

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Convocation of Catholic Leaders
“The Radical Call of Missionary Discipleship”
Orlando, Florida
Sunday, July 2, 2017
2:00 p.m.

“Context and Characteristics
of Missionary Disciples”

by

His Eminence
Donald Cardinal Wuerl
Archbishop of Washington

The theme of this Convocation of Catholic Leaders is “The Radical Call of Missionary Discipleship.” The challenge at our gathering is timely as the Church in our country looks to the future and our call to share the faith in word and deed as we move forward.

We have an extraordinary role model of the evangelizing disciple in the person of Pope Francis. From the moment he stepped out onto the balcony of Saint Peter’s Basilica following his election as Bishop of Rome and Successor of Saint Peter, he has presented our faith as an invitation to come and experience the mercy and love of God.

Pope Francis has made it clear that the continuation of the mission of Jesus, which began with the Great Commission following his death and Resurrection, is what we are engaged in today. Thus, a key message since the beginning of his ministry has been about being a missionary disciple.

To be fully a disciple of Jesus means not only accepting and believing his message, but also taking up and participating in the mission of encountering and inviting others to join our pilgrim journey to his heavenly kingdom. The great gift we have received from the Lord we cannot keep to ourselves. It must be handed on (*cf. Lumen Fidei*, 37).

To be truly a missionary means not simply giving people information about Jesus or the Gospel way of life. Not that this is not important. However, the reason we tell people about Jesus, his Gospel, his invitation to new life, is so that they, too, will come to experience him in an embrace of faith. The four Gospels are not intended just to recount the story of Jesus. Each of them is an invitation to believe in him. Our call, the call that is the reason we are here and accept the challenge to be a part of this convocation, is to experience a personal relationship with Jesus and to live his Gospel in a way that his love and truth shine in and through us. As the title of this Convocation suggests, missionary discipleship is not just any calling to follow Jesus, it is a particularly *radical* calling to share Jesus.

This morning, I want to touch on four characteristics of the missionary disciple. But to do so, we need to reflect briefly on the context today of our mission.

I. CONTEXT AND NEW EVANGELIZATION

The Gospel tells us how Jesus engaged people in many ways in the particular situation of their lives. Similarly, the missionary Apostle Paul in his travels to places like Athens, Corinth,

Ephesus and beyond, recognized the social and cultural peculiarities of each community and tailored his one Gospel message, as Pope John Paul II told us in *Redemptoris Missio*, “in language appropriate to and understandable in those surroundings” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 37(c)). This is our model for today too.

Over the past nine years our country has been blessed with two papal visits, one by Pope Benedict XVI in 2008 and, more recently, by Pope Francis in 2015. In both instances they called us to focus on the New Evangelization, the proclamation of the ancient, received faith of the Church, now in ways that are new in ardor, method and expression, and with a voice that reaches people today. To do that means being on the move, walking with others in their own life’s journey.

Pope Francis has focused especially on the Church as a dynamic community willing to leave the restricted circles of habit and institutional security to reach those persons who are far away, a movement towards the excluded and especially those who live in the existential peripheries, in a constant tension towards the encounter with the Lord.

Here we hear echoes of the Gospel story of the two men who went up to the temple to pray. Both clearly were believers because it says they “went up to the temple to pray.” But there is a difference in their attitude and self-appraisal. One announces his righteousness. He belongs to the true faithful of the Church, the small, elite group that knows the law, keeps the Commandments and can clearly recognize those who do not and should not be part of this smaller, purer, more faith-filled community.

The other, whom Jesus praises, acknowledges his sinfulness and also the great mercy of God. He realizes it is God’s grace that saves, not self-righteousness, a list of good deeds and declarations of exclusive faithfulness.

Our call today – because we recognize our own need for mercy – is to go out to those who still need to experience something of that embrace of compassion.

Pope Francis himself has been a pastor of souls who “goes out,” who journeys to encounter others, as he did in 2015 when he visited my own Archdiocese of Washington. Of course, whenever a pope comes to visit, the local bishop is always very honored and keeps the memory close in his heart. So you will understand when I use as an example Pope Francis’ words at the [Mass for the Canonization of Junípero Serra](#) – “*Siempre adelante!* Keep moving forward,” he said. “The Church, the holy People of God, treads the dust-laden paths of history, so often traversed by conflict, injustice and violence, in order to encounter her children, our brothers and sisters.”

This has been Francis’ consistent message from the beginning. At his very first General Audience in the midst of Holy Week in 2013, he explained that “following Jesus means learning to come out of ourselves... in order to go to meet others, to go towards the outskirts of existence, to be the first to take a step towards our brothers and our sisters, especially those who are the most distant, those who are forgotten, those who are most in need of understanding, comfort and help” (March 27, 2013).

My brothers and sisters, what brings us to this convocation in Orlando is the challenge to share the great blessing of our faith and to do so in a way that we are always moving forward.

Throughout his Petrine ministry, again and again, we have heard what are now some familiar words and phrases, such as: journey, go out, accompany, invite, welcome, embrace, take on the smell of the sheep, show mercy and exude joy.

This journey is a pilgrim journey toward a particular destination, toward the New Jerusalem, that promised land of the Lord and his heavenly kingdom (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 71). However, this journey is not always along a smooth and pleasant road. While not an aimless journey in the wilderness, still the path of the pilgrim Church sometimes must take us into those places of darkness and the desert of hunger and thirst, of indifference and abandonment, of spiritual poverty where God has been forgotten. We must go to these places to lead the people there out of the desert.

We today will encounter many people who live in dysfunctional or broken families, those who have divorced, people who are unemployed and who try to survive in material poverty, people who are on the move seeking refuge and a better life, people who are sick and dying, and many who are suffering from deep spiritual wounds.

Certainly, some of this hardship is reflective generally of the human condition in consequence of the Fall. But today there are various social, cultural, and political trends which add to the challenges we face in our mission. The obstacles we especially face include secularism, the materialism that is a part of the mentality of many people, and the individualism that dominates our society, particularly in the Western world. All of these phenomena have greatly influenced our culture, and have had an impact within the Church as well. The 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization addressed this very problem. In the context of that three-week gathering of bishops from all over the world, the secularization of today's society was described as a tsunami that has washed across so much of our cultures, taking with it so many of the foundational elements such as appreciation of marriage, family, basic right and wrong and a sense of community.

II. THE ROLE OF THE LAITY

There is one additional element in our context that we need to highlight, this one a very positive reality, the role of the laity. Looking around this hall, we see this great majority of laywomen and laymen.

At this great Convocation, we see the face of the Church. Here we find the face of the world, various languages, many, many ethnic traditions and backgrounds and we also recognize one very significant element today – the overwhelming majority of lay leaders.

Pope Francis, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, highlights the role of the laity. The mission given to the Apostles, the Pope points out, is given to the whole Church and he urges that every member of the Church – clergy, religious and laity – be missionary disciples,

each in the way proper to that state of life. This emphasis on the laity goes all the way back to the Second Vatican Council. Here we learn that it is precisely laywomen and laymen who have the responsibility for the sanctification and transformation of the temporal order (cf. AA 6, 7).

Pope Francis urges us to reconnect with the spiritual and Pentecostal energy of the Second Vatican Council and, once again, affirm and facilitate the place and role of the laity in the life and mission of the Church.

We bishops and priests can preach or speak at gatherings like this and we carry on the indispensable sacramental ministry of the Church, but it's the laity who go and live in those areas the clergy do not – in workplaces and schools, neighborhoods and on the sidelines of soccer fields and the daily engagement of family around the dinner table. Each of these areas are mission territory and Catholic leaders should encourage their brothers and sisters in the pews – and even those who are otherwise not actively involved in the Church – to take up this cause and be a light of Christ's love to the world.

As Catholic leaders we know that, in addition to being a missionary disciple through the ordinary acts of one's daily life, there are ways for the laity to share the faith by working with the Church's ministries of service. Part of our leadership is to inform people of these opportunities and invite them to participate, including youth groups, campus ministry programs, religious education and other faith formation programs, especially RCIA. The Church greatly depends upon the good laywomen and laymen who are engaged in these works of the Church at almost every diocesan, parish and institutional level.

As he concludes his earthly ministry, Jesus addresses these words to his followers – to you and to me – “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8).

IV. QUALITIES OF THE NEW EVANGELIZER

What are the characteristics of the evangelizing witness? What should be our identifying characteristics?

Of all the many, I will name only four: boldness or courage, connectedness to the Church, a sense of urgency, and joy. All of these are expressions of the outpouring, the anointing and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are all differing manifestations of the same Pentecostal grace, including joy, faithfulness, kindness, generosity and, of course, peace.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the word that describes the Apostles after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is “bold.” Peter boldly stands up and preaches the Good News of the Resurrection. Paul boldly announces the Word in frenetic movement around the Roman world. Today, the New Evangelization must show a similar gift of fortitude, courage, boldness borne of confidence in Christ. We cannot be lukewarm, but must be on fire with the Spirit.

Not that long ago as I took my seat on the plane, the woman in the seat next to me turned and asked, “Have you been born again?” While I thought the Roman collar might have given that away, I said, “Yes” and she continued, “When?”

My point in bringing this story up is two-fold: first, it points out how there are many people not at all hesitant to proclaim their experience of Christ.

But my encounter with the woman on the plane brings me to the second point or characteristic of the evangelizing disciple – our connectedness to the Church. This is the gift of knowledge and serenity or peace.

In answer to her question, “When was I born again?” I said, “When I was baptized.” “Oh,” she said, “you’re Catholic.” She then went on to explain herself. She said, “You Catholics are big into this Church thing, aren’t you?” I said, “Yes, we are” to which she replied, “Tell me about it.”

I thought to myself, “Well, you asked for it,” and so we began. None of us have received directly the revelation, the Gospel message, the truth that Christ brings to the world. It has all come to us through the mediation of the Church, through her enduring, apostolic tradition and witness.

The evangelizing disciples also needs a connectedness with the one Church, her one Gospel and her pastoral presence. The authentication of our message of everlasting life depends on our communion with the Church and solidarity with her pastors.

Another needed quality is a sense of urgency. We see in Mary’s Visitation to Elizabeth how the Gospel recounts that Mary set off in haste on a long and difficult journey. There is no time to be lost because the ministry is so important. Once again, we experience what our Holy Father, Pope Francis, tells us is the need to go out, to encounter and engage. The gift of the Spirit is not a personal possession – a talent to be buried. Rather, it is a gift that carries with it a sense of outreach. “Always forward.”

This too has been a consistent theme of Pope Francis. Like the angels who appeared after Jesus ascended to heaven and said to the Apostles, “Why are you standing there looking at the sky?” – effectively telling them, “Don’t just stand there. Do something! You have your commission. Do what you’ve been told to do.” – our Holy Father is saying likewise, “We have *talked about* the New Evangelization, about what it is and what it entails. Now, *go out and do it!*” We have been called to missionary discipleship, it’s time now for us to rise and be on our way.

Finally, when we look around and see the vast field waiting for us to sow seeds of new life, we must do so with joy. As you know, the exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* is translated as “The Joy of the Gospel.” Our message should be one that inspires others to follow us along the path to the kingdom of God. Ours is a message to *Rejoice! Christ is risen, Christ is with us!*

CONCLUSION

We are heirs to a bold missionary spirit, Pope Francis said at the canonization of Saint Junípero. “We are indebted to a tradition, a chain of witnesses who have made it possible for the Good News of the Gospel to be, in every generation, both ‘good’ and ‘news,’” he said. Now, it’s our turn. We are called to reinvigorate our faith every day and every year, and to share it with others.

This is a new moment in the life of the Church, a new Pentecost. It’s our turn in the long history of the Church simply to believe, to say and live the announcement: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Thank you.

June 16, 2017