

Sharing Easter Joy: Renewing Our Mission to Bring Glad Tidings and to Liberate Captives

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In Jeremiah 18, the Lord instructs the prophet to go to the potter's house, where Jeremiah observes the potter making whatever vessel he pleased. As Jeremiah watched, the Lord said to him, "Can I not do to you, house of Israel, as this potter has done?—oracle of the LORD. Indeed, like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, house of Israel" (18:6).

This image of the Lord as the potter and his people as clay best reflects my thoughts on formation. Lay formation and leadership development are important to the missionary work of the Body of Christ. The Easter season is an ideal time to awaken the call Christians have received in baptism to be formed as missionary disciples.

CONNECTING OUR MISSION WITH THE SACRAMENTS

Parishes rightly prioritize the initiation sacraments since the sacraments unite us with God and the Body of Christ while bestowing God's grace. Still, I wonder to what degree preparation for the sacraments is integrated with the mission of the sacraments. Our focus cannot be solely on Matthew 28:19: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit."

That commission is just one way of living out the mission Jesus gave us. At the Easter Vigil, parishes welcome people into the Church through the initiation sacraments; and during Easter Time, first Communions and confirmation liturgies are celebrated. The Easter season, however, is more than an entry point to the sacraments. As Christians rejoice in the resurrection for fifty days, this can be a time of reflection on the life to which our baptism calls us. For perspective on our mission, let us consider Jesus' mission statement in Luke 4:18–19: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / because he has anointed me / to bring glad tidings to the poor. / He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives / and recovery of sight to the blind, / to let the oppressed go free, / and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." In this proclamation of liberation, Jesus states that he is the anointed of God, relying on the Spirit of God as the source of inspiration and action.

Defining mission and action is imperative to understanding the life of God. Stephen Bevans, svd, in his work *The Mission Has a Church*, states: "God is Mission. Not that God has a



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Mission, but that God is Mission. This is what God is in God's deepest self: self-diffusive love, freely creating, redeeming, healing, challenging that creation."¹

Imagine that God is mission by nature, and that receiving the sacraments allows us to participate in God's life more deeply. Now we need to ask ourselves what we are awaiting to begin proclaiming the importance of this connection of bringing glad tidings to the poor, liberation to captives, and healing to those in need. Sacramental preparation is not about fulfilling requirements but accepting the mission of Christ.

John 17:17–19 offers a complementary perspective on mission: "(Father) consecrate them (the disciples) in the truth. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them so that they also may be consecrated in truth." In the post-resurrection experience, the Gospel narratives and the Acts of the Apostles manifest the early Church's realization that Christ's mission was their mission. Bevans explains, "The Church does not have a mission—the mission has a Church! The Church (People of God) has as its primary function fostering the values of God's reign in our time and place in history."² This statement helps us contemplate formation as training and developing skills for ministry in parish settings. We could consider formation to be engaging in every opportunity to respond to Christ's mission in daily life.



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Parishes will thrive when members are fully committed to the mission and understand their baptismal call.

The passages from both Luke and John emphasize *consecration, anointing, and sending forth*. If we can begin to imagine our parishes as fully committed to the mission, with members fully understanding their baptismal call, our parishes would be vital, thriving communities that “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” (*The Roman Missal, Order of Mass, 144*). The mission of God reaches outside the parish. The mission is participation in the life of Christ. The sacraments are integral to this mission, as they invite us to enter more fully into God’s life.

To connect formation, mission, and the sacraments, especially during the Easter season, parishes could

- include parents in religious education formation, reflecting together on the many opportunities to engage in mission,
- renew baptismal preparation sessions for parents with passages from the Gospels of Luke and John complementing the faith commitment of the parents and godparents,
- facilitate mystagogical reflection with confirmation candidates and their sponsors after service projects, or
- revisit marriage preparation, creating opportunities to see the sacrament as one of service to each other and the community.

MISSIONARY DISCIPLES AND THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

If parishes communicate that the baptismal call is embedded in the mission of Jesus, parishioners will develop their identity as missionary disciples. Bringing people to the sacraments is just the beginning of the pastoral minister’s work. Accompaniment is necessary for people to continue to grow in their faith. The disciple always remains at the feet of the master while at the same time being sent forth. Therefore, as a community of believers, we find ourselves on the path of facilitating opportunities to form other disciples on the way.

Pope Francis has put much emphasis on “becoming missionary disciples.” In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Francis constantly

emphasizes this call with eagerness and determination. He states: “All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients” (120). The pope insists that the missionary work of the Church not be left to a few. In virtue of our baptism, we are also called to accompany others.

Accounts of prominent figures in the history of salvation illustrate the importance of accompaniment. David needed the prophet Nathan, Mary needed Joseph, Paul needed Ananias, and the twelve apostles needed Jesus. Every missionary disciple needs to be accompanied. To flourish, parishes need to recognize the importance of accompaniment and examine whether and how it occurs in their community. Excited parishioners and volunteers who have encountered the risen Christ sometimes lack the determination to continue responding to their call because they were not appropriately supported in their journey. How can we remind our parishioners that the Easter season is an opportunity to accompany another?

Imagine that we situate ourselves as individuals and parish communities under the umbrella of the text of the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). Similarities could be found with the disengagement of the disciples with the mission after the resurrection and what occurs in our parishes. It is much easier to go back to the ordinary (Emmaus) and run away from the cross (Jerusalem). When this happens, though, there is a sense of hopelessness. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus appears to the distraught disciples and walks with them—listens to them, and shares in fellowship at the table. The walk to Emmaus reflects the master as a perfect companion on the faith journey. In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis urges that the Church invite everyone to engage in the art of accompaniment to bring about healing and growth in the Christian life. He states:

The Church will have to initiate everyone—priests, religious and laity—into this “art of accompaniment” which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Exodus 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates, and encourages growth in the Christian life. (169)

The Easter season is the perfect time to recollect and remember how the risen Christ continues to accompany his disciples, especially as they feel alone and hopeless. As followers of Christ, this is the time also to reflect on how we are encouraging our community to accompany others. When accompaniment occurs, disciples follow Jesus’ mission to bring “glad tidings to the poor,” “proclaim liberty to captives,” and allow “the oppressed to go free” (Luke 4:18). Through these actions, Christ’s followers act not just as *disciples* but as *missionary disciples*, terms that depend on one another. In describing the work of the apostle in his address to the Missionaries of Africa on June 13, 2022, Pope Francis emphasized the life of discipleship:

The apostle is not a manager; he is not a learned lecturer; he is not an IT wizard. The apostle is a *witness* . . . Witness essentially means two things: *prayer* and *fraternity*. A heart open to God and a heart open to one's brothers and sisters. First of all, to be in the presence of God, to let oneself be looked at by him, every day, in adoration. There, to draw the lifeblood, in that "abiding in him," in Christ, which is the condition for being apostles (cf. John 15:1-9). It is the paradox of the mission: you can *go* only if you *stay*. If you are not capable of abiding in the Lord, you cannot go.³

Evident in this message is Francis' understanding of contemplation and action. The life of a missionary disciple consists of these two attitudes, abiding in the Lord and being sent forth. As the pope points out, the mission of a disciple includes a paradox: you can *go* only if you *stay*. Francis calls people today to live with the same spirit as the early Church. "Prayer and fraternity: the Church must return to this *essential core*, this radiant simplicity, naturally not in a uniform way, but in the variety of her charisms, ministries, and institutions; but everything must allow this original core, which goes back to Pentecost and the first community, described in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. 2:42-47; 4:32-35), to shine through."

How beneficial would it be to reinforce in our ministries and parish groups a renewed understanding that the life of a missionary disciple consists of prayer and fraternity and abiding and being sent forth! Accompaniment and discernment, then, are part of formation. The following queries will help determine the systems in place for accompaniment:

- What kind of accompaniment is provided to groups and ministries who have already assumed a specific role or commitment?
- What type of follow-up is provided to evangelizing experiences in the parish?
- What kind of experiences foster a sound interpretation of the domestic church and the local church?
- How does the parish promote prayer and contemplation?
- How are spiritual direction and support groups encouraged in the parish?
- What resources are offered for discernment of gifts and talents to promote service and mission?

A CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER

In my years in parish life and diocesan ministry, I rejoiced and also suffered from the challenges that are part of a ministry of coordinating volunteers. Struggles included maintaining programming, keeping volunteers, encouraging new people in ministry, and beginning fresh initiatives. At times we were perplexed that the same people showed up as volunteers and that more people did not attend events. Sometimes we were baffled, because Jesus' message was one of joy. No matter what occurred, it was important to keep in mind that being a witness of the resurrection is synonymous with radiating joy. At least that is how the story of the road to Emmaus ends.

Imagine every missionary disciple as a witness to the joy of the resurrection. Such joy could allow space to create a culture of encounter for others to be renewed in their joy. Forming a culture of encounter requires collaborative effort among lay and ordained staff and volunteers, diocesan offices and parishes, bishop and priests, and dominant cultures and newcomers. No matter the time and the effort, our baptism calls us to a culture of encounter. May we look to the accompaniment that Jesus offered the disciples on the road to Emmaus as we seek to pray with and walk beside others, to abide in Christ, and to be sent forth. And in our accompaniment of others, may we boldly offer the light of faith. Pope Francis shows us how to support people in faith and meet them where they are, as he writes in *The Joy of the Gospel*:

I do not want a Church concerned with being at the center and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light, and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe. (49) ♦

Notes

1. Stephen Bevans, "The Mission Has a Church: Perspectives of a Roman Catholic Theologian," in *Edinburgh 2010 Mission Today and Tomorrow*, p. 3.
2. Bevans, p. 11.
3. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/june/documents/20220613-missionari-africa.html>.

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