



Gary Johnson: Canadian Witness to Faith



Background information

My name is Gary Johnson. For the past 8 years, I have been a Professor at the Centre for the Built Environment at Seneca College, teaching in the areas of energy, ecology & sustainability. Prior to joining Seneca I was a partner and owner in a consulting engineering and energy services company, I was ordained as a Permanent Deacon in 1990, and have 5 grown children (3 of whom are teachers) and 4 grandchildren.

If you had to create a Catholic Resume which highlighted ways you are a WITNESS to the Catholic faith, what would be on it?

If you can forgive the private sector business parlance, I believe that witnessing is a Pull strategy versus a Push strategy. In that way, it is similar to leadership. It is not about us hitting people over the head with our faith, trying to convince them that we are right. There are enough religious groups in the world doing that already. Rather, it is in our living out of our faith that people may become drawn to us - not by what we say, but by how we live our lives. This is especially true of this generation which seems to have a basic distrust of institutions, and are acute observers of personal and societal inconsistencies.

The way I witness to the faith is first and foremost in keeping in touch with God, by prayer and scripture reflection, but even more importantly by seeing God in the places, times and people I encounter. Next is by trying to be present and available to my family. The role of family as the "domestic church" is, I believe, too often understated,

and lost in the busy-ness of life. Next is in my ministry, whether by my involvement with the marginalized in our community, or through the privilege of being able to minister sacraments and preach.

What kind of difference do you hope to make in living a life based on Jesus' teachings?

For me, 1Peter4:10 has become a sort of mission statement. "as generous distributors of God's manifold grace, put your gifts at the service of others." I believe it is in the recognizing of my gifts, acknowledging the source of my gifts, and using those gifts to help others, that I find a deep sense of purpose in my life. It is in this sense of *diakonia*, of service to others, that my soul is rooted. Other people will have different ways of discovering their sense of purpose. I suspect that one of the tragedies of life is to have not discovered that sense somewhere in life's journey.

Do I really make a difference? If in encountering me, people become more aware of Gods message of love - that they are unique and irreplaceable, that their lives have meaning regardless of the situations they find themselves in - and in discovering this, it helps them deepen their relationship with others and with God, then I will have contributed in some small way.

In a different way, teaching has given me an opportunity to share the beautiful diversity of creation with my students. While I can not present it within a spiritual / religious tradition, by helping others see the consequences of our actions on nature, to begin to understand the concept of intergenerational social justice which is at the core of Sustainability, and lay out a framework for ethical decision making, I believe I am providing an opportunity for them to reflect at a more spiritual level consistent with their faith traditions or philosophical outlook.

What advice do you have for a young Catholic finding ways to express their faith?

Religion is a codification of spiritual experience. It is rooted in an encounter with God. So while understanding something of our religion is important, I believe the most important foundation we can provide is that of Spiritual Experience. Hence, creating opportunities for students to encounter the spiritual through reflection, retreat, liturgy, silent meditation and scripture is critical. It is this spiritual encounter that nourishes the desire to explore further.

The call to *diakonia* is received by all of us at our baptisms. Particularly with youth, allowing opportunities to serve others who are in most need, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the sorrowing, to be a loving and nonjudgmental presence to those in need, allows a deepening of the spiritual experience, and an awakening of God's unique call in their lives.

Dum Tempus Habemus, Operemur Bonum.