



Looking at a Culture of Evangelization

Parable of the Sower

Introduction

A culture in any organization reflects its values. Values are reflected in our actions – what we celebrate; what we tolerate; and what we presume. We may have a value statement, but how we *act* demonstrates our values more than words.

A culture of evangelization is a culture that gives priority to introducing people to Jesus Christ, inviting them into a relationship with the community, accompanies people on their discipleship journey, and sends missionary disciples out to give witness to Christ and invite them into a relationship with his people. It is a community that reflects the priorities of Renew My Church – to make disciples, to build community and to inspire witness.

CULTURE AS SOIL

Another way to look at a culture of evangelization is to look at our culture as soil. The Parable of the Sower is found in each of the three synoptic Gospels and is written almost exactly the same in each book. This tells us that this teaching was very important to the early disciples and was repeated over and over. The parable gives us direction for our evangelization efforts. While the parable is focused on the person's ability to receive the Good News and become a disciple, it can easily be used as a way to look at our parishes. Do our parishes have rich soil where seeds can be sown that will bring forth mature disciples with deep roots who will bear much fruit?

SWOT ANALYSIS

A SWOT Analysis is a tool used by businesses and organizations for strategic planning to reflect on their internal *strengths* and *weaknesses* and the external *opportunities* and *threats*. Often the purpose is to determine how a new project will meet the needs of an external audience. Another way to use the SWOT Analysis, especially for non-profit organizations, is to understand how a particular project will work within a specific community.

To understand what strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that may exist in your parish for the “creating a culture of evangelization” we invite you to reflect on the Parable of the Sower.



Reflection

Please pray with this reading (or another Gospel version if you prefer). Read through the Scripture verses in a prayerful manner to help determine where your parish is spiritually. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and help you see your parish through the lens of this particular parable – where is there soil ready for sowing seeds? Are there opportunities for the word to take root and for disciples to grow in your parish? Is there indifference, division, grief, fear that will choke it off? Below are some things to consider where your parish can begin its work on tilling your soil.

The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13: 1-9; 18-23 (Mark 4: 1-9; 13-20 and Luke 8:4-8; 11-15)

On that day, Jesus went out of the house and sat down by the sea. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd stood along the shore. And he spoke to them at length in parables,* saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. Whoever has ears ought to hear.”

“Hear then the parable of the sower. The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart. The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away. The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit. But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold.”

We recognize that God is always the sower of the seeds of faith in the heart. But we are called to do our part to help God by planting seeds that provide opportunities for people to encounter Jesus – liturgies, missions, retreats, programs, etc. But for seeds of faith to take root in our community, we need to till and weed the soil and do our best to nourish and water the seeds so that they will ultimately bear fruit.

Please take a few minutes and consider where in your parish you see rich soil, thorns, rocky ground and hard soil. Where are your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats?

As you consider the following scenarios and subsequent questions, try to think about your parish through the lens of a newcomer or someone who is not really engaged. Consider guests or visitors and those who are not “insiders” as you reflect on these questions. What sort of culture are they going to experience as they enter your community? How does your parish receive people at different stages of their journey?

**RICH SOIL: Strength**

“But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold.”

Scenario:

Andrew grew up Catholic, but only goes to Mass at Christmas, Easter and Mother's Day. He has a health scare. At this vulnerable point in his life, he encounters Jesus as he prays one night in the hospital, desperate and alone. From out of nowhere it seems, peace washes over him and he knows Christ is with him. Having grown up Catholic his whole life, this is the first moment he realizes that he is loved unconditionally by the Father and chooses to answer Jesus' call to "follow me!" Andrew is all in! After this conversion of heart, Andrew returns to his parish community ready to take on a more mature faith. He is hungry to know who this Jesus is. He knows a lot about him, but wants to truly know who Jesus is and what role Jesus can play in his life. Andrew is blessed because his parish recognizes that a conversion can happen at any time in a person's journey. The parish has ministers who are available to chat with and there are intentional formation opportunities so that his relationship with God will continue to grow at his pace. To help Andrew along the way, he is invited into the life of the faith community where the seed of faith that Christ has sown takes root. He learns how to pray, he has faith conversations, and he takes advantage of the various Bible studies, courses and other offerings that the parish offers to help him grow as a disciple. In time, Andrew becomes a missionary disciple and ultimately bears much fruit. Andrew shares his faith openly and is never shy about inviting people in his life to follow him to his parish community.

- Do you know of any Andrews in your parish?
- How does your parish help a person encounter Jesus Christ?
- How would your parish help someone who is hungry for more, like Andrew, grow in faith?
- How does your parish help individuals develop a mature faith life?
- What opportunities does your parish provide for ongoing adult faith formation?
- Does your parish have small faith communities that actively seeks newcomers?
- Where do you see “Andrews” bearing fruit in your community?

**THORNS: Weakness**

“The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit.”

Cathy has been away from church for several years. When she was younger, she really believed in Jesus, but when she went to college she got out of the habit of going to Mass. Now, she is married to a non-Catholic and they have two small children. Life has gotten hard lately and she longs for the days when her parents and siblings used to go to Mass together. She wishes she could give that sense of comfort and faith to her children, but she doesn't know where to begin. Something is urging her to go back to church, it is as if Jesus is nudging at her heart. One Sunday when her husband has the kids at a soccer game, Cathy decides to try to go to Mass at a local parish that she has heard about. Cathy hesitantly finds her way through the doors, feeling God tugging at her heart. She sees clusters of people chatting. It looks like a friendly place, but no one greets her. During Mass, she struggles to figure out how to follow along. She remembers parts of the liturgy, but feels very self-conscious, like everyone can tell she's been away for a long time. The music is lovely and the homily is thoughtful. She can feel God's presence in the church. She hears the announcement about coffee and donuts in some room somewhere, but Cathy doesn't know anyone and no one greets her after Mass. She decides to introduce herself to the pastor. She approaches the pastor to shake hands. He greets her with a "good morning" and a smile, but doesn't acknowledge she is new to the community. Cathy goes to Mass a few more times, but she doesn't feel like she belongs. Cathy recognizes that the parishioners seem like nice people, but she realizes she is an outsider. Besides, she has children who need her at home and she works full-time. She shouldn't take the time away from her ailing mother or miss her kids' soccer games anyway. Cathy tried, but maybe that thing in her heart wasn't real after all.

- Does your parish have Cathy's who walk through your doors?
- How would Cathy experience your parish? Through her eyes, how would Cathy describe the welcoming and hospitality in your parish?
- Would she be invited into the community? If so, how?
- How does your parish accompany people on their journey meeting their spiritual and human concerns?
- How does your parish support young adults, seniors, other stages that have their own worldly troubles and concerns? How is your parish relevant in their daily lives?
- Where do you see weaknesses in your parish in meeting the needs of the "Cathy's" in your midst?

**ROCKY GROUND: Opportunity**

“The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away.”

Juan grew up Methodist and stopped going to church years ago. His wife is Catholic and has an incredible faith that the whole family finds strength in. She invites Juan to go on a retreat with her parish. Part of him doesn't want to go to that “faith thing,” but another part of him desires the faith that his wife has. On the retreat, Juan encounters Jesus. He finds it hard to put into words, but he experiences God's love for him. He hears the Gospel message and believes. The joy in him is palpable. Juan decides to start going to Mass with his wife expecting to continue that “mountain top experience” of faith. But Mass makes no sense to him. The music is different, the people are different than they were on the retreat. None of this feels like it did on the retreat. The community he felt on the retreat is nowhere to be found. No one is warm and openly talks about their faith like he experienced in his small group on the retreat. After a few months, the feelings fade. Juan cannot remember what brought him to church and besides, he has better things to do on a Sunday morning. His faith never takes root.

- Have you ever encountered a Juan in your parish, perhaps after a retreat or after RCIA?
- What is your follow-up plan for the Juan's in your parish, those who participate in retreats, missions, the RCIA experience, etc.?
- How does your parish help the faith of those who joyfully hear the Word take root in your community?
- How do you help individuals engage in or continue in a small faith community experience?
- Where do you have opportunities in your parish to help those like Juan who encounter Christ and are hungry to grow?

**PATH (HARD SOIL): Threat**

“The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart.”

Mary has been Catholic her whole life, proudly declaring herself a “cradle Catholic.” She is part of a book club at the parish and makes her special cookies for funerals. She does her part. Mary goes to Mass every week like clockwork. She goes to the 8:00 a.m. Mass, sits in the second row, and afterward she and her husband go to breakfast. It is their routine. Mary has heard about Jesus her whole life and is very confused by all of this new language she is hearing about “evangelization and encounter and discipleship.” To Mary this all sounds quite protestant and she wants nothing to do with any of this. Mary learned what she needed at Catholic school and that is fine. She says the rosary from time to time and is a good Catholic. Mary’s parish is experiencing low Mass attendance and one of their priests is assigned to a new parish. With only one priest and fewer parishioners at each Mass, the pastor is thinking about changing Mass times, combining some Masses. Mary hears in her book club that they may be eliminating the 8:00 a.m. Mass and instead offering a 9:00 a.m. Mass to accommodate more people. Mary is furious. How dare he take away her Mass? Doesn’t he know that she has been going to that Mass for years? Mary is thinking about withholding her envelope or going to the neighboring parish’s 8:00 a.m. Mass instead.

- How do you help the Mary’s in your community to strengthen their relationship with Jesus and the larger parish community?
- How does your parish encourage parishioners to understand faith through the lens of an adult?
- How do you help parishioners grow as disciples and spiritually mature?
- How are the Mary’s in your parish a threat to newcomers or those who are seekers?



<p>RICH SOIL: Strengths</p> <p>Where do we have rich soil/strengths? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>How can we learn from these areas and improve other areas? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>THORNS: Weakness</p> <p>Where do we have thorns/weaknesses? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>How can we improve these areas? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>ROCKY GROUND: Opportunity</p> <p>Where do we have rocky soil/opportunities? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>How can we improve these areas? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>PATH (HARD SOIL): Threat</p> <p>Where do we have hard soil/threats? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>How can we improve these areas? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>