

Communicating Kerygma

A Fresh Look at Parish Communication

Perhaps you didn't hear about the latest Dead Sea Scrolls found in a cave at Qumran! They offer new insight into the great commission Jesus gave to his followers before he ascended into heaven. Most are familiar with the words already contained in Matthew 28, but now additional text has been discovered that sheds light on the disciples' response to Jesus' command. The following text combines the previously known Scripture with this newly found source material:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age." Then one of the disciples interjected, "We will accomplish these things by printing bulletins with Mass times and news of events, and we will repeat the same information over and over again with websites, e-mail, and Facebook!" Jesus responded with a voice faintly heard from above, as he was ascending into the heavens, "Are you kidding me?"



Qumran Caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.

Okay, so there was no great archeological find of scrolls detailing one disciple's vision of how churches everywhere actually communicate to the world around them, but hopefully you get the point. Churches everywhere struggle to create vibrant communities and have great difficulty imparting information to those in their communities. Most of the time it is simple: There isn't a whole lot of substance being communicated. Basic information is always important. People need to hear the "who, what, when, where, and how" of things. But as church, every time we give out a bulletin, send out a newsletter, or update a website, we have the opportunity, and responsibility, to do more than impart facts. We need to share the good news.

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The Command to Communicate

In the words of Jesus, we find a directive to *evangelize, baptize, and teach*. This is the plan laid out for us. Jim Kelley, former president of the International Catholic Stewardship Council, frequently reminds listeners in his presentations, “Keep the main thing the main thing.” *This is the main thing*.

However, too often we forget *the main thing* in our parishes and dioceses. We become consumed with implementation of programs, maintaining budgets, running events, and weekly schedule making. Our evangelization committees are sometimes afterthoughts, our liturgy committees are overly concerned with showmanship, and our stewardship committees are focused on numbers and increased money in the collection. And all of that, for better or worse, ends up detailed in our church communications. But all of that is *not* the main thing.

The epistles of Paul are letters of encouragement, teaching, and sometimes chastisement, to communities struggling to survive and maintain this new way of life in Jesus Christ. In the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in a similar situation. Atheism is in vogue, and Christian voices play a diminished role in the public square. For many of those who enter through the doors of a church on a Sunday, what they see, hear, and take home with them will be the only communication concerning Jesus Christ they will encounter that week. There is an opportunity there to be like St. Paul and provide something that makes a difference in their faith lives. In fact, it just might make all the difference.

Proclaiming the Good News

The word *kerygma* is perhaps not widely used by most Catholics. It is a Greek word, which essentially means *preaching or proclamation*, and it is used in theology to mean the basic, fundamental aspects of Jesus’ message, the central kernel of what the good news is all about. Our theology moves past the kerygma and develops because we grow in understanding and maturity of faith. But at the heart of who we are as Christians, lie the basic truths about Jesus, his role in our salvation, and his message of a new life in him. In the mandates given to the disciples in Matthew 28, the message to be communicated is this kerygma. A mature discipleship is only possible after one’s life is changed by this message.

In the church, we too often assume that people have been given an opportunity to accept this kerygma and then develop into mature disciples. By the sheer numbers of young adults that leave the church each year, we know this is not the case. Some will say the problem is that the kerygma is all they have received and because they never advanced past that, therein lies the problem. However, the early church had no Scott Hahn to teach them more about the Scriptures, and no Matthew Kelly books to help them reflect on their faith. The power of the kerygma, powerfully and consistently represented in preaching and word, was *the main thing* that transformed an upper room of disciples into a movement that ultimately changed the course of history. Today, we must never assume people have internalized and are conscious of why they are who they are as Christians. The church must constantly evangelize and teach those who would seek to follow him the kerygma of Jesus Christ.

Our Channels of Communication

Lord Byron, the British poet of the early nineteenth century, said, “A drop of ink may make a million think.” Most people wouldn’t put church bulletins, newsletters, websites, and e-mail in the category of poetry. However, that doesn’t mean that those things deserve less care and creativity in their creation. In fact, where good poetry may move one’s mind and heart, good church communication can actually help lead someone toward heaven.

The Bulletin

The church bulletin is certainly the oldest and most common channel of communication used by parishes. How it is used and what is included as content varies greatly from place to place. But too often, it is seen as little less than a handout containing dates, times, and advertisements for programs. The potential of many a bulletin is left completely untapped.

You could create a dozen different ways of communicating in your parish, but the bulletin is the only way to communicate to all Mass attendees and visitors. Even as the digital world expands, that paper bulletin is gold in terms of evangelization value, because you get it right into their physical hands. Imagine the Catholic who has returned after years away, the young adult who showed up for the first time not sure whether church is even relevant in her life, and the young family that is church shopping and had a difficult time just getting all the children out the door, all at your church on a Sunday morning. What is contained in that bulletin you place in their hands that might make all of the difference? Does the ink tell of only news, or does it clearly celebrate the good news?

Digital Media & Online Presence

Digital media is certainly permeating our culture and our church. Even the pope tweets! You must start using digital communication tools if you are not already. It’s where our world is today. However, many churches are currently abusing these tools instead of using them to proclaim the good news. In the kerygma of Jesus Christ there is tremendous joy! If your website, Facebook page, and e-mail exhibit no joy, why would you think anyone would be drawn to worship with you? Churches that haven’t updated a website in months are really communicating that they have nothing much to say. Most importantly, digital media is too often just another means of giving facts and more boring information. Those people mentioned previously who are attending your church are the same people who will look online to see what you are about. They are unsure of their place in this world, and how will it benefit them if they see online that you aren’t sure of your place in this world either?

Before: Facts are always important, but they are not “the main thing.”



After: Be aware: there is more power in a couple pages than you realize.



The Newsletter

Charles Zech, the Villanova professor and writer on stewardship, found in his research that employing four or more means of communication was the most effective way of producing engagement and increased stewardship in a parish. That should be obvious to any marketing professional. Look how brands like Coca-Cola and McDonalds have become so prominent in US culture due to the brand being pitched to us at every turn. So, all means of communication are necessary to get the attention of those living in a busy world. But Zech also found there is one means of communication that trumps all others in effectiveness, and it is probably the least used by parishes: the parish newsletter.

The real value of a newsletter is twofold. First, a parish sends it to all registered households, making it possible to reach shut-ins, infrequent Mass attendees, and lapsed parishioners. Of course, it also shows up in a mailbox, making it more likely to get into a home instead of the bulletin whose journey only made it to the backseat of the car. No other medium has the potential to reach so many. Also, it is easy for someone to forget about church when they have been away. The newsletter puts the church right in front of their face. Second, the newsletter has the ability to go deeper than a bulletin, e-mail, or many online media. Whereas the previous channels of communication provide a way to *proclaim the kerygma*, the newsletter

provides an opportunity to *explain the kerygma* and give testimony of the power of Jesus Christ.

The newsletter allows us to tell the story of our parish community, share about the lives of our parishioners, and lay out our plans and dreams for the future. It has the capacity to explain how the kerygma is changing people's lives. Will everyone read it? The answer, of course, is no. However, if you make it appealing in content and appearance, it will draw most to investigate. If they see that it speaks to their experience as a human being, they will read more. If they feel moved by what they read, they will read it again next time it arrives at their home. Keep in mind that you may have already made an impression because not only did you care enough as a parish to create and send a newsletter, but because it came to people at their homes; they actually belong to something. You aren't getting a copy in the mail unless you belong to something. The great Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy liked to say, "Belonging leads to believing." They are part of a community that preaches the good news of Jesus Christ. Through a newsletter, as well as all forms of church communication, you have the tools to evangelize and form them so they may believe.

Kerygma Can Be Dangerous

There is a book entitled, *Dangerous: A Go-to Guide for Church Communication*, published in print and digital media by Center for Church Communications. The various contributors speak of how churches can stand against the ideas that the church is no longer relevant, that it has embraced the status quo, and that old parishes can't learn to do new things and do them differently. They point out that it is not primarily about how you communicate, but the fact that you are willing to "tell the greatest story ever told." Yes, paying attention to the how has always been very important. You have never heard of the Sermon in the Valley, because preaching from a mount allows for people to see. Attention to details may dictate whether or not a person hears what you have to say. But what you say, that's the main thing, the kerygma, the good news of Jesus Christ. And that message can be dangerous. Why? Because when people start to hear it and are moved, there may be no stopping them. The message might actually get to all nations and the ends of the earth.

