

'Just do it'

A Keynote Address on Catholic Evangelism for Anglican-Catholic Future

In the best Anglican tradition I have just caught up with what the culture was doing twenty years ago and I am currently much inspired by the Nike strapline, 'Just do it.' That is my message to you today. Never mind more words. Let's *do* some evangelism. Let's leave our bags here, let's go out onto the streets, let's go into Paddington station where there are thousands of people waiting for trains. Let's each find someone we don't know and ask them what they think of Jesus. We'll see where the conversation goes from there and then return here to pool ideas.

Okay we're not really going to do that, at least not yet. That was a cheap way to make a point. You see I am bored of *talking* about Catholic evangelism. We need to stop talking, stop holding conferences, stop writing papers and articles and actually get on and do some evangelism. The mere fact there is a subject called 'Catholic Evangelism' which merits study on its own for me rather illustrates the problem. Do we have talks and papers on 'Evangelical evangelism?' No, because they're too busy doing it.

In our defence we are living through a time of immense evangelical influence in Church of England and as a result the techniques and ideas that surround evangelism are largely drawn from one tradition. Inevitably that means that we can feel at odds with much of the language of evangelism that is around today. Part of the problem is not that Catholics aren't doing evangelism, but that our approach and language differ such that people don't always notice what we're doing. It may be helpful therefore at the start of this talk to remind ourselves of the key elements of Catholic Evangelism. I would say there are four distinctive features.

First Catholic evangelism is **Incarnational**. Malcolm Brown, the Director of the Mission and Public Affairs Division, recently gave a fascinating paper at an Estates Evangelism conference in which he drew a doctrinal distinction between two approaches to mission, both of which have had periods of predominance in Anglican history.

One focuses on atonement and so places the emphasis on Calvary and the saving work of God on the cross. In this approach the world is viewed as a godless, dark, sinful place. The task of an evangelist therefore is to draw people to individual repentance and conversion, to encourage them to place their faith in the saving work of Christ on the cross so that they can be plucked from an evil world and saved in Christ forever. Conversion is therefore a profoundly individual choice. The church is little more than a local gathering of the voluntary community of the redeemed and is the safe harbour in a vast sea of sin and danger. This is the classical protestant approach which is highly individualistic and has a low theology of the Church.

The second approach focuses on the Incarnation and so the emphasis is on Bethlehem. God has been born into his world in an act that impacts on the whole of creation and remains powerfully present within it. Athanasius famously tells us, 'That which is assumed is redeemed.' The mere fact of Christ taking on human flesh impacts on our

lives and our world for sanctification. The Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins typifies this theology as he writes: 'The World charged with grandeur of God.' By his Incarnation, the presence of God suffuses all creation.

The task of the evangelist therefore is demonstrate the existing presence of God such that people acknowledge him and worship him in his Incarnate Son. I remember whilst working in Camden that around every six months an American funded Church planter would coming knocking at my door and say, 'Hi Phil, I've come to bring Jesus to in Camden.' I would reply, 'Actually do you know, he's already here. Come with me and we'll go and find him – in the faces of the poor and the destitute, in the lives of the prostitutes and the drug addicts, in the creativity of the artists and musicians, in the whole wonder of this diverse and extraordinary community.' That was a classic clash between Atonement-based and Incarnation-based approaches to mission.

Catholic evangelism therefore is incarnational. To draw someone to conversion is to awaken them to their divine potential, to help them discover the presence of God in their lives so that they can acknowledge their true purpose, their true identity, their true vocation and thereby be saved.

It is an approach that leads to a much higher theology of the Church. By virtue of the Incarnation the Church is a divine institution because it continues the Incarnate presence of the Son. It is his body in the world, his presence, and so it has an authority that is divine. In a Catholic evangelism the cross is central, but that is because it guarantees the eternal and enduring presence of God in his world. Catholic evangelism is about more than the plucking out of individuals for personal redemption. At its heart is the setting free of all creation.

This is why Catholics embed themselves in our communities for long periods of time. Catholic evangelism is boring. It mistrusts the spectacular and the short-term. Evangelism is about the long, slow, dull process of sharing lives and pointing out where Jesus fits into them.

Thus also Catholics have a passion for the dignity of human life because it is charged with the very life of God. In the Incarnation we see a thrilling vision of the dignity of human life, so we must despise anything that undermines that dignity. We locate ourselves with the poor. We have a passion for justice.

And a really good catholic evangelism will naturally draw together service and proclamation. S. Vincent de Paul is the perfect example of this, a man who renewed the whole French Church by proclaiming good news to the poor whether that poverty be spiritual, material or both. If we proclaim but do not serve, we are hypocrites preaching an empty Gospel. If we serve but fail to proclaim we are subjecting people to the greatest deprivation of all which, as Pope Francis reminds us, is to be deprived of ever hearing the saving news of God in Jesus Christ.

Secondly a Catholic evangelism is **Sacramental**. In a protestant soteriology, worship can at times seem a bolt on. What matters is individual conversion of the heart and

people do not always see where weekly Church attendance fits into that. An interesting illustration is the Alpha course. Around 2.5 million people in the UK have done Alpha and so you would expect that this would impact significantly on Churchgoing figures. If 20% of those who had been on the course made a commitment to Christ, you would presume that Sunday attendance would be up by around 500,000. But in that period of time church attendance has actually decreased and in the Church of England is now around 900,000. Many people it would seem have become Christians but are choosing not to worship.

For a Catholic, to believe and not to worship is quite simply impossible. At interview I sometimes ask a question that is often put to me by my sceptical sister. 'So what if a man called Jesus died 2000 years ago? How does the effect me now?' The answer for a Catholic is the Sacraments. In Baptism we are born anew into the risen life of the Christ who died for us. In the Eucharist we feed on that risen life for our salvation. It is through the Sacraments that power of the cross flows down upon us for salvation. It is the Sacraments that make the cross contemporary.

So for us as Catholics, to evangelise means to bring people to Jesus in the Eucharist. That in the end is our job. Why? Because in the Eucharist we come into the real, physical, actual presence of the incarnate Christ. We are in Bethlehem where we gaze upon the one who has assumed our humanity that we might assume his divinity. We are at Calvary where blood and water flows down upon us for our eternal salvation. We are in the garden gazing at the empty tomb as the Resurrection transforms the whole meaning and purpose of our humanity.

In the Eucharist we draw life from the Christ who, through his cross, redeems and sets free from sin. In the Eucharist we gaze upon the result of Christ's saving work as we are caught up in the very worship and life of heaven. The Eucharist is therefore both the means and the goal of our salvation.

We need to teach our people therefore to love the Eucharist because to love the Eucharist is to love Jesus. To love the Eucharist is to love the Gospel. And we need to be shameless in inviting people to the Eucharist, because within it people will find the purpose of their lives. The Eucharist in and of itself evangelises. Come to the Walsingham Youth Pilgrimage if you don't believe me.

Thirdly Catholic evangelism is **Communal**. A mission strategy whose sole purpose is the personal conversion of the individual will by nature be individualist. The Church therefore becomes no more than a voluntary gathering of the like-minded, a purely human institution. A good example for me came at the Keswick convention after a rather tortured seminar by an extremely intelligent man who was trying to make sense of one of the Old Testament genocides. I explained to another convention-goer that a Catholic approach to Scripture would avoid a lot of the problems that speaker had got himself into because we accept that the Church has an authority to interpret the Scriptures in the light of revelation. 'Oh!' my companion immediately shot back. 'So you put human authority above the authority of the scriptures do you?' Well not exactly. For

a Catholic the authority of the Church is a divine one. The Scriptures are sacred because they are the Church's book.

A Catholic theology will have a strong theology of the Church. That means that an incarnational missiology will emphasise community and the importance of belonging. I saw a wonderful example of this in Doncaster two years ago. A priest on a very rundown Council estate turned his whole church into an almighty banqueting hall and encouraged his congregation of around 20 to bring their friends for dinner. About 80 gathered for a wonderful meal and afterwards the priest stood up and gave one of the best off-the-cuff evangelistic talks I have ever heard. 'You've enjoyed a feast tonight,' he said. 'Now come to the real feast at the Mass tomorrow. That's where you belong. That's where you're wanted.' The next day he had over 50 at Mass. Hospitality, mutual love, togetherness and above all relationship – these things lie right at the heart of a Catholic evangelism. We seek right relationship with God and thus with each other. Many Catholic clergy will use language like 'building up community' rather than 'evangelism,' and that's because belonging to a Eucharistic community in itself has a salvific dimension.

And fourthly Catholic Evangelism is **Lifelong**. Conversion is viewed as a process rather than a one-off event. We're often a little too scared of the language of conversion as Catholics. I met an ex-prisoner a few days ago who told me proudly how he had 'got converted in prison' and was really clear about the date and the circumstances. That was a wonderful story and I envied his clarity. We need to recover that sort of language. But at the same time for Catholics conversion is not so much a moment in time as a way. Mary in the New Testament is our model here. As we read the narrative in Luke there is a beautifully drawn sub-plot which tells of the story of Mary's journey of conversion from earthly mother to disciple. She questions the angel at the Annunciation, but says yes anyway. She rejoices with Elizabeth but then she struggles to understand her son's vocation and at one stage even tries to draw him back into the earthly family. Only at Pentecost when she receives the spirit is the journey complete. Mary shows us the way of conversion.

When I think about how I became a Christian it is a similar pattern. I took myself to church at the age of 9 because they paid the choirboys, but I never really thought about faith. At 12 I decided to get Confirmed despite opposition from various wings of the family and at that stage would have said I was a Christian. By 14 I thought faith was a lot of tosh. When I was 16 an amazing new curate turned up who could make the Gospel make sense to teenagers. When I was 18 I was deeply moved by some of the preaching at Greenbelt and made a definite commitment. Where was I converted? The answer is that it was a path – and of course a path that I am still travelling. Conversion is a long string of events in which, like Mary, we say 'Yes.' It requires a constant obedience in the same direction.

This is why Pilgrimage is such an important devotion for Catholics. The small journey we take on the way to Jerusalem or Rome or Walsingham is a microcosm of the journey

of our lives. A pilgrimage is a parable of the journey of conversion and whilst the route can be slow and tedious we know the destination which is the life of heaven.

And because conversion is a journey, Catholics have very strong sense of heaven. A recent Church of England document about discipleship document managed to describe the Christian life without any mention whatsoever of the future hope or of the life of heaven. This makes no sense in a Catholic understanding. Christ has won the victory and so we know the future because the future is the beatific vision. And it is that knowledge of the future that dictates how we live in the present. So conversion is the slow discovery of purpose of our human life, the slow process of getting ready for life of heaven. And heaven is our goal. We are a people made for joy.

I think that then under those four headings we can define a distinctive, Catholic approach to evangelism, one that we are perhaps at times too slow to identify. The question then remains. Why are we doing so little of it? Or if we are doing it, why isn't it working? Why are most of our churches stagnant, declining or showing only modest growth? Why are there so few young people in catholic Parishes? Why are we so nervous and edgy in this ministry?

One reason is that each of the above can very easily become an excuse for *not* doing evangelism.

An evangelism that is **Incarnational** can become an excuse for merely being present in a community, being kind, being affable, being a living sign of the presence of Jesus but never actually opening our mouths to say anything. Slow evangelism can mean no evangelism. This is especially true in community ministry. We can be great at projects, great at running the foodbank or the winter nigh-shelter, but forget ever to proclaim why we are doing such things.

An evangelism that is **Sacramental** can easily pay such close attention to the quality of worship that we forget to ask anyone along. We are so busy emphasising worship as an offering to God rather than an entertainment for the people, so busy paying close attention to quality in our ordering of worship that we forget to invite, we forget to draw people in or we order it such that it becomes dull and inaccessible.

An evangelism that is **Communal** often never gets beyond having a nice time with plenty of cheery events, plenty of booze and lovely hospitality but forgets Jesus. We hold social events but never quite explain why. We go on lots of pastoral visits but never quite get round to praying or enquiring after the faith of the person we are visiting.

An evangelism that is **Lifelong** can forget altogether that there needs to be the moments of conversion. When is the change of life? When is the re-orientation to Jesus? Where are the moments of challenge? Sadly pilgrimage can all too easily be an example of this and deteriorate into no more than a holiday with Mass thrown in rather and thus fails to fulfil its potential of being a life-changing staging post on way of conversion.

Added to which there are a number of specific factors that can discourage Catholics from getting really stuck into evangelism.

For example there is often a strange reticence amongst us in open faith sharing. We can struggle to articulate a clear, Gospel message and certainly our laypeople often complain that they aren't equipped to talk about their faith. This is not helped by the influence of some ill-conceived, half-baked universalist theologies which are very unclear about the what the saving work of Jesus actually achieves or why the death of Christ was necessary.

Again, Catholics can be extremely slow to get on board with new initiatives, whether that be Renewal and Reform or local Diocesan growth plans. All too often we are the people sitting at the back of the room complaining about the language rather than finding ways of interpreting such strategies to our own people or seeing the possibilities that a Church newly focussed on growth can bring.

Again, there is too little engagement in Catholic circles with church planting, a movement that is having a marked impact across the country. There are of course a few exceptions to this, but on the whole we don't have the congregations or the will to plant new Eucharistic communities.

Again, we are held back by a growing fashion for dull worship and by new recidivism. For too many priests correctness seems to be more important than authenticity. They sometimes seem to be more interested in pushing back altars against walls than making Christian disciples. In some quarters we even make a virtue of offering worship that can appear studiously dull – boring music, dry preaching, cold and distant styles of Eucharistic presidency. Some label it 'the Reform of the Reform.' I call it death, or at the very least voluntary euthanasia.

Again, we have a huge lack of Catholic evangelism resources especially around nurture, youth work and discipleship. I had a great youth group when I was in Hartlepool. When I left many of them became Baptists. Why? Because the resources I had used were from evangelical publishers and had not formed them as Eucharistic Christians. I used those resources because they were the only ones out there.

Again, years of energy-sapping division within the Catholic movement over the Ordination of women has seriously weakened the witness we should have been offering to the world of the joys of sacramental living.

I was approached at New Wine by the Bishop of Berwick who almost pleaded with me, 'Philip, where are the missional Catholics? I don't want an entirely evangelical Diocese. But where are the Catholics who can bring growth?' The answer is, all too often they are busy complaining that they don't like the word 'missional!'

Now of course I am deliberately overstating my case to make a point. We all know that there many exceptions, many Catholic parishes that are growing, many priests and laypeople who are working incredibly hard to build up congregations. In addition most

of our Parishes are in inner city areas or in the outer estates where growth is really hard. But when Sir Terry Leahy went to Tesco's he said the first thing they needed to do to turn things round was to be really honest with themselves. And we too have to face facts. Catholics have an issue with primary evangelism. We are not great at converting non-Christian adults to Christ.

Part of the problem is that we too often think of evangelism is something that will miraculously do itself if the circumstances are right. If we put on really nice Masses, if we have strong community ministry and are kind then people will appear from nowhere. The trouble is in most contexts, that just doesn't work. Evangelism is something that we need to *do* ourselves.

Evangelism means talking to people about Jesus. It means actively inviting them to Mass. It means ordering the Mass such that it is aimed at new people. It means strengthening and equipping our laypeople to talk about faith in their daily lives. It means preaching in a way that answers questions people are asking and calls for clear response. It means creating the spaces where new Christians can learn about the Gospel in the company of others. It means ensuring that social events become proclamation events. It means leading the local church in such a way as to encourage growth. It means building a culture of welcome and invitation. It means stopping some activities in order to focus on those that will make new disciples. It means having a clear strategy. That cannot be a dirty word!

What our slowness in this area of the Christian life means is that we are losing a battle on two fronts. The first is the battle for the identity of the Church. Traditional Catholics used to complain about being side-lined. Today more liberal Catholics also complain about being side-lined. And it's not surprising. We are increasingly in a post-sacramental Church. Large numbers of practising Christians never attend the Eucharist, large numbers of Bishops and Archdeacons think that the Eucharist is a luxury that can be done without if there aren't enough priests. A sacramental understanding of priesthood is in many places all but lost. The recent conversations about the way in which the Bishop is the 'focus of unity' are interesting in this respect. In the past a Bishop was the focus of unity because they were the fountain of the sacramental life for the Diocese. It was the role they occupied within the institution that rendered them the focus of unity. But that sacramental understanding of authority is lost and has been replaced by the language of leadership. If the Bishop is seen primarily as a leader then their character and opinions matter more than the role they occupy. They become a focus of unity not because they are the sacramental source but because a majority of people like them or agree with them. This is a massive mind-set shift which is going to make the appointing of Bishops increasingly vexed.

If we are to recover the sacramental identity of the Church then as Anglo-Catholics we must find ways to work together across the barriers that have divided us. And we must work together not to engage in fruitless, time consuming debate with the Church, but to renew the Catholic movement by making new Christians. When we Catholics show we

can grow churches and make new disciples, only then will we get a hearing in the battle about sacramentality. Our engagement must be not with the Church but with the world.

Because more importantly, we are losing a second battle which is the one for the soul of the nation. The words we speak as Christians are a matter of life and death. The Sacraments we celebrate are a matter of life and death. We alone have the words that raise people from death to life through relationship with the Christ we meet at the altar. If we stay silent, people will die. If we fail to evangelise, we are subjecting people to meaninglessness. The task is urgent.

We need a new confidence in evangelism. And to achieve that, Catholics need to reach out across the tedious old divides and resource each other. Divisions within us are a luxury we can no longer afford and we need to dismiss altogether those voices whose addiction to past conflicts means they wish to divide rather than heal. We need to ignore those groups and individuals who cannot move beyond the arguments of the past. If there is to be any future for a sacramental Anglicanism, we must stand as one. We need a shared vision for Catholic evangelism.

It could be that some work that a small group of traditionalist clergy and laypeople have been doing in recent months could help with this. A former Vicar of St Peter's, Plymouth told us after the settlement over the issue of women Bishops that Catholics now need to: 'get off the battlefield and onto the mission field.' This new initiative is an attempt to respond to that challenge. Of course we can't direct the actions of clergy or local churches. Rather our desire is to inspire, to talk a different language, to set a different set of priorities.

Last year 20 priests who are all leading growing congregations met to ask a series of questions. What is distinctive about Catholic evangelism? What are the features of growing churches in the Catholic tradition? What priorities do we need to set as a movement if we are to recapture imaginations with the person of Jesus Christ and draw new people to meet him in the Eucharist? We are still thinking out loud but have set six priorities:

1 Forming God's People

We will:

- a) Form all the baptised as missionary disciples through worship, prayer, the study of Scripture and pilgrimage
- b) Set laypeople free for witness and service in the world and the church
- c) Draw people from BAME backgrounds into leadership roles
- d) Produce new catechetical materials and a rule of life

2 Nurturing Young Disciples

We will:

- a) Call and train paid and volunteer youth and children's leaders

- b) Better equip parishes for ministry to schools
- c) Teach the faith more effectively to the young through special services, events, pilgrimages and written materials
- d) Give young people a voice in the life of the Church and nurture them as leaders

3 Offering Excellence in Worship

We will:

- a) Encourage every local Church to assess its worshipping and devotional life
- b) Develop those who have a ministry as preachers
- c) Celebrate the beauty of holiness through music, art and sacred space

4 Celebrating Sacramental Priesthood

We will:

- a) Build confidence in the identity of the Church and the nature of priesthood
- b) Take active steps to foster priestly vocations
- c) Use teaching days, conferences and learning communities to encourage lifelong priestly formation

5 Being Intentional in Evangelism

We will:

- a) Support every parish in planning for growth
- b) Create in every local church a culture of invitation and warm hospitality
- c) Encourage evangelistic and teaching events
- d) Plant new Eucharistic communities

6 Serving the Common Good

We will:

- a) Be a prophetic voice for the poor and vulnerable
- b) Re-commit ourselves to service and proclamation in the most deprived parts of the country
- c) Protect the integrity of creation

Maybe this developing agenda is one that can inspire more broadly?

Let me finish with a word about priesthood, since many of you here are Ordained. We know of course that the key feature of a growing church is laypeople who are confident in living out their faith in their daily lives. But to achieve that, the priest must set the tone. I knew one priest who told me that our job is to equip and feed our laypeople so that they can be the witnesses on the frontline. But that is not enough. We must lead by doing it ourselves. *We are* the frontline.

Priesthood is innately evangelistic. Think of Maundy Thursday and two actions of the priest at the Mass of the Lord's Supper. We wash the feet of our people. We hold Jesus

high in the host and show him to the world. Service and proclamation. It is a huge statement of the evangelistic dimension of our call. So live the Mass you celebrate:

Preach a simple Gospel and call people to respond.

Locate your ministry at the edges.

Spend time with the people you find hard.

Use the dog collar as a chance to open up conversations that matter.

Pray with people.

Talk about Jesus. And actually the funny thing is, it's what people expect.

Above all – seek Jesus in every aspect of your life. As you evangelise, aim to be evangelised. As you bring Christ to your people, find Christ there.

Just do it. That is my final word to you. How often have you heard Catholics say, 'Well before we can do any mission we need to... get our theology right, sort out the building, improve the worship etc etc etc.' We just need to get on and do it. There are people out there who are longing to meet Jesus in the Eucharist. Let's commit our lives under God to them. Think Nike. Just do it.

+Philip Burnley

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