

The Making of Converts:

What 21st Century Catholics Can Learn
From Their Spiritual Ancestors

By Joe Tremblay

Preface:

In his book, *Called to Communion*, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI wrote that the word “Catholic” not only signifies the international character of the Church in any given time period, but it also conveys her intergenerational or diachronic nature. That is, the Mystical Body of Christ is not confined to any one generation, century or moment in time. She transcends time just as she transcends race.



With that said, the Holy Father went on to say that the Church can benefit from her long history and rich heritage of pastoral and theological wisdom. She can draw from it in order to correct imbalances or offset blind spots of the present age. After all, each generation suffers from certain biases and shortsightedness. People who live in 2013 are no different.

Truth and Grace

Over the last five to six decades, Catholics have relied heavily on lectures in faith formation programs, religious education and retreats. No doubt, religious instruction is an essential component in forming souls. But it would seem that intellectual development of this kind is insufficient. Tertullian, an early Church Father, once said that Christians are made, not born. Throughout Church history, but especially during the first millennium, pastors and spiritual leaders took this for granted. They knew that ideas or concepts alone do not make good Christians.

The revolutionary character of Christianity in those early years was that it recognized that intellectual enlightenment was scarcely enough to bring about a person's conversion to a higher, supernatural life. Indeed, Christ not only came to shed the light of truth but he also came to introduce the “power” of grace into souls. And the purpose of that grace was to empower the human will to live the life of Christ, both morally and spiritually. By the sheer volume of converts in those early years, it would seem that the Church's evangelization and pastoral practices tapped into that *truth and grace* to great effect.

Despair of Being Good:

Hence, if their practices and insights were the basis from which so many converts sprang, then it is from their example that the Church of the twenty-first century can garner a few helpful insights. For instance, a nineteenth century Catholic priest, Blessed Fr. Antonio Rosmini, spoke to the success of the early Christians. He said, “To merely imitate Christ or the virtues of the Apostles was insufficient for the regeneration of mankind. On the contrary, virtue, even heroic

virtue, was often an object of hatred. Without moral strength, an unattainable perfection of obedience to the commands of Christ could only aggravate the pagan's despair of reaching it..." Indeed, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius was an example of this despair. From what he wrote about the Christians it would seem that instead of being inspired by the heroism of the martyrs, he was rather annoyed with them. In fact, he could not understand why these heroes of the Faith embraced the prospects of death so willingly.

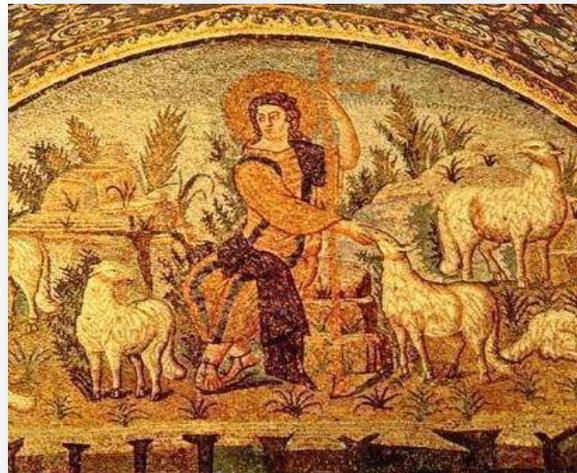
We also have the testimony of St. Cyprian, an early Church Father and martyr who doubted that he could reach the heights of sanctity before he converted to Catholicism. In a letter to Donatus, St. Cyprian wrote: "By the agency of the Spirit breathed from heaven, a second birth had restored me to a new man, then, in a wondrous manner, doubtful things at once began to assure themselves to me, hidden things to be revealed, dark things to be enlightened, what before had seemed difficult began to suggest a means of accomplishment, and what had been thought impossible, was capable of being achieved."

It wasn't until St. Cyprian entered into the life of Christ through prayer, spiritual activity and the exercise of virtue that it dawned on him that living such a life was possible. After all, it was in the "doing"- and not just through passively receiving information -that knowledge of God is to be had.

Holiness: A Source of Knowledge

This is why Clement of Alexandria, also a Father of the Church, said the following: "We do not assert that knowledge consists in merely in concepts, but it is a divine science and a light that has arisen in the soul through obedience to God; it reveals everything to humanity, teaching human beings to know themselves and God."

Yes. It is holiness, not just in learning alone, that leads to the life-giving knowledge of Christ. Fr. Rosmini speaks to this when he says the following: "God's work, through the Apostles, had to minister to the passive side of man as well as the active side; not just the intellect, but the will had to be regenerated...The doctrines which they spread abroad by preaching were not so many abstract assertions; but the practical force, the force of action, arose from that worship, whereby man could attain the grace of the Almighty." (*Of the Five Wounds of the Holy Church* 1832)



Reaching Only a Few:

Regarding abstract assertions, as the Church's theology developed and deepened over the centuries, more Catholic preachers, pastors and teachers (especially as we get closer to the twentieth and twenty-first century) relied on elevated and sophisticated theological language in communicating the Word of God. In doing so, the original simplicity and universal appeal which characterized the New Testament writings was diminished in some Catholic circles.

To be sure, it was the abstract assertions that limited the appeal of pagan philosophy. In his book, *Our Christian Heritage* (1889), Cardinal James Gibbons pointed out why pagan philosophy failed to capture the minds and hearts of most pagans in ancient civilization. Indeed, even the greatest of Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle failed to reach the common folk. Gibbons said, “[Pagan] Philosophers ‘might’ have been able to check immorality. Some of them, indeed, guided by the light of reason, inculcated beautiful and sublime moral maxims; but many causes that rendered their influence for the good were scarcely perceptible among the people. Their audience was generally composed of a narrow circle of literary men.”

What is more, pagan philosophy never produced a coherent and unified code of morality by which the Gentiles could live by. Gibbons continues: “They had no well-defined and uniform moral code; and they were often vague and contradictory in their ethical teaching. They suggested no adequate incentives to the practice of virtue. They never employed the greatest argument of St. Paul for morality: It is the will of God that you should be sanctified.”

The Gospel offered not only the best incentives for moral goodness, that is, to please God who sees all, but it provided the practical means (i.e. the practice of prayer, virtue and knowing how to approach the Sacraments) through which to attain that moral goodness. As such, the knowledge of Christian doctrine is only one chapter in the making of converts. It is not the whole book!

Formation: More than Lectures

Another nineteenth century priest, Fr. Johann Adam Mohler, said that “Christianity gave a creative power, able to beget a new life to its adherents; it made individuals aware that they were nothing aside from a continual living relationship with God, and it taught them that they must take up their instructions with humility if they wished to know anything.” It is good to keep in mind that the early Christians did not put the emphasis on concepts alone nor did they merely assert that Christian doctrine were better than pagan ones. They did not want the Gospel to be chosen because its philosophy or ideas were superior to their pagan counterpart. The non-Christian or candidate who wanted to join the Church had to be proven in his or her association with Christians as well as living out the Faith. If Christians were convinced that the candidate believed that the teaching of Christ was from God, their admission followed.

Therefore, today's parish ministries such as RCIA programs, religious education programs, marriage prep programs etc., are best served by a kind of spiritual formation which fosters an ongoing conversion to Christ. Certainly people need to be taught the basics of the Catholic Faith. Certainly the intellect must be enlightened and formed with the content of Divine Revelation. No argument there! But it was wholly foreign to the Fathers and the Saints of the Catholic Church to simply rely on lectures alone on a weekly basis.

The Catholics of the twenty-first century can learn a great deal from the early Church Fathers and from the likes of Blessed Fr. Antonio Rosmini, James Cardinal Gibbons and Fr. Johann Adam Mohler. They were not perfect by any means but they, in their own respective centuries, knew how to make converts!