

When he was 9 years old, Saint John Bosco had a dream. It was one that he would continue to have as his life wore on.

He dreamed that he was in a field with a crowd of children. The children started cursing and misbehaving. John jumped into the crowd to try to stop them by fighting and shouting with them. Suddenly, a man with a face filled with light appeared dressed in a white flowing mantle. The man called John over and made him leader of the boys. John was stunned at being placed in charge of the unruly gang. The man said to him, "You will have to win these friends of yours not with blows but with gentleness and kindness." It's a message even an adult would probably not want to hear, as it would require patience. But a 9-year old also probably would not want to hear such a thing, and John protested in the dream. "I'm just a boy" he argued. "How can you order me to do something that looks impossible?" The man answered, "What seems so impossible you must achieve by being obedient and acquiring knowledge." Then, in the dream, the boys turned into the wild animals they had been acting like. The man then told John that this is the field of John's life work. Once John changed and grew in humility, faithfulness and strength, he would see a change in the children - a change that the man now demonstrated. The wild animals suddenly turned into gentle lambs.

John recalls telling his family about the dream, but his brothers just laughed at him. Some said it meant he would become a shepherd, a priest or even a gang leader. His grandmother told him not to pay attention to it. And John tried not to, but it began to inspire him to follow the advice of the man in the dream, and reach out to other boys.

He did so in a very creative way. Born into poverty, he did work as a child as a shepherd, and received education from a priest. But despite having very little, he wanted to use what he had to help evangelize others. And so he would reach out to other poor and neglected boys, and used the love and guidance that seemed impossible at the age of 9 and help them to lead faithful and fulfilled lives. He did this by learning two important evangelical tools: juggling and magic. He learned this from traveling entertainers, and then he would put on shows juggling, doing magic and even doing acrobatics. He used this as a way to catch the interest of other boys. And once he had their attention, he would begin to talk to them about the faith and charge an admission price, that being a prayer.

He then would take them to Mass. But again, here he ran into problems. Not too many people wanted a crowd of loud boys hanging around. But he was undeterred. He still kept at it, even when priests made promises to him to help him and the other boys, but then got frustrated and didn't follow through.

Despite the setbacks, he continued on in his mission. His dreams continued, another one having Mary come to him to lead him into a beautiful garden with roses everywhere. The ground was covered with them, and John was told to take off his shoes and walk along a path through a rose arbor. Before he had walked more than few steps though, his feet were bleeding from the thorns. When he said he would have to wear shoes or turn back, Mary told him to put on sturdy shoes. As he went forward a second time, he was followed by helpers. But the walls of the arbor closed on him, the roof sank lower and the roses crept onto the path. Thorns caught at him from all around. When he pushed them aside he only got more cuts, until he was tangled in thorns. Yet

those who watched said, "How lucky Don John is! His path is forever strewn with roses! He hasn't a worry in the world. No troubles at all!" Many of the helpers, who had been expecting an easy journey, turned back, but some stayed with him. Finally he climbed through the roses and thorns to find another incredible garden. A cool breeze soothed his torn skin and healed his wounds.

In his interpretation, the path was his mission, the roses were his charity to the boys, and the thorns were the distractions, the obstacles and the frustrations that would stand in his way. The message of the dream was clear to John: he had to keep on going, not lose faith in God or his mission, and he would come through to the place he belonged.

And so, John did just that. In his teens, he took a job working on a wine farm, and eventually entered seminary in his early 20s being ordained. His first assignment was chaplain of a girls boarding school, and he was to visit prisoners, teach the catechism, and help out at country parishes. Here, he saw rampant poverty, and a number of teens in prison in deplorable conditions. Fr. John was determined to find a means to prevent them from ending up in prison, and he realized for him to do that, he had to get creative. And so he started to meet the boys where they were at - literally. He knew they worked in shops, offices, market places, and were pavers, stone-cutters, masons, plasterers who came from far away places. He founded an Oratorio, a place where the boys could come and learn, but it wasn't just about catechesis. He looked for jobs for the unemployed. Some of the boys did not have sleeping quarters and slept under bridges or in bleak public dormitories. Twice he tried to provide lodgings in his house with the help of his mother. The thanks they got? The first time the boys stole the blankets; the second they emptied the hay-loft. He did not give up. In May 1847, he gave shelter to a young boy from Valesia, in one of the three rooms he was renting in the slums of Valdocco, where he was living with his mother. He and "Mamma Margherita" began taking in orphans. The boys sheltered by Don Bosco numbered 36 in 1852, 115 in 1854, 470 in 1860 and 600 in 1861, 800 being the maximum some time later.

Not only were there some difficult boys who took advantage of him, there was again difficult from others. He was turned out of several places as he moved his oratory. One neighborhood got up in arms because the boys made too much noise while at play. Another time he was subjected to gossip that his meetings were political and he would incite the boys to revolution against the government. Even other priests said he was stealing boys from their parishes. The police chief of Turin, Italy, even interrogated him for alleged political meetings in his open-air religious education given to the boys. But again, Fr. John was undeterred.

Eventually, he put together the Society of Saint Francis de Sales. Some of the boys helped him to establish it, including one who later became a Cardinal in the Church.

As the order grew, it established a new style of education: the preventive system. He believed education was to be a matter of the heart, and said boys needed to not just be loved, but know that they are loved. The three components of it were reason, religion and kindness, with music and games mixed in.

As the order spread and also included ministry to girls, in the years that passed countless children were helped and changed for the better because of Saint John Bosco's work. He was canonized in 1934, and given the title, "Father and Teacher for the Youth."

What John Bosco did was to follow in the path of other great people before him who evangelized. Francis Xavier for instance went to India in the 16th century. Here he learned how people lived, and so he was known to wear rags like the poor people did so he could relate to them. Servant of God Matteo Ricci became one of the first missionaries to China to actually learn the Chinese language, and found inroads with the Chinese because he was skilled as a mathematician and cartographer, and wore silk garments because this made him more respectable to the Chinese, and thus, more likely to be able to speak with them. He used Chinese concepts to explain the Christian faith, and respected Chinese traditions as well.

Saints John Bosco and Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci and so many others all share something in common. And that's that they evangelize. They bring the faith out of the church and into the world, and truly act as fishers of men. This is something that has been stressed for us to do by Pope Francis, but it goes back to the beginning of our faith. Saint Paul says it best in our second reading: preaching the gospel he says is an "obligation" that has been "imposed" on him. He offers the gospel free of charge. And he talks about how he does it - doing exactly what John Bosco, Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci and others do, becoming all things to all people

That call to evangelize is given to you and me as well. The problem is sometimes we as Catholics think that this isn't our thing. But our goal always needs to be to bring people closer to God, including ourselves. Our faith can't be reduced to just fulfilling an obligation, or dropping kids off on Wednesday nights for faith formation. We should always be wanting to take things to the next level.

A good starting point is to look at our goals. What should a person who is evangelized look like? This might be a good project for the upcoming Lenten season.

Like Paul, a person has a personal relationship with Christ. That's important, because we do not just want to be a Catholic who is a minimalist, or who follows a set of rules such as go to Mass on Sunday, don't eat meat on Lenten Fridays, etc. Our faith has to be defined by our personal love of Jesus. This love for Jesus is what spurs Paul on.

The Catholic though has the personal relationship with the Church too. Paul's letter is to Corinth, and he is building up the Church. He preaches Jesus to give instruction, and that is the role of the Church for us too. Jesus' gift to us is our Church, and through the Church we have the sacraments, we have the Magisterium which safeguards Revelation. Everyone has a slightly different spirituality, but we must always trust in the Church to guide us in the way of the truth. The relationship with Jesus and His Church are two sides of the same coin.

So once we work on evangelizing ourselves and growing in faith (which is really life long), we have to get to the nuts and bolts of how to do it. That could easily fill a retreat or a conference. But there are a few key things we can do.

One is to set a good example for others. We live differently and act differently as an outward sign that what we are guided by, namely Jesus and the Church, is having an impact on us. This means praying daily, and making Mass a habit. It also means being a person of gratitude and kindness to people we meet at work, school or in the service industry. We can be bold in avoiding things, saying “this is against my faith” or “my faith teaches” if we are pressured to do something our conscience tells us is wrong. We can be a people of hospitality and welcomeness. We can stop gossiping. We can invite Christian conversation at dinner parties. We can smile and laugh and be a person who invites others to approach us and strike up a conversation. We can get involved in our parish and volunteer - in fact we have a ministry showcase this weekend that could also be called an evangelization showcase, because each one is a way to help people on their faith journey. Indeed, evangelization is about both word and action.

Besides the example for others and reaching out to them, we also have to think differently about the individual. Saint John Paul II stressed how each person was created in God’s image and the only response we should give to them is love. In our time though it can be easy to think of people as just an object; hence the widespread problem of objectionable images on the Internet that demean the human body. But beyond that, we can forget that people are human, which is what leads to being condescending towards others or gossiping about them. If we look at others through the eyes of Jesus, and take a page from Paul who was preaching to people from many different backgrounds, we’ll be able to treat others with love.

Lastly, along with treating others with love, if we are going to truly evangelize we have to invest with our time. Pope Francis has said priests should be shepherds living the smell of the sheep. John Bosco did exactly that as he met the children where they were at and helped them to develop a true relationship with God. We’re seeing this more and more too in our day and age. For instance, the program “Saint Paul Street Evangelization,” founded by Steve Dawson, a Catholic re-vert, has literally been taking it to the streets since 2002. In this ministry, two Catholic evangelists choose a place in a city or town with a high level of traffic. They set up shop with a folding table, a stand up sign, and assorted pamphlets on aspects of Catholicism, holy cards, Rosaries and Miraculous Medals. They invoke the Holy Spirit to guide them, and ask for Mary’s intercession. And they simply wait for people to stop by. They never argue. And they are non-confrontational. They aren’t out for an instant conversion, but rather to plant the seeds for people to come to the faith to help a person on their journey. Admittedly, I don’t have any plans to set up a card table in downtown Rosemount anytime soon. But it gets at an important component of evangelization. We as Christians act in different ways, and we talk about our faith, but we also need to be patient with people and meet people where they are at. We can’t just think people will suddenly show up at Mass, we have to go out there and get them. It starts within the home; knowing what our kids are doing, who they are hanging out with, what issues they are going through at school. And with others, we need to know their stories, their personalities, what things they may be going through. And above all else, it requires being patient with others; the law of gradualism as it is called, meaning gradually a person comes to know the truth. When we are patient and truly get to know people by spending time with them, by listening to them rather than talking over them, and truly journey with them, we’ll see results. Saint John Bosco had many failures and frustrations as he tried to help kids appreciate how much God loved them, but through it all as he went to where they were at and was patient with them, the results became apparent.

In the Gospel, Jesus is told by Simon Peter that “everyone is looking for you.” In our world today, so many people are looking for the wrong things because they don’t know where to look. That’s where you and I need to come in. Through our baptism and confirmation, we have said yes to follow Christ. But we need to be a light to the world and to others. A person who speaks about the faith, and who shows it through actions. As I said last week, to be a true fisher of men as Jesus tells the apostles when they follow him, we have to go out into the depths of the ocean. With us every step of the way is God, so let’s not be afraid to leave the shore and give something to people that will truly change their lives: a lasting relationship with God and His Church by not keeping our faith private, but by proclaiming it to the world as an evangelizer.