



Don't Forget the Crowds!

I have frequently referred to some of the 'inactive' Catholics in the pew every Sunday as "God's frozen people." This often elicits a laugh with other leaders. However, the more I think about it, the more I am convinced that this label is terribly inappropriate.

by Christopher Weber

Teaching as Jesus Did?

In the Gospels, Jesus recruited a band of disciples. Beyond the Twelve, we hear of others who followed his teachings closely, like devout women and people who went with him from place to place. Beyond Jesus' inner circle we read about individuals whose lives were radically changed by their encounter with Jesus, like the Woman at the Well (John 4), the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5) and Jairus (Mark 5). However, we also hear a lot about Jesus teaching **the crowds**. He spent plenty of time forming his disciples, but he spent an equal amount of time reaching out to total strangers, curiosity seekers, and people who listened for a few moments and then walked away.

The Gospel stories portray Jesus as a man driven to the crowds. Despite the likelihood of rejection or indifference, Jesus was compelled to reach out:

At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.

Matthew 9:36

Jesus' ministry focused inward, on forming his disciples in faith, and outward, on mission work to the throngs. The mission extended first to the "lost sheep of Israel," but quickly expanded to anyone who came

forward to ask for his help. Does our ministry work the same way?

Crowd Control?

Parishes offer a remarkable array of services. It is no wonder that there is always a strong push for more volunteers to staff the various ministries. In our concern to ease the load of the small core of volunteers who are doing everything, we constantly push to get more active parishioners, more envelope users, more volunteers, more committed disciples. However, do we sometimes spend so much energy on making disciples that we lose sight of "the crowd", and how God is already at work there?

Here are some questions that have been food for my thought:

1. **Do I complain about Christmas and Easter Catholics who crowd our churches two times a year, or those who show up for the occasional sacrament?**
2. **Do I equate belonging in my community with monetary support?**
3. **Do I set up hoops for people to jump through in order to belong to my community, celebrate a sacrament, or feel welcome as a visitor?**
4. **Where do I draw the line between being a disciple-maker and a gate-keeper?**

What were Jesus' hopes for the crowds? What did he demand of them?

Most of the time, Jesus didn't call the crowds "in" to belong to his inner circle, but rather sent them "out" to live the Gospel in their homes, their jobs, their everyday lives. We will be successful spreading the Gospel if our message does the same.

The Jesus Encounter

Let's never stop preaching and teaching to the crowd. However, we need to let go of the assumption that we are going to have churches one hundred percent full of profoundly committed believers. There will always be a small core of deeply committed disciples...and a large crowd of believers who are meeting Jesus at every conceivable point along the journey of faith.

Can we do as Jesus did? Can we meet each person where they are, and lovingly accept them as they are? Will that unconditional acceptance open hearts to look deeper, to seek, to follow the Way of Jesus?

It seemed to work pretty well for Jesus.✠

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