

Evangelization Requires Being Creative

Last Monday, January 31st, we had the feast of Saint John Bosco, an Italian priest who took seriously the call that Jesus gives to Peter in this week's Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men" (Luke 5:10).

In John Bosco's case, as a 9 year old, he had a dream. Wild animals turned into gentle lambs; but before that happened, a kindly man told John he was given care over the animals, which were actually boys his age. The man wanted John to win them over.

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. 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. In his teens, he took a job working on a wine farm, and eventually entered seminary in his early 20s being ordained. He began working with youth, and many young people he found ended up in trouble or in prison. 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, quite literally going to the places teens worked. Twice he tried to provide lodging in his house. The first time they stole the blankets; the second they emptied the hay-loft. He did not give up. He and "Mamma Margherita" his mother began taking in orphans, numbering over 800 at one point.

Not only were there some difficult boys who took advantage of him, there was again difficulty 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."

I've always admired Saint John Bosco, because his life is a reminder to how we are all called to be a "fisher of men." So how can we do that?

It starts with never forgetting how much God loves us, and has a job for us. Peter's words to Jesus are "depart from me Lord for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8) when he catches the boatload of fish. Peter recognizes there is something unique about this rabbi who has called him. But Jesus immediately tells him to follow Him, and he does. All of us are sinners like Peter; but all of us are loved and God will transform us. It just means we have to, like Saints John Bosco and Peter, look into ourselves first and ask ourselves how do we want to change for the better.

Secondly, we need to do all we can to reach out to others. Sometimes we can put people out of sight, out of mind, like the youths in Italy so many people had given up on. Maybe it's that family member who left the Church, or a friend who never really went to church to begin with. Perhaps it's people we know who think the teachings of the Church are outdated, or others who get riled up on social issues where the Church teaches what is counter-cultural. You'll find tons of testimonies and stories of people who were at one point very anti-Christian at one point or another. But reaching out makes a huge difference. I still stay in touch with a parish employee I worked with at a prior assignment who would make it a point to invite a Mormon or Jehovah's Witness inside when they came by. They ended up turning the tables though and talking about the Catholic faith, and actually got a few to become Catholic. Talk about being a fisher of men! Our faith leads to salvation; why do we so often treat it like a secret that is to be kept hidden?

And lastly through it all, patience. Peter had fished all night by the time Jesus arrives. But note Peter trusts in the Lord; He doesn't say "well I'm a fisherman and who does this guy think He is?" Peter goes out again and then the fish are caught. As close to fishing I get is going to a fish fry. But one of my hobbies is bird photography; often when looking for a particular bird, you have to go back repeatedly to the same spot, and may "strike out" on getting the photo you want. But if you keep at it, eventually you can find the bird. The point is whatever we do, patience is a big part of it for the desired results. How sad that so many seem to give up on others or the world, thinking this person will

never get it, or what's the point they never listen to me. Yes, evangelization can sure be frustrating. Many in society would want us to give up and not share our faith. But when we are patient and persistent, like Saint John Bosco, we can bring so many people to heaven.

All of us, like Peter, are invited to follow the Lord. But as we do so, let's never forget that we are also called to bring more people along for the journey like Peter. By growing in holiness, being creative and unafraid to evangelize, and patient waiting for the fish to bite, what a catch we will have when we pull in the net.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul