

The Conspiracy of Silence

The context of this Scripture passage relates to last week's Gospel, where the disciples are sent to go and preach the Gospel of the Kingdom. So this admonition about not being afraid is actually about not being afraid to preach the Gospel.

Indeed, at the end here we hear how important it is that we acknowledge Christ before others.

So today, in that sense, I want to talk about a very practical thing: all of us are called, according to our temperament and according to how God made us, to preach the Gospel, to be conduits of the Kingdom of God. No baptized Christian is exempt from this. But a lot of times we don't know what this looks like.

So today is going to be a very practical homily about how to evangelize.

Before I get to that, I think it's important just to paint a picture for you, because I think all of us can fall into a kind of conspiracy of silence around our faith.

Our country is very firm about the separation of church and state. And we can misinterpret that important value by falsely concluding that what it means is that faith is a private deal. Faith is a very personal deal, to be sure. But our faith should not be cowed into silence.

One example: at my last parish, we used to do Youth Migrant Project up north of here, and some of our high schoolers had come to help the middle schoolers, kind of to be peer ministers. There were five or six girls in this group, these high schoolers who were helping with the smaller kids' Youth Migrant Project, and they were in some small groups sharing.

What shocked them is that although all of them had known each other, most of them had gone to the school, and all of them were at the same high school—which happened to be a Catholic high school that won't be named—nonetheless, all of them were under the false impression that they were like the only person in their class who cared about the faith.

They were incredibly edified to find out that these other classmates, who maybe they weren't close friends with, nonetheless all deeply cared about their faith. But a conspiracy of silence had intimidated them and made them all think that they were alone in this.

It was both very edifying and very sad at the same time.

Now shifting to adults, there was a survey done in 2014 of non-Christians. This survey found that of non-Christians, only seven percent of them reported that they knew one of their coworkers to be a practicing Christian.

I'll say that again. Of these non-Christians, only seven percent of them stated that they knew one of their coworkers was a practicing Christian. And only four percent of them said that a coworker had ever talked about Jesus with them.

Now, of course, there are a lot more than seven percent of their coworkers who are practicing Christians, right? So, what does that say? It's a culture of silence.

I bring up coworkers because you might be surprised to find out that studies that have been done on this show that the greatest impact you can have is not on your closest relatives. The greatest possible contact you have of bringing someone to the Gospel, being a conduit of bringing someone to faith, is actually more like medium acquaintances: coworkers, people in your bridge group, the guys you grab coffee with, people who are not your close kin, except your minor children. When your kids are growing up, you have a lot of influence there.

But other than that, your greatest influence is actually on more medium acquaintances.

Let that sink in. Your greatest possible impact in potentially bringing someone to faith is with your medium acquaintances: your coworkers, those you go to school with. That's where your impact is.

So, today's homily is essentially going to be a playbook of how to evangelize your medium acquaintances.

Now before I do that, let me put a caveat in there. What about my husband who doesn't practice the faith, or my kids who have left the faith, or my sister who has walked away from the faith?

The way that you evangelize them is simply through personal witness. In effect, you have to become on fire for the faith. And by your personal journey—not by nagging them, not necessarily by talking to them about the faith, but by your own transformation—they see it.

That's how you evangelize your closest kin.

So, that being said, we're talking here about medium acquaintances.

Misconceptions About Evangelization

How do we evangelize?

First, a couple misconceptions about this to get out of the way before I give you the playbook.

The first misconception about evangelizing those you know is that you have to be an extrovert to do this. I promise you, you do not have to be an extrovert to evangelize.

The single strongest evangelist I personally know is extremely introverted. But she gives the Lord permission to use her, and people just end up in her life—on the bus, on the street, wherever. The Lord brings people to her, and she is able to preach the Gospel to them in a way that really fits with her temperament.

So, you don't have to be a different personality to preach the Gospel.

In that vein, you do not have to pretend like you have it all together. In fact, all of our lives are messy. If you pretend that you have it all together, you're not being authentic, and you will not be a good evangelist. You do not have to pretend you have it all together.

Connected to that, people will not hold you to be a bad witness simply because they know you are a sinner. If you fail, if you have a bad day, if you make an unkind remark, if you lose your temper, that is not disqualifying—as long as you own it and apologize when you need to apologize.

If you own it when you make an unkind remark, or lose your temper, or are not as loving as you should be with a coworker or with a classmate, and you apologize when you need to apologize, you are in a good position to be an effective evangelist. Because again, everyone's lives are messy.

All of us, in fact, need Jesus. That's the whole point of this. You need Jesus, and so does your coworker who doesn't practice any faith.

Finally, the last misconception, or the last thing that needs to be said: you don't have to have all the answers.

This is not mostly about information. It is about relationship, which I'll get to. It's not really about information. It is about relationship and being a bridge of trust.

You don't need to have all the answers. You can look that up. And if it's truly just a theological crisis, you can send them to the pastor, or you can get the answer from the pastor.

That being said, here's the playbook.

The Playbook: Relationship, Story, and Boldness

How is this done?

You put Christ on the table, not in their face. Very simple. You put Christ on the table, not in their face.

What that means is that your acquaintances, your coworkers, your classmates have to know that you are a person of faith. You can't be like these non-Christians, where only

seven percent of them know a practicing Christian at work. It's a much higher percentage, I promise you. But those folks are hiding.

That's what it says here: "Everyone who acknowledges Me before others, I will acknowledge before My Heavenly Father." So, you put the Lord Jesus on the table, not in their face.

If your friends, seekers, or coworkers don't have a connection of trust with a faithful Christian, they will very often not make it in terms of coming further into the faith. So put Christ on the table, but not in their face.

Pray for opportunities.

Very simple. My friend that I mentioned is the most effective evangelist I know of one-on-one. That's how she evangelizes. She prays for opportunities, and the Lord just surfaces opportunities for her to share the Gospel.

Also pray that maybe the Lord puts someone on your heart, someone you think you are supposed to be that bridge of trust to faith for. Pray for them specifically, and pray for opportunities.

Next, you have to be a pretty good listener, and you have to seek to understand the other person. Humans are very complex. We have complex histories. Some people have religious trauma or other traumas. Most people have very bad images of God that are not true. So you have to listen, and you have to seek to understand where they're coming from.

With these people, you have to love them. You have to show concern for them. You have to be interested in their lives—interested in their lives to the degree that they will share with you what keeps them up at night. You have to be interested enough, and involved enough in their life, that you know what keeps them up at night. You know what troubles them. There is enough vulnerability between you that that kind of stuff is shared.

And when they share that kind of stuff, tell them you will pray for them. You're not saying, "Hey, let's pray right here," and making them uncomfortable if you know they're a nonbeliever. But tell them that you'll pray for them.

I've only had one person ever be offended when I told them I'd pray for them, and I think it's primarily because I was a priest and I didn't know them that well. If you tell someone you will pray for them, even if they're not a believer, they appreciate the gesture.

This is the key point here. So, if you've zoned out, zone back in now.

When I said you have to know enough about their life, that they'll share what keeps them up at night, that they'll share what they're worried about, the key to evangelization is this point: evangelization is not about providing information. It is about sharing your story in a way that

is adjacent to something they are experiencing. I'll say that again. It's sharing your story in a way that is adjacent to something they're struggling with.

You share from your own example, your own life, how your faith, how the sacraments, how Jesus Himself was active in a situation that is similar. That's where the wheels start turning in terms of evangelization.

That's why I say you don't have to know all the answers, but you have to know your story. Whether you're sharing with a classmate, a coworker, a circle of friends, whatever, that's where evangelization starts and that's where the rubber hits the road.

A couple of things. I'm almost there.

Pray for boldness to see the opening in a conversation and to bring faith into it. Even when you're only sharing a few experiences, it's a little scary at first for most people. So, pray for boldness to step through that door when the door opens.

It's not about winning arguments. And if faith comes up and it gets a little contentious, don't get defensive. Don't take it personally. The Lord says right here in the Gospel: He is with you in this. Don't get defensive. And you don't need to get in an argument.

Meet people where they're at, not where you hope they are. This can take a very long period of time in cultivating relationship. You may never see it happen, but you may. And if it even happens once, what glory that is.

Last line. This line I found online, and I think it's really good: talk about spiritual things naturally, and naturally talk about natural things spiritually.

I'll let you interpret that as you may. But talk about spiritual things naturally, and talk about natural things spiritually. The Lord, in effect, holds everything in existence at once. And so, everything is related to Him.

So dear friends in Christ, at the end I'll point out to you that there's a handout to take with you today. So don't worry about getting all these points down.

But let us, as we receive Jesus in the Eucharist, realize we receive Jesus not just for ourselves, but to share Him. When we are sent forth from this place, we are sent forth to show forth the Gospel of the Lord.

And so let us pray for boldness and openness, for the Lord to point out to us whom He's calling us to be that bridge of trust for, and let us commit to being that light to others.

Praise be Jesus Christ.