

Unlocking the secret to evangelisation



Your parish may have an impressive liturgy, solid teaching and an inspiring outreach to the poor, but still be missing something vital. Some years ago, a lecturer in pastoral theology gave each member of his class £1 and told them to place a bet in a betting shop. When the seminarians, religious Sisters and lay chaplains reported back, they described how uncomfortable they had felt because they had no idea where to go or what to do in the shop. Even wearing lay clothes, they felt everybody was staring at them.

The lecturer concluded by saying: now you know how most people in this country feel when they enter a church. So if a parish wants to receive new members, its first task is to shrink the distance between most people and the church. This is the first step in the new evangelisation, the expression used to describe reaching out to people in countries such as ours where the Christian heritage has faded and needs reinvigorating.

Impressive liturgy, solid teaching and social engagement are essential elements of any Catholic community, and these already draw in some people who go on to be received into the Church through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). But most people cannot find a door into the church that attracts them.

Last year, I decided to learn more about how to create such a door, so I helped set up an Alpha course in a parish. There are many ways of building a door (CTS offers The Why? Course), but I offer my Alpha experience to help others build their own door.

The first part of the doorframe is hospitality. While welcoming people to the liturgy is important,

Sunday Mass is the culmination, not the starting point, of Christian hospitality.

On the first Alpha evening we organised, 18 new people came to the church hall on a midweek evening to be greeted by parishioners. They were then personally shown to a table, where a “table host” sat them down, offered them a delicious supper and introduced them to other guests. Twenty-five people were soon sitting at three tables enjoying food and conversation.

People may not know how to go to church but they still know how to share a meal, so immediately everybody was at ease. Still sitting at table with their new acquaintances, they then listened to a 25-minute talk that contained one truth about Christ, with lots of personal experience and humour to illustrate the truth.

And that’s the second element of the doorframe: a bite-sized mouthful of teaching presented with plenty of humanity for people with delicate spiritual stomachs. As St Paul said to the people of Corinth: “I fed you milk not solid food, for you were not able to take it.”

Finally, there’s a discussion led by the table host, which enables everybody to express a thought or feeling. Guests see that this process is there to help them think through what they believe, rather than browbeat them into faith. It’s a safe space for people to explore life’s big questions and to grapple with their own fears or doubts.

Over the space of 10 weeks, friendships developed and at the end people expressed appreciation in surprising ways. This has deepened our love, said one newly-wed couple, because we couldn’t have discussed such issues anywhere else.

No attempt is made to teach all of the Catholic faith, but people are enabled to begin a relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the context of a welcoming Catholic community. This is a contemporary expression of St Benedict’s teaching on how monks should receive a guest.

First, monks are designated for this work, in the same way that Alpha offers training for leaders and helpers. Secondly, Benedict says “all guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ”. This sense of the guest as a gift of divine presence is crucial. We are not selling a system, we are

enabling people to encounter Christ whose image they already bear. Next, Benedict says the divine law is read to them and food is offered.

Finally, he says special attention is to be shown to the poor “because in them more particularly Christ is received”. The essential elements of evangelisation are there in the Rule of Benedict: guests are received as they are, rich or poor, and they are offered food and teaching.

So I believe it is providential that the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales has chosen July 11, the feast of St Benedict, patron of Europe, for the conference of Proclaim 15, a nationwide initiative to encourage every diocese to take a step forward in the new evangelisation.

It was the monk Augustine who first preached the gospel to the Anglo-Saxons, and in our own day Benedict can remind us that Gospel afresh begins with an act of love.

This article first appeared in the latest edition of the Catholic Herald magazine (27/2/15). Also in this week’s issue: Andrew M Brown says all baptisms should have a touch of The Godfather, Mary Kenny on the wisdom of Stephen Hawking’s ex-wife and Colin Brazier says we should breed like rabbits. Take up our special subscription offer – 12 issues currently available for just £12!

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