

TURCH AS A MINISTRY OF EVANGELIZATION

In one of his first proclamations in the new Pontificate of Pope Francis he says, “The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus” by which he proposed “the new evangelization for the transmission of the faith.”

Evangelization can be done in many ways. In our work with the priests, deacons, and men religious we suppose that they are properly evangelized, but in time, with their ministry, often overworked, and sometimes at odds with the Church and Diocesan personnel, he may become discouraged and need a new perspective. It is our opportunity to “re-evangelize” him, to give him the support he needs to continue as an effective minister of the Gospel.

Unexpectedly, when we began this ministry, we did not anticipate the number of calls that we’re getting from the laity. We do not advertise our services to them but they find us on the internet and call us, expecting services that are religious or spiritual in nature. Perhaps it is the work of the Holy Spirit, sending us people who need help or direction in their daily lives, in their work and prayer. Rather than seeing this as an unexpected burden, let’s embrace it in the spirit of the Gospel, led by Christ, and served by us on the Line. We do not, at this time, expect to invite lay people to call, but we will accept those who do as sent by the Spirit and do our best to serve them. It is our opportunity, an invitation, to evangelize the unknowing, to cleanse the unfaithful from their evil ways, and to bring the Gospel in a new way to those who call seeking the peace and compassion of Christ.

MINISTRY SPECIFIC TO THE LAITY:

Pope Francis continues, “I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church’s journey in years to come. It is a heartfelt appeal to all baptized persons to bring Christ’s love to others, permanently in a state of mission, conquering the great danger in today’s world, that of an individualist, in desolation and anguish.” How can we not see the work of TURCH in this summons by Pope Francis to not only talk and listen to the callers, but to see them as our ministry to “be” Christ to them and lead them to the ways of Christian holiness?

We can be the “new avenues” and the “new paths of creativity” that the Pontiff is calling for. As you’ve heard him say, he prefers “a Church which bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church.” The “new avenue” and the “new paths of creativity” certainly describes the work of all the volunteers at TURCH. As far as our research shows, we are the only Catholic hotline doing this ministry. There are other Catholic hotlines, usually sponsored by, or responding to a specific issue, just as there are Catholic radio and TV programs evangelizing the faithful. But TURCH is different in that the callers come to us, usually in their most depressed and needy times. We receive them when they are the most vulnerable, most needy, and receive them without judgment, but offering them the mercy and compassion of Jesus as balm for their souls, and lead them back to the faith for which they

search. The calls dealing with the occult and activities of the evil one are especially fertile grounds for our help.

Pope Francis again says, "If something should rightly disturb us...it is the fact that many of our brothers and sisters are living without...the friendship of Jesus Christ." We know that is true from the content of the calls we receive. The caller presents a problem to us, expecting us to solve or resolve it for them, never thinking that the resolution lies in the heart of their Christianity, their relationship with Christ. How many times do we pray with the caller? How many times do they seek a priest for advice or direction? How many times and ways do we say prayers of healing for them when disturbed by the evil one? There is no other ministry on earth like the one we are privileged to do in the name of Jesus, the merciful and compassionate One. We are not superior to our callers; we are not an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the Church and her ways. We, too, are sinners; we too are seekers of the way of Christ.

In the Gospels of Matthew (4:19), Mark (1:17), Luke (5:27), and John (1:43), Jesus said, "Follow Me." He didn't say, "only priests, or Bishops, or only the Pope;" He said it to His followers, the laity, those who followed Him on the day to day journey. After His Resurrection this command to follow Him was called, "The Way," and people of faith continue to follow this path, as we do at TURCH.

He appeals to us not to be jealous of other ways, duties or the myriad ministries sponsored by the Church. Done on behalf of the Church they are blessed ministries and do much good. It is left to ministries like TURCH, however, to minister directly to the soul of the caller, in their most vulnerable time, deeply sharing what is in their heart. They share with us what they would never share with another when they are face-to-face in another ministry. This is not to castigate any other ministry or work of the Church, but to give importance and credence to the confidences the callers share with us on the phone, knowing they are anonymous and all conversations are confidential. We can say we share in the confessional ministry of the Church, and while we cannot give absolution, we can give them peace of mind and refer them to the priest who is responsible for them in their parish church.

The Holy Father supports this concept when he said that "underlying popular piety" in other words, supporting the caller when he calls about saying certain prayers, e.g., the rosary, "is an active evangelizing power." We have heart – to – heart conversations with the callers and do not talk with a moralistic or doctrinaire attitude. We offer hope to them when they need it most. We also support the caller when he calls just to pray. We support the lady who calls and wants to talk about the Bible and its stories.

Jesus was a story teller, helping people see the truth through the stories or parables He told. When the crowds came and He dealt with the great truths He wanted them to follow, He preached from the mountain tops, the hills, and beside the lakes. He not only dealt with people in large groups which He did magnificently, but he dealt with people one-on-one, performing the many miracles for them, e.g., the blind man, the paralytic, the woman who was hemorrhaging. He brought dead people back to life, e.g., the small girl and Lazarus, but He didn't love them in concept, from a distance in an indifferent manner. He loved them as individuals. He evangelized them, brought them to the knowledge of the Kingdom through His words and works. We cannot cure ills as He did; we cannot always work miracles. We can however, cure the heart of its woundedness, we can heal the many hurts inflicted on them by families or other individuals.

Jesus passed this ministry down to us, to follow Him in ways that are varied and sometimes unique, as is the hotline. He told us, "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world." This is what we

are called to be in relation to our callers, the individuals we meet every time we are on duty, whether it's an incoming call or a Sunshine call we make to the priests.

The invitation to follow Him, to be the salt and light of the earth, is an invitation to do this every time the phone rings. We do this in the attitudes we display, in the tenor of our voice in relating to that person as Jesus would, in openness, kindness, and compassion.

Jesus also always brought a healing Presence to His ministry. One had only to touch His garments to feel the healing and to be cured of the various maladies afflicting them. Not all were cured – only those of faith who relied on the power of the Holy Spirit and trusted in His mercy. Those who did and were cured took seriously the words of Jesus to spread the Good News of salvation so all men and women may know the one true God, and know His healing powers to not only cure their bodies, but to sanctify their souls. As Jesus' words were often words of acceptance, healing and mercy, so our words on the Line, to the caller, must also be words of acceptance and healing. The caller trusts that they will be accepted for who and what they are, and that we will be the healing touch for their souls to bring some rest and peace. Jesus uttered no angry words, no judgmental comments, or diatribes as to what they should have done. His words healed the soul in the kindness and acceptance He offered them.

Jesus was, above all else, a man of compassion. The only ones He refused to acknowledge with mercy were the Pharisees who had no faith and continually refused to see Him as He was; the Great Prophet, the Son of God, the Redeemer of the world, but more particularly, the lover of their soul. He was compassionate to the greatest sinners and never refused His mercy to anyone who called on Him. He had many followers. I wonder if some didn't ask Him the same questions over and over again. I wonder if He ever got tired of the "same old, same old" as we do sometimes when we talk to particular callers. The only thing we really know about Him in the Gospels is that He had infinite patience, always attended to them with compassion, and His mercy never failed in non-judgmental acceptance. To this we are called: to attend to the callers with the mercy and compassion of Jesus; to live out the command to follow Him in His ways, and to bring the caller to acknowledge, although often silently, the mercy of the loving Father in their life.

I want to turn now to our personal spirituality.

PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY:

Using the words of Pope Francis again, he says that "spirit-filled evangelizers...are those who fearlessly open to the working of the Holy Spirit and who have the courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition." Yes, even our callers sometimes reject our suggestions to return to the church, or join the church through RCIA, or other suggestions. He continues, "These are evangelizers who pray and work" in the knowledge that "mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people. Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others."

Prayer is the indispensable support of our ministry at TURCH. We cannot perform in the spirit of healing and compassion without a deep sense of the Presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit directing our every word and suggestion we make to the callers. Prayer must be a regular practice in our life, something that will affect the work we do both at home and at the Line. By prayer I don't mean rituals you find in

the parish. These are important, but underlying this is the private prayer that lives and breathes within you. Without this prayer we become the clanging cymbals in the Gospels, making noise but not effecting change in the lives of the callers. Prayer must be a way of life for those of us who wish to follow and imitate Christ in our daily life and work on the Line.

Prayer is also our support when we have a difficult call, especially those that deal with evil. We call on the Holy Spirit to direct us and help us choose words that will touch the soul of the caller and help them to accept and understand the words as coming from the Spirit.

Without prayer we are left to our own devices in directing the caller to a healthy and wise decision concerning the issues for which they've called. If we are dealing with the issue of information and referral it might be different because it is a statement of fact; where can we refer the caller for help about a physical problem. As we know, many, if not most, of our callers present to us a problem concerning a religious or spiritual value for which they need guidance or resolution. This often results in the reaching out to the Holy Spirit to touch the soul of the caller and the mind of the volunteer to be of assistance in bringing the caller back to God, to evangelize him in the most sacred way.

To support us in our prayer life and to carry it over into our ministry of The Upper Room, it is important that we have a Spiritual Director to whom we can turn for support when we've handled a difficult call that has affected us personally. My door is always open to debrief you or discuss an issue that you find difficult. There are, however, times when you need/want an objective voice to help you get through the process. Since you cannot talk about the callers to anyone outside of the Line, the Spiritual Director is the one you are allowed to go to and discuss the issue.

A Spiritual Director is also of vital importance in your spiritual development to make sure you are not infected with the evils you may hear on the phone. The protection and prayers of the Spiritual Director are a necessity. If you need help in finding one please let me know.

One grace we have been given is the promise of prayer from the Trappist Monks in Genesee, NY who have promised to pray especially for us and our continued ministry. As long as you are a volunteer on the Line, you are covered with the protection of their prayers.

When Jesus said, "Follow Me," He intended that you become a personal witness to the good works accomplished through His graces. You are to be the witness of the many graces He gives to those who call on Him and depend on the help of the Holy Spirit.

You witness Christ every time you answer the phone with the healing voice of compassion and acceptance. You are not asked to approve or accept the sin or the problem of the caller. You are asked to accept the caller, sometimes the sinner, as Christ would. To do that, you must act as Christ would to the caller. Let them hear the words of mercy, compassion and healing as though they come from the mouth of Jesus.

In our search for holiness to evangelize, we have the invitation to "be" Christ to the caller. Let not our voices say the words of Jesus from an empty heart. Then, truly, we are the clanging cymbals. Then we are the Pharisees. The holiness of the laity does not stop at imitating Christ, just as the holiness of the priest or religious doesn't stop there either. Imitation is the first step to living with and "being" Christ in your daily encounters with others, especially the troubled callers on the Line. Live as though you "are" Christ relating to the troubled, confused, angry, or even the evil caller. "Be" Christ in your daily life and it will overflow into the lives of those around you and will flow through the phone lines to the heart of the caller. When Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth" or "You are the light of the world," He didn't use

empty words. He meant His followers to be the catalyst of change in the lives of others, and in our case, the lives of the callers. Be the salt that enlivens their spirit to seek God. Be the light to show them the way. No greater ministry exists on earth than to “be” Christ to those who call on us for help and willingly respond with the compassionate voice of Christ.

Ending with the words of Pope Francis, he says that “Only the person who feels happiness in seeking the good of others, in desiring their happiness, can be a missionary;” or in our case, a volunteer, He says that if we can help at least one person to have a better life it already justifies the offering of my life.” Pope Francis urges us not to be discouraged before failure or scarce results, such as only a few calls per shift, since “fruitfulness is often invisible, elusive and unquantifiable. We must know, however, only that our commitment is necessary. Our commitment to the callers on the Line, then, is to “Be” Christ to them. It is our unique and sacred privilege to serve the callers in the name and compassion of Jesus.

*Sister Mary Frances Seeley, Ph.D, OSF
Executive Director
The Upper Room Crisis Hotline
January, 2014*