

HELPING OTHERS BECOME CATHOLIC

"The human soul is naturally Christian." This is the key of conversions everywhere. There is no difference in this between the people of China, America or Africa. It is simply a question of reaching as many as possible of them, with the message of Christian love. This obviously can best be done by the laity who are one of themselves, who have the same background and are in daily contact with them. The head of an insurance agency converted three girls in his office; a housewife converted a neighbor family; a factory worker converted two fellow workers—that is the idea.

Any priest will tell you that most of his converts come to the rectory or to classes only through contact with a lay Catholic whom they love and respect. A successful convert program consists simply in promoting and multiplying these contacts, in helping more Catholics to realize how they can imitate the insurance man, the housewife and the factory worker. In America and China, as once in Palestine, a Philip says to a Nathanael, "We have found the Messiah. Come and see."

At present most of the laity feel themselves excluded from convert making because they think it consists chiefly of explaining doctrinal questions to non-Catholics, which they do not feel capable of doing. We must help them understand that it is rather in bearing witness as Philip did. We must appeal to man's inner need of Christ rather than to his intellect. This is something any Catholic can do. If five per cent of our Catholics each made one convert each year, the number in this country would be 1,500,000 annually instead of the present 120,000. America could be converted in forty years. To call this visionary and impractical would be to put that label on the command of Christ Himself. God's grace is unlimited and meant for all. Increasing the number of instruments God can use, by making Catholics more alert to the apostolate and organizing them for it, would bring this grace to a proportionately greater number. We are not putting all the people we should into contact with divine grace. Competent observers estimate that there are 5 million persons in the United States ready to become Catholics if properly approached. Father Clarence Krull wrote in *The Priest* that, on the basis of replies during the last war by prospective and actual members of the Armed Services to the question: "What is your religion or religious preference?" there are in the United States, in addition to 30 million Catholics, 30 million others who have some interest in the Church and would like to know more about it." What a fertile field for a zealous laity!

The Most Rev. Charles F. Buddy, Bishop of San Diego, California, describes in America a convert campaign organized throughout his diocese during 1951. Committees of the most zealous and competent laymen were formed in every parish under the chairmanship of the pastor, who briefed them intensively on the technique of a tactful approach. The parishes were divided into blocks or sections, with a captain and lieutenant for each. Special cards were used to get a report on each visit. In the whole diocese 95,000 homes were visited by the workers in pairs, who introduced themselves as neighbors and extended an invitation to come to the Parish Inquiry Forum. They also gave a cordial letter to the same effect signed by the pastor, and a small pamphlet. All met with a gracious response, perhaps because the visiting teams were mostly married couples who came as neighbors. Over 6,000 persons expressed interest, 2,000 came to the classes, and nearly 5,000 lapsed Catholics returned.

An insurance salesman who sold a million dollars worth of insurance in a single year has described his method. He kept a record, from which he knew that for every fifteen calls, he got three interviews and made one sale, averaging about \$6,000 per policy. Thus he knew just how many calls he would have to make in a week to reach his goal. In the San Diego convert campaign it also took about fifteen calls to bring one person to Christ. In other words, if we had an organized program, we could count on about the same ratio of success. The trouble is, we do not have the program; the fifteen calls are not made and there is no follow-up.

In a Maryknoll parish in Japan, where the interested persons found by the visitors in convert making program were followed up by the Legion of Mary, about one in ten came to the Inquiry Class. This illustrates the value of division of labor according to what each one can do. Many more people can be found to take part in an occasional visitation program, while the follow-up by trained apostles makes it more effective.

Some priests use husband and wife Census Teams, who visit all the families in their area. Holy Name men and their wives could do this very well. Such teams can easily develop contacts on a neighborly basis. The census should

not be merely to discover the Catholics living in the area. It is also a valuable means of contact with possible converts. If the one answering the door is a non-Catholic the visitors do not simply walk away, but try to enter into a friendly conversation. They can imitate Saint Francis Xavier, who praised the home or the children.

This may be that family's first personal contact with Catholics, and it is vital that it make them feel these are neighbors worth knowing. The best hours to make calls are from 11 A.M. to 4 P.M. on Sundays, and from 6:30 to 8:30 on week-nights. Census Teams have a tactful way of finding out what church the family belongs to, and are ready to praise the zeal of its members. If they are not churchgoers, the team says something on the value of religion to meet today's problems, how it contributes to the happiness of family life, how it has helped the speaker in these matters. Many people today feel the need of some guide and help in their lives; sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses are growing because they seek them out. Personal witness is the most effective kind of argument, and one that any Catholic can present. A little experience will show them how to suit it to the people they meet. A large proportion of our converts come from among the good people who belong to no church. They form over half the population of this country.

These methods of contacting converts apply the principles of Pope Pius XI, who said, "It is a great law of nature, as well as of grace, that similarity opens the door to rapprochement and affection . . ." Thus in order to bring back to Christ the different classes of men, it is above all necessary to recruit and form in their midst auxiliaries of the Church who understand their mentality, who know how to speak to their hearts in a spirit of fraternal charity." "... Each state of life will have its corresponding apostles: workers, apostles of workers; farmers, apostles of farmers; sailors, apostles of sailors; students, apostles of students." The Study Clubs of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine are ideal for training Catholics to contact non-Catholics.

This practical application of their discussions would deepen and sustain their interest by giving them a feeling of personal achievement. We have only half learned anything until we are able to communicate it to others, and this is especially true of our Faith. The study-action technique is the ideal method of instructing our people. At each meeting the members would report on their contact activities. The Christopher News Notes tell of a nun in a Chicago high school who used Father Keller's *You Can Change The World* as a supplementary text in religion. The class resolved to get one convert apiece, and the result was thirteen converts within a few years.

In many parishes the Saint Vincent de Paul Society has little to do because welfare organizations have largely taken over assistance of the poor. What a field the members of the Society would have if they undertook to visit non-Catholics, especially those without church affiliations. Each member could easily find out who they are in his own neighborhood. Today in many parishes few people need the corporal works of mercy, but more than ever are in need of the spiritual ones.

The original purpose of the Society was to perform the spiritual as well as the corporal works of mercy. This is clear from the insistence of Frederick Ozanam, the founder, on personal visits to homes to demonstrate Christ's spirit of neighborly affection. Many exemplary Catholics, people with plenty of ability and initiative, are unwilling to be members of the average parish society because they feel that the meeting is largely given up to routine details. Yet if they were pointed towards making convert contacts, the Holy Name Society, the Altar and Rosary, the Laymen's Association and other parish organizations could be revitalized. The more zealous members could be formed into groups to plan their work and report on it at the meetings, e.g., Census Teams, Visitation Teams, or just plain good neighbors who take every opportunity to bring the love of Christ to others. The work of the teams would am be a matter just between themselves and the priest; reports should be made to the organization so that everyone in it feels that he has a share and be encouraged to participate. Much will depend on the emphasis and inspiration for convert making given by the priest. The fuel is there but the spark that fires it must come from him. If the attention of the people is constantly drawn to it, if they are guided and encouraged, they will make converts. That is what occurred in the cathedral parish of Denver, Colorado, which was among that pioneered Inquiry Classes in this country. Many Catholics brought inquiries to the classes every year. Father John A. O'Brien tells in his NCWC column how a husband and wife, themselves recent converts, brought thirty-six in one year. They studied each one and tried to show him how the Faith would satisfy his particular need, his hunger for spiritual security in a cold and indifferent world.

To contact the millions who feel something lacking in their lives, Our Lord needs many more hands like those of this devoted couple. There are many of them to be found in every parish; they need only encouragement and training. The converts will come exactly in proportion to the number of contacts they make.

That is the secret.

Experience in China convinced us that it was impossible to expect the congregation to become convert-minded without apostolic preaching, "in season and out of season." In the seminary we had been taught to plan dogmatic and moral sermons, but we had to add a third category - apostolic sermons. At least, every dogmatic and moral sermon was given an apostolic application. If our people are not apostolic, is it not because we preach to them almost exclusively about their individual spiritual lives, rarely turning their mind outward towards the needs of others, which simply fixes more strongly their natural tendency to individualism in religion? If we could get each adult to make one apostolic contact a day the parish would be quickly transformed.

Probably the greatest obstacle to developing the apostolate is inertia arising from deep-rooted habits and outlook. On the part of the laity, they have never had to do more than be on the receiving end spiritually; on the part of the clergy, we have always done everything ourselves. Clergy and laity must form a team. They already do it in financial drives; why not an apostolic partnership for Christ?
