

Taking the First Step: Keys to Sharing Faith Person-to-Person

by Saint Paul Street Evangelization

Evaluating Our Relationship with Christ—Growth in Self-Knowledge

Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.

Romans 12:2

All Catholics, whatever their circumstances in life, have been called to proclaim the Gospel (CCC 905, 1816; *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 120). As a grassroots organization, St. Paul Street Evangelization has equipped thousands of Catholics for the task of evangelization. Our evangelists share the Gospel with their communities through face-to-face encounters in the public square. They are on sidewalks and street corners; they are in classrooms and workplaces; they are at festivals, bus stations, front doors, and even prisons. Years of experience and tens of thousands of conversations have taught us that evangelization is a ministry of presence which takes place through listening, befriending, proclaiming the Gospel, and making an invitation to faith. These steps are the beginning of a lifelong process of conversion and discipleship for many people.

Evangelization is at the heart of the mission of the Church. “As the kernel and center of His Good News, Christ proclaims salvation, this great gift of God which is liberation from everything that oppresses man but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil One, in the joy of knowing God and being

known by Him, of seeing Him, and of being given over to Him” (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 9). Evangelists are motivated by the love of God and the desire for the salvation of souls; they wish to share with others that faith in Jesus Christ is the way given to us by God that we might spend eternity in heaven with him, and avoid the pains of hell (see 2 Corinthians 5:14).

In order to become an evangelist it is necessary to first examine our own life and our walk with Christ. In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis reminds us that people are attracted to the joy they see in Christians. Joy cannot be faked but radiates from a soul who is in the state of grace and prays. The evangelist has given their life to Jesus, received forgiveness of sin, and therefore exhibits the graces evident in a life lived according to the Cross of Christ.

Evangelists encounter people in the messiness of their lives. Evangelization begins when we invest ourselves in others in all their brokenness, because our own brokenness has been taken up and healed by Christ. There is something different about such Christians. They have found joy in their suffering because they have put their faith in Jesus, who first suffered and died for us. The Christian does not escape suffering, but suffering is transformed and gives way to a deep and abiding peace because of the nearness of Jesus Christ. “It is impossible to persevere in a fervent evangelization unless we are convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him”

(*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 266). We cannot introduce others to Jesus if we do not know him and if we do not live as disciples.

The Life of Discipleship— Strengthening Your Faith Through Prayer and Sacrament

The beginning of wisdom is fear of the LORD, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Proverbs 9:10

“Thanks solely to this encounter—or renewed encounter—with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 8).

A missionary disciple must find a balance between the contemplative life and the active life of Christian service. Christians who do not strengthen their faith through prayer and the sacraments run the risk of being caught up in the allure of the world and falling back into sinful habits. Pope Francis warns us against being trapped by a consumer mentality and cautions us to be detached from the things in the world by finding fulfillment in God: “The Church is sent by Jesus Christ as the sacrament of the salvation offered by God. Through her evangelizing activity, she cooperates as an instrument of that divine grace which works unceasingly and inscrutably” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 112).

Evangelists should first be encouraged to embrace the Gospel fully by acknowledging their complete dependence on God’s mercy, by professing their faith at Mass, and by repenting of their sins and receiving the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

regularly. Further, evangelists should develop a devotional life, such as praying the Rosary for the conversion of souls, practice Christian meditation such as *Lectio Divina*, praying the Rosary for the conversion of souls, or, as Pope Francis asked, by consecrating themselves daily to Jesus.

A Ministry of Presence—Evangelizing through the Art of Listening and Genuine Friendships

This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

John 15:12-13

In order to proclaim the Gospel to another, we must first open ourselves up to listening to another person’s story and befriending that person in their own journey. Evangelization requires time, commitment, and the vulnerability of interpersonal relationships more than it requires investment in particular programs. We cannot evangelize those we do not love, and we cannot love those we do not take the time to invest in, whether or not they end up becoming Catholic disciples. A good starting point is to find common ground with those we want to evangelize.

“In this preaching, which is always respectful and gentle, the first step is personal dialogue, when the other person speaks and shares his or her joys, hopes and concerns for loved ones, or so many other heartfelt needs. Only afterwards is it possible to bring up God’s Word, perhaps by reading a Bible verse or relating a story, but always keeping in mind the fundamental message: the personal love of God who became man, who gave himself up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 128).

Relational evangelization presupposes the understanding that the discovery of Jesus and the experience of his mercy comes before the obligations and demands of the Gospel and the moral life in

Christ. As Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa said, in Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God, to put the obligations of the Gospel ahead of the discovery of Jesus is to put the carts before the railway engine.

With this in mind, here are some basic steps we can take to quickly and easily share our faith. A short, two minute conversation can change a person's life forever.

- A face-to-face conversation about Jesus Christ and his Church can begin with an icebreaker. Often it is helpful to give someone a tangible reminder of Christ's love for them, like a Rosary or a holy medal.
- Invite the person to share something of their story with you. Get to know them as you would anyone you meet for the first time.
- Consider that this person is loved by God and that the Holy Spirit may have put them in your life so that they can hear the Gospel.
- Ask them if they go to church or to describe their relationship with God as a way to start talking about faith.
- Offer to share one good reason why you choose to believe in God or be a Christian.
- Offer to remember them in prayer daily for the next week and ask them if they have a particular prayer request.
- Offer to pray for them on the spot, placing the burden to pray on you and not on them.
- Ask permission to contact them later and tell them you would like to invite them to a parish event, or even over to your own home. Follow up on your promise to contact them.
- Invite them to events at your parish or small groups where they can explore the Gospel.

Our evangelists have found that people want to talk about God and want to connect with other people. We need to be open and vulnerable enough

ourselves to extend an offer of friendship and willingly open up the door to a conversation about faith.

A Ministry of Proclamation—Telling Stories and Making Invitations

This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.

Mark 1:15

According to Pope Paul VI, no true evangelization can exist if Jesus Christ has not been proclaimed (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 22). All Catholics share in the responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel in word and the witness of life. When prompted by the Holy Spirit, Catholics should be practiced enough to be able to make a simple proclamation of the Gospel. "We have rediscovered the fundamental role of the first announcement or kerygma, which needs to be the center of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 164).

Often, the Gospel is best proclaimed through story telling. This might include telling stories from popular culture with Christian themes, telling the great story of salvation in a simple and direct way, sharing our own personal testimony, or pointing out how God is at work in a person's life. Oftentimes, it also means planting seeds through other pre-evangelization activities that open up the heart to hearing the Gospel.

When the Gospel is proclaimed it is necessary to follow up the proclamation with an invitation that leads to accompaniment. In a face-to-face encounter Catholics should do their best to ask for permission to follow up with people they witness to, get their names and numbers (or e-mail addresses) and then invite them to continue the journey of discipleship by connecting them to appropriate resources in the local parish. We always seek to build a bridge of trust between the heart of the person, the local Catholic community, and Jesus. These relationships lead to conversion.

A Ministry of Accompaniment— Walking with People to Discipleship

And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them . . . Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures.

Luke 24:15, 27

The journey that began with a smile and a friendly greeting leads to spiritual accompaniment, just as Jesus walked with those on the road to Emmaus and opened the Scriptures to them. Those who have heard the Gospel should be encouraged to act on the knowledge of the truth and make an act of the will to follow Jesus. This is what conversion looks like. Once the will is resolved to follow Jesus, the relationship with him can begin with a prayer of consecration, returning to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and

making a commitment to amend one's life and become a disciple. An evangelist serves as a ready friend, guide, and prayerful intercessor throughout this process.

There is much more to be said about each of these areas, but the basic process of evangelization is not complicated. It does, however, require us to do the hard work of being saints ourselves, to invest in the lives of those we wish to evangelize, and to overcome the fear of making invitations to faith in Jesus Christ.

St. Paul Street Evangelization (SPSE) is a grassroots, non-profit organization, dedicated to responding to the mandate of Jesus to preach the Gospel to all nations by taking the Catholic faith to the streets. Christ's call to evangelize was made to every Catholic Christian, and the Second Vatican Council reiterated this need, urging each of the baptized to bring the Gospel, found fully in the Catholic Church, to a culture that has largely reverted to paganism. As an on-the-street Catholic evangelization organization, St. Paul Street Evangelization provides an avenue for people to share the Person of Jesus Christ and the truth and beauty of the Catholic faith with a hungry culture.