

Evangelization Today, Old and New: Practical Suggestions to Help the Unchurched

BY FR. TYRON TOMSON

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MY FIRST CHRISTMAS EVE AS A PRIEST, while I was putting the finishing touches on my Midnight Mass sermon, the rectory office doorbell rang continuously with devoted parishioners dropping off many gracious gifts. I opened the door for the umpteenth time, and there appeared before me, a college-aged guy . . . without a present or card. “Are you a priest?” he asked. My collar was apparently not tipping him off. “Yes,” I confirmed. “I want to be Catholic!” he eagerly rejoined. It was a far better Christmas present than any other I would receive.

The technical term “care of souls” sadly remains almost unknown outside of clerical training. The concept encompasses



...serving the spiritual needs of all: reconciling the wayward, evangelizing the unchurched, serving the suffering, challenging the staunch—in short, everything that makes the life of the Church fruitful from the parochial level on

up. An older translation renders it “cure of souls,” highlighting the hope of health for the spirit from the disease of sin with which we are plagued. For that reason, it applies specifically to the responsibilities of bishops and parish priests, the holy doctors of human hearts, but all the faithful have a share in its spirit of pursuing the salvation and sanctification of souls. No devout Catholic can be without a long prayer list for special cases in need of conversion or reversion. Imagine including the ones we’ve not even encountered yet!

The Case of Karl

That young man, we’ll call him “Karl,”¹ had been raised by once-active Catholic parents in a very intentionally nonreligious home. He had briefly encountered Christianity in history class at his suburban public school and then read enough online to recognize the truth of Catholicism, even before he learned of his deep German Catholic family heritage. His mother had been raised in an orphanage run by nuns and adopted into a pious family, but she had rejected the faith and its practice in favor of the collapsed

1 Some extraneous details of Karl’s story have been modified to preserve his anonymity.

culture's prosperity, pleasure, and permissiveness. Her children, along with most of their generation, consequently were deprived of their ecclesial heritage. It was therefore even more devastating for Karl after he realized what he had missed and who had failed him in their formative responsibilities, and why.

The spiritual upheaval of the 1970s resulted in innumerable such cases, as painful as any of history. As many have observed, that provides us with a huge opportunity for re-evangelizing. However, fewer have noted how that window is closing in many ways, and quickly. Outside of the significant immigrant community (whose impact on data remains poorly understood), the last vestiges of cultural Catholicism's expectations and benefits have now dissipated. Sacramental statistics among the present demographic swath are plummeting at freefall rates with no nadir in view. Soon, no one will have living halcyon memories of crowded schools fully staffed by religious sisters at bursting ethnic parishes on every city block. The New Evangelization ages very rapidly in this implosion scenario, basically leaving us with the Old Evangelization again: we will be sharing the *kerygma* with those who have heard rumblings about it more than had deep or complicated histories with it, very much as in the days of the Apostles.

A Whole Generation of Karls

As I worked with him, Karl embodied for me the trademarks of his admittedly overanalyzed generation: idealism devoid of effort, intelligence without wisdom, sincerity lacking guile, sickness at their own weakness. Equal parts edifying and saddening. Untangling his sacramental records, family religious history, developmental baggage, internet-fueled hangups, moral battles, and ideologically charged misinformation took a multidisciplinary pastoral approach. Whether his grandparents had insisted upon his baptism or if he had been slogged through some First Communion classes mattered so little as to be essentially immemorable. His case became overwhelming in its complexity

for both of us at first. That's just one soul; consider a whole generation's worth.

Thankfully, the faith remains as unchanged and unchanging as its Lord, and the human nature he created possesses constancy as well. So the strategies of evangelization, old and new, should not vary wildly as we announce the Gospel of our salvation to people of each time and place. Younger generations now have an innate, magnetic draw to the original, the

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unadulterated, the genuine. The digital era's overstimulation has finally begun not just to dull and lull them

but to turn off and unplug them to pursue the real instead. We have the occasion and duty to connect them to the fullness of that truly true metaphysical realm.

Karl's Complications

At one point, Karl and I were meeting in my office every single day for weeks on end. Endless internet message boards and catechetical apologetics videos could not replace the personal contact for which he was starved. His home life provided great family support humanly—in fact, too much comfort and convenience, and certainly no challenge in the order of virtue. He did not have healthy, developed friendships. High anxiety and a lack of self-confidence crippled him. Finding a confidant who welcomed him with discretion and attention proved to be pivotal.

I found out later that some very fine mentor figures had attempted to assist him, but the connection never clicked quite right. Waiting patiently for the right timing of each next step could be grueling as he consecutively experienced over the course of some months the dramatic deathbed reversion of his grandmother, the suicide of a childhood friend, the serious

disintegration of his brother's mental health, and other significant obstacles that he navigated through, by God's providence.

Juxtaposed with this, it is patently clear that specialty espresso machines and sound mixer boards in churches are hardly *accoutrement de rigueur* of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Such well-intentioned initiatives can backfire when the prospective beneficiaries realize they have been duped—and not in the biblical sense. These patronizing strategies bear fruit that soon sours. The high mortality rate of popup Protestant communities typified by them demonstrates as much. Many souls are attracted by the ephemeral and then brought to the more substantial, and praise God for that. We don't sufficiently appreciate all those searching for seriousness who simply never return after they encounter the Faith in such an enervated presentation.

The Appeal of the Authentic to Karl

Once, Karl and I visited a cloistered monastery for a day of recollection. I took pains to show him important dimensions of the Church that few in the ordinary RCIA/OCIA process might ever see: our soup kitchens, support group meetings, overnight adoration vigils, daily Masses, the Divine Office, and the like. Stories of distant saints in columns of textbooks paled in contrast with immediate immersion into the atmosphere of contemplative prayer and apostolic work in real time. He was enraptured by taking part in what we take for granted or forget about completely: the quiet, everyday activity of the Church.

Authenticity-based spirituality explains the growing appeal of homeschooling, homesteading, and even home births. These sorts are not driven by the cliché consumerist culture (even sometimes to a fault and beyond). Simple living suits them fine. They inhabit an ironic place, where futuristic technology acquiesces to retro values rather seamlessly. For some, the oversaturation of texting and tweeting and far worse has left them disillusioned and reverting to flip phones or “dumb” phones. Not too long ago, a famous Catholic media personality released

a podcast episode after having given up all screens, devices, and media himself, encouraging everyone else to do the same. He gladly acknowledged that it could put him out of business!

Surprising Strategies for Karl

I learned a great deal from ministering to Karl and others similarly. I was surprised to find a fundamental disposition of trust, even a nascent sense of transcendent reverence that had pooled in the void where the ubiquitous teenage “meh” had driven away everything deemed unworthy of attention. The usual, tired arguments failed to capture Karl’s interest for long; we need to be equipped for some of the most profound existential questions. Contending with vice can serve as an ongoing catalyst for ongoing conversion, but that alone does not ultimately constitute the substance of their faith struggle. Prayer, both personal and communal, proved so foreign as to be a long-term area of growth for Karl; the most ground can be gained there (in fact for most of us). Beautifully sublime worship elevated his heart in its search for the mystical like nothing else. These are refreshing spiritual lessons for even well-seasoned members of the faithful.

Young people now don’t fret about understanding every detail, so arcane chant, language, and ritual do not disturb but rather intrigue them. Clarity of teaching with convicted authenticity commands their allegiance. Hypocrisy and scandal remain just as repugnant as ever, thankfully. Overly technical jargon and shallow churchy goofiness are off-putting. Raw charity and extreme mercy speak to them potently. They love tangible sacramentals that are high-quality and meaningful. It is refreshing to see young minds disinterested in, if not disgusted by, the ideological bickering in the Church and the world alike.

Ecclesiastical hierarchs, pastors, evangelists, authors, teachers, and the baptized in general have often pursued the opposite of the Church’s stated goals to bring about the salvation of souls, both with their obvious scandalous moral failings and heterodoxy in teaching and practice. Instead of dynamically

grappling with our disintegrating society's failed value systems, Catholics have become statistically nearly indistinguishable from it. Far from welcoming myriads of new converts, pews and parishes have emptied out. No longer the culture's acknowledged spiritual and moral compass, we bewilderingly still attempt to

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and inviting them to *metanoia*. Fighting more among ourselves has consumed the energy that needs to be directed outwards. We should soberly take responsibility for these sins and correct them, not just at the institutional level but also in our individual lives, with a stout Catholic identity, a serious ecclesial and personal relationship with Christ, which remains the most attractive stimulus for true conversion.

Karl's Story Didn't End at Easter

How did Karl's story end? After some time and effort on everyone's part, he eventually was ready to receive the appropriate sacraments. While not without many struggles, now his faith grounds his life, seemingly as its only permanent feature, although he would be the first to admit that stability is more his strong suit in ideal theory than in applied practice. The Holy Eucharist properly holds the utmost central place in his worldview, but he regularly falls short in praying as he should. Whereas we all tend to see ourselves as exceptions to history, his twitchy heart is emblematic of our human nature's consistent fickleness, fallen as it is. Considering his conversion complete after his parish paperwork was dutifully filed away would be a terrible mistake opposed to

our Catholic understanding, but one that is made far too often. He needs ongoing discipling, like every single one of us.

Labels like “fallen away” and “unchurched” have morphed into a fluid and strained range of ecclesiastical statuses. Many young people describe their reversions in the same terms as classical conversions, discovering their identities and destinies as if for the first time. It’s exhilarating and exhausting to witness the full drama of salvation played out in another soul, yet no two are perfectly alike. While we expend time and resources futilely trying to psychologize why they left, we would be wiser to concentrate on what will summon them in.

An Apostolic Approach to the Karls

To be a mentor in the ways of holiness, mind your own house first. Vocations in family life and religious life lived faithfully attract others like the stories of the saints—because that’s exactly what they are. We might not be official martyrs, but our personal witness is powerful. Prepare for patient, personal accompaniment. Don’t drill the dogma. Even when they come from mainstream or non-denominational backgrounds, often all but empty of coherent doctrine and practice, they don’t need heresies uprooted; they need the dependable authority the Church can provide. Don’t cast meetings as classes with textbooks and boards; consider them extended meditations. Disconnect from the digital and plug into the real. Use authentic experiences, not arguments and gimmicks. Cultivate deep humility before the fullness of truth. Find their transcendent spiritual currency and exchange with them on those terms. Focus not on why they fell away, or even what can bring them back, but what will keep them close. Speak openly, joyfully, and normally about your own faith. Never fall into the temptation to attempt to change the Church and the Lord to please others; change the hearts of others to please the Lord. Above all, encourage them to true prayer. The saints’ praise of God in heaven should be begun by us on earth if we’re planning to make it there.

Have we brought our concerns before the Lord with an open heart, or smugly asked him to confirm our granite mindset and embolden our proselytizing all the more? Do we slough off our evangelizing responsibilities by forming more committees and creating more catechetical content, or do we practice the peripatetic tactics of Christ and his first Christians? Have we imposed our outlines and timelines with endless meetings and business-minded efficiency, or are we really, actually, humanly interested in real, actual humans? We need to examine our ministerial consciences for any trace of self-serving, self-satisfied, self-centered, self-conscious labor in the vineyard.

If Karl's conversion account didn't seem to fall neatly into the pat categories in your mind, you should probably get to adjusting them, as inconvenient and uncomfortable as that might be. Peter and Paul encountered droves of Karls and grew the universal Church by providing for their spiritual and material wellbeing, curing whatever afflicted them within or without, regardless of what level of involvement with the faith they'd had. We're seeing plenty of them these days, too. We need to evangelize them properly by caring for their souls as well as we can.

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