

# Making Disciples— for a Lifetime!

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We know discipleship-making in the church has fundamentally changed since the Second Vatican Council, and we know that many of the advancements in our formational frameworks have come from outside traditionally theological disciplines. Psychology, sociology, and technology are significantly reshaping the ways we transmit and relate the message of faith. Recognizing this paradigm-shift has helped to rekindle a central-task of evangelization — namely, fostering an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

To be effective in the present era, faith formation must incorporate a personal element; it must connect with people on a heart level, and it must impact people's daily lives lest the opportunity for true conversion be significantly limited or completely lost. The times have changed. In former generations one could presume that individuals had an ongoing, explicit, and active relationship with the Lord; whereas, today this can no longer be assumed. Catechetical professionals used to be able to expect that those seeking their assistance would come with some experience of organized religion, but today this is no longer the norm. Instead, the pervasive lack of familiarity with ecclesial practice leaves *many* baptized Catholics (and virtually everyone else) disconnected from the church, and the absence of inculturated Christian experience breeds a presumptive religious ignorance that can no longer be addressed solely (or easily) by parish-centered approaches. To develop mature discipleship among parishioners, and non-parishioners alike, the church must expand its influence beyond the temple walls.

## WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHY

Not long ago, I gave a presentation at a parish where I had participants self-identify themselves on the continuum of Catholic practice. Some saw themselves as Mass-only parishioners, others added a ministry or two, and still a few more were part of the minority who spend most of their lives at the parish. However, the truth (as I pointed out) was that they all were “super-Catholics” given today's declining statistics where roughly 75 percent of us don't regularly attend Mass. Rather than digressing into an analysis of why, I'd rather move us toward thinking about what. Surely you and I believe that the

Eucharist is the source and summit of our lives, but let's face it, the majority of Catholics aren't living that way. The culture of Catholic life isn't changing, *it has changed!* So maybe we need new starting-points and new metrics to rejuvenate the vibrancy of Catholic communal life and to lead us more fully into being a Eucharistic people. More important than asking “why?” is to resolve the issue of “what?” we intend to do differently. After all, Jesus said, “GO and make disciples” (Mt 28:19).

In recent years, bringing people to Christ has become more individualized, more particular, and more complex. The recognition of these changing dynamics, at least in some fashion, gave impetus to the promulgation of the *Year of Faith* and a call to renew Catholic life on very basic levels — beginning with Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ as primary points of inspiration for a new evangelization. Consequently, I've been promoting a softer response in our diocese driven by the broader planning question, “Now that the Year of Faith is over, what happens next?” At the heart of this inquiry is the recognition that our focus should be less about animating a specific celebratory period and more about enlivening a faith that can be more profoundly engendered over a lifetime. In many ways, we chose the long road but to help us get started on the journey we made some refinements to our short-term programming schema.

## GROWING INFLUENCE

We began by trying to grow our circle of influence. For example, we expanded our annual catechetical conference making it more accessible to a wider array of ministry genres by increasing workshop offerings and adding more language options. These changes helped to make the event more palatable to fostering mature discipleship by offering something for everyone.

We inaugurated our first-ever Congreso Juvenil (young adult congress) with a defined Hispanic cultural lens but making it bilingual and accessible to everyone. We created an adult faith formation seminar for parish leaders and interested adults (the event was conducted bilingually in English and Spanish). We gathered college Catholic campus ministry leaders to unify vision, to coordinate efforts, and to share best practices. We developed a morning of reflection program for seniors as well as small-group facilitation training — both of which we took on the road. And, recognizing that we were underserving our growing Latino community with regards to lay ministry

formation, we instituted a new parish-based Catholic fundamentals program. Many of these initiatives were operated in partnership with multiple chancery departments. This past summer we held a diocesan Liturgy Conference to enhance our liturgical practice and we also celebrated our first-ever Conference on Marriage.

Building upon these labors we sought to enhance people's spiritual lives by intentionally promoting the primacy of the Word of God through the use of *lectio divina*. This is an ingenious technique for our postmodern, pluralistic society; its flexible use makes it ideal for personal or communal study; its meditative simplicity makes it accessible to novice, intermediate, and advanced disciples alike. By including *lectio divina* in the majority of the aforementioned events (either as the main theme or as a complimentary element) we have been able to successfully model and encourage its use with individuals, families, and in parishes. Most important for our demographics, it is equally applicable and bears fruit regardless of ethnicity, language, socioeconomic background, etc.

### BUILDING URGENCY

And finally, we instilled urgency for change with our bishop's Holy Thursday announcement of the priorities that will occupy our chancery work for the next couple of years: enkindling deeper faith, forming leaders, and harmonizing ministries. Obviously, we want to practice the principles of good stewardship by enabling people to engage in the life of the Christ and the church, by identifying individuals' talents and maximizing their gifts, and by streamlining our pastoral efforts with administrative efficiency. These priorities live within the overarching pillars that the bishop had already identified as the focus of his episcopal ministry in our diocese: vocation, formation, and charity. Essentially, this entire corpus finds its unity within the mission of evangelization.

As we proceed this year, we will be taking a huge step back to reexamine and evaluate our current programming. We had already incorporated some online formation opportunities but we need to do more. The bishop has asked that we revamp our lay ministry formation program to make it more accessible, permeable, shorter, and less expensive. This is a huge



Photo by Andrew Hyde

undertaking. We're also looking at the formational assistance we can provide to parishes to help with the business/administrative side of their existence, and professional development and training events aimed at pastoral councils, finance councils, business managers, and pastors. After all, there is both an external aspect to ministry (how to engage people more fully in the faith and in ecclesial life), as well as an internal one (how to improve our management and application of limited resources in ways that enhance ministry and breed vibrancy). The pervading challenge in addressing these needs is more sociological than theological because our changing demographics are placing new demands upon us. The status-quo is no longer effective and we can no longer depend on the ways we have been doing ministry; we must find creative approaches to meeting people's needs both pastorally and practically.

### AGGIORNAMENTO

Intuitively, the election of Pope Francis may be the Holy Spirit's way of underscoring the need for a post-Council *aggiornamento*. Since his election he has been taking notable steps to incline the church's posture more toward people and addressing their needs — both in what he says and by how he acts; so far Francis instills a heart of service and humility bundled in joy and it is refreshing to see people taking notice — Catholics, non-Catholics, non-believers, and skeptics. Ironically, his actions have also made his voice more credible — not progressive or conservative, but rather, prophetic. Our new pope's call for us to evaluate our motivations and to revise our approaches in order that we, the church, might

become more interpersonal and customized in our ministering to God's people is fundamentally solid.

In many respects, the church is coming full-circle and presently greets the dawn of this new era in much the same way as early first-century Christians did at the onset of growing the church following Jesus' resurrection. Sharing the Good News requires both a modeling and a catechesis that connects with people's lives so that it might instill new ways of being which will ultimately become the cornerstone building blocks for encountering God's call and for ongoing conversion. This is not a new concept, and it should be obvious that intimacy with Christ must be at the center of all our actions. Jesus' command is clear, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples" (Jn 13:35).

I began this article by noting that changing times require different approaches. One implication of this is our need to be more immediate. Perhaps our studies (diagnosis) need more trending data (prescription) in order that we might stay more focused on where we need to be going instead of on where we have been. Technology is reshaping the face of everything we know. Globalization is shrinking time and space. Integration is replacing expertise with basic know-how. Today's educational models are being remolded in response to secular dominance which they are not trying to fight against, but rather incorporate (for example, my son is just beginning high school and is required to take an online course in order to graduate — even as some of us might still prefer standing firm against parents who seek to home-school their children's faith formation). Our purview must be meeting people's needs today while preparing them for the world they will live in tomorrow (and the next day in heaven). This is sometimes counterintuitive for a church whose anchor-points often come from a historical past. Therefore, as catechetical professionals and leaders, we must journey as if we are piloting a rowboat —gazing backward at the buoys and harbors of our Tradition as we row and navigate course onward through the present currents without fear. This may require a new type of leader and the face of leadership is also transitioning in the church (and not just with the pope).

Today's ministry personnel are more diverse than they used to be and this is good. However, to be effective, we must become increasingly adept at working in an ambiguous, pluralistic society. We need to be equipped to tend to a multicultural flock in ways that establish unity without uniformity. More and more we will find ourselves serving in intercultural and intergenerational settings where we will need to employ multifaceted formats that engage individuals, families, parishes, extra-parochial entities, apostolic movements, and the entire local church (arch/diocese). The bottom line is that leaders cannot be content to only be in charge; they must lead and they must actively take part in managing the changes and transitions we face.

## A NEW EDUCATIONAL PYRAMID

Educational theory is being reshaped, too. The ongoing debate between andragogy and pedagogy is subsiding amidst recogni-

tion that complementary and integrated methodologies offer more effective ways to teach. Social media's influence and a plethora of Internet/cloud-based learning modules have won acceptance for self-guided learning. These trends are affecting catechetical formation in positive ways; they open the door of faith to more people.

Today's competency-driven frameworks are quickly replacing traditional, self-contained programming models. In my own diocese, we are embracing this approach by creating multiple competency schemas that can utilize and share a variety of formational opportunities. This learner-centered approach is customized to individual need, making it more attractive to both learners and formators (and more efficient, and less expensive). The fact is, the entire educational pyramid most of us grew up with is being recreated. In the past, we were taught something, then we expanded our understanding, and finally we applied it into our lives. Today, the opposite is the case. First, we use it; second, we grow our understanding, and lastly we learn about it. If you're a skeptic on this point, think about how you learned to read, to do basic arithmetic, to use your computer and compare that against how you learned to Google, to use Facebook, and to use Twitter.

Do we lose something when we change? Yes. Will we be left behind if we don't change? Yes. Will change always be part of our reality? Yes — and the pace will likely increase, not decrease.

I'm presenting some bold suppositions but I'm not advocating that we discard the truths of our faith nor the practices that we value most. I'm also not suggesting that any of the steps we are taking in my diocese are perfect — far from it! But, they are steps and they will get us moving toward crafting a response to the needs of our times.

Discovery comes with journey — the road to Emmaus, the Good Samaritan, the lost sheep — this is the Christian paradox. Today the church has to emerge more people-centered and relational, and our models of evangelization, initiation, and catechesis must reflect this shifting landscape. The educational models and paradigms of our times have drastically changed and on our horizon a new sunrise awakens for the church's mission. This is a refreshing and intuitive challenge calling all of us to renewal. In these shifting and paradoxical times, we are given to profound reflection on what it means to be a follower of the Lord Jesus, and even more importantly, in discerning what it takes to share in the ministry of echoing the gospel as catechists, catechetical leaders, and ministry professionals. In essence, if we do not meet people at where they are, then we will most likely, in effect, not meet people! ■

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