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Welcome Home programs and the new evangelization

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The new evangelization is about more than distributing glossy pamphlets or costly TV ads that welcome Catholics home. Before we invite women and men to re-enter the doors of our church, we must take a critical look at what awaits them when they cross that threshold.

Several years ago, a Welcome Home program was attempted in my parish. We had experienced the classic emptying of the pews. Some was due to simple indifference, a "drifting away" from regular participation in liturgical worship and community activities. But some was due to anger at the authoritarianism of the previous pastor and bishop. These women and men had not drifted away. They purposely left and slammed the door behind them.

Things had not improved in our parish when the Welcome Home program was introduced. Its failure was not a surprise. What were we welcoming folks home to? The parish was still lifeless. The pastor was another micro-manager. Homilies were guilt-ridden exhortations about Sunday obligations and the sinfulness of family and friends who were not warming up the pews with us. Many of the faithful struggled to remain, fighting the temptation to bolt out the doors themselves. The parish was in need of healing, but past hurts were swept under the rug or ignored.

The Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization is providing positive signs for hope. Many and varied voices from around the world are speaking about the need for healing in our church. They speak of the need to listen first, to engage in active and effective dialogue. They are recognizing that groundwork is needed. We cannot reach out to others unless we better understand their needs, their yearnings and their hurts. These hurts must be acknowledged, and forgiveness sought and given.

These wise voices are also challenging us all to look within our dioceses, our parishes and within ourselves. We cannot give what we don't have. Faith is not a commodity that can be easily bought and sold door-to-door. Faith requires authentic conversion of mind and heart. The evangelizers must first be evangelized. They need to be well-formed in the teachings of their faith; not to beat others over the head with apologetic fervour, but to explain clearly the reason for their belief.

Evangelizers must be women and men of prayer who seek the silence in order to better hear God's word speaking to them and through them. We need to pray alone and with others in our Christian family. One of the most exciting challenges came from Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, who encouraged us [1] to ground our outreach in an "ecumenically shared contemplative practice."

Yes, we are to welcome Catholics home. But first, we need to get our home in order and prepare ourselves so we can offer the kind of hospitality that will draw others to come and see -- and stay.

(With a big shout-out of appreciation to John Allen and *NCR* for the detailed reports [2] from the Synod of

Bishops. As always, his analyses help us to better understand the global church.)

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