

**“HOW TO BE A MISSIONARY DISCIPLE:  
 LOVING AND DEFENDING THE CHURCH IN THE PRESENT TIME”**  
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 NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**  
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My dear friends,

I am pleased and honored to be with you this evening. As the Holy Father’s representative to the United States, I express to you the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of His Holiness Pope Francis. This evening I wish to speak to you about a theme close to the heart of the Pope: Missionary Discipleship.

Pope Francis has a dream for Christ’s Church – that it would be a missionary Church. He writes:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 27)

Pope Francis dreams of a Church that is close to the abandoned and forgotten and which conveys the tenderness of God. He wants an evangelical Church, called to measure itself constantly against the richness of the Gospel. He calls for a Church of missionary disciples, willing to go forth from its comfort zone (cf. *EG*, 20!

*Discipleship and Holiness*

If we are to be missionary Church, then we, its members, first need to be rooted in our identity as disciples. Discipleship involves listening to and following the Divine Master. Before sending the disciples on a mission, Jesus first called the disciples to be with Him. It was from Him that they discovered their mission, were given authority for preaching, and received their power to expel demons and bringing healing to the sick in the service of His Kingdom.

The Pope dreams of a missionary church, but the missionary endeavor is intimately connected to discipleship and holiness: union with God in Christ Jesus. The Holy Father stated in his recent exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*:

A Christian cannot think of his or her mission on earth without seeing it as a path of holiness, for “this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess 4:3). Each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel.

That mission has its fullest meaning in Christ and can only be understood through him. At its core, holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life. It consists in uniting ourselves to the Lord’s death and resurrection in a unique and personal way, constantly dying and rising anew with him. (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018, 19-20).

The Lord is calling each of us to holiness in this specific moment in history – in these present times, which seem dark and uncertain. The Holy Father has said that we “live not so much in an epoch of change as in a change of epoch.” Indeed, the times are changing with secularization spreading rapidly. More than a decade ago, Pope Benedict XVI lamented the rise of the dictatorship of relativism, and Pope Francis, in an interview last week, spoke of the “throwaway culture” and economic systems that perpetuate this culture. The present times also include daily news reports about the Church which can cause us to be discouraged and to lose sight of the many graces received in the pursuit of holiness.

In such a culture and in the Church at this time, what are we to do? At times we feel isolated, alienated, discredited, ignored and even mocked. How can we possibly consider going out on mission amid this storm? Yet, that is precisely what the Holy Father is asking us to do exhorting us to be missionary disciples. In this, he is imitating Jesus who told Peter to *put out into the deep for a great catch!*

Nevertheless, skeptics, looking at declining Mass attendance, lack of youth involvement in the Church, and the rapid erosion of perennial values, ask: Aren't things too far gone to change? Our answer must be: “Of course not! With Christ all things are possible.”

Culture, both within the Church and outside it, while beautiful at times, always needs the Gospel. The fact is that neither history, nor culture, solve our problems. People do. Disciples do, and, for this, the Holy Father calls upon us to accept our responsibility in the mission of evangelization.

#### *The Disciple's Encounter with Christ and the Mission of the Church*

This mission is born from the encounter with Christ – in prayer, in Word and in Sacrament. Missionary discipleship demands a commitment to all three; it requires daily commitment to a deeper friendship with Christ Himself. This friendship is the fruit of an encounter with Christ. It is the Church's mission – our mission – to facilitate this encounter, which, even in these present times, can be life-changing just as it was for Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. For effective evangelization, the encounter is essential.

Pope Benedict XVI expressed it this way:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. (Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 1)

This event or Person is Jesus Himself. The proclamation of the Lord's Resurrection cannot be understood as a mere recollection of a past event; rather, He continues to live. The Church's mission is to help others encounter the Risen One who offers salvation. To encounter the Risen One means to be gathered under the loving gaze that introduces us into the love of God, in a living and lasting relationship with Him. Pope Francis reminds us that the primary reason for evangelizing is “the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of Him.” (cf. *EG*, 264)

The best incentive to share the faith and to evangelize comes from contemplating His love. It is the Beauty of the Lord that amazes and excites us and that attracts new believers.

Even in these turbulent times, when our faith is sorely tested, we may ask: “Has the beauty of Christ’s sacrificial love changed? Does it no longer draw us?”

Yes, Christ has called us to an encounter with Him, but while He calls us by name to be disciples, but He does not call us to holiness or mission merely as individuals. He has called us to be a Church. When Pope Francis speaks of the Church, he describes her as “the holy, faithful People of God.” It is the whole People of God that proclaims the Gospel.

God has called, chosen, and saved us, not just as individuals but as a people. (cf. *EG*, 113) We belong to a People. We are His people. This idea of belonging to a community is challenging in America with its strong emphasis on individual liberty. Nevertheless, this idea of being a people can be prophetic in a world, marked by individualism. In *Laudato Si*, the Holy Father laments that rather than having care for a common home, many tend to view things as completely subject to individual use and progressively distance themselves from nature and from one another (Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*, 24 May 2015, 115-121).

This emphasis on the People of God helps the missionary Church focus on its destiny and the destiny of humanity. The Church is to be the universal sacrament of salvation. The Pope teaches us that:

Being Church means being God’s people in accordance with the great plan of his fatherly love. This means that we are to be God’s leaven in the midst of humanity. It means proclaiming and bringing God’s salvation into our world, which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged. (*EG*, 114)

The Church as the “holy, faithful, People of God” is made up of many members with equal dignity and who share a co-responsibility for the mission. The members have different roles, but no one is exempted or excluded. We do not need a clericalized Church, nor do we want to clericalize the laity; rather, clergy ought to place themselves wholeheartedly at the service of the Gospel and the lay faithful, so that the laity can live their vocations and evangelize.

Each vocation – that of the clergy and that of the laity – began with baptism, through which we were made children of God, incorporated into the Church, and anointed with the power of the Spirit. The clergy have been called to a special pastoral service of the People of God. A pastor is a pastor of a people. The concept of the People of God includes both the pastor and the flock, who journey together.

The whole People of God has a collective responsibility to evangelize. We recall the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on the universal call to holiness – to daily holiness, which is associated with patience (cf. *GE*, 7), not only in our duties or our existential situations but also in moving forward each day. This call to holiness is not only for the well-educated or “qualified” but for the whole people. As such, each member contributes something to the holiness and mission of the Church. We each must ask: What can I contribute to the Church and the culture?

This vision of the Church strengthens the idea of fraternity in the Spirit, which demands openness to the Spirit and to the other – to God and to our brothers and sisters. There is a true mystical fraternity (cf. *EG*, 92) in the People of God. Christ Himself summarized the Law and the Prophets in the two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. Without keeping these two commandments, holiness is impossible. The communion of the People of God –

fraternity – is a sign of the vocation to communion with God, the source of holiness. The People of God is called to be holy.

As I said, holiness is deeply connected to mission. If we are to be an evangelical Church, then we also need to recover a missionary spirit. In our Holy Father's words this:

“involves setting in a missionary key all the day-to-day activities of the particular churches. Clearly this entails a whole process of reforming ecclesial structures. The ‘change of structures’ will not be the result of reviewing the organizational flow chart, which would lead to a static reorganization; rather, it will result from the very dynamics of mission.” (Pope Francis, Address to the Leadership of CELAM, 28 July 2013)

Only from a paradigmatic choice to be a missionary Church will authentic reform, vital for evangelization, flow. Just as wind pushes against a sail and causes a boat to move upon the water, so too the Spirit of God pushes the whole Church to go forth into the world, attentive to the signs of the times and the needs of the people, jettisoning that which is obsolete. Pope Francis adds that “What makes obsolete structures pass away, what leads to a change of heart in Christians, is precisely *missionary* spirit.”

In the present times, what is needed is a commitment to the personal encounter with Christ – in prayer, in the Word, and in the sacraments. This encounter with Him – our deeper union with Him – happens both individually and collectively, and through this relationship we are gradually made holy. In turn, we share the joy of belonging to Him as a Church with the world by being open to the promptings of the Spirit who makes us fit for our common mission.

*The Mission of the Church and Building the Kingdom: A Call to Action*

Some years ago, at the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985, Cardinal Tomasek said:

“We must work for the Kingdom of God – that is a great thing. We must pray for the Kingdom of God – that is more important still. We must suffer for the Kingdom with the Crucified Christ – that is everything.”

Missionary discipleship today requires work, prayer, and suffering. It means being willing to go forth. Next week I will be in Fort Worth for the Fifth National Encuentro. At the beginning of the Encuentro Process two years ago, the Holy Father sent a video message to the American bishops in which he said:

The Church in America, as elsewhere, is called to ‘go out’ from its comfort zone and to be a leaven of communion. Communion among ourselves, with our fellow Christians, and with all who seek a future of hope. We need to become ever more fully a community of missionary disciples, filled with love of the Lord Jesus and enthusiasm for the spread of the Gospel. (Video message to the General Assembly of the USCCB, 14-17 November 2016)

Going out of our comfort zone means embracing our cross to be in solidarity with those at the spiritual and existential peripheries, even if this means suffering with Christ, who was rejected by many, and suffering in solidarity with the marginalized – but for us, this is everything, for it leads us to experience the joy of redemption and leads us closer to the hope offered in the Resurrection. Missionary discipleship demands that disciples go forth to those who are hurting

to bring the joyful message of God's mercy. We do not need to go off to the foreign missions; we can be missionaries in our homes, workplaces, and parishes and beyond, going to those less comfortable places.

These present times necessitate not merely talking about missionary discipleship, but actually being missionary disciples. This means showing some initiative. A community of missionary disciples shows initiative. Pope Francis invites us to be "imitators of God" by having foresight – to be proactive rather than reactive, anticipating the needs of the Church and the community. God seizes the initiative with us and calls us to do the same with those at the peripheries. The term *primerear* captures this idea. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Holy Father writes:

"An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative; he has loved us first (cf. 1 John 4:19), and therefore, we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast." (EG, 24)

A missionary disciple not only shows initiative, but he or she also gets engaged, refusing to be a bystander. The Holy Father sometimes uses the word *balconear*, which means to stand by the window or balcony to see what is happening, but without personal engagement. A person sees and criticizes everything without ever personally getting involved in the mission.

The lay faithful have been made priest, prophet, and king through baptism. They have talents and expertise to offer the Church and the world. If we want to show our love for the Church and to defend her, then we need to be personally involved, offering our gifts and talents, just as Jesus was involved personally in healing the lepers, in visiting the sick, in calling others to deeper conversion, and in bending down to wash his disciples' feet.

A community of missionary disciples also *accompanies* others. The Holy Father frequently exhorts the bishops and priests to have the "smell of the sheep." Some years ago, speaking in Assisi, Pope Francis said:

I repeat it often: walking with our people, sometimes in front, sometimes in the middle, and sometimes behind: in front in order to guide the community, in the middle in order to encourage and support; and at the back in order to keep it united and so that no one lags too far behind, to keep them united. (Francis, "Meeting with Clergy, Consecrated People, and Members of Diocesan Pastoral Councils," Cathedral of San Ruffino, Assisi, 4 October 2013.)

These words are also directed to us. We cannot live in a "bubble", pretending that all is well or that the challenges people pose to the faith or the anger and hurt they articulate are exaggerated. We must engage reality, listening to the stories of others, walking with them, and showing patience as we accompany them. Accompaniment entails guiding, encouraging and supporting, and uniting. Moreover, as we walk with them, they walk with us.

It is that evangelical "going the extra mile" that allows us to witness to them and allows for a mutual enrichment along the way. The mission of evangelization and of forming a new disciple will not happen immediately but only over time with perseverance and accompaniment. Perhaps in that journey, they will notice the joy that we have by belonging to Christ and an occasion will arise to present the truth of the Faith in an attractive way. Rather than seeing a

combative or defensive form of Catholicism, they will notice the serenity of the disciple who is certain that Lord accompanies him even in the darkest moments.

### *Conclusion*

The Holy Father has a dream – that we should be a Church of joyful missionaries at the peripheries of our world. In our present day, we have many challenges, but rather than seek shelter from the culture, we need to go forth to that place where the Lord directs us.

I conclude with the words of Pope Francis:

“...the position of missionary disciples is not in the center but at the periphery: they live poised towards the peripheries... including the peripheries of eternity, in the encounter with Jesus. In the preaching of the Gospel, to speak of ‘existential peripheries’ decentralizes things; as a rule, we are afraid to leave the center. The missionary disciple is someone ‘off center’: the center is Jesus Christ, who calls us and sends us forth.” (Pope Francis, Address to the Leadership of CELAM, 28 July 2013)

May Christ be the center of your lives as you go forth with Him as joyful, missionary disciples.

Thank you.