

# Missionary Discipleship

Phil Lawson



Pope Francis has often used the phrase “missionary disciples.” In his first apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)*, he says: “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.’”<sup>1</sup>

The pope is continuing to call us back to Christ in the form of ongoing discipleship, and then impelling us to mission, to take what we have been given out to a world that badly needs this witness and message of love. The Holy Father recently picked up this theme again when he said: “The people of God is a people of disciples because we receive the faith and a missionary people because we pass on the faith.”<sup>2</sup>

## MISSIONARIES

We are all called to be missionaries, by virtue of our baptism—proclaiming the faith boldly wherever we are “each in the place that the Lord has assigned to us.”<sup>3</sup> This is precisely what new evangelization calls for. “Each of the baptized, whatever their role in the Church or the educational level of their faith, is an active agent of evangelization....The new evangelization should involve a new central role for each of the baptized.”<sup>4</sup> Note that the only “qualification” the pope cites is “baptism.” One does not need a higher level degree in theology or formal training to be a missionary, just an encounter with Christ, which naturally inspires one to share this same encounter with others.

Mother Teresa once counseled someone who thought they had to go off to a foreign land to evangelize, to, “grow where you’re planted.” The Lord has put us wherever we are for a reason. Indeed, He has entrusted the various individuals who come into our lives and cross our paths, to us. A fruitful prayer is every day to pray for “those who have been entrusted to my

care.” Now that can be physical or spiritual children, family, children in a religious education program, students in a classroom, teenagers in a youth group, participants in an RCIA process, couples preparing for marriage, a whole roster of parishioners, your coworkers, all the way to the senior citizens or residents in an assisted living home. Each of these individuals, depending on one’s position, are entrusted to someone’s care (see Gn 3:9). And we are called to be a missionary to them, bringing Christ to them, helping them encounter the fullness of love and leading others to discipleship.

## DISCIPLES

We are called to be disciples. “All of us in the Church are disciples, always and for our entire lives....”<sup>5</sup> We never stop being disciples. The term “disciple” necessitates a relationship with the master or teacher. In the same way that none of us ever ceases to be a son or daughter to our parents, once we enter into relationship with Christ via that encounter, we never cease to be a disciple. And like that family relationship, while the circumstances and levels change, the relationship between the disciple and Christ remains forever.

*Evangelii Gaudium*, according to Father John Hurley, CSP, “invites Catholics today to think of themselves as disciples of Jesus. This fundamentally is what I think the call to a new evangelization is all about. It requires a paradigm shift from thinking of ourselves as members of the Church to disciples in the Church.”<sup>6</sup> Members can be passive, disciples are inherently active. Members can check the “Catholic box” on the surveys and show up on Christmas and Easter; disciples participate every Sunday.

## THE FOUNDATION AND IMPETUS

Pope Francis cites Pope Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi* eleven times in *The Joy of the Gospel*. Pope Paul VI wrote: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”<sup>7</sup> Missionary disciples are precisely what witnesses are and must be if we are to successfully be agents of a new evangelization.

1 *Evangelii Gaudium* #120.

2 *In The Church We Are All Missionaries and Disciples*, Vatican Information Service 1-15-14.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 [http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/2781/ievangelii\\_nuntiandi\\_the\\_greatest\\_pastoral\\_document\\_that\\_has\\_ever\\_been\\_written.aspx](http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/2781/ievangelii_nuntiandi_the_greatest_pastoral_document_that_has_ever_been_written.aspx)

7 Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

The beauty of Pope Francis' papacy thus far is that he has not only given us this teaching, but even more powerfully witnessed to what this teaching looks like in practice. And the world has clearly noticed.

In a column connecting these two papal writings, Catholic writer J.J. Ziegler describes the basis of being a missionary disciple. "The life of a Christian is a life of encounter with Jesus Christ...conversion, reconversion, and evangelization. It is only when I have encountered Jesus and live a transformed life that I can then invite others to encounter Christ... our faith is a love story."<sup>8</sup> It is a love story, which Christ initiates.

C.S. Lewis once said, "Continue seeking God with seriousness, unless he wanted you, you would not be wanting him." This desire for God is placed in our hearts, "because man is created by God and for God."<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis is specifically inviting everyone to experience that encounter, to enter that love story: "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them..."<sup>10</sup>

## EVERYONE OF US

This encounter with the love of Jesus Christ takes place within each of us. Hurley said: "So often people in ministry in the Church identify themselves by the task they are doing rather than their deepest identity. Identity as disciples calls us to the deepest identity we have with Jesus, this encounter that Blessed John Paul II spoke so much about along with Pope Benedict. Of course, Pope Francis is taking this culture of encounter to a whole new level."<sup>11</sup>

Pope Francis emphasized that every single one of us is a missionary disciple, humorously adding, "Some of you will say: 'Bishops aren't disciples; the bishops know everything. The pope knows everything and isn't a disciple.' No, even the bishops and the pope are to be disciples because, if they aren't, it's not good; they can't be missionaries; they can't pass on the faith. All of us are disciples and missionaries."<sup>12</sup>



## CATECHETICAL LEADERS TOO!

So how do we as catechetical leaders model and form others as missionary disciples? There are three steps: time, love and truth.

### Time

In the gospels, Jesus takes time to be with people. He speaks with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:1-30); he listens to, touches, and heals the leper (Mk 1:40-45); he receives Nicodemus at night and answers his questions (Jn 3:1-21). Pope Francis has noted that he spends one hour each evening before our Lord in the

Blessed Sacrament, conversing with Jesus. We must take the time with our Lord Jesus to sit at his feet in prayer, especially praying for those to whom we bring Christ.

### Love

God created us to love and be loved. Each person yearns for this unconditional love and can only find it in God. Jesus loved the Samaritan woman. She did not feel judged when he told her all that she ever did (see Jn 4:29) but rather she found hope and new life because he gave her healing through his merciful love. We too are called to reflect Christ's love to those entrusted to our care.

### Truth

Finally, if we are to be missionary disciples, we must share the truth. One youth minister told me she thinks Pope Francis is always challenging her. While the challenges are not always easy to hear, she told me how much she appreciates it. For she correctly sees these challenges as helping her to more fully be what the Lord is calling her to be. Jesus challenged the woman at the well, and yes, it made her uncomfortable. But it also led to her healing, change of life, and freedom. Unbound from her past, she was able to boldly proclaim Christ throughout the town as one of the first evangelists. The leper was healed and immediately went and spread the news everywhere. Nicodemus was challenged and soon became a follower of Christ. How do we go about sharing the truth of Christ with such conviction, love and joy?

So what are we waiting for? The invitation has been offered and there is certainly a need amidst what Pope Francis has called "the field hospital of the world," calling for the Church to go out and "tend the wounded." Encountering and continually re-encountering Christ, daily deepening our relationship with him, we grow as disciples. And from that discipleship, we emerge as missionaries, unable to contain within ourselves that love which we have experienced (cf. Acts 4:20). |

**Phil Lawson** is the coordinator of young adult ministry discipleship and RCIA formation in the Diocese of Green Bay.

8 [http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/2781/ievangelii\\_nuntiandii\\_the\\_greatest\\_pastoral\\_document\\_that\\_has\\_ever\\_been\\_written.aspx](http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/2781/ievangelii_nuntiandii_the_greatest_pastoral_document_that_has_ever_been_written.aspx)

9 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #27.

10 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 3.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *In The Church We Are All Missionaries and Disciples*, Vatican Information Service 1-15-14.