

CHAPTER ONE

A “New Discipleship” for the New Evangelization

Responding to the first question proposed in the Introduction—*What is missionary discipleship?*—this chapter will touch on two things: First, the rise of the New Evangelization in the Catholic Church which, today, requires a renewed focus on the missionary element of discipleship. Second, how the shape of missionary discipleship points to the “accompaniment” of others into a deeper encounter with Christ in the Church (as Pope Francis said in *The Joy of the Gospel*, no. 169). This accompaniment is rooted in the disciple’s desire to receive and share the mercy and love of God with others.

CHARISMATA *and* CONVENTS

As before, let's begin with a story of missionary discipleship in action. I was two days away from beginning my first semester of graduate studies at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. My car was packed, ready to make the long trek from Des Moines, Iowa, to the university. My phone rang, and the person on the other end told me that I no longer had an apartment to rent in Steubenville. A water main had burst, ruining the entire building.

I was shocked. I had no idea what I was going to do. I needed a place to live. I am no St. Francis, so sleeping on God's good earth, or in my car, while going to class was not even a remote possibility. I am a creature of comfort, for better or worse.

I couldn't find another apartment before I left Iowa. So I drove to Steubenville, figuring I would rent a hotel room until I could find a more permanent place. When I got to campus, the hotels in town were booked with families dropping their kids off at school. Also, it was a "Festival of Praise" weekend at the university, otherwise known as a "FOP." This is a charismatic event featuring witness talks, music, praise, and worship. It was my first FOP, and definitely the most memorable.

During the festival, a priest named Fr. John approached me and asked me if I was okay. I guess I didn't realize I was wearing my anxiety on my face. I told him my situation: that I didn't have a place to stay. He immediately called a friend of his (Fr. Dunfee) and asked if I could stay at the parish convent over in Mingo Junction, a town about five miles from Steubenville. (The sisters who lived in the convent had recently moved out.) Father John and I were soon on the way to my new "home": a massive house with several bedrooms and baths, scented candles, tea sets, floor to ceiling wood paneling, shag carpeting, and pastel colored wallpaper

and doilies everywhere you looked. There was also a little chapel, which later became a space for a young adult group I started with Fr. Dunfee's permission. Thanks to a missionary disciple, I had a place to call home.

GETTING UNCOMFORTABLE CAN MAKE OTHERS COMFORTABLE

Fr. John is a great example of the simplicity of missionary discipleship, and the power of doing small things with great love. Had he not taken notice of me and the anxiety I was showing, I don't know what I would have done about my housing dilemma. Fr. John was there at the right time, and he seized the moment. He took the opportunity to "go out" of his way to meet me—"going out" of his comfort zone to engage a stranger. Seizing the moment to go out to others and offer them the mercy and love of Christ is the foundation of missionary discipleship. It is an action of accompaniment, which is how we encounter and walk with others along their journey of faith, much like the resurrected Jesus, going to Jerusalem, walked out of his way (Emmaus is in the opposite direction of Jerusalem!) in order to accompany the two disciples (Lk 24:13–35). How many countless "spiritually homeless" people would be able to find a home in the Catholic Church if others were willing to go out to them and say, "Are you okay? Is there something I can do for you?"

Missionary work has traditionally been thought of as the work of, you guessed it, missionaries: generous and courageous priests and religious brothers and sisters who, over the centuries, have traversed the globe sharing the good news of Jesus. However, since

the pontificate of St. John Paul II and his call for a new evangelization, and the renewed emphasis and urgency this call has received under Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, the Catholic Church is slowly beginning to realize the full extent of what discipleship means, and the inherent commitment that is incumbent upon all Catholics who choose to be identified as such: namely, disciples are those who go out to share the good news with others.

In addition to evangelizing those who have not yet encountered Christ, the New Evangelization aims at reengaging those whose faith may be flagging and those who have disaffiliated from the Church. Seizing the moment, Pope Francis furnished the Catholic Church with a missionary vision that was built on the foundations of the New Evangelization. In his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* (2013), Francis mandated that the Church become missionary to its core: that its members constitute a community of disciples that goes forth to share the good news of Christ with people on the margins of faith and society. To encapsulate this vision, Francis used the term “missionary disciples”—a term he himself may have coined, as there appears to be no prior reference to it, at least in papal documents.

Although missionary work and discipleship are vocations as old as the Church itself, missionary discipleship is a rather new concept. The missionary disciple, Francis says:

knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy. (*The Joy of the Gospel*, no. 24)

From this, we can see that missionary discipleship finds its origin and fulfillment in the desire to receive and give God's mercy, the fruit of which is joy. We also discover in Francis' words that an unwillingness to forgive ourselves or others is detrimental to discipleship, not to mention our faith. How many have given up on God and/or left the Church out of confusion and hurt that has gone unattended to? I can't even imagine. The point is: a missionary church is driven by its concern for others. Like Christ, it has an insatiable thirst (Jn 19:28) to discover the pain and suffering that people keep hidden so that it can shine the light of God's truth and mercy and begin the healing.

In missionary discipleship, the word "missionary" is used as an adjective describing the kind of discipleship it is. This means a couple of things. First, discipleship can no longer be thought of in general terms. It has been given a focus and a mandate: go out and share Christ with others (Mt 28:19–20)! It also means, in terms of identity, that being "catholic" is not necessarily the same thing as being a disciple.

Since Reformation times, concern over the "branding" of faith (e.g., Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, etc.), unfortunately, has eclipsed the more fundamental identity of the Christian person, which is whether or not he or she is a disciple of Christ. By using the term "missionary discipleship," Pope Francis draws out the missional or evangelistic aspect of discipleship from underneath the Catholic "brand," reminding us of our most fundamental baptismal identity and call: we are disciples of Jesus.

In a sense, the Catholic Church's renewed focus on discipleship (and, now, *missionary* discipleship) has raised the stakes as to what it means to be "Catholic." One can be "Catholic" in a sacramental sense through baptism into the Church. One can be "Catholic" in a doctrinal sense through intellectual and volitional assent to church

teachings. One can be “Catholic” in an ecclesial sense through obedience to Christ and his will as it is revealed and experienced in the life of the Church. But these are not necessarily the same things as being a disciple, much less a missionary disciple. Being a missionary disciple means that our participation in the life of the Church—its sacraments, teachings, and the community of believers—leads us to action, to mission.

But what does “mission” look like? In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis offers the Church a way of evangelizing that he describes as “the art of accompaniment” (no. 169). This is a shift away from the popular programmatic approach to evangelization and church renewal. Accompaniment is not a program. It is a series of actions and attitudes that allow us to companion others in need of Christ’s mercy and love. It is about intentional relationship building that leads toward conversion; and it begins with our desire to be a companion of others. Without this, accompaniment can only be a façade; and people today, especially young people, can spot a phony a mile away.

Accompaniment is interpersonal and organic, moving at the pace of the relationship, according to the other’s needs. There are three distinct phases of accompaniment: encounter, sharing faith experiences, and articulating the faith. I outline these phases, along with the actions and attitudes of accompaniment, in my book *Becoming a Parish of Mercy*. However, I will say, here, that the most important action of accompaniment is the “going out” to others—out of our comfort zones—and engaging people where they are on their journey of faith. And the most important attitude of accompaniment is empathy. Empathy is that divine attitude by which we desire to share in another person’s experience and understanding of life. Much like Jesus emptied himself to become like us in all things except sin (Phil 2:7; Heb 4:15), the companion wishes to

empty himself or herself of presuppositions and prejudices and walk in another person's shoes for a while.

You do not have to be a master at accompaniment to see that someone needs help. You only need to be willing to look. Let us hope we never hear the Lord say to us, like he did to his first disciples, "Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear?" (Mk 8:18).

Reflection Questions

As the Church moves forward in this era of New Evangelization, all the baptized faithful will need to ask themselves one important question:

- Am I satisfied with simply "being Catholic" or does God want me to be a missionary disciple; that is, to share God's mercy and love with others?
- I think we all know the answer to this, but are we ready to say, like the prophet Samuel, "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:10)?