way to cope with discouragement? Write it down under #9.)

1. Admit you are discouraged with your evangelizing efforts.

- At times exhaustion, sickness, and lack of self-care cause discouragement.
- Failed expectations for immediate results can dishearten us.
- Realizing our sins and weaknesses can paralyze us, filling us with guilt and remorse.
- Discouragement is a gift that slows down the breakneck pace of our lives, giving us the opportunity to grow in patience.

Saint Francis de Sales, 1567-1622, tells us, "Have patience with all things, but chiefly have patience with yourself. Do not lose courage in considering your own imperfections but instantly set about remedying them - every day begin the task anew."

2. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who is always with us.

Caught in a storm at sea, the apostles' boat was being battered by the waves when, "[Jesus] came walking toward them on the sea...they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'" (Mat. 14:25-27)

3. Rejoice and thank God in difficult times.

Venerable Solanus Casey, OFM Cap., 1870-1956, taught a simple way to pray when we are discouraged. "Thank God ahead of time!" he proclaimed. Thank God for whatever way the Lord chooses to bring us through this experience, even before anything happens to help us. In this way we can throw ourselves on the mercy of Christ.

4. Forgive injuries and pray for those whose cause them.

Sometimes leaders and collaborators in evangelization fail to give us direction or stop supporting our efforts. We feel hurt or abandoned by their actions or inactions. We have a choice to make: to wallow in anger and resentment or to choose to forgive them. Developing a daily habit of praying for them and their well being over time can free us to trust again. Recall times when we hurt others in similar ways and repent. Discover the wisdom behind the saying, "Where two or three are gathered together, someone always spills the milk!"

5. Stick with the basics of the Christian life.

- Decide daily to follow Jesus.
- Keep up daily private prayer and regular reception of the sacraments.
- Study scripture and Church teaching each day.
- Seek support from the Christian community through having a spiritual director, networking with Christian friends and family, and being part of a small faith-sharing group or ministry.
- Continue to evangelize by witness, proclamation, works of mercy, and social justice.

6. Set and stick to your priorities.

Discouragement sometimes arises from temporary amnesia about what our real mission is as Catholic evangelizers. St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, 1850-1917, reminds us, "This will be my main purpose—to love Jesus, to seek Jesus, to speak of Jesus and to make Jesus known."

7. Read and meditate on the lives of the Saints.

Read about the day-to-day lives of great missionary Saints who faced discouragement in evangelizing. It is especially helpful to read books, letters, and quotes by the Saints themselves.

8. Persevere

St. Lucy Filippini, Foundress of the Religious Teachers Filippini, 1672-1732, wrote to encourage her teachers during hard times. Her words ring true to those who serve today in the mission of evangelization, "...[Evangelizers,] do not become discouraged or tire of your work. Instead, continue to labor perseveringly with even greater kindness and patience to abolish ignorance and to surmount all difficulties. Do not let ingratitude shift your focus from Him who calls you to [evangelize]. Entrust the results to Him and to Him alone."

**9. "Another way I have learned to deal with discouragement in evangelization is..."
(Please be specific):**

Prayer and Faith-sharing for Small Group Sharing—4 or 5 people (30-45 mins.)

Opening song: “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” (Public Domain)
(or another song about following Jesus)

1. I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
No turning back, no turning back.
2. The cross before me, the world behind me;
The cross before me, the world behind me;
The cross before me, the world behind me;
No turning back, no turning back.
3. Though none go with me, still I will follow;
Though none go with me, still I will follow;
Though none go with me, still I will follow;
No turning back, no turning back.

Reading: Sirach 2: 1-6

(Read passage aloud. Invite participants to read it a second time in silence. Then have someone else read the passage aloud again.)

“My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for testing. Set your heart right and be steadfast, and do not be impetuous in time of calamity. Cling to him and do not depart, so that your last days may be prosperous. Accept whatever befalls you, and in times of humiliation be patient. For gold is tested in the fire, and those found acceptable, in the furnace of humiliation. Trust in him, and he will help you; make your ways straight, and hope in him.”

1. **What word, phrase, or image in this passage or from the readings in this article encourages you the most? Why?**
2. **What discourages you most about Catholic evangelization in your life, your parish or your diocese? Who have you spoken to about this?**
3. **In what ways have you tried to deal with your discouragement about evangelization? How are these working for you?**
4. **Which two or three tips for dealing with discouragement in evangelization would you like to try in the future? Why did you choose these?**

Take an Evangelization Challenge:

Enroll for the online evangelization training course, [From Maintenance to Mission: Evangelization and the Revitalization of the Parish](https://www.pncea.org/events/frommaintenancetomission.aspx) (12 weeks). Deepen your knowledge of contemporary Catholic evangelization, learn how your parish can become more mission-focused, share your experiences, and learn from the experiences of others. Go to: <https://www.pncea.org/events/frommaintenancetomission.aspx>.