

PENTECOST SUNDAY

May 23, 2021

I.

Including this cathedral,
there are eight churches in the Diocese of Richmond dedicated to the Sacred Heart.

From 2011 to 2014,
I was pastor of one of them:
Sacred Heart in Danville,
which sits on the border of Virginia and North Carolina,
in the middle of the commonwealth.

That parish is large in terms of territory;
it includes all of Pittsylvania County and the independent city of Danville—
about the size of Rhode Island!

In Danville, Catholics make up one percent of the population.

Catholics who moved there from a more Catholic area
have the novel experience of being a religious minority
and living in a mission territory.

Sacred Heart parochial school has served Catholics and non-Catholics for 68 years,
and has played a role in helping Catholics to be accepted in local society.

While I was in Danville, an interesting encounter took place at the school.

It was toward the end of Lent,
and the statues both inside and outside the school were covered,
according to that meaningful Catholic custom.

The UPS driver witnessed this phenomenon each day
when he delivered his packages.

He was intrigued by it,
so he asked someone in the school:
“Why are the statues covered?”

The person who answered was a capable missionary-on-the-spot, and explained that the veiled statues were a sign of mourning as the Church prepared to commemorate the death of Christ on Good Friday.

The UPS driver, very respectfully and graciously, thanked the person for the information.

II.

We can easily understand that experience as a missionary encounter.

Most of the 36,000 square miles of the Diocese of Richmond— it's the 26th largest diocese in the United States, out of 176 dioceses— is one in which Catholics are a distinct minority.

The Richmond and Tidewater areas are exceptions to that norm, although even here Catholics are still a minority.

In the diocese as a whole, we are 200,000 Catholics who make up just five percent of the population.

Catholics in the Diocese of Richmond have lived in mission territory since 1820, clearly outnumbered by Protestants.

III.

Today, we are living in a mission territory in a second sense: over the last 40 or 50 years, the surrounding culture and population has become less religious.

Increasingly, the secular culture has moved from neutrality toward religion to outright hostility.

Sensing that seismic shift in religious attitudes, particularly in Europe and the United States, popes, beginning with St. Paul VI and especially St. John Paul II, have called for a “New Evangelization.”

The New Evangelization is not a new program but rather a paradigm shift: it means inspiring, encouraging, and equipping lay Catholics to give bolder witness to their faith, in ordinary life, toward baptized Catholics who have lapsed from the practice of the faith.

In other words, it's often people's own homes, schools, and workplaces that have become mission territory.

That consideration brings us to Pentecost.

Today's feast commemorates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with Christ's promise, upon the first group of disciples.

It's because of this event that the disciples, empowered by the Spirit, became the Church.

This is because only then do they proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ, for the forgiveness of sins, to the whole world.

The Sacrament of Confirmation is the special renewal of Pentecost in the Church.

This weekend, adults and adolescents in the parish are preparing to receive this special gift of the Holy Spirit so that they can give more effective witness to their faith.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches the following:

“By the Sacrament of Confirmation, [the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed” (no. 1285).

What does it mean, concretely, to give witness to one's faith, and to spread and defend it?

It means living out one's faith fully, in all aspects of life, and not compartmentalizing or privatizing it.

It means seizing opportunities to tell others why one is a Catholic, to explain the tenets of the faith, and to invite others, especially those who are separated from the Church, to practice the faith.

Being Catholics in the United States,
we get nervous when we hear those things.

We think that only fanatical Protestants do that,
and we don't want to impose our beliefs on others.

But what we rightly fear is proselytizing, not evangelizing.

Evangelization **proposes**; it does not **impose**.

Evangelization is urgent because the surrounding culture
no longer assists the Church in transmitting the faith.

That train has left the station a long time ago.

And the pandemic has made the situation more urgent,
because many Catholics have not yet returned to Mass,
and scores of people are suffering from the effects of isolation and loneliness.

Within the great project of evangelization,
you, the lay faithful, are the tip of the Church's missionary spear.

That is the dignity and greatness of your call.

My calling as a priest, is to serve and support you,
so that you can bear witness to the faith in the world,
in places where I cannot go.

Phrased another way,
I consecrate the Eucharist for you,
so that you can consecrate the world to God.

There are things that parishes can and should do to assist in evangelization.

But evangelization is not a program; it's a paradigm.

You can give bolder witness to your faith right now,
especially because you've been baptized and confirmed.

And you're already here because you believe in God.

To be effective, evangelization must be personal:
one-on-one, based on a relationship.

That's how it was at the beginning.

Each of us can reach people within our own social sphere.

God has given us unique gifts and talents to do that, and he will help us.

So, an encouragement:

Check in with someone who's been away from Mass
and ask how he or she is doing.

Give witness to your own faith:
explain why you come to Mass, and how it affects your life;
explain why the Mass is important,
that it makes present Jesus' death and resurrection,
allowing us to receive Christ himself in Holy Communion.

Answer the person's questions and concerns,
while always respecting his or her decision not to attend Mass.

Never pass judgment, nor engage in guilt-tripping or browbeating.

Pentecost includes a miracle of languages;
the disciples spoke in a multitude of tongues to explain to all peoples
what God had done in Christ.

This event means that the Church can reach the whole world
only through the witness of each diverse member.

We don't have to worry about "closing the deal," and convincing someone.

Only the person himself or herself can be convinced,
in his or her own conscience.

We only have to show and explain why we are Catholics,
and what God has done for us.

Above all, we don't need to be afraid
because God is with us.

We have been baptized with the Holy Spirit—
empowered to give witness, by our whole lives, to the faith we profess.