

- Several years ago, Bishop Jugis asked me to accompany him to an out-of-town meeting. As we got settled onto the plane, I was seated next to a man who, after a few minutes of conversation, revealed that he was a fallen-away Catholic.
- Realizing that this man's soul was more important than the work awaiting me on my laptop computer, I allowed this man to engage me in conversation during the flight.
- And after a friendly and candid conversation about sin and its eternal consequences, this man agreed to going to confession and getting back to Mass. He had his children baptized and caught up on their Sacraments as well.
- Occasionally, I still hear from him via email, and I'm delighted that he's still growing in his faith. All he needed was a little push in the right direction. This experience underscored for me the importance of being open to others.
- Although I've been a priest for 15 years, I'm still constantly amazed by the power of the Roman collar. The black and white collar that we priests wear is a powerful symbol, even for those who are not Catholic or even Christian.
- Very often, when I'm out and about in public, I'm approached by complete strangers who want to interact with a priest.
- What begins as a simple and friendly conversation in a store, a restaurant, or an airport often turns into a full-blown spiritual direction session or even a confession.
- So many people live lives of quiet desperation, and sometimes they just need a patient ear to listen to them and a broad shoulder to lean upon.
- But there are also so many people who just don't have faith, and they just need a little evangelization. And so I try to have an open attitude toward others in public, being willing to engage with anyone with the hope of leading them to Christ.
- While I must confess that I sometimes get a bit annoyed when my 5-minute trip to Harris Teeter to pick up one item turns into a 30-minute spiritual direction session in the produce aisle, I do know that God's work is being done in those encounters.
- When most people see a Roman collar, they instinctively know that the man wearing it is someone they should be able to trust with their worries and cares, a man from whom they can get counsel, advice, and direction. And that's as it should be!
- While priests and deacons have a special calling to minister to others in need, and while we stand out in public because of our clerical clothing, we're not the only ones who should be doing this work out in the world. This is the work of all the baptized!
- Funny enough, whenever my mother flies alone somewhere, I always ask her who she sat with on the plane, because I know that no matter who it is, she's going to suck them into a conversation.
- But I also know that, like a good Protestant, Mom will eventually bring up the topic of faith, and she'll do it nonchalantly and very amiably. And there's no doubt in my mind she leaves those people better off than she found them.
- Last Sunday I spoke about the spirit of the antichrist, and how we need to combat it by living our faith outwardly. As St. Peter tells us, the devil is like a prowling lion, seeking whom he can devour. Certainly, we live in a time when it seems he has the upper hand.

- There may come a time when we Christians have to retreat to the catacombs out of fear of persecution, but we're not there yet! It's a mistake to close ourselves off totally from the world. We must have an openness to others and be willing to engage with them.
- While certainly we must protect ourselves and our children from harmful worldly influences, especially re: to media and the internet, it's also important to teach our kids as they mature to know how to engage with others who may not share our views.
- In addition to be open and engaging with others, Catholics also need to learn how to engage with our society and culture. For if Christians pull back completely from the world, who will be out there to evangelize it?
- And if your kids run across people of different values and beliefs, that's where you parents can step in and talk about why we believe what we believe as Catholics!
- Think of the words we hear in our first reading: "I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth." Those are words we must take to heart, for we have a responsibility to evangelize.
- Last January when I was on our mission trip to India, our group made a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Thomas the Apostle, who is buried in Chennai on the southeastern coast.
- As I knelt before his tomb, I was amazed that St. Thomas traveled that far to spread the Gospel – and in a day before planes, trains, and automobiles.
- And it's not only amazing that St. Thomas and the other apostles were willing to go so far away from home, but they were willing to evangelize in hostile environments, as is witnessed by the fact that they were all martyred, save St. John.
- So there's a balance to be struck as we live in this world. First, we must remember that we are strangers and sojourners in this world, and that our true citizenship is in Heaven. God has made us for Himself, and we belong to Him.
- Yet while we must set our hearts on Heaven and seek to be detached from worldly allurements, we cannot hide from this world either. For this is our testing ground! It's here in this valley of tears that God wishes us to prove our love for Him.
- That's why we cannot live our faith in a vacuum. No! It's God's desire that we take our faith out into the world and evangelize. We mustn't hide the light of Christ under bushel baskets.
- So while we must not imbibe the poisons of sensuality, selfishness, and greed that have become the hallmarks of our society, and while we must protect our children from anything that can hinder their salvation, we must equip them to deal with our world.
- And when it comes to evangelizing, this can be done in very simple ways. Just wearing religious items that others can see, or praying in public – like before meals – can often provide opportunities to engage with others on matters of faith and morality.
- When we're willing to engage with others in a friendly and respectful manner, God can use us as an instrument of salvation to draw others closer to Him.
- My brothers and sisters: don't be ashamed of your Christian faith. Don't be scared to talk about your Redeemer. Don't be scared to engage with others who might not share our values. You never know how God might use you to save a soul.
- And while we can so easily see the evil in our society, let's not run and hide from it. But with the grace of God, let's try to influence the world for good.