

Commentary: In this fast-paced world, evangelization requires a personal connection

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Technology has increased the frequency and pace of most forms of communications. Many people feel overwhelmed. In the 1970s, people were exposed to 500-2,000 advertising messages a day, according to one report, while now it is 5,000 or more.

Yet, Catholic messages about tolerance, perseverance and lifelong effort at doing good can be complex. They require stories and entail explanation. They involve Scripture and descriptive language. Personal, human connection is an essential element of effective Christian communication. Evangelization, the process of spreading the Gospel message, can take years to make a difference in people's lives. Many people, married to a Catholic spouse for a dozen or more years, convert only after a significant life event, such as an illness, alters the way they perceive those messages.

The answer to the communications clutter, said speakers at a recent International Catholic Stewardship Council conference in New Orleans, is neither to dummy down nor to clip the message. Evangelization messages need to be compelling and personal. Shorter doesn't necessarily mean better. Communicating in a way that fosters a connection between people and with God is at the heart of evangelization whether through electronic means or old-fashioned, in-person speaking.

Conference speakers Tony Brandt and Chris Stewart of Casting Nets shared seven pillars of evangelization: being prayerful, invitational, hospitable, inspirational, sacramental, formative and mission-full. Mary Ann Otto, the Stewardship and Special Projects director at the Diocese of Green Bay in Wisconsin, suggested that evangelization starts literally on the front steps of parish churches with greeters whose smiles become living examples of hospitality. Amberly Boerschinger, the communications coordinator at Resurrection Parish in Green Bay put it this way: Show people grace in mercy in their lives so that they can focus on faith. "Ask them what they need," she said, "and respond to those needs."

In Hawaii, Catholics reflexively infuse evangelization with respect and listening as aspects of the aloha spirit. But evangelizing with the aloha spirit does not mean evangelization “lite.” Instead, it means respecting every individual whether in parish pews or out in the community, listening to understand individuals’ perspectives and their struggles, and sharing the good news of the Gospel in a joyful way. It can also mean speaking hard truths about the unacceptability of ignoring Hawaii’s homeless population. It means naming the human impact of disregarding poverty in each neighborhood or just down the street.

According to Pope Francis, every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization. He says that, indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Evangelizing is communication. Today, that means speaking, writing, photographing, videotaping, Facebook posting, and person-to-person talking about the life of Jesus. Electronic communications are fast paced, yet “e”vangelizing does not mean reducing the Gospel to a sound bite. It does mean recognizing that people’s lives are cluttered and that communications can be messy. It means persisting in the face of new technology and reaching out to others in a spirit of humility and love.

The authors are members of the Diocese of Honolulu’s Stewardship and Development Commission and recently attended the annual International Catholic Stewardship Council’s conference in New Orleans with 20 other clergy and lay people from Hawaii.