

Why Is It So Hard to Evangelize This Generation?

It's a question that comes up over and over again when priests, religious, deacons and lay people gather to study practical ministry skills in evangelization. "Why aren't we more effective in reaching 20s/30s adults (and others) with the Gospel of Jesus?" Or put another way, "What is the main reason that we are not seeing more fruit in our efforts to reach active, alienated, marginal and unchurched Catholic adults today?"

There does seem to be **ONE BIG REASON**—and many smaller ones. The big reason is that there has been a radical shift in worldview in our culture(s)—i.e., literally the food that we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. We are struggling to deal with it as a Church. It causes many complications for witnessing and proclaiming the good news of Jesus in traditional ways. At risk of overly simplifying this let us consider the following:

- ❖ Christianity originally grew in a culture(s) that admitted that there were absolute truths, regardless of whether or not we knew them or believed in them. Truth is truth whether I believe it or not. This is sometimes referred to as the ***Classical Worldview***.
- ❖ After the middle ages, a worldview began to grow that has especially blossomed in the last few centuries. It sees all truths as relative, not absolute—we are in a "deli" with shelves of truth all around us to select from, and what's true for you isn't necessarily true for me. This is frequently called the ***Modernist Worldview***.
- ❖ Today we are living in a culture(s) that breaks with both of the above. There is no absolute truth, and not really even relative truths. Truth is whatever I imagine truth is. This worldview insists that I create my own reality. In a sense, I am god. Perhaps the computer has hastened this—many of us live our entire life in a kind of virtual reality of our own making. This kind of thinking is coming to be referred to as the ***Post-Modernist Worldview***.

Perhaps an example can help clarify this a bit for us. There is an old philosophical problem that has been posed:

"A tree falls in the uninhabited wilderness when no one is around. Does it make a noise?"

Classical Worldview answer: Yes. Trees in the wilderness do fall. Of course one that falls makes a noise. Reality is reality whether I am there to experience it or not.

Modernist Worldview response: Maybe not. After all I haven't experienced every tree in the world when it fell. Perhaps this one tree made no noise when it fell. You never know.

Post-Modernist Worldview retort: What are you talking about? Unless I am there and experience it, it doesn't exist. I think I'll create my own forest and knock a tree down today.

Once again, this is a simplification. However, proclaiming one God of love who sent his son Jesus Christ to save us calls upon today's people to at least in some way accept the ***Classical Worldview*** (there is absolute truth) out of which the Church arose. We as Church have a hard time dealing with the ***Post-Modernist Worldview*** (truth is what I imagine) impact on our people. That worldview is evangelizing people much faster than the Church is evangelizing with the Gospel.

For more about this worldview shift:

Dr. Jane Regan, *Toward an Evangelizing Church*, Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association, 2003. <http://www.ncea.org/store/index.asp>. The church's renewed call for everyone's full participation in the mission of evangelization serves as a clear mandate for adult faith formation at the parish level amidst conflicting worldviews.

There are many other concrete reasons why people report becoming inactive Christians. For help understanding these see:

Bishop Michael A. Saltarelli, "How to Reach Inactive Catholics: A Pastoral Statement by the Diocese of Wilmington." *Origins*, January 27, 2000. www.cdot.org/inactivecatholics2.html. After the U.S. Bishops Committee on Evangelization researched why Catholic become inactive, Bishop Saltarelli selected nine of these reasons to suggest how the Church might respond.

Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among U.S. Catholics—Executive Summary <http://cara.georgetown.edu/sacramentsesum.pdf>. The Department of Communications of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) commissioned The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (Georgetown University) to conduct this survey in 2008. The Executive Summary has some sobering statistics about Catholic reception of the sacraments.

Reflection Questions for Small Group Sharing—4 or 5 people (25-40 mins.)

1. How have you experienced that it is “**hard to evangelize this generation?**”
2. With which of the three worldviews (Classical, Modernist, Post-Modernist) do you feel most comfortable? Why?
3. To which of the three worldviews do you find it most difficult to minister or to evangelize? Why?
4. How can we get help to learn more about how to evangelize across the worldviews and cultures in our area?

Take Home Challenge:

Over the next month try listening, without judgment or expectations, to two or three people in your daily life (family, friends, acquaintances) that seem to have worldviews quite different from your own. **Afterward:** What have you learned from doing this?