

The Cutting Edge *of the* NEW EVANGELIZATION

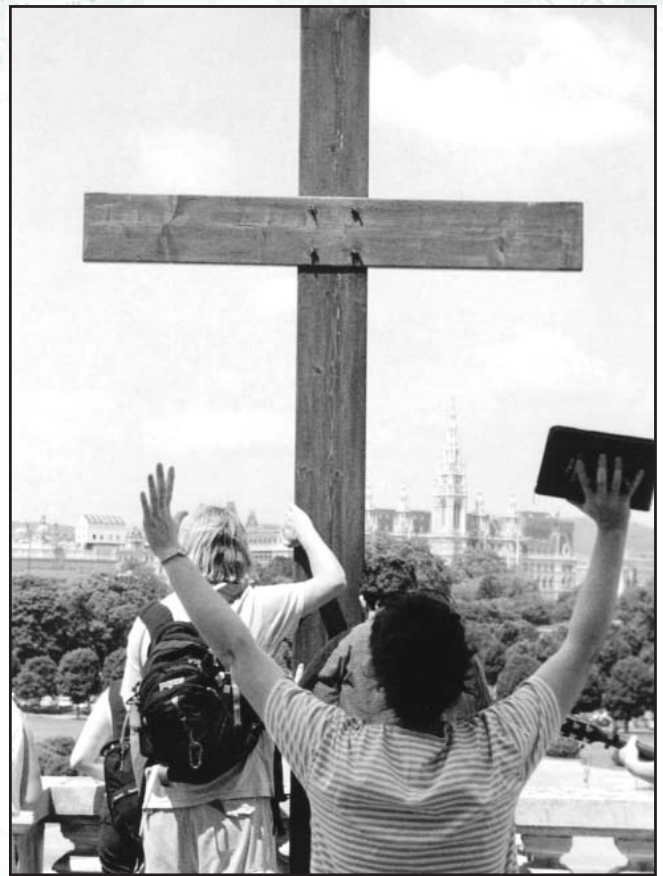
by Carole Brown

Ask the average Catholic what comes to mind when hearing the word “evangelization,” and inevitably you will hear responses that include “Billy Graham,” “T.V. preachers,” and “Bible-thumpers.” Evangelization is not a word that Catholics typically identify with being “of the essence” of their own faith. Indeed, even among convinced Catholics it is not uncommon to hear lamentations about family members who were “evangelized” away from the Church by Protestants; or on a more global level, about entire countries where the growth of Protestant denominations has been exponential in recent decades. Like the Bible, evangelization has long been thought of as a “Protestant thing,” and not always in positive terms.

In the decades following the Second Vatican Council, great pains have been taken to re-emphasize that “evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize” (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 14). This emphasis has been broadened by Pope John Paul II, who, throughout his pontificate, has been prophetic in calling the Church to a “new evangelization”—one which focuses on places where a Christian culture has already been long-established, but where the practice of the faith has become weak or nominal.¹ Part and parcel of this new evangelization is the summons to work for the restoration of Christian unity, nowhere more clearly articulated than in *Ut Unum Sint*, promulgated in 1995. Here, the Holy Father has called for “every possible form of practical cooperation [between Christians] at all levels . . . [including] witnessing to the Gospel message” (no. 40).

Behind the Curtain

As if anticipating this development, a curious chain of events took place in Poland in the decades during which it was behind the Communist Iron Curtain. The Church in Poland was experiencing great persecution from the Communists, but the Communists had their hands full with a priest named Fr. Franciszek Blachnicki. His own spiritual history had been permanently shaped decades earlier when, as a youth, he stood at “the wall” in Auschwitz, a Nazi con-



Praying before the World Youth Day Cross overlooking Vienna, Austria



Kerygma Team in Austria



centration camp, waiting to be shot. As he waited for the gun to go off, he uttered a quiet prayer, offering his life to the Lord, reasoning that if he died, he would go to heaven. If he lived, he promised he would serve God as a priest. As it turned out, Franciszek was pulled from the line of the firing squad, and his life was spared.

For Poland, the totalitarian rule of the Nazis was soon replaced by the totalitarian rule of the Communists. Fr. Blachnicki's brush with death had one unintended consequence—he was no longer afraid of anything. He was formed for his priestly vocation in an underground seminary, and after his ordination, he took a special interest in developing faith formation programs for young people. This was, of course, illegal. At a time when many of his contemporaries were disappearing and found dead, Fr. Blachnicki was holding clandestine youth camps in the forest areas near Wadowice.

There were many Bible-smuggling operations that had managed to penetrate the Iron Curtain during the decades of Communist control. By this means, Father became acquainted with such evangelical groups as Campus Crusade for Christ and Youth With A Mission. He was impressed with the fervor and the very personal sense of commitment to Jesus that led them to take such great risks on behalf of those who might never know Christ if the Communist program was successful.

Father observed that these Protestants had developed a way of communicating the message of the Gospel that was successful in securing a genuine conversion of life and personal attachment to Christ when they evangelized. Additionally, he realized that, in the most basic facets of their evangelization, apart from some doctrinal differences, there were no contra-



Fr. Franciszek Blachnicki

dictions with the teaching of the Catholic Church. He wondered if it could be adapted to a Catholic context. He invited missionaries from these groups to help him with his illegal youth camps and, with the blessing and encouragement of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II), in the course of time began to develop formation programs for lay Catholics based on their materials.

Courageous Solidarity

In the early 1980's, Fr. Blachnicki was an outspoken supporter of the Solidarity movement in Poland. Sneaking across the border of Germany, he transmitted radio broadcasts from there to the Polish workers who were on strike—a ministry that would have been impossible within Poland. As Solidarity was gaining steam, this activity earned Father the special attention of his government, and when he tried to return to Poland, he learned that he was to be arrested at the border. Knowing that this would likely mean death, he spent the rest of his life in exile in Germany, dying

there in 1987. His home diocese of Katowice has opened a cause for his canonization. Father Blachnicki's courage, both in his work with Solidarity and with the Protestant groups has had the effect of a stone dropping into a still pool of water—the ripples continue to this day.

One of the young men who crossed the border of Poland to help Fr. Blachnicki was an American Protestant named Bruce Clewett. Clewett was part of Youth With A Mission, an interconfessional lay mission organization for young people. He had worked throughout Europe and in countries behind the Iron Curtain since the early 1970's.

Deeply impacted by his experiences with Fr. Blachnicki and other Catholics, Clewett developed a passion to work for reconciliation among the churches and to assist in the evangelization of Catholics—not to woo them away from the Church, but rather to help them to fall in love with Christ, to remain Catholic, and to revitalize the Church from within, as he had experienced in Poland. Clewett experienced an explicit calling from God to work in Austria, a predominantly Catholic country—but he also felt that, in his role as a bridge builder, he should remain a Protestant (albeit a non-protesting one).

The Catholics there were, of course, not throwing themselves at his feet and begging to be evangelized. Austria was a school of hard knocks in many ways, but gradually Clewett and his co-workers built a network of training programs and relationships that are having a positive impact on the renewal of the Church throughout Europe.

Kerygma Teams

Over the years, Clewett found himself connecting with Catholics and other Protestants who had the same intuition as he did—to start a branch of Youth With A Mission specifically for Catholics. In 1996, Kerygma Teams was founded. Currently operating bases in Austria, Australia, Belgium, Ireland, India, Ghana, Slovakia, and Lithuania (as well as other projects beginning in the U.S.), Kerygma Teams is a pioneering work of the new evangelization.

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While each base has a specific focus (for example, youth ministry and radio communications in Ireland, mercy ministries in India, and family ministries in Slovakia), Kerygma Teams' most basic component is the Discipleship Training School. This is a six- to eight-month residential program in which a young person aged 18 to 30 can receive basic Christian formation and skills for evangelization. The first half of the program consists of instruction, and the second half is an actual evangelistic outreach in another country.

Language barriers and immigration issues aside, this pioneering work still has its share of practical difficulties. For one thing, everyone from the top down in Kerygma Teams must raise their own financial support—there are no salaries. In the Catholic Church, the concept of supporting a lay missionary is new—let alone one who is young and inexperienced. Moreover, finding people to staff such a school is not easy. Recruiting Catholics who have the theological foundation, pastoral experience, and requisite flexibility to work happily in an ecumenical environment, or Protestants who are generous and sensitive enough to adapt to a Catholic worldview—and who will work for free, raising their own financial support—borders on the miraculous.

Those who choose to serve as a missionary in Europe face the special challenge, both at home and among Europeans, to explain how Europe can be considered “mission territory.” After all, didn't most of the saints live there? Isn't Europe where missionaries come *from*?

With Kerygma Team's special charism to work for reconciliation among the churches, it is also challenging to create a living and learning environment that is Catholic, but also ecumenically friendly. Will Protestant visitors be thrown off by a large picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or a cross with a corpus on the living room wall, for example? What about all those little Catholic things we do, like making the Sign of the Cross, praying to St. Anthony when we lose something, and not eating meat on Fridays? How does a Catholic sensitively speak to a Protestant staff member who wants to understand the Church's teaching on the Eucharist, or why he or she cannot receive Communion in the Catholic Church? Yet, it brings tears to one's eyes to hear a Protestant staff member speak about Mary's “yes” to God, or encourage a Catholic group to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or express a special love for Pope John Paul II. These encounters create the rich background of daily life in a shared ministry that was unimaginable only a few decades ago.

Kerygma Teams operates “on the edge” of very new frontiers of the new evangelization, where old enemies are mending burned bridges, building new roads, and creating new possibilities for a shared future. And it is amazing to see that working together really does work.

¹ Cf. John Paul II, *Mission of the Redeemer* (no. 37); *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (no. 40); (Also referred to as “re-evangelization” in *Christifidelis Laici*, no. 34). This was also alluded to by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelization in the Modern World*, (no. 52). ■

Carole Brown worked as a CUF intern from 1994-'95. Since August 2004, she has been serving with Kerygma Teams in Austria and Eastern Europe. For more information, visit www.kteams.org.



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