

Obstacles to evangelization

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An NCR Editorial

From the earliest days of his pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI has expressed his ardent desire to re-Christianize the West. To this end, earlier this month he unveiled a new Vatican agency, the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization. Headed by Italian Archbishop Rino Fisichella, the council is to present the Catholic faith anew to the world.

In announcing the council, the Vatican listed social and economic changes that have dulled the Christian message, especially in the Western world. Mentioned were advances in science and technology; the widening of individual freedom and lifestyle choices; the mixing of cultures and ethnic groups brought about by migration; and the growing interdependence among peoples.

Benedict admitted that while some of these changes have brought about benefits for many people, they have often been accompanied by a loss of the sense of the sacred. To combat secularization, he called for a more effective presentation of the faith, saying the first task of the new agency is to prepare a 20th anniversary celebration for the revived Catholic catechism in the year 2012.

The task of effective evangelization is monumental. The pope is right to recognize the many seductive and competing influences. However, forgive us for being skeptical that a renewed focus on the Catholic catechism is the key to unlock the required fervor to fill the task. Yes, let's get back to teaching the faith. But how about making the focus the core teachings of Jesus? Is our church adequately proclaiming and living his teachings? Are we characterized by nonviolence, mercy, forgiveness and compassion? Are we celebrating and encouraging parents and their children? Are we hearing these teachings echoed from our pulpits?

If not, why not? If not, what are we hearing? Up front, let's admit virtually anything Catholic has been for a long time buried under endless reports of clergy sex abuse and episcopal cover-up. The callousness of those who repeatedly placed the perceived good of the institution before the protection of children has done incalculable damage to evangelization.

Again, what are we hearing? The sad answer is that we hear too little of the beatitudes and too much about judgment and admonition, seemingly always with a focus on sexual behavior. Our church would gain the ears of many if it were seen as an inclusive and welcoming community.

Effective evangelization requires a good dose of humility. We don't see enough of it in our church today. Humility requires listening and listening some more -- refraining from judgment, recognizing the challenges and struggles we all face. Might something be gained by recognizing the goodness and insights of those outside the Catholic faith? Could this begin a more effective conversation of faith? Instead, we have seen an emphasis on expressing Catholicism as the one and only true faith. Our U.S. women religious leaders today are being investigated by the Vatican for not adequately upholding to the supremacy of the Catholic faith. Maybe the women are simply better listeners.

Does our church come across as a caring, welcoming and inclusive? Ask gays and lesbians and their parents. They will give you an earful. Many of our parishes are inclusive, are welcoming of all. But this too often happens against the episcopal grain, not with it.

And then there is the elephant in the living room. It just sits there and blocks a vision for advancing good evangelization. There's the issue of women in the church. At this point, a decade into the 21st century, 20th-century cultural and educational shifts that have taken women into leadership positions worldwide are not mirrored in our church. Women simply have no say in key decision-making. Let's be clear here. No effective re-evangelization of the West will occur as long as women are treated as they are today within the Catholic church. It simply won't happen. Many Western mothers have long stopped encouraging their sons to join the Catholic priesthood; most find it difficult to impossible to defend Catholic canons to their daughters. Instead of addressing this matter squarely, as a prerequisite for sharing the faith, the Vatican shuns women's issues at every turn. When women really share leadership with men in our church, evangelization in the West will have another chance. Not before.

A half century ago, at the Second Vatican Council, church prelates from around the world gathered and spoke about the need to modernize the church, to empower the laity and to decentralize authority. They spoke of the primacy of local church and a critical need to understand and celebrate local culture. In retrospect those were enlightened moments, filled with evangelical humility. In recent decades, however, those intentions have withered. National episcopal conferences, which grew out of Vatican II, have been largely voided of authority. Even the language of prayer, growing out of spiritual concepts cemented in local culture, is again routinely usurped, edited by prelates with little understanding of local habits or language, and forced into local prayer books. This is not the work of humble agents of the Gospel. Meanwhile, five decades after Vatican II, the vision of collegiality has not been explored; it has been scrapped.

And so it was not surprising that we heard in recent days patriarchs at the synod on the Middle East speak of an imperial mindset in Rome. They, in turn, echoed many of the sentiments raised at the 1998 synod on Asia by bishops who said successful evangelization in the East requires respect, not edicts.

It's time to tear down artificial church barriers to Christian re-evangelization. Let's listen more; judge less. Let's speak with those who have found and who honor the spirit outside our church. Let's place a premium on humility. Then let's focus on living and teaching Jesus' liberating messages of faith. Joyfully, let's celebrate together. We might be surprised at the results.

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