

Conversion, Evangelization, and Preaching

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8-28-25

Conversion: Focusing on the End Product

How do you persevere in doing something that is difficult? Picture the end product.

I dug a hole to plant a peach tree six years ago. It was hard work. But in my mind, there was a peach pie. I could feel the crunch of the tender crust in my mouth. I could taste the crispy streusel crumb topping of brown sugar and oats. I could smell the cinnamon-y soft peaches in between. I could see and imagine that pie. Oh, so good. And oh, so worth it. Thinking about that pie made it a little easier to keep shoveling. Then I planted a little bare peach-tree stick into that beautifully big hole. It seemed many years away from bearing the desired fruit that could be made into a peach pie.

Evangelization is no different. Allow the Lord to convert us daily so that we exude the joy of God to others? That's not easy. Listen carefully to others so that we learn how to help them grow closer to God? That takes self-sacrifice. Speak to the perspective of another? That takes us outside of our comfort zone. Evangelization is hard. Sometimes it works. Oftentimes it fails. The desired fruit of our work may seem many years away. We can feel like we are continually shoveling and have dug a big hole and yet have only planted a little stick. How do we persevere in passing on the Good News and never give up? We ask the Lord to help us to envision the end product.

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How do we know what the end product looks like? How are we to know what God wants to do in calling us to do in transform this world? The Mighty God is so big. Go outside and look at the vastness of the stars. Look at the enormity of the sea. That only gives us a taste of the immensity of God. We are so small. There is no way that we can know what God is like. The Holy Trinity is infinite. Our minds are limited. We cannot know the inner life of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How are we to know who God is and what God wants to do and then wants us to do? That knowledge is just too mysterious for us.

But our faith tells us that we *can* know of God by what we see that he does. That same God who is infinite, has come close to us, intimately, in human flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. Why? To redeem us from sin, to rescue us from the pit, to lift us up to serve and praise God, now and in the age to come. Who God is – that is shown to us by Jesus. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” Through the healing and teaching and rescue of Jesus, people’s lives are changed. We trust God to change lives through us too. It has happened in the past. It can happen now. As in the story of St. Matthew, some folks get up and follow and commit their lives. The One who is the Good News will bring about the end result. We learn of God’s vision through the Scriptures.

We also see what God desires of us through the model of the saints. The saints allowed God to change them. Some of their “yesses,” their conversions, came in a flash or an instant. For others, it was a gradual process of committing themselves more and more fully to the person of Jesus Christ. They give us a model of whole-hearted conversion. They didn’t settle for a ho-hum faith or a comfortable life. They gave their all.

If we want to envision the end result, the desired fruits, of evangelization, we look at the saints.

The Fruits of Conversion

The ultimate fruit of conversion is to become like God, to be divinized, as the Church Fathers called it. St. Irenaeus said that “the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, through His transcendent love, became what we are, so that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”¹ We are all called to holiness, to become like Jesus in this human life ² - so full of God that we are close to bursting. That is our flourishing. That is our joy.

*Fruits of conversion -
a change in:
Behavior
Belief/Attitude
Memory/Story/Identity
Buy-in/Engagement
Buzz*

And yet, God does not make us all alike. You and I and each of the saints manifest that holiness differently. Like apples and peaches and apricots and cherries, there are different varieties of the fruits of conversion:

- a behavioral change
- a transformation of belief or attitude
- a shift in how a person sees themselves (identity) or the story that they tell about themselves
- a modification of where they use their life and energy (buy-in and engagement)
- a radical switch in what they want to talk about

¹ Irenaeus, "Book 5, Preface", *Against Heresies*

² And to be united with him in the next!

Many saints bear all of these fruits as they change their lives to conform to the life of Christ. Let's look at a few examples.

Conversion of Behavior

One of the most visible fruits of an encounter with God is a radical shift in behavior: a short tax collector gives away the money that he has extorted and becomes a follower of Jesus (Zacchaeus); a party-boy casts away his clothes to become an itinerant beggar and a church builder (Francis); a loose-lipped gossip becomes a teacher of prayer (Theresa of Avila). Sinner-to-saint stories capture our imagination. These tales fill our hearts with joy at what God has done. Christians love behavioral conversion stories.

St. Augustine of Hippo most readily comes to mind as an example of a change in behavior as the fruit of conversion. His mother Monica prayed, and the Holy Spirit moved him, and he changed from his loose-living way of life to become a holy and renowned bishop.

Other saints of history were even bigger sinners. Their conversion stories are even more radical.

St. Vladimir of Russia was a murderer, a rapist, a liar, and a cheat. He got himself baptized so that he could manipulate the emperor at Constantinople to give him the emperor's sister as his eighth wife. But God did something to him in that moment of baptism! His behavior radically changed. From then on, he worked tirelessly for the conversion of Russia.

St. Mary of Egypt was a seducer of young men. She prided herself on her power over them. When she arrived in Jerusalem on pilgrimage, the Holy Spirit moved within her. The Lord brought her to abhor her sinfulness. She went to confession and spent the rest of her life praying in the desert.

Is behavioral conversion always so stark? No. Other saints and holy people have changed more slowly. A change in behavior can come incrementally, as one asks, "How do I amend my ways daily? How do I become more holy? What do I need to do differently?" Living a cleaned-up life feels good. As a fruit of conversion, it can be both invigorating and exhilarating. Holiness of action is the goal.

Conversion of Belief/Attitude

St. Paul was hostile to Christianity. And rightly so. As a devout Pharisee and a Jew, the core of his belief was in one God. If Jesus was the Son of God, then he was equal to God the Creator. Nobody can be that. Blasphemy! Just wrong! There was no developed doctrine of the Trinity in those early days; you cannot believe that there is one God and then say that Jesus is the Son of

God, which puts him on the same level. No. Theologically, it was just wrong. He knew that. But he got knocked to the ground. His vision of Jesus Christ changed his belief. His attitude toward the early Christians changed. And the rest is history.

St. Athanasius was willing to go into exile rather than give up on the understanding that the divine nature of Christ was consubstantial (of the same “stuff”) as the Father. A deep commitment to a belief will hold you a long time and carry you through. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews attests to a long line of courageous men and women who held on by the inner assurance of faith:

“Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen... All these died in faith. They did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth, for those who speak thus show that they are seeking a homeland.” Hebrews 11: 1,13-14

A change in belief is profound. An encounter with God can cause a powerful mindset shift.

Conversion of Memory/Story/Identity

When God touches someone’s life, people see themselves differently. St. Ignatius of Loyola saw himself as a soldier. Then by God’s grace, his internal story was changed. He still saw himself as a soldier, but as a soldier for Christ.

After a conversion experience, the saints re-cast their internal story. They tell it differently: “this is who I am, this is me; this is the God who has touched my life – this is the God for whom I will live; this is the God for whom I am willing to die.”

Along with many early Christians, St. Lawrence saw his identity as a martyr for God. Martyrdom was so integral to his makeup that the story goes (perhaps apocryphally) that as he was being burned, he jested with the judge, "Turn me over, I'm done on this side!" He was willing to receive a martyr's reward, for a martyr was what he was and a martyr was who God called him to be.

Conversion that Results in Buy-in and Engagement

The model of “from sluggard to self-sacrifice” is exemplified by St. Charles de Foucauld. He was known as a lazy and undisciplined young man in France. He admitted to "eating a lot, sleeping a lot and thinking little." He made a gradual turn away from indolence and toward an ascetic life. In his early 40’s. He was ordained a priest and left comfort and luxury far behind. He became a missionary to the Tuareg peoples in the Sahara Desert. Living that stark life, he was assassinated in 1916. The fruit of his conversion was a total “buy-in” to a God-centered life.

In a conversion from “whatever-ism” to “energetic buy-in,” God fires the will. That motivation and drive become like a fiery motor within the saints. Their passionate response is, “I want to do things with this!” and “I will go, Lord, if you lead me!” John Bosco, Mother Theresa, Katherine Drexel, and Elizabeth Ann Seton, are examples of that fruit of total buy-in and engagement.³ They have been given a mission and they are going to go and do it!

Conversion becomes Buzz

Some saints become preachers. They *have to tell* the Good News, to testify to what God has done in their lives.

St. John Chrysostom (or golden-mouthed) was a gifted theologian who walked the streets of Constantinople in the fourth century. He observed how everyday people lived. In a time when clergy were criticized for their pompous lifestyle, his preachings and writings were full of illustrations from laborers and teamsters and shopkeepers. A Doctor of the Church, he translated the rich theology of the Church into ordinary life. He was eloquent. He was prolific. He just *had* to tell the Good News.

In current talks and writings about evangelization, “tell others,” is the fruit that is most often suggested. If God has changed your life, *talk* about it! And yet of the saints of history, this fruit is not the most common. God does not call everyone to be a talker. As you can see from the saints described above, some are doers rather than talkers. But there are times when God figuratively hands a microphone to the least likely of people. That might be you. That might be me. Moses was like that. Jeremiah from the Old Testament found that his talking got him into so much trouble, but he said of the fire of God which burned in his bones and he had to speak: “I cannot hold it in!”

God can do anything. Who knows?

Firing the Will as the Fruit of Conversion

The saints were motivated. They were driven. They were empowered to change the world for good, each in their own particular way. God fired their will to bear fruit.

Why look at the fruits of evangelization? We need to clearly know where we are going, what we are looking for. Plant a peach tree to make a pie. Evangelize so as to make saints. We are not alone in this mission. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses! Run with

³ Many of the saints were models of more than one of these categories, for God used them in several different ways.

perseverance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Heb 12:1-2)

We are Not in Control

And yet here is the frustration: we cannot *make* this happen. We live in an era of control. We want to be certain to *make* things happen: through evangelization, we want to ensure that people follow Jesus, commit their lives, get up and get going for God. We look for action and buzz and buy-in and loyalty and engagement. As a Church, we have begun to dig deeply into how evangelization works; we have categorized stages of conversion and the evangelization methods most appropriate for each of them. We have lists and charts of how to “get to” people. We carefully measure the effectiveness of our programs so that the return on investment is good. We want to see fruit. We want more people in the pews. We want decision and loyalty and commitment and energy for God. We want people to go talk to their neighbors and bring people in.

This passion for evangelization has been admirable. In the last fifteen years, the number of evangelization programs in the United States has proliferated.⁴ Donors have thrown money into them. There have been high-level marketing campaigns and big conferences. At the Convocation of Catholic Leaders in Orlando, FL in 2018, an avalanche of entrepreneurial endeavors was popping up in the US Catholic Church. Everyone selling their new programs.

There have been good results. Many programs and parishes continue to grow. We have pockets of fervor in the Church. Some programs have reached their zenith and have begun to fizzle or have shifted directions. Bishops were (and are) inundated with opportunities to renew their dioceses.

But it turns out that the renewal of the Catholic Church is a hard nut to crack. Why? Change is challenging. That difficulty is cultural, ecclesial, structural, and theological. We are an imperfect and sinful people. Only God can redeem us. Thus, in a mystical sense, there is a component within the conversion process that is not under our control.

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Creating an encounter with the living God is God’s business.

We can lay the groundwork for that encounter to happen. We can name what an encounter may look like. We can tell stories of the saints. But the heart of another person is not ours to tweak or manipulate. Even the most finely honed and carefully choreographed Eucharistic

⁴ For a recent summary of the four predominant models of evangelization, see Susan Windley-Daoust’s *The Four Ways Forward: Becoming an Apostolic Parish in a Post-Christian World* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2022).

adoration experiences may or may not touch a young person. There are no guarantees. Why? The inner life of another is not ours to command.

In a moment of conversion, whether immediate or gradual, the Holy Spirit fires the will, like sparking an inner motor or fire. Some describe this as an inner resonance – something “just sings” within them. Others acquire an inner certainty of faith in a flash. God does something. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is real. The Divine is at work. But why this moment and not that one? Why this person and not that one? That, too, is a grace and a mystery.

It is a sacred and holy moment when God encounters a human being. At some point, the saints experienced the God of the Universe touching, overwhelming, or moving within them. They experienced Jesus as Rescuer, as Redeemer, as Healer, as Source and Summit of their lives. This is God’s doing.

This moment of encounter can happen in prayer, or at Eucharistic adoration, or while reading the Scriptures. It can happen on a mountain top, at the birth of a child, or by pondering the first buds of spring. Each person is grasped by God differently. The encounter comes first.

Even our own encounter with God is not under our control. Coming to meet us is first God’s initiative. Drawing close to us is God’s desire. The Lord is near to us at all times, nearer than we are to ourselves. This is our belief. This is our faith. To live in an awareness of that, to allow the living Lord to overwhelm us, to respond with our personal “yes!” – even our response is graced by the Holy Spirit. It is ours to pray for. It is ours to personally receive. Most of all, it is ours to be thankful for. But that encounter is not ours to manipulate or manufacture.

Here is our challenge and our difficulty: the temptation in evangelization is to *seek for the fruit first*: buzz - tell others about Jesus; loyalty - encourage them to commit their lives to him; bring their friends and relatives to Mass; buy-in and engage; moral - clean up your act and become moral people; become a more integral part of the parish; be hospitable; bear fruit! But none of that happens if there has not been at least a flash of an encounter first.

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Models of evangelization offer lists of suggestions: “Pray, read the bible, go talk to others.” What’s the difficulty? First, having taught a prayer class at a major Catholic university, many lifelong Catholics readily admit that they do not know how to pray. Secondly, most have little background in the Bible. And thirdly, it is not so easy to speak with your friends and relatives about the things of faith. It can be like trying to talk with rocks in your mouth – up come hard feelings, unreceptivity, power dynamics, and downright hostility. Even to bring up the name of Jesus at the Thanksgiving table in this world of “you do you, I’ll do me” and “who are you to tell

me what to believe?” – oh, the trial of that! When we recognize our weakness and the humility of not being able to cause conversion to happen, we fall to our knees and beg, “Oh, God, help!”

Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides” (Mt 6:33).

God Wants to Speak through the Homily

What about liturgical preaching as a means of evangelization? A question for those who preach: How strongly do we personally believe that God wants to speak to us and through us? Do we affirm that the Lord has spoken within the Church, both now and throughout history? If the response is “yes” and “yes,” then we pass that belief on when we preach to others: the living God of the Universe wants to be near to you and to me and wants to communicate with us.

At the same time, we are imperfect vessels. The Church has always been cautious here, for historically weird and wacky theologies have arisen from personal revelation: “God said to me” and “God did this for me” always has to be accompanied by careful discernment. Ignatius of Loyola teaches us to ask: what of this is the Holy Spirit truly speaking? What comes from me and my innate desires or hopes or prides? What of this thought comes from evil?

At the heart of Christianity is the theology of revelation. We believe that God speaks first. We have experienced a God who wants to be known. The Bible is based on this interaction with God: Abraham looked up at the stars and the Almighty spoke. Moses encountered a burning bush and the great “I AM” spoke. The prophets spoke aloud what they sensed God wanted to say. God spoke through his Son who became flesh for us. The Holy Spirit has spoken throughout the history of the Church through saints and apostles and writers and holy men and women. God opens our eyes and our hearts and our minds and speaks. That encounter initiated by God is at the heart of all that we believe: Church tradition, the Scriptures, the Creeds – all of these arise from the experience of hearing and listening, carefully discerned. We hear imperfectly because we are imperfect, but the voice of the Trinitarian One continues to speak.

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In homiletics, we start from this confidence – that God continues to want to speak to his people in human words through liturgical preaching. Thus, preparing what to preach and how to preach is an act of discernment, through careful and prayerful listening. This is God’s work to

do. And ours to follow. We cannot alter the inner life of another person. But with God's help, we can help them along the pathway to encounter.

Pathways to Encounter

In the graphic at the end of this article, there is a visual model for preachers who hope to preach in order to foster the encounter that leads to conversion. In the center, at the core of the model, is the action of God. We have talked about the fruits of discipleship that arise from that encounter. But moving to the bottom of the model, at the foundation of encounter, are the pathways *toward* encounter. Different people hear and encounter the Lord in different ways.

The Pathway of the Cognitive: Some people are impacted by a solid logical argument that clearly lays out the scriptures and the teachings of the Church. They encounter God through the left brain of logical learning. A preached message that connects with them will hook into a truth with which they already have some. Curiosity of thought characterizes these listeners. A clear progression of ideas or insights sparks a new way for them to understand things. They come to conversion as they hear God speak through the "rightness" of the theological message. God has opened their minds to "get it."

From research into how listeners process messages, this is not a large segment of the listening population, perhaps 20% of them.⁵ Many current efforts at evangelization have focused their efforts here, through apologetics and how to argue and explain the faith. These robust initiatives have drawn in a population of young adults who encounter God through logic and understanding.

The Pathway of Story and Imagination: The greatest preacher of all, Jesus of Nazareth gave many teachings. He helped people to understand. But he did not just "explain."⁶ Jesus most commonly spoke through stories and parables. Why? Logical arguments do not resonate with everybody. Through shared human experience, Jesus wanted to reach everybody. And stories are sticky. We remember them. A larger percentage of people, about 40% of listeners, encounter God through stories, images and everyday experiences. The Holy Spirit works within them to "see" a new God-inspired way of being. The preaching of St. Pope John Paul II often awakened the imagination, inspiring young people

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⁵ For me, being originally a science and math person, systematic theology sets my mind ablaze and makes my soul to sing. Perhaps that is why I got my first graduate degree from Notre Dame in that discipline?

⁶ Sometimes thinkers may dismiss those who do not process theology in "their way" as somehow lesser. But God makes all kinds of people.

toward heroism and adventure.⁷ The natural world is a place where some find the Lord: A young man senses the presence of God in the full moonlight on a mountain. An elderly man has a dream of his deceased wife and his eyes are opened to an inner assurance that the resurrection is real. These experiences have to be discerned carefully, but these moments of grace are genuine. Recent evangelization efforts have not been as effective at reaching this right-brained listening population. We have sometimes been dismissive of those who call themselves “spiritual but not religious.” They may not want a logical argument for faith. They may thirst for a story of how God is already at work in their lives.

The Pathway of the Heart: In a conversation with a group of young adults, one woman asked, “Do Catholics really love each other?” This led to a discussion of youth and their hunger for belonging.⁸ When asked at a recent retreat about which of the three pathways to encounter which they themselves favored, a large number of the lay folks identified themselves as those who listen “through the heart.” People want to know that they are cared about. They want to know that they are not alone, that others know what they are going through. Throughout the scriptures, God speaks to the heart: “I will be your God, and you shall be my people.” Jesus repeatedly said, “Peace be with you.” The Holy Spirit is called the Comforter. The Almighty God of the Universe is close to us, closer to us than we are to ourselves. He knows what we are going through. He touches our hearts.

Multiple Pathways in Preaching: None of these pathways are exclusive. A young man who considers himself a logical thinker may find himself bursting into inconsolable tears in prayer one morning, followed by a God-given calm that passes all understanding. A woman who loves stories and metaphors may find a teacher who explains things so well that she is inspired by the Holy Spirit to dig deeper into theology. A second grader may be too young to understand the arguments for faith and may take metaphors literally, but she may have had an emotional experience of being deeply loved after her First Reconciliation. God is always at work: how and when and through whom are not under our control. But we can learn to speak to people in multiple ways, varying those pathways which will lead them toward that encounter.

In the words of St. Pope John Paul II, there is an urgency to this mission.⁹ What is the hoped-for end result of our work? Saints. Nothing less. Saints in love with the God who wants to speak. Saints on their way to holiness. Saints who are willing to change the world. It starts with you and me. But it cannot stay there. We cannot excuse ourselves with “oh... good enough.” This

⁷ At World Youth Day in 1989, he said, “Discovering Christ, always again and always more fully, is the most wonderful adventure of our life.” See https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/youth/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_27111988_iv-world-youth-day.html

⁸ As part of our Lilly Endowment grant, the Institute for Homiletics is holding conversations with young adults to get their input about how to connect liturgical preaching with young Catholics. Their comments will help to further this conversation about homiletics and evangelization.

⁹ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, #1.

world needs Jesus. Faith gives life. Loving God (and others) brings meaning. We care about that. That is why we have this mission of sharing the Good News in ways that our people can “get.” Holiness of life is the goal.

On this Feast of St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, pray for us!

August 28, 2025

A Listener-based Faith Resonance Model

