

4th Sunday of Lent “Called to Evangelize”

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About twenty one years ago, I had the opportunity to travel through Japan with my sister who was living there at the time with her family. One thing is for sure, the second you step off of the airplane you realize how completely different Japan is to Western Culture. Since I was a seminarian at the time, I was interested in visiting Shinto and Buddhist shrines. And they are very different from our churches. However, I noticed that there were also a few similarities. For instance, before entering into a shrine, there was a place for ritual hand washing. That was interesting. I couldn't help but think of our baptismal font. There were also sanctuaries in the shrines where their concept of the “holy” was and a dedicated place for the pilgrims to gather and worship. There was also a collection basket, so some things are universal!

My sister and I traveled to the ancient capital of Japan, Nara. At Nara, there is a huge several-stories tall single cast Bronze Buddha called the Daibutsu. I think the translation is Big Buddha. And it was big. The huge wood structure that houses the Big Buddha is one of the largest all wood buildings in the world. There were Buddhist monks scurrying about and hundreds of tourists. We ran into a couple from America and introduced ourselves. After the getting to know you phase, we got into a discussion. At some point, my sister asked the lady, “So, what do think of this Big Buddha? Isn't this amazing?” The lady replied, “To be honest, the Big Buddha makes us sad.” We were shocked by that response, “Oh, what makes you sad about it?” The lady responded, “The Buddha is beautiful and all, but Christ is not in their hearts and so we are sad that they are not saved.” Both my sister and I couldn't believe our ears. What a Debbie Downer. Soon we were mercifully travelling in a different direction than this couple.

As you know, among many of our Protestant brothers and sisters, salvation consists of explicit belief in Jesus Christ in this life. Those who don't explicitly say they are saved don't get to heaven. When someone asks us “Are you saved”, the Catholic response is “I am working on it”. We believe God waits until the end of time before he judges anyone, so can't we afford each other the same courtesy? Needless to say, we Catholics have a different take and it begins with the Gospel reading we have today.

Jesus says, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.” A question I get often is: Can those who are not baptized be saved? Can those who don't know Jesus be saved? What does the Church have to say about this? I am thankful to have clear statements from the Second Vatican Council to lean on. It's a mouthful but hang in there. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 16 states, because Christ is the light to all nations, “Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.” *Lumen Gentium* continues, “Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. She knows that it is given by Christ who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life.”

Lumen Gentium however doesn't downplay the need for evangelization, the document continues, "Often human beings, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator. Or some there are who, living and dying in this world without God, are exposed to final despair. Wherefore to promote the glory of God and procure the salvation of all of these, and mindful of the command of the Lord, 'Preach the Gospel to every creature', the Church fosters the missions with care and attention."

I think this piece from Lumen Gentium is both interesting and helpful. The Church believes that Christ the Light shines on all peoples. The work of missionaries then isn't to, quote unquote, "bring Jesus to nonbelievers". The work of missionaries is to help nonbelievers see how the light of Christ is already there, even if that light is dim. Through the help of Scripture and Tradition, missionaries can help new converts to see the light more clearly and to embrace the light in their love of God and neighbor through the reception of the fullness of revelation given to us in Jesus Christ, aided by the Sacraments of the Church.

I think we can see this principle from Lumen Gentium in its beginning stages in our Old Testament reading exalting the goodness of King Cyrus. You see, King Cyrus wasn't a Jew and yet the Jews saw King Cyrus as an instrument of God's deliverance. Meanwhile, when my sister and I traveled to Nara to see the Daibutsu, it was our Catholic instinct to recognize that the light of Christ was already present albeit unconsciously, or perhaps anonymously, in the hearts of those gathered in prayer that day. Salvation can only come from Jesus. Our Catholic instinct is that Jesus is present everywhere. What is lacking so often is our response. And so, we are called to evangelize beginning with the example of our lives.

Of course, when it comes to evangelization, an alarming statistic is this: while the largest religious group in United States is the Catholic Church, the second largest religious group is fallen away Catholics. Therefore, when it comes to a new evangelization, I think the best way is to begin by helping former Catholics see the light of Christ present in their lives. When the light of Christ gets stronger in a person's soul, the darkness gets smaller, and grace gets a foothold.

And so, here is an interesting challenge for this fourth week of Lent: Could you imagine what would happen if each and every one of us invited someone to come to Church next week? Think about it. Look around, what would this church look like if we did? I bet if we put our hearts and minds to it, each one of us could invite one person, just one person to join us at Mass in the coming weeks. People get uncomfortable with this. The reason why I think we don't typically feel comfortable about actively inviting people to Church is because we tend to downplay or forget how wonderful the light of Christ is, dwelling within us. The light within us is a precious gift, why wouldn't we want to share it? This is what happens if we do. As the light of Christ grows in our hearts, the light of Christ will grow in the hearts of others. The darkness in the world will therefore get smaller. And heaven will get a little bigger, one soul at a time.