

Mission

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What on earth did those eleven guys think when Jesus said to them, “Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations”? Did they have any idea how vast the world was? The Acts of the Apostles indicates the gospel did spread to parts of Europe, Africa and Asia. Paul took several missionary journeys to aid this purpose. Tradition holds that other Apostles brought the gospel to many other nations, where they were put to death for it - although we have little concrete historical evidence for this. Tradition says that both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome: Peter crucified, Paul beheaded. Andrew is said to have preached in modern-day Russia, Asia Minor, Turkey and Greece, where he was crucified on a X-shaped cross. Thomas brought the gospel to India, and Christians there today firmly trace their ancestry to him. Thomas died when four soldiers ran him through with spears. Philip went to North Africa and Asia Minor, where he is believed to have suffered crucifixion. Matthew perhaps traveled to Persia and Ethiopia, where he was stabbed to death. Bartholomew supposedly brought the gospel to India, Armenia, Ethiopia and Southern Arabia. Tradition holds he was skinned alive. In his depiction of the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo shows Bartholomew holding in one hand the knife that flayed him and in the other, his own loose skin; the face on the skin is a self-portrait of Michelangelo. James the Greater, the Son of Zebedee, was killed by the sword in Jerusalem - that is recorded in Acts 12:2. James the Lesser, the son of Alphæus, went to Syria, and Josephus says he was stoned and then clubbed to death with a fuller’s mallet. Simon the Zealot went to Persia (modern day Iraq) and was sawed in half. Jude was cut down by a sword. Matthias went to Syria with Andrew and was beheaded with an axe. John supposedly died of natural causes in Ephesus, having taken care of the mother of Jesus there, and having earlier survived being boiled in oil in Rome. A church stands on the site of the attempted murder.

Now, whether or not all this is true, Christians did suffer horrendous persecution, and many adherents were martyred. Christianity spread considerably as a result of this witness. The strength of faith was contagious. It impressed nonbelievers, who felt drawn to Christianity because of martyrs. (There were others drawn to Christianity because they saw its members care for the poor and the hungry, St. Pachomius, for example.) I’m still struck by passages from the fourth and fifth centuries about all this. In the Apostolic Tradition, for example, an early Church order that had a strong influence on the post-Vatican II RCIA, catechumens were given this word of consolation: “If a catechumen is arrested for the name of the Lord, he is not to be double-minded concerning the testimony. For if it happens and they act violently against him and kill him during the forgiveness of his sins, he will be justified, for he received baptism in his own blood” (Sahidic, 19:1-2). In other words, if catechumens were arrested for being a Christian, they were told to remain faithful to Christ, and if they suffered a bloody death, their own blood would baptize them without a minister, without words.

From the fifth-century *Testamentum Domini*, we find this: “If anyone, being a catechumen, is apprehended for my name and be judged with tortures, and hastens and presses forward to receive the laver, let the shepherd not hesitate, but let him give [it] to him. But if he suffer violence and be killed, not having received the laver, let him not be anxious. For having been baptized in his own blood, [he is] justified” (2.5). The word “laver” here refers to baptism. In this document, purportedly words of Jesus handed down outside the scriptures, the bishop is told to go ahead and baptize a catechumen who has been arrested and is being tortured; if such catechumens are asking for baptism, they don’t need more catechesis. It also tells catechumens who may be martyred before a water baptism is possible, that the spilling of their blood upon their dying bodies will serve as the equivalent. I used to make light of these quotes. I used to tell people, “Well, at least catechumens don’t have to worry about this any more.” But some of them do. There are places in the world where Christianity is outlawed, and proselytizing is a criminal offense. If you baptize a Christian in some countries, the neophyte will be put to death, and you will be put to death for performing the baptism. Would you do it? You? Would you literally risk your life to baptize a believer? In the early church, people did - in great numbers.

When recruiting new people to join the Church, we usually don’t tell them their lives could be at risk when they travel. It’s hard enough to explain why they undergo exorcisms before baptism, much less the prospect of martyrdom afterwards.

The word “apostle”, which recurs throughout the New Testament, means “one who is sent.” It is a slightly different category from the group known as the Twelve; or, after the suicide of Judas, the group known as “The Eleven.” Certainly, the Twelve were apostles. Matthias was recruited to take the place of Judas. Within the gospels, the names of the Twelve vary in the different lists, making you wonder if the group was more fluid than we like to acknowledge. Outside the gospels, Paul called himself an apostle. Barnabas also carried the title. At the end of the Letter to the Romans, Paul named among the apostles Adronicus and Junia, a man and a woman.

I recently heard a young priest preach at mass on the memorial of St. Mary Magdalene. He was speaking without notes and hadn’t checked his sources. He said that he thought Pope Benedict had called Mary Magdalene the disciple of the disciples. I told him afterward, I’m not sure what Pope Benedict may have said, but the early church called Mary Magdalene the apostle to the apostles. There is a difference. She wasn’t sitting at the feet of the disciples to learn from them; the risen Christ first appeared to her and sent her to bring the good news to the apostles.

All these apostles knew Jesus in one way or another, and they all felt called to share their experience. Christians all have the same aim. You may think that you are a disciple in order to learn more about Christ, but you are also an apostle, sent to tell others about Christ. The reason we are Christians is to carry out this mission.

Back at home in Kansas City, I support a few charities, as I'm sure many of you do. Over the years I've made friends with a number of musicians who play professionally, so I've always included the symphony among the charities I support. The Kansas City Symphony is very good to its donors. They give us snacks and drinks before each concert and during intermission. The orchestra now has a new hall, and the musicians are playing better than ever. The acoustician for the hall was Yasuhisa Toyota, who also worked on the renovation of the Sydney Opera House. Our conductor is Michael Stern, son of violinist Isaac Stern. Right now the classical music you hear in Kansas City is as great an experience as you'll have anywhere on earth. As you can tell, I not only go to the concerts and support the orchestra, I am an apostle for them. I'm constantly telling people, "You have to come hear the symphony. You've never heard music this way before." When I get people over there, they hear this incredibly beautiful music, and I take them to the donor room for snacks. Not anyone can walk into that room. There's a guard checking a list of names. Recently when she saw me coming, even before saying, "Welcome," she asked, "How many people are you bringing this time?" I said, "Do I have a reputation for bringing guests here?" "Yes," she smiled. In general they like it when we invite other people to come experience the music. So if any of you are in Kansas City when there's a concert, please let me know and I'll take you there.

Now, I suspect each of you feels that strongly about something. Some event or some place is so important to you that you want to bring people there to experience it. One way you can tell what's important to you is to examine the kind of places you bring your friends, your children or grandchildren. It may be a favorite store or shoreline, it could be a meeting of organic farmers or people who make ceramics. It could even be church. When we are excited about something, we start talking about it in the first person plural. "Our football team," "our local wines," "our fire department." You may have very little to do with those groups personally, but you feel so attached to them that you they seem a part of you. Even so, that's not enough. You want them to be part of your friends' lives as well.

Here are two extreme ways in which we become apostles for some cause - one positive and one negative. Every marriage ceremony is a public declaration of love. The couple's love is so intense they want it to last forever, and they want the world to know about their commitment. A significant difference between marriage and cohabitation is this desirable imperative to make the commitment public. Cohabiting couples may say they're in love, but it isn't the same kind of love made by a couple who declare it permanently and in public. A marriage ceremony is an expression of the couple's mission. They are apostles of love. They are so committed to their love that they want everyone to know. By inference, they'd like others to share their love as well.

There is also a negative way to be an apostle. Sometimes we evangelize our displeasure, even our hatred. When some people get angry, they don't care who finds out about it, and they will make their anger public. They often aim to recruit more people to their disdain in order to bring more suffering to the one with whom they are angry; they introduce the shame of public embarrassment.

Going public usually ossifies the discomfort of the person who is angry, so it is not always the best way to deal with conflict. But it is a way that some people choose on some occasions, and it demonstrates the movement from belief to expression, a movement classic among apostles. The big difference is that angry people share bad news.

Apostleship is sharing good news. It is the natural fruit of a relationship with Christ. If apostleship is weak, then our relationship with Christ may be weak too. If he is truly the center of our being, we will naturally explain to people why we make the choices we do, and we'll encourage others to join us. Mission is more than bringing people to church; it's bringing them into discipleship.

This mission comes from purpose, not from panic. We're not like an organization hemorrhaging members. Have you ever been part of a group where the agenda item that absorbs every meeting is, "How can we get more people to join?" That question is a sign of death. People panic: "We're getting older. Why don't we have more young members? Let's make a commitment that everyone will bring one new person to our next meeting." Such organizations are dying. Instead of planning how to recruit members, they should probably plan for a funeral.

The Christian life is different. Jesus didn't send people out simply to get more members. He sent the apostles out because the news was good. He wanted the world to know about his coming and the fruits that result from belief. Sharing the good news is its own aim. Whenever you have good news, you want to share it, and you want to share it first. Not everyone will receive it, as we know from Jesus' own parables. But we have to sow the seed. The Holy Spirit will give growth. All we have to do is spread the word. We're not panicking; we feel compelled to share.

The link between mission and the catechumenate can be traced to the Second Vatican Council. In its Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad gentes*, the council made this statement in paragraph 14: "since the life of the Church is an apostolic one, the catechumens also should learn to cooperate wholeheartedly, by the witness of their lives and by the profession of their faith, in the spread of the Gospel and in the building up of the Church." This statement reappears in the RCIA, as the final part of paragraph 75, which describes the four methods of formation to be used. You know these in your sleep by now: A suitable catechesis should be given so that the catechumens understand what they will say they believe. They should follow the Christian way of life, sharing the company of Christians and imitating their observance of the gospel's demands. They participate in liturgical rites while developing a sense of prayer. And they learn to spread the gospel. Now, in honesty, it says "learn" to spread the gospel, not "spread" the gospel. Paragraph 75/4 presumes that catechumens don't quite have everything figured out yet.

It also presumes that we do. So give this some thought first: How does my parish proclaim the gospel to the world? This happens in very basic ways: You have land and a building where you meet. The location is findable. You have a

presence on the internet so that people know where you are - and that you are. But is there something more that you do? Do leaders take a public stand on political issues that affect the common good? Do members volunteer at social service agencies? Does the community support missionary activity in other nations? Have some members left home and homeland to bring the gospel to the world? How can you support their work?

Catechumens are natural evangelizers. Many of them are so excited about their commitment to Christ that they are anxious to share the good news. They tell their family and friends. They inform people at work. They post messages through social media. Some of them change their ring tones and wallpaper. They post biblical citations at the foot of emails. Many of them are happy to do this. The rest of us could probably learn a few things about evangelization from the people we are striving to form.

Missionary work is not something that belongs only to the sacrament of confirmation or the period of mystagogy. It belongs even earlier to the period of the catechumenate. Certainly, after confirmation, Christians are expected to share the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Many parish and diocesan confirmation programs around the world include a requirement that candidates perform service hours before receiving the sacrament. Admirable as this sounds, real service should follow confirmation, not precede it. The sacrament confers gifts of the Holy Spirit intended to benefit the community. As catechumens are called to mission even before baptism, certainly other candidates can be called to mission before confirmation, but that sacrament has as its special feature the gifts of the Holy Spirit that empower Christians to serve the world. They may perform the same kind of service after confirmation that they did before, but afterwards they have better spiritual tools. Married couples do many of the same things they did when they were dating, but after marriage these activities absorb a new quality; they express the commitment the bride and groom have professed and the grace they have received.

Mystagogy, too, is a time of evangelization. Neophytes will continue to learn about the gospel, follow Christian example, worship God in prayer, and spread the message of Christ, but they will perform those activities on the firm foundation of their faith. They have been purified and enlightened, they have renounced Satan and his works, they have been joined to the body of Christ in baptism, fortified with the Spirit in confirmation, and given a foretaste of heaven in the eucharist. They are now better equipped to live the entire Christian life, including its apostolic mission. They may talk about their faith after baptism much the way they did before, but the quality of their message will improve. They can speak not just as an aspirant, but as a member.

During the period of the catechumenate, then, parish leaders may encourage catechumens to evangelize. Each week we could challenge ourselves to come up with some activity through which catechumens may share their faith. Jerry Galipeau's book, *Apprenticed to Christ: Activities for Practicing the Catholic Way of Life*, is an excellent starting point. He suggests activities for each Sunday of the three-year lectionary cycle of readings. But you can do this, too. Take the

readings each week and think about ways to live this gospel, and to invite others to do it as well.

Fifty years ago the Second Vatican Council was convening in Rome; preparations were underway for the third of the council's four sessions, which opened fifty years ago next month. The first fruits of the council had already been made public at the end of the second session, with its opening document, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Its first paragraph not only set the table for the liturgical renewal, but for all the activity of the council. Let me quote for you the first words of that historic statement: "This sacred Council has several aims in view: it desires to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church. The Council therefore sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy."

Notice the movement through these four aims. First the council wants to help the Christian life of the faithful. Second it adapts what it can to the needs of the times. Third, it fosters unity among Christians, and finally it calls all people into the household of the Church. The circles grow ever wider with each of these aims. It starts with the individual Christian, it moves out to all the Catholic Church, it reaches then to other Christians, and finally it embraces the whole world. Those were the aims of the entire council, starting with the liturgy. The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* is one of the most successful achievements of the Second Vatican Council. Church leaders thought it would be especially useful in countries where missionaries wanted a system of preparing for baptism that imitated the initiatory rites of pagan societies. No one predicted how well the RCIA would fit the needs of more advanced societies around the developed world. "Go out to all the nations," Jesus told the first disciples. One way the Second Vatican Council accepted this challenge was with the RCIA, an exponent of the fourth aim of the liturgical renewal but also of the entire council: "to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church."

The RCIA provided a vision of catechesis and liturgy. But it needed something else to happen first: evangelization. Too often Catholics take a passive view of evangelization. We think of evangelizers as those from fundamentalist Christian groups who aggressively - almost coercively - invite people into membership. A lot of Catholics find those techniques confrontational and annoying. However, we should respect the vitality of faith evident in many Christian evangelizers. Something has caught fire within them, and they desire to tell others the good news and to invite them to respond. We can imitate this zeal. Too often the Catholic approach to evangelization is to have someone play video games in the parish office until the phone rings. If the caller asks about joining the church, we say, "Oh, that's nice. Classes start in about three months. See you then."

Far better would be to invite specific individuals to church. Sit down sometime with a group of parishioners to ponder these questions: “Whom should we invite to follow Christ? How should we do it?” When Catholics in the US hear this question, they often start wondering, “Which members of our parish have a non-Catholic spouse? Why don’t we invite them?” OK, but this is low-hanging fruit. A study in the US several years ago revealed that 80% of inquirers who are married have a Catholic spouse - 80% of them. Marriage has become the doorway to evangelization. Of course, it probably works the other way as well. Some members decide to join the church of their non-Catholic spouse. Dating people from other churches or faith traditions is acceptable, but marriage and family life unleash powerful forces of unity; they often pull family members together into the same diet, smart phone plan, dry cleaner, and church. We know this intuitively, so we evangelize inside families.

But something more is needed. We are called to invite everyone to embrace Christ, especially households that are unchurched. I have some questions ready whenever I meet people inside or outside the neighborhood. Of course, when they find out I’m a priest, they expect these questions. I think some are disappointed if I don’t ask them. But every Catholic could have these questions at the ready. The simplest one for me when I meet someone new is to ask at some point in the conversation, “Do you have a church?” I find this a non-confrontational but inviting question to pose. If people do have a church, I respect that and rejoice in meeting someone else for whom faith is an important part of life. If they don’t, I often hear an explanation along with it. “Well, I used to go.” “I grew up Catholic.” “I went to a Catholic school.” “I haven’t been to church in a long time.” “I go at Christmas.” I may hear some version of these, and it lets me offer an invitation. “Well, you’re always welcome at St. Anthony’s.” Or, “Can I have someone call and invite you over?” Or, “Here’s my card. Can I email you some information about our church?” Sometimes they’ll say somewhat abruptly and decisively, “I’m not Catholic,” to which I say, “I can take care of that.” They laugh. It opens a door. I can’t say that I’m getting lots of success, but in a way that’s not totally my job. The Holy Spirit has to step in. But I need to open the door. I feel this is not just a requirement; it’s something of a passion. I want other people to know the joy of life in Christ.

We owe other believers our respect, but we also owe them an invitation. St. Paul expressed a beautiful sentiment in his letter to the Romans. We heard this as the second reading for mass yesterday evening. He speaks with great anguish about his own ethnicity, God’s chosen people, the Israelites, and the treasures within their grasp: “I could pray that I myself might be accursed and cut off from Christ, if this could benefit my brothers [and sisters] who are my own flesh and blood. They are Israelites; it was they who were adopted as children, the glory was theirs and the covenants; to them were given the Law and the worship of God and the promises. To them belong the fathers and out of them, so far as physical descent is concerned, came Christ who is above all, God, blessed for ever. Amen.” Had Paul been writing this today, he might speak about those in his own extended family who had not accepted Christ. God made them and loved

them, and God gave them the same evidence of his presence that everyone else receives. But they did not accept the message. Paul loves them so much that he would accept a cursed future for himself if only they might be saved. How many parents feel the same way about their children? As a church we have the same desire for all who have not yet accepted Christ.

Still, if people do not respond, we must not be discouraged. We simply must tell the good news. We simply must invite. It's not hard if we love Christ. We receive a reminder of this every time we participate at mass. The word "mass" comes from the Latin word *missa*, which means "sent". Mass is not just about getting people to show up; it's about getting people to go forth. The concluding command issued by the deacon or the priest is not a simple report that the activities are over now, but a solemn command to go forth into the next part of the day. We put exit signs over the inside doors of our churches to show people how to get out in case of emergency. But in a church, exit signs pertain to a different kind of emergency: the urgency to proclaim good news. Those signs say "exit", but they mean "entrance". We're not just leaving the building; we're going forth into the world.

We concluded the mass last night without a final song. I loved it. The rubrics of the Roman Rite never mention a concluding hymn. Almost every parish sings one, but it has never been part of the rubrics for the mass. We probably sing it because it adds some balance to the opening hymn. But the liturgy presumes something else. It presumes that the mass comes to an end with the command from the deacon: "Go." He doesn't say, "Go, but first let's hang around and sing another song." No, the command is more immediate. It asks for a response right away. When he says, "Let us offer a sign of peace," no one says, "OK, but let's wait a few minutes." No, we do it immediately. Whenever I ask musicians to eliminate the final song at our parish Sunday mass, I get complaints. People think we forgot something. Or that the musicians didn't practice. It feels odd to have no singing at the end. But the liturgy has in mind that what we hear is the shuffle of feet aiming for the door that leads to mission in the world.

We're supposed to leave together as a sign of our common purpose. We sing hymns together; we make responses together; we observe silence together; we sit together; we kneel together; we stand together. We're also supposed to be dismissed together as the body of Christ, but as you know this does not often happen. Some people like to leave mass early. They have something else to do at home or with the kids, or they just want to beat the crowd so they don't waste time in the car park. I wonder if we should have a special dismissal for them at communion time. We may offer a dismissal of children for their own liturgy of the word and a dismissal of catechumens after the homily. We have a formal dismissal for everyone else at the end of mass, but maybe before the distribution of communion the deacon should say something like this: "Would those of you who have to leave mass early today please step forward?" Then he'd wait until they all line up in front, wearing their coats, car keys and purses in hand. He'd say: "We understand that you have other responsibilities that keep you from

remaining with us to give thanks to God for the communion we receive, to offer a final prayer, to hear the announcements about opportunities for service this week, and to obtain God's blessing through the priest. After you receive communion, we assure you of our prayers that next week tranquility will so return to your lives that you may join us all for the conclusion of the mass and the final dismissal. Now, receive your communion and go in peace without announcing the gospel of the Lord."

Seriously, the final dismissal is the important conclusion of the liturgical service and the beginning of our apostolic service. We have a weighty responsibility, the same one Jesus gave the first disciples: "Go into the world and tell the good news." It's a little scary. We don't know what that commission may cost us - perhaps even our very lives. But we don't have to go alone. We go with one another. The fruits of our labor do not rest on our efforts alone. They rely on the Holy Spirit. In our ministry to catechumens, let us stoke the fire of faith within their hearts, so that after they are baptized and share communion with us, they may feel even more strongly the call to announce the gospel of the Lord to all the nations of the world.