



PLANS OF HOPE

HOUMA-THIBODAUX PARISH PLANNING

DIOCESAN PLANNING PRIORITY NO. 2: ADULT FORMATION

CHAPTER 11

SECTION 1



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THE MISSION AND THE COMMISSION

During the Pontificate of Pope Francis there has been an unprecedented quality and clarity of how and what the Lord is saying to the Church through the Holy Father. Whether it is because of trends that have decimated Christianity in Europe, and which now have teeth in the United States, or whether it is purely an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, anyone who has eyes to see and ears to hear is able to notice that something dramatic is happening in the Catholic Church in the United States. We are called to “make disciples”.

The call has its roots in the words of Jesus Himself. Of course, everything that we do in the Church has its roots in Christ Himself. We know that the Priesthood of Jesus Christ is directly from Jesus Christ. Jesus may not have explicitly used the actual word priesthood, but we clearly see the Priesthood of Jesus Christ as rooted in Christ and the Gospels. We also know that the Sacraments are rooted in Christ. While the word Sacrament was never explicitly mentioned by Jesus, we clearly see the Sacraments in the Bible. These two things are clearly in the Bible, even if they are not explicitly mentioned in the words of Jesus Christ.

Jesus does explicitly mention several things we are to do. In John 20, while in the upper room, Jesus says that we are to forgive sins. At the Last Supper Jesus says that we are to “do this in memorial” of Him. With all of that, with what Jesus *implicitly* told us to do, as well as what he *explicitly* told us to do, we cannot deny that **the very last thing he ordered us to do was to make disciples.**

The call to make disciples and the alignment that flows from there starts with the very words of Jesus in Matthew 28. They are **His** very words. They are **explicit** words. He explicitly commissions us to do what He has **commanded** us to do, “Go and make disciples.” If we are to reverence the very sacred things that are **implicit** in Jesus' words, how much more should we reverence the very things Jesus **explicitly** ordered us to do?

In the “great commission” of Matthew 28 Jesus gave us a mission; He gave us *the* mission. Jesus gave us our mission statement, “Make disciples.” Far too often our parish mission statements are long, cumbersome, and complex. They are so complex most parishioners dismiss them. We consistently have to explain our mission statements in order for parishioners to understand their purpose. Unfortunately, “If you have to make statements to clarify your statements then your statements aren’t making statements.” Perhaps our parish mission statements are too complex. Perhaps our mission statements have already been given to us.

The mission from Jesus could be the mission statement for every parish, “Make disciples.”

The Church has carried this as Her mission from the very moment that Jesus ascended to the Father in Matthew 28. While the word disciple is not an ordinary part of our Catholic vocabulary this does not mean that it hasn’t remained a central focus of the Church for the last 2,000 years. For over two millennia the Church has spoken of the need to make disciples. Sometimes she has been explicit in her teachings, while most of the time the words “make disciples” are implicit. Certainly the documents of the Second Vatican Council, as well as the writings of Pope Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis have reclaimed not only the call, but also the specific language of making disciples. In fact, prior to the 2017 release of *Living as Missionary Disciples* the US Bishops’ governing document on evangelization released in 2002, was actually entitled *Go and Make Disciples*.

There is a difference between stewardship and ownership. Since the Second Vatican Council there has been great renewal in the church. There has been a resurgence of energy in the lives of the lay faithful. There has been an unprecedented partnership between pastors and parishioners coming together to advance the mission. Sometimes what we truly believe on the inside does not always get adequately expressed on the outside. It is often said, “The Church is the people” or “The parishioners really ‘own’ their parish.” Of course, we all know what is implied with the passion expressed in these comments. Truly we are all in this together.

However, we should be careful do not confuse passion with precision. Jesus Christ, and He alone, “owns” the Church. Jesus “owns” the diocese. Jesus “owns” our parishes. Jesus “owns” your parish. All of us together, clergy and laity, are all **stewards** of what He has entrusted us with. We should not confuse stewardship with ownership. If we are stewards of His parish then we are stewards of His mission in the parish. If it is His parish then that means the parish exists for His mission, **the parish exists to make disciples.**

In 2013 Pope Francis addressed the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization. There he urged Church leaders to **focus** on making disciples. There, he called for “a shared commitment to a pastoral plan which brings us back to the essential and which is solidly focused on the essential; that is, on Jesus Christ. *To get diverted by many secondary or superfluous things does not help; what helps is to focus on the fundamental reality, which is the encounter with Christ*”.

Later, in that same year, he released *Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)* where he urged us to **focus** on making disciples. In 2015 he visited the United States and, among other things, he urged us to focus on making disciples. The exhortation from our Holy Father is not merely to *remind* us of our call, but he is explicitly asking us to **focus** on that call. By introducing the concept of missionary disciples Pope Francis is not merely asking us to make disciples, he is also reminding us that it is our mission. He is asking us to be *intentional*, he is asking us to **focus** our energy on making disciples.

In direct response to Pope Francis’ *Joy of the Gospel*, in 2017 the US Bishops published *Living as Missionary Disciples*. It is the blueprint for parish evangelization in the United States. As they cast their vision, the US Bishops write, “The parish must be concerned with bearing fruit throughout the discipleship process. This shift in focus ensures that attention is directed toward pruning what is ineffective so that new life and fruit can occur. Throughout Scripture, the metaphor of fruit is used many different times and in many ways in reference to mission. Jesus commands the disciples to ‘go and bear fruit that will remain’ (John 15:16). The work of pastoral planning ought to bear fruit and also involve effective pruning through planning, organization, and implementation so that new life and growth can occur. Jesus reminds us that the Father ‘takes away every branch ... that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit’ (John 15:1-2).” The Bishops are calling us to **focus**.

“YOU CAN’T SAY YOU’RE LISTENING UNLESS YOU ARE OPEN TO BEING CHANGED BY WHAT YOU HEARD”

To help us focus on our mission Bishop Fabre embarked upon an intentional commitment to listen. During a span of 14 months, beginning in the spring of 2015 and ending in the summer of 2016, Bishop Fabre listened to his priests and his people. Throughout this process he would often remind those he was listening to that, “You can’t say you’re listening unless you are open to being changed by what you heard.” While he had an intuition of what he was going to hear he remained committed to being open to whatever was said. He remained open to being changed by what he heard. What he heard changed him in that it shaped his understanding of what God was saying to us. His understanding helped to make clear how God was asking us to **focus**.

Bishop Fabre hosted 20 listening sessions in venues strategically placed throughout the diocese. Over 1,000 laity participated either in person, on paper, or on-line. Underneath the emerging themes was a plea from the laity: **focus**. Of all the themes that emerged from listening sessions there were two that specifically got his attention. First, there was an overwhelming sense that people in the pew are hungry for more relevant preaching. While many things emerged regarding all things Sunday Mass, the most consistent comment made regarding weekend Liturgy was the desire for better preaching. Secondly, there were explicit comments expressing the desire for better **adult formation**. We heard, “Most adult Catholics do not feel confident defending their faith.” We heard parents say that they want more themselves so as to better help their children. We heard hundreds reveal an ache for more. We heard that adults are hungry to be fed. Loud and clear we heard the call to **focus**, and to **focus on adult formation**.

A short time after the listening sessions concluded, the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux began a partnership with the Catholic Leadership Institute (CLI). One of the resources offered to us by CLI is the *Disciple Maker Index* (DMI). The DMI came to be as CLI once gathered 100 bishops, priests, diocesan officials, parish leaders and authors to a two-day “think tank” on parish engagement which produced some initial hypothesis. Based on the insights from the two-day gathering, CLI then took a smaller group of the same constituents and crafted a 75 question survey known as the *Disciple Maker Index*.

The DMI is an assessment tool designed to assess two essential aspects of parish life. First, the DMI helps pastors and parishes assess how parishioners describe “where they are” in their spiritual life. How are they doing? Where do they need help? Secondly, the DMI helps parishioners voice how well the parish is doing in helping them in their spiritual growth. The survey results reveal what about the parish is keeping parishioners engaged, as well as things that might be prompting them to start falling away.

In March 2017 nearly 4,500 Houma-Thibodaux parishioners participated in the DMI. The results of the DMI clearly confirmed the call to **focus on adult formation**.

- 44% Expressed explicitly that they want to grow in their spiritual life
- 48% Expressed implicitly that they want help being formed as a disciple
- 46% Expressed implicitly that they want help in their relationship with God
- 35% Expressed implicitly that they want help via Bible study or Bible teachings
- 53% Expressed either an interest in or openness to participating in a small group

Interestingly enough, all 38 parishes in the diocese scored lowest in the following two statements:

1. The parish is a place that helps form me as a disciple
2. I feel confident having a conversation about the faith and sharing my personal testimony

In addition to using the DMI, many Parish Implementation Teams took the initiative to get even more information from parishioners. These Parish Implementation Teams chose to complete an evaluation of their current ministries, assessing if those ministries naturally and consistently assist people through the Formation Life Cycle. Results from the surveys and assessments showed the following:

- Most parishes are ill-equipped in *intentionally* assisting people through the Formation Life Cycle, much less any intentional process of discipleship formation. Many parishes have adult catechesis or they may teach a class and offer intellectual formation. However, even then there seems to be a lack of systematic formation of the whole person.
- Most current ministry leaders are not equipped to accompany people through an intentional process of faith formation or discipleship.
- Ministries currently active in parishes are not aligned in a way that allows parishioners to easily take “the next step” in their relationship with God.
- Often the measure of success of a ministry isn’t consistent with how the US Bishops describe “fruitfulness”. In other words, success is often measured subjectively rather than through a series of assessments indicating if there is real sustainable fruit in one’s spiritual life.

Despite an abundance of “activity” in our parishes, there is little, if anything, that is intentionally designed to accompany the average parishioner through a process of formation to become a mature missionary disciple of Jesus Christ.

The Pope is calling us to **focus**. The US Bishops are calling us to **focus**. The people in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux are calling us to **focus**. The call is clear: **focus on forming adults**.

THE ENEMY OF THE BEST IS THE GOOD

In their 2006 best seller *Simple Church*, authors Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger illustrate trends within ministry models that are thriving, as well as those philosophies that are struggling. As they set the stage in chapter one, they present an impressive body of research and data that eventually peaks in the following statement, “Perhaps we are losing ground not despite our overabundance of activity but because of it.”

There is no shortage of activity in most of our parishes. If mere activity guaranteed transformation in people’s lives you would not be reading this, for we would not need a strategic plan. If being busy were an indication of the health of the parish, most churches in America would be thriving. Being busy is not the issue, being busy about the right things is. Again, “Perhaps we are losing ground not despite our overabundance of activity but because of it.” Pope Benedict XVI says this a bit more poetically during his 2006 Christ Mass, “The world in its frenetic activism often loses its direction. Its action and capacities become destructive if they lack the power of prayer, from which the waters of life irrigate the arid land.” We would do well if we looked deep into the mirror and asked ourselves two questions, “Why are we doing what we’re doing? Is what we are doing changing people’s lives?”

Commitment to discernment is required in a parish if there is to remain a commitment to focus. With all that is already happening in parishes, and with the ordinary excitement of the next “new idea” luring parishes to do even more, now more than ever we need **discernment** if we are to **focus**. The technical definition of discernment actually requires two goods, for one never discerns to do evil. Discernment in parish life is rarely the decision between good and bad. Discernment is often in between two things that are good. The art in church leadership is knowing what is the best between the goods. An undiscerned grasping at too many good ideas can dilute a parish’s intentionality and compromise its fruitfulness and long-term impact in people’s lives. In other words, it can be said, “The enemy of the best is the good.”

Pope Francis helps us appreciate the nuances of discerning well. In *Gaudete et Exsultate (The Call to Holiness in Today's World)* the Holy Father writes, "Often discernment is exercised in small and apparently irrelevant things, since greatness of spirit is manifested in simple everyday realities. ... Discernment also enables us to recognize the concrete means that the Lord provides in his mysterious and loving plan, to make us move beyond mere good intentions."

We need more than mere "good intentions" if we are to respond to the call to make disciples and the call to focus. **Adult formation cannot merely be another idea amongst many.** Mere good intentions towards one's spiritual maturation is *not* enough. "Perhaps we are losing ground not despite our overabundance of activity but because of it." Or, we could say, "Perhaps we are failing to form adults as disciples not despite our overabundance of activity but because of it."

THE URGENCY OF NOW

The Holy Father is asking us to **focus**. The Church is asking us to **focus**. The laity of Houma-Thibodaux are asking us to **focus**. With mounting pressure from both secular influences outside the church and competing philosophies inside the parish, the challenge of evangelization has never been what it is now. The question then looms: Why now? Is there a need for us to respond? Is there a need for us to focus *now*?

Let's take a look the landscape of Catholicism in the United States.

NATIONAL STATISTICS: *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate*

Total priests	1977 58,909	1997 49,054	2017 37,181
Priestly ordinations	1977 771	1997 511	2017 504
Parishes	1977 18,515	1997 19,331	2017 17,156
Parishes without a pastor	1977 702	1997 2,161	2017 3,552
Self-identified Catholic population	1977 54.5 million	1997 65.7 million	2017 74.3 million
Foreign-born adult Catholic population	1977 4.7 million	1997 7 million	2017 16.9 million
Those raised Catholic who no longer identify as Catholic	1977 7.5 million	1997 17.3 million	2017 30 million
Catholics attending Sunday Mass regularly	1977 42%	1997 35%	2017 23%

NATIONAL STATISTICS: *Forming Intentional Disciples* by Sherry Weddell

The 2014 Pew Research Center study “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” indicates the fastest-growing religious demographic in the United States to be “unaffiliated” (aka “nones”).

- One out of every four American adults say they are not affiliated with any religious group or tradition.
- Note: In 2008, merely 10 years ago, the statistic was one in six.

The 2014 Pew Research Center study “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” further indicates the crisis of 18-29 year olds as “unaffiliated” (aka “nones”).

- 39% of American adults 18-29 say they are not affiliated with any religious group or tradition
- 30% of Americans who were raised Catholic are still “practicing.”
- 32% of Americans who were raised Catholic — 1/3 of all Catholic adults — no longer consider themselves Catholic.

Why are Catholics leaving the Catholic Church for non-denominational or protestant communities?

- 52% of those attending non-denominational communities are former Catholics
- 71% “My spiritual needs were not being met”
- 62% “I felt called by God”
- 21% “Because of the sexual-abuse scandal”

Why people leave the Catholic Church to be “unaffiliated” (aka “nones”)

- 71% “I just gradually drifted away”
- 65% “Stopped believing in the Church’s teachings.”
- 42% “Don’t believe in God”
- 33% “Have not found the right religion”
- 27% “Because of the sexual-abuse scandal”

The crisis with youth and young adults

- 79% of cradle Catholics are no longer Catholic by the age of 23
- 50% of cradle Catholics ages 18-35 are no longer Catholic
- 7% of cradle Catholics ages 18-35 practice their Faith on a regular basis

Nationally speaking, what is the financial impact?

- \$5 billion estimated loss of revenue as baby boomers transition to eternal life

Why is adult formation a Diocesan planning priority?

The question is not *if* we need to do something but *when* do we need to do it. The aforementioned statistical analysis of the current state of affairs within the Catholic Church of America graphically illustrates **the urgency of now**. The historic exodus of Catholics leaving the Church is not just isolated to teens, young adults, or a season of life “when they’re just searching.” *Adults* are leaving the Church. Adults are leaving the Church for a number of reasons; there is no single answer to explain the crisis. While the crisis illustrates an urgency, we should be careful not to react compulsively out of fear.

Best-selling author Matthew Kelly once said, “Everything that is wrong about the Catholic Church can be fixed by everything that is right about the Catholic Church.” Of course, we know that there is nothing wrong with the Church Herself, the Sacraments, and the Bible, etc. However, there is something very wrong about the trends we see gripping the church in America. All of what we see requires us to look in our hearts. The most important question is not, “What is *wrong* with the Catholic Church?” The most important question is, “What is *right* with the Catholic Church?”

We are founded by Jesus Christ.

We have been given the very Word of God.

Every Mass we make presents the absolute real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

We stand on the shoulders of Saints.

We have weathered the storm for over two millennia and have learned from our history how to respond to the present.

Everything about that is right.

We have a Pope that has been given to us at this stage of history to confront these problems. He has called us to **focus**, to **make disciples**, and the most natural place to start is with the **adults** that are *already in the parish*. That’s adult formation. That’s a call to focus on adult formation.

The Church has echoed this call to focus.

The people of this diocese have asked for it.

An analysis of their needs illustrates the need for formation, **adult formation**.

While we could be busy about many things, what could we focus on that would be more important than helping the adults in our pews grow in their identity as a disciple? Adult formation is a diocesan planning priority, and perhaps the most important, and should not be seen as another option among many. Again I ask: While we could be busy about many things, what could we focus on that would be more important than helping the adults in our pews grow in their identity as a disciple?

Romans, chapter 10 states, “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. 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?”

We have been entrusted with a mission. Perhaps we could read Romans 10 with a reverent enhancement designed to help us appreciate the call, “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. 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 *come to know*? And how can they know Him ... unless their parish helps them?”

We have been entrusted with a mission. Now, at this stage of our history, we are called to respond. Let us do so with **focus**. Let us begin with **adult formation**.