

Franciscan University Presents
“Living the Faith”
With guest, Curtis Martin

Setting the World on Fire
Curtis Martin on the New Evangelization

The new evangelization isn't a program; it's a way of life. To that way of life, the Church calls Catholics of every age, sex, and vocation. But how do we understand that life? Even more importantly, how do we live it?

Recently, *Franciscan Way* put those questions to Curtis Martin MA '93, one of the two Americans chosen to serve on the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization and the founder and president of FOCUS, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students. Here's what we learned.

Franciscan Way: As we approach the end of the Year of Faith, how should Catholics view this time?

Curtis Martin: It's important to understand that the Year of Faith is a radical call back to the gateway of how we enter into relationship with God: through faith. It was meant to be a call to order, a call to reject the “business as usual” mentality. That's because if we do what we've been doing, we'll get what we've been getting. But, if we change what we're doing and really return to what it means to be a Catholic, everything changes. Whether it's Paul on the road to Damascus or Peter in the fishing boat when he dropped his nets and followed Jesus, a profound encounter with Jesus Christ means everything changes. And this is the question each of us needs to answer before the year is out: How does encountering Christ anew change my life?

FW: When it comes to the new evangelization, what is the primary misconception people have?

CM: We don't understand what evangelization is, or what's “new” about the new evangelization. Both words need to be defined, and I think Catholics—particularly Catholics in the West—have struggled because evangelization is a distant memory. In fact, in the United States, there really has never been a systematic Catholic evangelization. For the most part, our Church has grown through immigration and marriage and birth. So, we need to help people understand what it means to share the Good News—out of authentic joy, to sit with people we know and love and share with them what makes us happy.

When it comes to what's “new” about the new evangelization, we have to recognize that we live in a world where people think they know about Jesus and the Church, but in fact, their views may be filled with misunderstandings. We have to give them a new way to look at what they think they already know. That takes a new set of habits and skills. The heart of the new evangelization is inviting people to an encounter

with Christ, starting with ourselves. Each of us needs to ask, “Have I, in my daily prayer life, sought to encounter Christ? Or, has my faith become little more than a set of responsibilities?” One of the things Pope Benedict XVI challenged us to do was to practice *Lectio Divina*, the prayerful reading of Scripture on a daily basis, maybe for 10 or 15 minutes. Each and every one of us needs to come to the realization that we need to be re-evangelized before we do anything. Even if we’ve been doing this for a while, even if we’re deeply committed Catholics, we have to be re-evangelized.

FW: In terms of obstacles to the new evangelization, what are some that we as individuals face?

CM: I think the answer is in the question. G.K. Chesterton was once asked what was wrong with the world. He answered, “I am.” That is what we have to realize. The new evangelization begins with each of us each of us needs to be renewed and transformed in Christ. That’s also the only problem I have control over. I can say that priests should preach better homilies. But I’m not a priest; that’s not something I can fix. I can say there should be better marriages. But I can only fix one marriage: mine. We have to begin at home. So many of us inside the Church are in a coma. We’ve fallen into a pattern of behavior, and we have to get out of it. The Apostles had to do the same thing. After Jesus rose from the dead, Peter and John went out fishing. They went back to their old profession. Then, Jesus calls them from the shore, and when they recognize him, Peter jumps out into the water. He finally gets that everything has to change. He was made for something far more. So are we all. Jesus wants to shake us out of complacency. He calls us to live as if we are in the process of falling in love with him all over again. That’s the spark that has always driven Christianity. But today, we have people who are loyal but not necessarily in love. As Peter Herbeck told me several months ago, many Catholics are in a loveless marriage with God. That’s not OK. It’s not enough to simply not commit adultery. We need to rekindle that love affair. We have to know we are loved by a God who is rich in mercy and make the decision to give all of our life and all of our love back to him.

FW: How do we preach the Gospel to those living lives structured around sin? How do we actively love them, yet preach the truth at the same time?

CM: We, as a Church, are sometimes completely out of sync. We’ve reduced the faith to obedience, and then we want to catechize our loved ones who are away from the Church. But their primary need is not to be catechized; they need to be evangelized. Those are two intimately related realities, but they’re not the same. Take, for example, gay marriage. The Church is losing the battle in the culture over this issue, and the reason we’re losing is not because our arguments don’t make sense. They do. But people don’t listen to them. And the reason they don’t listen to them is because Catholic marriages don’t look any different from non-Catholic marriages. If Catholic marriages lasted longer, if they bore more fruit, if they produced more joy than non-Catholic marriages, people would care about what we have to say. But Catholic marriages don’t last any longer, they don’t produce any more children, and they don’t bring about any more joy. So a world that rejects the authority of the Church won’t even listen to the expertise of

the Church, because our expertise has not been proven. So the first step in evangelizing our loved ones is not “Let me tell you what the Church says.” It is the witness of joy. Then they will want to know how to follow Jesus.

It helps to remember that our world is seeking the short-term rewards that come from the pursuit of pleasure. Pleasure provides momentary, temporary happiness, but if it’s pursued for its own sake, it’s followed by dissatisfaction. So we have to let that run its course. We have to realize that our culture is going through a collective adolescence. We can’t lecture it into maturity. We just have to be there, stay engaged, and let people know we love them. They know we have moral principles. Our job is to prove to them the thing they don’t know: that we love them more than we disapprove of their behavior. That is modeling Christ, who loved us while we were yet sinners.

FW: What else can we do in the meantime?

CM: So many Catholic marriages are not faithful to the Church’s teachings. That’s the group of people we should be talking to first and foremost about following Christ. And as those marriages get healthy, they’ll be a role model for those seeking love and happiness. We have to catechize the Catholics who are engaged with the Church. The world is actually very clear on what the Church teaches about homosexual union; they don’t like it, and they hate us for it. However, Catholics are not clear on what the Church teaches about contraception. So, in large numbers and large percentages, they are not practicing what the Church teaches. But if we did a better job teaching the people who claim to be Catholic, they would then live differently, and they would set the example for those in the world. Then, and then only, will we win the world over.

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**Titles Mentioned on *Franciscan University Presents*
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Made for More by Curtis Martin. Ascension Press. Available on www.amazon.com.

The Real Story: Understanding the Big Picture of the Bible by Curtis Martin and Edward Sri. Epic Publishing. Available on www.amazon.com.

* *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis. Harper One Publishing.

* *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st Century Church* by George Weigel. Basic Books.

Christifideles Laici – Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II. Irish Commission for the Laity. Available on www.amazon.com.

The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic by Matthew Kelly. Beacon Publishing. Available on www.amazon.com.

The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries by Rodney Stark. Harper San Francisco. Available on www.amazon.com.

* *Catholic for a Reason I: Scripture and the Mystery of the Family of God*. Edited by Leon J. Suprenant and Scott Hahn. Emmaus Publishing.

* *Still Point: Loss, Longing, and Our Search for God* by Dr. Regis Martin. Ave Maria Press.

* *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300-1700* by Dr. Scott Hahn. Crossroad Publishing Company.

* Available through the Franciscan University Bookstore, 1235 University Blvd., Steubenville, OH 43952, 1-888-333-0381, www.franciscan.edu/bookstore.

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