

Have you heard the news?

This is the first in a series of articles encouraging evangelization in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

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The Fathers of Vatican II, Paul VI, and John Paul II, prompted a major development in the church's understanding of itself when they placed evangelization at the very center of ecclesial concern. They taught us that everything in the church—preaching, liturgy, pastoral care, striving for social justice—has to do finally with announcing the Lordship of Jesus Christ and drawing people into a share in his life.

In the years since the Council, however, something odd has happened: when you say the word "evangelization," eyes seem to glaze over and people quickly lose interest. Perhaps it's because we've used the term so often that it's become a catch-all, meaning everything and nothing. Or maybe it's just that, despite all of the endorsement from council and popes, evangelization still strikes Catholics as vaguely Protestant, just not something that "we" do.

Cardinal George has asked me to "jumpstart" evangelization in the archdiocese, to give it a renewed vigor and focus. As part of this effort, I'm writing a series of articles for The Catholic New World, of which this is the first.

Given the etymology of the word ("euangelion," glad tidings), here's the bottom line: evangelization must be about something very good and very new.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we find an account of the first Christian preaching. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the apostles are ecstatically proclaiming Jesus on Pentecost morning. St. Peter gets the attention of the people with these words, "You who are staying in Jerusalem, these men are not drunk, as you suppose!"

Now that tells us a great deal about the quality of enthusiasm and commitment in the proto-evangelists. They had been struck by something so wonderful and unexpected, that they couldn't contain themselves; they wanted to grab everyone around them by the lapels (if I can be permitted an anachronism!) and tell them the news.

And what is this desperately important message: "Jesus the Nazorean was a man commended to you by God with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs. . . . This man you killed, using lawless men to crucify him. But God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death."

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the "euangelion," the good news, the Gospel, and announcing it with a contagious, compelling enthusiasm is evangelization.

Now one might wonder: what made this proclamation so newsworthy? Didn't a number of first-century Jews—like most people today—have a conviction that there is life after death? Well, some Jews in Jesus' time believed that the dead went to the shadowy realm of Sheol, a rather unpleasant and tedious abode. Some believed that all the dead would rise at the end of time; still others held, in the Greek mode, that the souls of the dead would live on in separation from their bodies.

But the point is this: the first evangelists didn't use any of these categories when speaking of the resurrection of Jesus. They didn't say that his soul had gone to be with God; they didn't say that he had journeyed to join his ancestors in Sheol; and they didn't say that they were awaiting his resurrection at the end of time. What they said with an enthusiasm bordering on drunkenness is that the crucified Jesus had risen bodily from death through the power of God—and that this fact had changed everything.

Some theologians today rob evangelization of its newsworthy quality by translating the language of resurrection into subjective or political categories. "Resurrection," they maintain, is symbolic language evoking the conviction of the disciples that Jesus' "spirit" still lives among them or that his "cause" goes on after his death. Well, if that's all the term means, then Winston Churchill is "risen" whenever the Churchill society meets to read his speeches, and Beethoven is "risen" whenever a symphony audience catches his spirit while listening to his fifth piano concerto.

The "cause" of Jesus was, in fact, shattered on the cross, and his disciples were devastated. What gave them the confidence to preach him with such vigor, even to the point of giving their lives, was what happened to Jesus, resurrection from the dead.

So the resurrection is news; but why is it so good? In some ways, the 2,000-year tradition of Christianity is an attempt to embody an answer to that question, but I might make just one observation. In the resurrection of Jesus, we see that our most abiding fear is assuaged. What broods over the whole of life, mocking all of our accomplishments and relativizing all of our loves, is the brute fact of death. Jesus' bodily resurrection shows that God's love is more powerful than even this most fearsome of enemies.

So finally, here is the question: do you believe it? If you don't, you're not a Christian. If you do, how can you not want to grab everyone you meet by the lapels and tell them about the resurrection? How can you not evangelize?

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