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"Hi. Um, God's just telling me that you're on his mind and he just wants to take you and he just wants to love on you and he has special plans for you in your life. And he just wants you to be able to follow him with your whole heart," a young girl holding a Christian pamphlet tells a 20-something stranger in a bowling alley in one of the most uncomfortable scenes in the 2006 documentary "Jesus Camp." The stranger graciously takes the pamphlet and thanks the girl.

I've only seen the movie once, about a dozen years ago, but that scene is burned into my memory. And it has often come to mind since then when I've heard the word "evangelization," which has been sort of a problem, because I have spent my entire career working for Catholic institutions and colleagues in the field say the word all the time.

Evangelization: It sounds, well, *evangelical* to my Northeast Catholic ears. It sounds not-like-us. Catholics like me show up at Mass, even get involved in ministry activities, but we certainly don't talk about it with outsiders. We're definitely not doing that bowling alley stuff.

I'm not sure I'll ever be totally comfortable with the word, but over the past few years, I have learned to stop worrying and actually embrace what I think it means, even if I still get the heebie-jeebies a little when I say it. Here are three points about what evangelization is not that have helped bring me around.

### **Evangelization is not proselytism.**

A more apt term than "evangelization" for what the young girl is doing at the bowling alley is "proselytism," which is all about winning converts into your fold, packaged with a heavy dose of moral judgment. In its worst forms, proselytism is manipulative and confrontational. It puts people on the spot and is way more unidirectional talking than listening.

Even if, with a charitable view, the practice is rooted in an admirable desire to share the love of God, it's not actually sharing. It's wielding a spiritual sledgehammer. It takes no longer than it takes to ask, "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" (To be clear, I have a lot more concern with the parents of the girl in the film clip than with the girl herself. She's just a kid, seemingly put up to something through the powerful influence of authority figures in her life.)

On the flip side, evangelization is a long-term process. It's relationship-building, invitation, dialogue, truly caring about other people, and modeling Christian love through concrete actions. It's living with a sort of deep joy and hospitality that make people say, "I don't know what she has, but I want to be around her."

Does evangelization include talking about Jesus? Sure, absolutely, but only in the context of trusting relationship.

**Evangelization is not saying "God bless you" instead of "Bless you" when someone sneezes.**

I've been to a handful of evangelization workshops, and at every single dang one, the example of saying "God bless you" to a sneezer has popped up. For some folks, the darkest sign of secularism in our society today is that people don't say "God bless you" anymore.

The troubling belief running underneath this complaint is that evangelization is some sort of anti-PC battle we have to fight. This is veering toward proselytism again and it's distracting from the real hard work of evangelizing.

The idea animating evangelical activity is that the life of faith is full of so much beauty, meaning, community, learning, grace and more that we can't help but want to share that with others. We can't let superficial social interactions in our pluralistic society preoccupy us.

**Evangelization is not targeting people who are already committed to other traditions.**

Part of my discomfort with the idea of evangelization came from an assumption that we were supposed to be targeting non-Catholics who were already committed members of other faith communities. Then, a great speaker I heard helped me shake that idea. Fr. Frank DeSiano, a Paulist priest and expert evangelizer, was asked by an audience member what we were supposed to do to evangelize people who were committed members of, say, a Protestant church. His initial one-word response? "Don't."

Share your faith with people of other traditions, build interfaith understanding, but never approach them with an intention of recruitment. Even a subtle, "Well, maybe if they get to know me, they'll want to become Catholic" is disrespectful!

St. John Paul II talked about a "new evangelization," one that seeks to engage Catholics who have drifted away or whose faith has become hollow and lifeless. That's fertile ground for evangelization. And we can evangelize folks who aren't committed to any faith community in particular, people who are seeking something more in their lives.

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These three evangelization-is-nots helped me move past my aversion to the word, but they're not sufficient by themselves. If I'm not doing these things, what is evangelization, exactly?

I think about the people in my life who evangelized me, who shared their life and faith with me in ways that led me to my own deep commitment (and career). In my experience, evangelization is the willingness to wrestle with big, existential questions of faith and purpose with humility. Evangelization is making your home with those on the peripheries of society. Evangelization is remaining with someone in their moments of great suffering.

It is patience, good humor, quiet prayer, trust in God despite the temptation to skepticism, a shared pot of coffee, a ride to church or the airport. It is showing up even when you're not feeling it.

Maybe you've met evangelizers who do those things. Maybe God's calling you to be one for somebody else.

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