

The Strategic Role of Lay Catholics in the Dominican Mission

I am speaking to you today from a somewhat unusual life experience for one addressing a group of Dominican pastors. First of all, I am a parishioner at a Dominican parish, but this has not always been the case. I was born and raised in the evangelical Protestant community and more importantly for our considerations here today, I had the opportunity to do graduate-level study with some of the foremost evangelical missionary theologians, strategists and practitioners in the world. I have lived and served with evangelical missionaries in Europe and the Middle East and have gone to great lengths to keep in touch with the missions movement since I entered the Catholic church nearly eight years ago.

My experience in this area is significant because this gathering is considering the purpose of parish ministry and specifically the possible role of the parish and the lay Catholic in evangelizing the unchurched. I will be drawing upon some of the experience of our evangelical brothers and sisters, because despite their many theological and ecclesial deficiencies, they are very effective at evangelizing the unchurched and we, as Catholics, can learn a great deal from their practice in this area.

Now let us look again at the Acta from the Chapter of Caleruega:

In parishes we must not be satisfied with preaching to those who come to Mass. We require every province to consider its present commitment to parishes and ask if each one represents the *best basis for itinerancy in preaching to the unchurched*. *Is a particular parish a basis of new evangelization? Can it become so?* If not we should probably hand it over to the diocese. ([Chapter 2](#), no. 37)

It is a wonderful and very important question. How can we reach the unchurched and can parishes play a significant role in this evangelization?

Evangelism is clearly central to the mission of the church. Our present Pope defines evangelism beautifully. It is "to serve men and women by revealing to them the love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 2) But he then goes further to assert that missionary evangelism "is the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity in the modern world" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 2) Evangelism is also foundational to the vocation of a priest. "For since nobody can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all people" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4).

But before I go further, I'd like to ask a question about what might seem to be obvious: *What does it mean to evangelize the unchurched? What is evangelism?* I think that we need to ask this question because the issue is often framed in terms of assisting "inactive" Catholics to become "active" again, of somehow getting them to come back to the Mass and to take up again their identity as Catholics. I believe that when we focus on the "inactive" Catholic becoming "active" again, we may inadvertently be skipping over a

essential intermediary step: that of discipleship. Are "returning" Catholics returning to our parishes and to the Mass in order to follow Jesus? Are they becoming "active" because they have first become disciples? I ask this because discipleship, not just activity, is the true goal of evangelization.

When I use the word "disciple", Catholics sometimes tell me that I am showing my Protestant roots, that "disciple" is a Protestant term, not a Catholic one. But the U.S. Bishops don't seem to think so. When they issued their recent pastoral letter on evangelization, they entitled it "Go and Make Disciples," taking the term from Jesus' commission to his apostles at the end of the gospel of Matthew. Fr. Robert River, the director of Diocesan and Parish Services for the Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Association, put it this way:

Discipleship is 'what faith is for. . .it makes people into disciples of Jesus'. . . What is the purpose of our Catholic schools? To create active disciples of Jesus. Our religious education programs? Our sacramental catechesis? To create active disciples of Jesus. Moreover, discipleship involves a personal decision and a commitment - a free response to Jesus' call. . .Our whole way of being church must stem from knowing that the purpose of our faith is to be lifelong disciples. This is what makes us an evangelizing church." (*Evangelization Update*, vol. 2, no. 1)

To succeed at evangelization, we must be clear about what it entails. When we talk about preaching to the unchurched, we are talking about reaching out to those who have either ceased to be practicing Christians or who have had no meaningful contact with Christianity. But when we speak of evangelization, we are talking about reaching out to these people and calling them to become lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ *and* responsible members of his Church. Anything less than a proclamation and evangelization centered around life-long discipleship is less than Catholic.

With this definition in mind, we can then ask: what is the best method to reach out to the unchurched and call them to discipleship? I believe that a very strong case can be made that forming and enabling lay Catholics to be the primary evangelists to the unchurched is the most effective and most truly Catholic way to go about our mission. Why?

- Evangelism is intrinsic to the vocation of lay Christians. "All the laity are missionaries by baptism" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 71).
- It is proper to the lay vocation, and not primarily to the priestly vocation, to mediate between the Church and the world and to draw the world to Christ. As Yves Congar, O.P., wrote in his seminal book *Lay People in the Church*:

The hierarchy exercises the mediation of the means of grace between Christ and the faithful; the latter exercise a mediation of life between the Body of Christ and the world, and this also is a means of grace in its order. The world is drawn to Christ in and through the faithful, its human part to be transformed in him, its cosmic part to find its end in him. (p. 111)

- As Pope Paul VI noted, the contemporary society is not likely to pay attention to what is taught by the hierarchy, unless that teaching is accompanied by a compelling personal witness. A personal witness to Christ is, *par excellence*, the role of the laity in our Church. "People today put more trust in witnesses than preachers, in experience than in teaching, in life and action than in theories. The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 42). Doctrinal preaching, which is the first responsibility of the Dominican order, is not likely to be received by the unchurched unless it is embodied and witnessed in the lives of the Catholic lay men and women whom they encounter in their daily lives.
- Lay Catholics are already in daily contact with the unchurched. We have all sorts of natural ties to people who have no living contact with the Catholic Tradition. We have ready entry to many relationships and situations where no priest would be welcome.
- There are a lot more of us! There are only 150 or so Dominicans but there are 15,000 lay Catholics in Dominican parishes in the Western Province. Clearly, the outreach possible if we were able to mobilize and empower our lay membership for evangelization is many times greater than if the members of the Order are forced to rely on their own efforts alone.

For all these reasons, I believe that the most effective itinerant evangelists are trained lay disciples whose natural roles and responsibilities carry them among the unchurched every day.

But is all this just another idealistic theory that can never be realized? Is it really possible for lay Christians to successfully evangelize the unchurched? I can attest that it is not only possible, it is happening right now.

My oldest female friend is currently living in one of the most religiously repressive of the Islamic countries. I cannot reveal either her name or her location because it would be dangerous to both her and her family. She is a quite ordinary, middle-aged, five-foot - nothing housewife and mother. She and her husband spent years equipping themselves to be "tent-making" missionaries, that is, Christians who work at a secular profession that enables them to live in a country where no overt missionary work is possible in order that some living witness to the love of Jesus Christ might be found there. She now speaks the language fluently and frequently dons her national dress and goes out to the desert tribes and the outlying villages where she has developed many friendships. There she shares not only goat and spiced coffee, she shares the gospel.

What she does is possible *only* because she is a lay woman - no "official" missionary, no pastor, priest or nun would be allowed into the country. My friend is supported in her efforts not just by her husband but by her local Protestant congregation back home in the States. But when I tried to tell her story in a magazine article on lay vocation, the editor of a national magazine for committed lay Catholics told me to take it out. "None of our readers could hope to aspire to such a ministry," he said.

The odd thing is that lay evangelicals aspire to it all the time. I myself come from a quite ordinary family of Southern Baptists. We do not have any missionaries or pastors or evangelists in our background. Yet my youngest sister turned 20 in Nigeria while serving as part of a evangelistic team sent out by a Protestant congregation just a couple blocks away from Blessed Sacrament. One of my cousins is currently in Moscow where he is busy planting Protestant churches. My roommate in seminary spent five years as a lay "tent-making" missionary in Turkey. And I could tell many more such stories.

As a fellow evangelical-turned-Catholic observed to me, it is ironic that while Catholicism has a much stronger and richer theological basis for evangelization than evangelical Protestantism, the Protestants are the ones who are actually doing the lion's share of the evangelizing. The fact is that the global evangelical missionary movement has grown explosively over the past decade. In just the past ten years, the number of evangelical Protestants in the Third World has doubled from around 150 million to about 300 million. Why is this important to our discussion? Because this missionary explosion has been carried on by an evangelistic workforce that is 99% lay. And even more meaningful is the fact that a large percentage of these lay Protestant evangelists are former Catholics.

Everywhere I go in the world of evangelical missions, I run into leaders and activists who were baptized and raised as Catholics. That is because approximately 30% of today's 35 million evangelicals in the US are first or second generation former Catholics. That means that something like 11 million former Catholics identify themselves as Protestant evangelicals (Ralph Martin, *The Catholic Church at the End of an Age*, p. 39).

Among Hispanic Catholics in the United States, who now constitute nearly a third of American Catholics, five million have left the Catholic Church in the last ten years to join evangelical or Pentecostal churches or other religious movements. In 1970, 90% of American Hispanics identified themselves as Catholic. In the early 1990s, only 70% so identified themselves. (*ibid.*, p. 38)

And this trend is not just true in this country. Bishop Bonaventura Kloppenburg of Brazil has recently noted that Latin American is turning Protestant faster at the present time than Central Europe did in the sixteenth century (*ibid.*, p. 45).

Between 1960 and 1985; the numbers of evangelical Protestants:

- have doubled in Chile, Paraguay, Venezuela, Panama, and Haiti;
- tripled in Argentina, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic;
- quadrupled in Brazil and Puerto Rico;
- quintupled in El Salvador, Cost Rica, Peru, and Bolivia;
- and sextupled in Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, and Columbia (*ibid.*, p. 42).

Guatemala may have already become the first Protestant country in Latin America. If the current rate of evangelical expansion continues, it is estimated that the country will be

57% Protestant by the year 2000 (Thomas S. Giles, "Forty Million and Counting", *Christianity Today*, April 6, 1992, p. 32).

In Brazil, the largest Catholic country in the world, there are more Protestants in church on Sunday than Catholics. There are 30,000 full time Protestant ministers and only 13,000 Catholic priests. Laymen preside at more than 70% of the country's Sunday liturgies (Martin, p. 44-45). The slums of Rio are filled with Protestant churches as Catholicism is rapidly becoming the faith of the middle and upper classes. "The irony is . . . that the Catholics opted for the poor and the poor opted for the evangelicals". (James Brooke, "Pragmatic Protestants Win Catholic Converts in Brazil", *New York Times*, July 4, 1993, p.10.)

In light of these realities, I think that it is significant that one of the recommendations which emerged at Caleruega reads as follows: "...considering the widespread proselytism among Catholics by various groups of Christian evangelical inspiration, we can learn from aspects of their efforts: biblically-based preaching centered on Jesus in the language of the people, giving immediate access to lay ministry in the context of basic communities." ([Chapter 2](#), no. 38)

Why are the Protestants such effective evangelizers? The analysis of both evangelical and Catholic observers in Latin America and in this country is very similar. One of the explanations that is given again and again is that Evangelicals mobilize their laypeople for mission. ". . . observers agree that popular Protestantism has a remarkable ability to mobilize all church members for the missionary task. . . This sense of participation in mission leads to a sense of participation in worship and sometimes decision-making in the community". (Andres Topia, "Why is Latin America Turning Protestant?", *Christianity Today*, April 6, 1992, p. 33).

R. Kenneth Strachan, the late general director of the Protestant Latin American Mission, developed this influential principle for Latin churches: "The growth of any movement is in direct proportion to that movement's success in mobilizing its entire membership in constant propagation of its beliefs." The reality is that not even an Order of Preachers can take the place of the lay witness in and to the world. Priestly preaching is not an adequate substitute for a dynamic lay witness. It is the laity who have the primary responsibility for and the lion's share of the opportunity to evangelize the unchurched. Lay evangelism could also provide wonderful grist for the Dominican vocation of doctrinal preaching. As we come back to the parish from our work in the world, we bring with us the spiritual, human and social dilemmas that we encounter there. And our questions and concerns can serve as beginning places for a most fruitful Dominican preaching, as you bring the full Catholic tradition to bear on the life and culture of our times.

The question before us is not *will* Catholics in the pews be evangelized? In this country and elsewhere, the chances are very good that they will and that a significant portion of them will respond favorably and become evangelizers themselves in turn. The question is *who* will evangelize them? Evangelical Protestants? Mormons? Jehovah Witnesses? Or Catholics?

If the goal of evangelization is lifelong discipleship, how is that best achieved? Proclamation of the gospel must begin outside the Christian community but we cannot stop there. We must recognize that proclamation *alone* is not truly effective evangelization because proclamation alone does not usually make lifelong disciples. Life-long discipleship requires the on-going, life-long support of the Christian community. To make disciples requires not only evangelists, but an evangelizing parish as well.

Evangelical Protestants are famous for their emphasis on proclamation, for their mass evangelistic crusades where people are asked to come forward and accept Jesus as their "personal Savior". But recently, even they have started to become aware of the fact that proclamation alone is not enough. For instance, the evangelical world was surprised when studies showed that only 3-5% of those who make a first-time faith commitment at Billy Graham crusades are active members of a Christian community a year later. Very few if any churches, grow as a result of such crusades. Ed Silvano, a leading Protestant Argentinean evangelist, became dissatisfied with this 'proclamation-only' approach, as he realized that he was not seeing a great deal of fruit that endured. Silvano came to the United States and studied church growth at the Fuller School of World Mission, where he designed a whole new city-wide approach to evangelism. The major innovations involved focusing on making disciples, rather than getting decisions, and on planting new Christian communities designed around the incorporation and formation of the new converts. With this new approach, Silvano was thrilled to see that rate of assimilation into the local church of those making first-time decisions go up to 47%.

The evangelicals "discovered" this on a purely pragmatic basis. But Catholics have always recognized the absolutely essential and foundational role of the Christian community and rejected a "me and Jesus" version of Christianity. This is why proclamation alone without the evangelizing community is a less than fully Catholic approach to outreach. "Conversion and baptism give entry into a Church already in existence or require the establishment of new communities which confess Jesus as Saviour and Lord. This is part of God's plan, for it pleases him 'to call human beings to share in his own life not merely as individuals, without any unifying bond between them, but rather to make them into a people in which his children, who had been widely scattered, might be gathered together in unity' (*Lumen Gentium*, 9)." (*Redemptoris Missio*, 48).

To return to the recommendation of Caleruega: ". . .we can learn from aspects of their efforts, biblically-based preaching centered on Jesus in the language of the people, giving immediate access to lay ministry in the context of basic communities". ([Chapter 2](#), no. 38) There is a particular quality of warmth, relationship, and intimate sharing *centered around the discipleship of the people in the pews* that characterize an evangelizing parish. As a Swiss Catholic missionary to Bolivia, Robert Aubrey, has observed, "The atmosphere of a community of converted people which praise the Lord and find religious and human warmth in the midst of a faceless society and of almost anonymous parishes, is something essential for human life. Only within a community can the new convert persevere, and experience the riches of faith and its implications for life" (Samuel Escobar, "A New Reformation," *Christianity Today*, April 6, 1992, p. 33-34). Ninety-

nine percent of all Catholics have only one place where they could hope to find such support for their Christian life and vocation - their local parish.

When you entered the Order, you spent years being educated and formed for your vocation. But I, too, am a preacher of the gospel in my own right - and where is my house of formation? *Your* parish is *my* St. Albert's, the only house of formation I may ever have to prepare me for my vocation as an evangelizing change agent in the world. Lay movements can only do so much and only touch a very small percentage of the total Catholic community. I work for the charismatic renewal and I can tell you that we are acutely aware that we are trying to provide in a very fragmented and inadequate way the kind of formation and support for discipleship that can only be done really well in a full-blown Christian community, that is, in a parish. To be fully Catholic, evangelism requires not just the evangelizing preacher, but the evangelizing parish.

Is there anything that we can learn from the evangelical world about what a parish that effectively served as a formation center for lay evangelists might look like?

- Lay evangelicals think of themselves as disciples of Jesus Christ who are responsible for bringing his mission in the world to fulfillment. They routinely think in those terms *because their local congregation constantly encourages them to do so*. Evangelicals pick this up as naturally as Catholics pick up devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. If you spend enough time in the evangelical world, an evangelistic stance toward the whole world seeps into your very bones.
- Being involved in some form of evangelistic activity or ministry is the norm for the average member of an evangelical congregation. As the motto of the evangelical mega-church down the block from Blessed Sacrament puts it: "every member a minister." Evangelistic activity is constantly being held up, discussed, and modeled in the community.
- The catechesis, training, and personal support structures for lay evangelization are very visible, easily accessible, and designed to be meaningful to the average person in the pew. Most people are not innovators but respond to, react to, or reject the visible alternatives directly in front of them. There are literally tens of thousands of front line evangelical lay missionaries all over the world because there are *thousands of local congregations and para-church organizations that recruit, train, nurture, finance, and support lay evangelistic initiatives and teams*.

But when a lay Catholic starts to be evangelistically active, he or she has to carve out an individual, and often, quite lonely path. Lay Catholic evangelists often have to be remarkably independent and self-motivated because they can't count on much support or understanding from those their local parish. There is absolutely no reason why this has to be true of Dominican parishes. We can create both the atmosphere and structures in our local parishes that make both the need, the possibilities, and the resources immediately accessible to the *average* parishioner.

As pastors, of course, you cannot make this happen alone. You're already stretched to the limit - and where would you begin to find the time to nurture, form, and support hundreds

of your parishioners? No pastor, no matter how hard-working and gifted, can really sustain relationship with and nurture more than about 200 people at a time and Catholic parishes routinely have thousands of members. Our parishes are almost all what would be considered by Protestants to be "mega-churches", that is, communities of such size and complexity that secondary and tertiary levels of pastoral leadership are necessary to provide adequate care to every member. Without deliberately developing this secondary leadership, I don't think that we can create evangelizing communities or provide our laity with the formation they need to be effective in their vocations in the world.

I am not referring primarily to hiring more parish associates or staff, although that might be necessary in some instances. The gifts and charisms necessary to turn our parishes into evangelizing communities and to deliver the nurture and formation that effective lay evangelists require are already available - in the lay men and women of our parishes. There the Holy Spirit has given us wonderful charisms of evangelizing, teaching, pastoring, encouragement, administration, and leadership. The evangelical world knows this and puts great emphasis on developing secondary leadership from within the congregation. Some congregations even have full-time staff whose job is to facilitate the discernment and maturation of the charisms of the whole community. They are always scanning the horizon for potential new lay leadership and ensuring that these rising lay leaders get the formation they need. In such a congregation, the job of the pastor is not to pastor every individual in the community, but to pastor the lay pastors who then turn around and care for the community.

If evangelism "is the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity in the modern world" as Pope John Paul II has said, then I think that we must thoughtfully reassess our present pastoral practices in light of how we can best offer this "primary service" to as many as possible. One thing is clear in light of our Catholic tradition - every baptized Catholic has an essential role to play.

Although it is certainly true that you bear ultimate responsibility for the parish, you are not *the* leader or *the* pastor; you are a leader of developing leaders and a pastor of maturing pastors. You are not the sole preacher in your parish - you are the leader of a whole community of potential preachers. The 15,000 parishioners that attend Dominican parishes in the Western Province are, first and foremost, 15,000 potential fellow apostles. I assure you that is how they are perceived by the evangelical Protestants who are reaching out to them and, as we have seen, that is exactly what many lay Catholics become when seriously confronted with the call to follow Jesus Christ as Lord.

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