



Catechetical Sunday

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UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Found It!

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Have you ever asked, "How do I get there from here?" Modern technology would tell you to use a global positioning system (GPS). I confess taking the technological plunge and acquiring a GPS. For someone directionally challenged, a GPS offers great guidance. Occasionally the GPS knows my location better than I do. When given a desired destination, the GPS plots a course and with words and signs tells me how to get there.

For contemporary Catholics, the New Evangelization operates like a GPS. Building on a long tradition of evangelization where the Church introduces and proclaims Christ to those who do not know him, the New Evangelization instead addresses baptized Catholics who are absent, inactive, or alienated. Pope Benedict describes the New Evangelization as an opportunity to "repropose" the faith to those who are convinced they already know it and for whom faith holds no interest. The New Evangelization asks believers to creatively retell the story of faith for this time and place to engage and reignite the faith among all Catholics.

As Catholics, our destination is a close relationship with Christ in and through the Church. The New Evangelization, like a GPS, provides directional signs to navigate real challenges to our faith. In our secular, materialistic, and individualistic culture we require assistance to reach our destination successfully and faithfully. Through the New Evangelization the Church offers a new route to encounter, or in this case reencounter, Christ.

Today's mobility has faith connotations. People migrate from one faith tradition to another, as evidenced by the findings in a Pew Foundation study (see "Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the United States" [Washington, DC: Pew Foundation, 2009], www.pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux.aspx). Dissatisfaction with religious affiliation or the spiritual journey demonstrated by movement from one denomination to another is not unique to Catholicism. In fact, the fluctuation affects all religious traditions, even nonbelievers. Several points in the study stand out as noteworthy and reinforce the need for the New Evangelization.

System Alert!

The migration illustrated in the Pew study has a particular importance for youth, collegians, and young adults. According to “Faith in Flux” (FiF), a person remaining with his or her childhood denomination until the age of twenty-four tends to stay for the long haul. The successful engagement of young people in faith formation becomes a critical indicator for their continued participation in the Church.

Recognizing this unique time in a person’s development, Pope Benedict XVI described youth as “a privileged time for seeing and encountering truth” (“A Faith Credible to Reason,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, August 24, 2011, no. 34). He reminded university professors that teaching does not mean communicating content alone; teaching also encompasses forming young people. Sound content provides the foundation for faith formation. However, our current context demands system upgrades for active engagement and creative exploration to fully form believers.

The popular, high-tech treasure hunt known as “geocaching” offers a template for ways to engage and explore. In this “real-world outdoor treasure hunt players try to locate hidden containers, called geocaches, using GPS-enabled devices. After finding the geocache, treasure hunters share their experiences online” (www.geocaching.com). The Gospel of Matthew (Mt 13:46) similarly speaks of treasure, with particular attention to value, telling of a merchant who, “when he finds a pearl of great price, . . . goes and sells all that he has and buys it.” The parable, like the treasure hunt, evokes adventure and instills a sense of

urgency. As believers, the treasure we seek is Jesus, and the Pew study echoes the urgency of the treasure hunt when it comes to those under the age of twenty-four.

When traveling with a GPS, any deviation from course causes the device to politely announce that it is “recalculating.” While the message of Jesus Christ remains the same, our methods need an upgrade. The New Evangelization’s recalculation invites utilization of social networks, podcasts, blogs, and face time to share the Good News. In a 2010 pastoral letter, the archbishop of Washington writes, “We are called not just to announce, but to adapt our approach so as to attract and to urge an entire generation to find again the uncomplicated, genuine and tangible treasure of friendship with Jesus” (Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl, pastoral letter on the New Evangelization, *Disciples of the Lord: Sharing the Vision*, 12, www.adw.org/pastoral/pdf/ADW_PastoralNewE_Eng.pdf). With a renewed sense of adventure and urgency, let us reflect on two observations from the Pew study about how and why people leave their faith.

Drifting Away

“Drifting away” describes a common experience of someone leaving his or her religious tradition (see FiF). Leaving does not represent a particular decision but a series of choices that unintentionally lead to simply drifting away. The busyness of life and the abundance of distractions easily allow one to lose sight of the destination. Working weekends and sleeping in one Sunday followed by a quick trip the next weekend leave the door open to drifting

away, unless a connection brings us back. Participation in the Body of Christ keeps us linked together. Community matters and needs more attention if we are to diminish the numbers of those who simply drift away.

As members of the Body of Christ, we are called “to live in the joy of being a community gathered together by Jesus Christ to praise God the Father through the Spirit and to present this joy anew to people near and far” (Press conference for the presentation of the *Lineamenta* of the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, March 4, 2011, no. 3). For the parishioners who have drifted away, each one needs to hear that our celebration of the Eucharist resembles a fuller expression of Christ’s Body when they are present. Tell the absent guy that he was missed. Invite back the woman who has been away. Remind the friend alienated from the Church that she belongs to the Body of Christ.

In geocaching, an important part of the adventure lies in sharing the journey or telling the story. The woman at the well in John’s Gospel meets Jesus. She finds a priceless treasure! Inspired by the encounter, she goes to the village and tells everyone she can find. Many believe because of her, and many more come to believe because of their own encounter with Christ. Her enthusiasm resulting from her connection with Jesus compels her to share the Good News with her community. Her experience becomes contagious and engages those around her. Although geocaching can be done alone, it is best done with others. Sharing the discovery in conversation or online requires reflection and a sense of the true treasure.

We are “partners and co-workers, bound to one another in the realization of the plan of creation and redemption with mutual responsibility, and are together on the road towards the heavenly Father. Each person has the capacity to respond to God’s love and to share it reciprocally. No one is so poor that they cannot enrich their neighbor, no one is so rich that they do not need the help of others” (“Together and for One Another: The Characteristic Way of the Union,” in *Union of Catholic Apostolate, Appendix to the General Statutes* [Rome: 2008], 8). Celebrating Eucharist with the Body of Christ gathered reveals a vibrant community that keeps them engaged. People who are passionately connected to Christ and community will not simply drift away.

Going Hungry

Going hungry describes the experience of those referenced in the Pew study who leave their faith tradition because they do not feel fed at worship. The Mass offers rich nourishment where we break open the Word and share the bread of life and the cup of salvation as brothers and sisters becoming members of the Body of Christ. The fellowship of the Body of Christ in and around the table sustains us through the week and throughout our lives.

The geocaching analogy offers further insights. Treasure hunting requires more than just entering coordinates. Despite our best technology, a satellite can only get us so close. Finding the actual treasure requires a proximal, tangible engagement. The seeker has to be there, fully present. Discovering the treasure

requires eyes and ears, hands and feet. The treasure hunt could require looking under rocks or behind bushes. Similarly, the search for spiritual treasure requires seeing God present in all things, listening attentively to the Word, and participating in communion. The seeker must pray, individually and collectively, and keep an open heart for the Spirit to work. As believers, embracing the Eucharist through “full, conscious and active” participation prepares the path for each member of Christ’s Body to be well fed (Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [Sacrosanctum Concilium]*, no. 14, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]).

Catechetical Sunday reminds us that living our faith means frequent

encounters with the person of Jesus in the Eucharist, in Sacred Scripture, and in one another. The witness of “people’s lives give force to their efforts at evangelization” (*Lineamenta*, no. 22). The New Evangelization’s contemporary recalculation compels us, like the woman at the well, to encounter Jesus and to share the treasure. The geocaching adventure urges us to retool, engage, and explore. The dismissal rite of the *Roman Missal* reminds us that we do not just leave the building at the end of Mass; instead we enter the world with a mission to “go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”

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