

Catholics. Disciples. Missionaries - Personal Encounter

Fr. Frank DeSiano, CSP, Paulist Evangelization Ministries, November 2017 Evangelization Exchange

In the year 2012, then Pope Benedict called an important meeting called a synod. While such meetings can happen whenever a pope might call them, they usually happen every four years- “ordinary synods.” Two years before, Pope Benedict announced the theme of the Synod; it would address “The New Evangelization.”

The Church had been using the term “The New Evangelization” since 1983, when St. John Paul II coined the phrase in a talk he was giving to the bishops of Latin America in Haiti. The phrase came to refer to the kind of evangelizing activities that would address the situation of faith in many modern societies. Once fervently Catholic and devout, now these societies behaved as if faith was not important; rather, a secular aura prevailed. This situation well described many European countries as well as certain prevalent attitudes in the United States.

Over 260 bishops from all over the world attended the synod, plus religious and lay leaders. There were even representatives from the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church, and many other Protestant communions. The bishops spent three weeks discussing issues, and another week pulling their ideas together. When it came time to communicate their conclusions, among the things they stated was this:

This faith cannot be transmitted in a life which is not modeled after the Gospel or a life which does not find its meaning, truth and future based on the Gospel. For this reason, the New Evangelization for the transmission of the Christian faith calls all believers to renew their faith and their personal encounter with Jesus in the Church, to deepen their appreciation of the truth of the faith and joyfully to share it. (Synod, 2012, Prop. 57)

When I returned from Rome, after serving as a reporter on the synod, a pastor invited me to talk to his parish Women’s Group about the synod. They gathered at 6:30 pm for Adoration and Benediction; shared refreshments; and then sat down on folding chairs before the screen I had set up. I gave the overall process of a synod, the main outline of what happened, and then flashed on the screen the conclusion of the bishops stating that evangelization was basically a “personal encounter” with Christ.

I looked at these dozens of women (over 50 of them) and asked if any of them ever had a “personal encounter” with Jesus. They looked a bit aghast at the question and proceeded to look at each other with eyebrows wrinkled in puzzlement. It wasn’t quite clear to them what I was talking about! So then I smiled and asked them what they were doing when they knelt before the Blessed Sacrament for a half hour. What about when you go to Mass? Receive Holy Communion? Go out of your way to help someone in need? Share faith with your children?

Slowly their eyes lit up. They connected what was previously disconnected. Because Catholics are very comfortable talking about rites (Mass, Benediction, Confession) and things (candles, missals, holy cards). But when it comes to talking about relationships, Catholics are not very expressive. We have not developed the “style” of expressing our feelings, or even alluding to those feelings. It’s easier to frame Catholic life in terms of events and requirements. But these women began to make that all-too-necessary connection between a rite and a relationship: to spend a half-hour in Adoration was, indeed, to encounter Jesus in a very personal way.

Just as Catholics play down their experience of conversion, so they play down their personal experience. “I don’t wear my faith on my sleeve,” Catholics say. An attitude of private faith, not being showy, not making others feel guilty—these predominate in Catholic life. The possible reasons vary—from a faith learned through memorization, to not wanting to make others feel

uncomfortable by talking about something so personal. Catholics, and other Christians, have been bombarded for decades by believers quite willing to talk about their personal faith—and to imply that, if people didn't talk the way they talked, that somehow their faith was defective. Television channels catered to testimonies of people who all had the same style of personal expression: their lives were a mess; then someone mentioned Jesus; then they turned their lives to Jesus; and, ever since then, all their troubles have vanished.

Catholics can sometimes frame their religious experience in this kind of model; but, more often, they cannot. Rather than having experienced long periods of brokenness, with a sudden flash of redemption, they have rather experienced events on multiple levels which have brought them to an awareness of their personal commitment to Jesus.

These multiple levels have afforded Catholics very nuanced experiences of Jesus which can easily be retrieved when Catholics are given the right context. One level of encounter with Jesus is the community of faith—the Church. Christ's community comprises, of course, those people I see when I go to Church; but it also encompasses all those people throughout the world who have professed faith in Christ. In fact, for Catholics, the Church includes all those who, though dead, live in union with Christ in the spirit—believers from every age. If we walk into any community, something gets communicated to us, just from the relationships of people. Walk into any home, any business, any association—you can pick up something about the people involved right away.

The Church does this for Catholics. We see people entering a building, blessing themselves with the Sign of the Cross, bowing and genuflecting, then kneeling or sitting in prayer. Just these images of people gathering together communicate the place and person of Jesus. Why are they kneeling? Praying? Lighting candles? Something, Someone, touches them. Multiply this across a billion plus people, in every culture and situation, whether on Fifth Avenue in New York, or a tiny village in Vietnam: across the world, across cultures, faith motivates millions of people every day. How can we not encounter the breadth of Christ?

If you visit the new Cathedral in Los Angeles, one of the main elements to catch your eye is the long, multicolored tapestry of the saints executed by the artist John Nava. You cannot stand in this church without sensing the presence of two-thousand years of people who put Christ at the center of their lives. We see their images—heads bowed, or uplifted; dressed in religious garb, or dressed in working clothes—and we recognize the invitation: to see ourselves in their lives, wrapped in their love of Christ. We also recognize that these holy figures continue to see themselves in our lives. We are one transcendent community with Christ at the center, and his Spirit as a dynamic force of love.

Catholics also encounter Christ through a network of sacred things that recall Christ's connection to them. So typical are these holy objects, people want to use them to stereotype Catholics. What does the touch of rosary beads say? Or the wetness of a holy water font? Or the lighting of a candle? Or the wearing of a medal, year after year, so that the medals feels like a part of our bodies? What do holding hands, closing eyes, pausing in quiet, kneeling: what do these say to our very physical reality—how Christ comes to us in all these gestures and moments?

What does it mean to hear the words of Holy Scripture, especially the Gospels: Catholics stand when they hear them, as if straining their necks to not miss a word? Or to witness the Baptism of a child? Or the Confirmation of a niece? Or the marriage before God's altar of one's best friend? What does it mean to attend Mass, to hear the words of Consecration, to come forth to receive Communion? We will explore some of this later on, but here we must clearly affirm all these moments of encounter that are ordinary parts of the lives of everyday Catholics.

“Personal encounter” might seem like a strange term; aren't all encounters personal? But what makes an encounter personal? At their core, personal encounters have the power to change

who we are. That is to say, the relationship with another person has the capacity to permanently shape one's life. From transformed lives come new actions, thoughts, and commitments which, in fact, renew us and those around us.

We have many encounters that are somewhat personal. We might greet people on the street and nod, or interact with a cashier at the grocery store. We might smile at receptionists in the doctor's office, but when we are with the doctor, the relationship is yet different. We might call people every day on the phone as part of our business. Or we might call our best friend to catch up and blow off steam. Our best friend may get much of our attention, but, if a brother or sister gets sick, we get in the car and do whatever we can.

The amazing thing about these personal encounters is how they can deepen almost without warning. Consider our best friends. Can we say, at this point, what made them best friends? Can we remember the exact moment we met, or the occasion when it dawned on us that this person was so important to us? Often people move from acquaintances to friends; sometimes they move from friends to best friends; rarely, they move from best friends to soul mates. To have any encounter is to potentially have a life-changing encounter. To encounter any person is, potentially, to be profoundly changed.

We call faith the process by which Christ becomes the central person in our lives. Christ enters the field of personal networks according to which we define ourselves. Christ often enters through this network of friends. Yet, when Christ comes, he overtakes the network, shining his light upon those who see him, and changing how those who see him come to see everyone else and the world.

I think every believer will have a different kind of feeling when encountering Christ; indeed, these feelings will vary in the life of every believer. Sometimes they will be strong and emotionally shattering. I remember someone, whom I was visiting in jail, saying, almost out of the blue: "Every time I look on the cross I begin to cry." We might have these kinds of feelings when we go on retreat, or at a time of crisis in our lives.

At other points, the emotions may seem more smoothed out, less gripping. We may spend many months just pondering in the corner of our souls one or another aspect of Christ or his message . . . say, the invitation to reconciliation, or the need for inner peace. Honeymoons end; then it's the process of living for another as I live for myself, without much fanfare but with just as much commitment.

We can think of Catholic life, in the end, as a way to have an unending succession of encounters with Jesus. Every aspect of Catholic life involves encountering Christ, or his Word, or his Church, in his Spirit.

We shortchange ourselves and the power of our Catholic faith by not recognizing just how personal and involved we become with Jesus, and how Jesus opens our lives to a renewed vision of God, and a powerful life of the Spirit. We shortchange our Catholic experience when we imagine other believers have experienced Jesus, but not us.

Just this kind of experience defines our Catholic lives.

Exercise

"The Christian faith is above all conversion to Jesus Christ, full and sincere adherence to his person, and the decision to walk in his footsteps. Faith is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ making, of oneself a disciple of him (General Directory for Catechesis, #53)."

Write down the times you have felt "full and sincere" adherence to Jesus.

How do you feel Christ adheres to you?

How do you sense that you adhere to Jesus?