

Unintended Evangelization

I have always been short and not very athletic, which affected my self-confidence when I went to high school. When I first got to high school, it was in many ways terrifying. Although most of my classmates in primary school joined me in high school, I rarely got to see any of them, as high school was so much bigger. Even though I found a few new friends quickly, much of my time was still spent away from them.

During this time, I was starting to consider that perhaps any organized religion was ultimately a bad thing, but I never questioned the wisdom of the Bible or the core teachings of the Catholic Church. I found myself wanting more acquaintances to build my self-confidence. Once I realized what it was I wanted, I looked to scripture, and the scripture I came to was "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you." (Matthew 7:12). This message was very clear to me, if I wanted others to like me, I needed to like them.

And so I began a campaign of looking to make eye contact with anyone and everyone I could while walking down the halls between classes. If eye contact was made, I would smile and say, "Hi." Things moved slowly at first, but one by one over the weeks and months, more and more fellow students would smile back and say, "Hi" as well. Before I graduated, I had a few days where so many schoolmates were greeting me in the halls that I couldn't respond to all of them fast enough.

And there were very tangible benefits to this. Girls, it seemed to me, were the fastest to start saying, "Hi" back. A few times one of these students would surprise me by just walking up and starting a conversation. Even though we had never talked before that time, they often shared things I would normally expect to be shared with good friends. There were days when I felt terrible, but after a few students recognized me in the halls, I would completely turn around emotionally and feel great. It was then that I realized that perhaps I made others feel better about themselves as well. But the longest lasting benefit was the fact that, unwillingly and unknowingly, I was engaging in evangelization. And the ironic part of it was that I was evangelizing a faith I wanted to leave. But making people feel better about themselves is a corporeal work of mercy, and getting strangers to open up to me was a nascent spiritual work of mercy. By no means am I patting myself on the back here, only pointing out that God was still using me to bring others to Him despite my stubborn pride.

Although the details are different, and my motives have completely changed, I essentially do the same thing today as I did back then. I now drive a forklift all around the plant I work in, and I try to at least wave to all those I pass. By making this simple gesture instead of driving around them, I am letting them know, in a very real way, that somebody not only sees them, but recognizes them as someone of value. I rarely get a chance to talk to any of them, but when I do I have already earned their trust in me from this simple act. It is not awkward to bring up religion as we talk because my actions already matched what I had to say. And while I respect those who don't want to go in that direction, many of them are quite interested. Even non-Christians are often curious.

Of course there is a lot more to true evangelization, but I hope that I have demonstrated that it is the simple, easy things that matter here. Evangelization is a skill that grows as needed, so one does not need to worry about knowing it all. Maintaining a trust is more important than having all the answers, as trust will buy one time to either learn the answers or to direct them to someone who does have answers.

Raymond Mulholland
Original Publication Date: 16 February 2023