

The Other Side of the Door: The Evangelizing Assembly

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Introduction

Open wide the doors! What is your definition of a door? Ogden Nash wrote this one: “A door is what a dog is perpetually on the wrong side of.” I love this image for the evangelical potential of a door. On a typical Sunday morning we’ve got Christians worshipping on one side, and we’ve got everybody else on the other. Christians who worship will walk back through the door to get on with our day, and everyone else is searching for some gateway to happiness. Like dogs we are all anxious to spend some time on the other side of the door.

Pope Francis is so anxious to help us that he has knocked open a door. Pilgrims arriving at the Basilica of St. Peter’s in Vatican City cross the square and mount the steps to stand on the wide porch. Three sets of huge doors lead from there to the grand interior. The set on the north side is normally bricked shut. In our parishes we sometimes keep church doors locked for security. Or we have double doors, but we only open one of them because it’s too much effort to lean all the way over and flick the lock that secures the second door to the ground. The regulars all know which door to pull. Visitors don’t. You can always spot visitors this way. They don’t know the secret entrance to your church. Some of those doors have been locked so long that no one can locate the key. Some church doors are locked for security; others out of habit. However, the north doors of St. Peter’s Basilica are locked in anticipation of grace. They are sealed with a wall of bricks as sturdy as the last house of the Three Little Pigs. No mere huffing and puffing will blow them down. These are holy doors, opened only for the holy year. Other doors around the world and even in your own diocese have been designated as holy doors this year. The holy year is itself a door to God’s mercy. At the blessing of a door of mercy last month, each bishop stood at the entrance to his cathedral and alluded to the Book of Psalms, saying, “Open the gates of justice, we shall enter and give thanks to the Lord.” “This is the Lord’s gate: let us enter through it and obtain mercy and forgiveness.” People were invited to sing an antiphon inspired by John’s gospel: “I am the gate, says the Lord, whoever enters through me, will be saved.” This year is an invitation for each of us to seek God’s mercy, and for everyone else to find God’s mercy at church on the other side of the door.

The Southwest Liturgical Conference has invited me to explore the theme of the Evangelizing Assembly. I will do so in four sections: The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Parts of the Mass, the Functions of the People of God, and Both Sides of the Door.

1. The RCIA

Among Catholic parish liturgical celebrations, one ceremony stands out for its symbolic use of the door: The Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. Parishes may celebrate it two or three times a year if necessary, and our hope is that that will become necessary, so great and so frequent the number of people seeking life through the local Catholic parish. The Rite of Acceptance is the ceremony by which unbaptized adults and children of catechetical age formally begin their formation in the catechumenate, and during which they receive a new title: they become catechumens. You may recall this ceremony by its distinctive features - it begins on the other side of the door if possible, outside the church. Sponsors sign the lips, hands, feet and other parts of the body. The ritual signifies both who the catechumens are and who we the faithful are. Who are we? We are an evangelizing assembly.

Consider the title of this ceremony. In English we call it the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. The Latin title is *Ritus ad catechumenos faciendos*. The English translation puts the word “order” in the title to stress that the catechumens belong to a specific group with rights and responsibilities. Paragraph 7 of the RCIA uses the same expression: “the order of catechumens.” The English title also stresses that the Church “accepts” people into this order. In Spain and much of Latin America the title is a little different: *el Rito de entrada en el catecumenado* - or the rite of “entrance”. In Italy it’s the *Rito dell’ammissione al catecumenato* - or the rite of “admission”. There’s only a slight difference here. “Acceptance” and “admission” indicate something that the Church does, whereas “entrance” indicates something that the catechumens do. But the Latin title literally means something else, and at first it sounds a little odd: *Ritus ad catechumenos faciendos* means the Rite for Making Catechumens - as if they were something you manufactured in your parish kitchen like spaghetti sauce, povotica and cookies. You can find the same verb in the title of this ceremony in the Gelasian Sacramentary and in the Gothic Missal, which means that the idea goes back at least to the seventh century. In fact, from fourth century Sicily, a sad tombstone covers the remains of Julia Florentina, who lived eighteen months and nineteen days. The inscription calls her “the sweetest and most innocent infant,” and twice remarks that she was “made faithful” - probably a reference to her baptism. In the second century, Tertullian said Christians are made, not born (*Apology* 18). If you go all the way back to Mark’s gospel you find in 3:14 that Jesus appointed twelve to be apostles, but the word for “appointed” is more literally translated “made”. Jesus made apostles. If someone wants to become a Christian, you have to make them one. The work of making Christians cannot be the work of clergy alone; that responsibility falls to every Christian. Balthasar Fischer summed this up rather neatly. He was a priest of the Diocese of Trier, and he chaired the study group that prepared the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults after Vatican II. When asked about the work of evangelization, and who it is that makes Christians, he thought about the responsibility that all of us shared, not just pastors. He quipped, “Shepherds don’t make sheep. Sheep make sheep.” The title of this ceremony in Latin, “The Rite for Making Catechumens,”

shines a light on the responsibility that each of us shares in the evangelizing assembly.

Before becoming a catechumen inquirers undergo a period of preparation called “evangelization” or the “pre-catechumenate”. The word “inquirers” is not the most accurate way to translate what the RCIA calls the members of this group, but once again, a strict English translation would sound a little strange. The word *fautores* means people who have some interest, admirers. They may also be inquiring, but their questioning is not what defines them during this period. Rather, it’s their good disposition toward Christians, their support, perhaps even their yearning. The RCIA says this is what should be happening for them: “faithfully and constantly the living God is proclaimed and Jesus Christ whom he has sent for the salvation of all” (RCIA 36). Notice what they are supposed to hear during the initial period of their formation: not when to stand and kneel at mass, not the practice of going to confession, not devotion to Mary, not the Catholic teachings about sex and marriage. They will need to learn these matters in time, but something more basic and preliminary happens first: They need to hear us proclaim that God is a living God, and that Jesus Christ is the one whom God has sent for the salvation of us all. We often presume that inquirers have accepted these beliefs, but we should check them out. Some questions to ask inquirers are, “Do you have faith?” “Who is God for you?” “What have you heard about Jesus Christ?” These questions lie at the heart of the period we call the pre-catechumenate.

We hope that inquirers encounter Jesus Christ through us, his body, the church. The Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens features two symbols: the cross and a bible. (Actually, the Latin calls it a little book of the gospels, a kind of pamphlet they could carry around for quick reference to the words of Jesus Christ. In 1972 when Balthasar Fischer’s commission finished its work, they thought you might pause the ceremony to hand the catechumens a pamphlet; I guess today you would have them produce their cellular devices and give them a password to download a gospel app.) The cross and gospel are symbols of evangelization. Giving them presumes that up to this point the inquirers have not heard the entire gospel and have not shouldered the cross of Christ. Now they hear the good news that overcomes every kind of bad news. Although many people remember the signings from this ceremony, the cross and the gospels are key symbols of evangelization. The new catechumens do not receive the gospels until they have heard God’s word proclaimed. They will not hear about God’s word; they will hear God’s word speaking to them. As the General Instruction on the Roman Missal says, “When the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his word, proclaims the Gospel” (GIRM 29). Evangelization comes first from Christ; we are his ministers.

The other symbol so dear to this celebration is, of course, the door. The first acceptance of the gospel and the signings take place outside the front door of the church if possible. In my parish this would be dangerous. We have a tiny vestibule, and doors that lead directly onto a concrete stairway, which stops at

the sidewalk in front of one of the busiest streets in Historic Northeast Kansas City. Inquirers would be run over before they would ever make it to the door. But once they have been signed, they are invited to cross the threshold of the church and listen to the word of God with the community. Once they cross to the other side of the door, the rubrics of this liturgy give them their new title. They are “catechumens”.

Now, at the risk of upsetting a few of you, I have to tell you that there persists in some Catholic parishes a variation on this ceremony that many people love, but I do not. At the start, once the Catholics have gathered inside the church, someone instructs the inquirers outside to knock on the front door. This instruction is nowhere in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, but the variation was popularized years ago and is still done in some parishes. Some people say, “It’s beautiful.” I think it represents the very worst of Catholic evangelization. This is how many of us think: “We’re Catholics. We don’t like the word ‘evangelization’. That’s for Evangelicals. That’s for Baptists. Protestants. Mormons. We don’t do that. We don’t go door to door on the pretense of meeting people in the neighborhood when all we really want is for them to start coming to our church and donating. We don’t stick leaflets into windshield wipers of innocently parked cars. We don’t do robocalls.” Our favorite method of evangelizing is to have someone sit in the parish office and wait for the phone to ring. “I’m interested in becoming a Catholic,” the voice says. “OK,” the secretary responds. “The next classes start in September. You can come then.” <Click.> When inquirers are asked to knock on the door of a church, it shows the Catholic approach to evangelization. “We’ll just sit inside here and wait for someone to knock. Then we’ll decide whether or not we’ll get up and go to the door.” You see the problem? We need to go out that door and invite people to come in. We can learn a lot from our Protestant brothers and sisters. We also need ways of connecting inquirers now, this week, with some group, some activity, without telling them, “You have to wait till September.” What kind of evangelization is that? Evangelization does not have a shelf-life. Let’s not wait for people to become catechumens. Let’s make catechumens. Let’s manufacture them by sharing our values on the other side of the door.

2. Parts of the Mass

At a typical mass we have many opportunities to connect with the basic message of evangelization. The mass evangelizes us so that we might evangelize others. This happens in various ways, but the primary way that the mass evangelizes us is, of course, through the proclamation of the gospel. The word “evangelize” comes from the Greek word for “Gospel” - it means “to bring good news.” This is what we can expect whenever we go to church: we will hear good news. People complain that they encounter too much bad news on television, radio and the internet. This is true. The media give us bad news or odd news because it draws our attention. When a highway accident happens, traffic slows because people want to see. If there’s bad news, we’ll look. There’s a very simple antidote for us. Go to church. We specialize in good news there. We proclaim it every day. Slow down and come in.

It is especially significant that a deacon has the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel. Deacons have several callings as you know. They are called to perform charitable services, to assist at the liturgy, and to proclaim the gospel. When he assists at the liturgy, the deacon is a kind of prompter. Sometimes actors on stage can't remember their next line or where they should be to say it. They need a prompter to whisper the words or send them across the stage. The deacon does something similar every time he tells the assembly, "Let us stand," "Let us kneel," "Let us offer a sign of peace," and "Go in peace." We should know what to do, but he makes it clear when to do something. He never says, "Let us pray," during mass - that's for the priest. When the deacon and the priest share the sanctuary, the priest invites people to pray, but the deacon invites people to action: Stand, kneel, sit, offer peace, go. So which of these ministers is supposed to read the gospel? Not the priest who commonly invites you to the interior reflection of prayer, but the deacon, who tells you what to do. He is not just reading an excerpt from the bible. He is summoning you to action. He is proclaiming the good news with such power and insight that you cannot sit still. You stand for the gospel, as though you are taking your position in starting blocks, ready to run the race. The deacon will give you the word. You run with it. This is the first and most basic evangelization: You hear the gospel.

The Roman Missal sometimes connects the gospel of the day with the communion antiphon. This may surprise you. It does not connect the gospel with the opening hymn, but the communion antiphon. For example, one communion antiphon for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, coming up in just a couple of weeks, is "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the land." That is taken from the gospel of Year A on the same Sunday. The first option for the communion antiphon on the First Sunday of Lent is, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God," taken from Matthew's account of the temptation of Christ, the gospel of the same Sunday in Year A. When preparing a mass with the sacrament of confirmation, planners usually select a gospel reading from the options offered by the lectionary. Harder to find is a book called the *Graduale Romanum*, which gives five options for the communion antiphon at a confirmation mass, five different ones than the two you find in the missal. All five of the communion antiphons in the *Graduale Romanum* come from gospels recommended for the confirmation mass. Confirmation, like Pentecost, is about receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit so that you will use them to proclaim the gospel. Especially on this occasion, the liturgical texts try to link the proclaimed gospel with the singing at communion. When musicians choose the communion hymn, they often look first for a song about communion, but the liturgical books rarely do that. They frequently turn our attention to the gospel. In this subtle way the Liturgy of the Word bisects the Liturgy of the Eucharist. If the proclamation of the gospel has moved us to action, singing a refrain from the gospel while receiving communion names the purpose of this communion. It isn't just about me and Jesus; it nourishes us so that we can each proclaim the gospel faithfully.

For a model of evangelization, look no further than the bells that ring outside your church before mass. At the blessing of a new bell, the celebrant reminds the community that “bells alert us to important events, both happy and sad, in the life of the Church and the community.” In the prayer of blessing, the celebrant may say these words to God: “May your people hasten to your church when they hear the call of this bell. May they persevere in the teaching of the apostles, in steadfast fellowship, in unceasing prayer, and in the breaking of the bread. May they remain ever one in mind and heart to the glory of your name” (BB, chapter 37). Bells evangelize. They tell the community that we are gathering for prayer on the other side of the door.

One other important moment for evangelization at mass is the homily. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis considerably explores the purposes and techniques of a homily. He says, “it is God who seeks to reach out to others through the preacher” (136). The church “preaches in the same way that a mother speaks to her child, knowing that the child trusts that what she is teaching is for his or her benefit, for children know that they are loved” (138). The one who preaches speaks with the voice of God and the voice of a mother. The homilist has the responsibility to evangelize.

This is especially important when moral issues make national news. When gunshots fell innocent people at schools, shops and cinemas; when trusted church leaders abuse their power and virtue; when politicians promote bigotry and division; when the helpless unborn cannot obtain safe passage to life; when the poor cannot find employment, and the employed cannot receive a living wage; when the climate threatens creation; the people of God expect something when they go to church: preaching. They expect to hear the gospel speak to their society. They deserve to hear good news.

In the year 2000 our local media in Kansas City claimed that priests were dying of AIDS at a rate four times that of the general population. The statistics have been challenged, but the report spread rapidly through the media. Parishes grew tense. I remember greeting one priest friend that week with the usual, “Hi, how are you?” “HIV negative,” he said, “How are you?” My older brother telephoned me and asked, “What are you going to preach about this Sunday?” I said, “The gospel.” He asked, “Are you going to talk about priests with AIDS?” I said, “No. The less attention I draw to it the better.” He said, “You have to talk about this. Catholics are all wondering, ‘What does my priest think?’ If you don’t say something to your parishioners, their coworkers are going to ask them on Monday, ‘You go to church - What did your priest say about this?’ If they answer, ‘Nothing,’ you haven’t helped them.” My brother was right. Now whenever I prepare the homily, I think about what my parishioners need to know in order to carry the gospel forward this week. We shepherds need to equip the sheep with the tools they need to preach the gospel. Catholics are hungry for good preaching. We owe it to our congregations not just because it will help them with their personal spiritual lives, but because it will help them preach the gospel. The homily is a kind of op-ed piece for the church. It isn’t just my opinion; it’s the gospel’s opinion. I want people to hear it, think about it, and talk about it. After the

homily everyone should be equipped to proclaim the gospel on the other side of the door.

3. The Functions of the People of God

Inside the door, the assembly is the agent of the liturgy. Everyone has a role to play at mass, and each of us fulfills our function constantly. There are moments when individual ministers take on specific roles for the development of the liturgy, but even when we are not speaking, singing, or performing some action, we are listening, praying, and paying attention.

The General Instruction on the Roman Missal includes a section devoted to the different ministries required for the celebration of the mass. It speaks about those in holy orders. It explores particular ministries. It also develops a complete section on the functions of the people of God. It explains what you're supposed to do when you're at mass. I commend to you paragraphs 95-97. "In the celebration of Mass the faithful form a holy people, a people of God's own possession and a royal Priesthood." These words are based on the First Letter of Peter, chapter 2, verse 9. We hear something similar at the baptism of every infant when the priest or deacon anoints the child with chrism: "[God] now anoints you with the chrism of salvation, so that, united with his people, you may remain for ever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King." All the baptized are called into the common priesthood. It isn't just the ordained priest who offers the mass; the baptized do as well. Paragraph 95 explains that the reason the people are a royal Priesthood is "so that they may give thanks to God and offer the unblemished sacrificial Victim not only by means of the hands of the Priest but also together with him and so that they may learn to offer their very selves." A little earlier the General Instruction explains what the priest does during the eucharistic prayer: "he associates the people with himself in the Prayer that he addresses in the name of the entire community to God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the meaning of this Prayer is that the whole congregation of the faithful joins with Christ in confessing the great deeds of God and in the offering of Sacrifice" (78). The eucharistic prayer is not the priest's prayer; it is the prayer of the entire community. The altar is not the priest's altar; it belongs to everyone. It is the community's altar of sacrifice, and the community's table of communion.

Consequently, the entire assembly has certain rights and responsibilities at the mass. Everyone has a function. Now, if this is making you feel important, and it should, let me ask you a question. If you have this responsibility in the liturgy, when you go to mass, where should you sit? If the altar is your altar, where should you be in relationship to it? Catholics usually go through some calculations before they take a place inside the church. They prefer a seat on the aisle, far away from other people, and close to the restroom. Many of them will identify a certain pew as their own property. They haven't moved from that pew in 16 years, and they're not about to move from it now. If your church is like many others, about two thirds of those who come to mass sit in the back one third of the church. You know who you are. Host some other activity in the church, like a

children's Christmas concert, and how do the seats fill up? From the front. Go to mass, and how do the seats fill up? From the back. "In the celebration of Mass the faithful form a holy people, a people of God's own possession and a royal Priesthood." If you're holy, what are you doing in the back pew? If you are God's own possession, why do you sit like a visitor? If you are a royal Priesthood, why are you looking for your throne as far away from the altar as you can possibly be? At daily mass people sit so far away from each other that they have to wave during the sign of peace. They wave. "Howdy. Hope you're enjoying your space as much as I'm enjoying mine. Hope you're having as much peace over there as I'm having over here where I don't have to touch you." Have you ever heard of a parish where people love the mass so much that the pews fill from front to back? That could be your parish. Imagine it. It's in your power to make one little change. Sit up front.

There's another change that many of us need to make. It's implied in the same paragraph of the General Instruction that talks about the functions of the people of God. Sometimes when we go to mass, no matter how full the church is with faithful Catholics, all we see are difficult people. We feel irritated by the priest who does not preach well, the deacon who draws too much attention, the server who pays too little attention, the reader who cannot be understood, the cantor who cannot sing, the organist who cannot play, the communion minister improperly dressed, the person in front of us playing with a phone, the parents behind us shushing their kids. Thank God no one ever thinks that WE are disagreeable when we go to church. Here's what the General Instruction says about the people of God at mass: "They should, moreover, take care to show [that they are offering themselves] by their deep religious sense and their charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them in the same celebration. They are consequently to avoid any appearance of singularity or division, keeping in mind that they have only one Father in heaven and that hence are all brothers or sisters one to the other."

"Moreover," the instruction continues, "they are to form one body, whether in hearing the Word of God, or in taking part in the prayers and in the singing, or above all by the common offering of the Sacrifice and by participating together at the Lord's table. This unity is beautifully apparent from the gestures and bodily postures observed together by the faithful." When you sit down together, your common action shows the unity of the people of God. When you stand up together, when you kneel together, when you process together, when you share peace together, and yes, even when you exit the church together - not after communion - , your common action shows the unity of the people of God. So does music. Sometimes when the songleader announces a page number, I see a few people who refuse to sing standing totally immobile, as if they're thinking to themselves, "Hymnal? I don't see a hymnal. Singing is for other people, not me. That's not why I'm here. Maybe the song will be over more quickly if I just look around." Music demonstrates the faith and unity of the people of God. If you don't even pick up a hymnal, your inaction is tearing the fabric of unity in the congregation. Pick up the book. Look at the words. Try to sing. At least move

your lips. Join in the common prayer and praise of the people of God. If you have nothing in your life worth singing for, why not start with the praise of God?

The General Instruction makes one more point about the functions of the faithful at mass: “The faithful, moreover, should not refuse to serve the People of God in gladness whenever they are asked to perform some particular service or function in the celebration.” If the community needs a greeter, an usher, a cantor, or a server, then examine yourselves. Did God give you some abilities? Did God give you those abilities for some reason? Perhaps God is expecting you to use them for the sake of others.

4. Both sides of the door

Which brings us back to evangelization. At the end of the mass, the people of God are dismissed into the world because the mass is ended and the mission is beginning. We Catholics need to become more comfortable with sharing our faith and inviting people to church. I’m not saying that I’m the best at this, but I do try to keep a few questions handy when I meet someone new, especially in my neighborhood. “Do you have a church?” I’ll ask. I find that to be a factual, non-threatening question that people can dismiss or run with as they wish. Many times they’ll tell me, “Yes, I have a church elsewhere in the city.” OK. Or they may say, “I used to be Catholic.” That may open the door for a further question - “Did something happen that caused you to quit going to church?” Sometimes people answer defiantly, “Well, I’m not Catholic.” I tell them, “I can take care of that.”

Churchgoers should be familiar with the activities happening in your parish. If you don’t go to all of them, you should know what’s going on. You never know, you might meet someone who would like to experience mass on Ash Wednesday, see the inside of your church, play bingo with neighbors, join a neighborhood cleanup crew, or sing with a choir. If you listen to the announcements and read the bulletin and visit the parish web site, you’ll know many different ways that you could invite someone to experience life at your parish.

Some weekly churchgoers get discouraged at the small number of people who come to Sunday mass. They get cynical about those who come to church only on Christmas and Easter. But there are other reasons why our numbers swell on those days. Some Catholics come about once a month. You don’t really notice them during most of the year, but they all pick Christmas as the day in December they’ll come to church. Others may belong to other Christian churches that are not offering a service on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. They hope they’ll be welcome when they come see you. Other people have a strong faith, but they work on Sundays throughout the year, and they get Christmas off. They may love the chance to be there. All these people want a church at some point in their lives, not only on the days celebrating the birth and resurrection of Christ, but on other occasions as well: the marriage of a good friend, the funeral of a family member, or a quinceañera. Often it is relationships that bring people to church. Sometimes it is a local or national emergency; the number of congregants swelled all over the country during the weeks after 9/11. You may feel angry that

occasional churchgoers don't come at other times of the year, but look at it this way: They need you. They value church. They won't be able to come on Christmas unless we have done the hard work to build a community from week to week. If our efforts are successful, we will have church. We will have a place we can talk about when we bring the gospel to others, a place where people can come when they need us the most.

Participation and evangelization are reciprocal. People who participate well at mass tell others about their faith during the week. And people who share their faith during the week generally congregate on Sundays. What is common to participation and evangelization? An encounter with Jesus Christ. If we have made Christ part of our lives, if we have developed a friendship with him that is sincere and enriching, we will long to participate at mass, and we will happily tell others about our Savior. If you don't participate well, or you don't evangelize well, you might examine your relationship with Christ. Like any friendship, if you don't give it time, you will lose touch, and you will miss out when you most need a friend.

The eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. It is what nourishes us for the week ahead, and it is the place where we bring our joys and labors, our sacrifices and our thanksgivings. It prepares us for evangelization, and it evangelizes us in turn.

A door is what a dog is perpetually on the wrong side of. It is also what people are perpetually on the wrong side of. Like dogs yipping at someone to open a door, those outside a church are often searching for more meaning in their lives, and those inside the church are looking for ways to share their faith. No matter where we are, we are perpetually anxious to get to the other side of the door. You probably made some effort to get to this conference today. You were anxious to pass through the doors of this hotel so that you could experience Christ in one another. You also knew that once you got here, you would go back through those same doors, though not quite the same person who entered. You will have a renewed experience of Christ in your heart, so that you may bring his good news to all you meet. How do you evangelize? With your mouth and your hands. Open wide the doors!