

WDREF Convention 2010: Solid doctrine, practical applications

For more and more Catholics today, their parishes and even their Catholic faith are like islands. When they visit the island, they are immersed in the Good News of Jesus Christ through the sacraments and the theology of the Church. When they leave the island, they are once again surrounded by secular values that many times aren't in keeping with Gospel values. How do we bridge the distance between our daily lives and the island of faith?

Bishop John Barres, of the Diocese of Allentown, PA, offered a very inspiring vision of the current directions within the Church. He named six important areas where we, as parish catechetical leaders, can assist people in re-connecting with their faith and making it a more integral part of their lives.

1. A new apologetics is developing and we, as parish catechetical leaders, have a major role in this. We are the ones who are face to face with the people, so we know what their questions are, where confusion might exist, and how to provide content-rich catechesis to meet their needs.
2. Catechesis is pastoral. Providing quality catechesis is an art. Our catechetical efforts should be grounded in the current intellectual scholarship of Catholic Biblical scholars. While some Protestant scholarship is good, we must stay aware that their views might not be compatible with Catholic understandings. Learn *Lectio Divina* and use it with your parishioners. If every Catholic engaged daily in *Lectio Divina*, there will be a new springtime of evangelization. Chesterton said, "When you don't believe in God, it's not that you believe in nothing, it's that you're gullible to believe in anything." The reactions to *The DaVinci Code*, a novel based on a few facts and a lot of fiction, proved Chesterton's point. As parish catechetical leaders, we are called to assist people in being drawn into a deeper faith through *Lectio Divina* so that fiction is not confused with fact.
3. The Year of St. Paul was marvelous in leading people to read and study the letters of St. Paul and Acts of the Apostles. Today's world needs to understand Pauline theology of the cross, Pauline mysticism ("not me who lives, but Christ in me"), and the missionary, evangelizing dimensions of St. Paul's writings. We should bring the same energy from the Year of St. Paul to our parishes in reading and studying *Verbum Domini*. Use radical charity (also called radical hospitality) by being open to those with different views from ours as we share the teachings of the Church.
4. Be opportunistic when it comes to the new translation of the Roman Missal. Don't just teach the new words; help people to understand the theological beauty and flow of the words. Take advantage of this opportunity to help people to re-discover the meaning of the Eucharist, re-kindle their love of the Eucharist, and re-inspire their connection with the Eucharist.
5. Lead groups of teenagers, young adults, and married parishioners in a study of the USCCB's pastoral, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*. This is a wonderfully written pastoral on marriage with a sound theological and scriptural basis. It shows how God's providence brings couples together and helps them to rely on the power of the cross of Christ to bring marriage to deeper levels, as painful at times as those crosses might be. Marriage is a workshop on holiness; if we keep our eyes fixed on heaven, it keeps all our priorities in life straight.
6. Remember the role of the saints in our pedagogical teachings. Fr. Jim Martin's book, *My Life With the Saints*, is a wonderful look at the role of the saints in our lives. For example: The commitment of St. Thomas More, patron of statesmen, politicians, and lawyers, is more important today than when he was martyred and will be even more important in the future. This Man For All Seasons is the icon of conscience.

Dr. Jane Regan, Associate Professor of Theology at Boston College, focused on four key ways that we can help Catholics to moor themselves to their faith and their parish so that Gospel values become an intimate part of their everyday lives. A few brief paragraphs, can't do justice to the vision and

inspiration that Dr. Regan shared with us, but these are some of my thoughts based on her comments.

1. Hospitality

We usually think of “hospitality” as a friendly welcome, but who are we welcoming? Abraham and Sarah welcomed strangers, begged them to stay, and gave them their best food. Jesus related a number of hospitality stories focused on extending hospitality to the poor, the lame, those not in our social circles, and those from whom reciprocal hospitality would not be expected. Jesus made it clear that welcoming the stranger and those in need is welcoming God. Hospitality is a key to the kingdom.

How hospitable is your parish? Is the entry to the church a hospitable area? Are the parish offices welcoming? Do you welcome catechists, children, teens, and adults each time they arrive?

Who is missing – from Mass, faith formation, other activities – because they do not feel welcome? Who is missing because the “welcome” doesn’t seem to include them (e.g. single adults, “families” with single parents or non-Catholic spouses, those who can’t drive, those who have different ideas)?

Find those in your parish who have the gift of hospitality – those who enjoy setting a welcoming environment, preparing food, greeting others, making phone calls – and engage them in this ministry of hospitality. Create a warm environment for the staff so that they are excited about being there, working at the service of others. Train yourself and the parish secretary to always answer the phone with a smile because that smile can be heard in your voice. Encourage the parish maintenance people in their work for it is one of the keys to having a hospitable environment. Don’t let busyness get in the way of being hospitable to everyone.

2. Conversation

There are times when chit-chatty conversation is adequate for the setting. But, in this age of sound-bites and texting, true conversation about things that matter rarely takes place. Scripture gives us an outstanding example of true conversation in the dialogue between God and Abraham as they discuss the destruction of Sodom. Both God and Abraham are talking, both are listening intently and taking into consideration what the other says. Jesus engaged in a similarly open conversation with the Women at the Well – both talking, both listening, both affected by the conversation. In true conversations, everyone is open and honest, speaking and listening from the heart.

How often do the people in your parish engage in true conversations? How are they assisted in understanding the faith dimensions of the issues that matter to their lives? What are you doing to create an atmosphere of trust in which this sharing of ideas can take place?

Sustained, critical conversations enhance our abilities to see the connections between faith and life. They help us to clarify what we believe and learn to express our faith. Listening to others can open our eyes to the faith connections that others make and can enhance our understanding of prayer, the sacraments, and Scripture.

To help people engage in genuine conversations, inform people in advance of the topics that will be discussed so that they can reflect on it instead of speaking off the top of their heads. Prepare good questions that engage people in the topic. The questions should not sound “churchy”, but should relate to people’s lives.

Set the rules of the conversations: a) What is said remains with the group, b) say only what you mean, c) be as accurate as possible, d) listen to what others say, e) presume in their favor (they are speaking their truth), f) be willing to expand your thinking and change your mind if the conversation leads you to this.

3. Effective Followership

During the year, I follow my favorite sports teams by watching or listening to their games when I can and checking their places in the standings every few days. Others follow their sports teams by traveling far and wide to watch the games in person, wearing the teams' colors whenever possible, and talking (sometimes incessantly!) about everything related to their teams.

Too often, people's followership of Jesus is similar to my casual followership of my favorite sports teams. What Jesus expects of us is very different! In the story of the Rich Young Man, Jesus tells him that he should go beyond the basics. He should adopt an entirely new way of life if he is to be a real follower of Jesus. It's the same message that Jesus gave to the Woman at the Well, to Nicodemus, and to the fishermen whom he called.

Effective followers understand the vision of Jesus and share the mission that he entrusted to the Church. Effective followers, as members of his Church, the Body of Christ, bring their faith into the secular world, showing that world what it means to live as a follower of Jesus.

What does your parish do to encourage people to become more than casual followers of Jesus? How does your parish train people to share in the mission that Jesus entrusted to the Church? What support does your parish offer to people as they face the challenges of true followership?

4. Formative Community

There are many groups within the parish that gather to assist in the mission of the parish. From Maintenance Committees to Liturgy Committees, from catechists of the children to women who provide funeral lunches, all these groups are small communities within the larger community of the whole parish.

What would happen if we changed our vision of parish from one where all work and activity of the parish flows from the pastor and staff to a vision where the Liturgy is truly the fount and summit, where these Communities of Practice gather and are fed by the Liturgy and they understand that from the Liturgy their mission and work flows?

In that vision, the parish catechetical leader becomes more than just the person who plans the programs for the children, teens, and a few adults. The parish catechetical leader becomes the resource person for all the Communities of Practice, making them aware of resources for their tasks, helping them to share how their faith leads them to engage in that ministry, and providing them with opportunities to critically reflect on their tasks through the lens of evangelization, the mission of the Church.

The energy created through these Communities would lead others to see that their roles are not just to help the pastor and staff in the work of the Church. Their roles are to be the Church with the help of the pastor and staff. People who are not involved in a Community of Practice would be empowered to assume their rightful roles as baptized Christians. They could be helped to name their talents and their passions – sharing faith with the teens, working on social justice, reading at Mass, making snacks for the children, maintaining the parish website – the list is endless – and become involved in a Community of Practice or start a new one until

all parishioners are members of one or more Communities of Practice. The end result would be a truly evangelizing parish.

Alone, you can't bring that about, but you can begin to move the parish in that direction. Think of a vibrant Community of Practice that already exists in your parish. Recognize the value of their ministry and offer your support.

Look at the groups you work with (catechists, parents, Faith Formation Committee, etc). Think about how you can help them to own the vision instead of only seeing the tasks. Help new parishioners to reflect on their gifts and join a community within the parish.

During his homily, **Bishop Morlino** of the Diocese of Madison encouraged us to continue in our efforts as parish catechetical leaders. Referring to WDREF's Identity Statement of Parish catechetical Leaders, Bishop Morlino said that we truly are co-workers in the vineyard. Though the bishops have the authority to mandate, their ministry and ours are more effective when we operate as co-workers in carrying out the mission and ministry of the Church.

May all of us take our calls and missions seriously as we help to bring about the Kingdom of God!

- This article, courtesy of Joanie McKeown, a PCL and WDREF Board Rep. from the Diocese of Superior.