"Go Into the Whole World and Preach the Gospel to Every Creature": New Ideas for the New Millennium, Selections from a Seminar on Evangelization

Faith Fortnightly
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Editor's Words: On September 9, 2003 *Faith Fortnightly* held a seminar on Evangelization in its meeting room. They invited more than ten clergy and Catholics to participate. Everyone spoke freely about how to carry out evangelization in the new circumstances, and positively discussed a plan for it. The participants offered solutions and policies to overcome the difficulties encountered at present in preaching the Gospel, and sought to bring back the glory of evangelical work. *Faith Fortnightly* reproduces here the contents of the discussion in order to promote evangelization. It is hoped that the fruits of this discussion will make each parish, under the leadership of the pastor and with the cooperation of the faithful, raise the work of evangelization to new heights, and lead many more people to know Christ and to be converted to Christ.

Father Zhang Shijiang (Chief Editor of *Faith Fortnightly*): First of all, let me welcome everyone to *Faith Fortnightly*! At today's seminar we have priests and Sisters who are in the front lines of evangelization, as well as colleagues and friends who are involved in works

connected with evangelization. There are also Catholics who are devoutly concerned about evangelization. We thank each one of you for your positive response.

Why do we want to hold this seminar? First, it is the product of the strong sense of mission regarding evangelization, and of their successful achievements in it, on the part of some priests. For example in a certain place the numbers of Catholics have grown from several thousand to nearly 30,000 in recent years. When we recently held a training course for young priests, several of them asked that we arrange some materials on evangelization. During the classes we invited some Protestant friends to share their experiences with us. Through the formation course, the hearts of many priests were fired up regarding evangelization. If more clergy and Catholics would emphasize evangelization and participate in evangelization, then our evangelization teams would become stronger, and evangelization would become common practice. The future of evangelization would become brighter. Many priests suggested establishing a "preaching team," which would go to anyplace they are needed. They would help the local Church in its evangelization work. This was a concrete suggestion.

Secondly, during August, Father Wang Gang of Xinjiang talked to me twice about the success of the Protestants in evangelization. He said: "The methods of the Protestant Christian Churches are very practical. Why can't we just borrow theirs, and use them ourselves?" During this seminar, we can on the one hand study many of the good evangelical methods of the Protestants, but on the other hand, not just parrot them, or follow them blindly. We must adapt them to the situation and the needs of each local Church, and winnow out the good points, and use those evangelical experiences, which are advantageous to the development of the Church.

Thirdly, there is a relation to *Faith Fortnightly*. As the editor of a newspaper, I am always thinking about the direction of the newspaper and new ideas for it. How can I serve the clergy and Catholics better? How can I attract more readers? How can I meet the requirements of the readers? How do we adapt to developments in society? How can *Faith* newspaper be used as an evangelical tool? How can it serve as a bridge to the local Church? This is very important, and is the common responsibility of us all. Therefore,

this seminar is an attempt by us to promote a general discussion of evangelization among all the clergy and Catholics. This seminar is a new action to surface new ideas about evangelization, which would hopefully result in the mass of clergy and Catholics initiating evangelization, showing concern for it and supporting it. This is a timely response on our part to the challenges facing the Church today regarding evangelization. Therefore, I hope that everyone will freely give their opinions today, and suggest plans and policies for the Church's evangelization work. And in the future, I hope that our readers will participate in the discussion by sending their suggestions in writing to us.

Father Dong Shengping (Shijiazhuang Diocese): There is an old saying: "If you don't look you don't know; once you make a comparison, then you are frightened." If you consider the Protestant Church's evangelization work, you will get the feeling that our Catholic Church is too backward. To only protect the Church is not enough. I think that both our clergy and laity must have a sense of urgency and a sense of responsibility. St. Paul said: "Woe is me if I don't preach the Gospel." We should always keep this passage of Scripture in mind. It seems that our old traditional way of thinking was that we only preach the Gospel to and only celebrate Mass for our own Catholics. We really must break through this old way of thinking. The priest should not only care for the Catholics, but he should send out the Catholics to evangelize their neighbors and to bring new Christians into the Church. At the same time, the Church should prepare a good foundation. In addition to erecting a church building, there should also be some rooms set aside for evangelization on the church property. There should also be a certain economic base... For instance, the Protestants print many Bibles, booklets and pamphlets, which they distribute during their evangelization work. We Catholics do not have money for this.

Mr. Guo Yongsheng (a Catholic businessman from Xi'an): I am a businessman. When I travel around the country, I feel very sad,

because it is difficult to find a Catholic Church. When I go to a certain city, I ask the taxi driver to take me to the Catholic Church. He invariably takes me to the Protestant Church. It is not easy to find a Catholic Church. When I do find it, the door is tightly shut, and I can't get in. I am deeply saddened by this. One time, the gatekeeper would only let me in after I told him my baptismal name, and then he would let me only in to the garden and not into the church itself. When I travel to Europe or Southeast Asia, I definitely go to church. There are no walls around the church, nor any big gate. In Singapore for instance, the churches give you a friendly welcome.

I also have the following suggestion: assessments should be carried out regarding the achievements in evangelization of each priest, just like the government assesses the wo~~rk of~~ its officials. How many new Christians has each priest brought into the Church? And priests should preach the Gospel to educated persons in society....We should make use of these favorable times to preach the Gospel. Do not lose this opportunity. As China enters the world and has more contact with the world, this is very advantageous for our work of evangelization. So, let us not lose this opportunity. It may not come back again.

Moreover, based on my experience, the Church should become involved in social work. It should serve the poor and weak ones in society. In my own case, I use aid given to needy persons as a means of preaching the Gospel. I let them know that I am a Catholic. It is quite difficult to preach the Gospel directly to non-Christians. The Church should do some social work as an entrance point for the Gospel, because in the minds of non-Christians there is some resistance towards the Church. I hope that Catholic business people throughout the whole country will do some good works, and contribute to the support of evangelization.

Mr. Li Yuduo (a Catholic teacher in Cheng'an, Hebei Province): "The speed of the train depends on the locomotive." For non-Christians to respect the Chinese Catholic Church, they observe whether the Church is developing or not.

To spread the Gospel, we must talk about methods. If the clergy only stay in the Church, and do not think of ways to spread the Gospel, nor ask God to give them wisdom in this regard, then the numbers of Catholics will decrease, and not increase.... The priests cannot just preach the Gospel in church. They must deeply enter into real life, and show concern for all the needs of the Catholics. The priest is the "fire," and the Catholics are the "firewood." The firewood needs the fire to light it. So evangelization requires that the priest lead the way. The priest must think of ways to motivate the Catholics, and he must be an example for them. For example, if among 10,000 Catholics, half of them are motivated to evangelize, that would be wonderful. I think that if the Church throughout the whole country entered into a period of fast development, with the whole country on the move, this would create a cycle of good work. If the train of evangelization picks up speed in this way, it would be wonderful. But if the thinking of the clergy is confused, then the Church won't be able to develop.

Father Mi Jinjue (Xingtai Diocese): First, I think that the ideas about evangelization in our Chinese Catholic Church must change, that is to say, the thinking of the clergy must change. Nowadays there are very few really creative thinkers among the priests. The theological education of 95 or 98% of the priests was that taught them by old Fathers ordained in the 1930's....The old theology emphasized taking care of the Catholics, encouraging sinners to return to the fold, and helping lukewarm Catholics to become more fervent. Of course, the priests who did these works were responsible and fervent, and were on fire for spreading the Gospel. But no matter how much work they did, it was still "taking care of the fish in our fish tank." They really did not become "fishers of men," as the Gospel tells them to do. They did not bring in "new fish." They must become "fishers of men" who bring in "new fish." After the thinking of the clergy changes, the next step is to decide what methods to use to bring non-Catholics into the Church. Chances are that even after our thinking changes, we will continue in our old ways of doing things.

Secondly, to really carry out evangelization of the non-Christians, it is not enough to rely only on the strength of the clergy. In this area Father Zheng Ruiping has opened new roads. He has formed a cadre of Catholics to help him. When a priest goes out to evangelize, he brings at least five or six Catholics along with him, to act as his helping hands. Of course, as the evangelization work develops, the number of Catholic helpers increases.

Thirdly, create an atmosphere for evangelization. During the past few years I have been a pastor in a farming village. There were two situations in our parish. In the past there were several little chapels in the parish, which were surrounded by non-Christians. The hearts of many Catholics and non-Catholics were inclined towards the Church. Many lukewarm Catholics were also willing to return to the Church. But in the surrounding environment, many people looked down upon the Church. So the lukewarm Catholics felt embarrassed to come to church and the non-Catholics became afraid that they would be subject to ridicule if they joined the church. If the already baptized Catholics felt embarrassed about entering the church, can we blame the non-Catholics for not doing so? Therefore we need to create an atmosphere for evangelization, so that both Catholics and non-Catholics need not feel looked down upon if they accepted Christianity. I think that we need to create this for our work of evangelization.

Father Chen Yongguang (Baoding Diocese): When speaking about evangelization, first of all, the priest himself must evangelize. This is basic. Further, he must clearly understand why he is evangelizing. Why do salespersons in society propagate with such enthusiasm? It is because that is their profession. Priests must ask themselves: why do I do this work? We say that the church is not a profession; it is a kind of holy mission. It is a mission from which we are duty bound not to turn back. At the time of the reform and opening up, why was there the reaction of religious fervor? It was because for many years the Christians could not practice their faith. Their hearts rose in thanksgiving to God. But why in these days has religious fervor subsided? The reasons are many. One of them is that the clergy have not guided and

formed the Catholics enough in their religious lives. The Catholics only attend Mass. Even if they attend everyday, it is like eating the same thing everyday. After awhile they do not taste the flavor. So, in regard to evangelization, the clergy must renew their thinking. They must be urgently concerned for the needs of the Church and of the Catholics.

Although our mission is to preach the Gospel to non-believers, we should not overlook the need for re-catechizing the old Catholics. This also is an important content of evangelization. Although we have been baptized for many years, for how many years have we really followed Jesus? Most likely our relationship with Jesus is not very deep. You have known Jesus for so many years, but have you really experienced him? The necessity for re-catechizing the Christians is not only for the purpose of increasing their quality, but also that they will not become an obstacle to evangelization. For instance, when occasionally a Catholic brings a non-Catholic into the church, the old Catholics feel that the present order is broken. They will unconsciously have a prejudice towards the new Christian. They will say, "What does that person know that he should enter the Church?" The old Catholics cause the new Catholic not to have a sense of belonging or a feeling of trust. After he enters the Church, it is perhaps like a Pharisee receiving a Pharisee. Since the community does not accept the new Christian, the fervor soon goes out of him. We must give the new Christians space for existing and developing. So the re-catechizing of old Catholics is the key.

Moreover, regarding the evangelization of the non-Christian, we must have passion. It is not the passion one often hears in speeches, but should be that from the heart, a manifestation of your personal experience, like presenting the God living in your heart to others. I think that the Protestant method of evangelization is not just to hold some activities and sharing in order to attract people. Rather, they really give a witness by their lives. They really experience Christ acting in their persons. In this way, they move and attract many people. After they believe in Jesus, Jesus has brought about a change in their lives. This is manifested in ordinary households. People can really observe Jesus in their persons. That is to say, if we really have an experience of the faith, we can carry out our evangelization work, and it will be successful.

Father Zheng Ruiping (Handan Diocese): Although evangelization in our Wu'an Parish has achieved certain results, there are still many weak points and faults. Here I will give just a general summary of our methods. We emphasize two general directions in our evangelization work: one, increase the preaching, and two, open the gates wider.

Regarding increasing the preaching, each one has already mentioned this. Everyone must get involved in evangelization. However, I want to ask a question now: "Have you yourselves ever preached the Gospel to the non-believer?" The "revolution" must start with yourself. Speaking for myself, I can say that I have directly preached the Gospel to non-believers. In evangelizing non-Christians, there are three degrees: one is your relatives, the second is your friends, and the third is strangers. To preach the Gospel to strangers is the most difficult because no trust yet exists between the preacher and the stranger. To evangelize your relatives is the easiest. Just now Mr. Li Yuduo told us that his wife led him into the Church. To evangelize your relatives you need not preach much doctrine; just give a command and it is enough. To preach the Gospel to your friends, you can count a lot on the feelings between you and them. How should a priest preach the Gospel? We must start from ourselves. There is a saying: "In an unavoidable confrontation, the brave person prevails." You must be confident of winning.

How to preach the Gospel then? Today each of us must ask himself/herself the question: "If a Christian brought a non-Christian before us today, how would we persuade that person to believe in Christianity?" You must sum up all your past preaching experiences. When I first started going to Wu'an to preach the Gospel, I only had courage; I had no experience. I followed a church leader. The non-Christian person did not know the difference between a church leader and a priest. I spoke for a long time, and the non-Christian was unwilling to accept what I said. The church leader spoke for a little while, and after only a few words, the non-Christian accepted the faith. He said: "The church leader spoke better." The church leader spoke better because what he said came from his own life,

and there was a common language between them. We priests should learn from the successful experiences of the Catholics. When each Catholic returns from a successful effort at evangelization, he should make a report to you. You should treasure these reports, and sum up the Catholics' experiences. Later when someone brings a non-Catholic to you for instruction, you can learn from your past failures, and speak to him in a suitable manner.

"You have preached the Gospel in the past, haven't you?" Rather than just talking theory, let us begin with our own practical situations. If you are willing to go to preach the Gospel to the non-believer, can you encourage another priest to also take up this work? St. Paul told Timothy: "What you have heard from me...entrust to faithful people who will have the ability to teach others as well." (2 Tim. 2:2) As a priest, you desire to go to evangelize. You should persuade another priest, who can persuade others, to also go to evangelize. You should encourage another priest to also encourage others to get involved in evangelization. In this way, evangelization will continue to be carried out. If the ten or more of us here can encourage one more priest each month, pretty soon we will have 20 priests, and by the end of the year we will have 500 priests encouraged to carry out evangelization. The key is for us to begin with ourselves right here.

Furthermore, if we encourage the Catholics everyday to get involved in evangelization, and they still are not moved, what is the reason? Maybe our Masses are "set in one mold." It is not that way in my parish. Before Mass, we do not recite prayers. Rather we read the Bible and learn new hymns....During Mass we appeal to all the Catholics to study the Scriptures, and to sing the hymns. If only 20 or 30 persons are singing, we start over again. Everyone must sing. This is especially true of the Our Father. We hold hands with each other, and the force of the sound of the singing could lift the roof off the church. Another example is the Prayer of the Faithful. We always change the person who leads this, in order to give everyone a sense of participation. Each one thinks of the prayers themselves, and writes them out themselves....As for preaching during the Mass, after the reading of the Gospel, the priest introduces the Gospel and a Catholic gives a witness....For our Protestant friends, each Christian is a "soldier." After participating in the summer formation camp for priests this year, I encouraged the Catholics to read one

chapter of the Bible each day, beginning with the priest himself. Every morning the Catholics should say a prayer to God, offering the day up to God, petitioning Him for your needs and thanking Him for his graces. Now many new Catholics do not have the practice of saying daily morning prayers. I have told the Catholics that they must pray each morning, and to use their own words in talking to God.... Increasing the work of preaching is very important. Each of us priests should really carry this out. It is very timely of Father Zhang to organize this seminar on evangelization. If any diocese holds a retreat or a meeting, do we dare go there and preach the Gospel?

Secondly, we must open the gate wider. However, I must stress that between the opening of the gate and the later period of strengthening the faith, there must be a solid link. Opening the gate means to broaden the requirements for Baptism. In Wu'an, if I just used the method of "belief, then Baptism" to evangelize, then there would be many more than these several thousands of baptized Catholics. What I want to point out is that they must go through a process. After the Church has people, what should we do with them? Now my worries are at this point. To encourage one person to enter the Church is easy. In our parish, for non-Christians to enter the Church is a common matter. Our task now is to continue to encourage and motivate them. We encourage each village to prepare ten persons for baptism at Christmas. The Catholics themselves guarantee that this will happen.

After the Christians are baptized how should we strengthen them in the faith? In our parish we have organized basic Christian communities....Many Catholics fervently attend Mass, but they do not pray at home. They do not get along well with their neighbors. If the priest makes use of the basic Christian communities, these problems can be solved. It is easy to set up the basic Christian communities, but to maintain them in existence is difficult. Why? Because our Catholics do not understand the Bible. The Protestants in our area form their Christians well. The Protestants in Handan City have a formation center, where over 50 young people are taking a two-year training course. So, I would like to take this opportunity to call upon our Church to establish a lay formation center too.

We must give our Catholics the opportunity to study, that is, to form them. The pastor can pay for the cost of the training course. For studying the Bible...why not go to the Protestant Church to observe how they do it? If we have exchange with our Protestant Christian brothers and sisters, we will not only not lose our faith, but we will more strongly affirm our Catholic faith.

Regarding evangelization, we should have the spirit of plodding away at it bit by bit. Some people say that the city is not a suitable place to preach the Gospel. They say that Zheng Ruiping's method is only suitable for the countryside. I participated in three meetings in Shijiazhuang, and 11 persons believed in the Lord on the spot. The cities have their own problems. For instance, old persons have nothing to do in their retirement. They are lonely. Therefore on every level of society and at every time and place, we should look for openings for preaching the Gospel, just as Francis Xavier did in his time.

We have only to preach the Gospel, and all financial problems will take care of themselves. Just go out and preach, and do not worry about the finances. When the disciples went out two by two to preach the Gospel, what did Jesus tell them? Do not take food, a wallet, or shoes. But today, when we want to set up a preaching team, we first worry about the cost. I think that it is not necessary. What priest cannot afford the transportation fees? Even if you pay these little expenses, someone will reimburse you, right? There are some young ladies among the Protestants, who after believing in the Lord, travel for thousands of miles to preach the Gospel to non-believers. They do not worry about expenses. We should learn this wonderful spirit (of trust in the Lord) from them.

Father Zhou Wenshu (Cangzhou Diocese): Regarding evangelization, our diocese is comparatively backward. Although ours is an old diocese, in this area we are latecomers. I think that the diocese should take the lead in regard to evangelization. The thinking of our bishop and priests has undergone a great change. Thus through great efforts in the last few years, many non-Christians have entered the Church. As one of the lay Catholics just said, evangelization is a systematic process.

Evangelization cannot be carried out only by catechists, priests, or even the bishop. Rather it is a group activity to be carried out with a group spirit.

As was just mentioned, I think re-catechizing the Catholics is very important. During the re-catechizing process we must definitely introduce elements of evangelization. The Catholics should be made to realize (and the priests too) that the standard of the fervor of their faith would be judged by their involvement in evangelization. Let this idea make a deep impression on the Catholics' hearts. If we keep emphasizing this thinking, the Catholics will naturally become evangelizers. What I am saying is that it is very important to give full play to the efforts of the Catholics.

How to begin this work? Since 1996, our diocese has been holding classes. Classes have been held on the four commandments of the church; retreats have been held, and other kinds of classes. On the whole we have been trying to increase the Catholics' fervor for their faith, and raise the quality of their faith. In this process, we can do more to insert a consciousness for evangelization into the classes. We also try to target different groups among the Catholics with the classes. Starting from 1996, we have held more than ten of these formation classes. One was held for the church leaders, another for the pillars of the church, another for the catechists, and yet another for both the university and middle school students. Over 2,000 Catholics have taken part in these formation classes.

So, I think that re-catechizing the Catholics is very important. On the one hand we must maintain the fervor of the newly baptized Catholics for evangelization, and on the other hand, change the passive attitude of the old Catholics regarding evangelization. Summing up, regarding the development of evangelization work in the future, two points must be stressed: the clergy must see the importance of it, and the laity must be aroused to carry it out.

Father Zhang Huilai (Cangzhou Diocese): I think that although some priests and Catholics are satisfied with the status quo, most have come to realize the sense of mission and the sense of urgency regarding evangelization. They have

positively discussed and diligently searched for methods to carry out evangelization, in order to pass on their faith to the non-believer. But the present situation is one where the priest fights in isolation. A whole effort for mutual encouragement and support has not been established. If we are really serious about this, we should organize all the Catholic periodicals, and starting from each group, each diocese and each parish, light the fire of evangelization. At the start we should set up a concerned institution to completely research how we can preach the Gospel in today's society. We should make every effort to let both the clergy and the laity know how important and how urgent the task of evangelization is.

Sister Zhao Xiangjuan (Congregation of St. Joseph, Shijiazhuang): I think there is some distance between Sisters on the one side, and priests and Catholics on the other. Even though evangelization is everyone's duty, and everyone should take it up, how should the Church make use of Sisters in this important task? Besides, the Sisters must increase their knowledge about evangelization, and fill their hearts with enthusiasm for evangelization. This means that the Sisters must have the chance for more study. Speaking for myself, I have a strong desire to preach the Gospel. But I know my limitations. I need to continue studying to raise my qualifications.

Ms. Cai Lan (a Catholic, Company Manager): I would like to especially emphasize the problem of organization and structures. In my experience, when I went to a certain Protestant meeting point, I discovered that each one individually preaches the Gospel. Each one speaks of his own "sheep" which he has "given birth to." This is where we are different from them. Ours is a Catholic Church, which is the same everywhere in the world. This is our advantage, which we should make the most of. When there is an organization, the Christians can come together among themselves more easily. The Christians' energy is united

and much work can be accomplished. If there is no organization, then there is no system, no communication, and no work can be accomplished....Another thing is trying to develop a closer relationship with God, meaning one's own spiritual life. My feelings are especially deep. I have gone to church many times and in many places. If the Christians say that place is good, then I go there. I feel that I have a thirst in my heart. But there are many things that I do not understand, and at times I am confused. Now I am searching. I want to understand more. After studying with some Protestant brothers and sisters, I have come to some conclusions. How can I establish a closer relationship with God? I think that reading the Bible is an especially direct means of doing this. If one desires to preach the Gospel, then one must first train oneself. If we run into problems reading the Bible, we need someone who is knowledgeable about the Bible to instruct us. Through communication we become aware. Moreover there is need for a time and a place to reflect upon our faith. We need to set up a place where Christians can go for reflection and retreat. If we are going to participate in the great mission of preaching the Gospel, we need to first empty ourselves, and open ourselves to receive the grace of God. We must be ready to become a tool in God's hands. We need to hear His call, and receive the mission He wants to bestow upon us. When we let God's Holy Spirit work through us, then we can begin to preach the Gospel. In this way, our appearance will be more attractive, and our words will arouse people.