

The Art of Accompaniment

3rd Sunday in Easter (Year A)

April 26, 2020

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Today's homily makes sense in every context except the one we find ourselves in right now, this time of social distancing. It is about Pope Francis' emphasis on what he calls the 'art of accompaniment.' Accompaniment means 'to walk with,' 'to draw near to,' and 'to live in close proximity of.' So remember it now and apply it later!

Throughout much of our history, Pope Francis believes that the church has been really good at telling people what to do, but hasn't been so good on actually walking with people through the ups and downs of life. In his mind, we have preferred to stay at a distance from the messiness of real life. This is reflected in our doctrines, which emphasize aspects like purity, separation, and personal holiness to the exclusion of things like involvement, connection, and community. To reverse this trend, Pope Francis has advocated for what we might call 'social nearness.'

Telling the story of the two disciples traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus, our Gospel this weekend states, "and it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them." In this one sentence, we have the art of accompaniment. The Risen Lord 'drew near' and 'walked with.' Quite simply, Pope Francis is calling us to the art of accompaniment because that is what Jesus did all his life, both before and after his resurrection.

In his document *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis writes a little more about what he means by this 'art of accompaniment.' To accompany others first of all means to nonjudgmentally support them. This involves approaching others with a sense of profound respect, even if we disagree with them or think they are out of line. He writes, "one who accompanies others has to realize that each

person's situation before God and their life in grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without." (172) There isn't a one-size-fits-all to life. To be clear, this does not mean that we simply affirm people at all costs.

Accompaniment is not a form of therapy that supports others in their self-absorption, he says. Rather, nonjudgmental support is the ability to create a human connection before all else.

Accompaniment also requires listening. Listening, Pope Francis says, is more than simply hearing. He goes on, "listening, in communication, is an openness of the heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders." (171) One of the fruits of listening is that it prevents us from dominating the conversation. Notice that in the Gospel story today, Jesus didn't just jump in to telling the two disciples about the scriptures and how they relate to him. He allowed a dialogue to begin and even asked them questions, like "what are you discussing as you walk along?," "what sort of things?," and "was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" The ability to ask questions demonstrates an ability to listen.

Finally, accompaniment means we don't abandon others when times get tough. Pope Francis writes, "the pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life." (169) It is a long journey of patience and progress that isn't ended until we reach our destination.

As members of the Church, we are called to accompany each other on the path of life.

Who can I accompany on their path through life? Who can accompany me?

We accompany not because we have all the answers or know exactly where we're going. We accompany because life is simply too hard to go through alone.