‘The message of the Gospel keeps me focused’

Evangelization in a pluralistic, privatized world

Congress speaker discusses challenges of witnessing Catholicism in age of religious pluralism.

By Paula Doyle

Evangelization can be a prickly proposition in today’s religiously plural, increasingly skeptical world, said University of Chicago history professor R. Scott Appleby, in his Feb. 22 keynote address at the 2004 Religious Education Congress.

“The role of evangelizing in open, liberal societies or even in societies that are trying to move toward democratic principles is a pressing global question,” asserted Appleby, author of “Church and Age Until: The Modernist Impulse in American Catholicism” and co-author of “The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World.”

According to Appleby, when liberal societies are not “checked” or modified by communal (group) values or principles, three dominant cultural trends emerge which are a major challenge to evangelization: radical skepticism, anti-fundamentalism and suspicion of larger narratives such as the Bible.

“Today, skepticism is the orientation of many, if not most, Americans,” said Appleby. “Because skeptics take the view that reason itself can’t come to reliable conclusions about the ultimate nature of reality, they want to take the question of human destiny “off the table,” he explained. People of faith, especially when dealing with the media, will encounter hostility and suspicion of any claims that come from a source of conviction or belief, Appleby declared.

Closely related to the challenge of skepticism is the trend of anti-fundamentalism, which Appleby describes as a denial of the existence of universal foundations for knowledge. “The anti-fundamentalists say there are no foundations for moral reasoning based on nature,” said Appleby. “Anti-fundamentalists refuse the notion that there are higher principles binding people together.

Ironically, said Appleby, the Catholic Church unintentionally contributed to the anti-fundamentalist development during the ‘60s and ‘70s with the acknowledgement of diversity, which created “a flowering of pluralism — wonderful event in itself — but also destabilizing.” According to Appleby, the concern was less on how we are bound together as one people of God than on how we are the peoples of God.

“Now that was a perfectly appropriate, in my opinion, development, and a welcome development in theology, but it occurs at the same time that, in the larger culture, there is an excess of individualism and focus on (individual) experience.”

Also occurring at this time, said Appleby, was a “rapid erosion of the Bible and its story” as a mental framework for living. “This is very troubling and challenging for Catholics who are members of a Biblical people,” Appleby explained. He said it reflects a larger trend of a suspicion of “big stories” viewed as manipulative ways of controlling people.

While Appleby acknowledged that spirituality is alive in people, today’s distrust in religion and the value of living spiritual values in community is not as prevalent. In addition, there is a pervasive sense of being isolated in society, especially among people under 40 who grew up in the digital age of computers and e-mail.

In today’s cyber world, said Appleby, every evangelist has to be “architectonic.” “Everything that is said about Christ, every kind of ritual, when kind of message has to point to the foundation, to the plumbing, to the fact that this structure has been standing for 2,000 years. It wasn’t made up yesterday, it didn’t just come over the Web…people have died for it and people have given their lives to it and it is a foundation by which you look at all of life.”

As far as society’s religious pluralism, Appleby said evangelizers have to foster a “hard tolerance.” This means participating in respectful, inter-religious dialogue while “never yielding on what we understand to be the full (Gospel) message.”

“Catholic Christians don’t accept that religion is privatized, therefore not only God but also the public should,” said Appleby. “We are a church that’s engaged…we don’t accept the idea that we are all atomized individuals.”