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10 ways to revitalize the Catholic Church

By I. Michael Bellafiore, Updated: September 10, 2013

Reform is afoot in the Vatican. Pope Francis has tightened the reins on the Vatican bank, worked through a grueling visit to Brazil, named a new secretary of state, and is now busy preparing for the October meeting of cardinals who will advise him on how to breathe new life into the Catholic Church.

The new pope's agenda is simple: spread the good news of Jesus Christ in a freer and more convincing way. Christ stated the church's mission very plainly: "Go out and make disciples of all the nations."

Here in America, Catholic parishes need to take measures to better carry out this mission:

1. Parishioners and clergy must take responsibility for evangelization. The church is not a spiritual McDonald's whose success largely depends on its managers, the clergy. Paraphrasing President John Kennedy's call to service, "Ask not what the church can do for you, but what you can do for the church." Evangelicals and Pentecostals have much to teach Catholics in this regard. Polls show Catholics stayed away from church because they were ignored, slighted, or scandalized. Sometimes they misunderstand church teaching. They need to know that they are missed and that the door is open for them.
2. A priest in France has attracted people to packed Masses largely by spending six hours every night in the confessional. (He also wears priestly garb on the street so that those who want a priest know where to find one.) Clergy here need to recommit themselves to the sacrament of confession. They must be available at convenient times for more than a perfunctory half-hour before Saturday evening Mass. Frequenting the sacrament themselves, priests can awaken in their parishioners the need for repentance and conversion.
3. A pope once said that one good catechist is worth a hundred outstanding preachers. Yet there are wealthy parishes that expect directors of religious education to work as unpaid volunteers! Catechism needs to be taken more seriously as a *ministry*. In many parts of the world, the minister whom Catholics see the most is their catechist, not their pastor. Parents must be willing to be trained and work as catechists. More adult Catholics must also take responsibility for handing on the faith. This also includes shouldering ministries that care for the least, such as visiting the sick.
4. Catholic colleges and universities believe *unequivocally* that it is an honor to be Catholic, and need to be *demonstrably evangelical*. The people who are often

proudest to be part of Catholic education are in fact non-Catholics: Protestants, non-Christians, and even atheists.

5. More clergy and religious need to regard the church's teaching on sexuality and family as good news. It is part of the Gospel, and not something to be ashamed of. Granted, it must be done with tact and understanding. But it must be done, with the confidence that is part of the saving truth given by Jesus Christ.

6. Pray. A Protestant pastor in Cartagena, Colombia, is organizing 3:30 a.m. prayer rallies in the streets where violence, poverty, and prostitution reign. Catholics here could even do the same in neighborhoods where indifference rules. The world has just finished a day of prayer and fasting for peace. Friday is still a penitential day even though Catholics are not required to give up meat. The U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference issues weekly intentions for prayer and fasting. These calls can make for powerful spiritual kindling.

7. Catholic social teaching is an essential consequence of the Gospel, which means we must be involved in the public square – as Catholics. With enough prayer, sacrifice, advocacy, common sense, and sheer grace, Wall Street might cease being a casino; and likewise, civic leaders, public unions, and bondholders might be able to find agreement in the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression.

8. Pope Francis rightly warns us of the evil afoot in this world. Religious liberty is being threatened daily in the West, while 200 million Christians worldwide are in mortal danger because of their faith. Catholics must become more aware of the plight of our brothers and sisters abroad.

9. At the same time, we must forgive and pray for our adversaries. Recently, the parishioners of one of the many churches burned in Egypt wrote on the wall of their church that they forgave their enemies and would pray on their behalf to God, who is love. *That's Gospel!*

10. Remember that being Catholic in America, or anywhere, means we can rejoice and trust Christ's admonishment, "be not afraid."

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