



A talk given to Duchy Circle Catenians on 9th March 2021

by Fr Robbie Low

EVANGELISM FOR THE SHY, THE HESITANT AND THE INCOMPETENT.

Good evening, gentlemen, good to be with you – more or less, technology permitting. Lots to get through tonight so I will get on with it.

When Peter asked me, on your behalf, to give a little input tonight, I thought immediately of our greatest need as the Church in our land. That is to say, EVANGELISM.

In my lifetime and yours Mass attendance has gone off the cliff.

In 1960 75% of all Catholics were regular in their attendance at Mass ie weekly. Within fifty years that proportion had dropped to approximately 20%. The overwhelming bulk of even that miserable figure is made up of the moribund, those in the home strait, you and me.

Go to a Catholic funeral and encounter the vast hinterland of the lapsed who are there out of tribal loyalty but, in terms of the Mass and the Faith, haven't a clue whether they are having a shave or a shampoo. (This is true of other denominations too but I'm not interested in them). Some of those lapsed, to our sorrow and in spite of our best efforts, will be our children and grandchildren.

The reasons for this are legion. Some external, some internal. Internal first. The post-conciliar Church, while sticking to its stated aims, in most practical terms, abandoned its claim to uniqueness and played down the consequences of mortal sin.

Hell went on the back burner, so to speak.

The invention of the ‘anonymous Christian’ – courtesy of Karl Rahner - became a popular theological riff. Unencumbered by the theological finesse of the professionals, many ordinary folk were relieved to think they had discovered that everyone went to Heaven, that there was little need to convert their mates, and indeed that, consequently, missing mass might no longer have consequences, mortal or otherwise.

The decline of regular confession only accelerated this perception.

Outside the Church the culture was disintegrating and re-forming into an unrecognisable shape. The tectonic plates of Judeo-Christian morality were shifting at Warp Factor 5. The touchstone, as so often in periods of burgeoning paganism, was sex. As society, family and relationships have been increasingly disordered, at spectacular personal and social cost, the prevailing zeitgeist, far from taking stock and repenting, has reacted by putting its foot to the boards and accelerating its pursuit of destruction and disintegration.

We have a choice here. Either to despair of the world and simply give in to the thought that there is little we can do – I think of my great hero, Elijah, utterly depressed by the culture’s abandonment of God and asking God to let him die.

God’s response to Elijah’s lonely call is to tell him several things:

- 1) He is lonely but he is not alone. Others are rallying.
- 2) He needs to get off his arse (I paraphrase) set out to the Holy Mountain where the Covenant was given and wait on the Presence. Pilgrimage and prayer and re-dedication.
- 3) Go out and train up the next generation and anoint the future.

We too have a choice. Depression, introversion, collusion even OR Girding our loins, getting back to the foundations, dwelling in the Presence and getting out there among the next generation and introducing them to the Lord.

We can either look upon the present circumstances as the end – because the culture does not listen – or the beginning again because we write on a tabula rasa and the evidence is increasingly in – paganism and atheism do not work. They are both roads to ruin.

A little background:

On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception 1975, the tenth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, His Holiness Pope St. Paul VI issued an Apostolic Exhortation entitled ‘Evangelii Nuntiandi’, - The Proclamation of the Gospel to the people of our time. This is a foundational document for all post-conciliar considerations of the mission of the Church. (The recent Evangelii Gaudium is Pope Francis personal riff on that document)

This instruction from the Holy Father came to a generation that, though it could scarcely have realised it at the time, was about to be charged with the reconversion of the West.

The first thing to grasp is that evangelism is the central task of the Church of Christ. Evangelism is what the Church does from the moment of her birth at Pentecost and it is not an optional extra. We cannot leave evangelism to the evangelicals nor even to the professional evangelists. It is a whole Church task and calling. Part of the calling of each and every Christian is to bring men and women home to God for reconciliation, healing, forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

Pope Paul VI writes: ‘The task of evangelising all peoples constitutes the essential mission of the Church. --- She exists in order to evangelise.’

In short, it’s down to you and me.

The truth is that you are the people best placed to do it. You reach the parts that our clergy simply have neither the time nor the facility to access – your families, your workplace, your shops, your clubs, our friendship groups, in short everywhere you go. You are the frontline in this great

enterprise of Christ. Far from fearing this task you should embrace it joyfully. Your witness is the key.

The natural corollary of our conversion is to want to share that joy of salvation and knowing our destiny in Christ with others.

And here is a great spiritual lesson:

When we tell someone about the Faith or witness to it, we are ourselves strengthened. When we hear the Gospel and God acts in our lives and we remain silent, we lose something.

This is where this spiritual lesson fires home. Most of us have been taught loads. The reason many cannot evangelise is that they never pass this teaching on.. What you don't share, you lose.

The Church does not hold fast to the Tradition like some spiritual version of the National Trust or English Heritage, but rather so she can hand it on the living Faith intact to the next generation and the next. Tradition (Traditio) actually means just that –the handing on.

There is a lot more but I want to cut to the chase. What can we do practically?

So we need to keep learning, keep listening to the Word of God. There will never come a time when we know it all so we get sharing straightaway. We need to know our stuff. But we would need to know our stuff if we were learning golf, the banjo, a knitting pattern or nuclear physics. Why should we reserve our apathy and indolence for God?

Pray your offices, go to mass, read the books, take the educational courses offered to you. If you don't know, then ask.

In all this, our Holy Father tells us, of the primary importance of is the witness of our lives.

Who we are and what we do is vital. What we do must correspond to what we say. There must be an integrity.

Some people try to get out of evangelising by dredging up a supposed quote of St. Francis telling us to,

‘Preach the Gospel. Use words if necessary.’

Francis was speaking to a very religious age and he was suggesting that words have to be backed by action. He used a lot of words himself.

If we argue that we do not need to use words then we are suggesting that the outstanding holiness of our own lives is such that everyone will be amazed and turn immediately to Christ. Enough said. We need to be realistic. We need to join the dots for people. Say and do. Francis went to Africa to tell the Muslims!

People will look at the Church and say it is full of hypocrites.

I always agree with them. It is full of hypocrites. We have the highest standards and regularly fail to live up to them. The difference is that we acknowledge that in our confession and seek strength to do better. And then I tell my accuser that, yes the Church is full of hypocrites but there is always room for one more.

INTEGRITY is of the essence. Even our harshest critics admire integrity.

What we say must be what we do and who we are so the witness of life is vital.

But, the Holy Father goes on, we need explicit proclamation

In short we need to be able to tell it like it is. Our first Pope, St. Peter says:

‘Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope you all have.’ (I Pet. 3v 1)

If someone asked you why you are a Christian what would you say?

Evangelii Nuntiandi says,

‘There is no true evangelisation if the Name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed.’

Talk about what Jesus means to you and what he promises your questioner. That proclamation is but the beginning of evangelisation.

Always pray for those you encounter. We want them to come to Faith to be part of the Church of God and to go out, in their turn, to proclaim the Good News.

What’s the message?

1) We need to talk about God. About His love for us in Jesus.

Because of Jesus we know God, not as a remote or implausible tyrant or some indifferent cosmic force but as a loving Father.

2) We need to be able to say what Jesus has done in saving us from our sins, restoring us to the Father and giving us the promise of eternity in Heaven.

3) We need to talk about the world to come – Heaven, Purgatory, Hell.

We need to be able to communicate the reality of sin and the need for salvation.

4) This realisation has an effect on our whole lives, how we view others.

Why do we hold to the sanctity of life? Why do we do more caring, more aid work, more health care, more education than most of the rest of the planet put together/ Because what we believe about God tells us that we are precious to him. All people are our brothers and sisters. It flows directly from what we believe.

5) The Gospel is a message of liberation, physically and spiritually.

Others talk of freedom, the Gospel delivers. It is politically revolutionary but not in a violent or reductionist sense. It changes the hearts and therefore the actions of men. The Gospel is not a man centred project for the betterment of human social and economic conditions. Rather those laudable things come about because we recognise who we are in the light of God's mercy and love for us. This gives man an ultimate meaning and purpose that no political order can deny or degrade or disown. The Spiritual priority of the Gospel informs the political action – not the other way round. Purely political utopias end up as failures and often costly disasters because they remove the overarching spiritual dimension of the reality of our life in God.

Who's it for ?

This is a quick section. It's for everyone. We can respect others' faiths, opinions, differences etc etc but we cannot deny to them the right to hear and see and know the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. There may be hearts that are hardened, organisations that are hostile, states that are persecutory, cultures that are violently opposed – none of this reduces or removes the imperative of the Gospel. It is for everybody. We are never to curtail the mission of the Gospel for any reason whatsoever.

So, practically, what can we do? Few of us are likely to stand in the market-place on a soap box –but that is not how most people come to Christ anyway.

PRIORITY – see it as your job.

Pray for opportunities. (Mission group)

SOME EXAMPLES:

- 1) When new people arrive at Church, do we welcome them or ignore them? All research and common sense tells us that people are hugely more likely to stay where they make friendships
- 2) When they come to Mass, what do they encounter? Are they likely to sense that they are in the presence of something significant? Does the priest seem engaged with God? Does the demeanour of the congregation speak of spiritual uplift?
- 3) Do we have enough public outdoor events? Popular piety used to be a processional witness round the streets (Truro Bless Sac v Gay Pride)
- 4) Do we take random opportunities eg Carmel/ Judith ASDA
- 5) Do we offer to pray for people? 'Think' is useless.
Be known as a pray-er Mass offerer.
- 6) Family lapsi – letter post mortem leave with your will. Mass for your soul now. My kids. Mass for them on birthday -send card and bulletin
- 7) Help – invite help – John Jones - their church. Men come. Cyrene & sons
- 8) Start conversations – afternoon TV Life Insurance and funerals. Planning for summer holiday, crem or eternal life. Key mission question./Andy
- 9) Write MP – democratic involvement. The enemies off God do.
Articulate
- 10) Media -use it. Encourage the best attack the worst .
- 11) PERSONAL CONTACT zaccheus/woman at well
/nicodemus.
- 12) Casual refs – Feast days engaged /explain.