New Evangelization in a Pluralistic Culture.

By Deacon David Backes

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Last year I created and began teaching a new course at UWMilwaukee on religion and culture. Students from all different majors take it, as it counts toward a humanities requirement that all UWM undergrads must complete. Students from many different backgrounds take it...from different ethnic and racial backgrounds to different religious backgrounds. This semester, for example, my class of 50 includes four Muslim students, a Serbian Orthodox student, and several atheists. Catholics make up about a quarter of the class the largest single faith group.

As diverse as the group is, however, there is also a common bond a tremendous degree of ignorance about religion. They often have very strong attitudes about it, but those attitudes are based on stereotypes they get from popular culture, and from the often quite limited experiences they have had in their own encounters with it.

At the start of the semester, I have the students write a spiritual autobiography. To read these hundred papers that I have gathered in two semesters is an eye-opening experience. I want to share with you some quotes from the self-identified Catholics and ex-Catholics in the class, so you, too, can gain some insights into the challenges we face as a church. Even Catholics who regularly participate in their faith have many misunderstandings, as I have learned from teaching parents in my parish's intergenerational religious education program. But listen to some voices from among the majority of U.S. Catholics who are far less active in the faith:

"I don't think any one person can definitively say that his or her religion is right, because no one REALLY knows for sure. Organized religion has always seemed rather sexist, close minded and ignorant to me."

"I began (during parochial school) to realize that the Bible that had been taught as being the highest truth, could be nothing more than stories told by men who were very biased. And besides that, as stories are translated and passed down year after year, translator after translator, they lose their original meaning, and can pick up themes that were never intended. I can't base my life around something like that."

"And then when my other sister committed suicide I was reminded of the teachings of the Catholic Church. Anyone who takes their own life goes to hell. No questions asked."

"I think for church to really celebrate a religion and God it should at least be somewhat interesting and joyful. There was no joy in my church."

"As a Catholic I feel as if I am supposed to take the Bible literally, and without question, however, I cannot stop myself from thinking logically."

"I often wonder, if I have children, do I want to raise them Catholic? If I had to make a decision right now, I would have to say no. I do not think that I will want to raise my children with any type of particular religion. I feel that Catholicism was chosen for me, and often it felt forced."

"I felt odd and out of place during the services and maybe even a little annoyed that these people were preaching to me on how I should live my life."

"There is no proof of any God or Jesus other than what a book says which has been edited, deleted, and manipulated to someone's likings. To me that is not ethical, and I feel that it is propaganda and very controlling."

"I do not believe in God because I find him illogical. Faith is the ultimate in circular logic."
"I couldn't find ways to defend my faith against many of the arguments against religion."

"I simply don't care anymore about it. It's a refreshing change from being suffocated from the 'values' that the church holds and resisting the church's characteristic of jamming 'the right way' down my throat."

"I hate religion. It is simply the most divisive issue in the world, from the beginning of time. I love spirituality because it is so solitary, so non-political."

"I guess I just don't need God in my life to make sense of things."

You will get nowhere with the large numbers of uninvolved Catholics by focusing on doctrine. They have been raised in an educational system that has convinced them there is no such thing as absolute truth, and they often have a knee-jerk re-action to dismiss anything that seems to come from "the Church."

They also have experienced so many bad examples of Catholics-in-action, both lay and ordained, that they tend to distrust anyone who comes off as "religious." Even so, they still recognize that something is not right with our society, and that "the good life" promised by the mass media does not truly satisfy their deepest longings.

I have learned that once my students realize they can trust me, once they know I will listen to them and take their views seriously, I can gently challenge them according to where they are at rather than where I think they should be, and the negative stereotypes that they hold begin to break down.

The "new evangelization" that is so desperately needed in our church and in our society is not one that will catch fire with doctrine. It won't spread because of the attractiveness of rules and rubrics. As important as these things are, we cannot open people's minds until we touch their hearts. And we touch people's hearts through gentleness, not force; by knowing when to hold our tongues, rather than immediately correct every wrong idea they have about the church and our faith.

The new evangelization begins with the Holy Spirit. My prayer for the deacons of our archdiocese and everywhere is that the Holy Spirit will fill us with patience, kindness, and joy, that we may deepen our own relationship with Christ and become beacons of invitation to a skeptical world.

[Deacon David Backes is past-president of the Milwaukee archdiocesan diaconate community, where this article first appeared in the diaconate newsletter. ]