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# Christianity Rediscovered

## Reflections of a High School Chaplain

Kevyn Ernest

**M**ore than two decades ago, Spiritan Vincent Donovan wrote a book entitled *Christianity Rediscovered* which has become something of a timely classic for those interested in the Church's missionary work in Africa.

There is something about the wisdom of Father Donovan that draws me back to reread this book every few years. I've never been to Africa. My missionary work has unfolded in the context of Northern Canada and most recently, within a major urban high school.

I am a high school chaplain with responsibility for nurturing our students in the Catholic faith and for making Christ present in our school community. At first, I thought to myself that this would be a relatively smooth task since we are a Catholic school and we have a well-articulated mission statement that is rooted in the Gospel and the teachings of Christ. Surely, everyone who comes to a Catholic school must recognize and accept our mission. I've since discovered that high school chaplaincy is probably more difficult than teaching a core subject like math or science.

### How credible is Christianity?

Given the influences of living in a highly technological and changing world — the fact that our students and staff are pulled toward a message that is preached at them constantly by the media and by the gurus of technology — it is getting more and more difficult to convince people that Christian-

ity has a credible and relevant message for today.

I only have to walk the halls of our school in between classes to see that a cell phone is glued to the ear of many students; an earplug is connected to almost everyone so they can listen to their music on an MP3 and it is getting more and more a struggle to find a DVD that can be used in the classroom to supplement a lesson. I have found that the majority of students respond only to videos or movies that are full of fast action and “cool” images, regardless of the fact that such videos may have no direct link to the content we are pursuing in the classroom. Given such an environment, how can we speak the message of Christ?

### Live among, listen to, wait for

I recently had the opportunity to read for the sixth time, Vincent Donovan's book *Christianity Rediscovered*. He develops a mission-mindset that is radically different from that which we have seen in the past. Without tying Christianity to the traditional methods that were used in promoting the message of our faith, Donovan simply lived among the Maasai of Tanzania adapting to their nomadic lifestyle, listening to them, and waiting for them to invite him into their confidence and trust. He did not go among them by building a mission school, a health-care centre or an agricultural project under the name of Christianity. His approach was simply one of being present among the Maasai with no strings attached and taking small moments (teachable moments) to speak about Christ. Sounds very similar to the experience of first-century Christians who expressed what they had found and experienced by becoming disciples of Christ, not through gimmicks, but through simple words and by being present to one another.

### The power of personal stories

In the classroom, I have found that my teaching has to take the same direction. I use stories to speak about my relationship with Christ, making a link between my life and how it has unfolded and what the message of Christ has to say to me in the process. I have tried to model a reflective and critical attitude and practice so that my students are inspired to go beyond what they see, and search out the meaning of their lives at a deeper, more profound level. For example, we took upon ourselves an Advent project that would raise money and provide hampers for low-income families in our city. This could have simply become another “do-good” fund-raising effort. However, alongside the fund-raising I tried to get students to understand their role in continuing the mission of justice initiated





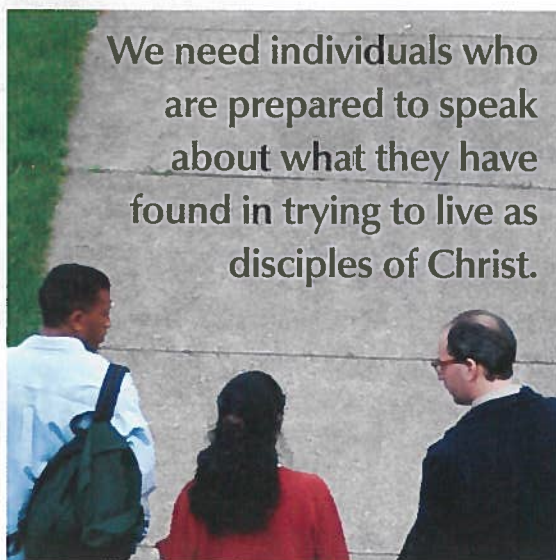
by Christ. We shared personal stories of how justice permeates our life at different levels and how we can support justice or contribute to injustice through our actions.

My reflection on Donovan's way of "doing" mission has revealed a great deal to me about my own presence and approach to the high school community where I am trying to make Christ known. I don't have much to rely on or to offer my students except the wisdom I have gained in my own relationship with Christ. My students and colleagues are presented with the "gimmicks" that society holds up to them as the ideal, the desired, the way to freedom and happiness. The sad part is that society can easily and convincingly back up its claims with material possessions and an appeal to superficial moments of happiness, that for the most part have led us to believe those claims. As a chaplain, I only have the Good News as I have experienced it and as I see it in contradiction to the message of the world. It is a difficult sell in a society that places so much more value on immediate satisfaction and the accumulation of material goods.

### The message is already present

All the same, Donovan's book spoke about the essential message of Christianity as already present and at work in a culture. That message is at the heart of all persons. We all search for liberation from those things that hold us down. We all search for meaningful connection with one another, based upon forgiveness and right action. We all search for a way to make our mark on the lives of others so that we contribute to building better persons (including ourselves) and a better world. We all search for a more meaningful way of responding to our life source and nurturer, our Creator God.

My reflections as a chaplain remind me of the essence of our Christian faith: we are a people of hope, drawn to light by our own experience of the Cross. We are indeed at a time in history reminiscent of first-century Christianity. History does have a way of repeating itself. With hindsight we are able to see that it is not "gimmicks" that we need to convince others of the validity and credibility of the Christian message. We need individuals who are prepared to speak about what they have found in trying to live as disciples of Christ. This is precisely what



drew me and inspired me to want to name myself as "Christian" so many years ago. This is what will convince others to search for their experience of Christ and to name themselves Christian as well. The message is simple and it is for all. It is not tied to the institutions of Catholic education or health care as the route for revealing Christ. Disciples will reveal their Master in the wisdom they share, in the actions they practice, and in the traits and values they recognize and assume as their own.

### One story evokes another

Ah, *Christianity Rediscovered* in high school chaplaincy is very simple! Be who you are and what you are, as you have experienced the permeation of Christ. The message will speak loud and clear on its own merit. What others see as the genuine good that lives within you will prompt them to ask where you got it from, and then you have an opportunity to share your story. This is Donovan's approach applied to a culture we are all familiar with: the high school-youth culture. The great part about this process is that one's story will evoke connections to another's story. Before long we discover that we are speaking the same language and story together.

I decided this year that I would not put on elaborate liturgies at the school, complete with decorations and visual distractions that would only have to be outdone at the following liturgy in order to keep the attention of those attending. I decided that I would not buy into gimmicks to attract my students to religious events. I did decide however, to speak honestly about my own journey of faith: the ups and downs, the joys and the hopes, as well as the

questions I had. I didn't witness great strides. However, throughout the year I heard from students and colleagues alike that the message of Christ was evident in what we were doing and in how we were doing it. Some of my students stated to me in their own personal reflections that the message of Christ was much simpler than they imagined or expected. This reminded me of the context and times spoken about in the Acts of the Apostles — a period of history marking the evolution of Christian faith, evolving from the experience of a few.

### Students' story in light of the Christ-story

We are "the few" today, who must tell this great story so that others make it their own by linking it to their experience. It was a privileged moment when I was able to walk with students through difficult personal family times such as death or crisis, and assist them in articulating how they might understand their story in light of the Christ-story. Sometimes tears, anger, a sense of not knowing what to do, could be transformed to occasions of grace.

I recall a student who spoke of the illness and suffering of an aunt and felt futility in dealing with it. All I could offer the student were prayers that spoke to the heart of her suffering and allowed her to feel connected to the Lord, no strings attached, no theological lecture or clichés. She left my office with a greater sense of hope and trust that her aunt was being well looked after by the Lord. She even came to see me a few days later and asked if she might be able to read one of the morning prayers since she could see more value in prayer after our prayers together for her aunt.

That is *Christianity Rediscovered*, for the life of Christ is already here, and it only needs someone to give it a language within its cultural context, whether that is in Tanzania, Canada's north, or in the high school. Vincent Donovan has an important message to share with all those who are involved in the Church's missionary work. We're all about sharing Good News with others who have yet to hear it. Evangelization will only take place when we have experienced that same Good News within ourselves and are prepared to let go of our own agenda so it can be shared with others. ■

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