Bringing joy to the masses

Reflections on attaining real joy and using it to evangelize the world

By Sarah Wolf
Of The Catholic Sentinel

It's contagious. It's attractive. It's as sought after as it is rare. It's joy. It's not a smile or a huge laugh. It's more internal than that. And for evangelizers everywhere, it is key to bringing people into communion with Christ.

In his 2013 apostolic exhortation *"Evangelii Gaudium"* (Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis writes, "An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral. ... Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but 'by attraction.'"



Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers

Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers is a local evangelizer and renowned speaker.

"No one wants to be around people who are moping all the time," says the deacon. "But there's something attractive about someone who is living this interior joy.

"Even though we don't understand certain circumstances that may be occurring, there's a joy in knowing that God's will in whatever form that takes is being fulfilled," he adds. "That is attractive to people."

Joy, however, has to be distinguished from happiness.

"Joy is not so much about feelings and emotions," says Deacon Burke-Sivers.

Happiness can come from eating ice cream or winning the lottery. It's external. Joy is internal, flowing from inside oneself outward.

The internal joy can be especially helpful in drawing even one's family and close friends into discussions of faith.

"One of the keys is showing that joy of the Lord and loving them even though you may not love their actions. You're still loving them. And the joy that shows through that love, I think, may bring them to a deeper conversation with you about things of the faith," he says.

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Evangelizing and joy

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Members of the St. John Society who work in a number of Oregon parishes and Newman Centers specialize in evangelization. Father Ignacio Llorente, pastor at St. Mary Parish in Corvallis, is one such member.

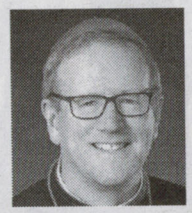
The church points to three essential elements to evangelize, says Father Llorente — prayer, word and witness.

"Witness of life is essential," says the priest. "It triggers the questions in others: Why is he or she like that? Where is that joy, peace and enthusiasm for life coming from?

"It takes the person out of indifference and moves them in the curiosity stage," he says. "This is very important because many times people who are away [from God or the faith] are not thinking about God. But when they see a Godly person who lives a different lifestyle, they might question it."

"Witness of life is a language that everyone can understand. They might not be able to understand all the dogmas of Christianity but they can understand the language of joy, peace and love," says Fr. Llorente.

In his blog "Word on Fire," Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron touches on the importance of joy in evangelization and its importance over even ethics.



Bishop Robert Barron

"Moral law follows and attends upon something far more basic, namely, the happiness that comes from intimate union with God.

"Once one has caught the zest of Christian life, one wants to know how to maintain that life," writes the bishop.



Felix Barba joyfully hands a rosary to a passerby as part of an evangelization effort. (Sarah Wolf/Catholic Sentinel)

He goes on to compare the experience to witnessing the exuberance of a baseball game for the first time and then, on one's own, being driven by excitement to search out all of the rules for the game.

"Ethics is important; but joy is more important," writes Bishop Barron. "And when the joy is in place, the ethics won't be shunned; it will be embraced."

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