

Evangelizing Youth: A Purposeful Process

by Sarah Ginther

When I first began working with high school youth, I spent a significant amount of time searching the internet, reading books, and eventually even listening to numerous podcasts with the hope of finding the next great insight on evangelization. This effort was both comforting and extremely overwhelming due to the plethora of ideas that were available. As time progressed, I found myself attempting to synthesize the seemingly endless information on youth evangelization while also trying to not burning out in the process of applying them. In this article, I hope to share with you the succinct steps of youth evangelization that have proven efficacious in my journey and I pray they also aid in your work in God's vineyard.

On December 8, 1975, Saint Pope Paul VI promulgated the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World) where he states, "Any partial and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even of distorting it"(Paragraph 17). So as you read this article, know that it is but a synopsis cannot be separated from the whole work of evangelization on a larger scale. So, as you continue to evangelize never settle for thinking you have understood it all - do not be satisfied with this short summary; rather continue to pursue your formation in evangelization. Papal documents such as the aforementioned one, books like "Forming Intentional Disciples" by Sherry Weddell, and Podcasts like Ascensions Presses "Every Knee Shall Bow" all work to give you a fuller view of the process of evangelization.

I) Power of Prayer

1 Corinthians 12: 3 says, "...no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." Here, it is important to note that evangelization and conversion are accomplished, first and foremost, by the grace of God at work in one's life. However obvious this reality may seem, it is still very easy to busy ourselves with other aspects of the evangelization process and, in turn, lose sight of the fact that it is God's grace at work. Hence the importance to begin here, with the power of prayer, as the primary focus in the evangelization process.

Whether you are a parent, a youth worker, or a Catechist volunteer it is essential that you intercede for the conversion of hearts in the lives of young people. A focus on prayer will likely not feel immediately efficacious and many other looming tasks will burden you and beg for your attention but stay the course and trust in God's grace!

II). Tilling the Soil (Power of Presence)

On any given day we likely encounter a large number of social media posts that are filled with clichés. These phrases permeate our daily conversations because, on some level, they speak truth. A phrase I often say to teens is, "showing up is half the battle"; however, I believe this cliché stops short of what 'half the battle' really entails. I should say something more like "showing up and being

invested is half the battle.” Unfortunately, in our current culture it seems to be less and less likely that young people are going to “show up” and spend any significant amount of time at Church if left to their own volition. So, this phrase and reality must convict us as evangelists to go forth, show up and invest in young people’s lives as well. We must go beyond the boundary lines of the Church’s property and be willing to dive into our communities. Evangelists cannot have the excuse that “youth aren’t coming to Church” as a reason for not reaching them and expect to be effective in their apostolate.

Attempting to reach youth can feel overwhelming, especially if we think we have to do it alone. Let us not forget that many are called to take up an evangelical role in the lives of youth, including: priests, adult volunteers, parents, older siblings, and even their own peers. So while effectively investing into the community looks different for each parish, it must not be a singular persons job to accomplish. Work to build or strengthen a systematic approach that empowers the different evangelists.

Similar to praying for teens, this aspect of evangelization does not happen on accident. Coordinated efforts to get evangelists into the community must actively be fostered and encouraged. Time spent witnessing our authentic desire to journey with them often fosters an openness with young people not naturally given. So show up and be present - learn names, ask open-ended questions about their lives and then truly listen and get to know the youth. Eventually, you will have chances to invite them to parish events but may still get rejected. Do not walk away or give up simply because they do not show up - keep journeying with them, keep forming relationships, keep showing up and investing.

III. Sowing the Seed (Living Your Witness)

Whether sharing the Gospel with someone for the first time or the hundredth time it is vital to live the life you are calling young people to live. Saint Pope Paul VI, in the aforementioned work on evangelization, wrote that, “Modern man listens more willingly to **witnesses** than to **teachers**, and **if** he does listen to **teachers**, it is because they are [first] **witnesses**” (Paragraph 41, Emphasis Added). As we journey with a youth our lives must reflect the Gospel. Great programs will languish if they are built upon false facades of holiness. Do not grow complacent in your own journey towards heaven. Everything we do flows forth from and back to the “source and summit” of our faith which is the Eucharist. When we seek Christ in our lives, youth will see this witnessed in how you deal with the less desirable aspects of life. They will see you working to forgive those who hurt you, being slow(er) to anger in moments that may promote rage, and trying to love those who persecute you. Witnessing with your life does not mean you do it perfectly but that you are striving to draw closer to the Lord each day.

Every day we “sow the seed” of the Gospel by witnessing with our decisions and choices; however, there will also be times when we witness with our words. First Peter 3:15 says, “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.” So we must also prepare our witness. This can be a 3-5 minute talk about how God has changed your life (i.e. a testimony) but it can also be small points that come from prayerful reflection on why you have hope. When we understand how God has worked in our lives we can more clearly and confidently share aspects of our own conversation with others. These moments of sharing may be on the bleachers at a

football game, in the talks given at events happening at the parish, or many other places. Knowing what Jesus did for humanity is essential to sharing the Gospel and knowing how what He did has taken deep root in your life is essential for witnessing to others.

IV. Tending the Vineyard (Organized Chaos)

The aforementioned aspects of the evangelization process (prayer, presence & witnessing) may not specifically occur at the parish; however, there is a need to have effective events that continue to aid youth in the different aspects of their faith journey. These events will vary significantly in their outward appearance due to the varying gathering points (i.e. sports, book club, youth group, one on ones, etc). No matter how different events look they will ultimately have the same end in mind - fostering a well formed faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. The important aspects of the formulated events are: Invitation, Conversion, Discipleship & Mission.

INVITATION

Come Follow Me. These events take the basic Gospel message of calling and put it into practice. This may look like simple fellowship at a school lunch, social events on a Sunday night or active engagement after the Masses. The main aspect of these events is the call “Come follow me”. Here the goal is showing that the authentically Catholic lifestyle is being lived and invite youth into living it.

CONVERSION

Connect them. The parish youth ministry must be equipped to respond to the “yes” of young people who have responded to the call to follow Jesus. Smoothly connecting them to appropriate programs like faith formation and sacramental preparation is the priority of this step. Post sacramental formation must not leave youth feeling spiritually homeless. Fostering groups & gathers that allow for a place to continue to foster and encourage the faith past Confirmation is vital.

DISCIPLESHIP

Send them. This is where disciples are prepared and sent back into their communities. Young people can and do qualify to be disciples. We catechize them, encourage them, and then empower them to help evangelize their peers, and even the adults around them. They have a circle of influence that they can begin to truly witness the Gospel to even if in the simplest of ways.

MISSION

Send them 2.0. Most young people understand the role of being present to their peers and others around them but they have a mission (and Vocation) that will be a way of living out these calls in particular

ways. Obviously most teenagers aren't stepping right into their vocations so helping foster the idea of long term missionary lifestyle enables them to think long term, invest long term, and truly become disciple makers themselves.

V. CONCLUSION

My senior year of high school I had a shirt that said "18,700 hours of classes for a piece of paper and a handshake". This shirt got a number of laughs, but it also started a lot of conversations regarding what that work was really aimed at accomplishing. I believe that a shirt about youth evangelization would likely say something about a few hundred youth events and a few thousand slices of pizza all for a handful of moments to really reach a teenager - or at least that is what it feels like at times. As you work through these aspects of evangelization remember conversion is a life-long process and you may be planting seeds now that will not come to fruition for many years. The sower in the parable did not question how well the ground was tilled or ask who would cultivate the seed he was sowing - he simply sowed the seed. In evangelization, there are many aspects of the process but the task always before us is simply to sow the Gospel. God will move evangelists in and out of young peoples lives so what you are doing now may be cultivated by a teacher, coach, or another future evangelist. And the fruit you see is the work of parents, religious education teachers and many others who journeyed with these youth before you. So do not count the fruits, simply so the seed as best you can and trust that God can use even our smallest "yes" to bring others into His Kingdom.

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