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The New Evangelization: "Give me a drink – please"

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“Give me a drink – please”

Pat Fitzpatrick CSSp

Jesus came to a Samaritan town called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”

“*I come for fresh water because I get thirsty. I also need running water for washing dishes, washing dirty clothes, cleaning floors and cooking. My bucket gets empty and I get thirsty. Even if I haven't used up all of yesterday's water, it gets stale and undrinkable. I need fresh water — fresh running water. Sometimes it's just my routine — I avoid the other women and their gossiping. They look down their noses at me — I'm on my fifth husband. One way or another — I need fresh water every day.*

“There's a man there today — sitting by the well in the noonday sun. ‘Give me a drink,’ he asks. He isn't a Samaritan. What is a lonely Jew doing in our area — a thirsty Jew who needs me, a woman of Samaria, to get him a drink? On his own he has no way of drawing water. Anyway, drawing water is women's work.

“I suppose he arrived too late for the other women to give him a drink and now he is hoping against hope that a late-comer might make her way to the well.”

John, the gospel author, is at his double-meaning best: a Jew and a Samaritan, a woman and a man, a two-layer conversation full of hidden allusions.

The introductory paragraphs to the New Evangelization document start with this Jacob's well story in Samaria. An outreach to today's drawers of water, washers of clothes, preparers of meals is a very good place to start — out there where women (and some men) spend most of their time — out there where the lonely and the shunned get through their daily chores — out there where you go for a bucket of water ... and come face to face with the water of life.

Think Catholic Church leadership and you think all-male. Think Catholic Church membership and you think vast majority female. Where would Jesus be without his mother, Mary of Nazareth? Where would the risen Jesus be without his faithful follower, Mary of Magdala? Who stood at the foot of the cross on Good Friday? His mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene — four women and

one man, the apostle John. Four women for every man — things haven't changed.

Jesus and Samaritans

Back to the well. The woman and the tired and thirsty traveler talk theology. We might label it a conversation about salvation history — the role of the Samaritans, the “no contact” rule preventing Jews and Samaritans from meeting and greeting. What a scandal it was in Luke's gospel when Jesus told his parable about the “good” Samaritan. In the eyes of chief priests and teachers of the Law there were no good Samaritans. A Samaritan was the social equivalent of a leper back then: “unclean, unclean.” Yet Jesus chose one of them to illustrate what a real neighbour was like.

We didn't learn gospel stories in religion class — we learned answers to questions in catechism class. One such

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question was, “Who is my neighbour?” Answer: “My neighbour is all mankind of every description, without any exception of persons, even those who injure us or differ from us in religion.” I grew up with Protestants as next-door neighbours. My one-true-Catholic Church mother could never quite work out how good these neighbours were: “They're wonderful people,” she would say ... “for Protestants.”

Woman and man at Jacob's Well in Samaria slaked each other's thirst. Jesus broke through the social mores of how Jews and Samaritans should relate; he sat with her, answered her questions, made her feel that it was all right to sit and talk religion in public, in broad daylight. She went back to her village and told everyone about this man she had met at the well. “This man? What man? A traveling Samaritan?” “No. A thirsty Jew who badly needed a drink of water and who told me everything I wanted to know. You must come and meet him.”

A strange story to introduce a document on The New Evangelization. Yet it highlights this new evangelization, at its best, breaking down differences and distinctions, stopping for one-on-one conversations, answering questions, engaging in friendly debates and returning home with a story, “You'll never guess who I met at the well this morning, what we talked about, what I asked and he answered, what he already knew about me.” He? Yes — he. Man and woman sitting and talking in public against all the customs and conventions of that time and place.

A call for dialogue

The New Evangelization goes back a long way. At its best, in a non-religious society, it revives our faith. It restores long hidden, even buried aspects of human life, it engages in dialogue not in top down teaching, like Jesus it is willing to stretch the rules — man and woman alone in conversation, Jew and Samaritan sitting side by side, man needing woman to give him a drink (some things never change, do they?), God as the God of all groups, both sexes, former enemies, chance encounters. Believers become witnesses and then missionaries to their own people.

A necessary beginning is dealing with and asking one's own questions. The issues are not so much in textbooks as in life. A conversation is far more likely to be of use than giving someone a book to “look it up.”

Be converted — and then, only then, think of converting others. How many of us are “converts”? How many have never felt the need to be converted from this or that way of life? How often, or perhaps how seldom, does our church, as such, feel it needs to be converted? Yet in the eyes of many our ways, our sense of self-importance cry out for change.



We have a new Pope and it would appear from his initial approach he has no fear of doing things differently, of converting the role of Pope from top-down to in-and-among, shepherd-like care: live among, listen to, learn from, seek advice, mull over, “I am among you as one who serves.”

The weaknesses of the disciples drag down the credibility of the mission. Church after church has testified to this. One need only think of the Irish church in recent decades.

The Acts of the Apostles and ourselves

Through the Easter season Masses we have been reading the Acts of the Apostles. Paul and Barnabas, then Paul by himself, went from attempt to attempt in their efforts to promote the Christian way. They got mixed results, but they kept on going — a success here, a rejection there, back to Jerusalem to give an account of their ministry, their successes and failures, their insistence that this new movement did not have to be a Jewish-only movement.

Gradually they won the approval of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. To be a follower of the Way, one did not need to be converted to Jewish ritual and observances. Do our newly-thriving Catholic churches have to become as Roman as the Romans themselves? Does our inherited way have to be fully imitated by every new member when, in reality, a more catholic approach would work better? We live the ongoing paradox of being “Roman Catholics”. We don’t always find it easy to be both.

Jesus wasn’t a *Roman Catholic*. Will our ongoing challenge be to reconcile these two ‘contradictions’? Will we rediscover

ways by which individuals and groups can come close to Jesus and his ways without losing their own individuality.

Our western Catholic Church is an aging church. Young people are not attracted to it in any significant numbers. How can we channel their enthusiasm?

Inter-religious dialogue contributes to peace and greater understanding and promotes respect for the beliefs and practices of others.

Each continent has its own particular contribution, its own particular challenge. Africa is a meeting place of old and newly imported cultures. North America continues to welcome immigrants and refugees. South America has given us our new Pope and faces various issues of poverty, religious pluralism and occasional violence. Europe — for so many centuries the cradle of Christianity — seems to have abandoned its Christian inheritance. Asia, on the other hand, has relatively few Christians. But their number is increasing.

On Good Friday the disciples were convinced that all was lost. It was the end of a foolish dream. In hiding, they waited, they prayed, they supported each other, they retreated. They must have felt like giving up. Then it happened — his spirit, the Holy Spirit, filled the entire house like the rush of a violent wind. A tongue, as of fire, rested on each of them. Wind and fire — and no insurance! Who cares?

People from all over the world were in town and they must proclaim God’s deeds of power to all of them — in their own languages. Out they went — from their hiding place into the market place. Not to the temple, not to the nearest synagogue, but into the streets. A new evangelization had begun. ■

A Conversation at Calvary

“Centurion, were you at the killing of that teacher today?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell me about his death.”

“The people were mocking him at first, and he prayed God to forgive them.”

“Was he suffering much?”

“No, sir. He wasn’t a strong man. The scourging must have nearly killed him. I thought he was dead by noon, and then suddenly he began to sing in a loud voice that he was giving back his spirit to God ... He believed he was God, they say.”

“Do you believe it?”

“We saw a fine young fellow, sir; not past middle age. And he was all alone. When we were done with him, he was a poor broken-down thing, dead on the cross.”

“Do you think he is dead?”

“No, sir. I don’t.”

“Then where is he?”

“Let loose in the world, sir.”

The Trial of Jesus, John Masefield

The Difference Easter Made

He was a Jew before that, knowing only the Jewish culture. He didn’t think that knowing all the cultures of the world like God knew them was something to cling to. He knew his own.

On Easter Sunday his Jewish friends didn’t want to let him go; they wanted to hang on to him. But he was no longer just a Jew. He was no longer just a male. What good would that be to half the human race? He was a universal human being, a complete human being.

Like Mary Magdalene, we too want to hold on to him, but we must let him rise from the dead. We must let him go to the Father so that he can send out his Spirit on all humankind, not just on us.

Vincent Donovan CSSp

