Evangelism: How Can We Reach Unchurched Larry and Mary?

Martin Pable, OFM Cap.

This Easter I again experienced what has become all too familiar: a full church with legions of children and young adults. Where were they the last few months? Absent. Anticipating this, I included in my homily a direct invitation along these lines: “Perhaps some of you here tonight have drifted away from God or from the Church. I just want to invite you to return. Perhaps we in the Church have let you down in some way. If so, we are truly sorry, and we want to be reconciled with you. God knows, we are not a perfect Church. All of us need forgiveness and healing. We’ll make it as easy as possible for you to reconnect. Just talk to your priest, or to anyone in the parish—they will direct you.”

But afterwards I doubted the effectiveness of this message, gentle and well-intentioned as I believe it was. However, the Christmas/Easter attendees are most likely not disappointed with the Church, much less angry. Those people are simply not there. They have walked away. They have either joined another denomination or have abandoned church membership altogether.

On the other hand, the non-practicing Catholics at Christmas/Easter Masses still retain some emotional connection with the religion of their childhood. But they have lost interest in being part of a church community or in regular Sunday worship. They are busy. They have many other interests. They are good people. They believe in God and probably pray. But they feel no need to be part of “organized religion” or to reconnect with the Church. The catchy slogan is, “I’m spiritual but not religious.”

As I was pondering these matters, I recalled a book I had read some years ago: Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary, by Lee Strobel, one of the pastors at a highly successful evangelical church in Illinois. I took the book down from my shelf and reclaimed many of the insights I had learned when I first read it in the 1990’s. In the first chapter, Strobel gives a vivid description of typical unchurched, secularized people who inhabit our workplaces and neighborhoods:

- Harry is the science teacher at the local high school who thinks that all religion is for intellectual weaklings.
- Mary is the extroverted neighbor who’s perfectly happy without God in her life.
- Harry is the husband who thinks his wife’s faith is a waste of time.
- Mary is the entrepreneur who’s so busy dealing with her success that she doesn’t have time for spiritual matters.
- Harry is the auto mechanic goes to church religiously—every Christmas and Easter!
- Mary is the government bureaucrat who was turned off on God by an early church experience that left her convinced that Christianity is at best boring and irrelevant.

Strobel makes a number of other observations, mostly based on social science research:
- For many unchurched people, their motto seems to be, “I believe in God; I just don’t believe in church.”
- Most unchurched people formerly attended church regularly; they have made a conscious decision to walk away. (I am not so sure of this. My impression is that most have just drifted into a pattern of non-attendance).
- According to a 1992 survey by George Barna, an overwhelming 91% of non-Christians believe that the churches are not sensitive to their needs. And in the eyes of our self-centered, consumer-oriented society, that is the ultimate sin.

However, for most non-practicing Christians, including Catholics, I do not believe that narcissism, consumerism or secularism are adequate explanations for falling church attendance. If we actually get to know them, we often find that they are motivated by some kind of spirituality. What drives them is a strongly felt sense of wanting to make a difference, some positive contribution to building a better society.

So they pursue careers in science or medicine, with the hope of finding cures for disease, caring for the earth’s resources, preventing famine and global warming. Or they work to insure human rights for all people and to find peaceful means of ending international conflicts. They enter social service fields where they hope to find better housing and health care for the poor; they strive to provide better educational opportunities for all citizens. These “unchurched Larrys and Marys,” as I like to call them, are not hostile toward the Church; they just don’t feel any need for it.

If this analysis has some validity, it presents a serious pastoral challenge. The lamentation of every parish I have encountered is the same: “Where are our young adults, our young couples with children?” They are conspicuously absent. How can we reach them with the good news of the Gospel? We already know that scolding and shaming will be of no avail. We believe that they truly need to have God in their lives and to have a connection with a faith community. But these are not felt needs for them: “We’re doing just fine, thank you.”

**Felt Needs of the Unchurched**

So, what are some of the felt needs of unchurched Larry and Mary? One of them, certainly, is the need to deal with their pain. I have often quipped that young people don’t feel the need for religion because they haven’t suffered yet. But now I would qualify that: they have suffered, but the pain has not become sharp enough, or they have found ways to numb it: think alcohol, music, and sex
for openers. But the pain is there, not far below the surface. Some are carrying scars from growing up in dysfunctional families. Others have suffered rejections and failed relationships. Still others are living in loneliness. Some have succeeded in finding good-paying jobs, but they are dismayed at the infighting and political back-stabbing they experience in the workplace. Others have gone through the pain of job loss. Those chilling words still ring in their ears: “Our company has to downsize, and there’s no longer a place for you.”

Then there are those who have suffered blows to their idealism. They have sacrificed pursuing lucrative careers in order to work for less pay in humanitarian fields such as agricultural or environmental aid, human rights legislation, anti-poverty programs and the like. To their dismay, they sometimes find that the work gets sabotaged by personality conflicts and power struggles among staff members. Or governmental and sponsoring agencies withdraw funding. The pain of disillusion sets in. Similar setbacks can occur among those who pursue careers in the arts.

Experiences of loss, failure, rejection, and disillusion can awaken people to the need for some kind of spiritual belief system that will provide an anchor for turbulent times.

But even when lives are proceeding smoothly, that need can surface. Author Stephen Covey in Seven Habits of Highly Effective People made use of a now-famous image to highlight this reality. Some people, he says, have worked so hard to climb the ladder of success, only to find it is leaning against the wrong wall. When they get to the top, they find nothing on the other side of the wall. Except the haunting question: “Is this all there is?”

My point: one of the felt needs for unchurched young adults is the need for a sense of meaning for their lives. “Why am I doing this? What’s the point? What gets me up in the morning? What is my mission? What helps me deal with life’s frustrations?” These are the “existential” questions that psychiatrist Viktor Frankl wrote about in his classic Man’s Search for Meaning. More recently, pastor Rick Warren wrote passionately about this need in The Purpose-Driven Life.

Connecting with Unchurched Larry and Mary

Granted that the need to deal with life’s pain and to find meaning in one’s life are felt needs of the people absent from our churches, how can we reach them with the hopeful message of the Gospel? After years of working with parishes to develop an evangelizing ministry, I have reluctantly come to this conclusion: There is very little that pastors and parish staffs can do directly to regain the vast numbers who have walked away from our churches. But the operative word here is “directly.” Indirectly, a number of structures—as well as attitudes—have to be in place. One is a welcoming attitude. This includes attractive outdoor signs with an upbeat message; a friendly, helpful parish receptionist; greeters and ushers at
Mass who are warm and welcoming without being gushy; presiders who create a
sense of welcome and inclusion by their whole manner. The Liturgy itself needs
to be prayerful, the music tasteful and inspiring, the homily relevant to the needs
and real-life situations of the people. There is nothing more deadly for an
unchurched person hesitantly “checking out” the parish than to walk into a Mass
that is lifeless, boring, and irrelevant. But for the most part, unchurched Larry and
Mary will not be there. We need to connect with them in their own life-spaces.

This means, in practice: the evangelizing parish should invest its energies and
resources in training the laity to reach out to the inactive Catholics and other
unchurched people whom they meet. Over the years I have developed a training
course that is described in the fifth chapter of my book Reclaim the Fire: A Parish
Guide to Evangelization. I have conducted the course, usually an all-day Satur-
day program, in a number of parishes around the country. I call it “How To Share
Your Faith Without Being Obnoxious.” It is a skills-based course built around
three steps:

1) **Listening** – to a friend, a co-worker, a stranger—anyone who starts talking
about their concerns: a health problem; a parent upset about a child’s behavior; a
spouse troubled by marital tensions; a job loss; break-up of a relationship; loss of
a loved one in death. Instead of giving out some easy advice or pious cliché, we
just respond in an empathic, non-judgmental manner, perhaps ask a few
questions for clarification.

2) **Sharing Your Story** – When you sense the right moment, you can say
something like: “I’ve been through something like that in my own life. What
helped me most was my faith in God and being part of my church community.”
Then you go on to share briefly what happened. I tell the participants: All of us
have had experiences of being in some kind of negative state and were able to
move through it with the help of our spiritual resources. I also give them a work-
sheet to write out some of those experiences that they can draw on. The beauty
of this approach is its simplicity and non-intrusiveness. You don’t argue; you
don’t talk theology; you simply share your own experience. As Lee Strobel says:
unchurched people don’t usually ask: “Is Christianity *true*?” But rather: “Does it
*work*?” Does it help you to live your life better and happier? The truth questions
may arise later, and they can be dealt with then.

3) **Inviting** – If the seeker is still engaged and appears to be open, you may
invite them to take one step, whatever they are ready for, to reconnect with God
or with the Church. It may be as basic as to begin praying again. They may not
be ready to attend Sunday Mass; but if they are, offer to go with them or meet
them at the church. Usually a smaller step is needed first: invite them to your
Bible class, or to an adult education program at the parish, or a Christian music
concert or drama. In any case, accompany them and introduce them to people.
Interestingly, some research has shown that as many as one-third of inactive
Catholics said they are interested in reconnecting with the Church, but they are
reluctant to make the first move. But they would welcome someone who reaches
out to them.
The purpose of this course is to empower ordinary lay people to do the front-line work of parish evangelizing. The response I often get is, “You know, I think I can do this!” But as I said earlier, the whole parish has to be ready to welcome returnees and have something life-giving to offer them. As Lee Strobel says, the values that attract the unchurched are: excellence, creativity, relevance, meaningful worship and preaching, participation by the laity, and servant leadership. And I would add: they need to see that the parish is about “making a difference” in the world beyond itself. That it is reaching out to the poor and neglected of society; is partnering with community organizations to improve education, housing, and health care for everyone; and is an agent of healing for people who are hurting from the wounds of life.

We Catholics keep hearing that we need to move beyond our reticence and our habit of “keeping our faith to ourselves.” We are called to be more mission-driven, more willing to risk some degree of discomfort in order to further the message of Christ. Perhaps we have not realized that there are large numbers of people who, while not practicing any particular religion, are nevertheless searching for some higher purpose, for something to believe in and hope for. We need to be convinced that our Catholic faith is a treasure that we are able to share with such seekers. Despite all of the Church’s problems, Catholicism continues to have an appeal, almost a fascination, for many people. This is true even of non-practicing Catholics. While some want nothing more to do with the Church, the majority have just lost their connection. The faith still slumbers within them and may be reawakened. But they are waiting for an invitation, for some sign that they will be welcomed. That is something every active Catholic can provide.

It is now 35 years since Pope Paul VI issued his passionate document “On Evangelization in the Modern World.” Fifteen years later, Pope John Paul II called for “a New Evangelization.” And last year Pope Benedict XVI formed the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization. When and how will we answer their call?