

Evangelization and St. Thomas More

My friends, I'm glad to be here with you once again. It seems the year goes fast and before we know it, it's time for another novena, and I'm sure that this year we all have been hearing about what they call "The New Evangelization." I imagine that's why Father Bergman selected "Evangelization" as the theme for this year's get-togethers and homilies.

When I hear "The New Evangelization" mentioned, I take that to mean that in an age when more and more people are disappearing from our churches, we have a problem that we need to address. Let me speak for my own parish. When I became pastor of a parish which was a merger of three parishes into one, I discovered a number of unsettling facts. I learned that during the process of the merger, the pastor at that time met never-ending problems among the parishioners. He was, for example, viciously attacked by certain individuals from all three original parishes. He actually received death threats by telephone, by letters and e-mail. More important, a sizable number of parishioners simply left the parish to go to a different church, even a church of a different denomination, or actually walked away from any church forever. And even among those who stayed, many stayed with bitterness and resentment. Many blamed those of other ethnic groups for what had happened.

What does that tell us about the faith of some of our people? We really have to ask ourselves that question. Why would supposedly faithful Catholics act that way? Were they really just looking for a reason to justify their lack of faith? Or was their faith based solely on a particular ethnic group, or on a particular church building? I don't know the complete answer to questions like those, and I suspect there were many factors behind what happened in the original three parishes as the merger took place. What I am pretty darn sure of is that all this points to some serious weaknesses of faith among what we call the "faithful."

The *America* magazine for the week of June 17-24 ran two articles that I think have some relevance to the problem. The first entitled "Christian Complicity" discusses the rise of nonbelievers in our country and the decline of church attendance and membership. These problems are not among Catholics alone. Most Christian denominations with few exceptions are experiencing the same phenomena. The article points to problems within our own faith communities that are nourishing the growth in atheism and agnosticism in our country and contributing to the decline in numbers of active church members.

With respect to our own Catholic Church, the article points to the Vatican II document, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World." That document named a number of factors that it believed has contributed to the rise in atheism, but that I think we can also say most likely contributed to the declining numbers of active, practicing Catholics. The factors it pointed to were these: 1. The neglect of education in the faith; 2. The teaching of false doctrine; and, 3. Defects in believers' own religious, moral or social issues. I believe there is some truth here. Many Catholics seem to have little understanding of some of the key beliefs of our Church. There *have been* pockets of deviations from the faith as the Church teaches it. And it's also true that some Catholics don't live up to our standards and what we say we believe.

What's behind all that? The biggest decline in religion, as I see it, is the ever-growing impact of materialism and personal egoism in our current culture that is so alien to what we say we believe. Even at the time of Jesus, He pointed to the same thing. In Matthew 6: 19-23. Jesus calls attention to the threat of materialism or crude this-worldliness: "Do not," He says, "store up for yourselves treasures on

earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.” So many today seem to be living for the moment with little or no thought about the future, let alone about the hereafter. It’s a way of life that the culture so promotes and feeds to the consumer in our society that it’s almost as if there is no escape. Just consider how our children and young people are being brainwashed today by all that surrounds them.

Because of concerns like these, it seems to me that the evangelization we need to do and to focus on most of all is summed up in one of the subheadings in one of the *America* articles. It reads: “*Evangelization begins at Home.*” And the article quotes Pope Paul VI in one of his writings: “The Church is an evangelizer,” he says, “but she begins by being evangelized herself.”

So, what do we do? Let me make a few suggestions. Before he retired, Pope Benedict himself said that one of the most important needs for the “New Evangelization” is for Catholics to come to know and understand Jesus so well that they can enter into a personal relationship with Him, a relationship that strengthens faith, builds hope, and leads to a deep love for our Lord and Savior. That kind of relationship can lead to a conversion of heart and a growth in virtue and the way we *live* the faith.

When I was a high-schooler at Scranton Prep many years ago, the Jesuits encouraged us to join the Sodality. Those of us who did were schooled in spirituality, trained in prayer and meditation, and we engaged in service to others in a number of different ways. In my opinion one of the best gifts to us was this. We were broken down into small groups of guys who lived in neighborhoods fairly close to one another. Each group was given paperback volumes of each of the four gospels, volumes that included the text, but also aids to understanding what might be unfamiliar, and at the end of each segment, questions for discussion. We’d take turns meeting in one another’s homes, read a segment at each meeting, then discuss it and answer the questions provided. The next week, we’d move into the next segment, and so on till we finished that particular Gospel.

What an eye-opener and heart-opener that was. I began to see what this Jesus was truly like and what He really was calling us to do and to be. It was a challenge, but at the same time I wanted to know Him more and more. I became increasingly hungry to become His friend. And so on.

What a gift—to have the chance and the support to enter into a relationship with Jesus when I was about 15—16 years old. What I learned through that never went away. It stayed with me, and made me want to keep learning more.

Coming to know Jesus like that and coming to look up to Him and love Him makes learning about the Church and its doctrines and moral teaching so much more meaningful. It’s easier to see the wisdom of it all, and to begin to understand that Jesus truly is the light of the world and the Way, the Truth, and the Life. That’s why, I think, Pope Benedict was so right in saying that coming to know Jesus and enter into a relationship with Him was the most important step toward being a good Catholic, or even a good Christian.

A second suggestion really comes from something St. Francis of Assisi is supposed to have said. He said, “I preach always; sometimes I even use words.” His words tell us that, as he sees it, the best evangelization is to live our faith. We just a few days ago celebrated the feast of another Franciscan—St. Anthony of Padua. In the Office of Readings for that day, there was a portion of one of Anthony’s sermons, and he said something similar. Let me read it to you. “The man who is filled with the Holy Spirit speaks in different languages. These different languages are different ways of witnessing to Christ, such as humility, poverty, patience, and obedience; we speak in those languages when we reveal

in ourselves those virtues to others. Actions speak louder than words; let your words teach and your actions speak. We are full of words but empty of actions, and therefore cursed by the Lord, since He Himself cursed the fig tree when he found no fruit but only leaves.”

I think it’s true. We live in an age clouded with much darkness, with so many people unhappy, feeling empty, lost and wondering where they are going. Just to see, for example, a husband and wife who obviously love one another, care for one another, care about their kids, see to it that they are given direction, and made to feel loved by their parents, but not spoiled—someone seeing that and experiencing it in that couple will wonder: “What do they have that makes their life look so peaceful and good?” It’s that kind of action that can draw others to look for what’s behind it and want it for themselves. Witnessing to Christ through our actions, our following in the Way of Jesus, can become a ray of light for those who feel they are in the darkness.

Someone said to me once that evangelization happens one person at a time. I think there is some wisdom in that too. Even in a crowd, it may be that only one or a few will be drawn to a message in a story or talk. It may take something different or a different occasion for the others in the crowd to find what may draw them out of themselves. And that’s probably because behind it all is the Lord. The Lord will touch a person when the time is ripe, or as St. Anthony put it, when the tree is ready to bear fruit.

What about St. Thomas More? Weren’t his life, his actions, his strength and stamina, his faith and courage a great piece of evangelizing? His witness affected his family, the Bishop John Fisher, and so many of those who followed his faithfulness and even were martyred for their faith. And it was an evangelizing that continues down the centuries even to now to draw seekers to the faith that he so wonderfully loved and lived.

Listen to his final words to his daughter Meg: “My good daughter, do not let your mind be troubled over anything that shall happen to me in this world. Nothing can come but what God wills. And I am very sure that whatever that be, however bad it may seem, it shall indeed be the best.”

Let us pray: “Father, you confirm the true faith with the crown of martyrdom. May the prayers of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More give us the courage to proclaim our faith by the witness of our lives.” Amen.