

ON BEING EVANGELIZED

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One of the many issues that came up indirectly at the Daughters of Charity Provincial Directors Meeting in Paris in July 2012 was “New Evangelization” and reaching out to those who have “left the Church”. While the discussion and comments on this topic went on, the thought went through my mind – when we talk about people having left the Church, in some situations we could well ask “who has left who?”¹ I suggest the answer is not always as clear-cut as we might like to think !

Some weeks ago, I helped a couple whom I shall call Jane and John (not their real names) prepare a Funeral Service and Mass for Jane’s recently deceased mother. Jane and John were a very affable couple, though naturally under some stress. Jane explained to me that her mother was a person of deep faith, and a practicing Catholic all her life. She had brought Jane up in the Catholic Tradition. But she herself, Jane, had wandered away from the Catholic Church in her late teens, and when in later years she felt the need of religion and faith, found that the presence of Jesus Christ eluded her in the Catholic Church, and that the Catholic Church’s attitude to equality of women was off-putting to say the least. After some searching, Jane found a home with the Salvation Army, to whom she has remained committed.

Because of her mother’s faith, Jane wanted the funeral service to be the full Catholic Mass. Her husband John, who belonged to the Uniting Church Tradition, was happy to support his wife and to help in any way he could. Then Jane produced the draft copy of the booklet for the Order of Service. It was as near to perfect as one could get. She explained that a couple of friends had given some advice, but that she had basically drawn it up herself. Readings were chosen, prayers of intercession written and readers organized, music arranged, offertory procession, eulogy, symbols, pall - everything was there.

Several days later, at the actual Funeral Mass, the liturgy was well carried out, with Jane, John and others looking after readings, prayers of intercession, bringing up the gifts and eulogy. Jane herself went to communion (she believes in the Eucharist). She and other members of the Salvation Army were there in uniform, and sang beautifully. It was as prayerful and meaningful a funeral liturgy as I have ever attended.

So, has Jane really left the Church ? In the eyes of some, she might be classed as a “cafeteria Catholic”, choosing what part of the Tradition of Christianity she wants to accept - and should be “brought back to the faith” in order to have the “truth”. For my part, I felt that I myself was being evangelized by Jane and her husband - and I found it difficult to believe that Jane is not part of the Church, despite her own claim that she had left it. Perhaps it is the Catholic and Christian Tradition which needs to reassess itself ?

Evangelization

In 1975, Pope Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: *The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herselfHaving been sent and evangelized, she then sends out evangelizers.....*² In this document, issued before the time the term “New Evangelization” had been coined, some fundamentals of a renewed evangelization were laid out by Paul VI. When we read the document, it is clear that evangelization in our time is not just shouting the same message in a louder voice, but attempting to announce the Gospel with freshness and by whatever means are available. And a basic component for the Church is that it first allow itself to be evangelized, that it listen to what those in the Church, and those who

¹ More properly, this might read *who has left whom?* But usage is sometimes less pedantic than correctness !

² Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (“On Evangelization in the Modern World”), December 8, 1975, n 15.

claim no affiliation with it – are saying, even when this does not completely conform to what the Church would like to hear. One of the many challenges to the Church at the present time is to listen - and be evangelized.

In our Church Tradition, there are those who have great difficulty in going beyond what the Tradition has always been for them, and find it very difficult to listen to what others are saying about developing the Tradition further. But they don't need to get stuck in the past !

Then there are those who call us to go forward to make radical changes in attitudes and in the way our Christian and Catholic Tradition should develop. These people are the ones who focus on keeping our Tradition alive, fresh and relevant – and stop it from becoming dessicated and moribund. Many of them might be classed as prophets - and they call us forward. Some of them will be voices from outside, some from within. But they don't need to discard our basic Tradition.

There is a tendency in our Church to think that we must follow either one or the other of the above approaches. Our Christian Tradition needs stability and foundation, and it also needs development. So can't it be "both/and" rather than "either/or". In the early Church. Peter and Paul epitomised this.

And in the Vincentian Family?

It is not difficult to apply this thinking to our own Vincentian Family Traditions. The members of our Vincentian Family value the heritage left to us by Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul. In their day, they were prophets, and we still need prophets now who will hold our heritage up to us for reflection and dialogue . Vincent and Louise evangelized one another. Vincent de Paul was affected by the man from Gannes, the people from Clichy and Châtillon. Frederic Ozanam was challenged by students in regard to the Church. We could come up with many other examples from our Vincentian Family and from those among whom we work and minister, especially the poor.

How and when have we ourselves been challenged and evangelized by people and events ?