

Seize the special day



Priests in parishes often come across unusual situations, but in September 2011, I experienced an event that was uniquely distressing and challenging. A 22-year-old woman had died in sudden and unexplained circumstances at a rock festival. Though baptised, neither she nor her family were a visible part of the local parish. When her grandmother had died, the family had requested a traditional Catholic funeral and they found this comforting. Now they wanted the same for their daughter.

Fortunately, the parish funeral team weighed in and helped immeasurably. On the day of this young woman's funeral, with their help, her friends decorated the church lavishly: statues were draped in bright colours, balloons and banners hung everywhere, with a sea of flowers surrounding the wicker coffin. A parade of speakers shared words and songs before the Mass, all managed by a confident member of the parish team, on the understanding that these personal secular elements would not intrude on the Eucharist to follow.

The church was packed for the Mass, mainly with people who had never been to such a liturgy before. It meant responses to the prayers were subdued, but attention to the words spoken was acute. In my homily that day, I spoke words of reassurance of God's loving presence with people in grief, to an audience desperate for some good news in the bleakness of their loss.

This surely was evangelisation, in the context best suited to it: aimed at people who needed Good News, in their local parish church, a place where they could return and find ongoing healing. The parish funeral team aided this evangelisation by their comforting presence, bringing to the grieving the compassionate care of the wider community.

I subsequently heard of another instance of evangelisation associated with this same tragic event. The young woman was “waked” the night before her funeral at a house in Cork city where her friends lived. I alerted a local priest, a man whose pastoral instincts would be much more traditional and devotional than mine. He called at the home to spend time with these young people as they “waked” their friend in their own way. He found a large number of young people there, many out of their mind, whether because of grief or exhaustion or drugs he could not say. But he gently spoke to them of the care that mothers give and of the woman being honoured by Catholics that day. (It was 8 September, the feast of the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary.) He led them in a portion of the rosary, a prayer with which they were not familiar, and commended everyone, living and dead, to the care of the Mother of God, a gesture they found both healing and comforting.

Evangelisation in a Catholic context takes many forms. It isn't most productively accomplished by taking a bullhorn and going to the city streets, shouting about God to strangers. It is more fruitful when it involves responding with compassion to those who ask for help and treating them with the love that the Lord would show in such times of need. Those responses to requests for help provide a ready audience for teaching about who God is, how he loves us, what Jesus taught and lived, and how we can live on after disaster strikes.

Responding to a local need imaginatively features prominently in my colleague Diana Klein's latest book, *Encounters of Evangelisation: Making the Most of Opportunities Through the Parish*. She writes movingly of her London suburban parish's response to the July 2005 bombings in the capital, in which a young parishioner was killed by the Tavistock Square bus bomb. A request for an evening's prayer before the Blessed Sacrament from his family filled the church not only with relatives, friends, neighbours and parishioners, but with colleagues from the city – Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Hindu. Fifty-four candles in memory of the victims were placed at the back of the church and people invited to bring them forward. But when that was done, more people came and asked for candles, until the church became a moving procession of light, for people of all faiths and none. The actions, prayers and music of the evening made this service a moment of evangelisation, a moment when those gathered could feel Christ present with them in their pain, this same Christ who died and rose again. You will find many more instances of such pastoral work in this book, which confirms my belief that evangelisation can happen every day in the parish. Klein teaches that every moment of parish life can be a moment of evangelisation.

Some further examples: most who work in parishes are involved in baptisms from time to time. Priests or deacons who preside at these celebrations have an opportunity to preach the good news to young couples eager to hear it (and their friends and family). Baptism team members who meet with couples in preparation for the sacrament also convey a message of evangelisation. Funerals provide a unique opportunity for evangelisation, as a form of ministry to people at the lowest moment of their lives. Parish funeral team members pray with the grieving, and help them plan the funeral Mass, with love and dignity. The priest who presides at this celebration has the chance to work on all that has been done, and preach Good News from the scriptures chosen for the celebration.

Marriages can provide similar opportunities. Often such ceremonies deliver a churchful of largely unchurched people to a presider. The presider, if he is rested and, having prayed about the liturgy, is in good form, can use the opportunity to evangelise.

The parish is the perfect venue for evangelisation, but the opportunities that present themselves have to be grasped. It helps if everyone who deals with the public is tuned in to these opportunities. St Francis de Sales (a patron of communication) taught that you catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than a barrel full of vinegar. People sometimes can be awkward and demanding, but they also make themselves available for evangelisation and it is up to all who work in parish ministry to see that such opportunities are grasped.

To Do

Respond with compassion to those who ask for help and treat them with the love that the Lord would show.

Respond to requests for help by teaching about who God is, how he loves us, how we can live on after disaster strikes.

Be aware of the opportunities for evangelisation we find in our parishes, so that they are not overlooked or missed.

Fr Bernard Cotter is the parish priest of Newcestown, Co. Cork, Ireland. He co-wrote *How to Survive Working in a Catholic Parish* with Diana Klein, whose latest book is *Encounters of Evangelisation: Making the Most of Opportunities Through the Parish*. Both are published by Redemptorist.

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