

The core of evangelization: we depend on each other

This is the fourth in a series of columns encouraging evangelization in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

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For the past several weeks, I've been talking about the essentials of evangelization. I've argued that preaching the Good News involves the proclamation of 1) Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead, 2) the divinity of the Lord, and 3) radical humanism. Now, a passionate and committed evangelical Protestant might agree quite readily with these three principles; so what is it that makes Catholic evangelization distinctively Catholic? I believe it is a fourth element, namely, the indispensability of the church.

It is a deep Catholic conviction that one cannot be truly converted to Jesus Christ without being, at the same time, incorporated into the church. In making this claim, I confront, of course, the enormous cultural prejudice against institutions of all stripes. A favorite American archetype—on display in both the popular and high culture—is that of the heroic individual facing down the corrupt government, business, police force, or church. So to say that true conversion must involve participation in an institution just seems counter-intuitive, even dangerous.

On a Catholic reading, the church is not primarily an institution, though it has an institutional dimension. It is, first and foremost, a body, that is to say, a living organism made up of interdependent cells, molecules, and organs. The head of this living body is Jesus Christ and its life-blood is the grace flowing from Jesus' death and resurrection. All of the baptized are incorporated (how appropriate that word is) into this organism and are drawn into its dynamics and interrelationships. So intimate is the bond between members of the body of Christ that the joys of any one are the joys of every other, and the sufferings of any one are the sufferings of every other. St. Paul, who developed this image of the church as body in a number of his letters, wondered: "Can the eye say to the hand, I have no need of you?" In the Gospel of John, Jesus himself says, "I am the vine, and you are the branches," implying that the members of his church are organically and not simply institutionally related to him.

One of the most powerful Biblical testimonies to this idea of the mystical body of Christ is the account of the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul falls to the ground, blinded by a great light, and he hears a voice, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" When he inquires as to the identity of this mysterious speaker, he hears, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Well, Saul had been aggressively persecuting the newly-born Christian churches. This was tantamount, he learned, to harming Christ

himself.

Therefore, it is not the case that the individual negotiates his or her relationship with Jesus Christ and then decides to join a group of like-minded people. It is not the case that a person first accesses salvation and subsequently enters into a voluntary society. Rather, the church is the life-force of Jesus Christ, the indispensable place where full encounter with him is alone possible.

One way to specify this idea is to speak of the sacraments. Jesus has willed that the Incarnation—the enfleshment of God—should continue precisely through those physical signs that become bearers of divine power. In baptism, confirmation, reconciliation, marriage, the anointing of the sick, holy orders—and especially the Eucharist, members of the church receive the Christ-life and are hence inserted more fully into the dynamism of the mystical body.

Another way is to speak of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, comforting the sorrowing, counseling the doubtful, praying for the living and the dead, visiting the imprisoned, etc. are the ways that the truth of the mystical body is put concretely into action. Dorothy Day commented that everything a baptized Christian does every day should be directly or indirectly related to these defining works of the Church.

Still another way is to speak of the practice of the faith. We have fallen into the unfortunate habit of bifurcating interior and exterior when it comes to questions of religion. Many people today consider themselves "spiritual" even when they do little to instantiate and embody that spirituality. But we would never accept such a scenario in regard to anything else that we took seriously.

Would a piano student be satisfied in knowing that she is "musical," even if she never sat down to play the instrument? Would a baseball player settle for being "athletic," while rarely actually playing the game of baseball? No, in either of those cases, we would consider practice of paramount importance. The church is that body, that organism, that field of force, in which the faith is concretely practiced. And that is why we cannot truly enter into Christ without entering, simultaneously, into the embodied activities that characterize the church.

And so, when we evangelize, we preach, not Christ alone, but Christ in his mystical body, Christ in his church.

Barron is professor of systemic theology at the University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary. He will be the preacher of the series of talks being presented as part of Mission Chicago, an effort to revive faith and encourage evangelization. For more information, visit www.missionchicago.net or www.archchicago.org.