

Catholic

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Be Converted Anew— and Go Evangelize

BY MATTHEW KILMURRY

As Catholics, we represent the Catholic Christian brand to everyone we meet. We've been given tremendous power, and we wield that power at all times. There's no off button. Our influence is always on—even if we don't feel like good Catholics.

Brand is the buzzword of our consumer culture. Dozens of brands are part of our daily lives. We display them on our clothes and the cars we drive. Companies now recognize the benefits of creating a brand, something Catholics have known for more than 2,000 years.

Companies spend years of research and boatloads of money defining their brand. Creating a brand involves developing a mission statement, a concise declaration about what the company believes and how it plans to accomplish its mission. Sound familiar? As Catholics, we recite something similar each time we say the Creed.

If employees and consumers don't buy into a brand, it falls flat. Similarly, the Church wants others to buy into their brand with enthusiasm. We're all spokespersons for the Catholic brand whether we intend to be or not. The following five steps will help us more effectively communicate the Catholic brand.

1. Be converted anew. A *Brand Evangelist* is a customer so in love with a brand that he does unofficial marketing for it. Who hasn't encountered passionate fans of a movie, restaurant, or band? Their enthusiasm is contagious. Emotional marketing is the promise of an unforgettable experience. This is also true in our spiritual lives. People are looking for an unforgettable experience, for conversion.

Whether your conversion happened in a flash or a slow progression, it's time to be converted anew. In the opening of the Joy of the Gospel (*Evangelii Gaudium*), Pope Francis writes: "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them.... Now is the time to say to Jesus: 'Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace'" (EG 3).



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Our brand training as Christians is a *personal encounter with Jesus Christ*. Each person will have a unique perspective on his or her own conversion to Christ and on who Christ is. We're each called to answer the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

As we consider this question, we must think in terms of problem and solution: *What problem does Jesus solve for me? What solution does he offer me?* Jesus is personal to each of us. He knows our deepest desires, fears, and sufferings and walks with us.

2. Know yourself. Know why you're Catholic. Producers of the most successful brands know what makes them different from the competition—company history, mission statement, and unique value they provide.

There's nothing more difficult, for a person or a brand, than taking an honest look in the mirror. We can't be witnesses to our Catholic faith when we have resentments we haven't acknowledged. Just as turning a blind eye toward inventory would hamper any business, a blind eye toward our resentments will hamper evangelization.

We need to name our negative feelings and consider how these resentments or fears about Jesus and the Church affect us personally. We must also honestly acknowledge our part in the resentment or fear. Following this, it's good to ask ourselves: *What positive things about Jesus and the Catholic Church are we grateful for? What good things has the Church instilled in the world and our personal lives?* The gratitude list is important; it grounds us in reality and balances out negative feelings.

3. Know our customers. Creating a culture of encounter is the heart of Pope Francis' message. It could also be framed as a "culture of experience." In order to know what experiences are best for whom, we have to get to know our neighbors.

We need to treat people like individuals, getting to know each person we encounter. We'll be amazed at what we receive when we keep our hearts open. Sometimes it's opportunities for expressing compassion, acts of service, or just listening with a smile. Other times, the tables turn and we receive inspiration through the sharing of wisdom or a powerful witness to the life-altering effects of the good news.

The only thing standing in our way of reaching out to others is usually our own fears—of rejection, being judged, insulting people, making them feel uncomfortable. These fears can prevent us from becoming effective Catholic Brand Evangelists.

We must focus on *who, what, when, and where* questions, which force people to think before answering. Many people slide through life without thinking about their relationship with God. When they ponder the divine, they allow the Holy Spirit to work. Be cautious with *why* questions. Questions such as, "Why do you go to Church only once a month?" can make people defensive and more likely to shut off quickly. *Why* questions are typically very personal, perhaps best left for conversations after we've really gotten to know our friend.

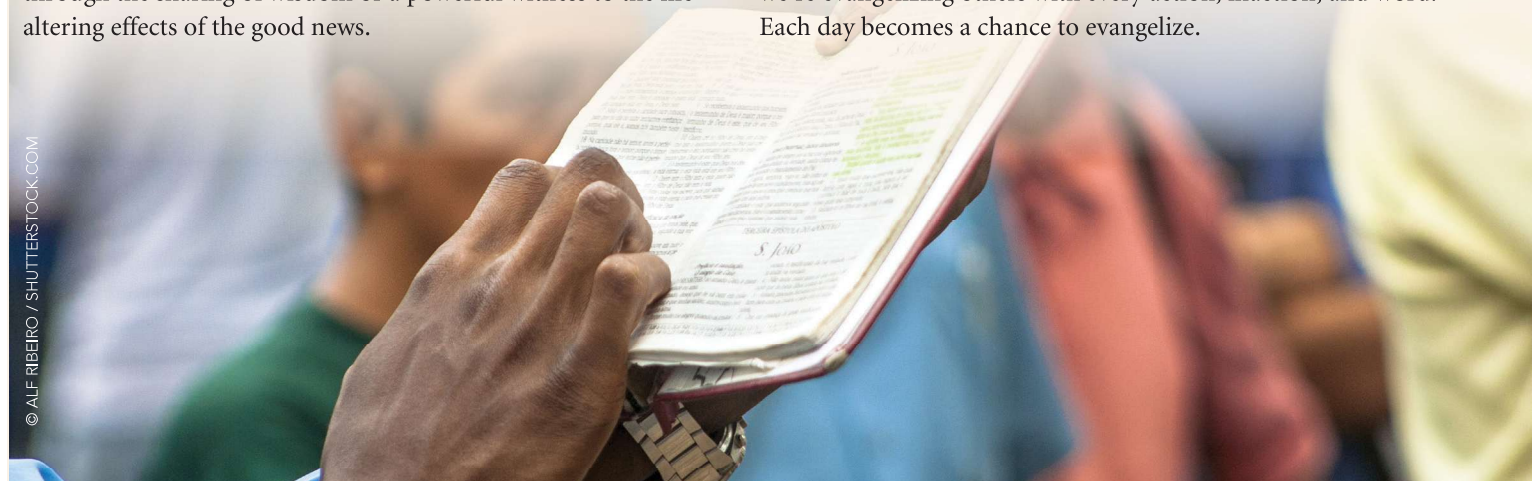
I also recommend that we share our own personal experiences with our friend when asking questions. This helps build relationships, can make us both more comfortable, and gives our friend a chance to open up. We shouldn't try to make ourselves into something we're not. Our own struggles can often be a great way to connect with others.

We need to keep our eyes and ears open during daily interactions. We need to be open to the Holy Spirit working in others. This awareness will allow us to more fully participate in his plan.

4. Personalize your messages. The good news of Jesus Christ has been proclaimed for 2,000-plus years in nearly every language and country. Is it possible to present the gospel in new, attention-grabbing ways today? Most definitely, yes!

More now than ever, we need to be creative. Many in our country reject organized religion in favor of a self-governed spirituality that has no connection to Jesus Christ. The prevailing feeling is one of freedom—shedding the "shackles" of religion.

The internet and social media connect us in new and exciting ways but can also be a loudspeaker for those with no sense of the sacred. I've seen complex theological concepts dumbed-down into simple dismissive graphics and anonymous statements. To present the Gospel in creative ways that will capture the hearts of our culture today, we need to be aware that we're evangelizing others with every action, inaction, and word. Each day becomes a chance to evangelize.



The Church plays a significant role in anchoring the faith, but the people who make up the Church transmit the faith from one person to another—through Scripture, Tradition, and personal encounters with other Christians.

We may wonder why God chose to reveal the most important truths in human history through people. He could easily have cast writings on indestructible material in a language that would enable every person who would ever live to read them with ease. We might never fully understand this mystery, but it makes one thing clear—even the transmission of the divine is meant to be a human experience on earth.

5. Maintain our brand. At this point, we have a spiritual mission statement, a list of friends, and a personalized message. All we need to do is maintain our Catholic brand.

The truth is, we're all lazy. About what and to what degree varies. This inclination toward sin is one of the central themes of the Old Testament. Despite all the warnings from prophets and the consequences of their actions, the Israelites repeatedly strayed from God's path.

The trials of the Israelites are also a metaphor for our internal spiritual lives. We never quite get our acts together. When we get close, our pride kicks in and we slack off or repeat the same mistakes. The Israelites needed a savior and so do we.

Jesus spoke of our predisposition toward sin and warned against it. In Matthew 24:43, he says, "If the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into." Had the watchman been awake, the thief wouldn't have been able to enter the house.

Consequences for brands that stray from their mission statement might include lost customers or revenue, but consequences for us when we stray from the path of virtue and holiness, as representatives of the Catholic brand, are much greater. We're living representatives of Christ to the people we meet. We may be the only experience of Christ someone has, and because of that, our brand is eternally important.

As Catholics, saying one thing but doing another can cause the people we're trying to evangelize to turn away from God. Our actions have serious consequences, and we can't take them lightly. So how can we maintain our brand as genuine followers of Christ?

We're imperfect persons who will continue to make mistakes. Each personal Catholic brand is a work in progress. Luckily, our Catholic faith doesn't require our "brand" to be perfect from the onset. See Leviticus 19:1–2; Matthew 5:48. It's about continuing to pick ourselves up from under the weight of our crosses,

FROM CONVERSION TO CREDIBILITY

Our conversion is the foundation of being a Catholic Brand Evangelist, but our conversion must lead to credibility.

When you represent Jesus Christ and his Church, people are gauging their ability to have a similar experience before trying it themselves. Typically, people aren't looking to you to answer their toughest philosophical or theological questions; more often they're looking to see if you're happy, fulfilled, and living a life of peace and wonder—the type of life they want for themselves. We shouldn't try to smile through clenched teeth and pretend our lives are perfect. An effective Brand Evangelist must be genuine in all circumstances, even when circumstances are bad.

Our courage and hope during trials come from one place—the foot of the cross. Our suffering in life becomes bearable when we put it in context of the suffering of Christ, who took on our punishment. Jesus' life answers the question "Does God understand what I'm going through?"

Saint Paul tells us we must die to ourselves and follow Christ. If we're going to follow him, we must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus through reading Scripture, receiving Holy Communion, and praying. The constant conversion of minds and hearts to Christ, regardless of life's circumstances, will always lead to a joy that extends beyond the blessings and trials of this world.



just as Jesus did. Everyone struggles, and when people see us continue in spite of struggles, our Catholic brand becomes more authentic.

Each of our stories is one among millions, with its own flavor and learnings. Personal stories create a living, moving brand for the Catholic Church. Personal stories and ministries play to our strengths and relate back to our mission statement. Remember, a brand program is simply a coordinated effort that ties into a goal. That goal is to help each other more fully experience God's presence, here in this life and forever in the next.

The idea of creating promoters is nothing new for Christians. It was Jesus' last great commission to go out to all nations

DIG DEEPER

Look: What does your "Catholic Brand" say to others about your faith?

Judge: Are you fully embracing the privilege and responsibility associated with the Catholic Brand?

Act: Consider how you can engage others in new ways to be Brand Evangelists—and be excited about it.

and make disciples. Jesus' message would have lasted only a generation if the good news hadn't converted more people into evangelists. One of the ways the apostles measured whether they were carrying out Jesus' command successfully was the number of disciples they were able to form.

We can't measure our success by conversions alone. Belief in Jesus is a gift from God and it comes from the Holy Spirit who empowers us to know what to say and enables the unbeliever to listen with an open heart. What we can measure is how often we allow the Holy Spirit to work through us.

All Christians should consider themselves disciples of Jesus Christ. One way in which the Catholic Church has formalized the discipleship process is through the RCIA program—molding and shaping the next wave of Brand Evangelists. But as a Brand Evangelist, we must not rely solely on the Church programs. We also need to seek out faithful Catholics with whom we can share support and encouragement.

Let's remember how Jesus led others. He preached to large crowds but spent most of his personal time with the Twelve, and even more time with three in particular—Peter, James, and John. Our Church would be transformed if we each were regularly engaged with a small group of “disciples” who challenged us to learn more, grow deeper, and live the faith more effectively.

Being a Catholic Brand Evangelist means being uncomfortable, challenged, enlightened, comforted, uplifted, introspective, and concerned. It's a great privilege and a responsibility to bear the Catholic brand. We must stay open to God's will and surround ourselves with other Brand Evangelists. Most of all, we will find joy in keeping our eyes fixed on Christ.

Matthew Kilmurry is the former director of marketing at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. He developed web, mobile, and social strategies to promote the USCCB's wide range of programs, and he worked on major efforts such as the World Meeting of Families 2015. Currently he is the senior director of marketing at an international law firm. Matthew earned a bachelor's degree in English from Ohio State University and a master's degree in marketing from Johns Hopkins University.

CREATE A PERSONAL MISSION STATEMENT



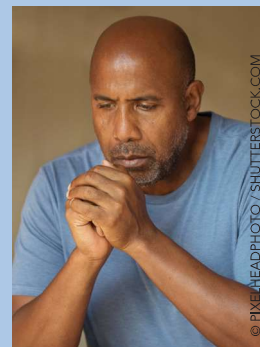
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Carefully examining our past helps us understand our present and provides a guide for the future. Every great brand has a clear sense of its past and its core mission. Forming a personal mission statement helps us internalize our core beliefs and attitudes. Our personal mission statements should orient us

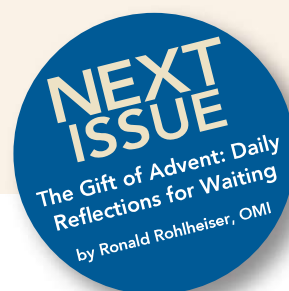
toward a set of goals and principles that help guide our faith.

A mission statement can be created only when we know who we are and where we want to go. This requires spending more time discovering who God created us to be. Saint Paul makes it clear that every one of us has unique gifts given by the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 12). The combination and manifestation of these gifts in our lives is uniquely ours.

God loves us beyond our imagination. That's the central fact we need to understand and apply when building a spiritual mission statement. Through our baptism and faith in Christ, God promises us peace in this life and immeasurable riches in the next.



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