

From ‘witness’ to ‘proclamation’.

I’ve just had an article published about the New Evangelisation in the Catholic Church. Here is the opening section about the importance of conviction for those involved in this work:

A quarter of a million people pass through Leicester Square in central London every day. By some kind of miracle, the four Catholic parishes in the area received permission from Westminster City Council to take over the square for a Saturday last summer under the banner ‘Spirit in the City’.



The event involved a stage with non-stop music and talks; a line of stalls promoting various Catholic charities, movements and religious orders; a series of workshops about every aspect of Christian faith; a team of street evangelists greeting people and handing out prayer cards; a makeshift confessional with a rota of priests; and a suitably dignified tent-cum-chapel with the Blessed Sacrament exposed for adoration and personal prayer.

It was the strangest experience to emerge from Burger King and then kneel before the Lord in the centre of Leicester Square – a sanctuary of silence in the madness of the city.

Archbishop Rino Fisichella, head of the recently established Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation, has a magnificent desk and a blank piece of paper. He has been charged by Pope Benedict with re-evangelising the West in an age of secularism and moral relativism and talks himself of the West living “in a cultural crisis” (see ‘Taking on the world’, The Tablet, 8 January).

He could do worse than pay a visit to Britain for some inspiration. It’s striking how many evangelisation initiatives have sprung up over the last few years, from small parish projects to national programmes, many of them focused on young people. And while they don’t all fit neatly into one model, there are some common ideas at the heart of them.

Those who are committed to evangelisation have a real love for Christ and for the Church, as many Catholics do. But they also have a conviction that the Christian faith is something too precious to be kept to oneself. The Sion Community is the largest ‘home mission’ organisation in the UK. It’s involved in parish missions, youth ministry, residential training, and in forming others for the task of evangelisation.

I recently led a study day about Christian motivation at their centre in Brentwood. At the end of the

morning session someone asked, ‘And how can this help us share the Gospel more effectively with the people we meet?’ They simply wanted to connect my topic with their deepest concern – which was helping others to know Christ. And the way this question instinctively arose helped me to see how focussed the community is on the explicit work of proclaiming and communicating the Gospel.

This approach is in sharp contrast to a reticence still felt by many Catholics about the very idea of evangelisation. I think there are different reasons for this, not all of them negative: a desire to witness unobtrusively through one’s personal example; a respect for the presence of God in people of other faiths or of no faith; a fear of appearing triumphalistic, arrogant or judgemental.

But the reticence can also reflect a subtle relativism that sometimes casts its spell, persuading Catholics that all beliefs are equally true, or that all truths are equally important. Many people aren’t convinced that evangelisation is ‘the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity’ (Redemptoris Missio, Pope John Paul). But at the Sion Community, they believe in the importance of moving from ‘witness’ to ‘proclamation’. [The Tablet, 22 Jan 2011, p10]

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