



SAINT PAUL
Evangelization Institute

Basic Evangelization Training

Course 1: The Basics

1.4 Witness of Life and Proclamation with Words

What does an evangelist do?: Witness of Life

In considering the meaning of the word “evangelization,” and the basic content of the gospel, we have already begun to outline somewhat the task of the evangelist and what it means to proclaim the gospel. But what does an evangelist do, practically speaking? The following are general comments on this question. We will get to more specific methods in later modules.

First and foremost, the evangelist must be a good Christian example. Pope St. Paul VI wrote,

For the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one's neighbor with limitless zeal. As we said recently to a group of lay people, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." St. Peter expressed this well when he held up the example of a reverent and chaste life that wins over even without a word those who refuse to obey the word. It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world.¹

Integrity of life, especially over time, is not only a powerful witness, but a necessary one. *There is no underestimating the evangelizing power of a life well-lived, joyfully fixed on “the one thing necessary” (Lk 10:42).* We must love God and neighbor above all else, and live like it. We must make our Christian love for the most poor and vulnerable believable by our deeds of charity. We must be patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not insisting on our own way, not irritable or resentful, not rejoicing in wrong, but rejoicing in right (cf. 1 Cor 13:4-6). We must exercise love, joy, peace, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (cf. Gal 5:22-23). We must give alms. We must be humble, and when we make mistakes or sin, we must be ready and willing to acknowledge them. We must bring peace to others. All this, in turn, requires a mature life of prayer.

An important, but often underestimated part of the witness of a Christian life is for the evangelist to make people part of their lives. Like Jesus our Lord, the evangelist invites people to share good things with them, to eat and drink with them (Mk 2:15-17). The evangelist must love others from the heart, not “in word or speech but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn 3:18). In so doing, they “heal the sick,” for “those who are sick” need a physician (cf. Mt 10:8; Mk 2:17). Since love is proven in deeds, the witness of life is the first and most important task of the evangelist.

What does an evangelist do?: Proclamation of the Gospel with Words

Though it is most important, witness of life is not enough. “Secondly,” Pope Paul VI wrote, there is the “necessity of preaching.”² Broadly speaking, and for our purposes, “preaching” is proclamation of the gospel using words. “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes from the preaching of Christ” (Rom 10:17). Many people think that St. Francis said that we should “preach the gospel at all times, and use words when necessary.” If you ask a Franciscan priest, they will tell you that Francis never said that. Think of it this way: Do we really think that we are so holy that people will only need to look at us and they will fall on their knees and worship God? Was St. Paul so holy that this was

¹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* [On evangelization in the modern world], December 8, 1975, sec. 41.

² Sec. 42.

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all he needed to do? Did Jesus find that he never had to use words in His mission? If they had to use words, we too, then, need to proclaim the name of Jesus, and the message of salvation, the gospel, with our lips.

Such “preaching” comes in many forms: formal preaching, teaching, conversation, spiritual encouragement, reminders, communal prayer, etc. *We speak the truth of the Gospel out loud, in the hopes that the word spoken will bear fruit in the hearts of the hearers.* This goal must always be kept in mind. If it is really kept in mind, then there are certain things that *will* be done, and certain things that *will not* be done. The means should be proportionate to the goal.

For example, some people evangelize as if they thought the primary goal of evangelization was to win an argument. *But intellectual debate is only very rarely a good means for bringing people to Christ and the Catholic faith.* Even experienced Catholic apologists (defenders of the Catholic faith) find that arguing with people usually only drives them to become even more entrenched in their views. (This is not because we don’t have the best arguments to make, but because effective argument takes willing, well-disposed participants.) When the apostles evangelized they proclaimed the Word, and they met people where they were at in their lives, and shared the truth with them. Jesus criticized or corrected the faults of the Scribes and Pharisees, but he never got into fruitless debates. He did not need to construct complex arguments. He spoke the truth, which does not become less true for being contradicted. Truth stands for itself. And the evangelist, confident in the truth, has a joy from God that allows him to keep his eyes fixed on the goal - the conversion of hearts to Christ - and not on “being right” or winning arguments.

Another example of “the proper means” to the goal, is that *we ought to be more interested in the person we are speaking to than in what we have to say.* Remember, the goal is that the Word of Christ bears fruit in the heart of the hearer. Our Lord and the New Testament evangelists *spoke in ways that were appropriate to their audience* - and yet they did not need to hide the truth out of a fear of being rejected. We must do our best, relying upon God’s help, to be attentive to the person, and to the Holy Spirit showing us the way to speak to them. What are the concerns and desires of the person? What wounds are in their hearts? Is their objection to faith a matter of the mind, or the heart? We need to respect their freedom and try to see them through eyes of love, and then speak “from heart to heart.”