

THE PURPOSE OF
Evangelization



BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD  on FIRE.

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Transcript taken from a talk given by
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Why do we bother evangelizing? The first reason is to get people out of hell. Now, I mean that in the full eschatological sense of helping people avoid eternal damnation. It is true that the saving of souls is the purpose of evangelization, but I want to focus it a bit because hell begins here on earth just as heaven begins here on earth. We get a taste of heaven in the best moments of life here, and we all know what it means to live in hell. Part of the purpose of evangelization is to help people get out of that condition.

The Buddhists say that the first noble truth is that all life is suffering. It doesn't mean that every single moment of your life is misery, but it's close to our doctrine of original sin—that we have a tendency to get caught in certain addictive and destructive patterns that condition the whole of our lives. Look at the imagery used for hell, the imagery that Jesus used himself with Gehenna. The city of Gehenna was a kind of garbage dump not far from Jerusalem where there was a permanent fire, a bit like a tire fire, where people were burning the trash and the refuse, and the fire never went out.

It's a great image of these addictive and self-destructive patterns that we get into that are like a fire always being kicked up within us. Dante used the opposite image. It wasn't fire for him, but ice. Sin gets us stuck in place. We can't move, we can't reach out to

others. Satan in Dante's *Divine Comedy* is buried up to his waist in ice, and he beats his great angel wings—but all they succeed in doing is making the world around him colder. That's a beautiful image of what sin does to us. It takes the very best in us, what's meant to be angelic in us, and as we exercise it while caught in these addictive patterns, it just makes the world around us colder.

So part of the purpose of evangelization is to get us out of hell. It has a saving purpose. Our word 'save' comes from a Latin word 'salus,' meaning "health." If you were greeting someone in ancient Rome, you would have said "Salve" to them. It meant, "Good health to you." Our word 'salve' has the closest relation to it in English. Part of the purpose of evangelization is to bring healing to people, to show them a way out of the desert, out of the fire, out of the ice, whatever metaphor you want to use. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). We agents of evangelization are meant to be bearers of life, helping people find a way out of hell.

What is hell? Hell is the suffering caused by false praise. What do I mean? St. Augustine reminded us long ago that we are built for God. We are wired for God. We have an infinite longing in our hearts. Only God can satisfy it. Therefore, when I hook that longing onto anything less than God, I'm unsatisfied. I've

always loved the imagery from St. John of the Cross, who said that we have infinite caverns in us. Those caverns symbolize the longing for God, that only the infinite God can satisfy. But what do we do? We spend most of our lives throwing things into those caverns, hoping they will be filled up.

We take the goods of the world, which really are goods but not meant to satisfy our infinite hunger, and we throw them down this infinite cavern. What's the result? We get frustrated, and then in short order, we become addicted. St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that the big four things we seek in place of God are wealth, power, pleasure, and honor. All of us end up, to varying degrees, worshiping some version or combination of those four things. We make them the highest value.

We take wealth or pleasure, power or honor, and then we throw them into these infinite caverns, and they're not filled up because they can't be filled up. And then we panic: I guess the reason I'm not happy is I don't have enough wealth. I don't have enough pleasure. I don't have enough power, enough honor. So I strive and strive and strive to fill up the infinite cavern and it doesn't work. Now a very deep fear sets in, and I'm caught in this self-destructive and addictive pattern. As I exercise my spiritual powers, all I'm doing is making the world around me colder.

The very best biblical image of this is from the Elijah cycle of stories, with Elijah and the priests of Baal on top of Mount Carmel. He tells the priests of Baal, “Go and build your altars to your gods. You cry out, we’ll see what happens. Then I’ll build an altar to God and let’s see who wins.” The priests of Baal honoring false gods—that’s always the problem, false worship.

They build the altars and they pray and they chant and they cajole and they beg and nothing happens. That’s a spiritual lesson of crucial significance because the fire will never fall when we’re worshipping false gods. It just won’t. It’s not meant to. And so they panic and they hop around the altars with greater insistence. And Elijah mocks them. “Maybe their gods are asleep!” (1 Kings 18:27). That’s beautiful spiritual leadership, by the way. We should do more of it.

We often get bullied by secular society. Let’s reverse some of that bullying. I mean that we are the ones who should name the pain of the secular society. The gods you’re worshipping—wealth, pleasure, honor, and power—will never satisfy you because they can’t. So, Elijah mocks them, at which point they begin to slash themselves until the blood flows and still no fire falls. It’s an image of the self-destructive quality of bad praise, the addictive self-destructive quality that makes us miserable and sad.

What saves us? Right praise. Elijah erects the altar to Yahweh, and then after he gives right praise to the true God, the fire falls. It still works that way. Getting people out of hell is getting them out of that terrible addictive tendency to hop around the altars of the priests of Baal. Every sinner that we come across is to some degree in that position. To evangelize is to move him out of it.

The great New Testament version of this is the woman at the well. What does Jesus say to her? You come to this well every day and you drink and you get thirsty again (John 4:13). St. Augustine said the well is indicative of what he called “concupiscent desire.” That’s Aaron’s desire, worshiping of false gods. It’s wealth, it’s power, it’s pleasure, it’s honor. We come to that well every day and we drink, but we get thirsty again. What does Jesus say to her? I want to give you water bubbling up in you to eternal life (4:14). I want to hook you onto the worship of the true God. That’s evangelization.

St. Thomas Aquinas says that this is on full display in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5). Is wealth your problem? A lot of us sinners are addicted to wealth, and we’re caught in that self-destructive pattern. So, what does Jesus say? How blessed are the poor in spirit. How blessed you are if you’re not addicted to wealth. Is pleasure your problem? How blessed are you if you mourn. What a

weird thing to say, right? But interpret it this way: how blessed you are if you're not addicted to pleasure. Is power your hangup? Then how blessed are the meek! I don't know any culture that would ever say to people how blessed they are if they are powerless and meek, but you see what he means: don't be addicted to power. Don't hop around that altar. Maybe honor is your poison. Therefore, how blessed you are when people hate you, when they persecute you because of the Son of Man. How lucky you are if you're not addicted to the approval of others.

Those four addictions overcome, what do we hear? How blessed are the merciful. What is mercy? God is mercy. The merciful are those who have hooked themselves onto the praise of the true God. How blessed are the single-hearted. If your life isn't divided among the goods of the world, it's single-hearted. It's focused on God alone. How blessed are the peacemakers. When you're addicted to one of these worldly goods, you're caught in the self-destructive pattern, you make the world around you colder. When you're hooked on to worship of the true God, when you've been saved, you've been healed, then you become a healer, a life-giver and a peacemaker.

You want to be happy? *Beatitudo*, right? That's the formula: get rid of the four addictions. Hook yourself onto right praise. To evangelize is to draw people into

that space. A little more Thomas Aquinas for you: where do you see the Beatitudes fully exemplified? In the cross of Jesus. Love what Jesus loved on the cross and despise what Jesus despised on the cross. You'll be happy. That's a really interesting little formula. Throw out the Oprah books and all those self-help books. They won't help you. This will help you.

What did Jesus despise on the cross? Well, what's his relationship to wealth there? How wealthy is he on the cross? He has nothing. What's his relationship to pleasure on the cross, at the limit of physical and psychological and even spiritual suffering? "God, my God, why have you abandoned me" (Matt 27:46; cf. Ps. 22:1). How much power does he have on the cross? None. He can't even move. How much honor does he have as they mock him and they spit at him? Nothing at all. He's detached from the four classic addictions. He's not worshiping at those altars. Love what Jesus loved on the cross, which is doing the will of his Father.

Do you see now why from that cross flows healing and salvation? Do you see now why the blood and water flowing from his side can heal us? It's also why St. Paul said that the only thing he knows is Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). I want to hold up Christ crucified because that's the source of healing to us. Just as the bronze serpent lifted up in the desert in the time of Moses brought healing to those who were bitten by

the serpents, so the image of Christ crucified heals. What is Christ crucified but the image of right praise? That's why we gather at Mass, to give right praise to the Father. To evangelize is to get people out of hell, and the way out of hell is the cross of Jesus.

Let me give you reason two why we evangelize: to let people know who their Lord is. Indeed, it gets us out of hell. There's a healing element within evangelization. But God is not satisfied that we're simply healed. That's the first step. But then once we're healed, he wants to send us on mission. Remember when the prophet Isaiah is called and the angel brings the burning coal to his lips (Isa. 6:6)? That's the purifying process. Then almost immediately, Isaiah says, "Here I am. Send me. I'm ready to go." Peter falls at the knees of Jesus. "Lord, leave me. I'm a sinful man." There's the moment of admission of sin and purgation. But then immediately, from then on, he is a fisher of men.

Another way to put this: Which army are you fighting in? You've been healed by the evangelizing word, but now you're ready for mission. You're ready to fight in the army. Those who have a Jesuit formation know that famous meditation in the *Spiritual Exercises* of the two standards. Ignatius invites us to imagine this great field with two armies, the army of Satan and the army of Christ, and the banners of both are flying. You've got a decision to make. Satan will make you field

marshal of his army. He'll offer you anything. Christ might make you the digger of latrines in his army. But the point is, you've got to choose which army you're fighting in.

Some things as you get older become more complicated, but other things become simpler as you get older. This, to me, is one of them. There is a stark either/or in life. My musical hero Bob Dylan put it in his song: "You've got to serve somebody. It might be the devil or it might be the Lord, but you have to serve somebody." It's dead right. Notice the language of service. Everybody is worshiping somebody or something. That's the highest value for everybody. It might be, again, wealth, it might be power, it might be your reputation, it might be your career, it might be your country, any of those things. But everybody's serving somebody, and you've got to decide. Is it God or something other than God? Everything else will flow from that decision. Evangelized people know who their Lord is and whom it is that they serve. Bob Dylan's song goes right back to the book of Joshua. At the end of the book, the Israelites have conquered the Promised Land, where there are people worshiping false gods. Joshua says bluntly to them: time for a decision. You can worship the gods of the peoples here. But as for me and my family, we'll worship the Lord (Josh. 24:15). Bracing, clear, unambiguous, and we've all got to face it.

The spiritual writer Fr. Ron Rolheiser, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, once said that there are two types of people in the world. There are people that suck the air out of the room and people that breathe life into a room. If you say that my life's all about wealth, then the people around me can help me get wealthier. My life's all about power; well, the people around me will just be a means to that end. My life's all about honor; well, then all these people might honor me. So my whole stance is now to draw life out of the room. But those who are free, those who have been saved, "salved" by the cross of Jesus, they're able now to breathe life into a room. So, which army are you in? Are you in the army of those who suck the air out of the room or the army of those who breathe life into the room?

Those who saw the *CATHOLICISM* series might remember this: I did a kind of commentary on the Christmas story, which culminates in an army appearing. It begins by invoking Caesar Augustus, the great emperor of the world, doing a typically imperial thing: calling for a census of the whole world so he could better control it. Talk about sucking the air out of a room. But because of that, this couple no one knows about makes their way from one dusty outpost to another. But the story isn't about Caesar; it's about them. The baby that the mother gives birth to is the true king. Caesar—well-fed, well-protected, in the best house in the world—could satisfy all his desires

with the snap of a finger, and then this baby came in a manger. No place to lay his head, wrapped up in swaddling clothes, surrounded not by courtiers but by shepherds who were considered lowlives.

But the climax of that story is when an angel appears. Of course, what's the reaction to an angel in the Bible? Inevitably it is fear. This reality from another dimensional system appears before me. Then we hear a whole army of angels appear. Now don't get romantic about that or think of Christmas cards. That's meant to be an overwhelming image, an army of angels. But they're not on the side of Caesar, they're on the side of the baby king. *He's* the one with the biggest army. *He's* the one with the true power. Which army will you fight in? Descendants of Caesar's army are all over the place today. They're thick on the ground. Are you going to fight in the baby's army? That's the decision.

Look now at the Gospels under this rubric. John Courtney Murray, the great Jesuit theologian, said the Gospels should be read as the story of an ever-increasing *agon*, the Greek term for "struggle" or "fight." Read the Gospel of John and look at the way each chapter ends. They sound like episodes of *The Sopranos* or *The Godfather*. "They plotted to destroy him" and "They spoke against him" and "They arranged to kill him." Read it as the story of this increasingly intense struggle between two armies if you want. Where does that come to its full expression? On the cross.

What is the cross? Read the Passion narratives of cruelty and hatred and stupidity and blindness and institutional injustice and all the negativity of the world produced by unsaved people, people in hell, people who are caught in these addictive, self-destructive patterns. All the characters that bring Jesus to the cross are meant to exemplify that. Think of the cross itself as a beautiful symbol of the fallen world in all of its power. It's what Rome used to terrify its enemies, and by God, it did terrify Rome's enemies for centuries. It's like the emblem of the fallen world. It's the emblem of hell, the cross.

On that cross, Jesus enters into the ultimate *agon* where his vision of life, his way of being in the world, comes up against the negativity of the world. By all accounts, on Good Friday, Caesar again has won. That's the drama of that day. We're meant to see this great Christ, this Messiah, done in by the power of the world. But then Easter Sunday shows that the love of God and the power of God is greater than anything that is in the world. Jesus went all the way down; he went all the way to the depth of our dysfunction, but then demonstrated that God's love is more powerful than any of the dysfunction of the world, that what was displayed at Christmas is in fact the case, that the angelic army is more powerful than Caesar's army.

That's why when you read the Gospels, they're filled

with this kind of marvelously militaristic language. Even this word that's at the heart of this book, *euangelion*, is good news. But this is what they did in the ancient world. When an emperor or a general won a battle, they would send ahead of them as *evangelists* bearers of good news to say that the emperor had won. You see how edgy, wonderfully edgy these first Christians were when they said that they have the real *euangelion*. It has nothing to do with Caesar, but rather with God's victory over Caesar, God's victory over sin and death and all of their power.

The point of St. Paul, as he evangelized, was to say, "You have a new Lord. It's no longer Caesar." *Kaiser kyrios* was kind of a watchword of the ancient world. "Caesar's the Lord." St. Paul says it's exactly why he ended up in jail. Paul says over and over again, *Jesus kyrios*, and we think it's nice spiritual talk, but that was a very edgy, revolutionary thing to say in the first century, because it meant that Caesar is not the king. Jesus is the king. You're not meant to march finally in Caesar's army; you're meant to march in Jesus' army.

"It may be the devil, it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody." Don't play the autonomy game. We're all serving somebody. Evangelized people have heard the *euangelion* that Jesus, having gone to the limits of godforsakenness, has emerged as the victor. Now, it's time, healed people, to

march in his army. That's what evangelization is about: knowing who your Lord is, whose army you belong to.

Dorothy Day is someone I've admired for a long time, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, now under consideration very seriously for canonization. Way back in the 1930s and 40s, Day was arguing against a distinction that was common at the time—namely, between what we call a “commandment spirituality” meant for the laity and a “counsel spirituality” meant for bishops, priests, nuns, and religious. What this means is that for the laity, they should follow the Ten Commandments, which means you do the basics. Don't kill people, don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't lie, what have you. Then the counsel spirituality, the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, is for the athletes, the spiritual heroes, the bishops, priests, nuns, religious, and monks. Well, Dorothy Day, of course, who was a laywoman, thought this was crazy. She said that all the baptized are called to the full level of holiness. In this, she anticipated the teaching of Vatican II, which famously teaches the universal call to holiness and overcomes the distinction between a mere commandment spirituality and a counsel spirituality. She said that the clergy and religious do live them in a different way, but every baptized person is called to be committed to poverty, chastity, and obedience.

I think it gives us a very good idea of what evangelized people look like. First of all, poverty. Again, the clergy and monks and so on will live this in a distinctive way, that's true. But what is being saved all about? It's about finding detachment from these things that make us crazy, the things that we falsely worship, that get us caught in addictive patterns. To be poor means to be spiritually detached from these things. How often do we even talk about asceticism for all the baptized? That's if you're addicted to pleasure. How about letting go of power? Can you willingly let it go and even run to the other extreme? Abandon your own power. Maybe you're addicted to honor? Can you be detached from it to the extent that you'll even accept the lowest place, the least-honored place?

Maybe where the rubber most meets the road is when it comes to wealth. A lot of us are addicted to wealth. We think that will make us happy and secure. The Church says a lot about wealth though. Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the great first encyclical in the social teaching tradition, says, "When what necessity demands has been supplied, and one's standing fairly taken thought for, it becomes a duty to give to the indigent out of what remains over" (*Rerum Novarum* 22). When the demands of necessity and propriety have been met, everything else you own belongs to the poor. This is what we call the universal destination of goods. That's from Thomas Aquinas,

too. Once the demands of necessity and propriety have been met, everything else you own belongs to the poor.

The United States is about 25 percent Catholic. What if tomorrow all the Catholics in our country decided they were going to live this way? Well, the whole country would change, wouldn't it? It's what evangelized people look like, people who are freed from their attachments and know which army they're fighting in. They know who their Lord is. How about chastity? It doesn't belong uniquely to monks and nuns and priests. No, chastity means sexual uprightness. It means living your sexual life in a morally upright manner. Everyone is called to chastity. The great teaching of the Church is that sexuality belongs within the context of marriage with the great ends of unity and procreation in mind.

Now, why do we teach that? We surround precious things with laws. If I'm out in some field and there's a rock lying there, I don't ask, "May I pick that up? May I take that home?" Of course you can; who cares? But if you walk into the Louvre in Paris and ask, "May I go up and just add a few strokes of paint to that?" Well, no, you can't. I used to go to the Louvre all the time when I was a student in Paris. It's surrounded by laws and restrictions. Anything we consider precious, we surround with law.

Catholics don't have a puritanical view of sex. We have a *caritative* view of sex. It's kind of a made-up word, from the Latin word *caritas*. The idea is to bring the whole of your life under the aegis of love. Love is willing the good of the other. Why unity and procreation within marriage? Because it renders caritative our sexuality. It directs sexuality according to the demands of love. To live chastely is to live precisely that way.

We Catholics are meant to be shining stars in the culture that show that way. In paragraph 17 of *Humanae Vitae*, St. Paul VI's great 1968 document, St. Paul VI begins playing the prophet, not about the particularities of contraception so much but about what might happen down the pike if we go down this road. "Let them first consider how easily this course of action could open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards. Not much experience is needed to be fully aware of human weakness and to understand that human beings—and especially the young, who are so exposed to temptation—need incentives to keep the moral law, and it is an evil thing to make it easy for them to break that law" (*Humanae Vitae* 17).

I don't know about you, but that sounds pretty prophetic to me. Are we not living in a culture that's marked by an awful lot of sexual chaos? It's an essential

part of life. If it's not disciplined according to caritas, it's not directed according to love, then we have a breakdown in marriage, which means a breakdown in the basic unit of society, which means a breakdown in the culture as a whole. Paul VI is naming this. "Another effect that gives cause for alarm is that a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection" (17).

This struck me in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein controversy and the MeToo movement and people quite rightly calling for the respect for women, decrying the way that this man and so many others have treated women. "Reducing her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection." This has been a teaching of the Church forever. We are the ones who have been saying this to the wider culture forever, and we get pilloried all the time for being hung up and puritanical. St. Paul VI saw it in 1968. What would happen if tomorrow one-quarter of our country began to live in radical chastity?

Consider the pornography problem in our country, now a multi-billion dollar industry. Most of it is made, by the way, in my former archdiocese in Los Angeles. What would happen if a quarter of the US population overnight began to live chastely?

Poverty, chastity, and obedience. When I was ordained in 1986, I put my hands in the hands of Joseph Bernadin who ordained me and said, “I promise obedience to you and your successors.” At the time, I barely knew Bernadin. He was just the cardinal and had no idea who his successor would be. But I was in that moment surrendering my career. When I say I’m going to promise obedience, it means I give up planning my life. I’m not going to plot the course. I’m going to listen to my superiors, trusting that they embody the voice of the Holy Spirit. That’s why I’ve tried to live my life that way as a cleric, as someone who’s promised obedience.

When I became rector of the seminary some years ago, I’d been named maybe a month prior and there was a big fundraiser. There were a lot of very wealthy people in the room. The cardinal was there too, and he had his red cape and cassock and everything. Up to me comes this lady in high dudgeon and she says, “Father Barron, this is the most ridiculous appointment I’ve ever heard of, you being made rector of that seminary. You’ve got a ministry to evangelize, to use the media, and now you’re pushing papers out of that little

seminary in the country. This makes no sense. It's a terrible use of your time and ability." All I said to her was, "There's a little man in a red cape in the next room who can answer all your questions."

That's obedience. I'm not plotting it. I didn't plan this. I didn't desire it. It was given to me. But for all of us, even though it's not under that kind of clerical authority, what does it mean to be obedient? It means *your life is not about you*, one of the basic intuitions of the spiritual life. I've used that language a lot from Hans Urs von Balthasar. It's not the ego-drama but the theo-drama that matters: what God wants for you, what God's designed. It might not be a starring role, at least in your eyes. To be obedient is to say, I'm not living the ego-drama. I'm living the theo-drama.

I saw this movie called *The Shape of Water* a couple of years ago about a lady who falls in love with a fish. The minute it ended, I turned to my friend and I said, "That's going to win the Academy Award for best picture." And I was right. The reason I said that is it checks every box, especially the title of the movie. What does "the shape of water" mean? Water has no shape except the shape that we choose to give it. Water is just utterly fluid. It's whatever you want it to be. That's the voice of our culture today. Moral norms, moral values, the integrity of human action: all of that is bracketed in favor of a completely autonomous self-creation.

This culture of self-creation is really dangerous. It's like saying to a kid that wants to learn baseball, "Just go play any way you want." No, the fun of it is to submit yourself to the rules, the objectivity, the integrity of the game so that those rules get into you and then make you into a baseball player. The same is true in the moral order. *Obedire* means to listen, to listen to the objective normativity of moral value. That's what brings us to life, not the shape of water to which I just give whatever form I want to. That's the old, tired ego-drama. The theo-drama is being attentive to these great objective normativities that make me come alive. That's the obedience that every evangelized person ought to demonstrate.

Two reasons to evangelize: (1) Get people out of hell. We've all been there because we're all sinners. You all know people right now who, in a very particular way, are probably in hell. Why do you evangelize? To hold up the cross of Jesus to show them the path out of that. (2) But then once they're out of hell, teach them and tell them what story they belong to, whom they serve, which army they ought to fight in. Then the way to do it is by living poverty, chastity, and obedience. That's why we evangelize.

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