

About 5 years ago, our parish added a sign on the corner of Connemara and Biscayne Avenues to let people know about Mass times, parish events, and also frankly to just let people know that we were here; for people saw the steeple, but many didn't know we were a Catholic church, let alone that we also had a school as a part of our campus.

I think the sign has been great, as it has many different messages, including one that stresses all are welcome. But as we all know, for people to know that they are welcome, they sometimes need you and me to be fishermen; to go out and evangelize. A sign is great, but you and I need to be signs too through how we live, and also through how we try to help foster a relationship with God for people.

Among the many evangelization programs and groups that are a part of the Catholic Church is one called Saint Paul Street Evangelization; it was founded by Steve Dawson, who converted to the faith, and has spread across the globe with hundreds of teams in cities all over, as people share their faith. And for so many, the stories are similar; it begins with themselves, but then it continues in how they take the commission at the

end of Mass to go and announce the Gospel of the Lord and to proclaim it with their lives seriously.

Edwin “Uzi” Mendez is today very active in the group. He comes from Brooklyn, and like so many of us has traveled a winding road on his faith journey.

Growing up in the 70s in Brooklyn, he grew up surrounded by Puerto Ricans like himself. His dad was Puerto Rican by way of Chicago and moved to New York and married his mother.

He writes that even as a child, he could sense his mother’s great virtue and faithfulness. His dad knew this too, and wanted to be the husband she deserved. But as hard as he tried to be good for her, he says his dad couldn’t do it; the restlessness took hold of him, and when Uzi was about a year old, his dad up and left for Chicago, going back to his old neighborhood in Chicago where he already had two young sons by another women.

Uzi was left with a broken-hearted mother who had to work hard to provide for Uzi and his sister. She strived for 11 years to make ends meet despite

the crushing struggle of life on her own. But his mom was also an evangelist to him and his sister; Uzi notes that faith was a priority and the source of her strength. She'd take them to Mass and make sure they received their early sacraments. Sadly she died when he was just 12; Uzi says the struggle wore her out and she died of a broken heart.

After that, he says the most important person in his life became Fr. Rosa, the family's parish priest. He was taken in by his aunt, and Fr. Rosa would often stop by to mentor him, to challenge him to come to Mass, and to encourage him to stay in school.

By the time he was in his early 20s, he and his sister moved to Chicago to try to re-connect with their father; but Uzi wasn't ready yet, he says it was like a cold war; they hardly tolerated each other. But one family member who he started connecting with was Louis, his half brother. He admired him with his possessions, clothes, wealth and stature. What he learned was Louis was the head of a gang called the Spanish Cobras. Louis brought him into this gang; introduced him as his brother; and on top of this now Uzi was being honored too. He felt like part of a family, and before long he was being groomed to take over one day.

Shockingly, Edwin's world was rocked when his brother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. And it was around this time he began to see through the glamour of gang life to the violence and despair. He became disillusioned with the drugs, immorality, violence and aimlessness of gang life. He realized that while worldly goods bring pleasure there is no joy there. His conscience, which had been formed by his mother and Fr. Rosa, became something he finally began to listen to and so after a year he found someone to take over the gang.

A rival gang though, Latin Kings, tried to have him killed, not knowing he was leaving the gang, and he was shot 9 times but survived. Laying flat on his back in the hospital, he reflects that God had a hand in saving him; he started to pray again the rosary, and slowly a hunger grew in him for the faith. His heart softened, and like Saint Ignatius of Loyola, this near-death experience brought him closer to God. He again heard Fr. Rosa's voice, "Uzi, you must go to Sunday Mass; it is the most important thing." He reflected on the sacrifices of his mom, and now wanted to return to the faith.

It took time; time to get over the anger at his dad, the rival gang, and to free his heart to love God. He went to confession, and then started going to Mass. He sought out Fr. Rosa who inspired him to go to college, and then he decided to make peace with his father. He even took his dad to a White Sox game; his dad loved baseball, and it broke the ice; his dad saying to him he wanted to always take him and now he was taking him instead. When his dad moved to Puerto Rico, Edwin took his own family to visit and they continued to work through things; each apologizing to the other. But there was something else Uzi learned about his dad: he had stopped going to Mass. When pressed as to why, his dad said he felt unworthy to be there for all of the sins he had committed. But Uzi told him that God is merciful and waits for us. Seeing the healing in the family, he hoped his dad would follow him back to Mass. A month later after the family returned to Chicago, his cousin phoned telling him his dad passed away; but before he died, he made his confession and hadn't missed Sunday Mass after that. Uzi says he is in awe at the way God had used his desire for peace with his father to spark the return of his faith. This was his first taste of evangelization.

This got him to think "what does it take to get someone to come back into the Catholic Church." He knew it was important to reach out and share the

Gospel. So he get involved into his parish. He taught marriage prep classes, and started to try to talk to those around him about God. And he learned as he went along; he learned he couldnt be defensive about the Church, or express too much zeal as fire and brimstone don't bring people in. Rather respecting, understanding and loving people do. He buried himself in prayer and the sacraments to become better prepared for whatever mission God had in store for him. His family saw his gentleness increase because of this and also his ability to express his love. He'd start reaching out to the homeless of Chicago; the lonely and down and out. As he put it, "I wanted to make sure that even a sandwich would show God's love so I made them special." When someone said the sandwich was great, and ask who to thank, Uzi would reply "Thank the Catholic Church." He'd explain how God loves them and the doors were always open for all were welcome. He'd even sometimes walk them to the nearest Catholic church and walk around with them literally through the doors. Some were not receptive; others didn't want the food, but his small mission was growing. His family would also help him too. But the more time he spent on streets, he realized there were so many people who did not know God and had no exposure to the truth. How true this is for us all; as he put it "We do not need to wait for someone else to begin the work of evangelization; all of us

who know God should be looking for ways to share Him with others right where we are.” This led him to Saint Paul Street Evangelization. He even began ministering to Jehovah’s Witnesses who had a Kingdom Hall in his neighborhood and were out during the day. A leader from the group told him to stop talking to “his people” as they were asking questions about the religion; and Uzi said hey I have freedom of speech, they can stop to talk and I can talk to them. A Jehovah’s Witness heard this conversation, and started to talk to Uzi afterwards, who taught him about Luther removing some books of the Bible; there was a back and forth, but Uzi never raised his voice and was calm and they engaged in a real conversation. After this, the man said “I felt the truth of what you were saying.” It went on for 6 months; the man, David, was worried about family and friends ostracizing him, but he kept coming back. They’d even talk about the Mass, and after a few more months he went to Adoration and went through RCIA and was baptized and confirmed, his uncle at his side. At one point David’s father threatened him with a baseball bat; Uzi said he’d count it an honor if he were hit with one, knowing the persecution was a sign the devil was upset with his efforts. But eventually he even went to a Mass too.

Uzi was also working in the territory of the Latin Kings; the rival gang that nearly killed him years prior. When some teens said they didn't need him as they were part of the biggest gang in the world; Uzi says he flashed the sign of his gang and made the Sign of the Cross. He knew they were like him at one point; baptized and now fallen away. But Uzi talked to them, and the teens amazingly went to Mass and confession that night - Divine Mercy Sunday. Some leaders threatened him, but he calmly talked to them, and they reached a compromise; Uzi would move out of their territory but work in it. In reality all he did was move his table across the street. Here he continued his work as an evangelist, and is a part of a team that helps people on the streets come to truly know God. He closes by saying there are so many with spiritual needs and broken hearts in need of a visit, a talk, and an invitation; as he puts it so well, all need God, and all can be reached by His grace.

How true that is, but for people to be reached, you and I have to be signs. As such, hopefully we take that call to be a fisher of men seriously. And the way we live out that call is to first and foremost listen to God; then to work at bettering ourselves daily into the people God knows we can become;



then through our way of life, and then through reaching out to people far and wide.

While Uzi ministered in Chicago, Jonah ministered in Nineveh. And he is to put it mildly a very reluctant prophet. Now we get just a snippet of the book of Jonah today; but the whole story is he does the opposite of what God tells him, then God sends the storm when he gets on the ship taking him away from Nineveh, and then he's in the belly of the big fish who takes him to the beaches near Nineveh which is God's way of saying "Get to work!" And so he preaches repentance though unlike Uzi, he wants to see the city destroyed; he essentially sits under a tree and waits for the fire and brimstone which doesn't come, for he has been too successful. Hopefully he came to realize that his work mattered, but what we do know is that God spoke, and he listened. So the starting point as I noted last week reflecting on conscience is to listen to that voice of God which tells us to make changes in life, or to do things better. Laying on his back in the hospital and even before that seeing the violence of the gang, Uzi realized what a waste his life was becoming as he traveled the path to fake happiness. We need to ask ourselves if we are truly happy with the choices we are making and if the answer is no, set about trying to make things right. As Jonah had a

change of heart, hopefully we do as well. We can't run away from our mission. It can be tempting to do that; to say "no this is too hard" to live the faith, to re-commit to it, to look at our sins, to evangelize - but we can't run from God and if we want to find peace and happiness and help others to do so, we need to go on the mission and listen.

Second, as Uzi did, we set about making things right within our souls. Think about the words "Come and see" that we heard in last week's Gospel when Andrew and Peter are called by Jesus. Do we pray? Do we go to Mass every week? Do we have a relationship with God so we think about the faith? Are there things we ignore that we know aren't right but just have kind of grown to accept? Are our priorities messed up? As Uzi did he loaded up on grace by praying, by going to Mass and confession and by having that spiritual component there so he could then evangelize. God is there to help us become better and truly free and happy, but we need to journey with Him and take the steps to daily grow in grace. We first grow deeper ourselves before we evangelize. Another thing you can consider is getting involved in groups here at the parish that will soon be forming as a part of the Synod; the apostles were a small group and these groups emulate them. In a couple of weeks on the First Sunday of Lent we'll have

a table in the back of Mass with more information on them, and they will help people grow and share their faith, equipping them to share it with the world.

Third, what does our life reveal to others with respect to how we live? Uzi's mother took him to Mass and worked hard to help him learn the faith and serve her family. And then as he grew in the faith as a man, he took to doing service for people, starting with helping the homeless and making people who were hungry a sandwich. Attitude means so much; when people see us smile; when people see us say "yes" to some things and "no" to others; when people are met with kindness and compassion or acts of charity; when people see how we live our lives, this is a powerful evangelization tool, in particular within our homes as kids see how we treat one another.

Fourth, how we are going to change the world? There can be so much fear with our faith with respect to sharing it. Like Jonah we can want to run in the other direction; there can be fear over what will happen when we talk about faith to that adult child who hasn't been to Mass in 30 years or to our neighbor who was Catholic but now is at Hosana or an evangelical free

church, fear when we talk about things like social issues, or moral issues like the unborn and marriage. But so much good happens when we do, which is why the Archbishop is asking us to be evangelists of the faith through the Synod. Jesus asks “what are you looking for” to the apostles; another way to think of it as “what do you want” and that’s what Uzi asked himself and then others. So it needs to be for us with people. Again, it starts at home; Uzi’s mother shared it with him, but then as a grown man he talked to his father about the faith and his dad returned to Mass and went to confession. How hard and downright scary that can be; for we all know people in our families who are fallen away, or make excuses about not going to Mass, or at odds with the Church on faith and morals. And we might not want to make people feel uncomfortable; but what’s better; making someone feel uncomfortable or helping someone find true happiness and get to heaven? So let us not be afraid with loved ones to invite them to Mass; to remind them that they are welcome and loved by God; that God is waiting for them to come back; and to truly catechize so our family members who may have fallen away can come to understand what it means to know God and why it is so important to find God; to talk about the “hot button” issues. It does not mean shaming, but it does mean also not being afraid to rock the boat a bit; you ask someone if they are

truly happy; or if they ever think about mortality and where they are going; and maybe someone begins to remember why the family went to Mass when they were growing up and why it is so important. You talk to them about how you have the guidance in life to choose right from wrong the Church gives us, and most importantly the love of God in the Eucharist which isn't available in other churches, and in these things we get people to think more deeply. Then this continues in the greater world; where as the people of God we, like Uzi, are not afraid to reach out to people who may even be hostile to the faith by talking about it with them, by being patient as he was with David the Jehovah's Witness-turned-Catholic; and realizing we each have the power to make such a difference to renew the faith in our world.

Signs are indeed helpful in that they provide information, but if you want to win souls for heaven, you need a whole lot more than a sign. You and I need to be a sign through how we live, and through not being afraid to go with Jesus and help people find Him. There is so much potential in us all, the problem is we as humans just kind of get lost on our own, and think happiness is one thing when in reality peace and joy only come when we truly center our lives in God. It's great we share our faith here together as a

community, but what happens here is meant to change the world. So let the Holy Spirit enkindle the flames of faith in our hearts, and let us as the people of God, truly set the world on fire by being fishers of men.