

# PASTORAL LETTER ON BRINGING PEOPLE TO CHRIST

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MOST REVEREND MARK E. BRENNAN  
BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON





Dear brothers and sisters of my beloved Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, I have written quite a few pastoral letters in my five years as your Shepherd. This may be the most important one, because it touches on the very reason we are a Church; so I ask you to take the time to read it and reflect on its message.

*† Mark E. Brennan*



## OUR IDENTITY AND MISSION

First of all, we must understand that we Catholics are not a religious club with periodic gatherings and quaint rituals. We are not a Fortune 500 company with branches called parishes and schools and corporate headquarters in Rome. The truth is that we are a movement going through history, proclaiming that Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, is the world's Savior from sin and death. We need such a Savior, for we are simply incapable of overcoming those twin evils by ourselves. The Lord Jesus himself founded our Church and will always sustain our effort to share his saving Gospel with the world.

How do you handle challenges? Do you run away from them or try to meet them? Here's the challenge the Lord Jesus gives us: he commands us to make him known to other people and to invite them to put their faith in him. He said to his disciples before he ascended back to heaven: *Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age* [Matthew 28:19-20].

This effort to bring other people to Christ and him to them is formally known as “evangelization.” It is a word that conjures up for some Catholics zealots of other religions who shout slogans on the streets or knock on doors offering pamphlets with obscure teachings.

But it is really about sharing our faith in Christ with others to give them an opportunity to know him and believe in him.

Let me illustrate what evangelization is like in practice. A boy I knew was ambivalent about the Catholic faith but, when he encountered a fine teacher in his Confirmation class, he warmed up to it. He joined the parish's high school youth group and became a leader. By now enthusiastic about his faith, he went on to college and there began dating a young woman who was not Catholic. He shared with her how much his faith meant to him. She became interested and joined a group at the university that was looking into the Catholic faith (the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, now called the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults). What she experienced resonated with her. She responded with faith and became a Catholic.

That young man had brought another person to Christ by his good example and his willingness to speak of Christ and the Church. But sometimes it is other Catholics we have an opportunity to influence. A young Catholic woman worked in an office and made it a point to go to Mass on her lunch hour at a nearby church on holy days of obligation (such as All Saints Day and the Immaculate Conception of Mary). Some of her colleagues noticed and asked her where she was going. Before long a couple of other workers, who were Catholic but not practicing, decided to go with her. Her good example helped those Catholics return to a regular practice of their faith.

Could you in a similar way help others to encounter Christ, either to know him for the first time or to renew their devotion to him? I know you could.



## **ALL OF US ARE CALLED TO EVANGELIZE**

Hoping to stir the embers of an evangelizing faith in the Church, Pope St. Paul VI wrote an encyclical letter in 1975 called “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*” (Announcing the Gospel) in which he underlined the supreme importance of evangelization: “Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of his death and glorious resurrection” [# 14].

Even so, you might say: “Don’t we have priests and deacons and nuns to do that? Isn’t it enough for me to live right so I can go to heaven?” Our clergy and religious often bring others to Christ but they aren’t meant to work alone. Yes, you should observe God’s commandments because that gives witness to the sincerity of your faith, but the Lord also calls you to join in the Church’s great evangelizing mission. *The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few, he said, so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest* [Matthew 9:37]. You are one of those laborers for the Gospel. Your Baptism made you a missionary disciple. The grace of that sacrament, renewed by the Eucharist, intensified by Confirmation, restored by Penance, strengthens you to love God above all things and your neighbor as

yourself. It prepares you to help bring in the harvest of souls for whom Christ thirsts.

Your prayer and worship honor God but the ways to love your neighbor are many and varied. Yet there is no greater form of love than to introduce another human being to his or her Savior. That love can make the difference between a person achieving the final destiny of eternal life in heaven or missing out on it. While the Lord will surely make allowances for those who, through no fault of their own, have not known him, it is far better to know your Savior and to enter into a personal and life-giving relationship with him. But someone needs to get the journey started. That someone is you!

Remember: Jesus himself tells us to evangelize. Re-read the quotation from St. Matthew's Gospel early in this letter. The Lord is not content with us caring only for our own salvation; he wants us to be concerned about others' salvation, too. Second, we have truly good news to share with other people. We know who the Savior of the world is. There have been other great religious figures in history, such as Moses, the Buddha and Mohammed, but none of them claimed to be the world's savior from sin and death. Only Jesus credibly claimed that role.

Third, as I indicated above, Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor. Out of love, we should be willing to reach out to those who have never known Christ or known him only superficially, as well as to those Catholics who, for various reasons, have stopped practicing their faith. Love means truly caring about the welfare of others; caring for their eternal welfare is the highest form of spiritual love.

Finally, we should want to invite others to join us in the Church. *It is not good for the man to be alone* [Genesis 2:18]. That is a truth applied in Genesis to marriage but it is applicable to religion as well. The Lord gathers his disciples into his Church so that they can support one another in living their faith and have greater strength and insight to speak of him to others. The Lord uses our social nature to build up the Body of Christ, the visible Church, on earth, so that we can fulfill our mission to announce his Gospel and infuse his goodness in the world.



## **WITNESS OF LIFE AND EXPLICIT PROCLAMATION**

If we are to evangelize effectively, it is essential that our way of life be in harmony with what we say to others about Christ and the Church. That testimony of life is our witness to the truth of the Gospel. Saint Paul VI wrote: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers and, if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” [EN 41].

A non-Catholic family had several Catholic neighbors, who sometimes talked about their involvement in their parish and their love for their faith. The non-Catholic family’s home burnt down. Their Catholic neighbors gave them food, clothing and many other kinds of help as the family struggled with their loss. Touched by the faith-inspired witness of life of those Catholic families, the non-Catholic family wanted to know more about Catholicism. Eventually that family entered the Church. As St. Paul VI said, “The Church is evangelized by constant conversion and renewal in order to evangelize the world with credibility” [EN 15]. Those neighbors brought a family to Christ because they were living their faith. Are you living yours? If you need to reform your life, pray hard, seek wise counsel from your priest or a trusted friend and never doubt that the Lord loves sinners and will always forgive those who repent.



## **PERSONAL EVANGELIZATION**

How do you engage personally in evangelization? You need to prepare spiritually. Begin by praying daily for specific people to be open to the gift of faith or of a renewed faith. Make a list if you need to but don't just pray in general; pray by name for people you know. Then add weight to your prayer by fasting for them at least once a week. Friday is a traditional day for fasting. You can fast from a meal or from some form of entertainment or favorite activity. You deprive yourself of some temporal good for a brief time as a sacrifice to win God's grace for others for eternity. A third form of spiritual preparation for evangelization is to offer to God your good works and sufferings on behalf of those for whom you are praying. God loves all absent Catholics and religiously unaffiliated people more than we do but He wants to see how much we love them. Following these steps shows Him our love.

Yet we cannot stop there. As St. Paul VI says, "The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed" [EN 22]. We have to seek opportunities to speak of Jesus Christ and why we follow him as members of his Church. Ask the Lord to give you opportunities to give



witness to your faith in him. You know why you follow him. You do not need a theological degree to tell others your reasons. You are an expert on your life of faith.

If the person has questions you cannot answer, consult the Catechism of the Catholic Church or a reliable online website to understand the matter and be able to respond. If the person needs help beyond what you can offer – he or she is divorced and remarried or is gay or lives in a household that is hostile to the faith or poses a question you have not found the way to answer – arrange for the person to speak to your priest or deacon or call the appropriate office at the diocesan Chancery for help. Obstacles must be recognized but obstacles can be overcome. Pick up one of the glossy cards at your parish to keep these principles of personal evangelization in mind.

People will often give you opportunities to engage them in that conversation: moments of great joy, such as the birth of a child, a wedding or a new home; moments of sadness and tragedy, such as the death of a loved one, the breakup of a marriage, the loss of a job or some other serious disappointment. These are openings to speak of how Christ has been your strength and joy when you have dealt with times both sad and happy.

A woman raised by virulently atheistic parents met and married a practicing Catholic. Seeing his joy, experiencing his kindness, watching how he dealt patiently with their children, knowing that he prayed every day, she wanted what he had and, after much interior struggle (she went through the RCIA three times), she finally became a Catholic. The husband gave an excellent witness of life to balance his gentle encouragement of her desire to be Catholic and the RCIA team provided clear knowledge of the faith.



## **NOW IS THE ACCEPTABLE TIME, NOW IS THE DAY OF SALVATION (II CORINTHIANS 6:2)**

We have been engaged for the past three years in a Eucharistic Revival and are now in the Year of Mission. This is a favorable time to invite people to come back to the Church or to taste for the first time how good the Lord is. As part of the Revival, the “Walk with One” effort is an approach to personal evangelization, similar to the one I have been describing. Go to [www.eucharisticrevival.org](http://www.eucharisticrevival.org) for an in-depth description how this effort can be carried out.

Be willing to step out in faith, trusting in the Lord’s words: *Do not worry beforehand about what you are to say but say whatever will be given to you at that hour, for it will not be you who are speaking but the Holy Spirit* [Mark 13:11]. Speak simply and personally. You can do it. A young man in an airplane revealed to the Catholic passenger seated next to him that he was having trouble dealing with his girlfriend’s decision to end their relationship. The Catholic knew a priest where the young man lived. “Why don’t you go talk with him? He gave me good advice once.” The man did contact the priest and found his counsel helpful. It led him to explore Catholicism and eventually he decided to come into the Church.

I’ve heard people say, “It shouldn’t be about numbers.” But I notice that the Church has always been concerned with numbers. St. Luke

notes that, after St. Peter's proclamation to the crowd on Pentecost, *those who accepted his message were baptized and about three thousand persons were added that day* [Acts of the Apostles 2:41]. Luke says later: *The Church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria was at peace. It was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers* [Acts 9:31]. Why do numbers matter? Not so we get more money in the collection or can brag about our size but because it means more people are responding to the Lord's saving message and growing in his grace. Numbers matter to God: *God our Savior wills everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth* [I Timothy 2:3].

My brothers and sisters in Christ, many of you have spoken to me about your sadness that family members and friends have walked away from the Church. Some of you lament that your parishes are aging with few young families and single persons in sight. I don't think any of us wants our Church to shrink and disappear. Our Catholic Church is the original Christian Church and by far the most universal. Don't we want it to embrace as many of those hundreds of thousands of West Virginians, *who are troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd* [Matthew 9:36], and assure them that they have a true Shepherd in Jesus Christ? Our Church – meaning all of us working together – must fulfill our mission and not settle for just hanging on, sad and listless.

Our state may be losing population but we can be growing as a Church. You all know Catholics who have walked away from us. You know some of those West Virginians with no religious affiliation. They are your relatives, friends, neighbors, fellow workers, people with whom you recreate. If your faith matters to you, do your part. Join with other Catholics around the state to reach out to those we have lost and those we never had. It is for their good and for ours as well. It may take years to see the full fruit of our efforts but we must begin. This is the challenge the Lord gives us here and now.

The season of Advent is a season of hope. In fact, Pope Francis has announced that the central theme of the Jubilee Year in 2025 will be hope. Jesus wants us to share our hope for forgiveness and eternal life

with others. If you are willing to do so, you may confidently hope to hear these words from the Lord when you die: *Well done, my good and faithful servant . . . Come, share your master's joy* [Matthew 25:23]. Be the good, faithful servant Jesus calls you to be and you will be rewarded beyond measure by the Lord with a joy that will never end.

If your *faith* matters to you,  
do your part.

*Bishop Mark E. Brennan*



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