

**Religious Education Congress 2017**  
**Joan Weber**  
**It's All about Joy—Evangelizing Young Adults**  
**Session 4-23**



### **What the Church Says about Evangelization**

**Identity:** “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) Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975

**Good News:** “Evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.” (18) *EN*

**Proclamation:** “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.” (22) *EN*

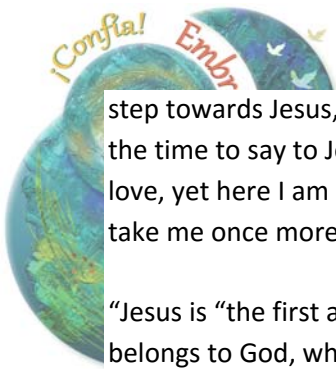
**Witness:** “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” (41) *EN*

(Evangelization is to be) “**new in its ardor, methods and expression**” (#6)... “In accepting this mission, everyone should keep in mind that the vital core of the new evangelization must be a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the person of Jesus Christ, that is, the preaching of his name, his teaching, his life, his promises and the Kingdom which he has gained for us by his Paschal Mystery.” (#66) Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 1999

(The entire Christian community) “is called to revive the missionary spirit in order to offer the new message that persons of our times are hoping for.” (2)

Pope Benedict XVI, speaking on the New Evangelization, 2011

“I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord”. The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a



step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. Now is the time to say to Jesus: “Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace”.” (3) Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013

“Jesus is “the first and greatest evangelizer”. In every activity of evangelization, the primacy always belongs to God, who has called us to cooperate with him and who leads us on by the power of his Spirit. The real newness is the newness which God himself mysteriously brings about and inspires, provokes, guides and accompanies in a thousand ways. The life of the Church should always reveal clearly that God takes the initiative, that “he has loved us first” (1 Jn 4:19) and that he alone “gives the growth” (1 Cor 3:7). This conviction enables us to maintain a spirit of joy in the midst of a task so demanding and challenging that it engages our entire life. God asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us.” (12) **EG**

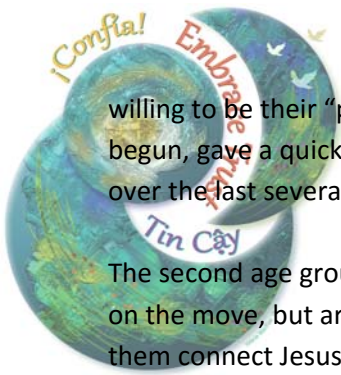
“Lastly, we cannot forget that evangelization is first and foremost about preaching the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him. Many of these are quietly seeking God, led by a yearning to see his face, even in countries of ancient Christian tradition. All of them have a right to receive the Gospel. Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but “by attraction” ...today missionary activity still represents the greatest challenge for the Church” and “the missionary task must remain foremost”. What would happen if we were to take these words seriously? We would realize that missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity. Along these lines the Latin American bishops stated that we “cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings”; we need to move “from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry”. This task continues to be a source of immense joy for the Church: “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk 15:7).” (14-15)

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013

## **It’s More of a Conversation than a Program**

The U.S. Bishops describe evangelizing outreach in *Sons and Daughters of the Light*: “To identify places where young adults gather and to connect them personally with the Church by listening to their concerns, hopes, and dreams and by welcoming them into a community of faith.” (**S & D**, p. 33)

The youngest adults, in their late teens and early twenties, are the most mobile and the least likely to be present at gathered church events. If we want to reach them, announcing programs at Sunday liturgies won’t work. We need to think of ways of reaching them WHERE THEY ARE. One of those places is online. Does your parish or campus have a Facebook, Twitter, or some type of web presence? Does it appeal to young adults, or does it have a middle-age appearance? Many parishes email the parish bulletin or send e-birthday cards, care packages, or other gestures of caring to their young adults who are at college, in the military, or even in prison. Some parishes match young adults away from home with parishioners



willing to be their “prayer partners”. One young man, home for the first time after this process was begun, gave a quick hello to his folks, then dashed off to meet the person who had been praying for him over the last several months.

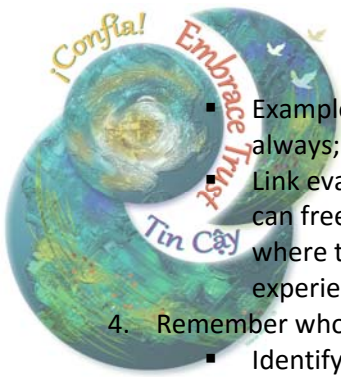
The second age group within young adulthood includes those in their mid-to-late twenties. They are still on the move, but are the most likely to show up at gathered programs. Offering sessions which help them connect Jesus to their deepest hungers can be very effective. Young adults have been told by the media that buying things, climbing the success ladder, having a great home and driving the right car satisfy these hungers. But if we create opportunities for young adults to come together, explore the Jesus of the Gospel, and see how he truly fills all their hungers, we are truly doing the work of evangelization!

Those young adults who are in their thirties comprise the final group of young adults. They make long-term commitments, are often married and parenting, and are sinking their roots into a community and a parish. Because they are so busy establishing their households, evangelizing strategies need to be very focused on their immediate needs. Support groups (e.g. young moms group, mentoring group of older professionals and younger persons in that same profession) which meet at flexible times to accommodate their hectic lives are often appreciated. Evangelizing them can sometimes be done when we incorporate their life needs into our marriage prep and baptismal prep programs already in place.

Catholic young adults, when asked to share what they were looking for from the Church, named inspiration as a top priority. While they don’t find arguments about church buildings or liberal vs. conservative or parish budgets inspiring, they told us over and over that they are inspired by the Good News of Jesus in the Gospel. More than anything else, we need to connect young adults with this good news if we are to reach this generation. We need to do more “God talk” with them, unabashedly sharing how God touches our lives in the ordinary and the everyday. When’s the last time you had a heart-to-heart with a young adult about God and faith and being faithful? “Carpe diem” would be a good motto for all of us who want to bring the Good News of Jesus to all human situations.

## Preparing to Evangelize Young Adults

1. Keep Jesus at the heart.
  - We’re sharing a PERSON, not a subject.
  - The challenge is to provide real faith experiences, not “near” faith experiences.
2. Remember the goal: intimacy and communion with Jesus Christ (*National Directory for Catechesis*)
  - Young adults are looking for a “soul-shaking, heart-waking, world-changing God to fall in love with...” (Kenda Creasy-Dean).
  - It’s not fair to make God sound boring!
3. Remember elements of the **New Evangelization**.
  - Keep in mind that everyone has an inherent hunger for God, for faith.
  - Bring your own joy—the most infallible sign of the presence of God!
  - Approach young adults with humility, not triumphalism.
  - Help them discover “the richness they already possess”, even if they’ve been distant from the Church.



- Example is a big part of evangelizing (remember St. Francis saying “Preach the Gospel always; when necessary, use words”).
  - Link evangelization to catechesis: Young adults need a “non-threatening place where they can freely express their questions, doubts, and even disagreements with the Church and where the teachings of the Church can be clearly articulated and related to their experience...” (*National Directory for Catechesis*, USCCB 48).
4. Remember who young adults are: Millennials and emerging Gen Zers.
- Identify with Pope Francis’ concerns for the poor, the environment and the common good
  - Decide for themselves the morality of homosexuality, and sexual behavior in general
  - Digital natives
  - Weekly Mass attendance low
  - Pragmatic—so always share the “why”
  - Non-linear thinkers—trust their route on the faith journey
  - Hunger for meaning, for authenticity, for hope
  - Don’t like being boxed in, labeled

## Strategies for Evangelization

1. Practice the ministry of presence—just be with young adults.
  - ✚ Go where they are: colleges, military bases, corporations, factories, gyms, coffee shops, pubs, bookstores, laundromats
  - ✚ Use social media—but as a means, not an end
    - Blogs about faith and life
    - Bustedhalo.com
  - ✚ Acknowledge their presence in the parish
    - Liturgies, especially Ash Wednesday, Easter, Christmas, family anniversaries and weddings
    - Where else?
  - ✚ Important: make sure there is no hidden agenda on your part
2. Have conversations with young adults (it’s not rocket science).
  - ✚ One-on-one, heart-to-heart
    - Listen to their stories first
    - Don’t make assumptions—let them tell you where they are on the faith journey
  - ✚ Share your faith journey, with its downs as well as its ups
  - ✚ Invitation to come and see (the Jesus Method)
3. Provide encounters with Christ in prayer, spiritual growth
  - ✚ Taizé prayer services
  - ✚ Eucharistic adoration
    - Quiet space in the midst of noisy lives
    - Connect to Eucharist
  - ✚ Retreats
    - Gathered: Busy Student/Busy Person, short retreats (e.g., evening)
    - Podcast retreats; online retreats  
<http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/online.html>
  - ✚ Spiritual exercises
    - Get young adults to ask themselves: What is my goal in life?
    - Go from there (gathered or online); great resource—Fr. Dan Schutte’s book *Walking the Sacred Path—Spiritual Exercises for Today* (Twenty-Third Publications)
  - ✚ Online prayer/theological reflection experiences



- [www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie)
- Romero Center Calendar of Daily Lenten Reflections (written by young adults)
- ✚ [Vocational discernment](#)
- 4. Offer mission trips, service experiences—transformative
  - ✚ Provide opportunities for dialogue with victims of injustice, the poor, the marginalized (Dorothy Day—they are my meeting place with God)
  - ✚ Encourage action—living Matthew 25:40
  - ✚ Do theological reflection, weaving in Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching
    - Inspire them
    - Stretch them to live the Gospel
      - Promote the life and dignity of all
      - Embrace solidarity
      - Have a preferential option for the poor
  - ✚ Challenge young adults to do advocacy for those whose voices aren't heard
  - ✚ Connect career with service (student, janitor, lawyer, nurse, food service personnel)
- 5. Break open God's Word
  - ✚ Question of the Week for young adults
  - ✚ Podcast of daily readings ([www.usccb.org/bible/readings/](http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/))
  - ✚ Lent and Advent Journals—connecting Gospel to the everyday lives of young adults
  - ✚ Young adult Bible study groups
    - In the prophetic style of Jesus of Nazareth, the proclamation of the Word of God "ought to appear to each person as a solution to his problems, an answer to his questioning, a widening of his values and an overall fulfillment to his aspirations." (Synod, 51)
    - Connect Scripture to everyday lives of young adults
  - ✚ Family Bible as gift to couple celebrating sacrament of marriage or baptism of child
- 6. Offer evangelization sessions which reveal how Jesus feeds our deepest hungers
  - ✚ Hunger for success and accomplishment, for meaning
  - ✚ Hunger for heroes, hunger to serve, hunger for sabbath
  - ✚ Hunger for belonging, for relationships, and for love
- 7. Engage young adults as peer evangelists
  - ✚ Provide them with training on Catholic evangelization—what it is (bringing the Good News of Jesus into people's lives) and isn't (beating them over the head with do's and don'ts)
    - Differentiate between triumphalism and humble sharing of the Good News
    - Discourage self-righteousness
    - Remind them that not all young adults are like them—and that's OK
  - ✚ Do theological reflection with them—what is the Spirit calling them to share?
  - ✚ Send them out in two's (Jesus did it that way)
  - ✚ Invite them to share their experiences and offer feedback

### Try These Evangelization Actions

1. Give young adults some "space" in the parish by offering a sport (e.g., volleyball, darts, sand volleyball, badminton, bowling) for young adults, but mix the teams every week. Keep it non-competitive as much as you can. After two weeks, have a table with flyers describing your young adult Bible study, retreat or prayer service. Let it evolve naturally, with no pressure to attend any of these opportunities.
2. One reason many young adults don't go to Sunday Mass is that they don't have anyone with whom to go and they don't want to go alone. Encourage active young adults to invite young singles who come to Mass to sit with them. (One parish in the Midwest has a designated section of the church





where young adults know they can go so they aren't sitting alone at liturgy. It's the Mass which gets the largest attendance of young adults—the last Mass on Sunday!)

3. Make registration a welcome process. Have one Sunday a month designated as the “official” registration day. Invite those who are registering to come to a particular Sunday mass and introduce them to the congregation at that mass. Have a simple breakfast or brunch for them after the mass, and only then have them fill out the forms and get the envelopes!
4. Have “Speaker-Social” evenings on topics relevant to the lives of young adults. Make it clear that each evening stands alone and no long-term commitment is being assumed. Advertise on your parish website, on facebook, and on flyers in strategic locations (local gyms, bars, bookstores and coffee shops, etc.). Begin with music and hospitality, have the speaker give input on a topic relevant to their lives (40-45 minutes), allow time for questions and answers, and invite people to linger if they choose for further conversation.
5. Ask your pastor to host a “Welcome Home for Christmas” (or another holiday) in the rectory for young adults. This does not have to include an agenda beyond that of conversation and an opportunity for young adults to gather with their pastor to enjoy each other's company.
6. Ask young adults to form a relationship with some of the seniors, the “wisdom people” in the parish. There can be a beautiful bond between these two generations. Encourage the elders to pray for the young adults. Invite the young adults to do physical tasks (e.g., grocery shopping, lawn mowing, snow shoveling, raking leaves) that are daunting for the elders.
7. Try imbedding catechesis in your evangelization efforts through a “Connecting Faith and Life” series.
  - a. Listen to young adults to learn what practical things they *want* to learn (e.g., money management, cooking, changing the oil in their car).
  - b. If you don't have the skills to teach the subject, find someone in your parish who can.
  - c. Invite young adults who are interested to come. Emphasize hospitality and community; get them talking to and connected with each other.
  - d. Ask questions which make the faith-life connection—but don't rush it.
  - e. Imbed catechesis naturally.
    - i. Oil change: how the Catholic Church uses oil as a sign of God's healing
    - ii. Cooking: when baking bread, explore Eucharist as bread of life
    - iii. Money management: what Catholic stewardship at its best means in terms of time and treasure and talent
  - f. Include simple rituals.
    - i. Oil change: a simple anointing of each other's hands with blessed oil
    - ii. Cooking: breaking bread together during the grace before eating
  - g. Give participants something to take home—on the topic and on faith (e.g., a recipe and a one-page explanation of the Real Present of Jesus in the Eucharist or a one-page explanation of how Matthew 25 challenges us to feed the hungry and have a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable).
  - h. Don't force communion. Let the Spirit work.

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