



How to Share my Faith and Keep my Friends Year of Youth Catechesis

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Sunday 08 April, 2018

The Archbishop and I thought that during the Year of Youth we would offer some talks, on subjects of faith which are of interest to the young people of the Archdiocese. The one that got my attention, when a selection of topics was suggested to me, is on how we go about sharing our faith with others. This has been of interest to me for a long time and I will tell you why shortly.

I decided to add to the title of this talk, 'How to share my faith.....and keep my friends!' Sharing what you believe with your friends is challenging. They will not all be thinking about faith or the Church or the Sacraments or commitment to Jesus as you do. As you know, they will probably have strongly opposing ideas to you because they want to be free to decide for themselves how they are going to live their lives. Many of them will be thinking that the Church has nothing to offer, and in fact that religion takes away a person's right to think for themselves or to be autonomous.

So, for us to try and present to them the idea that faith and religion are good seems to be a near impossible thing to do. We can see how easy it would be for them to not just reject our view, but us as well, as a person deluded and stuck in a long discredited world view that is no longer needed in our times of scientific and technological enlightenment. It could be so easy for them to find excuses not to be around us so much.

This is why I wanted to put some emphasis on how we can keep our friends and evangelise at the same time.

I mentioned that this topic has special meaning for me. This is why.

Some of you will know that my father passed away nearly four years ago. I had been living with him for the three years before that, being a presence at home during the night which gave him a sense of security. He had had a couple of falls and there had been times when he would have to call for an ambulance during the night. Having me at home gave him some security.

Eventually, he decided that he could no longer remain at home after he had a very bad fall on a Sunday morning, when I was attending a parish function. We were fortunate in finding that the Little Sisters of the Poor had a room available and that they were happy to receive Dad.

As things turned out, Dad lived there for just over two years before he passed away. But the thing that was so surprising for me was that having lived at the Home for one year, he asked me one day for baptism. It was almost too much to believe. It was a prayer answered that I had been asking for many years, and now the answer seemed to come out of nowhere, as it seemed to me. I had the enormous privilege to be able to bring my father into the Catholic Church, to baptise, confirm him and to give him Holy Communion for the first time. This had become his desire, so late in his life: he had turned ninety that year.

Yes, I had prayed for this for a long time. I remember giving him a book about the Catholic faith many years before, but I left it to him to make a response. I never referred to the book again.



The book remained under some magazines and books for probably twenty years. Had it been read or was it even remembered: I do not know.

How amazing to hear Dad's words: I think it is time for me to be baptised. It was a prayer answered, and I was reminded that prayer is important and is always heard by God.

There was more to this. Dad made this step not just because he was living with the Little Sisters, even though their gentle care for him had been so important. He had lived through war and the awful consequences of being involved as a soldier from the age of nineteen, being sent to three campaigns until the age of twenty two when the war ended. He suffered from malaria for many years afterwards and required hospitalisation. He struggled with stress right to the end of his life and this had had a great impact on his overall health. I am sure the question of where God was in all of this, and how could he make sense of religion and belonging to a church continued to tug at him.

I am sure that he would have struggled with making a simple act of faith, when there may have been other ways he could have followed to put his life together again and find real meaning to life. The world around him was to change dramatically. Horse and carts would give away to motor vehicles, steam engines to airliners and space stations. The world of science and advancing technology was spellbinding, and seemed to offer un-thought of possibilities.

Dad was asked after he became a Catholic, how long had he been thinking about taking this step. He answered: Oh, about fifty years! It had been a long struggle. But he had a few things that were to help him. The main one was his wife. He said that he had always been impressed by her faith. There had been very hard times for her and yet she seemed to rise above them all. Her faith was simple but firm, and it made sense to her. She prayed and trusted that all would be well, one way or another.

Their marriage was strong and they faced many challenging things together. This is how Dad came to see Mum's faith in action. He had grown up in a family that was very suspicious of Catholics, and he was nervous about introducing Mum into that situation. Yet she was able to make herself really loved. She quietly won over Dad's family by her gentleness, kindness and respect.

With regard to Dad's faith, Mum had decided from the first time they met that she would not demand or apply any pressure on him to become a Catholic. I think she wanted him to come to his own decision and she wanted to be the best example that she could be of the faith.

I hope that you can understand why the topic: How to share my faith and keep my friends, resonates with me as I share just a little of my experience in our family.

What I want to offer to you now is the why and how we can go about sharing our faith with the people in our lives.

I have always liked the things that St Paul says about being an evangelist. He gave a long list of the gifts that are found in the Church when he wrote to the Corinthian community. (1Cor 12:4-11) He wanted to emphasise that they are gifts that come from the Holy Spirit, and they have been given to the Christian communities to build up the Church. Not every member of the community is given all the gifts. But each does receive the charism from the Holy Spirit to have an intense faith and to learn how to share this faith.

So there are some who are gifted preachers and catechists. Some who are wonderful apologists, having the gift to present the reasons for their faith in Jesus Christ. There are others who have the gifts of prophesy and interpretation, healing and discernment. What we have to remember is that the gifts all come from the one Spirit for the good of the community, especially for the building up of unity in the community.



We don't all have to be apologists or fantastic preachers or teachers in order to evangelise. What we need is faith which is always deepening as we learn to read the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

St Paul also wrote, 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel'. He had had a personal encounter with the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. This had changed him radically, so much so, that he had to go to the small community of disciples for healing and to join them as a brother in the new faith. Paul began to feel the call to be an apostle and to join in the work of announcing the gospel. The love of Jesus he had experienced at the moment of his conversion would urge him on to share this Good News with everyone he met. Hence his words which express the need to be faithful to his calling as an apostle.

Pope Francis, too, has given us a reminder in *The Joy of the Gospel* on why we are to be evangelisers through the witnessing of our faith. He referred to St John Paul II, who once said that our absolute priority is to joyfully, patiently and progressively preach the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Pope Francis underlined this mission as one that belongs to the entire People of God.

The entire Church, you and me, are meant to be a people for everyone. When we come to a mature faith, an intense faith, it becomes obvious that the Good News was not fashioned just for me or a small comfortable group of friends. Discovering that we have been given faith, we become aware at the same time of the presence of the Holy Spirit within and the call to evangelise. We should ask why.

Simply, the answer is because the Lord has great respect and love for me. He calls me to be part of his people. We start to understand the enormous love God has for his creation, especially humanity, and the reason for the amazing lengths that he went to save us. So, the coming of the Holy Spirit to each of us, the gifting of faith for us, the invitation to be part of his people and our growing in love for God and every person begins from our acceptance of the undying love God has for us.

Faith begins to turn us toward the others around us. Some are easier to love than others, yet we sense that we are called to love all with the same love of their Creator. We begin to see the mission that the Lord calls us to as love begins to transform us. The mission is to proclaim the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ with our lives.

I believe this is why we commit to be missionary disciples, as Pope Francis says. It is because we are being transformed within, and we are seeing the others in our lives with the loving, compassionate and merciful eyes of God. We want to be a help to them also finding the loving Father and salvation.

How we are missionary disciples will depend on those charisms that we have received. But I think there are some general principles.

Firstly, we have to know who Jesus is and how we are coming to know him in our lives. He is the one we are to announce. This is done initially by taking the Word to ourselves and learning how to listen to the Lord speaking to us through the scripture. The Word will shed light on our reality and help us to interpret our lives in truth. It will help us to understand who we are and at the same time reveal that the Lord loves us as we are. It is in this love that we grow in trust that we can become the person that we are intended to be, with the Spirit guiding and strengthening us. We will begin to recognise the great moments when we have already experienced the strong presence of Jesus. These make us convinced that Jesus exists, that he loves us, that he is really risen and his life is available to us. These moments become our stories of witness to the love and power of Jesus.



Secondly, our primary method of evangelisation is through silent witness. You will have someone approach you to ask your advice to your surprise. You may have thought that they did not know you were a Christian. But they guessed that you are because of the ways you act and treat your colleagues. Your way of life can begin raising questions: why are you like this? Why do you live this way? Even why are you among them? St Paul VI, who wrote on evangelisation forty years ago, noted that this silent witnessing is strong and effective.

Thirdly, we need to recognise that we are somewhere on our own faith journey. There is still a lot the Lord can do in us. Our faith will deepen as we learn how to read the things the Spirit is helping us to see, accept and understand. I am always consoled by the story of St Peter. He experienced moments of great faith and perception, and he experienced devastation and humiliation because of his impetuous nature. Yet he was acknowledged as the chief witness to the resurrection of Jesus and of the power of Christ within himself that freed him and built stronger faith in him.

Next, we can be witnesses to our faith at any time. We don't need degrees in theology or be particularly learned. What we need is the reflective spirit and the openness to learn what the Spirit is revealing to us about God's undying love and mercy towards us, and what the Spirit is helping us to know about ourselves.

Another point is to ask myself: what is my motivation? Do I have a love and care for that person? Our witnessing has to be for the benefit of the other person because of our love for them. We want them to know the love of God for them through our simple gentleness, kindness and respect.

One to one evangelisation is most effective. Person to person interaction is where the Spirit will be felt, especially in the generous giving of our time to listen and to encourage that person. Misunderstandings can more easily be overcome through one to one dialogue that is mostly, from our side, listening attentively.

Our witnessing is about being who we are, a fellow traveller, as St Mary MacKillop would say, who is learning how to be a disciple of Christ as well. It is encouraging for a seeker to know that we are also on the journey of faith.

Preaching the gospel has many forms. Being kind, patient, caring, thoughtful and being willing to be a friend who does not judge, is a proclaiming of the Word that builds a foundation for the Spirit to work in the life of the other person. Preaching doctrine and morals at this fragile first stage of forming a connection is counter-productive. There will be a time for that, maybe, in the future and it may not be you who will be that preacher or teacher.

Another element has to be prayer. We know that praying for a person is a sign of our love for them. Prayer on our part is recognising that we evangelise for God and, whatever our part in this, the greater part is God's. He sees into the heart and knows what is needed. His patience is something we learn through our prayer. God knows when the time is right to offer the invitation to believe.

The final principle that I propose is to allow the time for the Spirit to work with the experience you have given by your Christian witness. There may be much that has to be done by the Spirit within the person that you cannot do. Much healing may be needed. It could take fifty years! So to summarise. Yes, there is a risk when we go about the work of evangelisation. We can be thought of as being out of step with the modern world and we could lose friends. A lot depends on how we evangelise.

Our message is always Jesus Christ. It is about his death and what that did for us, and his resurrection which can operate in our lives today.



There are many people looking for answers to the problems in their lives, just as we are looking with the Spirit to understand the meaning of events in our lives. We understand their seeking. We are wanting to be helpful in their searching because we have a care and love for them. We are reminded not to be afraid. The Spirit will give us the strength to live our faith and to witness the power of Christ in our lives.

Our primary work of evangelisation is to give witness to what we believe in the silent way of living lovingly: with heartfelt compassion, generosity and humility, gentleness and patience, putting up with one another, and being ready to forgive one another. (Col 3:12-13).

This will lay a foundation for deeper discussions on the Good News about Jesus. Beyond that will come more formal teaching and preaching, which may be the role of others who have been given the charism for that work of evangelisation.

The deeper discussions will give you the opportunity to share your experiences of God's mercy and love shown in the events of your life. Being your experiences, they carry a truth which may be an encouragement for your friend to seek Christ for themselves. (John 4:42).

Thank you for this chance to speak today. I hope you will be able to accept the call to evangelise and to introduce Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.