



Building Blocks for Mission

5. Missionary Spirit

Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father"
(Matthew 5: 16)

We can all be grateful for the important role our parishes play in our lives. In our parishes, the Word of God is proclaimed and preached, the Mass and Sacraments are celebrated, young and old are taught the faith, and the witness of a strong community helps us to appreciate the gift of being a member of Christ's body. Our spiritual lives are continually nourished through the pastoral care and ministries in our parishes. What we sometimes fail to recognize, however, is that the purpose of our parishes is not only to nurture the personal faith of its people but to prepare its people for service in Jesus' name. We call this our missionary vocation, which means we are called by God by virtue of our Baptism to share in the mission and ministry of Jesus. The parish is not an end in itself. Its purpose is not just to care for our personal spiritual needs, but to be a center where disciples are prepared and sent to put the Gospel into action. We are repeatedly reminded of this when we are dismissed at Mass with the charge: "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord."

The sign of an effective parish is not the size of the Sunday bulletin, nor the amount of the offertory collection, nor the number of weekly meetings. Rather, the well-being and integrity of a parish is best measured by how well parishioners have learned to become missionaries and to gladly share in the mission of Jesus. A healthy and vibrant parish calls its parishioners to mission, offers a number of concrete possibilities for service and provides spiritual formation, as well as necessary training and support. The thing to remember is that mission is not one of many ministries in a parish; mission is intended to be the heartbeat and purpose of every parish.

We Are All Missionaries

The whole idea of being a missionary may initially cause us to wonder whether this vocation is something reserved for a special group of people, beginning with clergy and religious. We might think that to share in the mission of the Church, we need to travel far from home. The truth is that we are all called to share in the mission of Jesus, each in our own way for the life of the world. As Pope Francis said, "Every Christian is a

missionary to the extent that he or she bears witness to God's love." (May 5, 2013).

You can be a missionary in your hometown, in your own parish, at work or play, in school or in the neighborhood. What matters is that you move beyond your own needs to serve others in the name of Jesus. As missionaries, we pattern our lives on the ministry of Jesus as he reached out to the poor, the sick and the sinner. Parishes that are strong and vibrant are parishes where parishioners gladly share in the mission of Christ. They further the reign of God in our world by embracing the Gospel mandate to be "the light of the world" (Mt 5:14).

Missionaries Must Look Beyond Themselves

Thinking of ourselves as missionaries leads us to go beyond our psychological comfort zones. Our service in the name of the Gospel may call us to places we have never been, to people we do not know, into circumstances we have never encountered. We follow Jesus without fear, and we rely upon the Holy Spirit's guidance. Engaging in mission means taking peacemaking seriously and working for justice. Mission may move us to visit an elderly neighbor, to volunteer at a soup kitchen, to write a letter to the local congressman, or to participate in a parish mission trip to Appalachia, Haiti or far beyond.

Being an effective missionary begins with learning to listen carefully to others in our community, including those who are not part of our circle of engaged believers. Our task is not to impose our spirituality on others, but to draw out the good from others by sharing the joy of our own faith. Like every missionary, we need to learn the language of the people we hope to reach and to communicate in a language others can understand. Think of the enormous implications of technology in today's culture. It is a new language upon which many people rely. This is just one example of how understanding culture goes beyond ethnic or racial background. How do people think? What do they value? What are they looking for in life? These are some of the questions missionaries ask.



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Living as a Missionary Is a Process

Engagement in mission is meant to be more than becoming an occasional volunteer. For the baptized Christian, the spirit of mission is an integral part of one's life. We may begin our missionary vocation as an apprentice with someone who has more experience. We may take small steps at first but then discover that we can assume more responsibility and eventually become a mentor in preparing others for mission. We are more than humanitarians, for it is the love of Christ that compels to reach out to others. We take seriously the mandate of Jesus who said, "As often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me" (Mt. 25:40). We take the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12) as our missionary charter, the defining wisdom of our vocation as missionaries.

Mission Flows from the Eucharist

Mission flows from the Eucharist. We are sent forth at Mass to: "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." We are charged to imitate the love and reconciliation we celebrate at the Lord's Table in all our relationships in society. Blessed Pope John II put it this way:

"The authentic sense of the Eucharist becomes itself the school of active love of neighbor... The Eucharist educates us to this love in a deeper way; it shows us, in fact what value each person, our brother or sister, has in God's eyes, if Christ offers Himself equally to each one, under the species of bread and wine."

(The Mystery and Worship of the Eucharist, 1980, #6)

Through the process of *Parish Transformation*, parishes are being called to foster a mission-minded culture. Parishes with a missionary spirit do not get overly concerned about their own internal issues which can lead to spiritual narcissism. They heed the call of Jesus that "demands that we go out from ourselves, and from living a tired and habitual faith" (Pope Francis, March 27, 2013). They see their vocation as missionary, sent to serve and not be served. A parish with missionary zeal is a joyful community because it has learned to be one with the One whom the Father sent.

FOR OUR MEDITATION

"As the Father sent me, so am I sending you."
(John 20:21)

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me, in prison and you came to visit me."
(Mt. 25:35-36)

"The need for the faithful to share in this responsibility [missionary activity] is not merely a matter of making the apostolate more effective; it is a right and duty based on their baptismal dignity, whereby the faithful participate, for their part, in the three-fold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King."
(Mission of the Redeemer, #71)

"Since the entire Church is missionary by its nature and since the work of evangelization is to be viewed as a fundamental duty of the people of God, all the Christian faithful, conscious of their own responsibility in this area, are to assume their role in missionary work."
(Canon 781)

"Now is the time for a new 'creativity,' not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by 'getting close' to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters."
(Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, #50)

"Christ leads us to go out from ourselves more and more, to give ourselves and to serve others."
(Pope Francis, June 4, 2013)