

HeartBeat

By Leisa Anslinger

In a newspaper called HeartBeat, the cover story recently featured a young girl with celiac disease preparing to receive Holy Communion for the first time. The story told of her mother's journey through worry about her daughter's health, physical and spiritual, as the family learned to adapt to Jessica's special dietary restrictions. Jessie's mom shared the joy of discovering a new, extremely low gluten host and she described the importance of her pastor's support as details for the host's use were worked out. A photo of a happy Jessie invited readers into their story of faith in the midst of trial, and of the community of which they are a part.

An inside story included an invitation to a special gathering called "Open Door," for those who wish to inquire about the Church, or Catholics who have been away and are now ready to return. "Open Door" is held on a Sunday afternoon about every four months, and is facilitated by members of the RCIA and Come Home teams.

Page 4 featured an article by a new parishioner who had recently attended a gathering in the home of a member of the stewardship commission. In the next column was a companion story, written by the woman at whose home the gathering was held. Dee described the surprise of a power outage that resulted in an unexpected candlelight reception and the fun of recognizing the new parishioners at Mass and other parish events.

On the facing page, a description of a new outreach to three local urban parishes was included. These parishes in the inner city have begun a leader formation process through the financial and personal support of this suburban parish. A garage sale in benefit of a community in Nicaragua is featured on page 9, followed by an article about an up-coming workcamp experience for parish youth, and an announcement of a Mass that will include communal anointing of the sick, with an explanation of the history of the sacrament of the sick, helping people to see that the sacrament isn't just for those who are dying.

The newspaper in which these articles were featured is mailed to the homes of every registered family in my parish six times each year. "HeartBeat" is a way for us to share our stories and invite others to join us as we grow in love of God and service to one another. Not only does the paper reach those who are active and are encouraged to continue to grow through the articles it contains, those who are less involved also receive the paper, through which they hear of many ways in which they can become connected to our faith community, and through the community to Christ. HeartBeat is a wonderful means of evangelization.

There is an inside joke among the high school students in my parish, that we often use "big words." A "big word" is one with profound meaning, one that seems to defy complete definition. Using that description, "evangelization" is a really big word, one that summarizes the very purpose and mission of the Church: spreading the Good News of Christ in present time and local place. We use ordinary actions to share and grow in Christ's saving love: "Proclamation, witness, teaching, sacraments, love of neighbor: all of these aspects are the means by which the one Gospel is transmitted and they constitute the essential elements of

evangelization itself.” The whole action of evangelization is greater than the sum of these parts, however. Evangelization is a “complex, rich and dynamic reality.” (GDC #46)

The parish, that local place in which we as Church gather, celebrate, learn, grow and from which we go forth, should bear striking resemblance to that “dynamic reality” of evangelization of which the General Directory for Catechesis speaks. In our communities, the simple power of God with and among us can flourish, drawing others into Christ’s midst, and encouraging living faith in each of us. Evangelization, for us as individuals and as a community of people who are Church together, isn’t about a series of activities, initiatives or ideas to interest one another or attract new members. Evangelization is an outgrowth of a living relationship with Christ. Once in love with God, people will naturally share that love with others in a complex, rich and dynamic way. “An ardent longing to invite others to encounter Jesus is the spark that starts the evangelizing mission.” (NDC #17A) When the community possesses such a longing, we can develop a climate in which individuals and the community may become evangelized and evangelizing, renewed and renewing.

A climate of evangelization develops in a fluid manner, as people experience Christ’s presence with and among each other. As we become more mindful of our mission to evangelize, many of the ordinary things we already do within our parishes can be accomplished with a new sense of purpose. How might parish festivals, picnics, or harvest dinners become moments of evangelization, for example? What about baptism or marriage preparation, or the celebration of those sacraments?

This year, our annual retreat day for our pastoral council and advisory commission members included a brief presentation on evangelization. We were encouraged to think about the many simple ways that we already spread the good news of Christ to others, how we already encourage members to grow in faith, and how we might be more intentional in the ways in which we “proclaim Christ, preach Christ, bear witness to Christ, teach Christ, and celebrate Christ’s sacraments. (NDC, #17C). Following that presentation, our Faith Formation Advisory Commission discussed ways in which we might support simple evangelization. One of our members offered to prepare a brief presentation that could be used to introduce those involved in ministry to key principles of evangelization. The presentation has now been shared with our Pastoral Council, and soon will be presented to others, commission to commission, ministry to ministry. The idea is simple: help others understand what it means to evangelize, and encourage them to look at their ministry in light of the principles presented. By doing so, we will be able to acknowledge and celebrate the evangelization that is already taking place, and we’ll grow in the ways in which we evangelize in the future. Knowing that each ministry is made up of people who wish to serve God in the best way possible, we are sure that inviting reflection on the mission we share as Church will bear much fruit.

Remember that cover story written by Jessica’s mother? Something she said in the article seems to be a fitting close to this exploration, in the hope that each of us will continue to find ways to simply evangelize in our lives and within our community of faith. Karen said,

“My baby step of faith – trusting that somehow this would work – has humbled me by reminding me of so much more... I am being taught about faith through a little girl with loads of it. Rest assured, she is most certainly not perfect (ask those who know her!) But

she is who God made her. She is following a path that she is called to. She has celiac for a reason. When I question why Jessica, or why us, I seem to hear the answer that we need to teach other families and children facing these issues.... As I watch Jessica with tears in my eyes, it will be in thanks for a little girl's faith, and with thanks for those who journey with me, our community of faith."

Now that's simple evangelization!

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