

# FISHERS OF MEN



John A.  
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# Fishers of Men

By

JOHN A. O'BRIEN, Ph.D.

“**H**OW many of you,” I asked, “have ever sought to interest a churchless person in the Faith? How many of you have ever brought a friend to a priest for a course of instructions?”

Five men, in the audience of about 150, raised their hands.

“Mr. Cronin,” I asked, “what did you do?”

“I brought a non-church-going friend,” he replied, “to the week’s mission for men conducted in our parish. After listening each night to the missionary’s sermon, he became interested in learning more about the Church. So I took him to the Inquiry Class that was started right after the mission.”

“Did he embrace the Faith?”

“Yes, and his wife and children subsequently came into the Church. They are

devout Catholics and they say that they can't ever thank me enough for heading them toward the Church."

"Mr. Mitchell," I asked, "how did you try to share your Faith?"

"I brought a friend to Mass on a couple of Sundays and briefed him beforehand on its meaning so he could read the prayers more intelligently. It served as an entering wedge and, after loaning him a book explaining the Faith, I brought him to our pastor for instruction. He's a good Catholic now."

"Splendid," I remarked, "and it's not especially difficult. But just think, you two are among the five, out of the 150 men present, who have made any effort in this matter. What about you, Mr. Dunlap? I didn't see your hand raised."

### **Never Lifted a Hand**

"I must confess," he replied, a bit shamefaced, "that I've never done anything along those lines. I get to Mass on Sunday myself, but I thought the matter of winning converts was something for the clergy to look after. I never heard anything from the pulpit, or even from the nuns in the school

I attended, about any duty on the part of lay people to intrude into such matters.”

Such was the conversation which took place in the open forum discussion following a lecture I gave at a meeting of the members of a Knights of Columbus Council in Chicago recently. Out of 150 members the ones who had made any effort in sharing their Faith with churchless friends and neighbors could alas! be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Is such apathy typical of the rank and file of our Catholic laity? A religious survey recently conducted provides the answers. To a cross section of people representing the millions of adults in the U. S. who go to some church, two questions were asked:

1. “Have you ever tried to get anyone to join your religious group?” 2. “Did you ever succeed in getting anyone to join?”

The replies of the Catholics disclosed that only 28% had ever tried to get anyone to join the Church. In contrast to that feeble effort, the replies of all the Protestants showed that 59% had definitely tried.

This brings into clear relief two important points: 1. The overwhelming majority (72%) of Catholic men and women have never so much as lifted a finger to win a convert for Christ. 2. Protestants are more

than twice as active as Catholics in seeking to win adherents, 59% against 28%.

The members of the various Protestant denominations are not only twice as active as Catholics in seeking to win adherents but also twice as successful. Of the 59% of the Protestants who tried, 43% were successful, 10% unsuccessful, while 6% did not know what the outcome of their efforts was. Of the 28% of the Catholics who made any effort to win converts, 17% were successful, 9% unsuccessful, while 2% were unaware of the result of their efforts.

It is probable that the greater success reported by the Protestants in gaining adherents is due not to any superior technique but to the fact that they were twice as active as their Catholic neighbors.

Presbyterians, with 52% succeeding in winning adherents, ranked first: Baptists, with 50% successful, were second; Episcopalians, with 45% successful, were third and the Methodists with 39% successful ranked fourth. On the whole, the denominations whose members were most active were the ones which achieved the largest relative gains.

## We Don't Try

This illustrates the principle stressed by all schools of salesmanship: Other things being equal, the salesman who knocks at the most doors makes the most sales. Catholics rank lowest not only because they require a long course of instruction on the part of prospective members but also because they knock at the fewest doors. If we are to share the precious treasure of our holy Catholic Faith with the millions of churchless people, more of our laity must participate in that apostolate and they must learn more effective techniques both for recruiting prospects and for instructing them.

The merchandisers of autos, radios, television sets, real estate and virtually every commodity go to great pains in learning the most effective techniques of introducing their products to the public and of selling them effectively. Witness all the ingenuity displayed by the manufacturers of the leading brands of cigarettes to convince the public that their particular product is the coolest, mildest, least irritating to the throat and the best. They display a zeal, industry and salesmanship worthy of a better cause.

If the hawkers of such products exhaust all their ingenuity in developing the most



effective techniques of salesmanship, how much more ingenuity should we, the salesmen of eternal truth, display in working out effective methods to bring our products into the minds and hearts of men. "Carefully study," wrote St. Paul to Timothy, "to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."

Fortunately, there is an increasing number of Catholics who are becoming conscious of their obligation to share the precious treasure of their holy Faith with churchless friends and neighbors and who are doing something about it. Let me tell you how they proceeded so you will be able to experience equal success. A few concrete examples will be more helpful than a volume of abstract theorizing.

## Rosemary's Long Fast

"In Boston," said Rosemary Barry of St. Theresa's parish there, "practically all my acquaintances and friends are Catholics. But a few summers ago I went to a camp in New Hampshire and found that out of about a hundred only 11 of us were Catholics.



“The nearest Catholic church was 28 miles away. We fasted and went to confession before Mass, if the bus arrived on time, so we could go to Holy Communion. Since I worked in the camp kitchen before we left for Mass, I felt famished as I helped prepare breakfast and then watched the others eat it.

“Dolores Ingram, a non-Catholic girl at the camp, knew that I had a hearty appetite which became even ravenous when I fasted several hours, especially with the fragrance of my favorite dishes hitting my nostrils.

“‘How come,’ she said to me one Sunday morning, ‘you stand around watching us stow away the food and you don’t eat any—not even wet your whistle? Have you gone on some kind of a hunger strike?’

“‘No, Dolly,’ I replied, ‘I still like food all right, but I’m going to receive Holy Communion this morning, so I’ll be fasting till I get back.’

“‘Gee,’ said Dolly, ‘that’ll be early noon. Why in the world can’t you eat your breakfast and then go and receive Communion?’

“‘It’s a little mark of reverence,’ I explained, ‘that we show our Blessed Lord. It’s our way of saying, “Dear Lord, we give You the place of honor. You come first, for your precious body and blood, soul and divinity, mean infinitely more to us than any

earthly food." It's a little way we show our love for our Lord and when you love someone it isn't hard to make a little sacrifice.'

"That was the little incident," remarked Rosemary, "that really got Dolly thinking about the Catholic religion. She told me so later on."

### "Did You Follow It Up?"

"Did you follow it up," I asked, "by bringing her to a priest for instruction?"

"No," replied Rosemary, "she wasn't quite ready for that. She was going with a young man who was violently opposed to the Church and that put something of a road-block in her way. But her interest had been kindled and she continued to pepper me with questions.

"I recall one day when we went out on a raft for a swim. After taking a couple dives, I thought I'd take a little nap in the sun. But Dolly bombarded me with so many questions that anything like a nap was out of the question.

"I could see that she sort of envied me my sense of security and tranquillity and she began to pray for light to see the truth. Finally, after three years, common sense and God's grace prevailed and she gave up the

boy who was so bitter towards the Faith she was growing to love.

“I then took her to Father Bourke in Concord and he gave her a complete course of instruction. Dolly was received into the Church and a few years later was married with a Nuptial Mass to a fine Catholic boy, one of a family of 10 children. Dolores Ingram Jelley—that’s her name now—hopes to have that many children herself. She loves her religion and can’t thank God enough for the gift of Faith.”

## Winning An All-American

Richie Regan, All-American star on the Seton Hall University basketball team at South Orange, New Jersey, didn’t talk much about religion to his teammate, Walter Dukes, but he set him an example that spoke volumes.

“Before every game,” said the giant Negro sharpshooter, “Richie would stop and say a prayer before going on the court and you could see it gave him a boost. He was a gentleman on the court and off it.

“I was thrown in close contact with all the players on the team and I couldn’t help

but notice the powerful influence which religion exercised in their lives. It was something very real to them and they went to church to invoke God's blessing and help when we were playing not only at home but also away."

"Did you notice," I ventured, "the influence of religion upon their conduct?"

"Yes," replied Wally, "they didn't pray merely for victories in games. They prayed for God's help to live good clean lives and to overcome temptation. And there's plenty of the latter thrown in the path of young people today, especially athletes.

"Then, too, I must acknowledge the influence of the priests and the students at Seton Hall. Those priests were giving their lives to bring Christ and His ideals more fully into the lives of the students and the better I got to know them the more did I respect and admire them. They didn't pay merely 'lip service' to the ideals of religion but they put them into daily practice."

### **"Did Richie Explain?"**

"Did Richie explain," I inquired, "any of the teachings of the Catholic religion to you?"

“Yes,” replied the towering athlete, “he put me right about a number of things. I could see that he wanted to share his Faith with me, though he was careful not to thrust it on me.”

“Had you been,” I asked, “a member of any denomination?”

“Yes,” he said, “I had gone to the Episcopal church when I was living at home in Rochester, New York. But for the last three years I felt a strong attraction to the Catholic Church and came to see it as the one Church which goes back to Christ and was founded by Him.

“So I finally went to Father John Davis who gave me a complete course of instruction and baptized me in Our Lady of Sorrows Church. Richie Regan was my godfather.

“The next day in the same church Father Davis gave me my First Holy Communion. Virtually all the members of the team attended that Mass and received Holy Communion with me. It seemed to me like another team victory.

“The day we won the final game in the National Invitational Tournament was a thrilling one in my life. But the day on which I made my First Holy Communion was the happiest of all. I felt God’s pres-

ence within me as I never had before. I hope I'll never lose Him."

Richie Regan led his team to many a hard-fought victory. He scaled the glamorous heights of All-American — the dream of every American boy. He saw his team fight its way to the championship against some of the best teams in the land at the National Invitational Tournament.

But when Richie stands before God's great judgment seat he will find that greater than all these victories was his part in leading his teammate, Wally Dukes, into the Church of Christ. "His fine example and zeal," said Wally, "lit the candle that lighted my way to the feet of Christ."

## What Kind of a Prayer Is That?

Across the street from Howard Hamerick's home in Selma, Alabama, lived the Shanahan family. It was one of the few Catholic families in the town. Each evening after supper, Howard noticed the father, John Shanahan, leading the family in a prayer in which they all took part.

"What kind of a prayer," inquired the

18-year-old Howard, "is that you folks say every night?"

"That," replied Mr. Shanahan, "is the rosary. It consists chiefly of Our Fathers and Hail Marys. While saying each decade, we meditate upon an important event in the life of Christ or of His Blessed Mother. As a little boy in Ireland, I learned this prayer and I've been saying it ever since."

"If it means so much to you," said Howard, "perhaps it might mean something to me too. Will you teach it to me?"

"Gladly," replied John Shanahan. "But to say it properly you ought to learn the teachings of the Catholic religion. We'll be glad to instruct you."

Despite the opposition of his family Howard took instructions and became a Catholic.

Shortly afterwards he was called to service with the armed forces. There he began the apostolate of sharing the precious treasure of his holy Faith, which ranks him with the leading lay convert makers of Alabama.

His first convert was a fellow soldier, Bert Kaiser from St. Louis. Bert noticed that his buddy had a high code of morals. He told no vulgar stories, no off-color jokes. He engaged in no profanity. He took his religion seriously. Whether in a trench or in the open field, he said his rosary each night.



## Power of Example

Example is more powerful than any words. Soon Bert was asking Howard about his religion and particularly about the rosary. Howard told him what his new-found Faith had come to mean to him, and explained his favorite prayer—the rosary.

“What about confession to a priest?” asked Bert. “Don’t you find that pretty tough?”

“On the contrary,” replied Howard, “that’s one of the most comforting practices of the Catholic religion. You feel a relief that nothing else can give you. Of course, you have to feel sorry for your sins and make a firm purpose of avoiding them—even their near occasions—in the future.

“Naturally, you feel ashamed at confessing any sin, but it’s a good remedy for pride which is at the root of most of our sins. Bert, it’s like taking a bit of cinder out of your eye. It hurts a moment to roll back the eyelid and remove the particle, but it feels wonderful when it’s out. That’s the way it is with removing the cinder of sin from your soul.”

The chaplain completed the instructions and Howard acted as godfather at Bert’s

baptism. When Howard returned home, he lost no time in leading his father, Seborn Hamerick, his brother Murray and his sister Beulah into the fold.

Howard's apostolate was not one of "fits and starts" or one that petered out with the passing of the years. Since winning his buddy, Bert Kaiser, Howard Hamerick has continued to be a fisher of souls for Christ. Recently he led his 53rd convert into the Church.

It all started when Howard asked John Shanahan, "What kind of prayer is that you folks say every night?" Get a person to say the rosary and you have won a convert.

## A Channel of Grace

Mrs. Frank J. Savage of Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, is a Catholic housewife who believes that good things should be shared. To her, the Catholic Faith is a precious treasure and a source of strength, comfort and happiness. Why in the world should she not share that treasure with her churchless friends and neighbors, especially when such sharing does not lessen the amount of

her spiritual treasure but, paradoxically enough, increases it?

“When I was living,” reports Mrs. Savage, “in St. Ann’s parish in Somerville, Massachusetts, I attended the funeral of an old friend, Mrs. William Morrison. At her grave I spoke a word of sympathy to her husband who had agreed to the Catholic rearing of the children.

“Then I suggested that he go with the children to Mass next Sunday, offer it up for the repose of his wife’s soul, and arrange with our Pastor, Father Butler, for instructions. The suggestion appealed to him and three months later he was received into the Church. His action thus safeguarded the faith of his children.

“Winning converts, I thought to myself, isn’t so hard, after all. Perhaps we’ve been at fault in not inviting more churchless people to join. I’ll extend that invitation to others and see what happens.

“Living next to us at that time were Mr. and Mrs. Thomas E. Stack and their three sons. I noticed that they were not going to any church. So, I had a little talk one evening with the Stacks and explained to them the great sense of security, peace and happiness which the devout practice of our holy Faith yields. I offered to arrange for their instruction.”

“We believe in God all right,” remarked Mr. Stack, “but like many others we’ve just been drifting along, living from day to day and giving no thought to the hereafter. I know that ‘man does not live by bread alone’ and I think it’s Providential that you called.

“If you make the arrangements with Father Butler,” he continued, “we’ll take a course of instruction. But we won’t make any definite decision until the end. We want to be sure that the Catholic religion is really our dish.”

### **Convincing Evidence**

When people come with an open mind and with a prayer on their lips for light, they can scarcely fail to see the convincing evidence of the Church’s divine foundation and her authority to speak in the name of Christ. The fact that the Catholic Church, alone among the Christian Churches, goes back to Christ and traces her pontiffs in unbroken succession from Peter to the present Pope, is convincing proof that she is the one true Church of Christ in the world today.

“The Stacks followed the instructions attentively,” continued Mrs. Savage, “and at the end asked to be admitted. The parents subsequently brought in their three sons.

“Later on I became acquainted with a lady in the neighborhood, Helen Bryan, who taught Sunday School at a Baptist Church. Knowing of her deep interest in religion, I invited her to come as my guest to a mission that was then being conducted at St. Benedict’s Church.

“She came and was profoundly impressed with the beauty of the services and the powerful sermon preached by the missionary. Like most non-Catholics who enter a Catholic church, she was struck by the deep reverence of the faithful, kneeling in silent prayer.

“She wanted to learn more about such a religion. So I took her to Father John G. Hogan who instructed and later received her into the fold. Like the other converts, Helen is a devout Catholic who can never thank God enough for the gift of faith.”

“That means then, Mrs. Savage,” we observed, “that you led seven persons into the Church. That’s an inspiring record. . . .”

“I’d rather say,” she modestly interjected, “that it was God’s grace which did the work. I just happened to make the contact for them with God and His Church.”

Yes, that’s well put, Mrs. Savage. For that’s about all any of us can do. But God’s grace does not flow through a vacuum but

through channels. And we must be those channels. If every Catholic channeled God's saving grace to seven souls, how quickly would we win the churchless millions of America and of the world for Christ!

## A Convert-Making Club

When Mrs. A. E. Anna was invited by a member of the Guild of St. Paul to the Inquiry Class conducted by Father Leonard B. Nienaber of Lexington, Kentucky, she little dreamt she was taking a step that would lead to the entrance of nine people into the Church and to the reclaiming of a fallen-away. The chain reaction is still continuing and probably the number of souls won for Christ will be doubled in another decade.

"At each class," says Mrs. Anna, "some of my misconceptions of the Catholic religion were washed away and little by little I began to see that it is no man-made creed but is the religion founded directly by Christ. I was amazed and delighted to discover all the means it offers for the living of a good and upright life.

"Contrary to the opinion formerly held

with many outside the fold, the Catholic Church teaches her members to love all people, even those who are hostile to her. She teaches her children not only to love them but also to pray for them and to work for their salvation.

“I was impressed, too,” she continued, “by the sight of Guild members spending their evenings in helping others find the truth. They called at the homes of non-Catholics, accompanied them to the Inquiry Class, remained at their side during the lecture and then saw them safely home. Surely, I thought, they must have the love of God burning in their hearts to be so concerned in helping others.

“Shortly after I was received into the Church, my husband, who was a fallen-away, returned to the practice of his Faith and our two daughters were baptized. That meant that for the first time we were a genuinely united family.”

“Did you join,” I asked, “that organization for converts, the Guild of St. Paul?”

“Yes,” she replied, “and I began to hope and pray that my mother, a good God-fearing woman, would receive the gift of Faith. In fact, just after I was baptized I asked mother to take a picture of Father Nienaber chiefly as a means of making a



contact for my mother with the priest who had instructed me with such care and devotion."

### **"Did Mother Come In?"**

"Did mother come in shortly afterwards?" I asked.

"No. Old habits of thought and worship are not easily changed. It took five years of prayer and the good example of my family before mother applied for instruction. When she did join the Church, members of the Guild were present, and an older member was appointed her 'Guardian Angel.'

"The latter took a special interest in mother: she went with mother to Holy Communion, introduced her to the Married Ladies Society and saw that she met fellow converts at the monthly Guild get-togethers. Guild members had done the same for me and I can tell you that it is a great help toward making new friends and feeling at home in new church surroundings.

"Mother did not hide her light under a bushel. She gave such good example that her husband asked for instructions and, when

he completed them, was baptized. She next brought Mr. Andrew Nowacki to instructions and saw him received into the Church. Her latest convert is Mrs. William McKenna. When I ask mother how she manages to interest them in the Faith, she simply says, 'All I do is to tell them what the religion has done for me.' "

"I can see now," I remarked, "why your mother, Mrs. Dickerson, was elected the 15th president of the Lexington Guild of St. Paul. She certainly deserved that honor."

"You can say that again," said Mrs. Anna. "But don't forget to give a lot of credit to the Guild of St. Paul which has been operating in Lexington for many years. At our monthly meetings we discuss the most effective ways of making contacts with non-Catholics. We see other members doing it constantly, so all of us take courage and go out to look for souls whom we can lead to Christ."

Yes, I agree with Mrs. Anna that the Guild deserves a lot of credit. It replaces casual sporadic activity by individuals with thorough, systematic group effort. A chapter of the Guild of St. Paul, consisting of converts and "cradle" Catholics, in every parish will greatly increase and perhaps double the annual total of converts won for Christ.

## Resolution

What these have done, you also can do if you will but try. Select right now the churchless friend or neighbor whom you will approach. Join prayer to action and get the truth seeker also to pray that God will give him the light to see the truth and the strength to follow it.

Then seal your good resolution by kneeling before a crucifix—the one on your rosary will do—and recite the following pledge:

“Dear Jesus, my crucified Lord and Saviour, I shall try earnestly and zealously to win for You the precious souls for whom You died, by living a life of virtue and holiness, by setting an example of charity toward all men, and by bringing non-Catholics to Mass, by loaning them Catholic literature, by explaining to them points of doctrine, and by bringing them to a priest for further instruction. So help me, God!”

NIHIL OBSTAT

John L. Reedy, C.S.C.

*Censor Deputatus*

IMPRIMATUR

✠ Most Rev. Leo A. Pursley, D.D.

*Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend*

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