

Communicating Kerygma

A Fresh Look at Parish Communication



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CHURCHES MATTER

Proclaiming the Good News

The word *kerygma* is perhaps not widely used by most Catholics. It is a Greek word, which essentially means preaching or proclamation, and is used in theology to mean the basic, fundamental aspects of Jesus' message, the central kernel of what the Good News is all about. Our theology moves beyond the kerygma and develops as we grow in understanding and in the maturity of our faith. But at the heart of who we are as Christians lie the basic truths about Jesus, his role in our salvation, and his message of a new life in him. In the mandates given to the disciples in Matthew 28, the message to be communicated is this kerygma. A mature discipleship is only possible after one's life is changed by this message.

In the Church, we too often assume that people have been given an opportunity to accept this kerygma and then develop into mature disciples. Given the sheer number of young adults who leave the Church each year, we know this is not the case. Some will say the

problem is that the kerygma is all they have received, and because they never advanced past that, therein lies the problem. However, the early Church had no Dr. Scott Hahn to teach them more about the Scriptures, and no Matthew Kelly books to help them reflect on their faith. The power of the kerygma, powerfully and consistently represented in preaching and word, was the main thing that transformed an upper room of disciples into a movement that ultimately changed the course of history. Today, we must never assume people have internalized and are conscious of why they are who they are as Christians. The Church must constantly evangelize and teach the kerygma of Jesus Christ to those who would seek to follow him.

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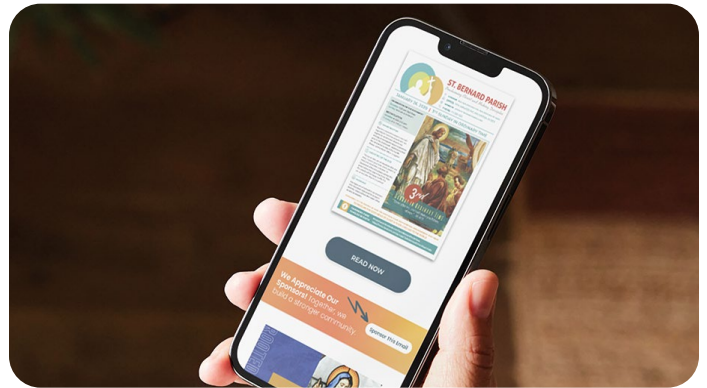
Our Channels of Communication

Lord Byron, the British poet of the early nineteenth century, said, “A drop of ink may make a million think.” Most people wouldn’t put church bulletins, newsletters, websites, and email in the category of poetry. However, that doesn’t mean that those things deserve less care and creativity in their creation. In fact, where good poetry may move one’s mind and heart, good church communication can help lead someone toward heaven.



The Bulletin

The church bulletin is certainly the oldest and most common channel of communication used by parishes. How it is used and what is included in the content vary greatly from place to place. But too often, it is seen as little less than a handout containing dates, times, and advertisements for programs. The potential of many a bulletin is left completely untapped. You could create a dozen different ways to communicate in your parish, but the bulletin is the only way to reach all Mass attendees and visitors who come through the doors. Even as the digital world expands, that paper bulletin is gold in terms of evangelization value, because you get it right into their physical hands. Imagine the Catholic who has returned after years away, the young adult who showed up for the first time, not sure whether the Church is even relevant in her life, and the young family that is church shopping and had a difficult time just getting all the children out the door, all at your church on a Sunday morning. What is contained in that bulletin you place in their hands that might make all the difference? Does the ink tell only news, or does it clearly celebrate the Good News?



Digital Media & Online Presence

Digital media certainly permeates our culture and our Church. Even the pope can be found on social media! You must start using digital communication tools if you are not already using them; it's just where our world is today. However, many churches are currently abusing these tools instead of using them to proclaim the Good News. In the kerygma of Jesus Christ, there is tremendous joy!

If your website, Facebook page, and email display no joy, why would you think anyone would be drawn to worship with you?

Churches that haven't updated their websites in months are really communicating that they have nothing much to say. Most importantly, digital media is too often just another means of giving facts and more boring information. Those people mentioned previously who are attending your church are the same ones who will look online to see what you are about. They're unsure of their place in this world — how will it benefit them if they see online that you aren't sure of your place in this world either?

The Newsletter

Charles Zech, PhD, Villanova professor and writer on stewardship, found in his research that employing four or more means of communication was the most effective way of producing engagement and increased

stewardship in a parish. That should be obvious to any marketing professional. Look at how brands like Coca-Cola and McDonald's have become so prominent in US culture because they're pitched to us at every turn. All means of communication are necessary to get the attention of those living in a busy world. But Zech also found there is one means of communication that trumps all others in effectiveness, but is probably the least used by parishes: the newsletter.

The real value of a newsletter is twofold. First, a parish can send it to all registered households, making it possible to reach shut-ins, infrequent Mass attendees, and lapsed parishioners. Second, the newsletter has the ability to go deeper than a bulletin, email, or even social media. Whereas the previous channels of communication provide a way to proclaim the kerygma, the newsletter offers an opportunity to explain it and bear testimony to the power of Jesus Christ.

The newsletter allows us to tell the story of our parish community, share the lives of

our parishioners, and lay out our plans and dreams for the future. It has the capacity to explain how the kerygma is changing people's lives. Will everyone read it? The answer, of course, is no. However, if you make it appealing in content and appearance, it will draw most to explore. If they see that it speaks to their experience as a human being, they will read more. If they feel moved by what they read, they will read it again the next time it arrives at their home. Keep in mind that you may have already made an impression because not only did you care enough as a parish to create and send a newsletter, but also because it came to people at their homes — they actually belong to something! You aren't getting a copy in the mail unless you're part of something. The great Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy liked to say, "Belonging leads to believing." They are part of a community that preaches the Good News of Jesus Christ. Through a newsletter, as well as all forms of church communication, you have the tools to evangelize and form them so they may believe.

Kerygma Can Be Dangerous

There is a book titled "Dangerous: A Go-to Guide for Church Communication," published by the Center for Church Communications. The various contributors speak to how churches can stand against the ideas that the Church is no longer relevant, that it has embraced the status quo, and that old parishes can't learn to do new things differently. They point out that it is not primarily about how you communicate, but the fact that you are willing to "tell the greatest story ever told." Yes, paying attention to the "how" has always been very important. You have never heard of the Sermon in the Valley, because preaching from a mount

allows for people to see. Attention to detail may dictate whether or not a person hears what you have to say. But what you say, that's the main thing, the kerygma, the Good News of Jesus Christ. And that message can be dangerous. Why? Because when people start to hear it and are moved, there may be no stopping them. The message might actually get to all nations and the ends of the earth.

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