How should the new evangelization work?

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The Baltimore archdiocese, along with many other dioceses throughout the country, is heavily engaged in pursuing the work of a new evangelization. A carefully structured process is being developed which includes surveys, lay participation, and focus groups. The goal appears to be developing a program for producing missionary disciples.

But what is this new evangelization? This is a real question as exemplified by the fact that it is taking a rather extraordinary process to determine what it is, and what is to be done about it. What would these new missionary disciples actually do? Pope Francis and his predecessors have indicated the importance of this new initiative. Francis, in fact, has elevated it to a major priority.

Yet one still has to ask the question, "What does Francis want us to do?" We had a practice in the seminary where seminarians would stand on a street corner in Baltimore and preach to passersby. Is this what we are to do? As lay people are we to approach our friends, neighbors and co-workers and say, "I want to tell you about the Catholic church?" Matthew tells us we are to go out into the world and make disciples of all nations.

One problem is the surveys show that the greatest resistance from parishioners is a reluctance to tell others what to believe, or to approach them and talk about their own faith. We are a community, especially in this country, that has learned to respect the beliefs of others and even to value the differences that exist in various religious traditions.

So where to begin? First of course, we have to deepen our own faith and come to a greater understanding of what we believe. We need to understand what we believe about the church, but also what we believe about the community in which we live.

I think it would be useful to know what the state of belief is in our country today. An article in The Atlantic provides a useful picture of religion as it exists in the United States today.

The primary issue in the article is determining why people don't go to church. The answer seems to be logistics. That is, they are too busy, and it's hard to get everybody ready to go on a Sunday morning. A corollary to this reality seems to be that church attendance is no longer seen to be as essential as it once was. Among Catholics, most no longer see it as a mortal sin if they miss Mass on Sunday. Do we want to hang that condemnation over the heads of Catholics again, or do we want to find more positive reasons for them to choose to attend church?

On the more positive side it turns out that a lot of people are going to church more frequently than before. Of the more than half of Americans who go to church regularly, 25 percent are more active now than they used to be.

Of those who were raised in a religious family, 20 percent have stopped going to church because of a dislike of organized religion, or because they have stopped believing in the tenets of their church. The bottom line seems to be that belief draws people to church, while logistics keeps them away.
Perhaps there is a group among all these statistics that could be targeted for a beneficial outreach effort?

I think Pope Francis may have the answer [2] to our original question when he says, "It is not by proselytizing that the church grows, but by attraction." So it seems that when Francis speaks of evangelization he is talking about making the church more attractive and welcoming. It is an active evangelization, but active in the sense of reaching out to people who are economically poor and providing help to those in need.

So my sense of what the new evangelization could mean in practical terms is a church open to the community around it. It involves what we have all been taught -- to witness by our example. We need to live a good Christian life at home, work, and in all that we do. We need to be receptive to those who seem interested or may be searching, but also respectful of the beliefs of others.

As a parish, I believe we need to be more conscious of the fact that we are part of a larger community. Clear and welcoming invitations should be a part of our parish activities. Members of the community should feel welcome to join us at fish fries, spring flings, spaghetti dinners, or ice cream socials.

Moreover, we should initiate and participate in joint projects with other churches to support those in need, or to address other issues of common interest to the community. We should conduct meaningful interfaith services more frequently.

Most missionaries in our church today go into an area and work to feed the hungry and clothe the naked before they ever start talking about their faith. Such missionaries work to become a good neighbor in their community and thus attract people to want to know more about them.

I think Francis has it right, "It is not by proselytizing that the church grows, but by attraction."


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