

## **Parish with a Powerful Missionary Vitality, with Parish Evangelization Cells.**

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Eight years ago in the basilica of Sant'Eustorgio in Milan the total number of people attending Sunday masses was about four to six hundred. That is the same as saying that the huge prestigious building was almost empty. Nowadays there are about 2,000, a large number of whom used to have no connection with the Church and whose lives were almost untouched by the faith, as is often the case in large western cities. What is going on in this parish? Why have so many people come to it? What is the secret of this evangelization which has had such good results?

These are questions which I myself was asking when, in August 1994, I heard the parish priest of Sant'Eustorgio, Fr P G Perigni, together with some laypeople of his parish, tell us about their experience during a retreat for priests which I was making. Recognising a new way that worked, I wanted to know more about it, so I signed on for the *European Seminar on the System of Parish Evangelization Cells*, which the parish has been running for several years to share its secrets and help those who wish to begin the experiment. There were about 270 people, about half of them priests, the other half laymen, and one bishop, not to mention the auxiliary bishop of Milan standing in for Cardinal Martini who was absent in Rome and who left a message of welcome for us.

The secret is simple: It is evangelization by laypeople in their life situation. It is that evangelization should be an effective priority in a parish, and that this can, and should, be carried out by laypeople in their life situation under the guidance of their parish priest. This is simply taking seriously what our Lord commanded: *Evangelize, and make disciples*. It is realising that this command is not directed just at priests and members of religious communities, but at all the baptised who have a vocation to evangelization and who can be Christ's instruments in the places where they are. This missionary initiative is based on the *Parish Evangelization Cells*.

Behind this initiative there is also the conviction that if a Christian, that if a parish, does not evangelize, they die. To illustrate this Fr P G used the two Palestinian seas, the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The same River Jordan empties into both. The first produces abundant life and lots of fish, because the Jordan both flows into and out of it. The other produces nothing but death because the Jordan flows into it, but not out of it. A Christian

who wishes simply to take from the Church without contributing anything, is doomed to vegetate and die.

## **Some history**

The experience of Sant'Eustorgio's parish goes back to June 1986 when Fr P G read an article describing what was going on in St Boniface's parish in Pembroke, Florida. He spoke to his bishop, Cardinal Martini, and with his approval crossed the Atlantic to go and see for himself on the spot. The reality was even better than what he had read. The missionary thrust, based on the *Parish Evangelization Cells*, is powerful, and life is throbbing everywhere. He was conquered. He wanted to achieve the same in his own sleepy parish.

In February 1987 he shared this experience with the Pastoral Council in his parish, with the Vicar General present. It was decided to start in a small way, with prayer: one hour of eucharistic adoration each day, in the parish chapel. Perpetual adoration sprung from this, which is the source and foundation of the whole missionary effort in St Boniface's, and later on in Sant'Eustorgio's.

In the same month of February 1987 Cardinal Martini sent three parishioners and a priest to St Boniface's to take part in a congress which it organises every year on the Evangelization Cells. They came back full of enthusiasm and a desire to search for the Lord not alone for themselves but above all in order to be able to give him to others. They understood that a living and evangelizing parish could exist.

As for Fr P G, he understood that it was necessary to transform the mentality and the style of evangelization in the parish. For this he organised a series of weekly meetings to study the encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi* of Paul VI, which were very successful. Then, in April, he ran a training course for six weeks for future leaders of the Cells, in which forty-two people participated. From this emerged four formation, or provisional, Cells, which met over a period of six months, in order to prepare themselves to be Cell leaders. The whole parish was kept informed all the time about what was going on, and anyone could attend the Cell meetings, by request, just to "see" what was happening.

By the end of January 1988 Fr P G, in the presence of the Vicar General, gave an account of it all at the Sunday masses and invited all the parishioners who wanted to join these Parish Evangelization Cells. There was a huge response. It was possible to set up twelve adult Cells and three for young people. An Executive Cell was also set up, with the task of keeping open lines of communication between the Cells and the parish priest; it meets

once a week. Today there are about 110 Cells, and constantly increasing. The increase is in geometric progression, and so is becoming ever more rapid. At the moment they bring together about 1,500 people, most of whom had been far from the faith and the Church.

### **What is a *Parish Evangelization Cell*?**

The cell image comes from biology. The cell is a living micro-organism which forms an integral part of a larger living organism and which is capable of growing and multiplying. The Parish Evangelization Cells are like this. They form part of the parochial, and even the diocesan, organism; they grow thanks to the evangelizing work of each member, and when they have become too large they split and give birth to daughter-cells.

The cell is a small community of Christians who have natural links between themselves and who wish to evangelize in their *Oikos* (Cf Acts 10 & 11, for example). What is that? The *Oikos* corresponds to the totality of persons with whom I am naturally linked: family, neighbours, friends, workmates, school and leisure friends. It is with those, in normal daily contacts, that I am called by God to share my faith.

The members of the cell meet in a house or flat once a week to help one another to become truer disciples of Jesus and better evangelizers. During the whole week they try to serve their neighbours, and to have a helping and charitable relationship with them. At the cell meeting they pray, reflect on the word of God, guided by a cassette recorded by the parish priest, and they share their faith and their efforts at evangelization. The essential questions at each meeting are: *What did the Lord do for me in the course of this week?* (Discover God at work in my life and in that of my brothers), and *What did I do for the Lord?* (Share how I tried to serve my brothers during the week, how I tried to evangelize). The cell is animated by a leader, who has completed the formation course referred to above, and who leads the prayer and sharing.

But how does one evangelize in one's life situation? Everyone feels straight off that they are ill prepared for this mission which seems to be difficult. What plan is put forward?

### **Stages in Evangelization**

Each one is asked to think of the members of his *Oikos* and to write down their names on a sheet of paper.

From then on, we must pray every day for each of those persons, and especially for those whom, we think, the Lord is calling us to evangelize in a more particular way. Prayer is the most important element in the evangelization process. It is its starting point and must accompany it step by step so that it may become really effective. It is, of course, the Holy Spirit who converts a heart and not some method which, in any case, is only secondary.

Next, and parallel, comes the level of service. **To love someone else by serving them.** This is the Lord's great commandment, so how could we omit it from an evangelization process? This is the way in which we mostly bear witness to the life which is expected of Christians. It means giving our time, our person, perhaps even our money and possessions, without limit. By serving those who do not have the faith we are building friendship bridges with them which later on can carry these people to the gospel.

From the moment in which we get someone else's trust our non-believing friends will become more open to the gospel. It will become possible for questions to arise, and we will have to reply **by sharing our faith-experience**, explaining as clearly and concretely as possible what the Lord has done in our own life. Fr P G likes saying to his parishioners: "Whatever little of Jesus you know, share it". , since they often feel they are incapable of witnessing to their faith.

Sharing our experience of the gospel with someone else can give rise to several questions. We must, at the appropriate moment, be able to answer anyone who asks of us the reason for our faith (1 Pt 3:15). We must be able to help the first steps in the faith of the person we are evangelizing, answering his questions, his objections, his fears, etc., so as to remove the obstacles which block him from giving himself to the Lord.

A moment will arrive when we help our friend to commit himself to **a personal relationship with Jesus** and to change his ordinary life in accordance with the gospel.

As soon as our friend has accepted the idea of committing himself to following Jesus he is invited **to share in the life of the cell**, where all the members have already heard about him and have been praying for him. Life in the cell, which is a Christian community of faith and prayer, will allow him to go along with others and little by little deepen his spiritual life. It will also serve as a sort of decompression chamber between his life outside the Church and **the Eucharistic Community** which he can join when he feels himself ready, and in which he will be able to find his place and accept responsibilities like the other members.

## **The Parish Assembly**

The eucharistic assembly in the parish of Sant'Eustorgio is a large community, living, joyful, shared, in which there are various ministries, with the choir, altar service, readers, etc., etc.

In the parish there are almost numberless services, ranging from catechesis to evangelization in other towns or other countries. The parish priest said that he has about one thousand laypeople committed to various services in the parish. It was also mainly laypeople who gave us the talks and who animated the discussions during the Seminar on the cells. They also took on the whole organization of the Seminar, from registration to simultaneous translation, and took care of all the administration from lodging to meals.

You'll also notice in the parish, especially in the liturgy, a way of expressing things that has been influenced by the Charismatic Renewal (singing, and so on), which is present in the parish. But it should be noted that this type of evangelization by cells develops also in parishes where the Charismatic Renewal is not present.

### **Helen's Witness**

To finish off, I will give Helen's witness, which well illustrates the sort of evangelization which is lived in Sant'Eustorgio. During a coffee-break at the Seminar I met her and asked her to tell me her story. Here it is. She is a young Frenchwoman who, for reasons of work, has lived in Milan for several years, and for the past three is married to a local Italian. She was born in the Paris area, in a totally non-believing family, or rather one antagonistic to the faith and to the Church; she received no religious education. Her husband is also an unbeliever. In their apartment block there is a woman -- let's call her Sylvia -- who is a member of a cell and who is always very kind towards her, always ready to render any little service. She hardly ever speaks about her faith, but she is known to be Christian.

One night Helen had a serious health problem: she had a miscarriage, followed by a haemorrhage. The panic-stricken husband did not know what to do. Although it was midnight, they had only one idea: knock at Sylvia's door, since she was always so available. Sylvia took Helen to hospital and did everything necessary for herself and her husband. They were both very touched at this. As Helen went into the operating theatre Sylvia gave her a small picture of the Blessed Virgin and told her she was praying for her.

Helen was very touched by such devotion and kindness. She wanted to find out more about what motivated this woman to such rare generosity, and to ask her why she did all this and what made her live. Sylvia then began to tell her of the very concrete faith-experience in her life, and of how the Lord did so many things in her life. They became closer and closer friends and sharing deepened between them. Helen also wanted to know more about this Jesus, about whom up to then she had nothing but ridiculous caricatures. After some time Helen, guided by Sylvia, gradually discovered the Lord and

began to live by him and feel his benefit in her personal everyday life. One day she was invited to Sylvia's cell, where she continued her journeying forward. Later she asked to be able to come to the church "*to see if there is as much love among those who go there as there is at Sylvia's place*". And... her answer was "Yes"! In the parish she found life, joy, brotherly-sisterly love. Now she is trying, in her turn, to evangelize, even if this still scares her. She prays for her husband who so far has not taken the first step in the faith, respecting his own journeying. That is how, reaching out to new members, the cells grow, and so the parish community.

### **The Experience of *Parish Evangelization Cells* spreads in Europe**

Having come from the United States the experience of evangelization cells is progressively spreading into different European countries (France, Austria, Ireland, Belgium, Germany and, of course, different parts of Italy, especially Sicily, etc.). Every year there is an informative Seminar on the *Parish Evangelization Cells* which lasts five days. For all useful information contact: Parrocchia Sant'Eustorgio, 20122 Milano, Italy.

### **For us Vincentians**

It seems to me that this *System of Parish Evangelization Cells* ought to attract the attention of St Vincent's disciples, which we are, whose vocation is to evangelize. It is, in fact, a method of evangelization adapted to a world in the process of being de-Christianised or badly Christianised, based on the power which God gives in prayer, on the witness of charity in everyday affairs, on community living in small groups, and on the concrete commitment of all laypeople to the apostolate. Haven't we here, all together, eminently Vincentian means, which set in motion the great missionary movements of the Church since Vatican II?

(Thomas Davitt CM, translator)