

Basics of Catholicism

About a month ago, Archbishop Charles Chaput, new Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, stated that his archdiocese “is now really a mission territory”. Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Cardinal Archbishop of the Archdiocese of New York, echoed this statement by writing on his personal blog, “Our beloved Archdiocese of New York is also mission territory!”

For those of us here in Montana, this might seem hard to believe. There are some parts of New York or Philadelphia that have more Catholic churches in one square mile than we have in some of our counties. New York and Philadelphia have Catholic populations that date back almost to the original settlement of the 13 colonies, while most of the Catholic population in Montana date only back to the late 1800's. How can those two archdiocese with massive populations be mission territory, and does that mean we're also in mission territory?

The simple answer to both questions is that they are mission territory and so are we. As Catholics, we have an image of mission territory being somewhere in Africa or South America or even Asian countries that do not have a large Christian population. We see missionary work going to another part of the world and another culture for the sake of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ.

While this form of missionary work is important and should be encouraged, we're missing an important aspect in our understanding on being a missionary. Cardinal Dolan put what it means to be a missionary when he wrote, “we are a mission territory, too. Every diocese is. And every committed Catholic is a missionary.” To be a missionary means to proclaim the Gospel to everyone.

The problem is that we're not proclaiming the Gospel. If we were, our churches would be full. Nearly every weekend, one person or another is mentioned as someone who “used to come to church, but doesn't anymore” or “grew up Catholic, but stopped coming” or “married outside the Church and joined their wife's church”. We've assumed that just having a Religious Education program and bringing the kids through the Sacraments of Baptism, Holy Communion, and Confirmation is going to be enough to make them into Catholics.

As we see by the shrinking numbers of younger people who attend Mass, this isn't happening. Going back to Cardinal Dolan's post, he quotes John Garvey, president of the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, “More and more residents of the Western World [you and me!] are simply wandering away from their faith, which means that what is happening in Philadelphia is but a microcosm of a much more disturbing erosion.” The Religious Education and put them through the Sacraments method isn't working. Younger adults aren't practicing the faith in which they grew up, which means they're not passing it on to their kids.

We see this in our Religious Education program. Very few of our RE kids have a basic understanding of the faith, and the number of kids who attend Mass with their parents on a weekly basis is extremely low. About the only time any sizable number of kids attend Mass with their parents is for the monthly Children's

Choir. There are some RE kids I've never seen at Mass throughout my 2 years here! This is not a good situation, and we need to do something about it.

This is where becoming a missionary comes in. The call by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI to a new evangelization is a call to renewing our missionary zeal. We need to be inviting people to join us. We need to be talking about what we believe as Catholics. We need to be encouraging those who are not practicing their faith to take it seriously, and those of us who are to always go deeper. As Greg Erlandson, editor of Our Sunday Visitor magazine, said in Cardinal Dolan's post, “Without a conversion of heart, starting with ourselves, we may never truly address the heart of the current crisis.”

When we held the two meetings in Malta last spring, the purpose was to brainstorm ideas of how we can put the New Evangelization into effect here and now. The conversation isn't over, however. More meetings will come, and there will be activities and events as part of the upcoming Year of Faith that will help to strengthen and grow how we practice the faith and give us the tools to encourage others to join us.

We shouldn't wait, however, for some future point in which we think we'll be “ready” to evangelize. We need to begin now, if we haven't already. Some might say, “But I don't know enough.” Fine. Time to pick up a book or two to learn - I recommend the United States Catholic Catechism for Adults - but start now with what you do know. You don't have to know anything to invite someone to Mass. If you want to ensure someone will come, say as part of the invitation, “I'll pick you up on Sunday. See you at 9:45!” and follow up with them.

As Catholics, we should be greatly disturbed that young men and women are not practicing the Catholic Faith, and we should be doing everything in our power to encourage them. We are in mission territory, and we are called to be missionaries!

