

The Efficient Work of God

“Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same? Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare? Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?”

- From *The Summons* by John Bell and Graham Maule

A Question for These Times

As a catechetical leader, I have heard this question often asked throughout COVID-19 now that in-person Mass has resumed: Where are the families? Understandably, many cannot yet return due to medical reasons, but what about the others? It is an important question for these times and as catechetical leaders one of which we should be proactively addressing. Many of our parishes are experiencing large drops in Christian Formation enrollment, and it is important that we not just offer programs but ensure that they attract and respond to the spiritual needs of the faithful during and post-COVID-19.

In the *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis writes (I have bolded the last line):

Lastly, we cannot forget that evangelization is first and foremost about preaching the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him. Many of them are quietly seeking God, led by a yearning to see his face, even in countries of ancient Christian tradition. All of them have a right to receive the Gospel. Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. **It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but “by attraction. [13]” (§14)**

The Catechism of the Church teaches that “the desire for God is written in the human heart” (CCC 27). Created in the image and likeness of God, we were created to love and be loved. Human beings are social beings which is why one of the most devastating effects of COVID-19 is the inability to

gather physically. Community is what shapes us, whether it be with your extended family, your church family, your school family, or even your sports family. We desire community because we desire God who is present in the love that is shared.

The Healing Power of Community

Because we are created as social beings, the power of community has the power to heal. I witnessed this first-hand when I was the Director of Child and Family Formation at Holy Spirit in Virginia Beach when, in the fall of 2013, we launched, GoodNews People (GNP), a new parish-wide program from JustFaith Ministries. Of over 100 participants, I do not think any person ever expected to be given the gift of community. One participant said, “It made me realize the importance of community and [I] didn’t realize how much I needed it.” Even more powerful was the witness talk of a preschool mom who spoke about how her faith journey with her GoodNews People group “challenged me, guided me, and most importantly healed me.” Through the Catechism, Scripture, prayer, virtue cultivation, sharing, readings and videos, GNP participants were called and sent to be Good News to the world by putting faith, hope and love into action.

Thanks to the support of our pastor and parish staff, we were able to gather over 100 people to commit to a 2-hour session each week for 14 weeks; they also participated in an immersion experience and an opening and closing plenary. It was the combination of support, enthusiasm, and offering of an educational opportunity that attracted participants to the program, but it was the genius of the program which engaged and enlivened participants, sustaining them through the duration.

Of the 11 groups, 5 parish staff members facilitated or participated including the youth minister, music director, social ministries director, Children’s Liturgy coordinator and myself. Groups consisted of:

- Preschool moms who met during their child's class time
- Married couples including one group which had 4 married couples
- Older parishioners i.e. grandparents, retirees
- Single, married, divorced, and widowed. Ages ranging from 30 years and up.
- Parishioners from Poland, Nigeria, France, El Salvador, and the Philippines who reflected the diversity of our parish.
- All walks of life spread the gamut of the economic and political spectrum.

GNP not only transformed minds but transformed hearts. From staff members and those immersed in ministry to “middle pew” parishioners who were participating in a parish program for the first time, GNP affected participants deeply and opened their eyes to the needs of one another and needs of the world. The fruit of GNP was not just social ministry grew, but *other ministries* grew. People discovered through staff and other ministry leaders that behind the scenes there were amazing people actively participating in the building of the Kingdom of God, and they, too, wanted to be part of the work.

The Potential for Something More

On December 3, 2020, I received a long-awaited email from the executive director of JustFaith Ministries that has the potential to be life-changing for the Church if we are willing to be open to it. In a letter from Bishop David O'Connell, Chairman of the Subcommittee of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), the Subcommittee voted to offer formal support of JustFaith Ministries' two Catholic programs: JustFaith Catholic and GoodNews People. Its support was based on the extensive review by the Education and Outreach office of the Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development which “determined that both programs offer great benefit to Catholics who seek formation in the Church's social justice tradition articulated by the Scriptures, the

Church's historical witness, theological inquiry, and Catholic social teaching.”

In reflection, the excerpt from Pope Francis' first apostolic exhortation points to the prophetic message proclaimed by the 1971 Synod of World Bishops' in their document, *Justice in the World* that “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel...” (6). Fr. Bryan Massingale explained in his keynote address at the Parish Social Ministry Training Conference held in Raleigh, NC 2007 that “constitutive to the Gospel” meant without it, the Gospel was missing an essential piece. A social ministries director compared it to baking bread without flour or water; without either, it cannot be bread. Many of the faithful are not familiar with Catholic Social Teaching including our own parish catechists. Catholic Social Teaching has often been regarded as an addition to formation rather than constitutive. It is important to understand that it is not a matter of either/or, but both/and - only then can we truly witness the efficient work of God.

Let us not have to ask the question post-COVID-19, “Where are the families?” but rather proclaim loudly to them now “We are here!” Our voices will be heard not just through our words but our actions that are visible for all to see. From my experience, the GoodNews People program from JustFaith Ministries is one such opportunity.

For more information on GoodNews People, please click the following links:

[GoodNews People and JustFaith Ministries](#)

[Testimonial from a Young Adult at Holy Spirit Parish in Virginia Beach](#)

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