

‘Disciples Called to Witness’ with Lives and Words

Recently, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis posted the online resource, *Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization*. The document is grounded in a call to renewed holiness. And it offers hope that “The New Evangelization” will give our people and parishes a fresh sense of purpose and mission. Yet some readers may be perplexed by the use of the word, ‘witness?’ We live in a culture where the religious use of the word “witness” is most often associated with evangelical and Pentecostal churches, Catholic charismatic renewal groups, or even other religions, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Let’s look at how the call to “witness” is understood in our Church. Perhaps you have heard the quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, “Go and preach the Gospel. And if you must, use words.” It is often used to emphasize the importance of the silent witness, the implicit or wordless sharing of faith that Catholics can give to others by living the Gospel of Jesus’ love in everyday life. Church teaching affirms this aspect of faith sharing: “Through this **wordless witness** these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live... Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here **we have an initial act of evangelization...**” (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, 21, emphasis mine) There is no question that we need to live like believers. Yet, is that all there is to witnessing to our Catholic Faith?

“Wordless witness” is only “an initial act of evangelization.” There is more. There is another equally important aspect to sharing our faith—explicit conversations about how we have encountered Jesus Christ in our daily lives. We are called to share openly about how scripture and Catholic teaching connect with our life experiences at home, in the neighborhood, the workplace, the civic community, as well as in Church ministries, committee meetings, and small groups. Pope Paul VI continues, “Nevertheless **this [wordless witness] always remains insufficient**, because even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified...and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus. The Good News proclaimed by the **witness of life** sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the **word of life**. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed...” (*EMW*, 22, emphasis mine)

This verbal sharing about our beliefs and experiences may scare many Catholics. We are not used to reflecting out loud or talking about how Jesus touches our lives: how he calls us to ongoing conversion and the moral decisions we need to make in order to “walk the talk,” as some writers put it. We will need to take time to practice talking with a friend or sharing group about our faith. Then we can ask Holy Spirit for opportunities to speak about Jesus Christ and the Church with others—“to witness”. Recognizing opportunities also includes cultivating an awareness of the signs that someone who is an inactive Catholic (or unchurched person) is ready to hear what we have to say about Jesus and the Church. Our experience with training average Catholics to speak about their faith is that it takes as long as nine to twelve months of concerted training, practice, and support to become comfortable with verbal witnessing.

Not long ago I was training some parish staffs about how to witness more effectively with our lives and words in everyday life and ministry. A strong objection was raised, “We can’t do this! Witnessing will take too much work!” Their concern was that witnessing will just be an add-on to our already busy and complicated lives. It seems to me that we cannot allow witnessing to become just another task. Rather it must become part of our daily life-styles, both as individuals and as a parish. Christ makes two great promises to us about witnessing to him. He will be with us, “And

remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mt. 28:20) And he promises the power of the Holy Spirit, “...You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

It seems that, as in many things Catholic, we are challenged to move beyond an “either/or” attitude about witnessing to Christ with our lives and words. We need a “both/and” approach. We are called to a radical love of God and neighbor (witness of life) “and” to speak (word of life) about the promises of Jesus and about our day-to-day encounters with him.

Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization raises the bar about witnessing to our faith as disciples of Jesus Christ, especially as we hope to reach out to our inactive Catholic brothers and sisters. “Even though much has already been done to welcome our missing brothers and sisters back to the Lord’s Table, there is still so much more that can be done... The task before the Church is to form Catholics who are willing to communicate and witness the faith to those who are no longer actively practicing. By taking up the call of the New Evangelization, we will do as St. Paul commands us: ‘Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you.’” (p.4)

Small Group or Ministry Sharing (3 or 4 people—20 mins.)

1. What is it like for you to hear the word “witness?” What images or personal experiences come to mind?
2. Which kind of witness are you most comfortable with, wordless witness or witnessing with words? How is that working out for you in reaching others for Jesus Christ?
3. What difference might it make in our parishes and diocese if we can give both kinds of witnesses to Jesus Christ and the Church in our everyday lives?
4. How has your parish or diocese recruited, formed, and supported individuals to be evangelizers through the witness of their lives and their words?

Take a “New Evangelization” Challenge:

Take time today to download, read, study, and share about the new online resource from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization* at <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/new-evangelization/disciples-called-to-witness/index.cfm>.

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