

Baptize All Nations

Episode 9: The Role of Culture in the New Evangelization

Welcome to Baptize All Nations. I'm your host, Michael Miller.

In evangelization, there's the temptation to soften the truths of the Gospel to make it easier to accept. But that's an injustice to Christ and those who we are evangelizing.

In the book of Genesis, we read about the Tower of Babel, a cautionary tale of man's pride. At the end, the tower is destroyed and mankind is separated into different languages, nations, and cultures. Today, even after the technological marvel of the communications revolution, the world is still divided.

But nowadays we don't have to go far away to evangelize – we can begin at home. Even there we have to take culture into account. What do we mean by this? Let's look at what Christ did.

He spoke in parables: allegorical stories designed to teach the truths of the faith. And they were culturally significant, speaking of things His audience would have understood and been aware of. Many of them can't even be understood without knowing something of the culture of the time.

For example, when we read the parable of the wedding feast in the 22nd chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew, we're shocked when the king throws out someone who doesn't have a wedding garment. So what if the poor guy couldn't afford a nice suit for the reception? That sounds like a terrible overreaction to a small problem. But if we go a little deeper, we'll see that the wedding garment was sent from the host along with the invitation. Jews of the first century would have known that showing up to a wedding feast in a garment other than what the host provided was incredibly insulting.

So the Lord used the imagery of fishermen, farmers, and the mundane details of domestic life, to help people to understand the divine truths He was trying to teach them.

When we evangelize it might seem that we are dealing with a single culture but even within the United States there are different cultural experiences. It's this and a desire to evangelize through and with the culture... that can lead to an error of evangelization.

In the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Doctrinal Note of Some Aspects of Evangelization* we're told:

Although the Gospel is independent from any culture, it is capable of infusing all cultures, while never allowing itself to be subservient to them." – CDF *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization* 5

But unfortunately today we see many efforts to evangelize which can make the Gospel subservient to the culture.

At the most extreme, there are things such as so-called "Gay Masses" – Masses offered not for the conversion or spiritual help of those with same-sex attraction but instead offered to affirm active homosexuals in their deviant lifestyles. Sex education programs that promote the use of contraceptives under the mistaken belief this widely-accepted evil cannot and should not be addressed lest people shy away from the faith. We even see efforts by high-ranking prelates to change the Church's teaching on communion for those divorced and remarried so that they don't feel left out and don't leave the faith. And, of course, the pernicious silence or de-emphasizing of hard teachings of the faith from the pulpit. Again, so that people aren't driven away from the Church.

Obviously, we can see that these things are utterly wrong. It's incredibly foolish to deny or downplay the teachings of the Church so people will join or at least not leave the Church. Remember, evangelization isn't like collecting baseball cards or Pokemon cards, the goal isn't to catch 'em all.

Instead, the goal is genuine conversion of souls, a turning towards Christ. That turning begins with

the truthful proclamation of who Christ is, not the presentation of a distorted, incomplete or false Christ. It's often said you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. But the false Christ who says it's okay to act on homosexual impulses, or who doesn't care about divorce, or who doesn't mind if people have sex before marriage, is a deadly trap that leads to eternal death in hell.

Another misguided method of evangelization is trying to be hip, cool, and "down with the kids". As you can tell from my use of the outdated terms hip, cool, and "down with the kids". I am neither hip, cool, nor down with the kids and really, neither are most efforts to be "relevant" in the Church these days.

Usually these efforts take the form of rock Masses, folk Masses, pop music Masses, and other profane attempts to make the liturgy exciting and attractive. But these efforts rarely bear good fruit and often completely fail. Why? Because when we alter the liturgy by taking the emphasis away from the sacrifice of Calvary and give it to the music then we move away from what the Mass is.

The Mass is the core of the new evangelization. It's the means by which Christ comes to us. A liturgy that gives pride of place to the music or where the preaching is modified to specifically address the concerns of the audience fails at that central requirement of evangelization.

People whether they realize it or not go to Mass to be joined for a short while with eternity. To meet Christ in the Eucharist and to worship Him.

If people want to go to a rock concert they'll have a far better experience listening to a professional band at an amphitheater or a club... not listening to a group of well meaning but clearly unpracticed teenagers jamming away on a cheap guitars during the consecration.

The Church has the greatest treasure in the world: Christ in the Flesh.

We don't need to dress that up in cheap beads in an attempt to attract those who like the costume jewelery of rock stars.

So how can we use and be sympathetic to the culture of people in the cause of evangelization?

We should speak to people where they are. Like Christ, our analogies should be things they understand. Are you talking to a football fan? Use football imagery. Speaking to a member of the military? The imagery of soldiers for Christ is powerful and effective. Even mothers and fathers have unique cultural experiences that can be compelling tools for evangelization.

Use modern pop culture but not merely as a lesson of what to avoid. All genuine heroes in movies TV shows and books are an imperfect reflection of Christ. Speak about their strengths, their weaknesses and how they relate to the Kingdom of God.

All that's noble, decent, and humane in culture has its origins in Christ and the laws of conduct that He embodies.

When we let the Gospel infuse the culture we take what is good in the culture of individuals and groups and use the Gospel to make it better. Nurturing the Christ-like elements within society will civilize it by encouraging greater loyalty and love of Christ.

I'm Michael Miller. We'll see you next time on Baptize All Nations.