

SEVEN WAYS TO WIN CONVERTS

by

Rev. John A. O'Brien Ph.D.

CHART. I— PROTESTANTS ARE MORE THAN TWICE AS ACTIVE IN WINNING CONVERTS THAN CATHOLICS

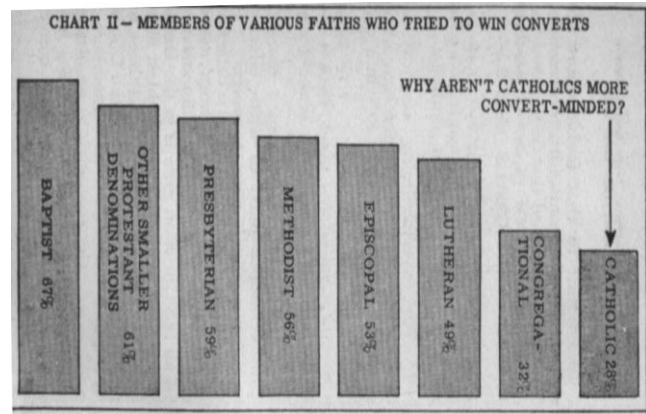
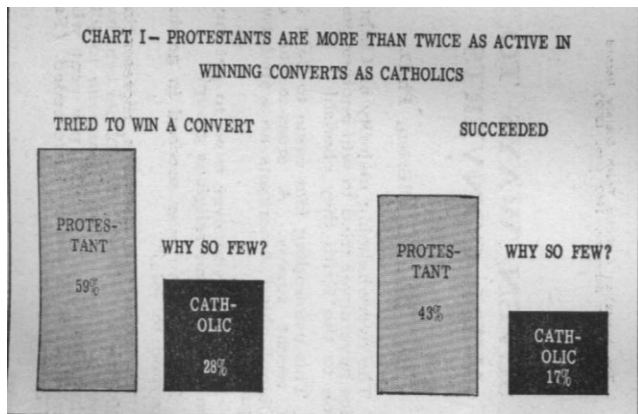
The overwhelming majority of Catholics have never tried to win another person to the Faith they cherish!

This astounding fact came to light in a recent survey. A cross-section of Church-going Americans answered two questions:

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 Catholics, representing 20.6 million, showed that 72 per cent had never even tried to get anyone to join the Church. Of the 28 per cent who tried, only 17 per cent succeeded. (See Chart 1,)

In contrast to that feeble effort, the replies of all Protestants, representing 53.3 million, showed that 59 per cent had definitely tried. Of these, 43 per cent succeeded! (See Chart 2)



The epoch-making survey sponsored by the *Catholic Digest* brings into relief the following significant findings:

1. The overwhelming majority of Catholic lay men and women have never so much as lifted a finger to win a convert for Christ.
2. Protestants are more than twice as zealous as Catholics in seeking converts.
3. Catholics need to learn effective techniques of winning converts.

While all the survey findings are of interest, one is of paramount importance. Of all the Christian groups in the United States, Catholics make the feeblest effort in seeking to recruit new members for their faith. The result is that the Church with more than 42,000,000 members is gaining only the pathetically small total of 140,000 converts a year. Three hundred Catholics average but one convert a year—undoubtedly the lowest average of any Church in all Christendom.

It is obvious that a small band of 54,682 priests (very old figures. ed.) cannot personally reach 100 million churchless people scattered over a vast continent. Only through the zeal of *the layman* will we be able to fill the spiritual void in the lives of millions of our countrymen.

This calls not for proselytizing but for evangelizing. There need be, and indeed there should be, no stirring of religious controversy, no attacks upon other faiths, no offensive intrusiveness. Our concern is with the millions of churchless people at the centre of whose being there is spiritual emptiness.

There is a real danger that if direction is not forthcoming from Christians those without faith will drift into atheistic communism. Every dictate of patriotism and of Christianity urges us, then, to share with these churchless millions our precious Christian heritage.

But mere interest in convert-making is not enough. Knowledge of the best techniques must go with it.

The Bureau of Convert Research at the University of Notre Dame, the only one of its kind in the English-speaking world, recently set out to determine these techniques. It analysed 1,000 case histories of conversions to discover the

answers to two questions: 1. What sparked the interest of the prospective convert? 2. What convinced him of the truth of the Catholic religion? The analysis disclosed seven basic techniques. One of these, or a combination of several, showed up in virtually every case.

A widespread dissemination of these seven basic methods is of the utmost importance. An actual case with the names of the individuals and places involved will exemplify each.

1. Setting a Good Example

“For 27 years I had been looking for God in .history books,” wrote Dr. Thomas Brady, distinguished historian and vice-president of the University of Missouri. “But where I finally found Him was where I had never looked—in the Catholic Church. The person who helped me to find my way into that Church was my wife. Her faith, devotion and holy life did more to bring me into the Catholic Church than all the books I’ve read, helpful though many of them were.”

In making that statement Dr. Brady merely voiced a truth recognized by all who study the mysterious workings of divine grace. God chooses human beings to be the channels of His grace more frequently than any other agency.

“I was 22, a student at Harvard, and a long way from home at Christmas,” Dr. Brady said, “when I first set foot inside a Catholic Church. A devout Catholic fellow student sensed my loneliness and invited me to attend the Christmas midnight Mass at the Holy Cross Cathedral in Boston. It made a deep and lasting impression upon me.

“Two years later I was a graduate student in history at Harvard. In the spring of 1926 I ran out of money. I went to the chairman of the History Department to ask advice. He looked up my grades, talked with me briefly, then wrote out a cheque for the amount I needed. ‘This is a little gift,’ he said, ‘and it will help you over the hump.’

“That kind man was Robert H. Lord, a convert to Catholicism, who later became a priest and died as pastor of St. Paul’s at Wellesley, Mass. That one of the first Catholics I ever knew should do this made a deep impression on me. I remember he asked if I was a Catholic, probably because of my name. When I replied that I wasn’t, he said that it made no difference.

“The Dominican priest Father Regan instructed me briefly before my marriage in December, 1934, in Denver. He was very kind and he gave me a word of advice I’ve never forgotten. ‘You will learn a lot about the faith,’ he said, ‘living with a good Catholic.’ The full truth of that I was to learn only through the years.

“I read a great deal of the writings of St. Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Cardinal Newman and C. K. Chesterton, whose *The Everlasting Man* impressed me deeply. Conversion didn’t come to me like a bolt of lightning, as it did to Paul on the road to Damascus. It was a slow, gradual process that took place over the years.

“The Sisters were teaching *me* as they taught our children. The first catechism I ever saw was the one that Tommy brought home. But most eloquent of all as my wife’s example. Her prayers, piety and life were a constant, though unspoken, sermon telling me of the strength, serenity, and joy derived from the practice of her faith. Only the most perverse person could live with a good Catholic for years and not feel a tremendous attraction towards the Church.”

2. Bringing a Person to Mass and Ceremonies

Every sincere truth-seeker who comes into the presence of our Eucharistic Lord departs a better person. So Dorothy Kellerman, a student at Southern Illinois University, found out. Dorothy is a great faith-sharer.

“I live in a residence with 12 other girls who belong to various denominations,” Dorothy remarked. “They frequently attend the services of churches other than their own—going now with this roommate and then with that one. I happen to be the only Catholic there.

“The girls noticed the regularity with which I went to Mass each Sunday at St. Francis Xavier Church. One day Jeanne Tilmann said: ‘Dot, I’m not a member of any Church but I can see how much you get out of your religion. I’d like to go with you some Sunday if you don’t mind.’

“I told her that I’d be delighted to have her come. She was impressed with the reverence of the worshippers and the earnestness with which they prayed. She noticed that they weren’t visiting or gossiping with one another but acted as if they were really in God’s presence.

“I gave her a rough outline of what the Mass was and lent her my missal so that she could follow the prayers. She

came from Okawville, where there are quite a few Catholics, many of whom she knew. This helped too. She was eager to know more about our religion.

“I brought her to Father Robert J. Flutsch, pastor of St. Francis Xavier Church, for instruction. I was her godmother and knelt at her side when she made her First Holy Communion.

“My other convert, Hilma Lorrens, was also a schoolmate at Southern. We spent two summers together at camp, the first as counsellors and the next as cooks.

“Every Sunday I would get up early while the rest stayed in bed. I’d go to Mass and still get back in time to help cook breakfast for the group. Hilma noticed this.

“ ‘Gee!’ she said, ‘your religion must mean a lot to you if you get out of bed so early and trek so far. I’d like to look into **it**. I’ve an additional reason now that I’m going with a Catholic boy.’”

“So I invited her to come along with me on the following Sundays. She was greatly impressed and wanted to learn the whole story.

“She was going to spend some time in the town of Murphysboro so I told her to see a priest there and get a course of instruction. She did, and I had the joy of acting as godmother at her baptism and of kneeling at her side when she made her First Holy Communion.

“Now when I’m back at Southern I have two companions to go with me to Sunday Mass—Jeanne and Hilma. That makes it more pleasant.”

3. Answering Questions

Answering questions about the faith may be the beginning of a chain which ends in conversion. Such was the experience of Robert M. Panarites, a young sailor stationed at Ellyson Field, Pensacola, Fla.

“I had been,” said Robert, “a Methodist, Presbyterian, Nazarene, Pentecostal and a Witness of Jehovah. But none of these sects satisfied me. None made me feel that it was really Christ’s Church and was speaking with His authority to me. Even the ministers of the same sect, I found, held different views and doctrines.

“In these various denominations I had heard much about the Catholic Church, and it was always unfavourable. I’m sorry to say I swallowed much of it, so that if anyone had told me I would one day be an ardent Catholic I’d have thought him crazy.

“A change began when I met Chester Fruge in boot camp at San Diego. We became close friends and I soon discovered that Chester was a devout French Catholic. No matter how tired he was, he got up on Sunday and went off to Mass. I noticed, too, that he usually went without eating breakfast.

“When I asked him about it, he said that he went to Holy Communion and that this required him to fast. I plied him with dozens of questions. He took them all in stride and set me right on each one. Even when some of the questions were rather offensive, Chester didn’t bristle and ‘blow his top.’ He knew that I had been fed a lot of ‘tripe,’ so he let me get it all out of my system.

Then he gave me the ‘lowdown’ on each item with great calmness and patience.

“I could see how much he got out of his religion. By the time he came back from Mass he would have lost some of his loneliness, and he said he felt as though he had had a visit with the folks back home.

“He wasn’t a bit backward in telling me about Confession, Holy Communion and the Mass. He told me that if I knew the grace, help and strength which Catholics get out of their religion I wouldn’t be able to embrace it fast enough. So I told him that sometime I would take a complete course of instruction.

“After boot camp we got separated. But we had promised to keep in touch, and a couple of weeks later I heard from him. ‘What have you done about looking into the Catholic faith?’ was underlined in his letter.

“That question ‘What have you done?’ kept coming up in each succeeding letter. I had done nothing about it, but I didn’t want to lie. So finally I grabbed a telephone book and looked up the name of a Catholic Church. I found one—St. Vincent Ferrer—in Vallejo, Calif., where I was then stationed.

‘How does one,’ I asked the priest who answered, ‘go about looking into the Catholic Church?’ The priest chuckled and arranged for my instruction. I was baptized on 29 September, 1948.

“And I began to share my new-found joy with others. First was my sister, Christina. I told her how much the Faith

would mean to her. She took instructions and was baptized on Thanksgiving Day 1950 at the Church of SS. Peter and Paul in Los Angeles. Next was my father, who was baptized at St Joseph's Church in Grand Junction, Colo., in August, 1951.

"Others I have helped into the fold are Charles F. Moore, a buddy of mine in the navy, and two good friends, Mr. and Mrs. Felix Chism. The Chisms were baptized at Vincent Ferrer's by Father William Moore, the zealous priest who also instructed and baptized me. I told these people that the Catholic religion would fill their hearts with the love of God and their fellow men and brighten their whole lives. I answered their questions and then arranged with a priest for their systematic instruction.

"And, under God, I owe it all to Chester Fruge. It was his willingness to answer questions and his repeated, 'What have you done about it?' that finally got me started. I can't thank him enough."

4. Doing Acts of Kindness

People aren't mere logic-machines. They have hearts, and those hearts are reached by love. Kindness is love's language, and everyone can understand that tongue. If one wins a person's friendship and love, he has taken the first step towards winning him for Christ.

A year after graduating from high school in Dorchester, Mass., Dorothea Dickenson became acquainted with a fine young man, Carl Cottuli, a non-Catholic. As their acquaintance ripened into friendship, she became increasingly eager to share her beautiful faith with her friend.

She told Carl what joy she got from the practice of her Catholic Faith. "It keeps me close to God," she said, "and gives meaning and purpose to life. The sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion keep me in the friendship of Christ and give me the joy of a good conscience."

"Well, if it means so much to you, Dot," said Carl, "I guess I ought to look into it and see if it might not mean something to me."

"There will be no pressure put on you to embrace our religion," she came back. "Faith requires the assent of the will, and that can't be forced. But prayer will help a lot, and I'll be praying with you."

"Fair enough," said Carl, "But I'd like to have you come along. I'd feel a little strange going by myself."

Accordingly, Dot brought Carl to Father Cummings at St. Mark's, who explained the doctrines and practices of the Catholic religion to the young enquirer. Dot helped Carl with his prayers and supplemented Father Cummings's exposition with additional bits of information. Every priest-instructor would welcome such an ally as Dot.

What started as a mixed courtship ended as a Catholic marriage with a Nuptial Mass and God's special benediction upon the young couple.

Eventually Carl's parents also found their hearts opening to Dot's kindness. Instead of "cold-shouldering her in-laws," as people so often do, Dot treated them as if they were her own parents: she visited them, cared for them in their sickness, surprised them with little presents, arranged for their instruction, and finally took them into her own home to look after them more effectively. Is it any wonder that the mother-in-law took the name of Dorothea in Confirmation? She wanted the name of a saint, and she found one, she felt, not only in Dorothea's patron but in Dorothea herself.

5. Lending Catholic Literature

When printed words present the truths of the Catholic faith, they become the channels of God's grace. When Catholic literature comes into a home, a missionary of great power and influence enters.

This is shown by the following case history. After Mrs. James Bowes, of Mosinee, Wis., a widow in her 80's, read *Our Sunday Visitor* from cover to cover, she brought it each week to her Luther-an next-door neighbours, the Rau family.

Frederic, the youngest among the six children, read every issue. He became interested in the Church and learned to say the Rosary. He went to his own church on one Sunday when the temperature was below zero and the attendance was poor.

The minister looked down towards the Catholic church and, seeing cars lined up for blocks around it just as on other Sundays, said, "When the Day of Judgement comes, that's the Church that will stand the test."

This deepened Fred's interest. With two Catholic friends he went to the Stations of the Cross and other evening devotions. Finally he wrote to the Confraternity Home Study Service and received instructions by mail.

"I was convinced that the Catholic Church was the true Church of Christ and was now determined to take instructions from a priest. Father Doyle of Wausau became my teacher. "Just before my instructions were completed, however, Father Doyle was killed in an auto accident. So I started all over again with Father Hawck, who baptized me and later offered my wedding Mass.

"I then served in the army for five years. One day at Fort Russell a fellow officer, Lt. Tillisch, told me he was going to marry a Catholic girl. He was scheduled to take some instructions from Father Henry Zaranthon in Marfa, Tex., and he wanted me to accompany him.

'Sure,' I replied, 'I've had only two complete courses already, so I guess a third one won't do me any harm.'

'Well,' he said, 'I'm glad you're willing to come because I had cold feet about going there alone. I never had any contact with priests.'

"Like most non-Catholics, Lt. Tillisch had many misconceptions but found them all removed during the course of instructions. He was received into the Church.

"As for me, I have a Catholic wife and four children. Give the credit, under God, to that nice little old lady who started it all by bringing *Our Sunday Visitor* to my home each week."

6. Bearing Witness for the Faith

The prospective convert-maker should not wait for persons to ask him questions. He should kindle their interest by telling them of the peace-and happiness of his faith and do so with humility, sincerity, good will and kindness. He should show that it is love which prompts him to share the source of his happiness.

The fruitfulness of this technique shows in the following story. Rosemary Amberg, a young housewife in Milwaukee, was busy with her housework one morning when she heard the doorbell.

"I'm Ray Haas," said the strapping young man at the door, "and I'm selling vacuum-cleaners. I think we have the best on the market. Will you give me a few minutes to demonstrate it?"

"Sure," replied Rosemary. "I'll be glad to see how it works."

The salesman ran the vacuum over her rugs. Rosemary was impressed. "That looks like the real article," she commented. "When my husband comes home this evening, I'll tell him about it and perhaps we'll buy one."

Then, after a pause, she added, "Now, Mr. Haas, I've something to sell you."

"What, you a saleswoman!" he remarked, as his eyes widened in surprise. "What have you got to sell?"

"The most precious treasure in the world—my holy Catholic Faith. It's the source of my greatest comfort and happiness. When I go to Confession on Saturday evening, I leave with a conscience as peaceful as that of the angels. On the following morning, when I receive Our Lord in Holy Communion, I have great joy in my heart. All the doctors, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts in the world can't give a person such peace of mind and happiness."

When she finished the salesman remarked: "I've never heard a person speak so glowingly about a religion. If I were to bring my wife over some evening, would you give a repeat performance?"

"Gladly," replied Rosemary. "Bring her over tomorrow."

After Rosemary had repeated her story, her husband, John, a convert, added his corroboration. Mrs. Haas was no less impressed than her husband.

"Why, Ray," she exclaimed, "this is just the thing for our friends the Karraghers. They're looking around for something to put meaning and purpose into life—and this will do just that."

Later that week Ray and Beatrice Haas brought John and Barbara Karragher to the Amberg home, and Rosemary and John repeated their stirring words. Then they took the Karraghers and the Haases to the Gesu Parish Enquiry Class. After attending the class for three months, the Karraghers and Haases were received into the Church with the Ambergs kneeling beside them.

Rosemary Amberg's little sales talk started the Karraghers and the Haases on the road to the Church. Those couples, eager to share their new-found treasure, brought others to instructions, and that process has continued. In a convert class three years later were the 15th, 16th and 17th persons whose conversions are traceable to the spiritual chain-reaction Rosemary started.

7. Bringing Persons to a Priest

Once an interested person is brought to a priest, the battle is more than half won. Unless that contact is made, however, the work in kindling the interest is not likely to bear fruit. At least the odds are against it. Miss Bessie O. Robinson, of Toronto, Canada, tells a story which illustrates this. "I was brought up in the Anglican faith," she said, "and attended many meetings of Buchman's Oxford Group. My father became interested in astrology and drifted away from the Anglican Church.

"I was out of the Church for about 30 years. Then I began to realize how purposeless is a life without God. So I started going to church again.

"I appreciated," she continued, "the friendliness of the people and of the parson and their friendly greetings. But I could not feel that this was the Church founded by Christ and in possession of all His truths. So I started going alone to the Catholic Church. I was impressed with the seriousness with which the people prayed, with their reverence for the Eucharistic King upon their altars, and with the beautiful liturgy

"I am in the interior-decorating business and I call upon my customers in their homes. Three of them are devout Catholics and they were also glad to answer my questions and tell me about their faith. However, I hesitated to take the step that would cut me off from many old friends, even though I was becoming increasingly aware that the Catholic Church alone went back to Christ.

"I don't know how long I would have continued drifting in that state of indecision had not one of my customers, Helen Mitchell, phoned me. 'Have you contacted any priest about that matter?' she asked. 'No,' I replied. 'Then I'll phone Father Forestell at St. Basil's and make an appointment for you,' Mrs. Mitchell said. 'There's no point in waiting any longer.'

"That was just the little spur I needed, and that most people in a similar state need badly. Father D. L. Forestell, a Basilian, was kind and understanding. He gave me instructions and on 14 Nov. 1946 received me into the fold of Christ. On the following Sunday I received my First Holy Communion.

Conclusion

Since faith is a gift of God, prayer is of supreme importance. It is not listed as a separate technique, however, but is an integral part of every technique.

These then are the seven basic methods of winning converts: 1. setting a good example; 2. bringing a person to services; 3. answering questions; 4. doing acts of kindness; 5. lending Catholic literature; 6. bearing witness for the faith; and 7. bringing persons to a priest.

Rarely will one technique be used in isolation. Generally the apostolic Catholic will use more, sometimes even all seven.

Using these techniques will give him a chance to give back to God a proportionate expression of gratitude for his own priceless gift—"faith for faith, divine gift for divine gift."

Pope Pius XII pointed out that the mark of a good Catholic is his missionary zeal and eagerness to share his faith. "The missionary spirit," he declared, "is not a virtue of supererogation expected of a chosen few. This spirit and the Catholic spirit are one and the same thing. One is not genuinely interested in and devoted to the Church unless one is interested in and devoted to its universality; that is, to its taking root and flourishing everywhere on earth."

To put into practice these seven tested methods it will be well to make the following pledge:

"My Jesus, I believe in Thee and I love Thee. Because I do, I will strive to the best of my ability to reclaim inactive members and to share the precious treasure of my holy Catholic Faith with others. This I shall do by my fervent prayers, by the example of an upright and holy life, by explaining my Faith, by answering questions about it, by sharing Catholic literature, by bringing non-Catholics to Mass and other ceremonies, and especially to my priest for systematic instruction. In this way, dear Jesus, I shall strive to win at least one convert and reclaim one inactive Catholic each year of my life."

Seal your pledge by kissing the crucifix—the one on your rosary will do.
