

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Pastoral Letter on Evangelization

Bishop James Powers, Diocese of Superior | Pentecost 2023

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All scriptural quotations are taken from the *New American Bible* at usccb.org. All quotations from Church documents are taken from **vatican.va**. For additional resources please visit **catholicdos.org**.

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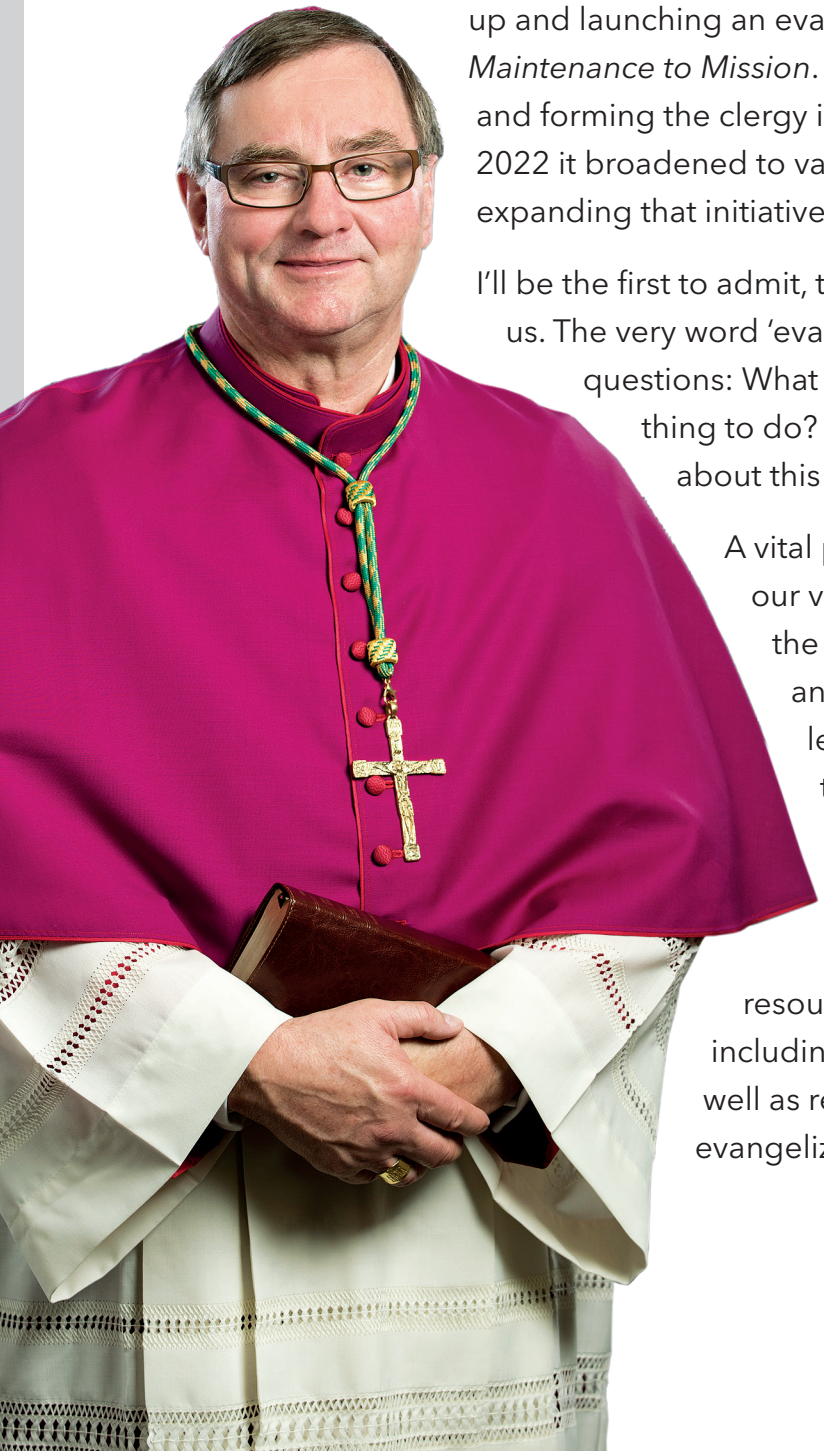
Preface



To all of the faithful of the diocese, priests, deacons, religious sisters, lay men and women. Greetings!

This letter is the fruit of a few years of prayer, thought and learning. Hopefully by now you are aware that we have been slowly building up and launching an evangelization initiative in our diocese called *Maintenance to Mission*. It commenced in 2021 with a year of teaching and forming the clergy in the mission of evangelization. In the fall of 2022 it broadened to various parish leaders. With this letter, we are expanding that initiative to the diocese at large.

I'll be the first to admit, the topic of evangelization is new to most of us. The very word 'evangelize' can elicit a strong reaction and many questions: What is evangelization? Is it even a Catholic sort of thing to do? How do we go about it? Why are we talking about this now?

A vital part of this initiative is being clear about what our vision for evangelization is as a diocese. That is the purpose of this letter. All of the baptized have an instrumental part to play in this. That is why this letter is being mailed directly to every family in the diocese.

I pray that you will read it slowly, bring its content to prayer, and talk about it with your fellow parishioners. There are additional resources available on our diocesan website including a study guide with reflection questions as well as resources for parishes in building a culture of evangelization.

1 | Introduction: A Call to Move from Maintenance to Mission

'I remember our parish back in its heyday. There were children everywhere and some of us had to stand out in the front lawn during Mass in the summer because the church itself was stuffed full. The parish dinners, the Christmas concerts, Holy Days…everyone was there and there was so much energy!'

Many of us have heard parishioners of a certain age reminisce with similar words. We yearn for those 'good old days' when the churches were full on Sunday mornings and they seemed to always be bustling with activity. We find ourselves wondering, 'what happened?'

In recent decades we have seen numbers steadily decline in almost every area of parish life across the diocese: participation in the sacraments, religious education enrollment, Mass attendance, Catholic schools enrollment. Looking back, many of us can fall into a spirit of sadness and even defeat. None of those numbers are mere statistics; we each know all too well that those numbers are indicative of family members, friends and neighbors who have fallen away from the practice of the faith.

My brothers and sisters, what are we to do?

As a diocese, and indeed as a Church around the world, we are at a turning point. We live in such a time that God in His Providence seems to have offered us a choice: we can either continue to watch the decline of the Church or we can take up our mission anew with faith, courage and passion. For me, the choice is clear. We must rouse ourselves out of complacency. We must courageously move past simply maintaining our programs and structures and allow the Lord to lead us into a deep renewal of our identity and purpose.

The purpose of this letter is twofold: to provide inspiration and to cast a clear vision for the mission of the Church in our diocese. It is addressed to the faithful of the diocese because this renewal in our mission is not for the clergy or the parish and diocesan staff alone, it is for all the baptized. I pray that this letter will be read, studied, prayed with and discussed.

Again, I will be the first to admit, the language of evangelization is not the language that I grew up with. It is not the language that I heard in seminary. Brothers and sisters, that is a problem. For decades, perhaps even centuries, we have grown complacent toward our most fundamental purpose as a Church. My hope is that we can approach this moment with humility and receptivity. I am convinced that God is at work in our diocese -- I have seen the firstfruits. Even as the world grows more secular and hostile around us, if we step forward in faith profound renewal is attainable. The Lord Jesus reminds us, "For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible."[1]

2 | Our Cultural Moment: 'From Christendom to Apostolic Mission'

The definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over again expecting different results. Over the past few decades we have persisted in maintaining our structures and programming, hoping for different results. Why? We kept going to the well of the tried-and-true, not because we were crazy, but because at one point it seemed to really work!

Things have changed. There are no simple or quick fixes. The decline of the practice of the Faith in the Western world over the past half century or more is due largely to massive cultural changes. As Pope Francis puts it, "Ours is not an age of change, but a change of the ages."

For centuries, Europe and the Americas enjoyed a culture that was permeated by Christianity. The dominant worldview -- philosophical, moral, theological, sociological, etc. -- was infused with Christianity. This era of history in the West is referred to as *'Christendom'*.

Many of the faithful in our diocese grew up and raised their children in the latter days of our former Christendom culture. The way that our parishes operate was designed for the high point of American Catholicism in the early to middle of the 20th century. The assumptions of the faithful during those decades were essentially Catholic: people had a Catholic worldview and they were faithfully devoted to the sacraments. They attended Mass weekly and on Holy Days of Obligation. Many prayed the Rosary with their families. They sacrificed to send their children to Catholic School when possible and, if not, dutifully participated in the catechesis offered by the parish. They baptized and confirmed their children. And when their children were grown, they too were married in the Church and continued the cycle with their own children.

In his excellent book *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission*, Msgr. James Shea says that in those days the overwhelming likelihood was that almost everyone was a Christian and would continue to be so. The larger culture -- even the popular culture of the arts and entertainment -- was largely supportive of individuals and families practicing the faith. In those days, Shea says, the most significant temptation was not to fall away from the faith so much as to go through the motions heartlessly.

CHRISTENDOM | The word 'Christendom' refers to a culture in which every area of life is permeated, to some degree, by Christianity. Historically, this word refers to an era in the West following the evangelization of Europe and the Americas that lasted more than a thousand years. Among scholars the date for the end of Christendom has been debated, what is clear is that it is over now. As Venerable Fulton J. Sheen said, "That [era] is finished. We have seen it die."[2]



In our days we have seen that culture erode ever more swiftly. In the past decades the broader culture has gone from generally supportive of the Faith to ambivalent, to opposed, to outright hostile. With his characteristic flair, Venerable Fulton J. Sheen said, "We are at the end of Christendom. Not of Christianity, not of the Church, but of Christendom." That quote is from all the way back in 1973. What would Archbishop Sheen say now?

What does this mean for us? Monsignor Shea says, "There is no getting around the fact that, in a society moving away from Christendom, the Church will by a kind of social necessity grow smaller: the majority in any society tends to embrace the ruling societal vision unconsciously unless they explicitly move out of it to something else."[3]

Brothers and sisters, that is the primary motivation for this letter: sadly, we will continue to lose members -- and at what cost to them and us! -- unless we begin to offer a clear and attractive alternative to the secular vision that our culture is promoting. To put it simply, if Christendom is over, then it is up to us -- all of us -- to become *apostles* -- to become evangelists.

Think back to those first few centuries of the Church. Compared to us the early Christians had almost nothing -- but they did have the grace of the sacraments and a zeal for the Gospel. We have inherited two millennia of teaching, art, liturgy, witness of the Saints, and more. Are we willing, as Catholic Christians, to make this not a new Secular Age, but a second Apostolic Age? That is my hope and my invitation.

APOSTLE | The term apostle is one that many in the Church today are not accustomed to hearing except in reference to the twelve Apostles and to St. Paul. Coming from the Greek verb apostellein, meaning 'to send', our word 'apostle' literally means 'one that is sent'. This is a different concept from the word 'disciple', which refers to a follower or a student. The original apostles were those disciples whom the Lord Jesus sent out on mission. The 'Apostolic Age' refers to the early days of the Church when these apostles and their successors traveled the known world announcing the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ.

3 | Call for the New Evangelization

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."[4]

This call to take up the task of witnessing to Christ is the fundamental mission of the Church. Sadly, for decades, or perhaps even centuries, most of us were complacent toward this task. Beginning with Pope Saint Paul VI back in the late 1960s, the Church has been calling for a new evangelization. Again, we ought never to have gotten to a point where we needed a new evangelization. After all, "[The Church] exists in order to evangelize."[5] Nevertheless, we are grateful that Paul VI and his successors have ceaselessly called for a rededication of the Church's resources to this fundamental purpose, "which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent."[6]

Pope Saint John Paul II put this call the most clearly. He said, "I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization…No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples."[7]

As we have been planning this initiative at the chancery over the past few years, we have frequently returned to the phrase, 'the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing'. If the 'main thing' for us as Catholics became ambiguous in the past, John Paul II makes it abundantly clear for us now: it is evangelization.

A crucial point to make here is to address the question of why we are promoting and pursuing evangelization now. If we are promoting evangelization merely as a means to keeping our parishes or religious education programs or Catholic schools open, we are deeply misguided. Authentic evangelization can only be an overflow of the love of God that we have personally received, pouring itself out in a desire for that love to be received by those around us.



God willing, this deep receptivity will lead to deep spiritual renewal. And spiritual renewal will secondarily lead to institutional renewal, but I hope and pray that it will also lead us to a healthy detachment from our structures and schedules and to a prioritization on the person of Jesus and the mission of making him known and loved.[8]

4 | The Kerygma: Encountering the Good News of the Gospel

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son."[9]

The primary task for us as we take up this call is to re-encounter the power of the Gospel. Admittedly, for those of us that have lived and breathed Catholic Christianity our whole lives, the 'good news' does not really feel like 'news'. Many of us have heard the same readings from scripture day after day and week after week and year after year. These words have become a fixture in our lives that we take for granted and even ignore.

St. Paul says that the kerygma - the proclamation of the Gospel - is explosive in its power to change our lives.[10] When we encounter the fullness of this proclamation it leaves us overwhelmed by the radical love that the Father has shown in creating us for relationship with Him and restoring that relationship in Jesus. When we stand in awe of this love we are led to a decision to entrust ourselves to Jesus Christ by faith, to drop our nets, and to follow him.[11]

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There are many forms that the kerygma can take. In scripture we can point to many passages, but the most famous is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." Pope Francis put it simply: "Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you."[12]

Two thousand years ago these words had explosive power -- the power to convert and the power to provoke martyrdom. Today, anyone reading this letter will probably have to really muster an emotional response. And the average non-religious American will hear them and simply ignore them as irrelevant.

Over the past few years we have utilized the work of Fr. John Riccardo from ACTS XXIX Ministries a great deal. He breaks the Gospel down into four stages: Created, Captured, Rescued and Response. I invite you to truly encounter the Gospel by sitting with each of these realities.

KERYGMA | 'Kerygma' is an ancient term derived directly from Greek, meaning 'proclamation'. In ancient Greek and Roman culture, kerygma referred to the announcing of a glorious military conquest. Heralds would travel throughout the empire proclaiming this good news to all the people. The early Christians adopted this term to refer to the proclamation of the ultimate Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ.



CREATED - The same God who created the billions and billions of stars, has created ***you***.

Psalm 8 declares:

> "When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers,
> the moon and stars that you set in place
> What is man that you are mindful of him,
> and a son of man that you care for him?
> Yet you have made him little less than a god,
> crowned him with glory and honor."

God Himself says that He formed your inmost being,[13] counted the hairs on your head[14] and knows your heart.[15] He sees you. He knows you. He loves you. There is an infinite value in every human life -- including yours.



CAPTURED - We all encounter a brokenness and pain that demands an explanation. Sin and death are universal realities and they must be admitted and reckoned with. The only explanation that makes sense is that we are not alone with God in the cosmos. There is a third actor on the stage: the enemy, the devil. He wields tremendous power that we alone cannot overcome. Nevertheless, he is a creature like us; the power of Satan is in no way equal to God's power.



RESCUED - From the moment of the Fall of our first parents Adam and Eve, God has been working to win us back. In the person of Jesus Christ He has gloriously completed that work. "God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ (by grace you have been saved), raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus."[16]



RESPONSE - The battle is won. Christ is victorious. It is up to us to respond. Salvation is ours if we will have it. God does not impose, but propose the reconciliation that our hearts long for. We respond in two primary ways: we can ignore his saving work or we can surrender to the Lordship of Jesus in a life of discipleship and worship.

DISCIPLESHIP | Discipleship is a way of life - marked by total surrender to Jesus Christ. All Christians -- indeed all of humanity -- are called and invited to this sort of relationship with the Lord. It begins with an encounter with the Lord Jesus and a decision to drop one's nets like Peter, Andrew, James and John and follow after Jesus. Sometimes referred to as 'an apprenticeship in the Christian life', discipleship includes not only intellectual formation, but also formation in a life of prayer, holiness, and mission.

When we encounter the truth of the kerygma and respond, we embark on a path of profound beauty and meaning. Despite the obvious decline of Christianity, the Gospel is just as timely and relevant to humanity today as it was fifty years ago or two thousand years ago. We see this in the lives of so many recently canonized saints and in thriving ministries that are deeply committed to mission.

Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that there are unique challenges today. While the early apostles were surrounded by a hostile culture too, at least in their day the Gospel itself was new and bold and unexpected. In our day, many of those that we might present the Gospel to are likely to think they have heard enough about Christianity already to know that it is not for them. Monsignor Shea describes evangelization in our day as being much more akin to wooing back an estranged spouse than proposing to a young lover.[17]

In part, we brought this challenge on ourselves by straying away from preaching and teaching the fullness of the Gospel. In recent decades we have treated the practice of the Faith and the formation of a Christian understanding of the world like it was an elective subject or an extracurricular activity. In marginalizing the claims of God, we made Him seem irrelevant to our contemporaries and they have taken us at our word.

On top of this we see the culture moving further and further away from its Judeo-Christian roots. Instead, many maintain a belief that science is the only way we can actually know anything and that morality is entirely up to individual choice.

In such a world winning souls to Christ is in some ways more difficult than ever. If the deck is so stacked against us evangelizing fruitfully, how do we break through? In a word, holiness. We must commit ourselves to ever-deepening our own conversion so that our lives increasingly reflect Christ in every facet.



CONVERSION | The glossary in the Catechism of the Catholic Church defines conversion as, "a radical reorientation of the whole life away from sin and evil, and toward God. This change of heart or conversion is a central element of Christ's preaching, of the Church's ministry of evangelization, and of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation."

5 | Evangelization and Holiness: A Fully Integrated Christian Life

Imagine if right now living in our diocese there were a handful of great missionary saints. Imagine if Saints Peter and Paul, St. Mary Magdalen, St. Dominic, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Francis Xavier and the great Jesuit Missionaries, St. John Henry Newman, Venerable Fulton Sheen, and St. Teresa of Calcutta were all scattered across our 16 counties. What sort of incredible renewal would our diocesan church experience?

Now, imagine this: what if there were 50,000 missionaries living in our diocese? Brothers and sisters, that is the exact desire of the Lord. At the time of this letter's publication there are 53,726 registered Catholics in our diocese. None of us is called to be St. Paul or St. Mary Magdalen or any other particular canonized saint for that matter. Each of them lived their own vocation in their own time and place. And yet, each of us *is* without question called to be the saint that the Lord is calling us to be.

This universal call to holiness is perhaps *the* central teaching of the Second Vatican Council. As the world looks to the Church and even upon individual Christians with greater hostility and cynicism, holiness becomes a more urgent task than ever. John Paul II said that in our day the joyful witness of holiness in the saints is "the simplest and most attractive way" for the world to perceive the truth of the Gospel and the Christian Life.[20] When Christians live lives of selflessness and deep faith, we bear an undeniable witness to the power of God's grace working in us.

UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS | Every member of the Church is called to become holy -- to become a saint. This was a core teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which taught: "All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity."18 Vocations to marriage, the priesthood, religious life, consecrated single life are secondary to this primary calling. St. John Paul II championed this teaching, encouraging the faithful around the world to truly believe that holiness is possible in Jesus Christ. Accordingly, he canonized more saints than any pope before him in an effort to inspire and give hope to the faithful. Pope Benedict, who continued this trend, said,

"We might ask ourselves: can we, with our limitations, with our weaknesses, aim so high? During the Liturgical Year, the Church invites us to commemorate a host of saints, the ones, that is, who lived charity to the full, who knew how to love and follow Christ in their daily lives. They tell us that it is possible for everyone to take this road. In every epoch of the Church's history, on every latitude of the world map, the saints belong to all the ages and to every state of life; they are actual faces of every people, language and nation."[19]



There is of course great power in the extraordinary witness of seeing St. Maximilian Kolbe singing hymns in the starvation bunker at Auschwitz or of St. Joan of Arc confidently declaring in the midst of her martyrdom, "I am not afraid; God is with me; I was born for this." But there is also power in the crucially important witness of everyday saints.

Think of a Christian businessman working hard with integrity, cheerfulness, joy and charity; always looking for opportunities to encourage and support his coworkers. Or consider a nurse exuding genuine compassion and selfless service as she works long, hard hours in an understaffed hospital or nursing home; never entering into the gossip and complaining, but maintaining a deep peace that her peers are drawn to and curious about. Think of the college student living chastity and virtue on a secular campus, loving her friends enough to ask them to coffee to invite them into a Bible Study or tell them about an event at the Newman Center.

Our own growth as disciples of the Lord and our own ongoing conversion is vital for our role in the mission of evangelization. "You must set yourselves on the path of holiness. Only thus can you be a sign of God in the world."[21]

We must admit that in our day and age this often can be difficult. As the broader culture moves further and further away from its Christian roots, seeking to live out a fully integrated Christian life necessarily means courageously choosing to live more counter-culturally.

In the history of Catholicism in America, our story has been a long one of desiring to become mainstream Americans. As waves of Catholics immigrated to this country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they often settled in ethnic enclaves and were looked upon with

suspicion by the broader Protestant culture. But with the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 that longing for normalcy was in many ways realized. While being accepted and welcomed into the culture was of course a great blessing in many ways, in hindsight we would do well to count the cost. Like the Israelites in the Old Testament who longed to be like the other nations to their great detriment, in how many ways have we turned our backs on the fullness of Christianity? Sadly, we have largely relegated the faith to a pious practice on Sunday mornings and perhaps before meals.

If we are going to take up the call to mission, it starts with an honest assessment: is my Christianity the core of my identity and the absolute priority in my life? Deitrich Bonhoeffer, the famous Lutheran pastor who was martyred by the Nazis, gave us a powerful analogy for this. He wrote that over the years we have settled for an increasingly watered-down version of the faith, "like a farmer who needs a horse for his fields; he leaves the fiery stallion on one side, and buys the tame, broken-in horse. This is just the way men have tamed for themselves a usable Christianity, and it is only a matter of time and honest thought before they lose interest in their creation and get rid of it."[22]

Sadly, how deep those words cut. St. Paul wrote to the Romans that the Gospel "is the power of salvation for all who believe."[23] My invitation to us all is to re-encounter the Gospel as good news of salvation and ask for the grace to humbly acknowledge any ways that we have settled for a 'tamed' or 'broken-in' version that is merely useful for us.

Over the past decade our diocesan offices have been encouraging our schools and religious education programs to prioritize evangelization by leading people to an encounter with the Lord, while also deepening their commitment to the fullness of the Church's teachings. St. Paul urged the early Christians: "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."[24] We must double down on this task.

As young men left home to follow a rabbi in Jesus's day, it is said that their families and neighbors would call out, 'May you be covered in the dust of the master!' Disciples sought to follow close on the heels of their teacher, learning to live and see the world anew according to his teachings. We, as disciples of Jesus, are invited to do the same. In an exhortation to us Americans, John Paul II wrote "Conversion *(metanoia)*, to which every person is called, leads to an acceptance and appropriation of the new vision which the Gospel proposes. This requires leaving behind our worldly way of thinking and acting, which so often heavily conditions our behavior."[25]



In the first circle we see someone with no relationship with Christ or His Church. He is naturally the center of his own life and every aspect of his life -- his relationships, his work, his passions and hobbies, his politics, etc. Everything is ordered around himself. In the second circle, we see that Christ has become part of the individual's life, but he is only one item amongst many, no more important than entertainment, hobbies, political affiliation, work, family or anything else. In the third circle, we see Christ at the center. This is a picture of the life of a saint -- one whose whole life is surrendered and ordered to the lordship of Jesus. This is the aspiration of a disciple. St. Paul puts it: "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me."[26]

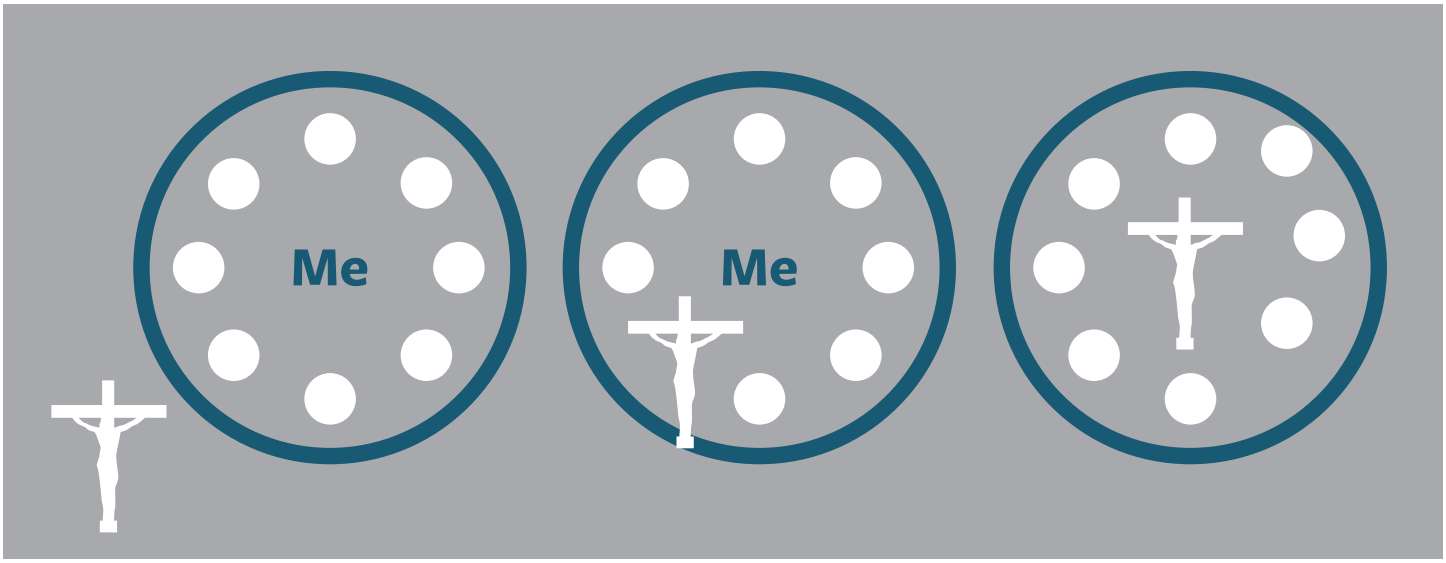
Brothers and sisters, the main reason for the decline of the Church in recent decades is that we have settled for 'second circle' Catholicism. We have allowed the Lord to be a part, but not the driving force of our lives.

John Paul II said, it is no surprise that, "in the Church's history, missionary drive has always been a sign of vitality, just as its lessening is a sign of a crisis of faith."[27] When by God's grace we allow ourselves to be transformed, we cannot help but become witnesses and seek opportunities to spread the good news of the freedom, joy, peace and hope we have encountered. What are your biggest passions in life? I would wager that you are not shy about talking about them. Why then, when it comes to talking about the faith, do most of us get clammy and nervous?



"We have settled for 'second circle' Catholicism. We have allowed the Lord to be a part, but not the driving force of our lives."

I believe there are two reasons. The first is the need for deeper faith; to be striving for 'third circle' Catholicism. The second is we simply do not know how to go about it.



6 | The Call to Be Apostles

"Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men."[28]

Each of the four gospels concludes with some form of sending of the disciples to continue the mission of Jesus after his ascension. The passage we think of most often is the great commission in Matthew's Gospel:

> "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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."[29]

This passage gives the most information about the specifics of our mission. First, the primary focus for us is inviting the entire world into a discipleship relationship with Jesus through his Church. We are to do this by the sacraments ("baptizing them") and catechesis ("teaching them") and abiding in the presence of Jesus through prayer ("I am with you").[30]

In John, Jesus leads us to the heart of this mission saying, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."[31] The central task of our mission is to make disciples, but even discipleship is only a means to the deeper aim: reconciliation in our relationship with the Father. John Paul II wrote, "The ultimate purpose of mission is to enable people to share in the communion which exists between the Father and the Son. The disciples are to live in unity with one another, remaining in the Father and the Son, so that the world may know and believe."[32]

We must acknowledge, therefore, that the heart of evangelization is relationship: our own relationship with God pouring out into our relationships with other people.

These evangelistic relationships must be pursued in two ways: personal evangelization and programmatic evangelization. They are mutually dependent and are both vital.

"We must acknowledge, therefore, that the heart of evangelization is relationship: our own relationship with God pouring out into our relationships with other people."

Personal Evangelization

A classic definition of evangelization is 'one beggar telling the other beggars where he found the bread'. We have discussed the 'bread' of this definition thoroughly already in this letter, but what we have not touched on yet is the hunger that it satisfies.

We evangelize naturally when we genuinely believe that Jesus is the answer to the longings, ills and sufferings that we encounter in others. Every day as we talk to friends, co-workers, neighbors, family members and even strangers, to some degree people are sharing their hearts with us: a sick child at home, fear about a lost job, a divorce in the family, the death of a loved one. Imagine if the apostles heard someone share one of those pains. What would their response be? They would bring them to Jesus. Why is that? They knew with every fiber of their being that Jesus -- the Word made Flesh -- was the answer to all the longings of the human heart.

Recall with me the story in the Gospel of the paralytic whose friends carried him on a stretcher. They were so eager to bring him to Jesus that when the house was too full of people to get in, they tore open the roof and lowered him down.[33] That is evangelization! What do we see in these men that we can apply to ourselves?

- They were in relationship with the paralytic and they cared about his needs.
- They had confidence in the power and love of God and desired to bring their friend to the Lord.
- They were willing to take a chance inviting him to come to Jesus.
- They accompanied him, even going so far as to carry him.
- They were not deterred by the obstacles.

Friends, these are all things that we can do right now today. If your mental picture of evangelization is still one of an angry Christian on the street corner with a poster about the coming judgment, please let that go. We can do this. And we must.

In his exhortation on evangelization, Pope Francis wrote, "Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love."[34] Here are four simple tasks that we can all do to begin evangelizing right today:

1. **Pray every day.** Build a life of intimacy with the Lord. Read God's word every day too. Be transformed by the renewal of your mind to see the world the way God does and to love like He does.

2. **Invest in Christian friendship.** It took four of those men to carry the paralytic. We are not going to get very far living this mission on our own. Meet with these peers regularly, pray together, share your hearts -- your fears, struggles and joys.

3. **Invest in relationship in your spheres of influence.** Those spheres are your primary field for apostolate: those are the places that the Lord is *sending* you. You may be the only Christian in those spheres after all. Are you willing to let the Holy Spirit work through you? If so, we all need to be genuinely listening to the people we interact with day-to-day.

4. **When someone opens up to you, respond.** Offer to pray for them -- if you are comfortable, offer to pray with them then and there. If appropriate, offer specific material support. Make an invitation to come with you to a specific ministry or event at your parish.

If as a diocese we were to do just those four things, we would take a massive step toward becoming a church that evangelizes. It is helpful to note that the initial stages of conversion are trust, curiosity, openness and seeking.[35] For most people, most of the time we move through these stages in one on one relationships *outside* the four walls of a church. The latter stages of conversion typically happen in or through our parishes. But those earlier movements are far more likely to happen at the coffee shop, around the watercooler at work, at our children's basketball game, and at a barbeque in a neighbor's backyard.

When Jesus looked upon the crowds of people that were troubled and abandoned, he turned to the disciples and said, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest."[36] Brothers and Sisters, our communities are full of troubled and abandoned people… are we willing to be sent out for the harvest?



Programmatic Evangelization

What is the parish's role in this? Looking at the Gospel image again, the four friends did not stop at telling the paralytic about Jesus. They proactively brought him to Jesus. This exemplifies the partnership between personal and programmatic evangelization.

It is essential for us to be aware of the different events and ministries available so that when people in our lives open up to us, we can not only listen to them and pray with them, but make an invitation to go deeper in allowing the Lord to meet their needs -- often through the life of the parish.

For most of us the thought of inviting someone into the life of the parish means one thing: inviting him to Mass. If someone is already a fully initiated Catholic that can be a great idea. Invite him to come to Mass *with you* and to go out for brunch together afterwards. If he is not Catholic though, attending Mass may very likely *not* be the best next step for him to take. Fr. James Mallon, an expert on parish renewal, makes this point in a very helpful way: "As beautiful as the liturgy is, it is, by its

very nature, inhospitable to the outsider. It is so because it is the worship of the initiated."[37] We can and ought to take seriously the aspect of hospitality at Mass, welcoming and engaging everyone that comes. But our parishes need to be intentional about also offering a spectrum of events where seekers can encounter Christ and the life of the Church where they are at.

As parishioners go on mission to bring people to the love of God, here are a few suggestions:

- If there is a dire material need, reach out to St. Vincent de Paul Society.
- If there is a struggle with addiction, reach out to an Alcoholics Anonymous ministry.
- If there is an openness toward learning about the Lord, bring them to an evangelization program like Alpha, the Rescued Project or the Search where they can express and receive answers to their questions, while hearing a strong, compelling witness of the Gospel.
- If there is a curiosity about the Eucharist and worship, bring them to a night of Eucharistic adoration with effective music and testimonies.
- If they are ready to take a significant step, invite them to a parish or diocesan retreat.



Again, I am not proposing that all of us are going to become extraordinary evangelists. Rather, I am suggesting that we take up our call to grow in holiness and to become humble, loving witnesses who know where to lead people at our parishes when they express a need or are ready to take the next step toward God.

In the years ahead the diocese will be encouraging and working with the parishes and parish clusters to help them create simple but comprehensive discipleship pathways. A discipleship pathway is a clearly articulated plan that details the handful of essential ministries the parish invests in to help move someone from having no relationship with God and the Church to becoming a missionary disciple. Some parishes are already taking strides to make this a reality; my hope is that *all* of our parishes will follow suit. Pastors and other parish leaders will play a key role in regularly referring to these items and giving clear vision for how parishioners can mature as disciples of the Lord.

Perhaps this sounds fanciful. Is every parish in the diocese really going to suddenly start offering lots of new programs? Honestly, I hope not. Flash in the pan solutions never last. What I do hope is that all the parishes in the diocese become increasingly more intentional about what they are offering and that they communicate a pathway forward to the faithful. A culture of genuine discipleship culminating in mission will take time to build. We must be patient and we must work together, with smaller parishes leaning on the resources of larger parishes for bigger events and perhaps on regional ministries meeting virtually.

Whatever comes to pass, both of these aspects of evangelization (personal and programmatic) are vital and mutually dependent. I have often heard the faithful lament that their parishes do not offer enough of these sorts of programs; but I also hear leaders complain that they offer these things, but no one comes. The programs and events rely on the effective apostolate of the parishioners investing in and inviting the people in their lives. The parishioners rely on the programs being offered and being done well so that when an invitation is accepted it bears fruit. When both begin to take hold a culture of evangelization can be formed in our parishes and that is our goal.

The Role of Catechesis in the Church's Mission

In recent decades as the urgent challenges in the Church have become increasingly clear, many have pointed at religious education programs as both the source of the problem and the place for a solution. Make no mistake, religious education programs can and must improve, but they can only do what they are designed to do.



In the process of evangelization, catechesis is only supposed to take place after an individual has made a decision to follow Christ. First comes pre-evangelization, which features building trust and openness through relationships and witness of the Christian life. Next comes intentional evangelization, including an invitation to respond. Finally, after one has made a decision to embrace Christianity comes discipleship and catechesis.

So many of the struggles in religious education in recent decades have been the product of attempting to catechize young people who have not been evangelized. Think of it this way: discipleship is best considered as mentorship in the Christian life, but we've been seeking to coach people in a way of life they have not chosen to live, to deepen their understanding of a worldview they have not decided to hold.

When catechists get to work with a group of motivated young people in religious education or Catholic schools or a group of eager adults going through the OCIA (Order of Christian Initiation for Adults) the experience is thrilling and energizing. Sadly, that is so often not the case because over and over again we put the cart before the horse.[38] Our diocesan offices are working to help parishes make this transition toward evangelization and discipleship using the best resources available and many parishes are already making great strides.

7 | Two Tendencies to be Avoided: Isolation and Worldliness

There have been two central themes to this letter: the universal call to holiness and the universal call to evangelize. As is hopefully clear by now, these two calls are inextricably linked and form one mission.

As a pastor I see two main ways that we often get this mission wrong. The first is responding to the end of Christendom by taking a 'circle the wagons' approach and isolating ourselves. The second is being lured into an unhealthy worldliness. Sadly, we have witnessed this over and over again in recent decades as many Catholics have become accustomed to pick and choose which teachings fit their worldview. And in those years, we have seen a tragic loss of the understanding of the dignity of the human person and the importance of the family.

The Temptation of Isolationism

At the last supper Jesus told the disciples, *"I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing."*[39] For some the temptation is not to leave the vine enticed by worldly allurements, but to ignore the mandate to bear fruit. "As the Father has sent me so I send you."[40]

As the culture departs from its Christian roots, the Christian's place in society grows increasingly vulnerable. Soft persecution is now a reality for many: in public schools and corporate America dissent from secular ideology about sexuality can result in ostracization and even discipline. For the faithful experiencing these trials -- and those hearing about them -- there is a tendency and, I daresay, a temptation to fully withdraw. This inclination is humanly speaking understandable; but to be frank it is at odds with the Gospel. Prudence is indeed a virtue and there are many justified reasons to withdraw from particular elements of society. I am here addressing the temptation to a total withdrawal.

In the public sphere, we need to be emboldened by the Holy Spirit and courageously give voice to the truth of the dignity of the human person and the truth of the Natural Law. Simultaneously, we must invest in relationships in our spheres of influence so as to become compassionate ambassadors for Christ and the Church.

A recurring image in our Maintenance to Mission Initiative has been that of the lifeboats at the wreck of the Titanic. Tragically, after the ship sank, of the 18 lifeboats launched only two actively returned to search the debris for passengers drowning in the frigid waters.[41]

Brothers and sisters, let it not be said of us that we sat idly by. Look at the alcohol and drug related deaths, suicide rates, depression rates: they are all historically high. The people in our communities are isolated and hurting and are seeking to numb the pain with whatever they can find. Do we look

upon those outside of the Church with contempt or do we see them as beloved Children of God in need of rescue -- just like us?

Whenever the impulse to leave the world to its own ruin arises in our hearts, let us name that temptation for what it is: the spirit of judgment, condemnation and division. Instead, let us beg the Lord for an extra share of the Holy Spirit that we might be animated by charity and a zeal for souls.

The Temptation of Worldliness

As I discussed earlier, American Catholics have a long history of seeking to be welcomed into the mainstream culture. Nevertheless, it is now clear that authentic discipleship demands the willingness to live counter-culturally.

Our Catholic Christianity cannot be simply part of our worldview -- it must be the lens and authority by which and through which we see everything. To be fair: this takes courage. In an apostolic age courage is the virtue we ought to be praying for.

Most of us just want to go about our lives living in peace. We do not like tension and we do whatever we can to alleviate it as quickly and easily as possible. Knowing that reality of human nature, it is vital that we not hide from the tensions that this call to mission arouses in us. I will name a few that are likely to come to mind:

We live in a multicultural society. Coexisting with peers of different religions peacefully is an achievement that we should not take for granted. It is a sad reality that in the history of humanity many wars have been fought over religion. However, we must acknowledge that in light of this achievement, we have been conditioned to think that we should live out our faith privately and that it would be politically incorrect to evangelize.

The Second Vatican Council sheds light on this stating,

> "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in [other] religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men."

SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL | In the 2000 year history of the Catholic Church, there have been 21 times that the Pope has called an Ecumenical Council to discuss a critical matter and proclaim official teaching in response. Vatican II was the most recent of these councils. The teachings from such gatherings carry the highest degree of authority in Catholic doctrine. The Second Vatican Council was called by Pope Saint John XXIII and was closed by Pope Saint Paul VI. It lasted from October 11, 1962 until December 8, 1965. Throughout the various sessions, more than 2,600 bishops from around the world participated, including Bishop Karol Wojtyla (later Pope John Paul II) and Fr. Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI). The Council produced 16 documents on a variety of topics including four major writings, called constitutions, on the Liturgy, Revelation, the Church, and the Church's Role in the Modern World.



As Catholics we believe that there are aspects of all religions that contain truth and interreligious dialogue is designed to draw those commonalities out.

A few lines later the Council Fathers go on to affirm that the mission of evangelization is still primary. "[The Church] proclaims, and ever must proclaim, Christ 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself."[42]

A decade later, Pope St. Paul VI added that this proclamation cannot simply be done through the example of our life. "The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed."[43] Admittedly, that proclamation is going to make some people uncomfortable -- ourselves included. If the Church truly exists to evangelize -- and it is clear from the Lord Jesus himself that She does -- then She is not being herself without doing so. Furthermore, in the Christendom era, when evangelization seemed unnecessary, the faithful grew accustomed to a way of life that was unhealthy for us as followers of Christ. Thus, Fulton Sheen says that despite the tragedy of the end of Christendom, "These are great and glorious days in which to be alive!"

"There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed."

- Pope St. Paul VI

In the World, Not of It

We must pursue simultaneously two goals that at first blush seem contradictory. We must become more deeply countercultural, living as a 'sign of contradiction' in our secular society. At the same time, we must answer the essential call of all true disciples and be sent by the Lord out into the world to be heralds of the good news.

Many of the faithful, indeed probably all of us, will gravitate toward one of these responsibilities: either investing more and more in our Catholic identity or investing more and more in relationships in the world. The true apostle must be committed to both and always with an eye toward mission. We should ask ourselves: is my ongoing formation in the faith animating a deeper desire to make the Lord known and loved in my spheres of influence? And conversely, is my engagement in the world motivated by a deepening desire to make the Lord known and loved?

8 | A New Pentecost

Given the gravity of the Church's mission, especially in such a pivotal time as ours, we cannot remind ourselves often enough that the primary agent of this mission is not us, but the Holy Spirit.

Time and again the popes since Paul VI have prayed for a New Pentecost to lead to this new evangelization they have called forth. We do well to remember the Lord's own apostles gathered in the Upper Room prior to Pentecost. After His Glorious Resurrection the Lord spent 40 days with them continuing to form them and unpack the scriptures. Then when he ascended into heaven what did they do? Nothing. It was not until the Holy Spirit descended upon them that they set out on mission.

Perhaps the reason the New Evangelization has largely been left unstarted is that a New Pentecost has not yet come. Addressing this need Pope Francis tells us,

> "How I long to find the right words to stir up enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelization full of fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction! Yet I realize that no words of encouragement will be enough unless the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in our hearts. A spirit-filled evangelization is one guided by the Holy Spirit, for he is the soul of the Church called to proclaim the Gospel"[44]

Returning once more to the image of the vine and the branches, we hear the sobering words of the Lord: "Without me you can do nothing."[45] His grace and his life are the power that make us holy and that drive evangelization.

We must commit ourselves to utter humility in this regard. Can a branch lopped off from the vine bear any fruit? Of course not -- it cannot even live. So it is with us and this mission. If we were to embark upon this initiative with superhuman efforts without the guidance, leadership, blessing, power and grace of God, it would be of no avail. The Psalmist writes,

> "Unless the LORD build the house,
> they labor in vain who build.
> Unless the LORD guard the city,
> in vain does the guard keep watch.
> It is vain for you to rise early
> and put off your rest at night,
> to eat bread earned by hard toil–
> all this God gives to his beloved in sleep."[46]



Learning to draw close to the Lord and truly let him lead is of paramount importance. Intimacy with Him is not the privileged gift of great saints; it is the ardent desire of the Father for everyone. Toward this end Pope Francis implores us,

> "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; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since 'no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord'. The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. Now is the time to say to Jesus: 'Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace.'"[47]

"We must constantly entrust ourselves to Him. When we do, He will lead us down paths we would have never dreamt of."

When we abide in this place of trust and dependence there is no telling what the Lord will be able to do in and through us. We must constantly entrust ourselves to Him. When we do, He will lead us down paths we would have never dreamt of. Jesus says, "The wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."[48] The widely varying witness of the saints over the past 2,000 years reveals one common denominator: radical trust and total dependence upon the loving provision of God.

9 | **A Diocesan Church of Apostles**

"But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed?
And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard?
And how can they hear without someone to preach?
And how can people preach unless they are sent?"[28]

I hope, dear brothers and sisters, as this letter concludes that this vision is clear. It is quite simply that our diocese becomes a diocese of apostles. Like the first apostles we need to rally close to each other in genuine Christian community. Like the first apostles we need to be animated by the Holy Spirit. Like the first apostles we need to depend utterly on the provision of God especially in and through the Holy Eucharist.

I take no credit for this vision -- it is the vision of all of the popes of recent memory[50] and of the Church Fathers in the first apostolic age. Nevertheless, it is my vision too.

The Church's mission belongs to all of us -- clergy and laity alike. The future of the Church and, indeed, of the world depends on our 'yes' to this divine invitation.

When we are awakened to the urgency of the Church's mission there can be a desire to rush into action. As understandable as that impulse may be, experience shows it will not bear much fruit. How many programs have we seen come and go that got everyone excited only to peter out once the 'reality' of life set back in?

St. Josemaría Escrivá, writing during a time of great turmoil in Spain, characterized this inclination as: "Hurrying, hurrying! Working, working! Feverish activity, anxiety to be up and doing." In place of that he proposed to his would-be missionaries: "Calmness. Peace. Intense life within you. Without that wild hurry, without that frenzy for change, you can work from your proper place in life. And, like a powerful generator of spiritual electricity, you will give light and energy to very many, without losing your own vigor and light."[51]

My hope is not to arouse a sudden burst of activity around the diocese. Rather my hope for us is to stir up a desire to say 'yes', like Mary, to receiving the love of God in a fruitful way. The coinciding of this initiative with the national Eucharistic Revival is a providential gift that grounds us in this posture of receptivity. For it is through the great gift of the Blessed Sacrament that the Lord will sanctify, nourish, and send us. May Mary and St. Augustine our patron and all of the saints and angels intercede for us. Amen.

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26 Matthew 4:18
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28 Mark and Luke's commissioning passages are similar in emphasizing the call to preach and give witness to the Gospel.
29 John 20:21
30 St. John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio, 23
31 Mark 2:1-12
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33 For a very helpful analysis of the stages of conversion see Sherry Weddell's groundbreaking work, Forming Intentional Disciples.
34 Matthew 9:37-38
35 Fr. James Mallon, Divine Renovation, 106. Obviously, Mass is an open public event that anyone is welcome to attend at any time, but we have to think strategically here.
36 In 2020 the Vatican published a new Directory for Catechesis that repeatedly champions the need for kerygmatic catechesis: "Catechesis is an ecclesial act, arising from the missionary mandate of the Lord (cf. Mt 28:19-20) and aimed, as its very name indicates (katechein means 'resound'), at making the proclamation of his passion, death, and resurrection continually resound in the heart of every person, so that his life may be transformed" (55).
37 John 15:5
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48 Most recently, Pope Francis wrote, "Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. 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.'"Evangelii Gaudium, 120
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