

Baldwin, Terrie

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From Discipleship to Apostleship: Creating Witnesses in Faith

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis lays out a plan to fill the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus and encourages the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by joy, while pointing out paths for the Church's journey in the years to come (EG,1). The hope of this paper is to actively join in this vision, to take a brief look at the present day situation of the church, to delve deeply into the connections between evangelization and catechesis of the past and present, and to propose a simple catechetical method for the future to assist and encourage others to become witnesses of faith.

While research doesn't tell the full story, here is a brief synopsis from two studies on the present landscape regarding Catholics sharing their faith. In Forming Intentional Disciples, Sherry Weddell quotes a study done by Nancy T. Ammerman in 2005 citing that only 6% of U.S. Catholics responded positively in answering the question, "whether spreading the faith was a high priority of their parishes" (Weddell, 51). In 2007, according to PEW Research studies, only 14% of U.S. Catholics shared faith with others at least weekly. Interestingly, this number went up by 2% to 16% since by 2014. Perhaps this is a good sign of witnessing to come (PEW, 14).

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis comments on the situation of formation and evangelization for the world-wide church, citing the need of formation of the laity and the evangelization of professional and intellectual life as a present significant pastoral challenge.

Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God. The minority – ordained ministers – are at their service. There has been a growing awareness of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church. We can count on many lay persons, although still not nearly enough, who have a deeply-rooted sense of community and great fidelity to the tasks of charity, catechesis and the celebration of the faith. At the same time, a clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act,

due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making. Even if many are now involved in the lay ministries, this involvement is not reflected in a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political and economic sectors. It often remains tied to tasks within the Church, without a real commitment to applying the Gospel to the transformation of society. The formation of the laity and the evangelization of professional and intellectual life represent a significant pastoral challenge (EG, 102).

The situation is apparent. The church has and is being called to evangelize. From the time of Jesus, to Pope Paul VI declaring “The church exists to evangelize!” to Pope Francis calling us to be missionary disciples, first there is a mission to fulfill and second, training is needed to do it.

In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries”, but rather that we are always “missionary disciples”. If we are not convinced, let us look at those first disciples, who, immediately after encountering the gaze of Jesus, went forth to proclaim him joyfully: “We have found the Messiah!” (Jn 1:41). The Samaritan woman became a missionary immediately after speaking with Jesus and many Samaritans come to believe in him “because of the woman’s testimony” (Jn 4:39). So too, Saint Paul, after his encounter with Jesus Christ, “immediately proclaimed Jesus” (Acts 9:20; cf. 22:6-21). So what are we waiting for? (EG, 120)

Agreed! What are we waiting for? We cannot wait any longer. We need to form missionary disciples in evangelizing churches. Realizing the position of the Catholic faith at this time, based on the statement from Pope Francis as well as recent research, it seems the time is now to pray for the future of the church. It is also time to take action in creating new catechetical methods for creating missionary disciples. To follow in this paper is how Catholic tradition, scripture, and writings all support the importance of evangelization and catechesis in the mission of the church. Following this analysis, an idea is proposed. It explains how by using a simple additional catechetical method into our present catechesis, we can begin to assist the young and the old to begin thinking and acting in new ways as missionary disciples.

Catechesis and evangelization are closely tied together in bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ through both writings and traditions of a 2000 plus year history. In scripture, Jesus taught his followers how to be disciples throughout his living days on earth. Upon his resurrection the disciples were transformed and sent them forth to be apostles beginning with Mary Magdalene, Apostle of the Apostles, and the women at the tomb, who were instructed by an angel of the Lord to “go quickly and tell the disciples” (Mt. 28 1-7) continuing on until he ascended into heaven sending them all forth with the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). From this point in history forward through oral and written scripture the message of the Gospel has been spread person by person through the process of inviting, believing, contemplating, following and sending.

In more recent times, this process has become a more defined and formalized understanding of the process of catechesis and evangelization working together. From the first writing on evangelization following the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council, beginning with *Ad Gentes*, encouraging the laity to be witnesses to Pope Francis and *Evangelii Gaudium* reminding everyone of our baptismal call to be missionary disciples over the past fifty plus years the church hierarchy has explored in many ways how to create missionary disciples through evangelization and catechesis.

Ad Gentes, written following the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council, draws the connection between catechesis and evangelization by discussing the duty of the laity and the importance of preparing them to be witnesses. “Their main duty, whether they are men or women, is the witness which they are bound to bear to Christ by their life and works in the home, in their social milieu, and in their own professional circle...In fact, wherever possible, the laity should be prepared, in more immediate cooperation with the hierarchy, to fulfill a special mission of proclaiming the Gospel and communicating Christian teachings, so that they may add vigor to the nascent Church” (AG, 21).

Pope Paul VI continued the conversation on catechesis and evangelization discusses the mission of the church and connections to teaching in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

It is with joy and consolation that at the end of the great Assembly of 1974 we heard these illuminating words: "We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church." It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection (EN, 14).

This document also describes the intricate and commingled connection between catechesis and evangelization of proclamation of the kerygma.

Even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified - what Peter called always having "your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have" and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus... There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed... This proclamation - kerygma, preaching or catechesis - occupies such an important place in evangelization that it has often become synonymous with it; and yet it is only one aspect of evangelization (EN, 22).

Continuing the intricate connection between evangelization and catechesis, an emphasis is placed on good catechetical instruction.

A means of evangelization that must not be neglected is that of catechetical instruction. The intelligence, especially that of children and young people, needs to learn through systematic religious instruction the fundamental teachings, the living content of the truth which God has wished to convey to us and which the Church has sought to express in an ever richer fashion during the course of her long history... Truly the effort for evangelization will profit greatly- at the level of catechetical instruction given at church, in the schools, where this is possible, and in every case in Christian homes... The methods must be adapted to the age, culture and aptitude of the persons concerned, they must seek always to fix in the memory, intelligence and heart the essential truths that must impregnate all of life. It is necessary above all to prepare good instructors- parochial catechists, teachers, parents- who are desirous of perfecting themselves in this superior art, which is indispensable and requires religious instruction" (EN, 44).

Pope John Paul II picked up where Pope Paul VI left off in *Catechesi Tradendae*, "*Evangelii Nuntiandi*... rightly stressed that evangelization, which has the aim of bringing the Good News to the whole of humanity, so that all may live by it, is a rich, complex and dynamic reality, made up of elements, or one could say moments, that are essential and different from each other, and that must all be kept in view simultaneously. Catechesis is one of these moments - a very remarkable

one - in the whole process of evangelization" (CT, 18). "Let us first of all recall that there is no separation or opposition between catechesis and evangelization. Nor can the two be simply identified with each other. Instead, they have close links whereby they integrate and complement each other" (CT, 18).

Nevertheless, the specific aim of catechesis is to develop, with God's help, and as yet initial faith, and to advance in fullness and to nourish day by day the Christian life of the faithful, young and old. It is in fact a matter of giving growth, at the level of knowledge and in life, to the seed of faith sown by the Holy Spirit with the initial proclamation and effectively transmitted by Baptism.

Catechesis aims therefore at developing understanding of the mystery of Christ in the light of God's word, so that the whole of a person's humanity is impregnated by that word. Changed by the working of grace into a new creature, the Christian thus sets himself to follow Christ and learns more and more within the Church to think like him, to judge like him, to act in conformity with his commandments, and to hope as he invites us to.

To put it more precisely: within the whole process of evangelization, the aim of catechesis is to be the teaching and maturation stage, that is to say, the period in which the Christian, having accepted by faith the person of Jesus Christ as the one Lord and having given him complete adherence by sincere conversion of heart, endeavors to know better this Jesus to whom he has entrusted himself: to know His "mystery," the kingdom of God proclaimed by him, the requirements and promises contained in His Gospel message, and the paths that he has laid down for anyone who wishes to follow him.

It is true that being a Christian means saying "yes" to Jesus Christ, but let us remember that this "yes" has two levels: It consists in surrendering to the word of God and relying on it, but it also means, at a later stage, endeavoring to know better - and better the profound meaning of this word (CT, 20).

Finally as described in *Catechesi Tradendae*, the roles of catechesis and evangelization come through the sharing of faith by every Christian in the world.

Since catechesis is a moment or aspect of evangelization, its content cannot be anything else but the content of evangelization as a whole. The one message - the Good News of salvation - that has been heard once or hundreds of times and has been accepted with the heart, is in catechesis probed unceasingly by reflection and systematic study, by awareness of its repercussions on one's personal life - an awareness calling for ever greater commitment - and by inserting it into an organic and harmonious whole, namely, Christian living in society and the world (CT 26).

Continuing through the years in the post Vatican II era, when Pope Benedict XVI announced the Year of Faith, our attention was drawn to the work of catechesis and evangelization as working together so as to authentically witness one's faith. The goal as presented in *Porta Fidei*

was “to make our relationship with Christ the Lord increasingly firm, since only in him is there the certitude for looking to the future and the guarantee of an authentic and lasting love.” The work of the Second Vatican Council and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* were emphasized in this document as we began to discover and encourage one another to a deeper meaning of our faith: to believe more strongly in what we profess through learning and because of this engage in a new way of living our faith in Jesus Christ. Through this we discovered the truth in this statement. “What the world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and heart by the word of the Lord, and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life, life without end” (PF, 15).

In our progression of documents and papacies we see a distinct move in the papacy of Pope Francis to a specific focus on evangelization with a desire to create missionary disciples. On December 3, 2015, Pope Francis stressed this while addressing the assembly of the *Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*. “Throughout the world, let us be permanently in a state of mission.” Urging, that this 'going forth' is innate in our Baptism, and the mission's 'boundaries' are those of the world. (ZENIT, 1)

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis continues the conversation of the relationship between catechesis and evangelization, not by repeating the words of his predecessors intentionally, but by encouraging growth in each person as the root of evangelization.

The Lord’s missionary mandate includes a call to growth in faith: “Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:20). Hence it is clear that that the first proclamation also calls for ongoing formation and maturation. Evangelization aims at a process of growth which entails taking seriously each person and God’s plan for his or her life. All of us need to grow in Christ. Evangelization should stimulate a desire for this growth, so that each of us can say wholeheartedly: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20) (EG, 160).

A few paragraphs later he sums this up in this statement on evangelization. “Education and catechesis are at the service of this growth” (EG, 163).

So in what practical way can we encourage catechesis for the continued growth of an individual and for the purpose of evangelization? The following is a simple proposal for a

catechetical method to be used to promote the formation of missionary disciples who can go forth to call others to Christ. The desire would be to move a person through a process of transformation from invitation, belief, wisdom, to discipleship and apostleship.

1. Invite a basic understanding (Invitation)
2. Present the Catholic belief (Belief)
3. Contemplate a related personal experience (Wisdom)
4. Create a call to action (Discipleship - witness in deeds)
5. Create a plan to witness (Apostleship - witness in words)

Admittedly, this author would agree with one who would contest the fact that the first four items mentioned here are not new catechetical methods. But rarely would the author contend that in most catechetical books, programs and resources does number five appear.

For instance, in reflection questions after reading a chapter or watching a video, most catechetical resources will include the first four formative questions encouraging inclusion, knowledge, wisdom and discipleship.

However, as Pope Paul VI stated in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* over 50 years ago, “The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life” (EN 22).

With this proposal and the simple addition of item five, there is a possibility of disciples being transformed into missionary disciples. Now is the time to begin integrating into catechetical books, programs and resources, an additional question designed to intentionally teach people how to be witnesses of the faith, to specifically consider a person they know who could benefit from their sharing and to go forth and to be an apostle. If started at a young age, imagine the number of joyful witnesses that could be created for the future.

It seems this apostolic vision of teaching the faith to young and old have some roots.

Consider the following statement from *Catechesi Tradendae* describing this vision.

All in all, it can be taken here that catechesis is an education of children, young people and adults in the faith, which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life. Accordingly, while not being formally identified with them,

catechesis is built on a certain number of elements of the Church's pastoral mission that have a catechetical aspect, that prepare for catechesis, or that spring from it. These elements are: the initial proclamation of the Gospel or missionary preaching through the *kerygma* to arouse faith, apologetics or examination of the reasons for belief, experience of Christian living, celebration of the sacraments, integration into the ecclesial community, and apostolic and missionary witness (CT, 18).

Evangelii Nuntiandi also describes the necessity for the formation of adults for their maturation and missionary spirit.

This is why the Church keeps her missionary spirit alive, and even wishes to intensify it in the moment of history in which we are living. She feels responsible before entire peoples. She has no rest so long as she has not done her best to proclaim the Good News of Jesus the Savior. She is always preparing new generations of apostles. Let us state this fact with joy at a time when there are not lacking those who think and even say that ardor and the apostolic spirit are exhausted, and that the time of the missions is now past. The Synod has replied that the missionary proclamation never ceases and that the Church will always be striving for the fulfillment of this proclamation (EN, 53).

Consider this next section as a way of creating a plan for witness. In the section entitled *Personal Accompaniment in Processes of Growth*, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis describes a process for evangelization through accompaniment, listening and talking to another. Perhaps this could even be the “how to” model for the proposed number five, “create a plan for witness”?

Although it sounds obvious, spiritual accompaniment must lead others ever closer to God, in whom we attain true freedom. Some people think they are free if they can avoid God; they fail to see that they remain existentially orphaned, helpless, homeless. They cease being pilgrims and become drifters, flitting around themselves and never getting anywhere. To accompany them would be counterproductive if it became a sort of therapy supporting their self-absorption and ceased to be a pilgrimage with Christ to the Father.

Today more than ever we need men and women who, on the basis of their experience of accompanying others, are familiar with processes which call for prudence, understanding, patience and docility to the Spirit, so that they can protect the sheep from wolves who would scatter the flock. We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of 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. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives. But this always demands the patience of one who knows full well what Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us: that anyone can have grace and charity, and yet falter in the exercise of the virtues because of persistent “contrary inclinations”. In other words, the organic unity of the virtues always and necessarily exists in habitus, even though forms of conditioning can hinder the operations of those virtuous habits. Hence the need for “a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery”. Reaching a level of maturity where individuals

can make truly free and responsible decisions calls for much time and patience. As Blessed Peter Faber used to say: “Time is God’s messenger”.

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. The Gospel tells us to correct others and to help them to grow on the basis of a recognition of the objective evil of their actions (cf. Mt 18:15), but without making judgments about their responsibility and culpability (cf. Mt 7:1; Lk 6:37). Someone good at such accompaniment does not give in to frustrations or fears. He or she invites others to let themselves be healed, to take up their mat, embrace the cross, leave all behind and go forth ever anew to proclaim the Gospel. Our personal experience of being accompanied and assisted, and of openness to those who accompany us, will teach us to be patient and compassionate with others, and to find the right way to gain their trust, their openness and their readiness to grow.

Genuine spiritual accompaniment always begins and flourishes in the context of service to the mission of evangelization. Paul’s relationship with Timothy and Titus provides an example of this accompaniment and formation which takes place in the midst of apostolic activity. Entrusting them with the mission of remaining in each city to “put in order what remains to be done” (Tit 1:5; cf. 1 Tim 1:3-5), Paul also gives them rules for their personal lives and their pastoral activity. This is clearly distinct from every kind of intrusive accompaniment or isolated self-realization. Missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples (EG, 170-173).

Pope Francis encourages those in leadership to initiate everyone into this “art of accompaniment”. “In our world, ordained ministers and other pastoral workers can make present the fragrance of Christ’s closeness and his personal gaze. The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this “art of accompaniment” which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. *Ex* 3:5). 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” (EG, 169). This vision may be something to bring to parish leaders for discussion. In what ways can a parish encourage this vision of accompaniment? What are some other methods we could employ to live this vision in our parish communities?

In addition and quite simply a parish leader could bring to the table and also ask the question to a staff or group of lay leaders for spirit-storming, “What other methods might be used to accomplish number five, “Create a plan for witness?”

For anyone leading a catechetical or faith formation session on any topic, consider doing the following with members of the group before they leave:

1. In silence and in prayer discern who else might benefit from what was learned
2. Consider what this person might want to know
3. Discern how they might share what they have learned
4. Determine a time and place where you could meet or talk with this person comfortably
5. Close your eyes and imagine the faith sharing conversation

Then conclude with a prayer for love and courage, a prayer asking the Holy Spirit to accompany them as apostles or missionary disciples for Christ. A suggested resource for this prayer would be the USCCB *Prayer for the New Evangelization*.

In closing here is one final simple idea to encourage missionary discipleship through catechesis. This would be to create and provide to each person in the catechetical program a business card at the end of each session that says, "Who can I share my faith with today?"

In conclusion, these 2 segments excerpted from *Evangelii Gadium* are being shared for inspiration as we go forth to be missionary disciples.

The ministry of evangelization requires faith, love and mercy. "The Church which 'goes forth' is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 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. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father's infinite mercy" (EG, 24).

Let us therefore preserve our fervor of spirit. Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow. May it mean for us- as it did for John the Baptist, for Peter and Paul, for the other apostles and for a multitude of splendid evangelizers all through the Church's history- an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench. May it be the great joy of our consecrated lives. And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world (EN, 80).

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About the Author

Terrie Baldwin is presently the Director of Evangelization in the Diocese of Cleveland serving 186 parishes. Prior to that, she ministered as the Director of Religious Education/Pastoral Minister and Technology Director for the parish community of St. Mary Magdalene in Willowick, Ohio for 13 years. At St. Mary Magdalene she has been a catechist for 29 years and presently holds a Master's Catechist designation in the Diocese of Cleveland.

Other certifications include a Diocesan Certified Lay Ecclesial Minister designation and a Master's Degree in Ministry from Ursuline College.