



## Can I Get a Witness?

The cry resounds throughout the heritage of our African-American Church, “Can I Get a Witness?” The expectation that whatever being discussed or taught among the gathering of believers should have within that same community a testimony of a God-intervention that is related to the same point. Our creed as Church is creed, therefore, not just because of scripture and tradition, not just because of our respect for the teacher (pastor, catechists, parent, youth minister); but because of the lived experiences of ourselves and those around us willing to profess their lived faith.

Recently, the Holy Father declared a Year of Faith (in his apostolic letter [Porta Fideis](#)). It will begin October 11, 2012, which is the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council as well as the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The Year will conclude on the Solemnity of Christ the King, November 24, 2013. Pope Benedict’s goal in declaring a Year of Faith is to *arouse in every believer the aspiration to profess the faith in fullness and with renewed conviction, with confidence and hope* (PF9)

Over thirty-five years ago, in *Evangelii Nuntiando*, Pope Paul VI reminded us that “the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one’s neighbor with limitless zeal... ‘Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.’” (EN 41) Being a witness to the faith (in both words and deeds) is not an option if we are passing on the faith. Pope Benedict reminds us that

*It is the love of Christ that fills our hearts and impels us to evangelize. Today as in the past, he sends us through the highways of the world to proclaim his Gospel to all the peoples of the earth* (PF7)

as well as that

*The renewal of the Church is also achieved through the witness offered by the lives of believers: by their very existence in the world, Christians are called to radiate the word of truth that the Lord Jesus has left us.* (PF 5)

Clearly, one specific way that we in youth ministry will challenge young people and those that serve with them to evangelize as well as radiate the truth will be through the personal testimony of a Witness Talk.

Let us take a look as to what makes for an effective witness talk.

## ***A Witness Talk Is Not About Me.***

Everyone has a story of an experience of faith. Often, a witness talk effectively shared with others will allow the recipients to make connections from the story offered to their own experience.

Yes, it is your story. Yes, you probably play a central role in the narrative of the story, not only sharing your experiences but your feelings and the outcomes of your journey. But, your public telling of a witness talk expands the story beyond you, beyond your own experience, and becomes something much more significant.

*Confessing with the lips indicates in turn that faith implies public testimony and commitment. A Christian may never think of belief as a private act. Faith is choosing to stand with the Lord so as to live with him. This “standing with him” points towards an understanding of the reasons for believing (PF10)*

A witness talk is not meant to be imposed upon others, but to be shared within a community of friends. It is not intended to a moment of preaching as much as it is meant to be about reaching.

Further, care should be taken in the content of the presentation. If the faith story conveyed remains only about tragedy, suffering, or scandalous behavior, then we are confining faith to Good Friday experiences. We are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song. A full and rich witness story will value discussing the changes that have come about as we stand with God in our lives. Our faith stories are neither just confessing our weakness nor heralding our strengths, our stories should call attention to the faithfulness of God amidst it all.

When a witness talk quickly becomes about the presenter is if it comes off as superficial and evasive. When one speaks from the heart, others will take notice and your experiences might make it easier for others to share their own. If there is incongruity with the actions, behavior, attitude of a witness talker around their personal testimony, this, too, will draw attention away from the subject and towards the speaker.

## ***A Witness Talk Is About The...***

### ***...Context of the Presentation***

An effective witness talk will be developed with clear consideration as to the context of where and when it will be presented. What will precede the presentation? What will be the activity immediately following the presentation?

It is natural for recipients of any presentation to attempt to “connect the dots” between programmatic elements. Those who are preparing witness talks should have

a clear understanding as to where their own story fits into the larger story being shared.

### ***... Reception of the Audience***

Especially with teen audiences, but true for all audience, there should be great care taken of the audience members in the preparation of a story. Witness Stories can often be quite dramatic with emphasis on the harsh realities of life. Yet, the trauma retold within a witness talk can potentially be connected to quite similar traumas within the lives of the listener.

Great care should be taken in screening such witness talks with serious consideration for the listener. In some cases, such a talk might be appropriate, but there should be care and consideration as to how a listener might respond as well as to how those responsible for the context of the whole program may need to respond to a potential audience response.

In previous times and generation, the success of a witness talk may have been wrongly evaluated by how many tears and sniffles fill the room during and after a presentation. Overtly seeking such a response is not as much about being a witness of faith as it is about being a manipulator of emotions and perpetuating a unsafe environment where one might explore their own relationship with God.

*Faith grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy. (PF7)*

### ***A Witness Talk Is About Thee***

In the National Directory for Catechesis, criteria has been set for an authentic presentation of the Christian Message. The NDC reminds us that “The Word of God contained in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition is the single source of the fundamental criteria for the presentation of the Christian message.” The presentation of the Christian message, which should always be at the core of witness talk, therefore

- Centers on Jesus Christ
- Introduces the Trinitarian dimensions of the Gospel message
- Proclaims the Good News of salvation and liberation
- Comes from and leads to the Church
- Communicates the profound dignity of the human person

The above list, while not inclusive of all the elements identified in the NDC, does demand that an authentic presentation / witness talk does make clear and direct connections back to Jesus and the Gospels as well as within the rich tradition of our Church.

In a time when researchers are suggesting that the underlying message of faith being transmitted to young people is a Moralistic Therapeutic Deism that treats God as some sort of “Cosmic Butler,” we should be attentive to a witness talk actually speaking to the challenges and joys of discipleship with Jesus, and not some sort of God who “had my back” when called upon.

We will need to keep our gaze fixed upon Jesus Christ, the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (*Heb 12:2*): in him, all the anguish and all the longing of the human heart finds fulfillment. The joy of love, the answer to the drama of suffering and pain, the power of forgiveness in the face of an offence received and the victory of life over the emptiness of death: all this finds fulfillment in the mystery of his Incarnation, in his becoming man, in his sharing our human weakness so as to transform it by the power of his resurrection. In him who died and rose again for our salvation, the examples of faith that have marked these two thousand years of our salvation history are brought into the fullness of light. (PF13)

Finally, a recipient of a witness talk should never walk away with the impression of how weak the presenter was (or the emotional prompt that the recipient likely shares in same weakness) as much as they should remain mindful of how powerful God is within the lives of God’s people. St. Paul serves as a model here when he confesses to his own struggles. We see him admitting to his imperfections in Romans 7 “For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want” and 2 Corinthians 12:7 “a thorn in the flesh was given to me.” Without outlining specifics, he acknowledges his own sinfulness. But, then St. Paul continues by detailing that God’s grace is enough and that power is made perfect in weakness.

A witness talk becomes about Thee, our Lord, when the audience recipients and the presenter find themselves in solidarity with one another. Yes, we are different. Yes, we have some unique but some common struggles. Yet, the Lord is there for each of us- front pew sitter, late back row arriver, someone who just walked in or came along with a friend, and the speaker- We are each created uniquely, but the Creator’s love for each of remains equal and constant.

### ***Preach the Gospel At All Times***

Sometimes it is necessary to use words. But, we should take great care with our words. A witness talk provided by a peer or a trusted adult might very well become the “door of faith” (*Acts 14:27*) opening for another, ushering them into the life of communion with God and offering entry into his Church.

Many people, while not claiming to have the gift of faith, are nevertheless sincerely searching for the ultimate meaning and definitive truth of their lives and of the world. This search is an authentic “preamble” to the faith, because it guides people onto the path that leads to the mystery of God. (PF10)

When we offer a witness talk, we find ourselves joined

By faith, across the centuries, (with) men and women of all ages, whose names are written in the Book of Life (cf. *Rev* 7:9, 13:8), (who) have confessed the beauty of following the Lord Jesus wherever they were called to bear witness to the fact that they were Christian: in the family, in the workplace, in public life, in the exercise of the charisms and ministries to which they were called. (PF13)

This same communion of saints did not always find the mission of sharing faith to be easy. They each responded to the call of “Can I Get a Witness?” in both word and in deed. It is essential to remember that there is quite often less personal gain in sharing faith and the real possibility of risk or pain in the very act. Yet, by placing themselves in collaboration with the Holy Spirit, their words and actions prompted AMENs in the lives of those around them.

It should remain our most fervent prayer that the Spirit be with us and that our witness arouse in another the aspiration to profess the faith with renewed conviction, with confidence and hope. Amen.

#### **Appendix: Markers to Consider in Developing a Witness Talk**

- Will your story be meaningful to you alone or will others find it accessible?
- How will this presentation “fit” into what else is occurring within the any setting?
- What are the potential consequences of sharing information for the recipient?
- What are you hoping to inspire? What is your call to action? How might others respond with an AMEN in their lives?
- How does this message tie into our Church’s understanding of the life and message of Jesus Christ? What is the Good News that your testimony offers to the recipient?

#### **Resources:**

- Mae Richardson, High School Leadership Institute Emmaus Track Information Packet, Archdiocese of Baltimore
- David Charboneau, Giving a Witness Talk  
<http://seattleoyyam.org/programs/archdiocesan-events/youth-convention/youth-key-notes>
- Robert Rice, Franciscan University of Steubenville

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