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**Evangelization:
Bringing the Good News**

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When Bill Mann asked me to consider doing a presentation on evangelization, I thought: «That should be easy. After all, I've been teaching religion for almost fifteen years. I have a Masters Degree in Scriptures, certificates in Religious Education and Spiritual Guidance, completed the Buttimer Institute and am about to complete the Lasallian Leadership Institute. »

But, the more I thought about what to write, the more confused and frustrated I became. I began to realize that the word «evangelization» invoked in me great fear and guilt. Whenever I am watching TV or listening to the radio, and I hear an evangelist speaking, I become fearful. When the evangelist begins with the quote: «Only in Jesus Christ can you be saved,» I am immediately reminded of Abraham Heschel, Chaim Potok, Rabbi Zalman Schacter, and Elie Wiesel, who have so influenced my life. I think of Yogananda and Satchidinanda, my Hindu teachers, the Dalai Lama of Tibet and Thich Nhat Han and the wonderful Muslim students whom I have met at Bishop Loughlin, and I wonder why that particular quote is so important to so many «evangelists.» Evangelists like this frighten me. I've also come to expect from this type of evangelist an insistence that women get back into their place so that men can get back into their place, or I wait for condemnation of my gay and lesbian friends. I am often frightened by people who consider themselves to be evangelists. The word «evangelization» also stirs up guilt in me.

When I began to write about evangelization, I was filled with guilt. Questions like these passed through my mind: «How many non-Catholic students at Loughlin convert to Catholicism?» «If students were tested on dogma and doctrine how many would understand?» These are the types of questions I associate with the word «evangelization.»

So, what is evangelization really? Is it what I teach, is it what I do? How do I know if I evangelize? And yet, I know enough Greek from my studies to know that «eu angelion» is about «good news» - bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to the people of God. This happens at Bishop Loughlin, but sometimes not when we decide that evangelization «must» be done. For example, at times I have attended Mass at Bishop Loughlin where the whole school **had** to attend. Now, you must keep in mind that more than 50% of Loughlin students are non-Catholic. The entire school is in the auditorium. Teachers are expected to stand by, as we would on a supervision, addressing students who

are talking, elbowing a student who dozes off. When I return to the classroom, I ask them to tell me what the service meant to them. The majority of students say that it's boring. Is this evangelization?

When we have had Masses that are optional during a school day, few students attend. When I read the announcement that there will be a Mass on Friday during Period 3 and you can attend if you like, I see students leap out of their seats as soon as they realize what teacher or what subject they have for Period 3 so this becomes a chance to take a break.

However, I have seen another phenomenon at Bishop Loughlin. I saw the school closed down after a Loughlin student was killed for the gold cap on his tooth on his way home from school. The school was closed the day of his funeral. Mass was held at Holy Cross parish in Flatbush, Brooklyn. (It was the coldest day of the year, a day in December.) The boy who was killed was an only child. His parents were divorced and there were few relatives. Loughlin's chorus and band filled the choir loft. Musical instruments were carried in from vans. Although nobody was required to be there, 90% of the student body, most of the faculty, and all the administrators were there.

Early in the morning, students were arriving from Bed-Stuy, East New York, Fort Greene, Jamaica, St. Albans, Hollis, and Far Rockaway, filling the church and lining the streets to maximum capacity. They sat in pews and stood in the aisles of the church. Not one teacher felt that it was necessary to police the students. They did not misbehave during the service, nor did any students fall asleep. Many wept. Students came to grieve, to support one another and to feel part of a larger family at a time when life was so fragile. We brought this terrible tragedy to the liturgy, and the sacred to the tragedy. It was such a holy experience. Students heard a teacher give a eulogy of his student, his voice cracking. The homily was relevant and moving. Students left that service embracing one another, embracing the mother of the student and greeting the father. Then they stood in the cold, waiting for the casket to be placed in the hearse and driven away.

The Good News of Jesus Christ was palpable that day. Was it spoken? Was it preached? Was it taught? Who did the evangelizing? The school was in touch with the heartbeat of the students. We responded to it; all brought their gifts and talents. Evangelization happened!

Liturgy was a natural outpouring of the Spirit in the hearts of all involved. The publication that came with the report of the five colloquia asks this regarding evangelization: «What attention do we pay to the everyday life of young people? What attention do we pay to their expressions, their rites, their places, their productions, their manifestations, their silences?» We must find ways to bring all of their experiences to the sacred and the sacred to all of their experiences.

One day I was sitting alone in the Religion Department at Bishop Loughlin when the phone rang. When I answered, I heard the desperation of a frantic woman. «I need to speak to Bro. James.» Bro. James wasn't there. «Brother Dennis, then,» she said hurriedly. Brother Dennis wasn't there. «Please, please,» she said, «pray with me. I am the mother of Ronn Robles.» Immediately images of her son passed through my mind - tall, thin with glasses, a very soft-spoken student. We had heard a year ago that Ronn Robles was killed - shot to death at a disco house in the city. He was

trying to prevent the killer from killing another man when the killer turned on him. «I just read the newspaper,» this woman cried, «I saw the photo of his murderer. It said Ronn kept calling to him: "Please, don't kill me, don't kill me".»

My mother's heart was wrenched with her pain, seeing the face of her son's killer and hearing for the first time the last words of her son pleading to be spared. «Mary, Mother of Jesus. you who held in your arms the dead body of your son, killed though innocent, listen to the cry of this woman. Take her into your arms and comfort her. Let her experience the warmth and peace of your presence, for more than any other you understand the brokenness of her heart." Alone in the Religion Office, I could let all the passionate Baptist flow forth from me.

Many times since then I wondered about why she called Loughlin at that moment. Such intense anguish and she immediately called Loughlin. Why? She must have sensed that at Loughlin she would be comforted, or maybe Loughlin was all that she had.

One day, I was on a weekend retreat with Loughlin students. The students broke into small groups and were sharing their life stories - painful stories of abandonment, abuse, suicide attempts. Sometimes I think that we live in denial of all that today's teenagers are going through. One of Gerard Rummery's favorite quotes of the founder is this and it can certainly be applied to today's teenagers:

Children often do not have the strength of mind or body to bare the greater difficulties which life presents to them.

After we left the small groups, we gathered in chapel for prayer. The chapel was dark and there were votive candles at the foot of large statues, casting shadows on the faces of the statues. The students were giggling both from the feeling of being spooked by the surroundings, and also, I imagine, as an outlet for the deeply painful experiences they had just shared in their small groups. A priest had just driven up from the city to say Mass for the retreatants. Not having experienced the retreat itself or the pain of the students, he wanted to begin the Mass. Angrily, he chastised them for their behavior in church. He called for them to be silent «right now.» The students became silent, but there would be bursts of laughter, the nervous laughter of being commanded not to laugh.

The Mass was awkward and most of us were uncomfortable throughout. To me, there was little evangelization. It did not feel like good news. I want to repeat what I quoted earlier from the publication with the five colloquia regarding evangelization: «What attention do we pay to the everyday life of young people?»

The Catholic priest came from his own personal experience of Church. He did not hear the stories which the young people just shared. He was not in tune with the heartbeat of the students at that time. He came into the community without being part of the community. Again,

half of Loughlin's population is non-Catholic. Many are afraid of statues and dark places, evoking spirits. It is very difficult to experience the good news when there is such a gap between, in this case, the priest's experience of life and of Church and the students'.

In Pope Paul VI's Decree on Evangelization in the Modern World, he states this:

«Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.»

I have visited some of the Baptist churches which our students attend - wonderful Baptist churches. The people come in and talk to one another right up to the time the service begins. Even when the preacher begins the service, the people stay in dialogue with the minister. «Yes, Rev. Jones, say it's so, Thank you, Jesus - let Him be praised.» All this is being said while the preacher preaches. It is not only considered to be an interruption, it adds to the fervor. The people are not quiet. All are there praising the Lord. Our style of praying is different. The students find it boring oftentimes, but Paul VI tells us that we must use **their** language, their signs and symbols, in order to have concrete impact on **their** lives.

So, at Loughlin, we have an excellent Gospel-singing chorus. They also sing beautiful Gregorian chants at times, or hymns that we adults are used to, but the student body wakes up and is most attentive when the music is their music gospel, reggae, latino. Many of the pictures of Jesus hanging at Loughlin are black and Hispanic representations. We are sensitive to the importance of the students seeing God in themselves and themselves in God. We have excellent retreat programs which the students enjoy. They enjoy it because they get the day off from regular classes; but they enjoy it for more than that - they are affirmed. They pray. Their prayers heal us who work the retreats. They challenge us and deepen our own spirituality. We cannot preach or teach «cheap religion» to students who know so much violence and racism and have such pained lives. Our teachings and our preachings must be relevant. They must touch the core of their experience or they don't want it. Many of them have lives that are too broken to swallow sentimentality. And so, they teach us to teach, constantly challenge us to stretch and to grow. Their experiences, shared with us, make the gospels come alive.

So, who does the evangelizing? It is a hard line to draw. I often wonder if I have ever touched hearts to the depth to which my own heart has been touched by my colleagues, the faculty, the Brothers and my students. Evangelization is announcing the Good News that God is alive in our midst, in the joy and pain of our lives as we gather together in community, knowing full well that God is present with us and continues to work with us and through us as we touch the hearts of one another. This is the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ. •