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Ads aim to extend Catholic welcome

by Brian Roewe

With Christmas comes a flood of holiday favorites to the TV -- there's Rudolph, George Bailey, Scrooge and Charlie Brown, and a sleigh-load of holiday-themed movies and shows. Among the flurry of classic Christmas staples this season, viewers may have seen a new Christmas message creep in during a commercial break -- a welcome home.

Since Dec. 16 and running through Jan. 9, a nonprofit organization and lay apostolate, Catholics Come Home, has filled prime-time airwaves nationwide with commercials aimed at inviting lapsed Catholics and seculars, among others, to return to the church, to give it another go.

The campaign aims to reach 250 million TV viewers in more than 10,000 cities in an effort to bring a million people home for "the largest family reunion in history."

With a 2008 Pew Study saying only 41 percent of U.S. Catholics attend Mass weekly and Americans spending an estimated 38 hours a week consuming media, the ads aim to meet people where they are, airing on stations like CBS, NBC and FOX News, and during shows like "60 Minutes," "NCIS" and college football bowl games.

One commercial titled "Epic" tracks the enormity and accomplishments of the church's 2,000-year history, saying, "We are the largest charitable organization on the planet, bringing comfort to those in need."

(EPIC Full Length from Catholics Come Home on Vimeo.)

"It shows [the] beauty and depth of who we are as Catholics," said Tom Peterson, who founded the campaign after a "spiritual reversion" on a married men's retreat in 1997.

A second commercial, "Movie," shows people as they watch the film of their life, with all the ups and the downs, concluding Jesus came to save the world, and God can help edit your life story if you accept his mercy.

(MOVIE from Catholics Come Home on Vimeo.)

Advertisement

The Hollywood-caliber commercials reframe contemporary Catholicism, said Edward Russell, an advertising professor at the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University in New York, adding he was surprised at first viewing. Though not Catholic himself, Russell found the ads sincere and honest.

"I think the message and the way it was written was very welcoming: I'm not telling you what to do, I'm not telling you what not to do, I'm just telling you, if you would like to come back, we'd love to have you. And that to me was a very nonthreatening, sort of welcoming message," he said.

The nearly \$4 million campaign comes as a signature moment for Catholics Come Home and Peterson, who have been partnering with dioceses across the country in regional campaigns since the organization's 2008 inception in Phoenix.

Since then, 30 dioceses have run Catholics Come Home campaigns in their television markets, including Sacramento, Calif.; Providence, R.I.; Chicago; and Boston. For many, the professional quality of the ads made the campaign enticing.

"It was solid, it was Catholic, but it was also very well-produced, very professionally done. It was something that was going to stand out in the media," said Msgr. Jacques Plante, director of the Office for Evangelization and Pastoral Planning with the Providence diocese, which used the ads as part of a larger, year-of-evangelization initiative.

Regional campaigns varied depending on media markets, and dioceses covered the costs in different ways, ranging from evangelization budgets and single donors to fundraiser campaigns and second collections.

The Sacramento diocese gauged the interest of its parishioners before signing on with Catholics Come Home, finding overwhelming support.

"Even though our budgets were dwindling, and we're having to lay off people at the pastoral center, the money was just coming in for this [campaign]," said Carson Weber, associate director for new media evangelization for the Sacramento diocese. Part of the \$400,000 his office raised went toward the national campaign.

Many dioceses say the reaction to the commercials has been widely positive. Priests have seen a reinvigorated excitement among the people, with one anecdote telling of 350 people showing up for a Christmas tree lighting and prayer service at St. Patrick's Church in Providence, amid a torrential rainstorm.

Who is coming back? Parishes and dioceses report that many returners said they had become distracted from their faith, that it was no longer a priority.

“People recognized that everything else was crowding out their regular practice of their faith, and it was the ads that really touched them, that brought them back,” Plante said.

Peterson, while proud of the commercials, refuses to take any credit for their impact.

“We can provide excellence, we can provide an inviting, loving message. But the bottom line is, this is a work and an action of the Holy Spirit,” he said.

While few doubt the compelling nature of the commercials, quantifying the results is a hazy endeavor.

Catholics Come Home says that participating dioceses see on average a 10 percent increase in Mass attendance, while some see up to 18 percent. Since Peterson and his team leave the measuring to each diocese, there is no uniform system for detecting an effect.

After its Lent 2008 campaign, Peterson’s home diocese of Phoenix saw an increase of 12 percent the following October and Lent. Ryan Hanning, director of parish leadership support, attributed the increase to the commercials and outreach efforts of the parishes, and said the 12 percent has held steady.

“From all data we have, we’ve shown a retention of that 12 percent, if not a slightly higher increase throughout the years,” Hanning said.

To track the results of its Advent 2009 campaign, the Rockford, Ill., diocese ran its usual October head count and an additional count the second week of Lent. From October 2009 to February 2010, the diocese saw a 10 per-cent bump in Mass attendance -- the number reported on Catholics Come Home’s website -- but comparing head counts from the campaign year to the next calendar year showed a more modest 1 percent increase.

Providence saw similar results: an increase of 2,171 people at Mass in its October 2010 head count that followed its Advent 2009 campaign. A spokesperson from the Chicago archdiocese also said there was an increase immediately after its Advent 2009 campaign -- but not the 8.1 percent Catholics Come Home advertises -- and saw its numbers drop in following years.

Before the national campaign kicked off, Mark Gray of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University in Washington compared Mass attendance data in dioceses with a Catholics Come Home campaign and dioceses without it from 2005 and 2011.

At the same time the number of people saying they attend Mass at least once a month increased by 8 percent in dioceses with Catholics Come Home, dioceses without the ads saw a 9 percent rise. Still, Catholics Come Home dioceses reported a growth of 1.2 million more Catholics than dioceses not using the ads, from 2006-2011.

Factors like general population shifts and baptism rates also add distortion to the reported numbers. Gray found that most of the growth concentrated in three dioceses -- Phoenix, Atlanta and Sacramento -- that saw significant increases in total population growth over the last decade. Baptism rates were shown to decline in Catholics Come Home dioceses during the same period.

Russell, with 25 years in the advertising business, said, “Tracking success is hard for anybody. You might be tremendously successful, but it’s because of three other things happening in town -- a company pulled

out and everyone lost their jobs and everybody's coming to pray.?

Despite the uncertain quantitative effect of the ads, dioceses that used the campaign stand by its impact, particularly as a catalyst for those already in the pews.

?It really was a boost to the people that are in the church, to say, ?Hey, I have a responsibility to go out and evangelize, I have a responsibility to ask people to come back, I have a responsibility to my own children,? ? said Penny Wiegert, director of communication in the Rockford diocese.

Like Rockford, the Sacramento and Providence dioceses never set parameters to judge the campaign's worth. The St. Louis archdiocese, currently running the Catholics Come Home ads, said it hopes to see a 10 percent increase in Mass attendance.

?We never expected people to come back to the church in droves,? Wiegert said. ?We never expected a commercial to do that kind of thing, because there's a lot more to a person's faith experience and the practice of their faith.?

?Catholics Come Home is not a magic bullet to evangelization,? Weber said. ?We're trying not to look at evangelization as a numbers game.?

?[We] can only do so much,? said Peterson, explaining his team's call is to ?put out a warm, inviting, appealing message through television and the Internet,? and it is up to the parishes and people there to help with long-term retention.

To aid and continue the evangelization effort ignited by Catholics Come Home, many dioceses have increased their efforts to not only welcome people back, but ensure they feel welcomed once they arrive.

In Rockford, ?ministers of first impression? -- ushers, parish secretaries and maintenance staff -- received training to answer questions people may have and provide an inviting environment. Similar parish welcoming committees sprouted up in many areas, placing ?welcome home? banners on churches and providing special meetings for newcomers. After the ads ran in Sacramento, the diocese saw the number of return-home ministries double to more than 70 parishes.

In Providence and Phoenix, parishioners even went door-to-door to invite others back. For many parishes, the Catholics Come Home campaign provided a much-needed spark to revitalize its people toward an evangelization effort that rarely yields instant results.

?Evangelization is a process in people's lives,? Weber said. ?We knew that what we're doing, in many people's lives, we're just planting seeds. This may not come to fruition for 10 years.?

?As far as numbers, one is enough,? Wiegert said.

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