



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - July 2014

The New Evangelisation and the Parish

For most of us in the Pallottine family, we came to know our faith and the person of St. Vincent Pallotti in the parish. It is in the parish that we are first introduced to the beauty and wonder of the sacraments, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist. Who among us does not have fond memories of singing in church as a child, or for those of us who entered the Church as an adult, the reverence in the ritual of the Mass in our home parishes? It is in the parish that we learn in a more formal way about the person of Jesus and the tenets of our faith, whether through attending a catechetical programme, a Catholic school or the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults). It is through the parish that we prepare for and celebrate the sacraments. Traditionally, and it is still this way in many places today, the parish is also where we centre not only our spiritual lives, but also our social lives, beyond Sunday or daily Mass. And for those of us in the UAC, it is most likely that our involvement began in the parish.

As we continue to explore what the New Evangelisation means for us as members of the Pallottine community, it is appropriate to explore what it means to be parish and how all three are interrelated.

Pope Francis reminds us that the “parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelises, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be ‘the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters’. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelisers.

It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 28).

Too often, the parish *is* seen as out dated and stodgy, not a place of innovation and joy but one of rules and “how it’s always been”. It is easy for parishioners, often without realising it, to create their own “in crowd”, with specific ways of doing things and a specific vocabulary, which to the newcomer can become a real deterrent to participation. On the other hand, at their best, parishes truly *are* in the lives of their people – in their joys and celebrations as well as their sorrows and struggles. These parishes are places where creativity is allowed to flourish; where “because we’ve always done it that way” does not apply and where “outsiders” are welcomed with open doors and hearts.

These vibrant parishes are natural places of evangelisation, without even trying. They live by the quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi of “preaching the Gospel always, when necessary using words” or, as St. Vincent Pallotti tells us, of “leading a life which is the Gospel in practice.” (OCCC XIII, 455). Members of these parishes are excited about their faith and their community and that excitement is naturally infectious. Visitors want to know why members of the parish are so happy to be there – and how they too can be a part of it! These parishioners are gentle and loving to newcomers, looking for ways to plug them in to the mission of the Church according to each person’s gifts and abilities.

By its very definition, a parish is relational. Just as there are many parts in the Body of Christ universal, so it is becoming this way at the local parish level as well. While in the past, one could count on a parish to embody the culture of the people in the neighbourhood, bringing with them their languages and traditions as well as their similar socio economic statuses, now we find parishes bringing diverse cultures and sometimes even languages together in one place, both figuratively and literally. With that comes various ways of living out one's spirituality. The one commonality is faith. This in itself can be a challenge – or an opportunity - depending on one’s perspective.

St. Vincent Pallotti reminds us that “the most difficult task in community living is to maintain charity” (OOCC III, 236). While sharing a worship space with a “stranger” might be uncomfortable for some, it is in Jesus’ command to love our neighbour (and what better definition of neighbour than a fellow parishioner!) that we must abide. Our most effective evangelisation is the love we show for others, especially when the “other” seems very different from what we are used to. This charity forces us outside of our comfort zone, urging us to learn about our neighbour and to truly share in his or her life. But if we cannot do that at the parish level, how are we going to do it in the “outside world”.

The New Evangelisation calls on us, as a people of God, to find new ways to share the same Gospel message we have always been taught – God’s infinite love. Some of us might bemoan the fact that society has turned its back on God, that there is not an interest in coming to church. But could it be that when the people about whom we worry so much have actually come, we have turned them away, sometimes literally? Are we lacking mercy in our judgment of others when they don’t understand how we do things or when we disapprove of choices they have made in their life? Are we meeting people where they are right now, and inviting them to come (again) to meet the person of Christ through us? Again, St. Vincent Pallotti advises us: “Since the acts of courtesy and so-called etiquette, done with a Christian motivation, can be considered and are like acts of charity, then we should bear all the defects of others with patience, following the rules of Christian etiquette” (OOCC III, 236).

The “new ways” of the New Evangelisation might mean, again, coming out of our comfort zone also as far as technology in our parishes is concerned. Technology should not be looked on as an “extra” or, even less, as a distraction. Through technology, parishes have the power to reach people we may have thought lost before by, again, meeting them where they are. This might mean we have to learn a new language or way of doing things, but the benefits of this way of evangelising is that all people of faith can do it; often with tools which we already have in our pockets!

Pope Francis continues this discussion of the New Evangelisation and the parish by singling out organizations like the UAC: “Other Church institutions, basic communities and small communities, movements, and forms of association are a source of enrichment for the Church, raised up

by the Spirit for evangelising different areas and sectors. Frequently they bring a new evangelising fervour and a new capacity for dialogue with the world whereby the Church is renewed. *But it will prove beneficial for them not to lose contact with the rich reality of the local parish and to participate readily in the overall pastoral activity of the particular Church.* This kind of integration will prevent them from concentrating only on part of the Gospel or the Church, or becoming nomads without roots” (EG 29). (Emphasis added by authors of reflection.)

As members of the UAC, we are in a unique position to live our call from our founder and to do so in the life of the parish. St. Vincent Pallotti reminds us that the Union “is founded and instituted upon love in order to promote in all the faithful... the most perfect and actualised practice of the works of love” (OCCC I, 105). When we do this in the parish setting, when we truly practice love in all its ways, we are being true to who we are as people of faith.

Reflection questions:

- What role do you play in your local parish? How can you more effectively share your gifts in your parish?
- What do you think St. Vincent Pallotti would say is the role of the UAC in the parish setting? How active is your local UAC in parish life? How does your local UAC use technology for evangelisation?
- What unique charism of the UAC can be shared with a parish? How should the UAC promote this charism in our parishes?

Prayer

God of Infinite Love, who has gifted us in so many ways, we ask for the continued guidance of your Spirit to spread your Word and to be your servants in our families, in our communities, in our parishes and in the world. Help us to be your voice of love and mercy, to be welcoming to all people, especially to the stranger among us, and help us to bring the light of your Son, Jesus Christ, to all people. We ask all this through the intercession of your servant, St. Vincent Pallotti. Amen.

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