

The Obstacles of Evangelism

By Victor Beshir

Many Orthodox people, while they would love to commit their lives to evangelism, distance themselves from it. Many remember their promises to the Lord in the Divine Liturgy when they say publicly, "Amen, amen, amen. Your death O Lord we proclaim." They believe in the purity of the Orthodox Faith and the spirituality of the Church. They also feel the need of such spirituality to enrich and heal their lives. While envision both orthodoxy and spirituality, they see contemporary man's spiritual sickness and know the cure, yet, they are afraid to evangelize.

It is a perplexing situation, when we look at it from afar, so let us come closer. We need to ask the question:

Why Orthodox people do not evangelize?

The answer is fear. But, fear of what? Here are some fearful thoughts that go through the minds of some Orthodox People:

1_ If they are immigrants, some think their English is not good enough. How can I express myself freely with the poor vocabulary that I know?

2_ I do not know enough about Christianity or the Bible or even about my Church. What would happen if people ask me questions? How can I evangelize while I do not know that much?

3_ I am a sinner. I am still struggling in my spiritual life. Shouldn't I be strong spiritually first before trying to lead others to Christ?

4_ After all, Isn't evangelism is the work of priests and bishops? Why then should I get involved in it?

5_ Is evangelism for me? No, I cannot stand in a street or a park, shouting at passing people and preaching at them. I cannot do that.

6_ Do you want me to evangelize? No, I cannot go from one door to another, knocking at each door, and imposing myself on others. I do not want to be that insensitive person who talks about topics that people do not like to touch. If they need a religion, they have the

libraries full of books to read about religion, or they can search Internet to find answers.

7_ I would like to keep my job. If I try to evangelize, my boss and my colleagues would consider me as a preacher. Subsequently, they will not keep the same image of my good personality. They will think that I am a less intelligent person.

What do you think of all these reasons? Do you think they make sense? Probably some of them sound as if they are true. You may agree with a couple of these reasons yourself, but the truth is that all the above answers can be summarized in two big reasons:

1- ***Misunderstanding***

2- ***Fear***

First: Misunderstanding:

When most people think of evangelism, they think of evangelism in the old days, because this is all what they know about evangelism. They have a portrait of an evangelist who stood up in the market place and shouted at people. Then people would listen for a minute, and leave. The preacher would end up begging everyone to listen to him. Or, they would picture an evangelist going from door to door, with people slamming the door in his face, or insulting him.

However, who said that every evangelist should do that? Who said that these methods were the only ways of evangelism? I have some good news for all those people who misunderstand evangelism: **evangelism today has hundreds of methods. Some of the most effective ways of evangelism do not require standing in front of people or preaching at them** or going from one door to another. Outreach has changed dramatically in the last fifty years, and there are new ways to communicate with people.

Do you remember the last time you sent a letter to a friend? I bet it was long time ago. So, what happened to mailing letters by the Post Office? People replaced it by using E-mailing, since e-mail is faster, easier, cheaper, and informal, all of which are characteristics of today's contemporary life. When you need to search something, where do you go now? Of course, to the Internet, something nobody heard of thirty years ago! **Life has changed dramatically, and so do the evangelistic methods.** We do not have open-air markets

offering everything along Main Street on a daily basis any more, as it used to be, so we cannot use that method anymore. We have to find contemporary methods.

People now read books more than they did in the middle ages, so we need to write more books to explain our religion. People prefer reading something short and easy, so we need to write brochures, tracts, and booklets. The new generation spends more time on the Internet, so we need to meet them on the Internet, either in face books, or chatting rooms, or e-mails. People love music, stories, movies, and plays. Therefore, we need to create more of these, and make them interesting enough to attract them.

Missionary workers used to travel for months by sea to go to Africa or Asia to evangelize. Nowadays, we have hundreds of thousands of international students come to the Western country to study. In most cases, they are eager to learn and to develop their thoughts and understanding. These students are our evangelists of their own country if we can evangelize them and prepare them.

People nowadays like open houses, tourism, and old artifacts, activities that we could easily do in our churches since our church is old and being full of old Coptic art and having icon holder (Iconstasis) dated back to the fifth century. Some people are eager to know about how to do certain things or how to handle certain situations in their lives. If this is the case, why we do not sponsor lectures in the church that deal with topics such as: How to take care of your garden? Or, how to deal with your teenager child? Or, how to elevate stress? Or, how to write a resume? The list is so long. The main idea is to offer what people in your community need. Then receive them in your church. Have an open talk to welcome them and introduce Christianity and your church. At the end have a short film or video about the church.

Do you think people do not listen to talk about God? Try this, prepare attractive topic with modern technology, then invite people to your church and say you will have pizza. You will be shocked of the number of people coming to your church.

You could talk to one person in a public place, but have you thought about reaching out to tens of thousands if you write in your local newspaper, or even to hundreds of thousands when you write to big city newspaper or to millions if you write a book. You are eager to let people know about your church. You do not need a market place, but all you need is a good relationship with the religion editor of your city

newspaper. Then invite the newspaper to every event or feast or fast in your church, preparing attractive excited articles about your church to give to the writer.

You are complaining because there is nobody listens to your evangelism talk. Try to arrange for a visit to a senior home. Do not start with a lecture, but rather with flowers, songs (if allowed). Listen to them first. Then they will listen to you.

What I am trying to say is: **what some people think of evangelism is not true any more, especially here in the Western countries. We are challenged to change our evangelistic methods.** We need to speak to contemporary man, not in the streets, but in the places he visits and uses the most. Moreover, we need to think of new methods to attract him to our church.

Second: Fear:

The evangelistic work in the past required a knowledgeable person, because he talked to people face to face. Most of the audience at that time did not know how to read or write. So, he had to be the source of information. Today, evangelistic work is different in so many ways. The methods are no longer the simple methods of the past. **The complex new methods need more diverse people with different talents and backgrounds.**

For example, one contemporary method of evangelism is the church Open House. You invite people in the community to visit your church, and you offer them refreshments, a tour of the church, a video about your faith, a visit the church bookstore, and an introduction to the different activities you have in the church. Then you answer questions they have. All these activities have one purpose, which is to get them interested enough in the church to come back or to accept an invitation to attend a Bible study.

How many people would be needed to do such an Open House? At least 30 people to do it in a small community and church. However, not every volunteer would preach or even talk about the church or answer questions. Think about how many people will prepare refreshments? How many will just welcome people and take their names and addresses? How many others would contact the local newspaper to tell them about the event, or contact a broadcast facility? Some will write fliers to distribute all over the community. Still others would stop at each grocery store bulletin board in the

community to post an invitation. Others would invite dignitaries from the community. Many people would need to pray before, during, and after the event. Think, also, of those who are going to draw maps and write directions to the church. Think of those who bring videos, books, CDs, brochures, and other materials about the church.

Another example would be a web page to talk to others about our church. How many people would that project need? What kind of talents is required? What kind of tasks would they need to accomplish, and how long would it take? They would need to do more than just a web page. It would need to be an effective web page. The realistic answer is 'many,' some with a background in web page design and editing, others in English editing, others in word processing, while others would be evangelists who understand people's mentality and know what to write to attract people to the church. You need others on a scholarly level in the different subjects of our ecclesiastical life and theology. Such an effort would need a commitment from all to support the web page for a long time, which is sometimes hard to get from volunteers, mostly because those people are the busiest ones in the church.

Similarly, **in evangelism we need all kinds of gifted people. To have an active church in evangelism, we need everyone in the church to work in evangelism. Again, not everyone would preach or teach or write, but everyone's job is important in evangelism.** You need to tell everyone that they all are needed: music, art, public relations, Internet, setting out refreshments for gatherings, project management, team coordinators, cleaning up, welcoming committees, writing, producing videos, e-mailing, contacting others using phone, collating programs for events, contacting the community newspapers, radio, TV, ushers, just to name a few.

Does that mean we stop inviting others to Christ and to the church using personal invitations, or that we stop giving lectures or talking to others? No. We still depend on friendship as a strong method of evangelism. As the Spirit of God guides us, we need to talk to others about salvation and our wonderful Savior. It is a great to start a dialogue especially with those people who have many questions about god or church. We could win many through quite rational dialogue. However, this kind of evangelism in this paragraph needs people whose interest and devotion to evangelism is greatly deep, and who have already overcome the fears mentioned earlier.