



Evangelization Is Priority One

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD  on FIRE.

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Transcript taken from a talk given by
Bishop Robert Barron.

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The number one concern of everybody at every level of the Church's life, very much including religious educators, is evangelization and the crisis of evangelization that I think we all have to respond to in our own way. To get at this, I will go back to the June 2014 Presbyteral Day in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

At that point, I was rector of the seminary at Mundelein. It was Cardinal Francis George's last opportunity to speak at Presbyteral Day. "He was actually in the waning months of his own life, and he died just about a year after that talk. But Cardinal George gathered with about six hundred or seven hundred Chicago priests. He talked about his many years as a priest and bishop and then went into some of the institutional issues that we were facing with our parishes, schools, finances, and so on.

But then he said something that I consider truly prophetic: "Brothers, remember something. At the beginning of the Church's life, there were no Catholic parishes. There were no Catholic schools. There were no Catholic hospitals. There were no chancery offices. There was no USCCB. There was no Vatican. There was no institutional structure in the earliest days. However," he said, "there were evangelists."

Now I say it was a prophetic remark, and not because the cardinal was somehow denigrating parish life or saying that our institutions aren't important or we shouldn't worry about them. He did in fact tell us how worried he was about them. However, he was reminding us of the priority. What has been true now up and down the life of the Church from the beginning to today, the one thing that's absolutely essential, is not the institutional structures, as good as they might be, as effective as they might be, but evangelization. Go back to the Church of Peter and Paul and James and John and Mary Magdalene and all those hundreds and thousands of others whose names have been lost to history who proclaimed Jesus risen from the dead. They are the reason why there is a Church at all.

What's our priority? Are we into maintenance or mission? Again, we always have to worry about maintaining our institutions, but if the maintenance of our institutions takes priority over the mission of evangelizing, something's going wrong, because there weren't any of those things in the beginning, but there were always evangelists. So, to this day, there must be evangelists. I would say that given this crisis of disaffiliation we're going through, especially with the young, this must be a priority at every level of the Church's life. You know who comes to mind here, of course, is Pope Francis, who from the very beginning of his papacy has insisted upon a Church that goes out from itself. When

the Church is turned inward, it becomes sclerotic and sick. The Church is meant to go out in an evangelizing spirit.

In a way, I'm backing away from the specifics of education, though I think it touches on education at every level, but I'm taking a somewhat higher perspective to look at the nature of evangelization. Just recently, the new General Directory for Catechesis came out from the Vatican. The central theme of it is that all of our teaching and all of our catechesis must be evangelizing in nature. They're getting that right, it seems to me; they're finding the priority correctly.

There are five areas that I think are essential to evangelization today. Here's the first one and the most important: Evangelization has to do primarily with proclaiming Jesus risen from the dead. Look at the word 'evangelization,' from the Greek *euangelion*. So *eu* always means "good" in Greek, and then *angelion* is "message"; together, they mean "good news." Can we distill from the great religions and religious philosophies of the world a sort of generic spirituality? Yes. If you look at Hinduism and Buddhism and Judaism and Islam and the great religious poets and mystics, can you distill from that a sort of general spiritual perspective? I think so. Read some of the New Age material, or even watch anything that Oprah puts out; there is a generic spirituality that we can talk about there.

But that's not evangelization, because evangelization has to do with good news. Something happened two thousand years ago, and these first Christians wanted to tell the whole world about it. Something new broke through, which we couldn't learn on our own. We couldn't come up with the kerygma through our own poetic and spiritual musings. No, God has done something that's turned the whole world upside down. That's good news.

Now, again that word *euangelion*, there's a Jewish sense of it because a Jew would hear that and think of the prophet Isaiah, who said, "how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who bring good news" (Isa. 52:7). That's from the second section of Isaiah where they're talking about the return of the exiles from Babylon. Good news has to do with a liberation from slavery, a liberation from exile.

Euangelion also had a very Roman sense. When a Roman general or the emperor won a great victory, he would send evangelists out ahead of him to announce the good news that the emperor or the general has won a great victory. So bring those two together, the Jewish sense and the Roman sense. A great victory has been won, which amounts to a liberation. That's evangelization. What were the first Christians talking about? The cross and the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. On that awful cross, the Son of God took upon himself all human dysfunction.

That is a way to read those still-startling Passion narratives, because you see in them all these forms of human sinfulness and dysfunction, cruelty and hatred and violence and injustice and so on. All of it is taken upon the Son of God, and then in the Resurrection, all of it has been conquered. God's love, the first Christians realized, is greater than anything that is in the world. Whatever the world can throw at us, God's love is greater. This is the news that they wanted to go out to all the world, to grab them by the shoulders and by the lapels and tell them about.

Stay with that image for a second. If you look at the great religious poets and philosophers and mystics, there's a kind of calmness in their rhetoric, and that's okay. They're articulating basic serene truths about the spiritual order. But then read the New Testament. I mean all of it—the Gospels, the Pauline letters, Acts of the Apostles, and the book of Revelation. Read every book of the New Testament. What do you find? Not serene mystical musings. You hear people that want to grab you by the lapels and tell you good news. That's evangelization.

When Paul speaks of the cross of Jesus, we naturally think, "Yeah, the cross of Jesus. What a beautiful religious reality." But put yourself back in that time. The cross was the most horrific thing these people could imagine. To be put to death on this awful instrument

of torture was the means by which Rome terrorized its enemies. Paul in contrast says, I'm going to hold it up. The one thing I'm going to preach to you is the cross of Jesus. They must have thought he was mad.

What was he doing? He was taunting the Roman world. You think that scares us? God's love is more powerful than anything you can do. That's the Good News. Hence why the tyrants trembled, as they always have, at this news. Turn the Resurrection into a bland myth or symbol, and the tyrants aren't worried. That's stuff they can knock around in the faculty lounge. But when you come out and you say, and you really mean it, "Jesus Christ is risen from the dead," the tyrants will always tremble at that because now God's love is revealed as more powerful than anything they can throw at us.

So Paul taunts the world with it, and still does. We should recover the radicality of the cross and how frightening it is to those who trade in oppression.

Just one more remark about the Resurrection. It shows the relativity of death. Death broods over the whole of life. Tyrants and oppressors use the fear of death to keep people in line. The Resurrection, however, reveals that death does not have the final word. Life is more powerful than death.

Again, the best way to undermine all this is to turn the Resurrection into a vague myth or legend or symbol or literary device. When you do that, you undercut evangelization. You say, “Oh, it’s a nice myth or metaphor from the ancient world.” In that case, who cares? Any poet could come up with that. That has no earth-shaking significance. The first Christians wouldn’t go careering around their world to announce a poetic metaphor. No, look at the New Testament again now with this in mind, and when we evangelize, we should bring that same energy and enthusiasm about the Resurrection of Jesus.

The next point about evangelization is that it has to do with the lordship of Jesus. Because we declare him risen from the dead, we also declare him Lord. I’ve hinted at this, that ‘Lord’ had a Roman connotation at that time, because people would say *Kaiser kurios*, the Greek for “Caesar is the Lord.” So when Paul says in his letter *Iēsous kurios*, “Jesus is Lord,” we say, “Yeah, that’s a nice religious thing to say.” But in his time, that was a subversive thing to say. Caesar is not the Lord. Jesus is Lord. He is the one to whom our allegiance is due. He is the one in whose nonviolent army we should get involved. But now there’s also a Jewish sense to the lordship of Jesus. Of course, Paul knew this great tradition. When they wanted to refer to God, they wouldn’t use his unspeakable name, the Tetragrammaton. We say Yahweh, but they would never have said that. They

couldn't pronounce the name of God, so as a kind of circumlocution, they would call him "the Lord."

Right away, the first Christians begin referring to the Lord Jesus. If you're a Jew of the first century, you're not going to miss that. These people are claiming that this risen Jesus is divine, that in fact he is who he said he was. Look back at the Gospels. Time and again, Jesus speaks and acts in the very person of God. To the paralyzed man, "My son, your sins are forgiven." Right away the bystanders quite correctly say, "Well, who's this guy think he is? Only God can forgive sins" (cf. Mark 2:5-7).

That's the point. "You've heard it said . . . but I say." You've heard it said in the Torah, which is the highest possible authority for someone in the Jewish tradition. You've heard it said there in the Law that was given to Moses by God himself. "But I say." Who could say that coherently and consistently but the one who in fact authored the Torah? Referring to himself, he says that "you have something greater than the temple here" (cf. Matt. 12:6). Again, that probably will just sort of roll through our minds, but it didn't roll through their minds. The temple was the meeting place of divinity and humanity, the most sacred place imaginable. That was God's home. For Jesus to say in reference to himself, "You have something greater than the temple here," means that he is the dwelling place of God.

“Unless you love me more than your mother and your father, more than your very life, you’re not worthy of me” (cf. Luke 14:26). It’s breathtaking, isn’t it? We can imagine a religious philosopher or a religious founder saying, “Unless you love God more than you love your parents or your very life.” But to say “Unless you love me more than the highest goods”? Who could say that coherently except the one who is himself the highest good?

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus speaks and acts in the person of God. That’s why he went to the cross. They didn’t miss this back then. That’s exactly why he was accused of blasphemy. Hanging on that cross, anyone would’ve said, “Well, there he is, the poor guy, this poor deluded fellow.”

So in the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, what did they see with great clarity? You see it in the Gospel of John when the risen Christ appears. Remember, Thomas is not there the first time, but the second time he is there and Jesus says, “Put your fingers in the wounds in my hands. Put your hand in my side.” What does Thomas say? “My Lord and my God” (cf. John 20:27–28). It’s the culminating point in some ways of the Gospel of John, when Thomas acknowledges and the whole Church does it with him: now we know you are who you said you were.

If Jesus Christ is Lord, the one to whom allegiance is due, the one who is himself God from God, light from light, true God from true God, then I have to give my whole life to him. He can't be one figure among many. "I love the Buddha and Muhammad. I love the Sufi mystics and all the great poets." Mind you, I'm not denigrating any of these people because none of them ever claimed what Jesus claimed about himself. I say it to their credit, the Buddha, Muhammad, Moses, Confucius, and so on. None of these people ever claimed what Jesus claimed.

But now in the light of the Resurrection, now that I know he is who he says he was, I have to give my whole life to him. He can't be one among many. He has to be the one who has my whole mind, my whole heart, all my energy, all my enthusiasm. In the presence of Jesus, we can't have a bland "live and let live" attitude. As he himself said, "Either you're with me or you're against me" (cf. Matt. 12:30). He compels a choice the way no other founder does.

If you want to be an evangelist, and that's the number one priority for everybody in the Church right now, you have to see the lordship of Jesus. You have to be able to make this move where you say, "My relationship to him is the central value of my life." Evangelization is not sharing information about Jesus. Believe me, I think that's a very important thing, but that

belongs more to theology and apologetics. Evangelization, rather, is sharing a relationship, a friendship. This friendship I have with Jesus, the Lord, is the most important friendship of my life, and I want to share it with you. You have the old Roman adage, *Nemo dat quod non habet*. No one gives what he doesn't have. Dead right, and it's dead right in this context. If you don't have a living relationship with Jesus the Lord, if you don't make him central to your life, then you can't share that friendship effectively with others.

The General Directory on Catechetics makes this point over and over again that teachers of the faith have to know a lot about it. What they're primarily doing is sharing this friendship with the risen Lord Jesus, God from God, light from light, true God from true God. If you don't have that, you won't evangelize.

There was a survey that was done several years ago on what makes a mentor or a teacher compelling to younger people. My generation really emphasized relevance. What supposedly makes evangelists compelling is that they ape the popular culture and they can get in the kids' world and speak the lingo of young people and all this. This survey argued the contrary. Whether you're teaching a sport or a musical instrument or religion, here's what young people find compelling: (1.) When you're passionate about your subject and (2.) You know a lot about it. Those two things. You don't have

to be flashy, you don't have to be relevant, you don't have to be aping whatever the current popular culture is dictating, but they have a sense that you think it's really important. And then you know a lot about it. When those two things come together, young people find you compelling.

The first part of that is the lordship of Jesus. That is this personal relationship with him that is the most important friendship of your life. I don't care whether you're a teacher, a priest, a preacher, anywhere in the Church, people have to sense that from you or you won't evangelize.

My third point is to stop dumbing down the faith. We must stop dumbing down the faith if we want to evangelize. In that survey, the second factor is that you know a lot about your subject. After the Second Vatican Council, though not because of it, there was a dumbing down of the faith.

My generation was the first one to receive the full brunt of this dumbing down. We've had at least another generation that has continued under the weight of this dumbered-down presentation. I'll say it bluntly: it has been a pastoral disaster. I'm not just whistling Dixie here; I know this from survey after survey after survey. When they ask young people why they left the faith, they will come forward with intellectual reasons.

They'll often say something like "My questions never got answered." Or they'll say, "Science and religion conflict." Or, "I was never given a rational justification." This dumbed-down presentation in the name of relevance or making it more acceptable or whatever it was has been demonstrably a pastoral disaster.

I have recently interacted with a young man named Alex O'Connor. He is in his twenties, studied at Oxford, and is very, very bright. He has an internet presence under the name "Cosmic Skeptic." He's emerged as one of the most popular and articulate evangelists for atheism in the world. Look him up on YouTube. He's talked to some of the leading figures on the atheist side and the religious side. I have had multiple conversations with him at this point, and I like him a lot. I must say, as I was talking to him, I kept thinking, "How did we lose this kid?" I say that because he's a Catholic by birth and by training. He told me that when he was a young kid, he even prayed the Rosary, enduring the taunts of his friends on the bus. He had that kind of bravado and courage. But now he's the Cosmic Skeptic, one of the most powerful atheists in the world. That question was bugging me throughout the interview. So finally I just asked him, "How did we lose you?" His answer was this: "I was never given a reasonable or rational basis for belief." Someone who is supposedly educated in the Church of Augustine, Anselm, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, John Henry Newman, G.K. Chesterton, Flan-

nery O'Connor, and John Paul II could say blithely, "No one ever gave me a reasonable explanation of the faith." That is just a tragedy. This Catholic kid is now the Cosmic Skeptic because he didn't get from his teachers the deep knowledge which is indeed in our great tradition.

Another story that is apposite here. Not too long ago, my niece was going into her senior year in high school. Her books were on the table and my brother proudly said, "Take a look at her books there for the year." She was attending a good Catholic school outside Chicago. I looked at the pile of books and there was Shakespeare for English class, *Hamlet* or one of his other plays. In her science and math classes, she had Einstein and high-level math and physics. She was a Latin student, and she had Virgil's *Aeneid*, which they were reading in the original Latin. Then, underneath those books was this big paperback with a big color photo on the front, with a lot of pictures on the inside. If you haven't guessed it already, that was her religion book. Can you see what the matter is with this picture? Here in a Catholic school, a good school, my niece is getting the highest-level stuff in English, math, science, languages. Religion? We're giving her a kid's book.

Why wasn't she reading Aquinas? Why wasn't she reading Augustine? Why wasn't she reading Chesterton? Why wasn't she reading Newman? No one came

in and dictated this to us, by the way; we did it to ourselves. The dumbing down of the presentation of our faith has been a pastoral disaster, and it does not serve evangelization.

Twice now, I've gone on Reddit and done an AMA (Ask Me Anything). All I said was, "I'm a Catholic bishop who loves talking to atheists and skeptics and non-believers," and both times got this massive response. Again, they don't know me from Adam, I'm sure, but the fact that I was a Catholic bishop saying "Ask me anything you want" was compelling to many. There were four questions that most preoccupied the younger people that use Reddit. (1.) How do you know God exists? (2.) How do you solve the problem of suffering? (3.) How do you know Christianity of all the religions is the right religion? (4.) How do you justify the Church's sexual teaching?

That is not a bad way to structure your religious education for a year, by the way. Take those four questions: God, suffering, the distinctiveness of Christianity, and sexual teaching. I think you could, taking those four questions as basic, produce an entire curriculum for the year. Those are the questions people have. A dumbed-down faith, trust me, is not going to make it.

We also have to use social media in a creative way. For weal or for woe, most people today receive the lion's

share of their religious instruction online. For years, it was from books or courses that we offered or lectures and so on. But let's face it: the overwhelming majority, especially of our young people, learning about religion, positively or negatively, learn about it online. YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit: that's where young people live.

If my own work with Word on Fire has proven anything, it's that people are engaged in that world by religious questions. In 2007, I started doing YouTube videos. I didn't know if they were going to work. My idea was to start with the popular culture, movies and music and books and whatever people are talking about, and then find a link to the Gospel. When we just started making these, I didn't know if anyone would watch.

I remember the very first time one of my videos made it to three hundred views. I was delighted! In time, they were fresh. We put one up frequently. They were interactive. You could make comments, and then I was able, more so in those early years, to respond to the comments. Soon there was a lot of interest. Of course, a lot of it was negative and by people who don't like religion. All right. So what? It gave me a little traction. People that would never darken the doors of institutions were coming to this world.

A couple years ago, I was a delegate to the Youth Synod back in 2018. We gathered in Rome there with Pope Francis every day to talk about outreach to the young. I listened to the presentations, all by good people. But I was getting impatient. I finally expressed my impatience because I said, “So much of our rhetoric was about our parish programs and what we can do at the parish level to bring people and help them. Yeah, I know brothers, that’s great. The parishes are great, but these young people aren’t coming to our parishes. They’re not going to spontaneously come to our little programs. Rather, we have to use this tool, which I think in God’s providence has been given to us, the tool of the new media, precisely at the moment when we most need it.”

When this army of the disaffiliated is running away from us, we do have a way to get into their world, but religion has got to be there as a strong, smart, and passionate presence. Here I’ll speak especially to some younger people who have social media in their blood and their bones. My generation had to learn it. I have wonderful younger people at Word on Fire that know how to do all this. But you who did grow up with it, use it. Think about it creatively.

There are so many ways that you can engage people through social media. Again, I started with the culture. Do it a positive way. I’m not shaking my finger at the

culture but saying, “Hey, this film actually has got a lot of themes that are redolent of Christianity.” Or, “Hey, this issue that everyone’s talking about, there’s a religious dimension to it. Let me tell you about it.” That’s what I did. You do something else if you want. But use it creatively.

I’ve been telling my brother bishops, if I were bishop of a diocese, I would find my brightest young seminarian or priest and send them for doctorates, not to teach in the seminary or in a university but precisely to run the social media in the diocese. Who are your brightest young people that know this world well, that can use it creatively? I think you have to do it.

My last point is that all of us involved in evangelization have to pick up our game in study and prayer. First, a word about study. As I mentioned, we have such a rich theological tradition. It’s one of the glories of Catholicism that we didn’t eschew the intellect. From those earliest days, from Paul and Origen and Irenaeus up until Joseph Ratzinger, we’ve stubbornly thought about the faith.

We’ve produced some of the greatest minds in Western civilization. Read them, study them. Don’t leave them on bookshelves. A dumbed-down Catholicism is not going to be compelling to people. We have the tools required to respond to the kind of questions

that young people have. Trust me when I tell you, they listen carefully to the atheists, old and new. Think of a Christopher Hitchens or a Sam Harris or a Richard Dawkins. These men are very effective evangelists for their own position. We have to out-evangelize them. We know we have a better story, the story of Jesus risen from the dead, but we also have a rich intellectual tradition that explicates that evangelical faith. So study.

Over the years, when I was teaching and then I was rector in the seminary, young seminarians came to me all the time and they would say, “Father, I’d love to do what you’re doing. I want to get involved in social media and evangelizing the culture.” I would say, “Okay, go to the library. Before you even think about new media, you need to get really immersed in the old medium of books. You need to know what you’re talking about. You need to be grounded so you’ve got something substantive to say when these questions and anxieties emerge.” So study. That will give you the knowledge you need to be compelling, especially to young people.

Finally, the most important thing is to pray. Now, I don’t just mean piously mumbling prayers. What I mean is the cultivation of a deeply personal relationship with the risen Lord Jesus Christ. One of my heroes is Fulton Sheen. When I was a young man, Sheen had been largely forgotten. My parents’ generation knew him, and that’s why I knew of him, but he was kind

of rediscovered by the generation after mine. As I was teaching these young men in the seminary, they would talk about Fulton Sheen, and that brought me back into the Sheen world. What most galvanized these young men, even more than the substance of his teaching, was Sheen's insistence upon the Holy Hour, to spend one hour of uninterrupted prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament every day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Yes, even on the weekends, on vacation, etc., make the commitment to spend an hour of uninterrupted prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament every day.

That practice has now revolutionized seminaries and rectories around the country as more and more seminarians and priests have adopted that practice. Now, when I was going through the seminary, if you had said, "Hey, have you done your Holy Hour today?" we wouldn't have known what you were talking about. But now, the Holy Hour for me is now the most important part of my day. I wake up early, and I have the great blessing as a bishop to have a chapel in my home, and I go to the chapel every morning. The first thing I do is spend an hour of uninterrupted prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Now, that's a high ideal. Maybe not everyone can reach that, but I would recommend in a special way the Holy Hour as a way of grounding evangelists in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Again, I love parishes. Of course we want to bring people to our parishes, to Mass, to the Blessed Sacrament, and so on. But right now, in the life of the Church, a lot of people are not coming to our institutions.

I think we have to go get them in the spirit of Peter and Paul, of James and John, of Mary Magdalene. In the beginning of the life of the Church, there were no parishes, schools, hospitals, chanceries, or Vatican, but there were evangelists. So too today, there have to be evangelists if the Church is going to thrive.

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