

Getting to the Heart of the Gospel is the Goal of Alpha

A number of years ago now Pope John Paul II said in a speech in Haiti that we in the Church of today need "a new evangelization." By this he didn't mean that we needed to come up with some new Gospel, as if a new Gospel could be invented (cf. Galatians 1: 6-9). The newness of the new evangelization wasn't the message, for "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow" (Hebrews 13:8). What, then, is new in "the new evangelization?" Well, according to our late holy father, we need an evangelization that is "new in ardor, method and expression." Several weeks ago at all the Masses we mentioned one of the many ways we at OLGc are trying to employ new methods for communicating the Gospel when we spoke about the many ways we are capitalizing on the gift of technology to get the Good Word out, whether via our smartphone app, our own Youtube channel, our website, Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. This fall, however, the biggest way we are trying to embark on the new evangelization will be the full parish immersion of what's known as the Alpha Course.

Planting seeds in concrete is not recommended

Let me take just a minute and address the reason why we are doing this. I heard a friend recently say that trying to catechize someone who has never been evangelized is like planting seeds in concrete; they won't grow. What did he mean? Well, as we have said on many occasions, in recent months especially, many people in the Church grew up Catholic, went to Catholic schools or religious education, received their sacraments of initiation, but somehow never got truly introduced into a friendship with Jesus, and through Him, by the power of the Holy Spirit, with the Father. The result? Faith was reduced to a subject, a set of things to memorize, a code, an ethic, some rules to abide by (when convenient). But at the heart of the Gospel is not a code or a set of rules but a person: Jesus. Rules don't change people's lives, they don't bring peace that can't be stolen, they don't lead to conversion, to joy, to unshakeable hope. Friendship with God, the God who loves us, made us, became one of us, went to the cross to atone for our sins, and gloriously rose from the dead for us does.

Proclamation comes before teaching

On the day of Pentecost, when the Apostles went out into the streets to preach to the people, they didn't start with a systematic treatise from the Catechism. They didn't launch into a full blown RCIA program. They didn't even start with a teaching on the Eucharist and the other sacraments. They preached what is known as the kerygma. The kerygma is a Greek word meaning "proclamation." In short, what the Apostles did on that day was to proclaim in a very basic fashion what God had done for the world in His Son Jesus. This proclamation was directed to the hearts of those listening to move them to act, to make a decision, to repent and to accept the love of God offered to us in Jesus. Only after this was a second, and very necessary, step added: what's known as the didache, or "teaching." I think it's safe to say that many people who have grown up Catholic never heard the kerygma; we started right away with the didache which, as my friend put it, is like planting seeds in concrete. Pope John Paul II put it this way: "Initial proclamation has a central and irreplaceable role, since it introduces man 'into the mystery of the love of God, who invites him to enter into a personal relationship with himself in Christ' and

opens the way to conversion. Faith is born of preaching, and every ecclesial community draws its origin and life from the personal response of each believer to that preaching" (*The Mission of the Redeemer*, 44).

Why I'm so interested in the Alpha Course

I've heard a few people express concerns about the non-Catholic origin of Alpha. It's true. It was founded by an Anglican pastor, Nicky Gumbel, with whom I have corresponded several times, by the way. (He, and our Archbishop, are both watching with great interest what will come from our full immersion attempt this fall.) Though it's origin might not be Catholic, it has been spoken highly about by people ranging from Father Raniero Cantalamessa, who is the Pope's preacher in the Vatican, and Archbishop Arenas, the Secretary for the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization. Recently, Cardinal Christoph Schonborn, the man responsible for editing *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, was interviewed by Nicky at a massive event to help promote Alpha in the UK. Now, is it perfect? No. Of course not. We will make some tweaks and modifications along the way. But, as Father Cantalamessa says, "We need a new evangelization which, while being open to all the fullness of the truth and the Christian life, will yet be simple and basic. This is the reason I look with interest and appreciation to the Alpha Course. It seems to me that it answers precisely this need of ours. The very name shows this. It is not called 'Alpha and Omega course' but simply 'Alpha Course' because it doesn't claim to lead people from beginning to end in faith; only to help them get acquainted with it, to foster a personal encounter with Jesus, leaving it to other Church departments to develop the newly kindled faith."

So, who should come to Alpha? Well, would you like to have a greater friendship with the King of Kings, The Lord of Lords, the Ruler and Maker of the Universe, the Best Friend you can imagine, the Most Interesting Man (OK, God-man) in the World, the One who triumphed over sin, death, hell and the grave? If so, then come. It just might change everything.

In His love,
Fr. John

From Fr. John Riccardo of Our Lady of Good Counsel Catholic Church
<http://www.olgcparrish.net/events/alpha.html>