

# I Witness

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## Introduction

By 1954 Mid-Continent Airlines had merged into Braniff Airlines, and the expanded company transferred William Turner, my father, from the office in New Orleans, the city of his birth, to a new office in Kansas City. He had been married for six years, and his fourth child was a newborn. He was driving his blue Plymouth sedan on US Highway 71 from Louisiana to Kansas City, when the third child, just over one year old, started talking. And I haven't stopped since. My parents had children numbers five and six in Kansas City, where all six of us still live. Mom is 94. Dad died in 2002.

Parents grow excited when a kid starts talking because they are curious to know what their child has to say. Children are happy to talk because they can finally communicate what they have seen and heard. We all give witness. When my family arrived in Kansas City my parents bought a house within walking distance of a Catholic church and school. They wanted us to be formed by the gospel and to share it with others. When Braniff moved my father to a new office, I'm sure they wanted him to make a difference in the business world of Kansas City. He ended up making a difference in the local church as well.

Bearing witness often happens when you leave one place and go to another. You have some previous experience that contrasts with a new setting. You have something to say. Whether you are advancing from the world of an infant to the world of a toddler, or from one city to another, or even from church to home, the different settings invite you to speak up about what you have seen and heard and to invite others to see and hear the same.

The theme for the Gulf Coast Faith Formation Conference this year is "Christ-Centered People, Called, Gifted and Sent." The three keynote goals are "To Witness, To Proclaim, [and] to Serve." I've been asked to reflect on the call to witness, to tell others about our faith. I will do this by talking about the parts of the mass we call "dismissals", the times when groups of people leave. I realize you just got here, but my theme is "witness" and it is implied in these dismissals. There are anywhere from one to four dismissals that may take place at a typical Sunday mass. Each of them carries an invitation - not simply to leave, but to do something. When people are transferred inside a company, they usually are not simply leaving one office; they are going forth to a new place where they can bring their expertise and apply it in new ways. The dismissals at mass aim to accomplish the same thing. They invite us to bear witness.

## Dismissal at the end

The dismissal you know the best is the one that comes at the end, so let me begin there. The word "mass" comes from the Latin word embedded in the dismissal, *Ite missa est*. More or less, it means "Go, you are sent." The root word, *mitto*, appears in English words such as "transmit" - to send across, "submit" - to

send in, and “omit” - not to send anywhere. But the Latin word *missa* came to mean the entire celebration of the eucharist, so *Ite missa est* could also be translated, “Go, that’s all there is to the mass.” When the liturgy first went from Latin into the vernacular languages, the group preparing the changes after Vatican II were concerned about the final response of the people. After hearing the words, “The mass is ended,” people were to say, “Thanks be to God.” It would sound as though they were happy that mass was finally over. The missal now includes a selection of four formulas that conclude the eucharist: “Go forth, the Mass is ended,” “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord,” “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life,” and “Go in peace.” You may hear some variation on these, but the four of them all begin with the same word, “Go.” The very word we use for the eucharist, the mass, is a word that does not mean gathering, listening, adoring, or receiving communion. The word “mass” means “sending”. One of the main reasons we come together, hear the word of God and share communion is to go forth and bear witness. We give thanks for that.

Parish announcements come at the end of mass - not before it gets underway, and not to introduce the homily. They come at the end so that people can hear about the opportunities for service in the parish this week. Both the announcements and the dismissal may be given by the deacon. He serves the parish not just by assisting at the altar, preaching, and presiding for baptisms and weddings. He also models charitable service. The deacon knows who needs help and how the community can respond. He sends people forth at the end of the mass to join him in apostolic activity. A good deacon constantly bears witness to the gospel by the charity he gives to others.

After the dismissal on Sundays people usually sing a closing hymn. Believe it or not, the closing hymn does not exist anywhere in the official rubrics for the mass. There’s an opening hymn, a psalm, a song at the preparation of the gifts, music during the eucharistic prayer, a hymn at communion, and other opportunities for song. But nowhere does the official Roman Missal ever promote singing a song at the end. Almost every parish does it because it balances the opening hymn. It ends the mass on a strong note. Even before the Second Vatican Council, there was no closing hymn in the rubrics; people sang one, but there was no official provision for it. The group revising the Order of Mass after Vatican II kept the unkept custom of no hymn at the end. They wanted the last words of the mass to be the command of the deacon, “Go,” and the response of the people, “Thanks be to God.” The people were to hear that command and act on it immediately - with nothing intervening, not even a hymn.

I’ve tried this in my own parish from time to time, but most people think that I’ve forgotten something, that the musicians haven’t practiced, or that the song leader has fallen asleep. They don’t realize they are supposed to take the words of the deacon seriously: Go. Go out there. Don’t sing a song. Go out there and do something. Tell the good news. Don’t hang around here. We’re done. Let’s move.

## The dismissal of children

You may be familiar with another dismissal - the dismissal of children before the liturgy of the word. The Directory for Masses with Children says that children - especially those who are pre-adolescents - may be brought to a separate but not too distant place for their own liturgy of the word. The Vatican's Directory does not explain much more about this, but in the United States our bishops said a little more. They approved a Lectionary for Masses with Children using the 1991 Contemporary English Version of the Bible, a translation that makes the complex bible readings more accessible to children. The introduction to this lectionary specifies that children participate with adults for the introductory rites, but after the collect the priest "may formally send the children and their ministers to the place where they will celebrate their own liturgy of the word" (8). The presider may therefore place the children's lectionary in the hands of a minister and address words either to that minister or to the children. The children have their own liturgy of the word and return for the start of the liturgy of the eucharist when the rest of the assembly begins the preparation of the gifts.

Such children have their own liturgy, not their own catechetical session or playtime. They process to their separate room. They settle down. They listen to the readings and sing the psalm and acclamations. The minister may lead a prayerful reflection on the readings. The children could recite the Apostles' Creed, which was included in the missal partly to accommodate their abilities: The Apostles' Creed is shorter than the Nicene Creed, and it does not include difficult words such as "consubstantial". Children may conclude their time with their own prayer of the faithful. Then they rejoin the rest of the community. The Directory for Masses with Children states that this may all be done "sometimes" if it seems appropriate. Even so, some parishes offer it every week. Others never do.

The dismissal of children after the collect is quite different from the dismissal of the entire assembly at the end of mass. The kids are not going out into the world. They're coming right back. They're basically taking an intermission where they may participate in the Liturgy of the Word with more understanding. "Dismissal" is almost the wrong word. It's more like an "excuse me for a while" than an "I'm outta here."

The real dismissal of the children will happen with the rest of the community at the end of mass. If they have participated in a children's liturgy of the word, they have nourished their souls to bear witness when they finally do leave the building.

So even though the US edition of the children's lectionary calls this action a "dismissal" - it isn't consistent with the meaning of the word elsewhere in the liturgy. After the collect the children are not dismissed to bear witness; they are excused for a while to participate in a liturgy of the word that will form them as better Christians.

## The dismissal of catechumens

The dismissal of catechumens, however, shares more in common with the dismissal that concludes the mass because it also implies that the catechumens are leaving and not coming back today. Among other activities, they are going forth to bear witness. In my experience, not many parishes offer this every week, but it holds the same liturgical weight as the dismissal of the faithful at the end of the mass.

A catechumen is an unbaptized adult or child of catechetical age who is preparing for the three sacraments of initiation. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults makes no assumptions about the spiritual capabilities of those who are coming to our churches inquiring about baptism. In fact, their experience is quite varied. Many adults who have never been baptized actually call themselves Christians. They have grown up in Christian households. They believe in God and that Jesus is the Son of God. They pray. They may even come to midnight mass. They do works of charity because they think it's the right thing to do. They may know the bible better than you do. It's just that, well, they never got around to baptism. Maybe their parents were waiting for the right occasion; maybe they themselves had opportunities but never pursued them. They consider themselves unbaptized Christians. We have adults like this in our communities.

But the RCIA does not presume that everyone is like that. It presumes the opposite. It thinks that people who have never been baptized have had very little experience of prayer, the bible, its stories of Jesus Christ, or anything to do with Catholic parishes from the altar society to the pancake breakfast. They may have grown up in other parts of the world where Christians are few, where the gospel is unknown, or where baptism is illegal and punishable by death. Or they may come from families who experienced those realities. But something has happened. Now living as adults on their own, they have met Christians. They've been impressed. They want to know more. We have these people in our communities too. When they come to us, we have to be careful not to move too quickly. The RCIA says that the period of the precatechumenate is when "faithfully and constantly the living God is proclaimed and Jesus Christ whom he has sent for the salvation of all" (36). The precatechumenate is when we ask questions such as these: "Have you experienced mystery in your life?" "Why have you tried to help your neighbor?" "Where does love come from?" "Do you believe in God?" "What have you heard about Jesus Christ?" And so on. We ask basic questions, and we give basic witness. Before we jump to explanations about Catholic belief in the virginity of Mary or the frequency of confession, we start with the basics: Who is God? Who is Jesus Christ whom God sent for the salvation of all?

Once we have established an agreement that the inquirer wants to follow Christ and that we think the inquirer is ready for this journey, we conduct a liturgical ceremony called the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. The inquirers and their sponsors gather outside the church building if possible, where the priest or deacon greets them together with some of the faithful. The inquirers state their readiness to follow Christ, and the minister signs them with

the cross. The sponsors may then sign different parts of the inquirers' body with the cross. They pass through the threshold of the church, and at this point the rite start referring to these inquirers as "catechumens". They have literally entered the church. They now have a formal canonical relationship with the Catholic Church even though they have not yet been baptized. They are considered members in the broadest definition of the word; they are entitled to a Catholic wedding and to Catholic burial. They have entered the period of the catechumenate.

During this period, the priest or deacon may dismiss catechumens from Sunday mass after the Liturgy of the Word. It is not obligatory, but it may happen. Christians of the first few centuries dismissed catechumens at a time when only the faithful were allowed to participate at the liturgy of the eucharist. Catechists didn't even speak about the eucharist, so nonmembers were kept in the dark. In those centuries, when the presider dismissed catechumens from the eucharist, the group probably went home. Today that feels too inhospitable, so many parishes choose not to dismiss catechumens, while those who do, dismiss them into a catechetical session. The RCIA is silent about dismissing into catechesis, so it's still acceptable to dismiss catechumens after the homily and send them back into the world.

Even though many RCIA teams, priests and Catholic faithful think that dismissals are rude, many catechumens rather like them. They like going into a session where they can talk about the readings and the homily, and learn more about the Church. They also get to leave before the ushers take up the collection.

The catechesis that takes place during the period of the catechumenate has four different forms. These are outlined in paragraph 75, which, for catechumenate geeks, is the John 3:16 of the RCIA. First, a suitable catechesis is provided. Second, catechumens become familiar with the Christian way of life. Third, suitable liturgical rites purify and strengthen them. And fourth, catechumens learn to spread the gospel. Preparation for baptism demands all four methods.

When Catholics talk about the RCIA, many of them think it means the classes people take to join the church. However, the RCIA is a liturgical book. It describes in detail the liturgical rites that mark the stages of preparation for baptism. Yet many people don't think of RCIA as liturgy; they think it is catechesis. That's why you hear some people say, "We don't have RCIA in our parish." Of course they have RCIA in the parish. If their priest has ever baptized an adult, then he has used the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults to do it. He cannot find the words and actions for baptizing anywhere else. The parish may not offer extensive catechetical formation, but that is another matter. Furthermore, when people think about the catechesis you need to become a Catholic, they are probably thinking about catechism, doctrine, and dogma.

Paragraph 75 section 1 does indeed say that a suitable catechesis has to be provided for those in preparation for baptism, and in this sentence it probably does mean catechism, doctrine and dogma. But sections 2, 3 and 4 of the same

paragraph speak about worship, community life and evangelization. What many people think the RCIA is about (instructional catechesis) takes up only one fourth of one paragraph of the entire book. The RCIA does not tell you how to do the catechesis any more than the Rite of Marriage tells you how to do marriage preparation, or the Rite of Baptism for Children tells you how to prepare parents for the baptism of their infants. These are liturgical books. They are describing liturgy. Catechesis develops differently.

Section two of paragraph 75 says catechumens should become familiar with the Christian way of life. They should therefore meet other Christians. They should learn what is important to Christians, how they live their lives and what morals they observe. They should participate in social activities and respect our teachings on human sexuality. Section three speaks about the liturgical rites that accompany their formation. The catechumens are learning about the Church, and the Church is praying for them. Incidentally, there are some fancy Greek words you can use to impress your friends. Section one speaks of *Κατήχηση*. Section two of *Κοινωνία*, and section three of *Λειτουργία*.

It's section four of paragraph 75 that has more to do with the theme of this address: *Διακονία*. Catechumens learn to spread the gospel; they give service to the community. One of the four methods of catechesis is training for evangelization. This surprises many people. If you were asked, "Which sacrament of the Church is about spreading the gospel?" you might very well answer "Confirmation". You'd be right. Those being confirmed are receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but these gifts are given to them with a specific purpose: to bear witness to the gospel. Yet here we are in the period of the catechumenate - long before baptism has taken place. Already the catechumens are being asked to learn how to evangelize.

Many of them do this naturally. Many catechumens are so on fire with their faith that they can hardly wait to tell you about it. They'll tell other people about it too. Their coworkers will be inspired to learn what is going on in their lives. Family members will remark how different the catechumens seem now that they are in formation. Something is happening within them, and their closest circle of friends notice. That is proof that they are learning to spread the gospel.

So, when there is a dismissal of catechumens from the Sunday mass, this is what it implies. They aren't just going off to a catechetical session the way that children do for a children's liturgy of the word. They are going out into the world to start doing what the faithful do: Bearing witness to Christ.

Why don't they stay for the end of mass and just get dismissed with everyone else? They may, and most do. The RCIA allows this. But it also envisions that the ancient practice of the dismissal should still take place. It's not because the second half of the mass is a secret; that was true in the first Christian centuries, but it is totally untrue today. Anyone can walk into any Catholic church and experience the mass. Anyone can watch a television broadcast of the pope celebrating the eucharist. You can see videos online or on



instructional DVDs. What happens in the liturgy of the eucharist is no secret any more.

However, by their nature the Christian faithful have capabilities that catechumens lack. Christians remain in the pews while catechumens are dismissed. It's not just that catechumens cannot receive communion. They cannot authentically take part in most of what transpires after the homily. The prayer of the faithful is just that - petitions offered by those who have been baptized. They belong to the priestly people of God, and they exercise their common priesthood in these prayers. During the preparation of the gifts and the eucharistic prayer, the faithful offer themselves to God together with Jesus Christ, and they receive the fruit of this offering in communion. The Lord's Prayer belongs to those who have been adopted as children of God through their baptism; baptism gives us the right to call God "Our Father." The sign of peace signifies Christian love shared among the members of the body of Christ. It's not so much a time to make peace, but to affirm the peace that Christians do share in their community. The entire second half of the mass lays out certain expectations for full, conscious, active participation. But you have to be baptized to participate fully in the liturgy of the eucharist - not just in holy communion. Catechumens can stay if they wish, but only the faithful have the tools to participate fully.

The pivotal moment between the dismissal of catechumens and the rest of the mass is the proclamation of the Creed. Once the catechumens leave, the first thing the faithful do is to profess their common faith. Two of the last ceremonies that precede the baptism of adults are the presentation and the recitation of the creed. Many parishes skip these, but they are integral to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Just a few weeks before they are baptized, having studied an overview of the Christian way of life, the elect receive the Creed from the faithful, who profess it publicly in the presence of the elect. When a group of the baptized profess their faith in this ceremony, they present the creed to a new generation of believers. (In some parish communities, the elect receive a printed copy of the creed suitable for framing, but that is not the tradition. The creed is not presented on parchment. It travels from the lips of believers onto the ears of the elect.) Then on Holy Saturday, the day of their baptism, the elect gather in the church to recite the creed back to the faithful. Having meditated on it for several weeks, learned about it, talked it over with their godparents, they are ready to show that they own it. Ideally, they should recite it from memory. Saint Augustine required this of his catechumens in the fifth century. Can you imagine? Imagine having to learn the entire creed by heart and then to recite it from memory in public at the cathedral in the presence of the bishop. Then imagine that your bishop is Saint Augustine. In case you're wondering, if some catechumens stumbled on the words, he was merciful enough to give them a second chance. But not a third.

We should know the Creed from memory too, but we don't. At least I don't. I used to, but the words changed a few years ago, I've grown older, and it's hard to recite it all without reading it. I do some work for the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, but I still find the revised translation hard to memorize. If I'm struggling, I think a lot of people in my parish are struggling too. Yet I see very

few of them hold a copy of the creed in their hands so that they can say the right words. And the right words are important. This is the creed that holds us together. It has bound believers ever since the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in the fourth and fifth centuries.

The revised translation of the creed raised quite a few issues, and I'm going to address a few of these because there is no more important witness we bear than the creed every Sunday. One of the arguments I frequently hear for raising the age of confirmation ever higher is to give young people an opportunity to profess their faith on their own. I say, "They have that opportunity already every time they come to mass on Sunday." At this, people roll their eyes as if to say that the creed on Sunday doesn't mean anything. No one takes it seriously. It's just an especially boring minute and a half in a 60-minute liturgy. Well, excuse me, but the creed is serious. People have died for it, and we should mean what we say. Every Sunday we should gear up for this, so that it becomes the first public witness of our faith each week. The translation changed in many key places, but the basic creed is the same one that our church has professed for nearly 1700 years, and through which we share a communion of faith with many other Christians as well.

Now, regarding the translation: "We believe" changed to "I believe." Many people preferred the plural because it showed the community of believers articulating their faith together. The bishops attending the council of Nicaea wrote the original creed in the plural, "we believe," because it expressed the faith that those bishops held together in contrast to heretics. When the creed came into the liturgy several hundred years later, people recited it together in the singular because it gave each individual an opportunity to profess his or her own faith. We have always renewed baptismal promises in just the same way. When asked, "Do you believe in God the Father almighty?" everyone answers, "I do," not "We do."

We used to say that God created things "seen and unseen," but now we say God created things "visible and invisible." There is a difference. From where you are sitting right now, the Gulf of Mexico is unseen, but it's not invisible. Your very best friend may be unseen right now, but if your best friend is invisible then we probably need to have a talk with you. The point is that God created realities that no eye can see.

We used to say that Christ is "one in being" with the Father, and now we say that he is "consubstantial" with the Father. We say that, that is, if we can pronounce "consubstantial." That word remains very difficult for many believers. I support this change, even though it is a hard word to say and understand, because the Council of Nicaea also struggled to come up with the right word. The participants wanted to express the relationship between the Son and the Father, and they could not find a word in the bible, so they made one up. It's a very precise word that affirms our belief that Jesus is divine: he shares the same substance as the Father - the substance of divinity. Both of them are the same God. We also believe that the Holy Spirit is consubstantial with the Father, and we believe that Jesus is consubstantial with his mother Mary. He shares human substance as much as he shares divine substance. It is a difficult word, but it's a



word worth keeping because any other expression we come up with, including “one in being,” is something the Council of Nicaea would have rejected.

The words “For us men” did not change. Many people were hoping they would. After all, Jesus came not just for the salvation of men, but for the salvation of women and children as well. ICEL and the English-speaking conferences of bishops tried to get this changed to “For us” - eliminating the word “men” - but the Vatican did not approve it. The reason seems to be the word at the end of the same sentence, where we profess our belief that God “became man.” Most people do not object to the word “man” there because Jesus was a historical male. However, the words for “men” and “man” in this sentence are the singular and the plural of the same word in the original Greek and Latin of the creed. Both are inclusive words, not gender-specific words. The Nicene Creed does not profess a belief that Jesus became male; it professes a belief that he became human, and that he came to redeem all humans. If you drop the first word, “men”, and leave the second word, “man”, you haven’t eliminated the problem. The Creed professes that Jesus became one of what he came to save; there is no salvation for any of us unless he became one of us. In my opinion, the words “men” and “man” do not express this very well in English, and the Vatican should have worked harder toward some other solution. For example, “For us humans” he “became human”. I think people would have made the connection a lot better. But this is what we have.

We used to say “he was born of the Virgin Mary” but now we say “he was incarnate of the Virgin Mary.” This is a pretty important difference. We used to say that Jesus was born and [then] became human, but of course he took on humanity with the incarnation, nine months before his birth. The distinction is important especially in an age when we struggle to convince people that a child in the womb is fully human. During these words about the incarnation, we are supposed to bow. Almost no one does. But we should. In the mass prior to Vatican II, we genuflected at these words during the creed. That practice continues today only on the Solemnity of the Annunciation, March 25, and on Christmas, December 25. Almost no one does. Think back this past Christmas, did you kneel down during these words of the creed? Did the priest? Was he able to get back up again? On Sundays throughout the year, the post-Vatican II mass simplified the gesture from a weekly genuflection to a low bow in the direction of the altar. I have to turn slightly to do this. I usually face the congregation for the creed, but I turn to the altar for these words about the incarnation and make a bow - not a head bow like the one you may do when saying the name “Jesus,” but a bow from the waist, a low bow to show belief in Christ, the Son of God, who lowered himself to become one like us. If we don’t bow, we are missing an opportunity to put a little more meaning into the words we say each Sunday.

Two pronouns that used to refer to the Holy Spirit as “he” have been replaced with the pronoun “who” - which lines up better with the Latin and coincidentally is now gender-neutral.

The word “acknowledge” was changed to “confess” but I think “profess” would have been more readily understood. As it is some people might mistakenly

think we're saying that baptism is a sin. "I look forward to the resurrection" is clearly better than "We look for the resurrection" as if it's something that we've misplaced, and we know it's around here somewhere.

The Creed divides into three main divisions following our belief in the Trinity, though the section most developed is the one that pertains to Christ. We believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is the reason we call ourselves Christians. If we are to bear witness to Christ, we better have a clear idea of who he is.

The Creed is so important that catechumens may be dismissed before we recite it. In the moments before their baptism, they will be asked to make their baptismal promises through questions based on this creed. Before that time they have not yet professed their faith as part of their decision to follow Christ. Those of us baptized as infants had others profess on our behalf, others who raised us in the practice of the faith. They bore witness by sharing faith with us. Now we bear witness every time we recite the creed on Sundays. Catechumens are not expected to do the same. They have not yet expressed this faith. They may be dismissed.

## **The dismissal after communion**

I said at the beginning of this talk that there are up to four different dismissals at any given mass. I say that tongue in cheek. There may be a dismissal of children after the collect. There may be a dismissal of catechumens after the homily. There is a dismissal of the assembly at the end of mass. But another dismissal happens even though it appears nowhere in the rubrics. Many people leave mass early. They dismiss themselves right after they receive communion. No one has given them permission to go. No one has sent them forth. Instead, they simply leave the building. It's hard to know for sure what this is about. At the very basic level, it shows that these individuals got what they came for and see no reason to stay any longer. They have come to receive communion, not to sing a communion hymn in praise of God, not to accompany other members of the community as they receive communion, not to spend time in silence giving thanks to God, not to listen to the prayer after communion to put into words the faith and hope they feel, not to hear the announcements of ways that they can meet with others this week, and not to be sent forth into the world to bear witness to Christ together with everyone else. No, they got their communion; they got what they came for. So they leave.

We're supposed to leave together as a sign of our common purpose. Throughout the mass 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. It doesn't work. We can't force people to stay. So I wonder if we should add a special dismissal at communion time. Maybe before the distribution of communion the deacon, standing behind the altar, should announce 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, coats on their shoulders, car keys and purses in

hand. The deacon would then continue: “We understand that you have other duties that keep you from remaining with us to sing praise, to give thanks to God for the communion we receive, to offer a final prayer, to hear announcements about opportunities for service, and to obtain God’s blessing through the words of 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 without peace.”

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. With God’s help we bear witness to the world.

## **What you have seen and heard**

The final dismissal sends us out to proclaim what we have seen and heard. The New Testament explores this theme. John opens his first letter writing, “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life... [W]hat we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you so that you too may have fellowship with us” (1 John 1:1, 3). In Acts of the Apostles, after Peter gave a speech early in his career, he and John were both put into prison. They used their trial as an opportunity to bear witness to the gospel again. The leaders, elders, scribes and high priests heard all this, feared the crowd, and decided to release Peter and John on this condition: “Do not speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” Peter and John said, “It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). When Jesus stood before Annas, the high priest “questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his doctrine. Jesus answered him, ‘I have spoken publicly to the world. I have always taught in a synagogue or in the temple area where all the Jews gather, and in secret I have said nothing. Why ask me? Ask those who heard me what I said to them. They know what I said’” (John 18:19-21). I can never hear those words without imagining that Jesus is referring to me. His words are public before all the world. He does not have to answer any more questions. He relies on witnesses to answer for him. So that’s what I do. I witness.

I witness as an eye witness to the person of Jesus Christ. I have seen him in the community of believers. I have heard him in the cry of the poor. I have seen him heal the sick. I have heard him proclaim peace.

When we say the words “I believe” in the creed each Sunday, we aren’t simply saying “I believe that God exists.” The word “believe” means something even more than that. It means “I trust in God. I center my life on God. I organize my decisions and my day around the statements you are about to hear.” I believe in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I also believe in creation and communion. I

**believe in forgiveness. I believe in the communion of saints. It's not just that I believe that those things exist, but that they order my days and decisions.**

**Whoever you are, catechist, liturgist, musician or chauffeur, if you are in church, you are there because you seek a way to blend your worship with your belief, your witness with your sending forth. You have just arrived at this conference, but soon you will be dismissed. You won't merely be leaving the Pontchartrain Center. You'll be going into the world. Open your eyes and ears these next few days. See Jesus Christ. Hear his word. Then go forth. Bear witness. Tell good news to the world.**