

EVANGELISING CATECHESIS

I thank Sr. Hyacinthe and the Formation for Mission Team for inviting me to address you today. I welcome you to the Cathedral for this Day of Renewal for Catechists and I thank you greatly for your generosity, and for all the hard work you do across the Diocese catechising children and adults, especially preparing them for the sacraments. In this talk, I cover three things, some of which you may have heard me speak about before. My chief point is the need for a new kind of catechesis.

1. Data

First, in England and Wales, as the National Census shews, Christianity has for some decades now been in steep decline. By the end of this decade, Christians will be in a minority, under 50%.¹ Islam is the second fastest growing religious group, now 1 in 2 of the population. But the fastest growth is the ‘nones,’ i.e. people of no religious affiliation. 1 in 4 people (25% of the population) now say they have no religion. Stephen Bullivant of St. Mary’s Twickenham in his recent British Attitudes Survey, *Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales* puts it higher. He argues that about 45% of the population are nones, people of no religion far outnumbering active Christians.² Most Christians in England and Wales are Anglicans, although the Anglican Church is in decline. In 1981 it was 44% of population; today it is 18%.

Catholics constitute 1 in 12 or 8% of population and recently our Diocese of Portsmouth has been undertaking a computer mapping project. This is why this October, along with the usual Mass count, the diocesan Social Research Unit is conducting a once every 5 year demographic survey of Mass-goers, asking their age, attendance-rate and ethnicity. Phase One of the project has mapped every parish boundary down to street level. It includes internal parish data (Mass practice, baptisms etc.) and external social and ethnic data. St. Michael’s Leigh Park is the parish with highest number of ‘nones’ (47.5%). Interestingly, it is also the area with the least ethnic diversity: ‘Anglos’ make up 97.8% of population. The total population of the Diocese of Portsmouth is 3.129M people, of whom 259K (8%) are baptised Catholic. Of these 259K, 35,500 practice: 13% of the total baptised Catholic population. In other words, practising Catholics form a tiny minority of Catholics.

In the general population, regular (once a month) church attendance - a notoriously difficult statistic to measure reliably - is 1.6M attendees, about 2.8% of the population (1 person in every 35 – one of the lowest rates in the Western world). So in England and Wales, there are huge numbers of ‘unchurched:’ 34 out of every 35 people. In the Diocese of Portsmouth, with its practice rate of 13%, there are huge numbers of ‘inactive’ or ‘not yet practising’ Catholics: almost 9 out of every 10. Of those who do practice, two-thirds are women, and a quarter of all Mass-goers are women over 65. The trend is downwards. Over the last 25

¹ See www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/index.html (October 2016).

² See www.stmarys.ac.uk/benedict-xvi/docs/2016-may-contemporary-catholicism-report.pdf (October 2016)

years, attendance at Sunday Mass has plummeted from 54,500 to 35,000. Arguably, it might be more illuminating to tabulate the trend for adult baptisms and for receptions into full communion. In the Diocese of Portsmouth in 2014, there were 320 adult baptisms and receptions – surely miniscule in view of the population? Bullivant’s research shews that 9 out of every 10 receptions into the Catholic Church are Christians converting from another denomination. Only 1 in 10 is the conversion of a ‘none’ - an interesting statistic to ponder.

So the challenge of evangelisation is enormous. Leaving aside minority religions, most people in England and Wales are unchurched. Most Christians and most Catholics are non-churchgoing. These statistics mask the magnitude of the challenge. For in this Diocese over the last 25 years, especially its urban centres, there has been a massive influx of immigrant Catholic groups such as Filipinos, Keralans, Poles. This suggests that much of the former Anglo-Irish constituency has now evaporated.

Statistics are important, of course, although there are limits. Evangelisation is not about numbers. The Lord never promised full churches; indeed, if anything He seemed to envisage the Christian community as a small band. Yet the Church *is* incarnate and so numbers do have some significance for the Church’s internal functioning and its external mission. Evidently, the Church has been losing ground. How to respond? Can something be done? How can the lapsed be reached? How might there be an effective outreach to the unchurched?

2. New Evangelisation

Secondly, evangelisation. What does it mean? The term ‘evangelisation’, as you know, comes from *eu-angellizomai*: to ‘spread Good News’. We need to differentiate three elements or moments in evangelisation.

- (1) First, religious experience, the grace of Christ touching a person’s heart, rousing them to faith; then
- (2) Second, on-going conversion, catechesis and formation in discipleship; and
- (3) Third, sacramentalisation (Baptism, Confirmation and Penance/Eucharist) receiving the sacraments and insertion into the life of the Christian community.

These three elements (encounter, catechesis, sacraments), the fruit of God’s grace, Scott Hahn likens to falling-in-love, getting engaged, then marriage and family life.³ In RCIA, typically the enquirer has had a religious experience; they then receive catechesis; the process culminates at the Easter Vigil with receiving the sacraments and insertion into the life of the parish.

Now for many cradle Catholics these three moments are reversed:

- sacramentalised at birth in baptism,
- catechised through childhood and given Holy Communion and Confirmation,
- it could be asked: When were they evangelised?

³ See S. Hahn *Evangelizing Catholics. A Mission Manual for the New Evangelization* (Huntington IN, Our Sunday Visitor: 2014) 47-57

Many Catholics are sacramentalised but lightly evangelised. Sherry Weddell in her book *Forming Intentional Disciples* argues that the era of tribal Catholicism has now passed when we relied on the culture, the family, school and parish communities implicitly to evangelise the young during the process of catechesis for sacraments. The expectation was that as adults, they too would want to hand on the faith to their offspring.⁴ Yet the failure of this tribal Catholicism in today's circumstances is evident. Youngsters are leaving the Catholic Church in droves. Moreover, even practising Catholics, parishioners, those who undertake prominent parish ministries, seem not to have been evangelised. Pew Surveys shew that almost 50% of *practising* Catholics do not believe in a personal God or that they can have a personal relationship with God. Almost half the people around you at Mass next Sunday have little belief that God is personal, loves them and wants to enter into a personal friendship with them!

In outreach to the non-churchgoing and the un-churched the first moment (encounter) is critical. The key issue today is how to rouse people to faith, to expect God's gift of His love in religious experience. Whilst entrusting everything to God's grace, we need to connect with people's religious sense. We need to focus on the heart rather than the head. We need to create the conditions – and to keep creating the conditions - in which they can encounter the Mystery of Christ and so want the Truth and Life He offers. Often, for instance in baptism preparation, or when people come to request Confirmation, First Holy Communion for their child or a funeral for a departed loved one, the focus is on verbal catechesis or the details of the liturgical celebration. The focus needs to be on 'religion', on religious experience, on God. The issue is helping people to find God, to experience the love of God, to learn the art of praying, to develop a personal-passionate friendship with Jesus Christ, to grasp the meaning of His death and resurrection, to have a sense of being personally called to be His disciple. Catholics have huge resources for this in two millennia of spiritual theology, the wisdom and lives of the saints, and a rich and diverse Tradition.

Above all, evangelisation is about a Person, Jesus Christ, and a transforming encounter with Him within His Body, the Church. In recent times, the term 'new evangelisation' (NE) has come into use. JP2 famously called for an evangelisation "new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression".⁵ This NE is not ecclesio-centric (about the Church) but Christo-centric (about Christ). The aim is not to enhance the institution of the Church, to fill the pews, to build up parish structures and ministries, or to enlist more helpers, say, to run the Children's Liturgy or the RCIA. It is about making Jesus Christ better known and better loved, spreading His teaching, attracting people to His Way of Life. Catholics have much to learn here from evangelical Christians. The aim is not to build up missionary parishes but missionary disciples. A parish is not an end in itself. A parish is a chaplaincy equipped with what is needed to communicate the Gospel. A parish is, if you will, the operating system on which Apps run. NE requires a change of mind-set. In the past, it was a closed system.

⁴ See S. Weddell *Forming Intentional Disciples. The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, Our Sunday Visitor: 2012) 15-47. Cf. M. Sweeney and S. Weddell *The Parish: Mission or Maintenance* (Colorado Springs, Catherine of Siena Institute: 2000) and S. Weddell *Making Disciples; Equipping Apostles* (Colorado Springs, Catherine of Siena Institute: 2000)

⁵ See John Paul II "The Task of the Latin American Bishop" in *Origins* 12 (March 24, 1983): 659-62. The occasion was a discourse to an assembly of CELAM in Port-au-Prince on 9th March 1983. Cf. R. Fisichella *The New Evangelisation* (Gracewing, Leominster: 2012) 8f

Clergy acted as ‘chaplains to the Catholic community’ and the faithful were ‘consumers of the sacraments.’ Today, the faithful need to become missionary-disciples and the clergy mission-directors. After Vatican II, there was a strong focus on the Church, on building up the Church, on lay ministries and structures. Today, the focus needs to be less on the Church of the Lord and more on the Lord of the Church.

Evangelisation is always bi-directional, like breathing-in and breathing-out. It is about ourselves being evangelised – a life-long process - as much as ourselves evangelising others. The challenge is not a shortage of priests but a shortage of people, that is, people and priests converted to Christ, who truly love Him and who wish to spread the Gospel to others. We need more Catholics personally and passionately in love with Jesus Christ, formed in the Scriptures and worshipping the Lord in the Holy Eucharist. In this way parishes will have the human resources needed to tackle the challenge.

Finally to mention here, evangelisation always has a double intention. Its proximate goal is the individual, but its ultimate goal is to baptise culture. Christ calls individuals to follow Him, incorporating them into His Body the Church. But the Church as His Body is meant to be a ‘leaven in the dough’ (Lk 13: 20-21), permeating, guiding and fulfilling the culture with Christian meanings and values, as Christ Himself did for the Jewish culture. By the High Middle Ages, the Church had successfully baptised European culture, but since the late-seventeenth century, Christians have had minimal success baptising modernity and today’s postmodern secular culture. Consequently, there is now a massive dichotomy between faith and culture, with vast sectors of everyday life from politics, business and the media to medicine, the arts and human sciences, little touched by Gospel values and Christian influence. Paul VI called this the tragedy of our time.⁶ JP2 said “the greatest challenge of our age comes from a growing separation between faith and reason, between the Gospel and culture.”⁷

To sum this up, NE is the presentation of the Person of Jesus Christ and the *kerygma* or Great Story of His birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection and its meaning for us and for our salvation. It is about enabling people to encounter Him and be transformed, about being formed in His teaching and life-style, and discerning the gifts He has given them for service and mission.

3. Catechesis in the Light of the New Evangelisation

So in the light of the call to the NE, what is the role of the catechist? What sort of catechesis, catechetical curriculum and catechetical programmes are needed? How might catechesis be given for instance in the RCIA, Children’s Liturgy, First Holy Communion and Confirmation, or in marriage preparation?

⁶ DH 4578 (Paul VI: *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 20)

⁷ John Paul II *Inter Munera Academicarum* 2:
www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19990128_inter-munera-academicarum_en.html (May 2016)

It seems to me a new form of catechesis is needed, an ‘evangelising catechesis.’ The foundation of this evangelising catechesis is the person of the catechist him-/herself. Evangelising catechesis needs an *evangelised* catechist. Catechists need to be credible witnesses. Catechists need constantly to be evangelised, that is, converted to the Person of Jesus Christ, in love with Him, full of joy and energy. This means deciding to spend time in prayer, to undertake Eucharistic Adoration, to celebrate regularly the Sacrament of Reconciliation, above all, to love Jesus in the Mass. It means loving the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, studying them daily, using them as *lectio divina*, penetrating their meaning. It means studying the teaching of the Church, above all in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in order to know not only what the Church teaches but *why* the Church teaches it, and what that teaching means in practice. A catechist is there not to give their own opinions, but Christ’s opinion. If we have difficulties or issues with what the Church teaches, then we need to seek help from a sound mentor. In evangelising catechesis, the person of the catechist is crucial as a credible witness. He or she must be full of energy, full of human virtues like friendliness, joy, inclusiveness, and full of God. He or she must be holy.

Evangelising catechesis underlines religious experience. It seeks to develop the religious sense of wonder and awe, helping people to pray and find God. Of the three moments of evangelisation mentioned above - religious experience, catechesis and sacramentalisation - evangelising catechesis pays attention to the first, religious experience. It nourishes the heart as much as the head and the will. It draws attention to the testimony of the saints as much as to the teaching of the Church. It is rooted in prayer, Eucharistic Adoration and *lectio divina* as much as in the *Catechism*. Evangelising catechesis cannot be reduced to head-knowledge: it is as much about teaching a person to pray, as forming a person’s mind and influencing their will.

Moreover, evangelising catechesis presents the Person of Christ before expounding the Mystery of the Church. Sometimes RCIA groups get ‘bogged down’ in the Church’s moral teachings or the conditions for reception of the sacraments or whether women priests might one day be permitted. Instead, an evangelising catechesis would constantly refer to the *kerygma*, to the Great Story of the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life. Everything in catechesis needs to be related to the Great Story, then to shew how that Story is fulfilled and continued in the life and mission of the Church, its Bible, its Tradition, its magisterial teaching and above all in its Liturgy. Evangelising catechesis is about meeting Jesus Christ in the Bible and meeting Him in the Holy Eucharist.

In presenting the centrality of the Person of Christ, programmes and curricula should always have three panels: call, formation, sending. In other words:

- first, the call of the disciple to meet the Person of Jesus Christ in a transforming personal encounter;
- second, the formation of the disciple in the Way of Christ within His body the Church, the specifically catechetical moment; and
- third, discerning the gifts and talents God has given for mission and service, in order to become a missionary disciple of Christ, full of creativity.

Every session of catechesis ought to have these three panels in varying combinations: call, formation, sending, or if you like, Christological, ecclesial, charismatic. The diocesan framework is similarly structured around three vicariates: vocation, formation, evangelisation. When preparing a session, the catechist might ask: Which panels need emphasis tonight? Evangelising catechesis, even when preparing someone directly to receive a sacrament, is always about making that person into a missionary disciple.

Another feature of evangelising catechesis is the way it constantly addresses the key questions or blocks to faith that post-modern peoples and millennials raise. Robert Spitzer mentions the myths and problems contemporaries find with Christian belief:

- Does God really exist? Or is He a projection of human need? And if He is so good, then why does He permit so much suffering in the world?
- Science and religion: empirical science seems to give the truth, the facts, while religion seems to be a matter of private opinion. What is the real relationship between science and religion, faith and reason?
- Jesus Christ was a good man, even a prophet. But did He really exist? How can it be certain He was Divine, the Son of God?
- And the Church. Why does the Church seem to impose so many moral rules, especially on sexuality?

Spitzer adds a further more general block: the busyness of contemporary culture, with its pervasive digital media, constant work, consumerism and entertainment. People do not have much time or leisure for reflection on the big questions of life.⁸ A catechesis that is evangelising creates space for these questions and is forever addressing them.

Lastly, evangelising catechesis should always be fun. Catholics here again can learn much from evangelical Christians. Rick Warren, the founder of the extraordinarily successful Saddleback Church in California, now the centre of a global network of church-plants and missions, in his classic book *The Purpose-Driven Church*, stresses the importance of belonging.⁹ The new comer must be welcomed and immediately feel a sense of belonging; he or she is invited to join a small formation-group. He calls this 101. When they have finished that, they graduate to another group, 201, and then to another, 301, and another, 401, and so on. Transposing this into a Catholic context, after a seekers' group such as Sycamore or Alpha, the newcomer might next belong to the RCIA group, but once received into full communion, they then need to belong to another group, say, the Jeff Cavins *Great Adventure Catholic Bible Study*.¹⁰ Indeed, every Catholic, not just newcomers, should constantly be in formation. Everyone should belong to a small group – a Men's Group, a Youth Group, a Young Mothers' Group, an SVP - whose key ingredients are prayer, formation, fun and friendship. Evangelising catechesis, following the lead of new ecclesial movements, takes place principally in small groups where people can share with one another life's joys and challenges, whilst also giving testimony to what God has done for them.

⁸ See R. Spitzer *Finding True Happiness* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press: 2015). See also www.magiscenter.com (October 2016)

⁹ R. Warren *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan: 1995)

¹⁰ See <http://biblestudyforcatholics.com> (October 2016)

Summing up, catechesis in the light of the NE is an evangelising catechesis. The energy and holiness of the catechist is crucial as a credible witness. Evangelising catechesis seeks to develop the religious sense, to help people encounter the Person of Christ, to be formed in His Gospel and to be equipped for mission. It addresses the key questions people raise today and it takes place mostly within small groups. It is a catechesis driven by the joy of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion.

So to conclude. Evangelisation is two-way: it's about ourselves being evangelised, a life-long endeavour, and about ourselves evangelising others. It means drawing people to a personal, transforming encounter with Jesus Christ. The thesis here is that in the light of the call to the NE, all catechesis, whether given in the RCIA programme, Children's Liturgy, First Holy Communion and Confirmation, or in marriage preparation - all catechesis should be evangelising catechesis. This requires on-going conversion, holiness and energy on the part of the catechist and a real effort to help the catechised pray and develop a personal friendship with God.

The challenge of evangelisation in Britain is enormous but exciting. Britain is a fertile mission-field in which the potential harvest is rich and at this point ripe. True, whilst it is rare to encounter direct hostility, there are small but vibrant activist groups such as *Stonewall* or *The National Secular Society*. But there is no need for despondency. Christ is the only Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14: 6), and we believe that even at this moment the Holy Spirit is at work in people's hearts wooing them towards Christ and His Church. It is not the 'Gospel-product' that is defective but the ability of people in a busy, secular consumer-culture, full of distractions, entertainment, mobiles and the internet, to hear God's Voice. We stand within the great Catholic Tradition. The Message we have is wonderfully Good News. It is addressed to every single person. Our task is to communicate this Message, the Person of Jesus Christ, more imaginatively and attractively so that all can find their way to that true, genuine, lasting human happiness and fulfilment for which they long.

As catechists, I thank you enormously for all that you do so generously to serve Christ's Church in this great Diocese of Portsmouth. But I do pray for you. We do need to pray for creativity. I pray that you will be given great creativity. I pray you will be filled with the joy and gifts of the Holy Spirit. I pray earnestly that the Father will graciously hear and answer this prayer.

Thank you for listening!