



Preface

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

On January 10, 2012, twenty-two-year-old Jefferson Bethke clicked *publish* on a YouTube video that was about to go viral. He made a bet with his roommates about how many views it would get—a hundred views, maybe a thousand—but none of them came close to predicting what was about to happen. The video, titled “Why I Hate Religion but Love Jesus,” is a poetic rap expressing Bethke’s love for Jesus but disdain for religious legalism. In two days it had more than two million views. Two weeks later YouTube showed it had more than sixteen million views, and by early 2015, it approached thirty million.

This video resonated with so many millions of people because Bethke was able to articulate in a five-minute video what a growing number of people try to express by calling themselves “spiritual but not religious.” This self-characterization is incredibly common today within every generational, ethnic, and cultural grouping in the United States.

There is no questioning the real decline in numbers facing the Catholic Church in some parts of the United States today. In many areas of the country, numbers of self-identified Catholics are decreasing at rapid rates. According to a recent Pew Research Center study, the number of people self-identifying as Catholics decreased from 23.9 percent in 2007 to 20.8 percent in 2014.¹ That equates to a loss of about 3.4 million Catholics in just seven years. In many places the pews are increasingly empty. Baptisms,

marriages, First Communion, Confirmations—you name it—they are on the downturn. People are not satisfied with their churches, so they go elsewhere or they do not go at all. During the same period between 2007 and 2014, the number of Evangelical Protestants grew by about 2.4 million and the number of religiously unaffiliated (spiritual but not religious) grew by a staggering 19.2 million people.²

Many of these unaffiliated spiritual seekers put a higher priority on youth sports events, watching professional sports, recreational activities with friends or family, personal downtime, or simply sleeping in on Sunday mornings than they put on going to Mass. They have not stopped believing in God—in fact, many will be back in church on Christmas and Easter—they just do not find much inspiration or joy in organized religion on a weekly—let alone daily—basis. In many areas of our country, church after church is being forced to close or consolidate now that once-full pews are growing empty.

One possible response is to blame an uncontrollable consumer culture and simply admit defeat. Many have pointed to the various “-isms” for the shift away from religion (secularism, relativism, individualism, etc.) and express an incapability to overcome such powerful movements. But another possible response is to look at ourselves as Christian leaders and the work we have been doing to see if there is something we can do differently to meet the spiritual—indeed, religious—needs of Americans today. Take a look at one of the most powerful verses from the middle of Jefferson Bethke’s rap:

But now that I know Jesus, I boast in my weakness.
If grace is water, then the church should be an ocean,
Cuz it’s not a museum for good people
it’s a hospital for the broken.

Compare that verse with the words of Pope Francis in his 2013 interview with Father Antonio Spadaro in *America* magazine titled “A Big Heart Open to God”:

I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. . . . And you have to start from the ground up.

The Church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the Church must be ministers of mercy above all.³

I believe Bethke and Pope Francis are both pointing to an essential change that we need to make as leaders in the Church. We have to heal wounds, and we have to go deeper with our proclamation of salvation in Christ. It may be that the reason we continue to see so many Catholics leave the Church is that many people do not find in the Church a source of healing for their pain. They do not hear people in our churches preaching a message that inspires or connects with their deepest hopes, dreams, and needs. It may even be that our focus on conveying doctrine, without first laying a foundation for understanding it, renders the Church easy to leave for many and keeps others from ever entering its doors.

The Church can either be a community of people that welcomes the sinner and helps heal the wounds of sin and isolation, or it will be a place where sinners are condemned and turned away, forced by our lack of mercy back into their spirituality of

individualism. It can be a community that proclaims the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, or it can be an institution focused on scolding (sometimes condemning) outsiders for denying its doctrines. For many of us on the inside, especially those of us in leadership, the Church *we* know and love welcomes the lost and proclaims salvation, but the great challenge we face day in and day out is helping others see and experience what we do so that they develop a hunger to come and see more.

WHAT ABOUT RELIGION LOOKS SO BAD?

Let's face it: religion is a tough sell—even to the curious. To outsiders, religion often seems dominated by rules—rules that are pretty tough to follow. *They* ask *us* to totally transform our lives and turn away from what is comfortable and makes us feel good. The time commitment once each week (sometimes more) may seem like nothing to us, but for many people Sunday morning is prime time for all sorts of other activities. Religion can feel confrontational or can seem an unnecessary hassle. Probably most people who don't go to church are hardworking good people who just want to get a break by sleeping in, playing golf, watching football, getting caught up on things around the house, or just enjoying downtime with loved ones.

The vast majority of people who grew up going to church and do not go anymore are not ardent atheists. They are not anti-Church or anti-God. Remember, they see themselves as spiritual people who believe in God. They may not get anything out of going to church on Sundays, but they do like to pray, especially in times of crisis or when they feel profoundly grateful. Most of these people want to do what is right, and they want to enjoy life. Religion, however, puts restrictions on them without providing much payoff. To them, it adds unnecessary rules and

meaningless actions to their already too-busy lives. Religion seems to take the fun out of life.

As Christian leaders whose lives have been transformed by Christ, we know differently. We are spiritual *and* religious because we know the joy of intimate relationship with Christ and the benefits of following God's laws and getting involved in a community of fellow believers. We are at church not out of an obligation but because we *want* to be there. We want to give thanks to God for his gifts, and we know we cannot live the life we want to live without his help. Many of us have tried to find fulfillment outside of the Church but ultimately cannot find a better source of hope. Our attempts to find happiness elsewhere have failed. We have found hope and an incredible source of peace and joy in God and within the communion of the Church.

Do you see the difference? We believe what we believe and do what we do because we *want* to. Religion is a part of who we are, something we choose over and over again to remain with. Our religious practice brings with it certain obligations, but they are obligations we choose to accept as members of the Church. Those who consider themselves open only to spirituality see religion as an obligation put upon them by others. This is why many of them still go to church occasionally when Mom and Dad visit, on Christmas and Easter, or for other special occasions such as weddings, Baptisms, and funerals. Often these people attend more because of sentiment than conviction.

The challenge before us, then, is to show others why Christian beliefs, teachings, practices, and laws are worth understanding and embracing. It is to show our brothers and sisters that just being spiritual is not enough; there is further commitment necessary when choosing a Christian life. But even before inviting others to discipleship, we need to help restore for them trust in organized religion, which continues to be degraded by a

tendency to preach and teach without first attending to compassionate mercy and love. Many religious leaders—certainly within Catholicism, but also within other Christian communities—have too long neglected that to which Pope Francis now calls us. We must return our way of ministry to our biblical roots and the example of Jesus himself by becoming “ministers of mercy above all.”⁴ This is the key to genuine, life-changing evangelization.

IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE SO HARD

As I write this book, I have in mind many conversations I have had with parents who are in tears over their grown children's separation from the Church. They have tried everything. Every conversation these parents have had about God is brushed off and unwelcome. If their children come to church with them, it is out of coercion or a murky sense of guilt, not free choice. If they believe there is a God, they are not all that interested in worshiping him, especially not in church. On the brink of hopelessness, these parents turn to God in prayer, feeling helpless and guilty for failing to raise their kids to become practicing Catholics. They cannot even with confidence claim their children are Christians.

I also have in mind the professional and volunteer ministers who are struggling to reach people at all different ages and progressions along their faith journeys. In many places the pews are emptier and emptier each year. New ministries, such as youth nights and adult faith-formation series, often do not attract enough participants to sustain them. Children's programs may be steady in attendance, but the parents of these children do not bring their kids to Mass on Sundays. Often, once those kids receive the sacraments, they don't come back to Mass or any other parish activity. In other places churches are filled to overflowing, but ministry leaders can't help but feel that what

they do primarily is barter in the sacraments. They set up hoops, parishioners jump through, and sacraments are received. But then what? Too many ministers are left wondering how many people come to truly know Christ because of what they do.

There are, of course, sparks of success in many corners of the Church, but nearly everywhere there are too many Catholics who *aren't* in church this can bring great distress to ministers striving to do more. These leaders try new things but never quite know what is working, except for prayer, which faith tells them always works.

As a result, some members of the Church have unfortunately become passionately frustrated and even angry with the current situation. In reaction to the many uncatechized kids and adults, members of this group hold tight to the fervent beliefs and doctrines of the Church and try to share their love of these teachings every chance they get. It is usually with good intention but often with negative results. The spiritual-but-not-religious crowd often reacts by taking offense and turns further from the Church, sometimes growing passionate as well—passionately frustrated with the people in the Church!

What, then, shall we do to bring people back or attract them for the first time? How might we who are engaged inspire them to know and love God *and* Church? You will find in this book a process for evangelizing ministry that works. It is a process that Jesus himself used to make disciples. It is the process that his apostles used to grow the Church and that the great saints throughout history have followed ever since. It is the same process that many successful individuals, parishes, and Catholic ministries are using today to foster growing numbers of disciples and conversion experiences in the people they serve.

With this process, you will not have to feel hopeless anymore. Instead of turning to God in prayer as a last resort, you

will trust in his work, trust in the process, and thank him in prayer for his great intervention. Or, instead of putting all the trust in your own actions to inspire faith in others, you will look to the process and turn to God in faith that he will work through you and others in each stage along a person's journey.

Evangelization is not a mysterious set of activities that only people with charismatic gifts are able to do. It is about so much more than great preaching or good teaching. It is something we all can do in every day of our lives if we begin with mercy offered as healing to those who hurt. The most common form of evangelization, in fact, doesn't feel like something extraordinary at all. As you will find, we are all *called to* and *able to* make disciples, and we don't have to be great preachers, teachers, or miracle-workers to do it.



Introduction

WHAT IS EVANGELIZATION?

Every Sunday millions of Christians throughout the world say “I believe” as they recite the words of the Nicene Creed. *Believe* is a word that has taken on all kinds of meanings today. We might say, “I believe in ghosts,” meaning, “I believe that ghosts exist.” We can say to someone, “I believe you,” as in, “I believe that what you are saying is true.” We often say, “I can’t believe that!” when something shocking has happened that is difficult to comprehend. In almost every case other than in the context of the creed, we say “believe” in reference to the acceptance of an idea or perception. The “I believe” we say in the creed, however, is very different.

In the original Latin, “I believe” is the single word *credo*. It can mean “believe in,” but it can also mean “trust in.” The Latin word originates as the compound of two words: *ker* or *cor*, which means “heart”; and *do* or *dheh*, which means “to put, place, or set.” When Christians recite the creed, what we are really proclaiming is that we place our hearts in God. It is commitment to a someone (not just a something) with whom we can have a relationship. It is so much more than a simple acceptance of ideas, perceptions, or truths. When we recite the creed, we pledge our very hearts to God. This should have an enormous impact on the way we live every day and a profound influence on how we think of ministry, particularly in the way we evangelize.

WHAT IS EVANGELIZATION?

What exactly is the purpose of evangelization? What are we trying to accomplish? Why should we want to do it? What exactly is it? Simply put, evangelization is the way in which we show others why and how to trust in God. It is the process by which we help others learn to pledge their hearts continuously to Christ. From the outside, this might feel selfish and imposing. Today more than ever people take offense even to the idea of openly sharing religious beliefs with those who do not already accept them. They have become hypersensitive to proselytization and religious fundamentalism because they have seen and experienced the negative effects of these.

At the same time, the word *evangelization* has been naturally adopted by the secular world. An increasing number of “brand evangelists” can be found in companies and start-ups today. These individuals practice a form of marketing that is focused on word of mouth. They create messages that spread among people who love a product or a company. The goal is to craft a message and a reputation among people who already love a product and get it to spread to others.

Christian evangelization, on the other hand, is about so much more than spreading an idea or defending a reputation. Christianity spreads not because of convincing arguments, but because of heartfelt encounters with Christ that transform lives. Christianity calls for more than the acceptance of ideas alone; it exists as the result of and in response to an encounter with a living God. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1).

If, when we think about evangelization, we think only of the beliefs and stories of Christianity and not about the benefit to the

other person, then our perception is much too narrow. We evangelize to enter into the deepest needs of our neighbors in order to help them find solutions to their deepest desires. Evangelization is about the heart, wounded by sin and separation and yearning for something more. This kind of evangelization—one that puts the needs of others first—is the only one that really works. It is the ministerial approach used by Jesus himself. It is this kind of evangelization that will not cause us to feel guilty or unsure of ourselves. We never have to feel bad about evangelization in this sense, because it keeps the needs of others at the forefront of our concern.

Evangelization is not primarily about teaching doctrines and communicating ideas. Learning and assenting to the doctrines of the Church and committing to a life of discipleship do not *lead* a person to conversion. Rather, these *result* from conversion. In order for a Christian to proclaim “I believe,” he or she must first experience a transformation in mind and heart. With that transformation comes the recognition that we are loved by God and will do everything we can to love God back. The doctrines and teachings help us to love God, but they only make sense when built upon that firm foundation of love.

Understanding and accepting Church doctrines is a process that takes time and internal motivation. It cannot be done with a simple intellectual assent. We accept the doctrines because of an intimate relationship that we have formed with Christ and the Church. This is what we mean by the word *faith*. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes faith as a response to God’s revelation by which “man completely submits his intellect and his will to God,” and, further, “with his whole being man gives his assent to God the revealer” (142–43). In order to have faith, we must have a change of both mind *and* heart, a reorienting of our lives toward God, which leads to ongoing conversion. This

means we have to share more than ideas when we evangelize. When we invite another into relationship with Christ, we have to *love*.

HOW TO EVANGELIZE

Evangelization, if it is to be effective, is always the challenging work of entering into the depths of another human being's experience and walking with him or her into the light of a better tomorrow. It is more than teaching about doctrines. It is more than spreading ideas. Ministry is always about serving another human being in that person's greatest need and deepest longing.

I always thought the new evangelization—the appeal to Catholics to evangelize even those who have already been baptized but have now fallen away—was about getting better at knowing and sharing my “faith” (i.e., Catholic doctrine and theology) with others. As it turns out, the new evangelization—and, in fact, *all* evangelization and all ministry—calls for a much greater sacrifice than acquiring knowledge and building up the skills of articulating what we believe. It calls us, as disciples, to get comfortable with being uncomfortable, to be vulnerable rather than knowledgeable, to be interested *in* others rather than simply interesting *to* others.

As dedicated Catholics and ministers, most of us have had striking, unexpected transformations in faith or lifelong religious experiences that have made an incredible impact on our lives. At some point we felt the call to share the love of God we encountered in those experiences—to serve the Church in children's or youth ministry, adult faith formation, or liturgical ministries; as volunteers in soup kitchens; or in numerous other ways. We feel compelled to share the joy we know in Christ, but the question is, how do we actually do it effectively without scaring people off or, worse, pushing them away?