

The following reflection was published in *The Texas Catholic*. May it serve us on our journey of missionary discipleship, as we help others and ourselves encounter Christ in a more profound and meaningful way.

Proselytism and Evangelization

By Father John Bayer

What is the difference between evangelization and proselytism? As

Christians, we have been commanded to go out and “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). And yet, we are sensitive to the conflicts that emerge from proselytism, or from attitudes that are — rightly or wrongly — sometimes associated with Christian missionaries: an argumentative spirit; an inability to admit mistakes or to learn from someone else; and an indifference to others beyond what it takes to convert them.

We rightly discourage proselytism. Pope Francis even referred to it as a “venom” poisoning ecumenism. But proselytism is not evangelization, for the same pope who condemned proselytism also wrote *The Joy of the Gospel*, which is a massive exhortation precisely about evangelization.

So, what is the difference? I think there are several, but many could be captured in the difference between preaching and prosecuting.

Preaching the Gospel is a much broader activity than prosecuting a case. If faith is like a fire, then evangelization is like the light and warmth which radiate from it naturally. Evangelization is not an isolated task relegated to professionals in the Church with a talent for public speaking, like lawyers. It is the natural effect of authentic life in Christ by which our conversion extends ever more deeply into our words, actions and culture. A lawyer prosecutes as a profession; a Christian preaches as a way of life.

But while evangelization is incumbent upon all Christians, there is a God-



given vocational diversity that shapes the ways in which we evangelize. St. Paul says that Christ gave only “some” the vocation to serve as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph 4:11). In other words, we do not all have to speak all the time. It is right sometimes to defer: to give pastors, teachers and especially the great saints and doctors a chance to speak. No one should think that he will have every answer in his pocket.

There inevitably comes a time when the only just answer is the humble one: “I do not know, but you can ask...” To answer in any other way is to proselytize: it is to make prosecuting a case your goal rather than witnessing to life in Christ.

Of course, we should all learn to speak responsibly about our faith. And so, all Catholics should spend some time praying with the Bible and the great works of our tradition. But in the end, we speak not to overpower others but rather to preach the joy of life in Christ.

“The first step in evangelization is not “Let me show you why you are wrong” but rather “Let me tell you what great things the Lord has done for me” (cf. Lk 1:46-55).

St. Peter tells us always to be prepared to give “a reason for your hope” (1 Pt 3:15). So, let us first make sure that people see our hope! Only then would they ever stand to hear our reason for it.”

Proselytes worry only about winning. Anxiety plagues them because they must have an answer for everything (an impossible demand for anyone, no matter how smart and learned). Evangelists, on the other hand, worry only about preaching. They try to speak correctly, but they know well that they do not know all things, and so they freely admit their mistakes and ignorance. This freedom makes them peaceful and pleasant to hear. St. Peter says their speech is marked by “gentleness and reverence” and a “clear conscience” (1 Pt 3:16). At the end of the day, their best argument is the cross of Christ, and the fearlessness with which they embrace it in their own conversion. Strangely, the preacher can often be most effective precisely when he seems to fail, for in that moment his peace reveals the true source of his strength, and so testifies most eloquently to the reality of God. †

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