Do you remember a commercial, aired on television some years ago, of two people who accidentally bump into each other: one busy eating chocolate and the other, peanut butter? The serendipitous mixture of foods became a delicious discovery: Reese’s peanut butter cups! Distinct foods enhanced one another.

Mission preaching and the outreach to inactive Catholics are two distinct and vital ministries for any parish, but when the two are combined, the impact can be enriching, not just for returning Catholics, but for the parish that seeks to evangelize. Justo and Catherine Gonzalez observe that the Spirit of Pentecost inspired holy speech, which manifested an outward (centrifugal) and an inward (centripetal) force. The communication (literally, “to make common”) realized by the early community had a twofold effect: bearing good news without and strengthening unity within: “Moving outward, sent by the Spirit [and] moving inward, pulled by the Spirit, is . . . the meaning of Pentecost. Both are essential . . . indeed, both are so closely tied together that we can only experience the one as we are part of the other” (2003, 10).

Having waxed and waned in the last fifty years, missions (four or five days and nights of intense spiritual renewal by a community usually with Scripture, ritual, music and fellowship) have regained their popularity because many pastoral ministers believe that the week of a mission can reach more people than almost any other parish event during the year. They also provide, as we will see, a collateral benefit: the formation of an evangelizing parish. But if opponents of parish missions are correct in accusing them of catering only to the “choir,” there is a movement in many dioceses and parishes to reach those who, for a variety of reasons, have left the active practice of the Catholic faith.

Visible on the horizon of church ministry is an increasing number of programs designed specifically for Catholics who have drifted away: the North American Forum on the Catechumenate’s ReMembering Church, the Paulists’ Landings, the Franciscans’ Come Home Program, Omaha’s We Miss You, Welcome Back, and many others. The USCCB document, A Time to Listen . . . A Time to Heal, is an excellent resource directory. While each of these

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programs has its unique emphasis, the goal is the same: to extend beyond church walls in order to invite non-practicing Catholics to meaningful dialogue, healing, and prayer. Some programs culminate the “coming home” process with a public ritual celebration patterned after the Easter Vigil.

However, in my experience as a preacher of missions, many Catholics have left the Church quietly and prefer to return in similar fashion. A week-long mission, with a full church, offers a returning Catholic the initial comfort of anonymous companionship without the pressure of forced disclosure.

To have a mission in conjunction with an outreach program is to “communicate” the power of the Gospel outside and inside. It engages the entire parish in a call to evangelization. It regards the celebration of a week of renewal, enrichment, fellowship, and encounter with various ministries. It can truly be a week of grace for all parishioners—pleased pillars as well as grateful returnees. The “choir” might in fact be present, but in the wings are new voices singing songs of thanksgiving amidst tears of gladness.

These partners in ministry have much in common. Both outreach and missions (a) respond to the call of Pope John Paul II for a “new evangelization”; (b) anticipate the return of inactive Catholics; and (c) usually involve hospitality, liturgy, and lay participation. Let us take a closer look at the aims of these twin ministries.

Mission as Invitation to Inactive Catholics

William McKee, C.Ss.R., was working in the field of outreach to inactive Catholics years before this growing group became a real concern in our Church. He discovered that the main reason many people came back to the Church was something as simple as a personal invitation. Unfortunately, such people are not loitering in the vestibules of our parishes. They require a phone call, a visit, an advertisement in a secular paper announcing some attractive program, or other means to get their attention. Once they are comfortable with speaking again to a person representing the Church, they may or may not respond to an invitation to attend a mission. But for those who do so it may be the first time they are back in church. Perhaps they might sit together or regroup afterwards for discussion. The mission that I lead purposefully avoids Eucharist and Reconciliation until the third or fourth night. The first evenings offer returning Catholics a safe haven, a non-threatening place to hear that they too are beloved.

Mission as Place of Compassion

An important dynamic that is astonishing to many returning Catholics is the space and encouragement to articulate the reasons why they had left the Church and/or the faith. Healing catharsis occurs in most cases; in others, there is an opportunity for the Church to listen to and acknowledge compassionately the faith journeys of our brothers and sisters who feel marginalized or unwelcomed. If the mission takes place at the end of an outreach program, a returning Catholic may find a great deal of healing over the course of the week. A mission can never be about the missionary, nor can it be reduced merely to excellent preaching. The best missions evoke a broad range of experiences for many people with diverse spiritualities; gathering afterwards gives the opportunity for this expression. One parish set up tables after each mission service so that during the fellowship and over snacks people could approach someone answering questions about divorce and annulments, or sit down and speak to another about bereavement or Project Rachel, or receive
information about church teaching. They discovered that the Church is serious about formation by supplying information and inspiration along with catechesis and kerygma.

Mission and Evangelization

One of the gifts of the “new evangelization” is that such gospel work is now clearly seen as a duty and a privilege for many to “preach the gospel at all times . . . if necessary, to use words.” A parish that includes outreach to inactive Catholics in pastoral planning and budgeting is an evangelizing parish. I do not believe it to be a coincidence that these parishes usually have all of the following: excellent preaching, keen social awareness, lively hospitality, and a strong music ministry. When this parish community stretches out to invite non-practicing sisters and brothers back to the parish especially for the celebration of a mission, two things happen. The Church commissions ministers and sends them out to evangelize; they, in turn, bring back people who themselves experience a powerful, gospel-driven week of evangelization. Some typical reactions from returning Catholics after a mission are: “I am glad to see you emphasized the Bible,” “I never felt so close to Jesus,” or “I need to bring my spouse with me tomorrow!” The communication of good news outside the Church helps to improve community within the Church.

Mission as Outreach

There is nothing so evangelically primal as the passion certain people have for reaching inactive Catholics. People who have left the Church and now know the joy of full communion are often the most passionate. Serving in the ministry of outreach can be both a challenge and a joy: some people are not ready to come back and speak plainly, giving reasons why; others have just been waiting for “a sign.” The most effective ministers are patient listeners who invite people to “tell their story,” free of judgment, and then respond with helpful possibilities by way of books, groups such as bereavement, or the divorced and remarried, or other resources. A mission, when it is well prepared, is likewise a patient “listener.” Before I preach in a parish, I will have met with the mission committee four to six months in advance and inquired as to what kind of parish it is, what are the issues, why they want a mission, what hopes they have for the future, what evangelizing will take place. When the actual mission is celebrated, although the missionary is an outsider, much like the outreach minister at the door of the home of an inactive Catholic, they are somewhat conversant with the story of the parish, and can help connect the gospel message with those people at that time in that place.

Mission as Horizontal and Vertical

Both Ronald Rolheiser and Richard Rohr make frequent mention of Karl Rahner’s conviction that the time is fast approaching when one will either become a mystic or a non-believer. With the decline in a sense of the transcendent in our culture, a widening credibility gap in politics and institutional religion, a technologically savvy Generation Y that lives reality vicariously through television programs and disembodied-but-instant messaging, Rahner’s words are more accurate now than ever. In the months following September 11, I preached in a number of communities which had suffered fatalities that tragic day. I met people who were confused, angry, unsure about the existence of God or quite sure in their negative opinion of a toxic God. I met others who were struggling with a loss of naïveté and a lust for
revenge. And yet, I continue to encounter others who have come back to the Church to discover anew the power of religion: to “re-ligify” or “reconnect the frayed threads of life into a tapestry of meaning.” If an outreach program can connect people to one another and help to re-establish relationships to the Church and the sacraments, where possible, then the mission can help fortify those relationships while pointing to a deeper reality, a broader perspective: our fundamental connection to the Father, whose Pentecostal Spirit impels us without, even as we work for (comm)-unity within.

References