

Here's the Church, Where Are the People?

Lois DeFelice



As a child, many of us played the game, folding our hands to make the church and steeple, opening the doors, and seeing all the people. At some point, we discovered that if you folded your fingers on top, when you opened the door, the people were missing.

In a recent issue of *Catechetical Leader*, Janet Crespi spoke about all the things we are doing right inside the doors, yet the people are not there. She proposed a radical change in our methods of catechizing. Following the Second Vatican Council a number of books graced the shelves of the evolving ministry of catechetical leader. As this article on the “new evangelization” began to develop, one title kept surfacing: *Hope for the Flowers* by Trina Paulus. Paulus’s intent in writing this book was to assist a friend during a difficult time. The church today could be a beacon of hope for people facing difficulty during these challenging times.

The mission of the church has remained the same since the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). So, we have been about evangelization from the start. Jesus told us that he came to show the path to life; this is what evangelization is about. The Second Vatican Council Fathers warned about the separation between faith and life. There are many church documents giving us background for the “new evangelization,” a phrase coined by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelization in the Modern World*. He was speaking about how the church could respond to the challenges created by the contemporary world. In *Mission of the Redeemer*, Pope John Paul II saw the great need to relaunch evangelization in the present life of the church. He emphasized the need for a personal relationship with Jesus, Lord and Savior. The *National Directory of Catechesis* states: “Jesus Christ is the energizing center of evangelization and the heart of catechesis” (4).

Catechesis is a remarkable moment of evangelization. This means we, as catechists, need to be firmly rooted in our understanding of the gospel and its message. We know as catechists that the message of the gospel must be heard, understood, embraced, lived, and shared. This is part of our baptismal call. The “new evangelization” calls all to live out this vocation through sacrificial service to the world. Pope Francis shows us through his service how to bring the gospel to a materialistic, spiritually deficient world.

In our catechetical programs we need to make the gospel message a priority for formation of catechetical leaders, catechists, and learners whether adult, young adult, teen, or children. We need to include time in each session to reflect on the weekly Scriptures, breaking open the word, and then seeking a way to act on that word in our life. Statistics are telling us that if we don’t keep the young people between the ages of 13 and 24, they will be gone for good once they leave. The statistics also indicate that in families where the parent has faith and follows that commitment, their children are more likely to do so. Our catechetical programs need to address the families and help them see the connection between faith and life, and give them the tools to live in a world that no longer shares the same values.

In June of 2010, Pope Benedict XVI announced the establishment of a new Pontifical Council for New Evangelization. The contemporary culture has thrown off almost all Christian influence. We are surrounded by secularism, materialism, anti-life preoccupation, technology without conscience, and an economic crisis. Many Catholics do not know what the Catholic Church actually teaches and often pick and choose what parts they will agree with and practice. Many Catholics profess the creed at weekly liturgy but confine its practice and understanding to just that hour. With the recent implementation of the Third Edition of the Roman Missal, catechists continue to have an opportunity to increase the faithful’s understanding of the liturgy, its transformative power, and to emphasize the sending to the world at the dismissal rite.

There are many other opportunities to evangelize and assist those who have heard the gospel message but have forgotten how to live it. There are opportunities to catechize and evangelize at sacramental moments in our church.

- * Are our meetings around the sacraments only about the time, the place, the dress, and what is “required” to receive a particular sacrament at this parish?
- * Do we take these moments to journey with people where they are on their faith journey?
- * At marriage and baptism prep, we have an opportunity to assist families in seeing that faith connection between their lives and what they are asking of the church.
- * At reconciliation meetings, there is an opportunity to reconnect the adults with the practice of confession.

- * Often we have parents who are bringing children to experience the sacrament and they have not been to confession for years. How do we encourage and invite the adults back to practicing their faith?
- * At the end of parent meetings, take the time to invite those who have anything that might be preventing them from full participation in the sacrament that they are bringing their child to, for example marriage/annulment issues or perhaps the parent has not been fully initiated or is of another faith.

These moments are times to invite people to a fuller and deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the teaching of the Catholic Church has been consistent concerning the missionary activity of the church. The church by its very nature is missionary and every baptized Christian participates in that missionary activity. Pope Benedict XVI said, “All the sectors of pastoral life, of catechesis and of charity should be characterized by the missionary dimension: The Church is mission.”

Evangelization requires a living faith which plants within a person the desire to share that faith with others. We need to

recapture a Catholic culture, present it in an engaging and imaginative way. Pope Benedict XVI told us, “the goal of all our pastoral and catechetical work, the object of our preaching, and the focus of our sacramental ministry should be to help people establish and nurture that living relationship with ‘Christ Jesus, our hope’” (1 Tim 1:1).

The challenge for catechesis today is to be willing to take risks and venture into new ways of transmitting this message of hope to those whom we encounter on this journey. We, as catechists, are the “hope for the flowers,” those whom we are sowing the seeds of faith in today and maybe through our efforts, we can find the people back “in the church.”

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