

UNIT EIGHT: The Power of a Witness



Huw Warmenhoven & Catherine Cooney

LEADERSHIP & MISSION IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

What is the Church?
What is its Mission?
What is Witness?
How do we witness?

1) Church

Q. What do you see is the Church?
Google image search

Google image search Catholic Church Australia and this is the first photo that pops up.

What does it represent? Buildings, men, old, hierarchy, institution?

The church becomes sterile when it closes up inside itself, when "it believes itself to be, let's say, a 'school of religion' with lots of beautiful ideas, with many beautiful temples, with many fine museums, with many gorgeous things." It is a living people who follow Jesus and give witness to Him every day. – Pope Francis

"Am I a Christian giving witness to Jesus or am I a simple numerary of this sect," unable to let the Holy Spirit "drive me forward in my Christian vocation?" – Pope Francis

"A Christian who doesn't give witness is unfathomable," – Pope Francis

2) Mission

Why do we have a church? What is its purpose?

Evangelisation. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize (EN, 14)

If she exists in order to evangelise, how do you evangelise? The evangelisation process.

The stage in the evangelisation process is witness. It is fundamental to the evangelisation.

3) Witness

(RM 42) The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission: Christ, whose mission we

continue, is the "witness" par excellence (Rv 1:5; 3:14) and the model of all Christian witness. The Holy Spirit accompanies the Church along her way and associates her with the witness he gives to Christ (cf. Jn 15:26-27).

The first form of witness is the very life of the missionary, of the Christian family, and of the ecclesial community, which reveal a new way of living. The missionary who, despite all his or her human limitations and defects, lives a simple life, taking Christ as the model, is a sign of God and of transcendent realities. But everyone in the Church, striving to imitate the Divine Master, can and must bear this kind of witness;⁷⁰ in many cases it is the only possible way of being a missionary.

The evangelical witness which the world finds most appealing is that of concern for people, and of charity toward the poor, the weak and those who suffer. The complete generosity underlying this attitude and these actions stands in marked contrast to human selfishness. It raises precise questions which lead to God and to the Gospel. A commitment to peace, justice, human rights and human promotion is also a witness to the Gospel when it is a sign of concern for persons and is directed toward integral human development.⁷¹

(RM 43) Christians and Christian communities are very much a part of the life of their respective nations and can be a sign of the Gospel in their fidelity to their native land, people and national culture, while always preserving the freedom brought by Christ. Christianity is open to universal brotherhood, for all men and women are sons and daughters of the same Father and brothers and sisters in Christ. The Church is called to bear witness to Christ by taking courageous and prophetic stands in the face of the corruption of political or economic power; by not seeking her own glory and material wealth; by using her resources to serve the poorest of the poor and by imitating Christ's own simplicity of life. The Church and her missionaries must also bear the witness of humility, above all with regard to themselves—a humility which allows them to make a personal and communal examination of conscience in order to correct in their behavior whatever is contrary to the Gospel and disfigures the face of Christ.

- Christ is the perfect model of mission: think the woman at the well
- It is the witness of a deeply personal, living relationship with the person with Jesus

- Nemo dat quod non habet, you cannot give what you do not have. Seek that relationship then your entire life can be a tool of evangelisation.

- Witness is essentially always in marked contrast to the selfishness of the secularised world it proposes, but does not impose, questions about God

(EN, 21). Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness. Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here we have an initial act of evangelization. The above questions will ask, whether they are people to whom Christ has never been proclaimed, or baptized people who do not practice, or people who live as nominal Christians but according to principles that are in no way Christian, or people who are seeking, and not without suffering, something or someone whom they sense but cannot name. Other questions will arise, deeper and more demanding ones, questions evoked by this witness which involves presence, sharing, solidarity, and which is an essential element, and generally the first one, in evangelization."

Witness demands a response. Why? Because it is radically counter cultural, it goes against the secularist, self centred notion of today and is marked on the outward giving of the internal gift of faith.

What do you witness? What is the title of the formation (and the work that arguably defines the current Papacy) – Joy of the Gospel. That is what you are witnessing to, every day, joy above all.

Joy is a virtue. The thing about virtues is that they need to be cultivated. They need to be nurtured. They also hunt in packs. If you go after joy, wait and see compassion, love, mercy around the corner.

Just as the virtue hunts in pack, so do the virtuous. Witness must occur as individuals, as family and as community. I have spoken about the traditional ecclesial understanding of evangelisation, but there is a contemporary model that is floating around. It says that we once focused on a model like this:

Behave, Believe, Belong

That has drastically been turned on its head to be like this:
Belong, Believe, Behave/Become

In this sense, witness is seeing the real and tangible presence of the Body of Christ amidst our Christian community.

Q. Has anyone brought a non-Catholic to Mass? Men in dresses, guy waving a handbag on fire, people kneeling, then standing, then kneeling, then standing... It's weird as an outsider. And when you have someone new, you don't realise how inculturated you are to the Catholic faith.

The question Danielle was asking in her heart was not 'Do I Believe?' but 'Do I Belong?' Think about how we can make more belonging communities as the first point of entry.

Sourpusses – it is the first time that sourpuss has ever been used in Church dogma! Story of the translation around the table, where it made perfect sense until the Spanish translation: Vinegar Face.

Turn water into wine. Those people who are sourpusses, who bring down others rather than raise them up. Sometimes we too can be sourpusses, even unintentionally.

Q. Following your current trajectory, where would you rate yourself on the scale of sour to sweet?

Story about heaven and the evaluation. One question: Did you enjoy the life I gave you?

4) How to witness

Witness by your testimony and witness by your life

Catherine Cooney Testimony

Joy at the Heart

'When God laughs at the soul and the soul laughs back at God, the persons of the Trinity are begotten. When the Father laughs at the Son and the Son laughs back at the Father, that laughter gives pleasure, that pleasure gives joy, that joy gives love, and that is the Holy Spirit.' Meister Eckhart

Rather than experts in dire predictions, dour judges bent on rooting out every threat and deviation, we should appear as joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of the goodness and beauty which shine forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel. (EG, 168)