

Commissioning for Active Catholics

Evangelization is part of our call as baptized Christians. We are called to share our faith and our life in Christ with others. While this has always been part of our Catholic faith, it is often not part of our Catholic identity. We tend to think of evangelization as something Mormons or Seventh-Day Adventists do door-to-door or that Father or Sister or someone else does in our parish. Yet when we become a parish on fire with a sense of commissioning, we, the laity, called by Vatican II to transform the world, can begin to do that with friends, family, and neighbors who once were baptized Catholic. The Catholic Church never sees herself as losing members. For the Church, once Catholic by baptism, always Catholic. While there is full recognition of other faiths and full acceptance of each person's free will to find and worship God in individual ways, there is also the claim of grace through the Church. The issue for us is how to become effective at evangelization. This is a work in progress. The following ideas are gleaned from a variety of sources as possibilities. They can be worked into a full Mentor/Companion centered parish effort to quietly and gradually reclaim members who are not part of the active parish community.

Start a St. Monica Prayer Group. St. Monica prayed for years for the conversion of her son, Augustine. He, in time, not only came to the faith, but laid the foundation for much Catholic theology. Members of the parish can meet weekly to pray for family and friends. Praying together adds strength to prayers and builds up those praying to persevere and perhaps recognize opportunities for gentle nudges home.

Include prayers for return in Prayers of the Faithful. This brings the call to prayer to the whole parish at Sunday liturgies.

Have "bring a friend to mass" Sundays. This is a Sunday once or twice a year in which members of the parish are encouraged to bring a friend to mass. That friend might be non-Catholic, a member of another parish, or someone who hasn't been to mass recently. This helps parishioners think evangelization and brings new people to church. It gives God an extra chance to move hearts.

Put a notice in the bulletin, "If you've noticed someone absent, let us know..." Parents know when their children stop attending mass. Children know when their parents aren't coming. Siblings and friends know when someone begins to drift away. After you miss a couple of Sundays, it is easy to miss more. Returning Catholics tell us repeatedly that once they stopped coming to mass, it was easy to begin to think outside the Church. If Father or Sister or the Returning Catholics team can make a call, send a note, or make a visit to someone who has been absent a few weeks, it can make all the difference. Encourage parishioners to let someone know when they know that a loved one is missing. Of course, you must be ready to follow-up discreetly and with much love.

Have a parish program, "How to Talk to Others Who Have Left the Faith or Who Disagree with Church Teaching." Parishioners are there at teachable moments, but they often say nothing or say things that don't help a fledgling interest in returning to the church. Often Church teaching is poorly understood, so it quickly falls victim to inquiring or resistant minds. Let those who know how to gently have such discussions (such as your Companions) talk with others about how to do it.

Display materials that discuss Church teaching on moral issues. A good brochure on Church teaching on marriage, artificial birth control, dealing with end of life issues, or handling a crisis of faith can instruct both those having issues and those who love them and are in a position to have a serious conversation.

Have and publicize Divine Mercy devotions. Some once active Catholics have wandered far from the moral teachings of the Church. For many of them, Divine Mercy novenas and chaplets are roads of hope and return. This is another sacramental like ashes and palms that those who won't come to mass will practice at home or attend.

From time to time, have testimonies of faith at the end of mass. Let those in the parish whose faith is on fire touch others with their witness. These testimonies might come from someone recently returned to the Church or from someone whose faith is renewed or someone whose love of God has never flagged. Giving a testimony strengthens the person giving it. It provides a model for those listening who have similar testimonies. It encourages yearning in those whose faith is not burning so brightly. It reaches out to those whose flame is a barely burning ember.

From time to time, have programs on "Hot Topics." Fortnight for Freedom provided opportunities to face head on the consequences of being silent about controversial topics. Have programs on topics that we think might lead people away from the Church. That enables your parishioners to know what the Church teaches and why. As they hear explanations and participate in discussions they have an opportunity to question self. Many of us have lived years without knowing or fully understanding Church teaching on many topics. That makes it easy for us to avoid discussion with others who openly doubt or question. It makes it easy for us to avoid standing up for our faith. When we know Church teaching, we can both live and portray it.

Have an effective Stewardship of Time and Talent process. When you have an effective way to plug people into ministries and groups within the parish, it fuels fires of faith and witness.

Provide training in outreach, evangelization, and Companionship. Rare is the person who does well what he or she has never been trained to do. Outreach and evangelization by laity are not part of our Catholic culture, even though Vatican II calls us to do it. Provide training for whatever efforts you make around helping people return to the Church.

Encourage the attitude that hospitality is everyone's responsibility all the time.