

Evangelization 101

The Church's Furnace

In the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, only 19% of Catholics attend Mass on a regular basis. Added to this dire statistic is the gloomy fact that our annual October Mass counts show continually declining Mass attendance each year in virtually every parish of the Archdiocese. This means that many people who are currently in our pews are soon to be the next inactive Catholics. Our most recent figures¹ tell us that in one year in our Archdiocese, we lost over 9,000 Catholics. This is not good news. It indicates that something is wrong. It is too easy to blame the secular world and its tantalizing influences for drawing people away. The fact is that something is also wrong “in house.” The Church’s sheep have been and continue to be ripe for the taking. That they are so easily snatched away means that many Catholics have not been engaged, their relationship with Jesus Christ has not been solidified, they have not tasted and seen the splendor and exquisite joy of being Catholic. In a word, the declining numbers tell us that we as the Church have become lukewarm; we have ceased to give off the heat that, like a bonfire on a cold night, naturally attracts people to its warmth.

The very good news, however, is that in reality the Church herself is *not* lukewarm. At the heart of the Church is a blazing furnace, which is the love that burns in the Heart of Jesus Christ made present for us in the Eucharist. The problem is that we ourselves and large swaths of our parish communities are not adequately connected to this source of heat. Many of us, even though we might attend Mass and be very involved in our parish, are still disconnected from Christ interiorly. This happens through our lack of a regular prayer life, infrequent Confession², a slowness to address personal sin and spiritual blockages, turning a blind eye to wrongdoing and a tendency to shrink from proclaiming the fullness of the Gospel, especially when it comes to the hard teachings.

These are the kinds of things that deaden the life of a soul and of a parish. So, if we want to revive our parishes, stop declining Mass numbers, and help bring our people home, we ourselves must reverse these tendencies, first in our own lives and then in our parish community. The same tasks that cause the fire of Christ’s love to burn in us are the same tasks we must undertake in our parishes as well: cultivate a culture of personal prayer, encourage frequent reception of the Sacrament of Confession to unblock our spiritual arteries and discover and *love* the transformative power of Christ’s teachings, especially the most radical ones. Above all, knowing the Church’s primary source of spiritual heat is the Eucharist, we must devote ourselves to a reformation of our approach to the Eucharist, bringing back reverence and beauty in Mass, fighting off complacency and indifference, and helping our people discover personally and *experientially* that the infinite love for which every human heart longs is available to us in every tabernacle and on every altar.

The good news is that we do not have to invent something new in order to reverse the troubling trends we see. There is already a furnace of all-consuming heat dwelling in the heart of the Church. Our task is simply to have the courage to do the necessary work to tap into it and allow Him to set us ablaze once again.

1 – October Mass Count data for 2016-2017

2 – According to the Catholic Leadership Institute’s Disciple Maker Index, among 17,000 of our most engaged Catholics in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, 75% of them said they go to Confession 1-2 times per year or never.