

Evangelization must reach out to all

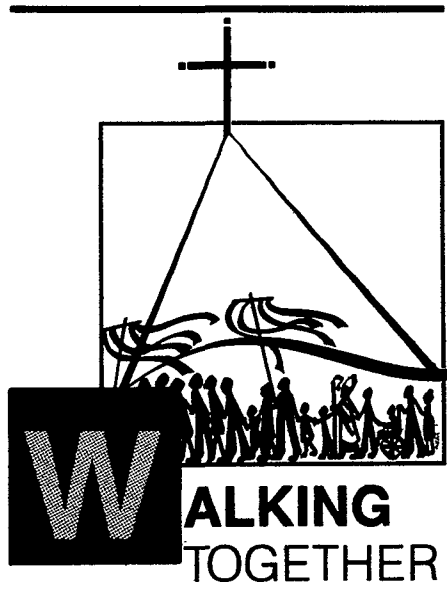
By Monsignor William Shannon
Guest contributor

I had the privilege of visiting our Sisters of St. Joseph working in Brazil in 1982. I learned much about their evangelization work amid a culture very different from their own. It was a joy to see the humility and concern with which they helped the poor and the oppressed come to recognize their own worth as human beings and as Christians.

One day in the little town of Cacu, Sister Marlena Roeger, SSJ, took me to visit Maria Elena, one of the local catechists. I asked this young mother whether the Second Vatican Council had made any difference in her life.

"Oh, yes," she said, "when I was a child I believed that the Gospel was the story of Jesus' life, something that happened a long time ago. Now I know that it is also the story of my life: something happening right now."

The Christian community's task during every age has been to evangelize the world. This means, among other things, helping people to see that the Gospel is not a book about the past, but a loving reality of the present. It means showing people that Jesus' proclamation, "Repent and believe the Good News," belongs not to a remote yesterday but to today. To evangelize is to enable people to see the Gospel as the story of their lives.



Here and now Jesus calls us, individuals and community, to "repent." Too often repentance is seen as a negative attitude: being sorry for misconduct. Yet this biblical term is positive and rich in meaning. It's all about "conversion," which means change. We are called to *change our attitudes*: to put on the mind of Jesus, to let the beatitudes' spirit rather than the materialism of a consumer-centered culture dictate the way we arrive at the values that will give meaning to our lives.

We are called to *change our behavior*: to be more selfless, gentler, loving, non-violent. We are called to a *change of consciousness*: to begin to see reality

differently, to see our oneness as God's people and the responsibilities we have to all women and men — for we all belong to God.

It should be clear that conversion in all these dimensions is not a one-shot experience that happens and is over with; it is an ongoing reality that we keep striving for, never quite achieve, but yet never cease from the striving.

Baptism sets us on the road to conversion (though we must never forget that there are those whom God, always prodigal with gifts of grace, calls to take this road even though they know nothing of baptism). But that road baptism put us on must be traveled. Most of us have a long way to go on this road of inner discipline and transformation, as we work toward a breakthrough into a different mode of living — namely, Jesus' way.

The paradox is that it is the community of God's people who make the journey and that same community which, led by the Spirit, also directs the journey. And as we journey are not always sure whether we are teachers or learners or sometimes a bit of both, as we involve ourselves in instructional and experiential programs.

Begun in the family, reinforced in the school and other catechetical ventures for children and youth, these programs — ideally at least — reach their highest point in the lifelong pro-

grams of learning and deepening Christian experiences offered to adults. In these programs we are formed into the Christian community by the stories of those disciples who have gone before us, by the Scriptures, the liturgy, the teaching office, and the church's living ever-being clarified tradition. We learn to act with informed consciences. We make moral decisions in which we put our own authenticity as people on the line.

When I was ordained a priest, my father did not receive Communion at my first Mass, because he had never been baptized. A few months after my ordination, a priest friend chided him.

"I was disappointed," he said, "that you did not become a Catholic before Bill was ordained." My father's simple and somewhat accusatory rejoinder was: "No one asked me."

Evangelization must not stop at our ecclesial doorsteps. There are many outside who have been alienated from the church; many more who have never heard of Jesus Christ in any meaningful way. Our evangelization must reach out with warmth and love to all of these.

Our synod discussions and recommendations must help us find ways to do so. Those outside the doors must never have occasion to say: "No one asked me."

Monsignor Shannon is professor emeritus at Nazareth College.

This world is passing, the next is eternal

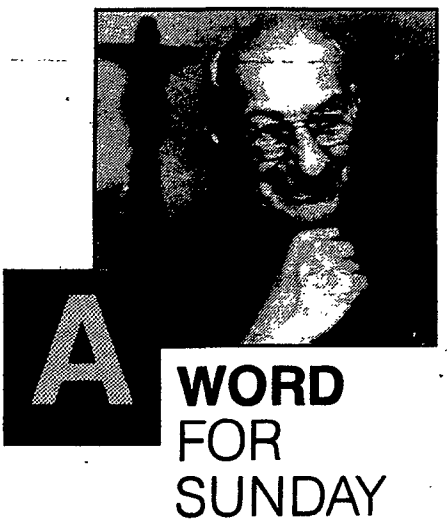
By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 17:1-9; (R1) Genesis 12:1-4; (R2) 2 Timothy 1:8-10.

Some say life begins at 40. For St. Frances Cabrini life began at 38; for Mother Teresa of Calcutta, at 49; for Pope John XXIII, at age 77. And for Abraham, life began at 75, when the Lord called him to leave his kinsfolk and go to a land that "I will show you."

This illustrates two points. First, retirement should never mean the end of achievement. Tennyson saw the great hazard in this and expressed it in his poem, "Ulysses": "How dull it is to pause, to make an end, / To rust unburnished, not to shine in use! / As though to breathe were life!"

Secondly, God always takes the initiative in salvation history — like when He called Abraham. Thus Paul wrote: "God has saved us and has called us to a holy life, not because of any merit of ours but according to his own design" (R2). That's precisely what grace is — a free gift, totally undeserved. That's the message of



infant baptism: God calls us, not we God.

How good that ought to make us feel. We are handpicked, a chosen people, a people set apart — "before the world began." No wonder the early Christians emphasized the Mass' thanksgiving, eucharistic aspect.

Thirdly, the Gospel tells the story of Jesus' transfiguration. St. Luke says the story this way: "... Jesus went up the mountain to pray. While he was

praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white" (9:28-29). In other words, He was transfigured while He prayed.

Prayer should change us. If it does not, we are not praying correctly. Prayer so changed Jesus that one day the apostles said, "Lord, teach us to pray."

I remember calling upon some fallen-away Catholics once. I suggested that they come back to the church. The man of the house said, "Father, I'm doing all right, without the church. I've got a good job, house, wife and kids. I really don't need the church."

I agreed that so far he was correct. But I said, "What about the next world. Will you get along there without the church?" He said he never thought of that. How true. All many people think about is this world: their job, promotion, education, college degrees, and so on.

One of the transfiguration's great lessons is to remind us of the next world, the real world, the one beyond this world. Moses and Elijah appeared — alive and quite well — even though Moses had been dead 1,250 years and Elijah for 850.

In the world beyond this is the fountain of youth. Jesus had a body like ours, but He let Peter, James and John see what it would be like, and possibilities: to shine like the sun, to bask in such glory that Peter didn't want to come down from the mount.

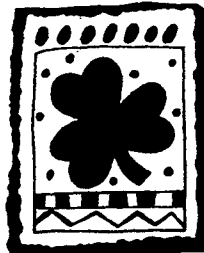
It's OK to get along in this world. But do not neglect the next world. This one is passing; the next is eternal. What blood, sweat and tears we expend to make it in this world. Ought we to do less to make it in the world that really counts?

And what did Moses and Elijah talk to Jesus about? They talked about His coming death. Glory comes through the cross. No cross, no crown, no pain, no palm, no thorns, no throne, no gall, no glory.

St. Paul said that this world's sufferings are nothing compared with the glory to come. Now is the time to make a few sacrifices, for it is Lent. Why not go to daily Mass? Weekly confession? Daily rosary? Fast on Wednesdays and Fridays?

If we do these little things, we'll make a go of it not only in this world, but especially in the next one where it really counts.

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