

What's Bringing So Many Catholics Home? (Part 1)

Interview With Campaign Founder Tom Peterson

By Andrea Kirk Assaf

ROME, MAY 4, 2010 (Zenit.org).- It began with a single conversion, a moment in which a soul opened itself to the mercy and grace of God. From there, the Holy Spirit, working through that soul and its particular God-given talents, has multiplied and ricocheted this message of conversion around the world through an apostolate in the New Evangelization, bringing hundreds of thousands of fallen-away Catholics, and even non-Catholics, home to Rome.

The soul in question is that of Tom Peterson, an American former advertising executive, who has put his expertise and experience at the service of the Church through the creation of the Catholics Come Home ad campaign and [Web site](#).

ZENIT spoke about the past, present and future of the campaign with the founder and president during his recent visit to Rome to address a conference on "Church Communications: Identity and Dialogue" at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross.

Part 2 of this interview will be published Tuesday.

ZENIT: How did the Holy Spirit inspire you to begin this apostolate?

Peterson: I went on a retreat 13 years ago that changed my life, and in front of the Eucharist I got to know the God of the universe. I had known him before but, through the distraction of the secular world, I started focusing on business and acquiring more stuff. Through God's mercy and grace he invited me on this retreat, I said yes and my whole life changed.

So I had a profound experience in front of the Eucharist, like a Saul to Paul conversion. I had never missed Mass before that, but I didn't pay much attention, I would think about work, maybe what was for lunch, I'd race out of the parking lot, and very much lived in the grey area, a secular world Monday through Saturday, and then go to church for an hour on Sunday.

I was living a very lukewarm life. And as I grew in my faith, I realized how much more I had to learn.

ZENIT: Was there a slow process of change after that or did things begin to happen rapidly?

Peterson: Obviously the Good Shepherd is always looking for us, he is always leading us, so things happened both before the retreat and after. But things started speeding up after the retreat, when I said "OK Lord, I want to do your will, what do you want from me?" The first desire was to get close to the sacraments, with frequent confession, frequent Eucharist, start reading the Bible. I started going to daily Mass, and I begged God to serve. A few months later I had two dreams: one was about a little baby who was being put in a suitcase and smothered by a pillow, and I kept removing the arm holding the pillow and blessing the baby with the sign of the cross; in the second dream I was producing some sort of Catholic evangelization ad. Both dreams actually became true: Virtue Media, our pro-life apostolate, was born after that evening, and God called me into this, to protect babies and families for the sanctity of life by producing television commercials that air nationwide and in many cases worldwide, which help pregnant girls and post-abortive families and teach about the sanctity of life. It is called virtuemedia.org.

The second dream was fulfilled when the Diocese of Phoenix called me back in 1997, and they said "the Holy Father Pope John Paul II, for the New Evangelization, would like to invite inactive

Catholics back home to the Church for the Jubilee, would you help us?" I said of course, that's the fulfillment of my dream, and that is the calling I had on my retreat, to use the talents that God had given me, not for my own benefit but for the Church.

So I said yes, of course, and we did a very simplistic version of Catholics Come Home back in 1997. We aired it for 2.5 weeks in the Diocese of Phoenix, and miraculously 3,000 people came back to the Church. I figured out how much we had invested and said, "Hey, it is only \$10 a soul. This is an incredible return and investment." That was a one-time program and years later now we resurrected it, and created it as a full time lay apostolate, faithful to the magisterium of the Church. We've got excellent boards of advisors, we've got many clergy, we've got business advisors, we have lay theologians, noted Catholic authors, speakers who give us advice and make sure that our commercials have sound teachings.

So we aired the commercials again, under the new form where there are film commercials like "Epic" showing the universality of the Church all over the world, commercials like "Movie" that call folks to a deeper relationship with Jesus and talk about his divine mercy, testimonial ads of people who have left the Church for various reasons and have come home, and now miraculously the results are even more grace-filled. We've aired in 12 archdioceses and dioceses around the United States -- Chicago, Seattle, back in Phoenix again -- and while we are still working with the dioceses to calculate final statistics, it appears that as many as 200,000 people have come back to the faith or converted, which is a huge blessing, and the average diocese, based on the initial statistics, has grown as much as 11%.

ZENIT: You collect all the statistics on returning or new Catholics influenced by the ads through the dioceses?

Peterson: The dioceses do it, and sometimes they employ statisticians to make sure all their analysis is correct. They look at the census data, usually from October Mass counts, and they compare it with the post Catholics Come Home initiative Mass counts, then they look at the difference, after factoring out anything that may affect the numbers. So in Phoenix it was a 12% increase; in Corpus Christi, 17.5% in Spanish and in English. So far the average appears to be about 11% percent around the United States, and as many as 200,000 people. Amazingly, we are getting testimonials from around the country showing that not only are inactive Catholics coming back to the faith, but as a surprise to us, non-Catholics, Protestants and so forth, are converting to the faith after seeing the ads, going on the Web site, and being touched by the Holy Spirit. A young man named Harrison was enrolled in a Protestant university, but he just did not feel he was deep enough in his faith, when he came upon the Catholics Come Home Web site and said "This is exactly what I have been looking for." A year later he converted to Catholicism, and now he is enrolled in Ave Maria Catholic University in Florida.

Another amazing story was from a man named Adrian from Colorado. He was born Catholic but not raised in the faith. He left his faith and became an atheist, his wife and children were atheists too. When he came across the Catholics Come Home Web site he saw the "Epic" ad that shows the history, beauty, spirituality and accomplishments of the Church and it made sense to him. When he heard the line "We are Catholic, welcome home," he said "I felt like the Holy Spirit touched me, I had to know more." A year later he came home to the Catholic Church with his wife and children and they were received this Easter 2010. He said, "I used to talk people out of the Church, now I am teaching people about the Catholic faith and bringing them back to the Church."

ZENIT: How does an atheist know where to look for Catholics Come Home?

Peterson: We tried to find out because we have aired in Colorado but we don't think we aired in his particular community, so obviously through the work of the Holy Spirit while he was surfing the Internet or while he was at a restaurant when the commercial came on TV. We have yet to find out how exactly he stumbled upon it, maybe he Googled a key word that brought up our

site. We are not really sure, but obviously it was a work of the Holy Spirit and not a direct work of ours, because he found us as opposed to us advertising the message to him.

ZENIT: Do you air on secular television as well?

Peterson: All the time, in fact most times that is where we air. Our statistics are showing that as many as a million people from 80 different foreign countries have seen the ads through the Web site, some in the Middle East. Usually we expect people from Italy or Ireland to find us because at least they are known to be Catholic countries, but when people from Qatar or other not traditionally Catholic countries find us, it seems miraculous. So that is how the Internet works, as a viral message going out into the world where a friend or family member may have seen or heard about something in an e-mail and they perhaps spread it that way, or through various Internet search engines, or through Facebook, social media, or blogs, people stumble upon us.

But the vast majority of people who hear this message of hope and redemption in Jesus' love for them see it on secular television. We normally air the ads for six weeks in a given diocese, very heavily so the average person will see the ads two or three times a day; we have about 25 different ads, various testimonials, we have the "Movie" ad, we have "Epic" in different lengths and different languages. Typically, in either late Advent leading to the New Year or in Lent we air these ads heavily in the given diocese. Ninety-eight percent of the people in the television area see the ads two or three times a day and by the time the campaign is over there is a lot of buzz about it in the secular media, there are a lot of discussions going on in beauty parlors and bars, at work places, everyone has pretty much seen the ads and are talking about them. Protestants, Catholics, former Catholics, Muslims, Jewish people, secular media ... it opens positive dialogue.

Amazingly our focus groups and dial tests before we aired the ads, showed that people often came into the survey group having a negative impression about Catholicism or the Catholic Church, whether they were Protestants, former Catholic, even practicing Catholics, and people with no faith ... but after they saw the commercials one time, 76% of the people surveyed in the focus groups said: "I think it is a very positive message, I like it very much." There were strong approval ratings, and the Hollywood firm that specializes in testing for movie trailers and product introductions told us "You've got a hit, you've got the tiger by the tail, so launch it." We asked another follow up question, which is probably more important: Now that you've seen these ads, would you consider coming back to the Church? -- if they were fallen away Catholics; and if they were non-Catholics, Protestants, or perhaps agnostics: Would you consider looking into the Catholic faith? Miraculously 53% of both groups said, yes, I'd consider it.

So what we are learning is that communicating in a professional manner, using our God-given gifts, and our first fruits, much in the same way secular advertisers put out a message, we can do God's work of the New Evangelization that Pope John Paul II so eloquently spoke about. He calls us laity through the encyclical "Christi Fidelis Laici" to live and serve the Church in our lay occupations. When we combine knowledge and experience and the talents God gave us in the secular world with faith and prayer and guidance by the Holy Spirit, miraculous fruits are born, like this apostolate and its results.