

Evangelizing Young Adults on an E.P.I.C. Scale

Dennis Mahaney, Office of Parish Life, Diocese of Buffalo, writes, “St. Paul lived large. He traveled extensively, spoke multiple languages, and lived an adventurous life. He paid attention to people wherever he went.... Paul also engaged people using the technologies of the day to paint a vibrant picture of faith.” He had a knack for listening to God’s Word with one ear and God’s world with the other, and then bringing the two together. He served a God-sized purpose, with an approach that was **EPIC** in scale. If Facebook would have been around, he would have had a multitude of friends from many different countries.

“An **EPIC** approach to evangelization is needed to reach a generation that has gone global. It is needed to reach a generation that recognizes Tiger, Michael, and Oprah more than Jesus.” If we are to be effective, we must imitate Paul's **E.P.I.C.** approach. [Concept of doing church on an E.P.I.C. scale is from Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for a 21st Century Church* (Broadman and Holman, 2000)].”

Young adults “are the most media-defined generation in the history of our species, raised on an odd assortment of computer animation and reality TV.... For the first time, the media actually creates **EXPERIENCE**. Technology invites **PARTICIPATION**. Information is **IMAGE-DRIVEN** (in high-def). And the internet is a place for making **CONNECTIONS**.” Young adults are hungry for a life, a God, and a Church that is larger than life, one that is **E.P.I.C.**

What does E.P.I.C evangelization look like?

1. Experiential – P – I – C

We know we are surrounded by Internet addicts and Facebook fans. People have chosen to transact business and manage friendships online because these interactions feel so real. We exercise in our living rooms with Wii. Web-based video games display a world that is almost too real to be just entertaining. And, the current norm for advertising is *over-the-top*. Few ads describe the technical specifications of a product. And some commercials never display the product at all. Instead we see geckos, wild dream sequences, comic skits, or perfectly sculpted bodies holding beer bottles.

The goal of advertisers is not to convince the mind, but to evoke feelings, because emotional neurons are far more powerful than conceptual neurons. St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Dominican theologian, near the end of his life had a direct encounter with God. After that he stopped writing and said, “All my works seem like straw after what I have seen.” Young adults hunger for experiences that stir the heart and evoke passion. For the Church to be evangelizing it must experiential. We want to encounter God, not just talk about God. We want to encounter Mystery. We want to be changed, not just talk about change.

This is good news for Catholics. We engage in the tangible currency of sacraments, rituals, and works of charity and justice. But how can we make worship more engaging? How can we

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welcome all of God's people? How can our preaching and teaching touch the heart as well as the mind? How can our parish be alive with mission all week long?

2. E – Participatory – I – C

Young adults take cues from those around them, more than from those above them. When faced with a spiritual question, young adults search for an answer online, rather than at church. They live in a Web 2.0 culture where people shape the news through blogs and maintain relationships with online tools (e.g. Facebook, eHarmony, Twitter, video sharing, email or texting).

Participatory cultures make decisions from multiple options. So how can we make Catholic worship more involving? How can all the baptized be empowered to share their talents in the ministries of the parish?

3. E – P – Image driven – C

We have transitioned from a word-based economy to an image-driven one. If we asked someone to summarize the message of a Sunday homily, what would happen? But ask that same person to recall the final scene of a film or recount a line from a favorite movie and the results are often astounding.

Fluency in visual languages is no longer an option. Parish websites, workshops, and worship must be visually stimulating to hold a viewer's attention. The young adult blockbuster film is almost certainly either an animated production or a green-screened performance. To fill theater seats today, a film must be epic, bigger-than-life in scale. Many other churches produce made-for-TV worship experiences, complete with extreme-makeover conversion stories.

In times past, Catholic churches were the most visually captivating places in the world. They were places of mystery and visual ecstasy (stain-glass, music, incense, and larger-than-life statuary). Previous generations came to church to hear the truly epic tales of life, adventure and meaning. How can we enhance our worship through imagery or imagination today? How can we tap the power of the Christian Story? How can we share the mythic stories of saints, martyrs and the faithful witnesses of today?

4. E – P – I – Connected

Connectedness is key to physical and emotional health. People are hardwired for relationship and building communities. This has become the *raison d'être* for the web. Many people conduct their lives and transact their business online because the Internet connects us 24/7 and on our own terms. Paradoxically, the more connected that we become electronically, the less connected we are physically. As a result, we are growing increasingly disillusioned with the hyper-individualism of our culture. This is a great opportunity for parishes to engage people on new terms.

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Human beings need a variety of basic connections for abundant life – in family, with colleagues and friends, through the world of music, ideas and the arts, in nature and with our Creator. The church has always existed to connect people to this abundant life – life with Jesus Christ, life with God’s people, life in God’s will, and in leading others to God. How can the parish be a place to bring these worlds together? How can our faith connect us with one another? How can we design every program so that people are re-acquainted with one another, forming small groups for faith sharing, prayer, and learning?

St. Paul served a God-sized purpose, “. . .It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20 NRSV) People who evangelize young adults can start by seeking life in abundance, because that is what Jesus promised us – life on an **E.P.I.C.** scale. In one sense the work of evangelization is to live a Christ-sized life and share it with whoever hungers for more and through a multitude of formats.

Reflection Questions for Small Group Sharing—4 or 5 people (25-40 mins.)

1. Dennis Mahaney makes the observation that “Young adults are the most media-defined generation in the history of our species, raised on an odd assortment of computer animation and reality TV.” How does this strike you?
2. He suggests that evangelization of young adults needs to be done on an **E.P.I.C.** scale: **Experiential, Participatory, Image Driven, and Connected**? Which of these qualities do you feel most comfortable with? Which do you feel least comfortable with?
3. Which of these four suggestions is our parish or (arch)diocese already working on? How is it going? What’s going well? What’s not going well?
4. Which of the four suggestions for evangelizing young adults do you think we should focus on in the next few years? Why did you choose this one?

Take an Evangelization Challenge:

Invite a group of 7-8 young adults (ages 18-35) to come together over a simple meal to read and discuss this article together. What do they think about these four suggestions: Experiential, Participatory, Image Driven, and Connected? What specific recommendations for implementing these suggestions would they like to make to your parish or (arch)diocese?

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