

A pastor was walking down the road and came to a dead mule that had been hit by a truck. He recognized the mule and walked to the owner's house to tell him about it and to express his regrets. The owner of the mule said, "Well, it is the custom here for the persons who find something like that to take responsibility for burying it." "All right," the pastor said, "but I just thought I'd notify the next of kin."

A new priest from up north was assigned to the south Georgia peanut-growing country, and he had some difficulty in understanding the ways of the South. One day he was in the confessional, and 3 boys came in to confess. He asked the first two how they had sinned and they answered in turn, "We've been throwing peanuts in the river." He didn't understand how that was a sin, but he didn't want to appear stupid, so he absolved them, and they left. However, after he had absolved the third boy of some minor infraction, he asked, "Why is it bad to throw peanuts in the river?" "I'm Peanuts," said the boy.

First, a word about repentance. Jesus tells us to repent, and believe in the gospel. We tend to reduce repentance to the sacrament of confession, or trying to make up for something we have done wrong. And while those are part of it, they are not the whole of it. In his book *HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN*, the late poet and essayist Brian Doyle reflects on "the one sweet thing about being Catholic": Confession, asking and receiving forgiveness. But Doyle gives this a much richer treatment, closer to what Jesus means in the gospel. He writes: "After you leave the church, you walk to the river and while you are pretending to watch for herons, You envision each person against whose holiness you did sin, And to each you apologize, and ask for forgiveness. Some of Them are long gone from this world but not from the Infinite Mercy who remembers all levels and forgetteth not a sparrow. You are absolved not (just) when a man says so but when you have Asked, with every fiber of your being, to be forgiven, to walk Home clean, to start again, to be possible. What we really ask For in the sacrament of Reconciliation is to be a question mark Again, to be verb, to be not what we did but what we might Yet be able to do; a map of the unknown, an unfinished song."

When Jesus calls us to repent, He's not calling us to cease and desist; He's not calling us out for our sins and failures. Repentance is a call to change, to look at our lives and our world in a new light, to become the person of hope and faith we seek to be. The Eastern Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware writes that, correctly understood, repentance "means, not self-pity or remorse, but conversion, the re-centering of our whole life upon the Trinity. It is to look, not backward with regret – but forward with hope – not downwards at our own shortcomings, but upwards at God's love. It is to see, not what we have failed to be, but what by divine grace we can now become; and it is to act upon what we see. To repent is to open our eyes to the light. In this sense, repentance is not just a single act, an initial step, but a continuing state, an attitude of heart and will that needs to be ceaselessly renewed up to the end of life." (From *THE ORTHODOX WAY*, by Kallistos Ware) (taken from *CONNECTIONS*, 24 Jan 2021) THAT'S the notion of repent that become the foundation of a life in pursuit of something deeper, richer, and more fulfilling – a life in Christ.

Second, the disciples are called to be fishers of men and women. And that task has been handed on to us through our baptism. We are the church. The church exists to evangelize. To share this good news of Jesus with others. The reality is that we are ALL evangelists. But most of us are not evangelizing about Jesus. Just see how passionate some people are when they talk about their iPhone. They tell you why they love it so much, point out the favorite apps and features, and by the time they are finished we probably want one for ourself. That is evangelization. The other day someone was lamenting that Apex used to be such a nice quiet little town. And now it's exploded. We have only ourselves to blame. So many of us moved here from the north. We kept bragging about the climate, the natural beauty, the low cost housing – and voila! We

evangelized ourselves out of nice quiet little Apex! The truth is that we ARE evangelists. The question is what we are evangelizing about. I read that the average American church goer invites someone to church every 14 years. How many of you are past due?! Jesus did not command the whole world to go to church. Jesus commanded the church to go to the whole world. (Evangelist Greg Laurie)

Humor writer Ed McManus said one day he was late leaving home for work. There was a knock at his front door. It was wet and cold outside. He opened the door and there stood 2 Jehovah's Witnesses, damp and shivering in the cold. They asked if they could come inside. Well, he couldn't leave them standing there, so he said okay. He brought them into his living room and offered them a chair and a cup of tea. They were quiet for a long time, so he asked – "What happens now?" The older one said, "We don't know. We never got this far before."

We have often thought of evangelization in that door-knocking kind of way – or as a mostly head thing – using words – apologetics – to convince people that the Catholic faith is the one, true faith. It hasn't worked. Christianity is supposed to be a process of attraction, not of promotion. Christianity is at its best when it is lived out – rather than when we speak about it. The paradox is that living it is the best way to speak about it. We need to let our lives speak. (Adapted from Matthew Kelly)

It is not for us to worry about a person's worthiness – their marital status, their sexual orientation, their morality. The command is "Be ye fishers of men. You catch them. He'll clean them." It's not up to us to decide whether they are ready or not – worthy or not. Jesus pulled everyone in. If they fell in love with Him, they changed. He didn't tell them to do it. When we fall in love, we are willing to turn our whole lives upside down to pursue what we love.

The best way to share our faith is to celebrate it. To live our own lives to the fullest. To embrace life with both arms wide open, to lay our lives enthusiastically at the service of humanity, to love deeply the people who cross our paths, and above all, to embrace God in the midst of it all. Life should never be wasted. Not one moment, because life is precious.

I believe the best way to defend the faith is to celebrate the faith. The best way to celebrate Catholicism is to live the faith more fully with each passing day, allowing it to reach into every corner of our lives. When Catholicism is the foundation of our family life, our social life, our intellectual life, our spiritual life, our community life, and our professional life, then we will have established an integrated life – a life of integrity. That unity of life will speak more powerfully than any words can ever speak. And if just a handful of people in one place and one time will give their whole selves to seeking, discovering, embracing, and living this life, they can change the whole course of human history.

We can celebrate anything we wish. We can celebrate life and faith. We can celebrate love and honesty, beauty, goodness, and redemption. Or we can celebrate destruction and superiority. We can celebrate hatred and violence, selfishness and greed, contempt and disrespect. We can celebrate corruption, pride, and deceit. But one thing is certain, we become what we celebrate. This is the one immutable truth found in the life of every person who has ever lived. We become what we celebrate. It is true not only in the life of a person, but also in the life of a family. It is true in the life of a nation, and it is true in the life of the church. (adapted from REDISCOVERING CATHOLICISM, Matthew Kelly, p. 50-51)

But one of the simplest tools of evangelization is our welcoming presence to the people we encounter. A young boy from a non-Christian family named Palmer Ofouku was placed in a mission school by his Nigerian

parents because they knew he would receive a good education there. He attended the school for a number of years, yet he did not convert to Christianity. He remained an adherent of a traditional African religion.

One year a new missionary came to the school who began to develop close relationships with the students, including Palmer. Eventually the missionary's welcome led Palmer to Christ. Palmer Ofouku explained the missionary's influence like this: "He built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across." It's a great definition of evangelization – and it is not above the capabilities of any one of us in this church. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Jan-Feb 2012, p. 29-30)

I conclude with these beautiful words from Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston, which sums up what we have to offer in our sharing of the good news of the gospel. He writes: "I have encountered God in the unexpected -- and lost God in the familiar. I have been carried on people's shoulders -- and have been thrown beneath the bus. I have discovered the sacred in places of struggle -- and the humble in places full of privilege. I have searched like a miner for meaning -- and practiced the science of wonder. I have walked empty halls called holy, heard wordless sermons, listened to songs of adoration gone suddenly silent. I am a doubter by trade and a disciple by vocation. Like all seekers, I have a long story to tell, full of the beauty and pain of living." (adapted from HOMILETICS ONLINE, 24 January 2021, p. 10)

This is OUR story, my friends, the story of Jesus Christ – fully alive in our midst and in our lives. We need to share this wonderful Catholic gift with others. Let the Church say AMEN.