

Reaching Out to the Masses Using Writing

By Victor Beshir

"There is no 'worship' in my church," a statement that I heard over and again from many people. You read about Americans who travelled all the way to the Tibet just to search for spirituality. Other Americans visit Islamic mosques, or Hindu temples or New Age centers just to find a true religion. In fact, many people from all walks of life are questioning their religion, denomination, or church. They are not satisfied with what they have there and looking for a religion or a church that is better. People are hungry for true religion, church, and spirituality that water their spirits with unchangeable source. We, the Christian Orthodox, have the greatest unchanged faith since Christian inception, a proven deep spirituality over the centuries, and unmatched heavenly worship; we have the source, the water, and the food. Yet, we fail to make it known to the masses; we keep it as a secret. We have to reach out to the masses in North America.

A great way to reach out to a large number of people is writing. Some people get scared when they think about writing, but writing a book is different from writing an article to a local newspaper, newsletter, or college newsletter because they don't require the same level of writing skills and talent needed to write a book, or to write to national magazines, and newspapers. Once you have trained yourself on following a few steps in writing the ideas and topics, the rest will be easy because you can get help in editing and style. A few years ago I was talking to an editor in a big local newspaper and she told me that she spends a lot of time going through each article to correct grammar and to refine the style of article. This shocked me because I thought that everyone that writes to a big newspaper should already have mastered grammar and writing style. From that day on, I was encouraged to write.

The fear of writing and making mistakes stops many people from writing, but for us as people who like to evangelize we need to overcome this fear, having faith that God could use our weak persons and our weakest talent. A successful article is not mainly successful because of its grammar or style, but rather because of the appealing topic, the interesting introduction, the smooth transferring from one idea to the other, concentration on the theme of the article, and convincing the reader. You will be surprised how others may like your writings once you follow the directions in this lesson. Mainly, this is a writing lesson, but rather it is a lesson on how to use, with the grace of God, writing to promote evangelism.

In today's world, if we're serious about evangelistic efforts, we should include writings to newspapers and magazines in our agenda.

Other religions are very active in this field because the evangelistic benefits from these writings are so great. In fact, some other religions have good contacts with newspapers editors and send a monthly article. This way they keep the town aware of their existence, and in each article they just add one appealing reason on why a person should join them. They do it in such an indirect way that nobody objects to it, but on the contrary, it attracts people.

You will be surprised to know that newspapers always on the lookout for peoples' writings to fill their papers. As any other business deals with ideas, newspapers also search for new topics with new ideas to attract readers. They need your articles. Similarly, Colleges' newsletters also encourage students and others to write articles. **One great idea is to establish a good relationship with the editors of the religion section of the local newspapers.** This relationship would allow you to publish deep Orthodoxy articles without much opposition. A few years ago, I established a good relationship with the editor of the religion section of a big newspaper, and I sent her a couple of articles. She published them, but after some scrutiny to avoid direct religious invitation, she changed them to be more indirect. When I sent the third one, I used an indirect way to evangelize, thinking that she will catch it and eliminate it. To my surprise, she published the whole article without changing a letter, and put my name as a writer of the newspaper, something I never dreamed would happen.

Writing About Church News:

One of the best ideas for evangelistic writing is writing about news of the church. Whenever there is news, write to local newspapers about it. First, contact them, tell them about the news, and ask them to come to talk about it. When meeting with the writer or the editor, give them a written article that covers the background of the news or the occasion. Mostly, they will send a writer and a photographer to cover the news or the event. From that point on, work with the writer to inject some evangelistic words or ideas. Remember that the writer needs help and he/she will welcome your efforts. In the beginning expect some word scrutiny, but after a while, scrutiny will go away.

What kind of news you need to write about? Here is a small list:

1- **Visit** of significant figures: The pope, a bishop that came for a specific task, a scholar, an artist, a writer, a theologian, a pioneer, a charity organization, or a cultural organization.

2- **Meetings:** Committee meetings to arrange for a specific activity or a project, meeting for priests from different places, or meeting between different local leaders of different churches.

3- **Feasts and Fasting:** Advent fasting, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Virgin Mary fast, Saint of the church, holy family flight into Egypt, and the new Coptic year, just to mention a few.

4- **Festivals**

5- Charitable days

- 6- Cultural, Spiritual, and Social **events**
- 7- Something new in the church, like an icon holder or a Coptic icon.
- 8- Baptism
- 9- Marriage
- 10- Ordination

The main idea is not the news, but to use the news as a vehicle to include evangelism. Having even one evangelistic thought in an article is worth the efforts. I will give you an example; we had a priest ordination in our church, so I called the religion editor and told her that we have an ordination and need coverage. The first reaction was something like, 'so what, we have ordinations all the time. This is not attractive news.' Then, I realized that I did not do a good job and decided to think about it. A few days latter, I visited her and said, "Probably, I did not explain myself the other day. What we have is a historic event; this is the first time in the history of our area to witness an ordination of a priest for one of the oldest church in the world. Bishops will come from as far as Egypt and people will come from many other states to attend." She was quick to arrange for a writer and a photographer for the event. I gave the writer a good article about the deep spirituality of priest's ordination, not written as a spiritual lesson but as the old amazing ways that the church still keeps from the days of Christ until now without changes.

Amazingly, after the article was published, another big newspaper editor called me blaming me for ignoring them and not contacting them to write about the event. Wow!

By the way, I am not very good when it comes to writing in English, but I write, then I give the article to someone else to edit before I send it to the newspaper. Just do one job and let others help you. You put the ideas in words and mold them. Then delegate the other responsibilities to others.

Other Writings:

To reach out to people, **you need to be creative**, especially when it comes to writing. Once I thought about how to talk about the spirituality of the church without direct talk to make it acceptable to a newspaper. So, I wrote an article about visiting Egypt. In the article I started with an attractive topic to the reader, which is ancient Egypt and its monuments. Then from there I talked about another hidden treasure of ancient Egypt, its spirituality. Afterwards, I talked in details about the spirituality of the monks of the church, and the spirituality of the church itself. Every few lines I go back to mention something about ancient Egypt. I made the whole article seem as if it is a description of a personal visit that shocked me when I compared our living here in the States to the spiritual living there. The editor added pictures of the pyramids and sphinx to the article, did not change a single word, and put my name as a writer of the newspaper. I met people many months latter and when they saw me they recognized me and started to tell me how they were touched by this article.

What I am trying to say is to be creative. You can create an appealing article about any simple thing in the church, our history, about a dialogue, about what we do for our youth or elders, or our very old liturgies and hymns. I could go on forever. You may tell me that you don't have that much information about all the topics I mentioned. Well, this is not a problem. Just look for something that is new for someone outside of the church. Once you recognize something, start asking about it and reading about it. Get deep into its spiritual meaning and its impact on our life. Then imagine that you're talking to someone in front of you, telling him/her about the idea. Train yourself on what is best to say first and what is better to say next. Ask yourself, "Wouldn't it be better if I started by saying this or I conclude with this." Having this dialogue with yourself until you write something that you are thinking is a good approach.

Come back to what you wrote in a few days and examine it again to modify the tone of the words, to make sure of the smoothness from one idea to the other, to change long wordy sentences into small effective ones, and to add attractiveness to its lines and paragraphs. If you need help in that, give it to someone else. Is it sound too much? It could be in the beginning, but because of the love of our Lord, we train ourselves, and read more until we master it. Little by little, you will notice improvement in your writings. When you get discouraged, consider someone like me; English is my second language and it took me years even to write a correct simple sentence.

Guideline for Writing to Local Newspapers:

In addition to what I already mentioned above, here are other points to discuss:

1- Have an Attractive Topic:

The local newspapers welcome articles about interesting topics; they are always in search for new topics. In evangelism, we already have numerous topics to write about. So, all you need to do is to practice how to discover good topics and how to present them. Ask yourself whether or not this would be something new for someone outside the church, and then work on how to make it attractive to the readers. Think of the thousands of commercials about products that you would normally not pay any attention to, but the commercials make them very appealing. Someone gathered information about them and thought about how to represent them in an appealing way to the viewers.

2- Put evangelism inside other topics:

Once one college was celebrating "Black History Month," and I decided to write an evangelistic article for the occasion. So, I choose a title, "African Americans Should Be Proud of Africa." When the readers see the title, they think that I am writing about Africa. Indeed, I started by talking about civilization of ancient Egypt and its achievements in areas that touch today's reader such as how women reached the level of a queen in Egypt and how

women were sitting next to men to learn in the Theological School of Alexandria in the second century. Then I moved directions to talk about how African Americans should be proud of Africa that was visited by prominent personalities of the old world. Then I mentioned that Christ lived in Egypt for four years. From there, I talked about how Africans should be proud of the achievements of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Between the lines of achievements, I wrote my evangelistic messages. Also, I opened the eyes to the fact that Christianity is not a white man religion, as others tell African Americans, and that Christ was not a European man. Every few lines I go back to talk about Africa. The article was accepted despite all evangelistic messages because of the way the message was included and the attractiveness of the original topic.

What I am trying to say is to write about a topic that doesn't look like evangelism in order for your article to be published. No newspaper will publish an article that evangelizes people, except if it was a religious one. But, the secret is to pick up another topic and carefully insert your evangelistic message inside the topic.

What I am saying about articles could be easily adapted to presentations or speeches in universities and communities. You can say all what you need to say but under another umbrella and say it indirectly. A few years ago, I was taking a counseling course. The teacher asked everyone to give a presentation about a topic related to counseling. A Muslim lady in her presentation started by saying I am a teacher in an Islamic school and to let you be familiar with what I am saying let me tell you a few things about Islam. Then this few things took about fifteen minutes talking about Islam, as if she was giving information, but in reality in each sentence she was comparing Islam to Christianity and making Islam superior to Christianity without mentioning the word Christianity. Everyone sat silently listening to her words.

What I am trying to say is that you can lecture and say everything you want if you put it under an acceptable topic title and if you present it as information, as history, or as anything without saying the word evangelism directly. This lady said everything she dreamed of saying, even to the point of attacking, but in a way that did not cause any anger of others.

3- Have a catching title.

The readers don't have the time to read every article in the newspaper, so they have to be selective. Catching titles grab their attention. So, pick up an exciting title for your article. Unless the title attracts the readers' attention, your article will never be read.

4- Have an appealing opening paragraph:

If the reader likes your title, he/she will read the first paragraph. If the first paragraph was attractive and catches the reader's attention, then you win, because the reader most likely will read the rest of your article.

This opening paragraph should create curiosity by asking questions or throw an amazing fact that you will talk about. You may make the reader laugh in your first paragraph to relax him or her and make your article a pleasant one. Most American preachers start their sermons by saying a joke. When people hear the joke, they laugh, get relaxed, feel the sermon will be pleasant, and continue to listen.

5- **Write with the reader in mind:**

The approach to writing is to think as the reader thinks. Most readers of newspapers prefer simple language. Imagine that the reader is sitting next to you and you're trying to explain your topic to them.

Ask yourself what I should do to keep the reader's attention while they read my article. How can I make my words and sentences interesting enough to get the reader's attention? One of the magazines described my "Coptic Roots" book as "The book that is attractive in form and style and will hold the reader of any age till he finishes it." You need to keep the reader's attention during the entire article. Use questions to keep their curiosity. Let the readers always feel like they want to continue reading to discover the answers and facts about what you have shown as being important for them to know.

Ask yourself, what could be important for the readers. What would they be looking for in my article that is important in their life? Mostly, in newspapers' articles, there is only one idea you can talk about at a time, so you need to concentrate on that idea in the article.

Another technique you can use is to keep the reader amazed. People like adventures because they like to know what will happen. Keep the level of amazement high. For example, I always keep the reader amazed at how the Coptic Orthodox Church preserves the original faith and worship for two thousand years without modifications. The reader would say, "Wow." This "wow" would keep him or her reading.

You may also present your facts as shocking information. For example, when African Americans read the article I wrote about Africa, and that Christ was not a white man but He had dark hair, dark eyes, and dark skin, they were shocked. Especially because this was a different view than the view they may have heard from others who are trying to attract them to another religion. I can imagine that their mouths would be opened widely from amazement. If you can maintain this feeling, you win.

Remember, any topic could be boring or very interesting. You can imagine how teenagers would hate to read about parents. This is a very boring topic for them. But how about if I start an article with a title like, "How to win over your parents and get all you want from them?" I am sure that I will attract some teenagers, if not all, to read this article.

In the same article about parents, if I write, 'you need to do the following: 1- Be obedient to your parents 2- Be respectful, etc., the teenagers would throw away the article. However, if I represent some alluring psychological facts, they would continue to read. For example, I can say, 'how to use your parents love to win them over? "Then I explain what loving parents entails, what influences it, and how to win that love? I say exactly the same things that could be very boring but in a fascinating way.

By the way, the same thing could be said about teaching in Sunday school or in youth meetings. You can apply these thoughts on Sunday school classes to get the attention of your students.

6- Avoid being academic

Don't throw a flood of information in a scientific way. Most people hate to read scientific articles or books. Instead pick up a few examples and present them not in scientific ways but in a captivating way. Also, don't use scientific jargon. Instead use everyday language to say what you like to say.

7- Switch to evangelism

Once you reached the heart and mind of the reader, then throw in your evangelistic topic. However, make it in an indirect way. You need to learn how to go back and forth between your topic and evangelism smoothly. You say what draws people into the article and smoothly switch to evangelism to say something before going back to your topic again. Evangelism doesn't mean preaching. You can evangelize by stating facts, by describing the effect of the church on people's life, by giving information that lead people, or by using logical argument. For example, you can say, "As our bodies get hungry for food, our souls get hungry to other kinds of food." Then get back to your topic. Switch again to evangelism to describe how entering an Orthodox Church give you peace and made your soul feel happy.

8- Make sure the article will keep people thinking:

A successful article is one that makes you think long after you have finished reading. After two months of writing an article in a big newspaper in my city, I was visiting a dentist for the first time. When he knew my name, he started talking to me about my article. This means the article stayed with him long after it was published.

9- Speak to their hearts:

Gently touch the reader's heart. You speak to their brains and leave a mark on their hearts. Touching hearts usually happens by talking about realities and a lack of peace, joy, happiness, love, or deep spirituality. Touching the needs of the human soul usually leaves a trace in their hearts. You need to say how the church fulfills their needs or how the gospel did that in a certain area or time.

10- Pray

Prayers should start before writing and continue long after the article appeared in the newspaper. Only the Holy Spirit can open the hearts of people and draw them to the Lord. All that I mentioned above are just channels the Holy Spirit can use. But the channels are useless without Him. We do our best to present the best that we can offer for Him to use. Review St. Paul's introduction to his sermon in Athena. He started by saying a nice complement, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious," a complement that opened the hearts and ears of the audience.

Then he used a great topic from their own town. "For as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To The Unknown God.' Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you." (ACTS 17: 22, 23) St. Paul, as a profound evangelist, knew how important it was to pick up an interesting topic for the audience, and then learned how to use a striking introduction to his sermon. Of course, St. Paul has no interest in their idols and altars, but these words showed a person who walked through their beloved gods and altars. Even when he was about to talk about Christ, he used one of their own gods as an introduction to Christ.

How about if your English is not good?

It is a well known fact that there are people who work as editors, their job is to edit the work of others. That reveals a fact that not all who write have a good command of the language. Plus it is always good to have someone double check your work after you have finished. As I mentioned above, the editor in a newspaper edits most of the work he/she receives. Again, think of the people that write for newspapers and the fact that they also need editing. Therefore, you should not be discouraged.

In addition, Most of the famous people who write a book about their life hire a writer to write the book for them. Nothing is wrong with giving the article to someone else to edit it. So, being not good at English writing is not an excuse, since you can let someone else edit your writing.

Growing:

After writing to local newspaper, it is time to think about our evangelism needs for other kinds of publications, such as brochures, booklets, books, and web pages.