

Being Catholic Today

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Lecture 6: Spreading the Word

Thank you all for your faithfulness in attending these lectures. On this last night of the series I will try to pull together thoughts of the previous lectures and invite questions or qualifications you might have or suggestions for spreading the faith among our contemporaries. I have done a lot of talking and had intended to invite more discussion. Tonight will be your chance to share your reactions to what I have said and a chance for us to listen together how the Lord might be asking us to witness our faith to the people of our day, whether former Catholics, members of other churches, or the unchurched. I have listed twelve elements of being Catholic today that I have covered in my talks. It might be helpful if I say a little about each one, then when we've reviewed them all briefly we can take them one by one and you can make your comments where they are appropriate. You will see that they overlap quite a bit while each is a distinct ingredient in the whole.

Being Catholic today means:

1. Rediscovering the freshness of the Gospel message, which is a Person, the Jesus who makes God present among men. We are being called to a deepening relationship with him, a rediscovery of him as our all: in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found (Col 2:3), in whose body lives the fullness of divinity (Col 2:9). Pope Benedict himself is calling for this rediscovery: In his message to the world last

Christmas he stated, "Only by rediscovering the gift she has received can the Church bear witness to Christ the Savior before all people." We need to encounter him individually as our friend, the love of God for us made visible. Only such a personal adherence to Jesus is going to enable us to speak convincingly about our faith. We have to be excited about the lordship of Christ, his victory over sin and death. The Holy Father says that the Church witnesses to Christ "with passionate enthusiasm, with full respect for all cultural and religious traditions; she does so joyfully, knowing that the One she proclaims takes away nothing that is authentically human, but instead brings it to fulfillment." We have to be convinced that nothing can separate us from his love (Rom 8:35). We have to live as members of his body who draw life from him. "The Church in America must speak increasingly of Jesus Christ, the human face of God and the divine face of man. It is this proclamation that truly makes an impact on people, awakens and transforms hearts, in a word, converts" (John Paul II, *The Church in America* 67). Pope Benedict said it forcefully on this past Easter Monday: "The Christian faith, as we know, is not born from the acceptance of a doctrine but from the encounter with a Person, with Christ, dead and Risen.... And it is more important than ever that the men and women of our age know and encounter Jesus, and also, thanks to our example, allow themselves to be won over by him."

2. Rediscovering our relationship with the three persons of the Trinity, the awareness that Christ has made us sons

of the Father so that we experience God as Father, Christ as eldest brother and companion, and the Spirit as a power within us binding us to the Son and to the Father (Gal 4:6). We must live our ordinary lives in the consciousness of our membership in this family. "It is in Christ, dead and risen, and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, given without measure, that we have become sharers of God's inmost life. Jesus Christ, who "through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God", makes us, in the gift of the Eucharist, sharers in God's own life." (Benedict XVI: *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007), 8)

3. An awareness that communion with Christ is not only spiritual but since Christ was Incarnate involves acceptance of him in his body, the visible Church in which he lives and is present. Remember, "In Christ infinite love touches us," and touch involves the body. Our creator and redeemer, in taking a human body, has forever identified himself with flesh and makes those who believe in him one body, one spirit with him. We cannot be linked with him and not linked with his body, the community of believers on earth who are one with him. When we accept Christ as Lord we are at once linked to this visible body of his. Are we excited about that, on fire with it? Do we see our membership in the Church as an organic link with Christ? Can we see ourselves as an extension of Christ in the world?
4. A renewed sense of the Church as a communion of human persons in Christ, living by the same life, the same Spirit (John 15:5-11). A consequence of our union with the

Body of Christ is our union with each other, a communion of mutual concern and love, including respect for the successors of the Apostles and their teaching, a willingness to work together with very different people in the same household of faith, a prioritizing of the search for unity within the Catholic Church and within the greater Christian church. Dissension and conflict and destructive talk need to be replaced by listening, reaching out, constructive talk, striving to work together, and lots of forgiveness (Matt 18:35, Eph 4:32). The common goal of all Catholics is the building up of the Church as the Body of Christ (Acts 4:32-25, Eph 4:3).

5. A Eucharistic life in which the Eucharist is experienced as not merely a ritual but the nourishment of love and apostolic activity, the sacrament of unity. Remember the Eucharist has power to change the world. "The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving. Jesus "draws us into himself." The substantial conversion of bread and wine into his body and blood introduces within creation the principle of a radical change, a sort of "nuclear fission," to use an image familiar to us today, which penetrates to the heart of all being, a change meant to set off a process which transforms reality, a process leading ultimately to the transfiguration of the entire world, to the point where God will be all in all." (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 11) "By receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ we become sharers in the divine life in an ever more adult and

conscious way” (SC 70). If our regular reception of the Eucharist has not made us different from what we used to be, then maybe we have not really opened ourselves to its transforming power, the power of the Lord himself acting in us.

6. An awareness of the lay vocation to transform the world in the Spirit of Christ. One might connect this vocation with the sacrament of Confirmation which gives the grace not just to *be* in Christ but to *act* in the world as Christ, transforming structures and professions and society. The presence of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit are events capable of engaging every cultural reality and bringing to it the leaven of the Gospel. (SC 78)
7. The proclamation of Catholic orthodoxy as an invitation rather than something to be imposed. “Orthodoxy would have a brilliant future if it were represented with a more cheerful face” (Avery Dulles). An ability to show the world the joy and reasonableness of our faith as the road to fullness of life. An ability to see the hard teachings of our faith (e.g., sexual principles) as a healthy discipline leading to authentic freedom. “Narrow is the way that leads to life” (Matt 7:14).
8. Nurturing our faith with any of various forms of prayer. There are many ways of doing this, all of them alive and flourishing in our parish: daily Mass, liturgy of the hours, adoration, *lectio divina* alone or in groups, meditation, intercessory prayer groups, the rosary, chaplet of divine mercy, other spoken prayers, praying in tongues. We need to find the prayer mode or combination

of modes that is most comfortable for us, the mode(s) to which the Lord is calling us as individuals. There’s no one right way. What is important is that whatever the form of prayer it should sustain and deepen the relationship with Christ and comprise some element of meditation or contemplation. “Contemplation is not a privilege reserved to the few; on the contrary, in parishes, in communities and movements there is a need to foster a spirituality clearly oriented to contemplation of the fundamental truths of faith: the mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation of the Word, the Redemption of humanity, and the other great saving works of God” (*Church in America* 29). These mysteries or dogmas are not ideas but a Person who loves us and need to be experienced as such. “Prayer, as a means of drawing ever new strength from Christ, is concretely and urgently needed....In the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta we have a clear illustration of the fact that time devoted to God in prayer not only does not detract from effective and loving service to our neighbor but is in fact the inexhaustible source of that service” (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* 36).

9. A recovery of the spirit of repentance as an acknowledgement of our failures to respond wholeheartedly to God’s love. An experience of repentance is the entry into the experience of the fullness of divine mercy. A periodic use of the sacrament of Penance with this goal. A growth in honesty about the self as child of God forgiven and reconciled. “The loss of a consciousness of sin always entails a certain superficiality in the

understanding of God's love"
(*Sacramentum Caritatis* 20).

10. Deepening an understanding of one's faith. Catholics today are more educated than they ever have been. Their knowledge of their faith needs to develop along with their secular knowledge. Recent popes have produced volumes of teaching on many areas where Catholicism and the world interface. We need to inform ourselves of these teachings as much as we can. They will help us understand and be enthusiastic about the life-message we have to offer. There are the documents of the Second Vatican Council (especially *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, Revelation), the Catholic Catechism, the encyclicals and exhortations of John Paul II, the teaching of Cardinal Ratzinger before and after becoming pope. The Catholic press produces books for all readers. The church of the last century saw an enormous and vital renewal, a rediscovery of the richness of its heritage and a concerted effort to adapt the heritage to the needs of the day. The Church rediscovered the Scriptures, the teaching of the Church Fathers, the meaning of the liturgy, and developed an extensive social doctrine based on the Gospel. She wishes to engage the world in the task of rendering the world a more human place for all men and women, especially the poor and downtrodden. A laity educated as never before has the opportunity to match its secular education with a religious one. We must be sure to nurture our thinking about the Church with her own teaching and not just with the critical press which literally "presses" its own agenda.

11. An ability to see all the sacraments, not just the Eucharist, as external signs that develop our interior life. In one way or another all the topics above are associated with sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Ordination, Matrimony—only Anointing of the Sick has not been alluded to. The sacraments are external signs that effect (bring about) what they signify, but their efficacy depends on our conscious cooperation with their power. "By receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ we become sharers in the divine life in an ever more adult and conscious way" (*SC* 70).

12. All this renewing of our own faith will help us evangelize the people around us who are looking for deeper meaning in their lives. We can share with them in human ways the joy we have found in Christ. Pope Benedict wrote earlier this year, "There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know him and to speak to others of our friendship with him....What the world needs is God's love; it needs to encounter Christ and to believe in him....Truly, nothing is more beautiful than to know Christ and to make him known to others" (*Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007) 84). "Let your light shine before men" (Matt 5:16).

I'm very aware that these talks have not much been on the practical level. I have focused on interior, personal and communal renewal as the prerequisite for evangelization. Being Catholic today means, first of all, understanding our religion and being passionate about it. Only then can we speak of it effectively to

others. Most Catholics are introduced to the faith in childhood. It easily becomes a matter of external habit, and that is as it should be. But the external practices are there to have an effect on our spiritual lives, to deepen them, to animate us with divine love. Has my faith brought me joy, peace, wisdom, greater love, courage, a sense of meaning? We can't stop at an automatic Catholicism sustained only by social context, a faith "of habit" or mere ritual, of conformity to rules and commandments. Our morality must be a grateful response of love to the one who has loved us so much. The renewed personal dimension is the call of the Church for us today. Such a renewal will then impel us to find the practical strategies for spreading the good news in our time and place. **I will conclude by suggesting some practical areas where a renewed understanding of our faith needs to show itself, areas where those with particular gifts can take the necessary action:**

1. What programs can be devised for reaching out to the unchurched?
2. How can we show hospitality to potential Catholics?
3. How can we assure that our children are well formed in the faith and being given a foundation for lifetime commitment?
4. How can laity and hierarchy best work together in the task of evangelizing?
5. How can seminarians be taught to pray and to preach the word of God with power?
6. What can we do to assure a better sharing of wealth with the poorer nations?
7. How can we promote understanding of other religions, particularly Islam?
8. How should faith impact our political, secular, economic, professional, public life?

Conclusion:

"It is more necessary than ever for all the faithful to move from a faith of habit, sustained perhaps by social context alone, to a faith which is conscious and personally lived. The renewal of faith will always be the best way to lead others to the Truth that is Christ" (*Church in America* 73).

[Questions and discussion]

Prayer to Mary from *Deus Caritas Est*.

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
 you have given the world its true light,
 Jesus, your Son—the Son of God.
 You abandoned yourself completely
 to God's call
 and thus became a wellspring
 of the goodness which flows forth
 from him.
 Show us Jesus. Lead us to him.
 Teach us to know and love him,
 so that we too can become
 capable of true love
 and be fountains of living water
 in the midst of a thirsting world. Amen.