
A Missionary Church

This was the title of the 2010 Diocesan Summer School – four days of talks held at NORES in Milton Keynes. Fr Pat Collins C.M. a Vincentian priest from Ireland, inspired and challenged us on the first day, and the speakers who followed were clearly inspired by the same Spirit. Here are some thoughts from their teachings on Evangelising and Sharing Faith, both of which are important parts of our Thriving Catholic Communities.

In the past, mission was to foreign countries, by priests and nuns, or more recently by lay people. Now, the emphasis is on home mission, because so many people in this country need to know about Christ! **The New Evangelisation** is about presenting the gospel message to a culture that is very different now. Before Vatican II, the church and the kingdom were seen as the same, but now, they are not. The kingdom of God is a person, called Jesus, not an abstraction. Evangelisation is not the same as outreach, which may just be pastoral. Part of the new evangelisation is to preach the “kerygma”, the basic gospel message, and also for people to receive a personal faith. We need to evangelise the small number of people who come to church – many have a formal, not a personal relationship with Jesus. Alpha courses and Life in the Spirit seminars bring people to baptism in the Spirit, which is integral to the sacraments of initiation, and in turn results in a desire to evangelise others.

Since Vatican II, there has been a renewed understanding of the mission of the church, with the parish as the most important place for the formation and expression of the Christian community. Dr Maria Heath shared with us some results of her research into mission in four different parishes. Some parishioners

experienced faith as a two way loving relationship, following an experience of formation as an adult. Other parishioners described themselves as being “born a Catholic”, and saw their faith as a private affair. They were uncomfortable talking about it, few had taken part in any adult formation, and because they understood faith as inherited, they saw no need to be missionary.

To understand the church’s missionary role today, it helps to know that the church is to serve **all** people, not just Catholics; to know that faith is a gift to be shared and to be aware of the baptismal call as a mandate for evangelisation by all, including the laity.

Maria suggested that we need to create an environment where it is safe for people to talk about spiritual things, and to move from doctrinal to sharing. As well as preaching and teaching on the kingdom, it can be helpful to have a project that is beyond the parish boundary. Consider inviting lapsed or resting Catholics for example to an Advent service, rather than to a Mass. What opportunities are there to appropriate faith as an adult, rather than as a child? We all need to know our core belief, the “kerygma”, Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

Ecumenical relationships are key to renewal because of the scandal of disunity. Parishes need new life – develop relations with new ecclesial communities, eg the Sion Community.



Fr Pat Collins asked us the following **ten questions** about our parishes: Has the parish a mission statement, one that includes evangelisation? (There should be wide consultation every few years, with a facilitator.) Does the parish have a yearly plan, stating what individual groups will evangelise the unchurched? (Without one, urgent pastoral needs can easily take priority over evangelisation. cf Pareto principle.) Does the parish have any practical form of outreach to unbelievers? (Apart from RCIA?) What does the parish do to evangelise the

18-30 age group? Does the parish council have an evangelisation committee? (See Canon Law recommendations.) Does the parish provide any training for people to learn to evangelise? (From diocesan team) Is there an evangelisation team that does house to house visitation? (Training needed.) If there is an occasional parish mission, is it aimed at the unchurched and unbelievers? Does the parish newsletter contain evangelisation items? Are there any groups, e.g. housebound, who can pray for those who are active in evangelisation? More than six "no" answers means we need to turn around!



We were encouraged to **pray and ask God for a vision** of what our parish will be like in five or ten years time. Also to identify the three best and three least points to work on in our Thriving Catholic Communities; to read the bible, use Lectio Divina, and to pray to the Holy Spirit because evangelisation can only be done in the power of the Spirit.

A New Springtime in the church

Pope Benedict has recently set up a new Pontifical Council for the promotion of the New Evangelisation in countries in the West where the faith was once strong but where there is now a secularisation of society. The magisterium of the church is keen on the New Evangelisation and courses such as CaFE, Philip retreat, Cursillo weekends and the RCIA basic course are already used in many dioceses.

The Alpha Course is designed for the unchurched, it brings people to faith in Christ, and is also approved by Catholic bishops. In the past, the pattern of entry into the church was Believe, Behave, Belong. Now the postmodern need is to Belong unconditionally first, then Believe, then Behave. Alpha insists on a meal, and this is the context in which people initially belong, hence its success.

How do we belong? Where our churches are too anonymous or too big, small communities are needed to encourage

people to develop friendships and talk about faith. Parishes need restructuring into a **community of communities**, so we need to create a network of belonging.

Charles Whitehead reminded us of the **goal of evangelisation** – to bring about in every Catholic an enthusiasm for faith, and to be Jesus for others. To invite all to hear the message of salvation and to foster gospel values in society is a tall order, but when God calls, he equips! We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit, just as the Apostles were. (Acts 1:8) The more we are open to receiving the gifts of the Spirit, the more effective we will be.

In our parishes, Alex Heath illustrated how we need both the **kerygma and catechesis** – they are complimentary. Familiar gospel images of farmers and fishermen showed us that we need both types of people, with "farmers", who systematically sow the seeds of faith, and also "fishermen", who are creative and adaptable to changing situations.

At this time of change in our parishes, we need to trust, and to "put out into the deep", as Jesus famously said to the fisherman, Simon (Lk 5:4). Peter and his companions trusted Christ's words, and cast the nets. "When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish" (Lk 5:6). So too may we, with the help of the Holy Spirit!



Teresa Brown, August 2010

Vatican documents:

Evangelii Nuntiandi
(Pope Paul VI, 1975)
Redemptoris Missio
(Pope John Paul II, 1990)
Novo Millennio Ineunte
(Pope John Paul II, 2001)
Ecclesia in Europa
(Pope John Paul II, 2003)

Available online at www.vatican.va

Fr Pat Collins' talk is available here in full: <http://patcollinscm.webs.com/newevangelization.htm>