

The Parish: A Community of Missionary Disciples

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Pope Francis, in his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, proposes a profound missionary renewal of the entire Church; his vision is eminently applicable to parishes. He asserts that we need an “evangelizing Church that comes out of herself,” not a Church or parish that is “self-referential” and “lives within herself, of herself, for herself.” “I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.... All renewal in the Church [and every parish] must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion” (EG 27).

The Pope continues: “Missionary outreach is *paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity*.... We need to move ‘from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry’” (15). “I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here has programmatic significance and important consequences.... Throughout the world, let us be ‘permanently in a state of mission’” (25).

Pope Francis’ convictions come from his deep personal relationship with Christ. He writes: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ.... I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (3). A Christian “drinks of the wellspring of his [Jesus’] brimming heart” (5). Indeed, in “this encounter—or renewed encounter—with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption.... Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization” (8).

A pivotal insight of Pope Francis is that “we are all missionary disciples” (119); through baptism, “all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples” (120). All Christians are “agents of evangelization.” “The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized.... Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’” (120).

For Pope Francis, salvation history is a “great stream of joy” (5) which we must also enter. Let the joy of faith be revived, because God’s mercies never end (cf. 6). Unfortunately, “there are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter” (6). “An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral” (10). We must *not* become “querulous and disillusioned pessimists, ‘sourpusses’” (85). “We feel that we must disagree with those prophets of doom” (cf. Saint John XXIII). “May the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ (10; cf. EN 75).

Numerous additional insights for the missionary renewal of the Church—and all parishes—can be found in *Evangelii Gaudium*. We listen to the voice of Pope Francis: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (8). For Pope Francis, every Christian “ought to grow in awareness that he himself is



continually in need of being evangelized” (164). Francis focuses extensively (50-109) on the challenges facing the proclamation of the Gospel today; the pope asserts: “Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor” (109).

THE PARISH AS COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Pope Francis’ challenging mission vision has ramifications for the local Church of the Philippines. Currently, the Philippine Bishops (CBCP) continue to implement a nine-year plan for the renewal of the local Church as it prepares for the fifth centenary of Christianity in the Islands (1521-2021). In a lengthy pastoral letter on the New Evangelization issued in 2012 the CBCP once again promoted missionary evangelization as the fundamental commitment of the local Church; the scope of the CBCP document is impressive; it is a clear road map for the coming years. Concretely, the CBCP has organized this nine-year faith-journey around nine key themes—one central theme for each year. And, the focused theme for 2017 is: *The Parish as a Communion of Communities*. Thus, this presentation seeks to answer a basic question: How can our parishes embody and concretize Pope Francis’s call for the missionary renewal of the entire Church?

To anchor the discussion, a simple workable description of the parish may prove helpful. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) describes a parish in this way: “A parish is a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular [local] Church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop. It is the place where all the faithful can be gathered together for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. The parish initiates the Christian people into the ordinary expression of the liturgical life: it gathers them together in this celebration; it teaches Christ’s saving doctrine; it practices the charity of the Lord in good works and brotherly love” (CCC 2179).

The *Catechism* further elaborates the mission of the Church and the parish: it “must go out” to meet people and answer their needs. “Because she believes in God’s universal plan of salvation, the Church must be missionary” (CCC 851). The Church and all parishes are to unfold “the mission of Christ, who was sent to evangelize the poor; so the Church, urged on by the Spirit of Christ, must walk the road Christ himself walked, a way of poverty and obedience, of service and self-sacrifice even to death” (852). “By her very mission, the Church ... travels the same journey as all humanity and shares the same earthly lot with the world; she is to be a leaven ... in human society” (854). “The missionary

task implies a respectful dialogue with those who do not yet accept the Gospel” (856). To be a missionary Church, to be missionary disciples, and to be missionary parishes responds to the challenges Pope Francis sets before us, particularly here in the local Church in the Philippines!

One may logically ask: How does a parish transform itself into being an agent of evangelization. In the considered opinion of this writer, one needs to reflect upon two poles of effective evangelization: (1) a *comprehensive vision of missionary evangelization*, and (2) a *wide variety of concrete initiatives* that engage parish members in missionary activities. Both the comprehensive *vision* as well as many concrete *initiatives* will contribute to the missionary transformation of the parishes, as well as all various groups, ministries, sectors, and organizations that comprise a vibrant parish. This presentation now turns to elucidating a vision of evangelization appropriate to the parish.

COMPREHENSIVE VISION OF MISSIONARY EVANGELIZATION

Evangelization, for many Catholics, may be a relatively new term. The Second Vatican Council as well as recent popes [Paul VI, John Paul II, and Francis] have placed evangelization at the center of the Church’s identity and mission. Vatican II (*Ad Gentes* 2) asserts: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature.” This identity “flows from the ‘fount-like love’ or charity of God.” Today the Church sees that the “principal elements” of mission and evangelization are: •• presence and witness; •• commitment to social development and human liberation; •• interreligious dialogue; •• proclamation and catechesis; and •• liturgical life, prayer and contemplation. In a word, the one evangelizing mission of the Church is comprised of several component elements and authentic forms; the five categories mentioned here are broad and encompass a wide variety of possible activities. This integral or holistic vision has served the Church well in past decades; it is a Catholic vision of evangelization, a vision to guide parish life.

The most frequently quoted document in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) by Pope Francis is Blessed Pope Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN); for further clarity, specific citations from both EN and EG will be presented for each of the five “principle elements”

or areas of evangelization. Blessed Paul VI gives a succinct description of evangelization; he sees that “evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity” (EN 18). Thus, **Christian presence and witness of life** form the “initial act of evangelization” (EN 21). Daily activities, living together in harmony, lives as individuals of integrity, duties in the community—all these are to be a basic “faith-witness” that demonstrates how Christian living is shaped by Christian faith and values. Through this wordless witness, “Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live” (EN 21). People desire and respect authentic witnesses (cf. EN 41; EG 14, 20, 119-121, 149-151). Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta, canonized on September 4, 2016, known for her loving and selfless care of the poorest of the poor, is an “icon” of Christian presence, life, and service. The witness of life by ordinary parish members is a concrete, practical means of effective evangelization; thus, the Gospel is taken to the highways and byways of daily human activity.

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Community living as good neighbors based on faith convictions should naturally issue in a **commitment to social development and human liberation**, a genuine service of humanity. This means serving the most unfortunate, witnessing to justice, defending the integrity of creation; this dimension of evangelization includes all areas of social concern, ranging from peace-building, education and health services, to promoting family life and good government. Concrete social problems (e.g. street children, proliferation of drug use, petty crimes, etc.) can be addressed by members and groups in the parish. Small, personal, and group initiatives are often effective means of announcing to the disadvantaged God’s mercy and compassion (the theme of Pope Francis’ 2015 visit to the Philippines). Areas of human development or human promotion are vast areas of the Church’s evangelizing mission (cf. EN 18-19, 29-33; EG 50-109, 181-185, 197-216).

All evangelizing activities are inserted into specific contexts; particularly in Asia, these activities naturally assume an interreligious dimension. Thus, the Church in Asia, similar to most places in the world of today, accomplishes her mission in pluralistic and diverse cultures; she enters into **interreligious dialogue**, cooperating with the followers of the great religious traditions (e.g. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.) as well as local indigenous faith traditions and practices. Interreligious dialogue takes many forms; there are the dialogues of daily life, deeds of service, religious experts, and faith experience, as well as other forms. Saint John Paul II has asserted: “Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church’s evangelizing mission” (RM 55). This dialogue emerges from one’s faith convictions. In contemporary circumstances, dialogue with religions and cultures is the truly appropriate Christian response (cf. EN 20, 53; EG 115-118, 238-243, 250-254). This is one area of engagement that receives relatively little emphasis in many parishes, though it is seen as integral to the proclamation of the Gospel in the contemporary world.

In mission today there is the role of **explicit Gospel proclamation and catechesis**. This dimension of evangelization includes preaching, catechesis on Christian life, teaching the content of the faith; in a word, this means “telling the Jesus story.” When the Holy Spirit opens the door and when the time is opportune, Christians do tell the Jesus story, giving explicit witness and testimony to the faith. Others are invited, in freedom of conscience, to follow, to know Jesus. Through proclamation Christians themselves are further instructed in their faith; this is the process through which the Christian faith is communicated to the next generation of believers (cf. EN 22, 27, 42; EG 3, 12, 24, 110-111, 246). Many parishes have a variety of religious education programs for students, youth, young adults, young families, as well as middle-aged Christians. Parishes can further explore those groups of people who are *not* being reached by their current parish programs.

Finally, integral evangelization and liberation will necessarily include **liturgical life, prayer and contemplation**. No one can effectively be engaged in the Church’s mission without a strong faith and prayer-life.

Evangelization needs holy men and women who are themselves on fire with the love of Christ; spreading the fire of the Gospel will be accomplished only by those already burning with an experience of Christ. Holiness is an irreplaceable condition for evangelizers. The “God-experience” achieved in prayer and contemplation, in sacramental and liturgical life, will illumine and transform all other dimensions of evangelization (cf. EN 23, 43-44, 47; EG 47, 173, 259-288). One is pleased to see that many Catholics are involved in various liturgical roles; this is fine because people come to treasure the Eucharist. Hopefully, in our parishes the Eucharist will also propel people into various forms of mission and public ministry mentioned earlier in this presentation.

Obviously, these five dimensions of an integral understanding of evangelization complement and reinforce each other. In speaking of the complexity of the Church’s evangelizing action, Paul VI gave a timely admonition: “Any partial and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even of distorting it.” The pope continued: “It is impossible to grasp the concept of evangelization unless one tries to keep in view all its essential elements” (EN 17). The evangelizing parish sets its ministry horizons broad and wide, serving both the *ad intra* (internal) as well as the *ad extra* (external, public) needs of people.

Parish leaders need to appreciate that an older, narrower concept of the Church’s mission has been





set aside. No longer are the elements of social justice, interfaith dialogue, peace-building, education and health care, life-witness, etc. simply “preparatory” to evangelization [*praeparatio evangelica*]; all five “principal elements” are constitutive of an integral understanding. Certainly this would be the vision of Pope Francis who constantly invites Catholics to expand their horizons of evangelization, moving to serve those on the “peripheries” and “margins.” In all this, a more restrictive view, which held that only explicit Gospel proclamation and sacramental life constituted mission, has been superseded.

Concomitant with this expanded vision of evangelization, one finds a renewed emphasis on the missionary nature of the *entire* Church (cf. EN 14, 59; EG 14, 20, 119-121). Every baptized member of the Church is an evangelizer, whether layperson, ordained, or religious. Previously, when evangelization was linked more exclusively with explicit Gospel proclamation and sacramental life, laity often found it difficult to appreciate how they were to be evangelizers. Today, Catholic evangelization engages the entire Church (from top to bottom, including all local churches and all segments of the parish), all states of life (lay, religious, ordained, married, single), all apostolic activities and forms of witness (the five principal elements). Yes, the totality of Christian missionary evangelization embraces all these aspects.

Recall that in this section, the author attempts to present a panoramic overview of a ***Catholic vision of evangelization***—one that is fitted to parish life. In

addition to grasping the vision, Catholic Christians must step back, reflect, and radically affirm that: *All mission and evangelization is God’s project. The Holy Spirit is always the principal agent of evangelization.* For evangelizers, missionaries, pastors, catechists, religious and lay alike, mission necessarily means trying to find out what God wills and what He is doing. Then, the authentic evangelizer bends his/her will to God’s will, joyfully surrenders to God’s loving plan, and expends all efforts and energy to become a worthy instrument that enables God’s design to unfold. Evangelization, at heart and center, is an issue of faith (cf. RM 11). For Christians in every parish, to live is to evangelize, to truly become “missionary disciples” (EG 120)!

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FOSTERING CONCRETE INITIATIVES IN PARISHES

In this final section, the author simply presents a variety of concrete initiatives that could be implemented in a parish to foster its growth as a “missionary parish.” These suggestions are “practical applications” that flow from the five “principle elements” of the vision of “integral evangelization.” The suggestions are randomly presented; no hierarchy or priority is implied. Various segments of the parish may choose to focus their attention on specific items found in this diverse list, renewing their commitment to undertake some concrete initiatives.

- Develop effective and attractive programs of life-long and continuing “faith-formation” in the parish. Deeper conversion to Christ and discipleship is an ongoing process. Missionary awareness will emerge through a closer knowledge and friendship with Jesus.
- Invest in resources and materials to foster a deeper understanding of the evangelizing mission of the Church; this also means that disciples (e.g. lay leaders, catechists, dedicated youth) will need to be trained to evangelize effectively.

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- Promote a “culture of vocations.” It is often said that “Vocations are everybody’s business.” Through homilies and ministry formation, parishioners must be encouraged to view themselves as “missionary disciples,” called by God to the various vocations of holy marriage, priesthood, or religious life.
- Foster a reverent and active sacramental life in the parish. The Eucharist and the sacraments are primary sources of grace for people; here ordinary people encounter Jesus and his transforming love—the very source of mission. Eucharistic Adoration and Reconciliation, made available at accessible times, will enrich the growth of parish disciples as evangelizers.
- Encourage a wide variety of apostolic and charitable activities and organizations, so that parishioners have many options available to live out their life of discipleship in the service of the needy. Ask parish members to commit to engage in some form of social outreach on a regular basis (weekly, or at least, monthly).
- Invite parish members to explore the wisdom of the social teachings of the Church; this will help them appreciate how the Church is to be a missionary presence in the contemporary world—with all its challenges and deep problems. Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium* is truly a gem for renewing the missionary thrust of individuals and parish groups!
- Consider forming “discipleship circles” where people can come to know and love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. These may be Bible study groups, charismatic prayer gatherings, teams to visit the sick, elderly, and homebound, etc.
- Actively encourage the growth of the “basic ecclesial communities” movement within the parish; the BECs are a powerful tool to personally engage people and to foster the missionary growth of the wider parish.
- Seek to get the laity involved in all kinds of leadership roles and services (e.g. parish council members, catechists, lay leaders, youth evangelizers, etc.). Numerous creative options are possible!
- Make a simple “social survey” of the most pressing needs of various groups within the parish; do not limit it to only to Christians. In light of the findings, initiate “reach-out” groups or committees to address the most pressing social needs in various parish neighborhoods.
- Search for practical means to foster friendly and neighborly relationships with the followers of various faith communities in the parish (both Christian and non-Christian). Such interfaith partnerships can be employed to serve the poor and needy.
- Actively seek to make the parish a “joyful, welcoming, and friendly community.” Pope Francis continually insists that if people do not hear the Gospel today from joyful evangelizers [this includes the parish staff], they will not hear the message at all. Joy attracts; joy evangelizes!

These twelve suggestions are only initial ideas and possibilities from the present author. Each parish community can add those activities and initiatives which will transform it into a “missionary parish,” an “evangelizing community.” As the local Church in the Philippines focuses on the theme of the “parish” for 2017, may it experience a resurgence of evangelistic fervor as desired by Pope Francis. We pray for an “ongoing Pentecost” in the parishes of the Philippines!

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