



What does your t-shirt say...about you?

Back in the 1990s we printed t-shirts for our parish catechists, about 100 in all, showing a globe spanning from Minnesota to Venezuela with the message: "Go, make disciples of all the nations, baptize them, teach them to carry out all I have commanded, and know that I am with you always." One day a group of catechists came to me complaining that so-and-so was not taking good care of his t-shirt...not keeping it sparkling white and well-ironed. They certainly took pride in the message and the ministry those t-shirts represented.



A "Día del Niño" event here at Jesucristo Resucitado.

Given our hot climate, t-shirts are even more present here than in Minnesota and almost all of them have something printed on them. It's particularly "in" to have a t-shirt with English words, although rare that the wearer knows what they mean. "What does it say, Padre?" Sometimes the translation causes a bit of embarrassment, but more often laughter: "Tell the truth and run", a smile: "a pixie's work is never done", a look of appreciation: "beautiful", satisfaction: "hope", or a need for further explanation: "Just do it" or "STOIC...she stoically endures asversity ". Misspellings, as with that last word, are fairly common, a sure indication that the designer-printer didn't have a great command of the English language, but few of his Venezuelan customers would know or care. As long as their t-shirt was in English, it would be "cool".

T-shirts were first produced around the turn of the 20th century as undershirts for U.S. Navy sailors and went public in 1904 when the Cooper Underwear Company (Jockey) ran magazine ads for a "bachelor undershirt". By the time people began calling it a "t-shirt" in the 1920s, the light cotton short-sleeved pullover garment had pretty much become the standard undershirt for men replacing the union suit, a full-body long-sleeved flannel garment that buttoned up the front and had a button-down flap in the rear. Ugh! By the 1930s it was common for farm hands, construction workers, and kids doing chores or playing sports on hot days to shed their shirts and go with just the t-shirt. When Marlon Brando and James Dean appeared on the big screen bedecked in tight-fitting white tees in the 1950s, the t-shirt moved from an undergarment to become a fashion statement.

As an acceptable outer garment, it was then just a matter of time before creative heads realized they could turn the broad open front of a white t-shirt into a walking billboard. Thomas E. Dewey, the Republican presidential candidate in 1948, was the first politician to do so. His "Do it with Dewey" tees were creative and popular, though not enough to defeat Harry Truman in the election. The real boon for printed tees came in the 1960s with advancements in screen printing that made the process easier and cheaper. It was a bonanza for Walt Disney and Coca-Cola. People actually paid to wear their logos. Anyone could now get into the game, promoting their particular group, product, sports team, event, or ideology...myself included.

I made a rudimentary press in the mid-70s and, for a total outlay of less than \$50, began printing t-shirts for summer bike trips at St. Raphael in Crystal where I worked as a youth minister and making my Christmas shopping easy, printing t-shirts with a family logo for all my relatives. After returning to Minnesota from Venezuela in 1999, I worked with volunteers, first at St. Francis St. James in St. Paul and then at St. Dominic in Northfield, designing and printing t-shirts for summer youth programs and other events. We saved a lot of money doing it ourselves, got more people involved, and gave the participants a sense of pride identifying with the parish and its programs.

"Do you have a favorite t-shirt?" I asked some friends in Minnesota. Among the responses, here are a few that I particularly liked: "Teaching makes all other professions possible", "In a world where you can be anything BE KIND", "Life is Good", "no one fights alone" (support for a coworker with cancer), and "I don't need Google, my wife knows everything" (she actually bought it for him). Most favorites were from places visited, groups to which people belonged, or events in which they participated. Be it there in Minnesota or here in Venezuela, our t-shirts make a statement, not just in what they say but, even more importantly, in what they say about us.

Points to ponder

If you were to design a t-shirt, what would it promote or represent? What would it say? It doesn't have to be super complicated to have an impact. The iconic "I ♥ N Y" t-shirt was designed on a napkin during lunch.

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.