

## *The Fortress*

By Randy Hain

When I imagine a fortress, it invokes thoughts of strength, security and protection. The image is comforting, particularly when used in relation to one's faith. I was speaking with someone I met recently about my faith and learned that he, too, was Catholic. After hearing my story, he explained to me the role faith played in his life. He described it as a *fortress* in that it made him feel safe and served as the foundation of his life. A little probing on my part led me to discover that he was generally very quiet about his beliefs and the thought of sharing Christ's message with others was daunting and uncomfortable. Before my very eyes, the safe and foundational fortress of faith he described was transformed into a fortress mentality.

As Catholic Christians, do we some times fall into this trap and exhibit behavior that is absolutely contrary to scripture and the teachings of the Church regarding the call to evangelization? Do we hide within "faith fortresses" of our own making?

Like many, I some times struggle with evangelizing and I am writing this not to render judgment, but to hopefully inspire all of us to think differently, change our behavior and be Lights for Christ. One only has to read the Great Commission given to us by Jesus Christ himself in **Matthew 28:19-20** to understand our expected role, "*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the world.*" Our Lord also calls us to evangelization in **Matthew 9:37-38**, "*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.*"

I choose to believe that all of us mean well and have good intentions when it comes to bearing witness for Christ, but there are obstacles (many of our own making) that keep us from doing so. What are some of these and how can they be overcome?

- ***I don't know what to say.***

It is said that St. Francis of Assisi once offered this advice, "*Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.*" It is through the love and charity we give others and our daily example of Christ's love within us that allows us to bear witness. If we are truly Lights for Christ, people will be drawn to us and the Holy Spirit will work through us-if necessary, the words will come.

- ***I am not secure enough in my faith to witness to others.***

Author Peter Kreeft is fond of saying " *...that the Catholic Church is not a museum for Saints, but a hospital for Sinners.*" We are not perfect-only God is perfect. We can wait our entire lives to be prepared and worthy to evangelize and we will have wasted a lifetime of opportunity. Don't let your pursuit of Sainthood keep you from sharing Christ's message with other potential Saints.

- ***I am not comfortable sharing anything personal, especially about my faith.***  
 Transparency invites transparency! We can't expect someone to open up to us unless we are willing to do the same. Your faith journey is a blessing, meant to be shared, and the witness you give may have a profound influence on someone. As we read in **1 Peter 3:15-16**, "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame.*" Ask a new convert or someone experiencing a spiritual renewal how they reached this point on their faith journey. They will likely credit the Holy Spirit and name someone who reached beyond their comfort zone to share Christ's message. Try viewing yourself as a vehicle through which the Holy Spirit can utilize your witness to connect with others.
- ***I don't want to appear judgmental.***  
 So don't judge. It's not our place. Our mission is to spread Christ's message of love and mercy, not tell people their sins. Pope Benedict XVI shares this guidance, "*Nowadays, in a special way the world needs people capable of proclaiming and bearing witness to God who is love. The Church's mission is the extension of Christ's mission: to bring God's love to all, proclaiming it with words and with the concrete testimony of charity.*" The Holy Father is clearly saying that we must witness with love-God's love. Be encouraging, listen attentively, offer assistance, share Christ's message and absolutely pray-these are the actions of love that will allow you to effectively bear witness.
- ***Isn't evangelization the primary responsibility of the Priests and Deacons in our parish?***  
 Absolutely not. We are all called to go and make disciples (**Matthew 28:19**). In his encyclical ***Redemptoris Missio***, Pope John Paul II wrote, "*No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.*" In ***Lumen Gentium***, Vatican II specifically describes the mission of the lay faithful, "*The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the Church. Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself. Moreover, by the sacraments, and especially by the Eucharist, that love of God and man which is the soul of the apostolate is communicated and nourished. The laity, however, are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth. Thus, every lay person, through those gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the Church itself, according to the measure of Christ's bestowal.*" (LG 33) This is crystal clear direction for all of us to understand our special responsibility within the Church.

- ***I don't want to alienate my friends or new people I meet.***

There is a difference between *preaching* and *judging* versus *loving* and *sharing*. If people respond to the “hope you have” and the “joy within you”, then they will be curious and ask you questions. But, this will not work if we stay inside our fortress of faith. Consider this passage from **In Conversation With God** by Francis Fernandez, “*On our part we are called upon to be good channels through which His grace will flow and to facilitate the action of the Holy Spirit in ourselves, in friends, relatives, acquaintances and colleagues....If our Lord never gets tired of giving His help to everybody, how can we who are only instruments ever become discouraged? Once the carpenter's hand is firmly placed on the wood, how can the tool ever have any reservations about doing its work?*”

So I ask, do these obstacles resonate with you? I personally am challenged by these, but my commitment to evangelize and witness for Christ remains strong. I grew up in the Baptist church, stopped going when I was 15 and became a convert, along with my wife, to the Catholic Church 23 years later in 2006. I am eternally grateful that I have been given a second chance to experience Christ's love after living most of my life in the “spiritual wilderness”. Reflecting on the profound impact Christ has had on my life since my conversion makes me want to share my story with everyone I meet. All of us have been given an incredible gift-Christ's redeeming love! At times we are weak, we may stumble on our faith journey and we are sinners, but we must remember to be grateful and joyful for the countless blessings we have been given. In fact, one of the easiest ways to evangelize to others is to be joyful. When we are happy in our faith, we inspire and encourage others and create opportunities to witness for Christ-they want to hear the Good News!

Consider the fortress illustration again. In order to evangelize, we need to operate outside the walls of our faith fortresses. Francis Fernandez shares additional insight from **In Conversation With God**, “*Ours is an age when Christ needs men and women who are able to stand beside the Cross, strong, daring, simple, hard workers, without any human respect when it comes to doing good; men and women who are cheerful, who have as the foundation of their lives prayer-a relationship with Jesus that is full of friendship.*”

If we only share our faith and witness with other Catholics or worse, keep it to ourselves, how will the Church grow and spread Christ's message of love? Will we make the necessary commitments to heed the call of the Great Commission, other supporting scripture, the leadership of the Popes, Vatican II and the Catechism? What are simple ways we can all evangelize and bear witness for Christ? I prayerfully and respectfully ask you to consider doing the following:

- ***Pray***  
Pray for courage. Pray that the Holy Spirit will work through us. Pray for opportunities to bear witness. Pray that God will allow us to recognize opportunities for evangelization. Make the Sign of the Cross and pray Grace

before each meal (public and private) and say prayers as a family. Prayer is the key, because it prepares both our hearts and those of others for those moments of truth and grace.

- ***Be a Light for Christ.....***  
.....in your workplace, at home, in the community and with your friends. Be a joyful, forgiving and generous person: Next to prayer, this is the most effective thing you can do. Let Christ's love and the blessings he has given you be apparent to others. They will want to know the source of your happiness and will likely initiate a faith conversation. *"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father."* **Matthew 5:13-14, 16.**
- ***Keep your own faith journey on track***  
It would be hypocritical for us to share the message of Christ's love unless we believed it and lived it. This means living our faith at home and teaching our children about the Church and Christ's love for them. Pray, attend mass, go to reconciliation frequently, go to Eucharistic Adoration, observe the sacraments, study our faith and be joyful Christians. These actions will prepare us to share with sincerity the impact Christ has in our lives.
- ***Share your story with others-give witness to the blessings of Jesus in your life***  
As I suggested before, be transparent! If you feel uncomfortable asking questions about their faith, why not share yours? They will most likely be moved by your example and be open in return. My willingness to be open about my Catholicism has given me countless opportunities to evangelize. As Maurice Blumberg wrote in a recent Catholic Exchange article, *"Don't be afraid of witnessing to the love and mercy of God. All you have to do is tell your own story. This may sound daunting, but it isn't. Just share how your faith has made a difference in your life. The Holy Spirit will give you the right words."*

We do not need to always have a Bible or pamphlet handy in order to evangelize because our greatest witnessing resources are the Holy Spirit and our own faith experience. Most of us have had moments in which we were touched, helped, encouraged or healed by God, were deeply comforted by hearing or reading a Bible passage or listening to a moving Christian song. Often the encouragement or help came through some person, yet we were convinced it was really God who brought it about. That is what we share with the one who has opened up their heart to us: "You know, I've been through something like that in my own life. And what helped me most was my faith in the Lord."

- ***Reach out to the Lazarus in your life every day***  
Lazarus is the poor man covered with sores at the gate of the rich man in Christ's parable related in **Luke 16:19-31**. Can you think of a greater witness for Christ than to emulate our Lord and help those most in need? Think of the sick, jobless,

depressed, troubled people in your life and reach out to them. Parish ministry is one of the best ways for you to get involved and make a difference. As you help them through their troubles, the Holy Spirit can work through you to share God's message of love!

- ***Share or give a book, CD, DVD, article or homily related to the Faith***  
This is a wonderful act of kindness that will help someone grow spiritually and give you ample opportunity for further discussion about the Lord. An interesting perspective on this type of evangelization is that it creates a safe environment to begin a faith dialogue. "The book I gave you really touched my heart and helped me learn to pray-what did you think of it?" or "Did you listen to the CD I sent you by Peter Kreeft on the 7 Reasons to be Catholic? After hearing it I really feel better prepared to explain our Faith to others!" You get the picture-let your gift open the door for a rich and engaging conversation, then allow the Holy Spirit to take over.

The fortress mentality is a real issue for many Christians and we have to remain committed and diligent about living our faith beyond those walls. This article is focused on simple ways to witness, but there are countless other ways to bring people Christ's message including extending an invitation to mass or a parish event. What ever you do or plan to do, God will bless you for heeding the call to evangelization.

I conclude with a quote from Pope John Paul II, who wrote in **Springtime for Evangelization**: *"Evangelization is the Church's effort to proclaim to everyone that God loves them, that he has given himself for them in Christ Jesus, and that he invites them to an unending life of happiness. Once this Gospel has been accepted as the "good news", it demands to be shared. All baptized Christians must commit themselves to evangelization, conscious that God is already at work in the mind and hearts of their listeners, just as he prompted the Ethiopian to ask for baptism when Philip told him "the good news of Jesus" (**Acts 8:35**). Evangelization is thus a part of the great mystery of God's self-revelation to the world: it involves the human effort to preach the Gospel and the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in those who encounter its saving message. Since we are proclaiming a mystery, we are servants of a supernatural gift, which surpasses anything our human minds are fully grasping or explaining, yet which attracts by its inner logic and beauty."*

I am hopeful that this image of the fortress and its dual nature will encourage you to reflect on your approach evangelization. We can either live securely inside our faith fortress or we can heed the call to evangelize and operate outside its walls. To those who faithfully practice evangelization the way our Lord intended, thank you for showing us the way by your example. As lay people, we can make a dramatic impact on the lives of so many individuals if we will only accept our responsibility to share the dramatic impact Christ has on our lives. Thank you and God Bless you.

