



PARISH RENEWAL

CONFERENCE 2022

ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL PRECINCT

PRESENTATIONS

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**GO MAKE
DISCIPLES**



The Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney's Parish Renewal Conference was an opportunity for clergy, parish leaders and parishioners to be renewed in the Church's mission of evangelisation and to be equipped to strengthen their practical efforts through spiritual, intellectual, pastoral and human formation in accordance with our archdiocesan mission plan *Go Make Disciples*.



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SYDNEY CENTRE *for* EVANGELISATION

INTRODUCTION: RENEWING PARISHES IN CHRIST

DANIEL ANG

Director, Sydney Centre for Evangelisation
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On the eve and the Feast of St Bernard of Clairvaux, we were blessed to welcome almost 300 clergy, religious and laity to the St Mary's Cathedral precinct for our inaugural Parish Renewal Conference.

We welcomed individual participants and faith communities from Sydney, Parramatta, Wollongong, Broken Bay, Canberra Armidale, Hobart, Melbourne, Ballarat and Toowoomba. We learned from exceptional keynote speakers, prayed together in the Cathedral crypt, heard stories of conversion and renewal from the grassroots, and reflected deeply on the mission of evangelisation at the heart of Scripture and our Catholic tradition.

The aim of the conference, was to encourage and better equip parishes to embrace the evangelising mission which Christ gives to His Church in every age. This is the expressed focus of *Go Make Disciples*, the Mission Plan for Sydney inaugurated by Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP which centres

on Christ's call to make, form, equip and send disciples in the midst of the Church for the sake of the world.

As the conference underscored, this mission of deepening discipleship and evangelisation is urgent and essential for it is when people encounter Jesus Christ, surrender and make the decision to follow that our parishes and faith communities will be renewed. This encounter and invitation to missionary discipleship takes place throughout our Christian lives and binds us together.

Our speakers addressed not only the ancient roots of the parish, as a school of holiness and a mother of saints, but also spoke to its future, a future which depends deeply on the witness, receptivity to the Holy Spirit and conviction of those who form these communities by faith. With reflections on discernment of the Spirit, workshops on invitation as an expression of love for another and the evangelising potential of Christian



community, it was powerfully clear that we cannot raise up disciples or undertake this work of renewal by our own power or will.

A day or so before the conference I was driving my children home after school, when we saw the moon through the window, hovering in the faint blue sky. I shared with my son and daughter that the first Christians used to compare the Church to the moon, because the moon has no light of its own and depends entirely for its brilliance on the sun.

In the same way the Church radiates no light or grace of its own and depends for its life and its mission on the light and grace of Christ. It is true that the Church, in its humanity, can, like the moon, obscure the sun as in an eclipse, casting shadow upon

the earth rather than light; it can wax and wane, appear bright or dim. However, the Church's true nature and our essential calling is to radiate ever more fully all that we receive from Christ – including his life and mission, so we and others enter fully into that new way of being that the Gospel calls discipleship.

The Christ we encountered powerfully in Adoration at the opening night of our conference is the same Christ who is alive and risen in every single one of our parishes. In this respect every one of our parishes and Eucharistic communities contains the entire treasure of the Church - Jesus Christ himself, truly present among us, in all places and yet as one. We are called to respond to this divine gift by sharing the love and presence of Christ

with others in the midst of the Church and in all the places and with all the people in our lives.

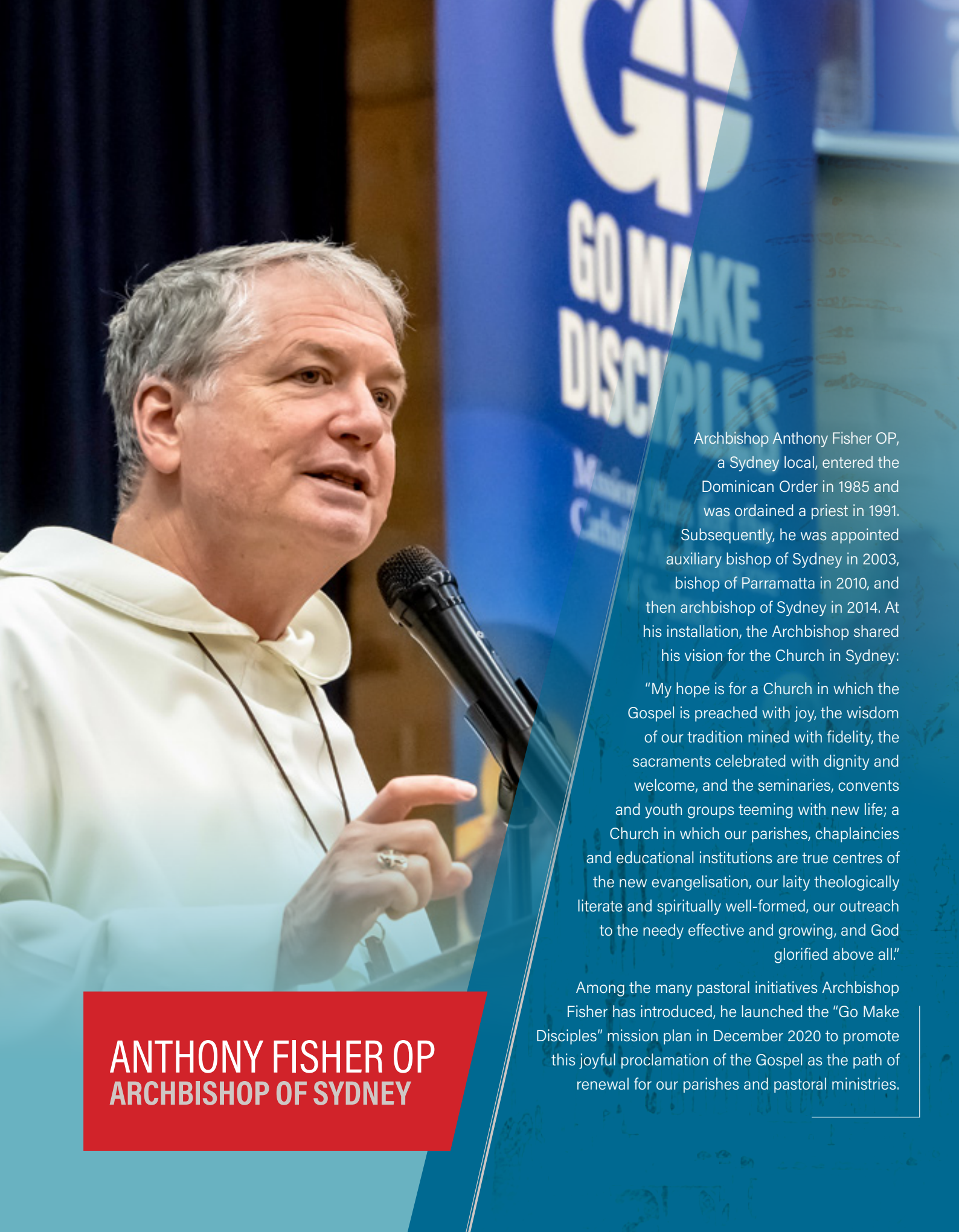
We hope these reflections from our 2022 Parish Renewal Conference encourage you and your communities, its leaders, ministries and initiatives to embrace anew this mission and proclamation of Jesus Christ, Good News that the world so deeply needs.

Yours in Him,



Daniel Ang
Director, Sydney Centre for Evangelisation
Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney





ANTHONY FISHER OP ARCHBISHOP OF SYDNEY

Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP, a Sydney local, entered the Dominican Order in 1985 and was ordained a priest in 1991. Subsequently, he was appointed auxiliary bishop of Sydney in 2003, bishop of Parramatta in 2010, and then archbishop of Sydney in 2014. At his installation, the Archbishop shared his vision for the Church in Sydney:

"My hope is for a Church in which the Gospel is preached with joy, the wisdom of our tradition mined with fidelity, the sacraments celebrated with dignity and welcome, and the seminaries, convents and youth groups teeming with new life; a Church in which our parishes, chaplaincies and educational institutions are true centres of the new evangelisation, our laity theologically literate and spiritually well-formed, our outreach to the needy effective and growing, and God glorified above all"

Among the many pastoral initiatives Archbishop Fisher has introduced, he launched the "Go Make Disciples" mission plan in December 2020 to promote this joyful proclamation of the Gospel as the path of renewal for our parishes and pastoral ministries.



MY PARISH: A CENTRE OF EVANGELISATION

ARCHBISHOP ANTHONY FISHER OP

Parish Renewal Conference, St Mary's Cathedral College Hall,
19 August 2022

Welcome to my place! I'm delighted to see so many here for what will be, God willing, two days of inspiring reflection upon Parish Renewal. I would like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of the Parish Renewal Team and the Sydney Centre for Evangelisation, for providing this opportunity to the Church in Sydney and beyond. The Archdiocese is blessed to have so many sharing their gifts to make our parishes places of encounter with Christ, of spiritual growth, of pastoral support, and of outreach to the community. This evening I'd like to reflect with you on parishes as centres of evangelisation.

Whether or not we are Boomers, COVID has made us all Zoomers! The video-conferencing app *Zoom* is now used on a truly 'biblical' scale: by 300 million participants daily for 3.5 trillion minutes a year. Yet it was not all plain sailing for its Chinese-born founder Eric Yuan. In the late 1990s he sought to move to Silicon Valley in the U.S., so he could join the tech boom, but his

“Jesus' promise that the Church will survive is for the whole Church, not for any part. The future of every parish depends on evangelisation.”

visa application was rejected eight times. On the ninth attempt he was finally admitted and started work with WebEx, a web conferencing startup. Because he spoke virtually no English, his primary mode of communication was computer code. Back in his university days he had to travel more than ten hours to visit his girlfriend (and future wife) Sherry and he had lamented his difficulty in seeing and speaking to her. This sparked his interest in developing videocall software that would connect people better. In 2011 he pitched a new smartphone-friendly version to WebEx and Cisco Systems, only to have the idea rejected: the market was

already saturated with comms technologies from Microsoft and others; even his friends said he was proposing a 'solution' to a problem that didn't exist! But Eric was having none of it: convinced of the merits of his idea and motivated by love, he started his own company *Zoom* and convinced some talented developers to join him. The app went public in April 2019, the COVID-19 virus emerged a few months later, and the rest is history. The success of *Zoom* is told in Yuan's net worth rising \$US16.4 billion in the following year and by the fact that *Zoom* and *zooming* are now part of the universal vocabulary!

Although our parishes are not Silicon Valley start-ups, Eric Yuan's tale of a project aimed at bringing people together that was sparked by love, pursued with conviction, demonstrated trust amidst risk and perseverance despite setbacks, and built upon teamwork has its parallels with our present concerns. Indeed, one of tomorrow's presenters will be zooming us from America. There is inspiration there for us, even if *Zoom* is not altogether the way of the future for our parishes.



I THE WHO AND WHERE OF THE MISSIONARY PARISH

There are no parishes as such in the New Testament. There is 'the Church' as a whole and there are 'the Churches'—more or less dioceses—in Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, Smyrna etc. Yet you might say there are the beginnings of the idea of parishes. While there was only one Temple in Jerusalem—the cathedral as it were—there were synagogues in the towns and suburbs where people prayed, gave or received alms, studied and discussed the word of God, and were governed as a local faith community. Jesus Himself was a regular both at the Temple and in the synagogues. His first intimation of the Eucharist, however, was out in the hills with thousands of people, when

He took bread—and fish—blessed, broke and miraculously multiplied it, echoing a previous occasion when He had miraculously changed water to wine in similarly extravagant quantity. This time he directed the disciples to divide the crowd into what we might call *parishes* of fifty or a hundred families, so they could receive this proto-eucharist (*Mk* 6:40; *Lk* 9:14). And while Jesus had thousands of followers, He mostly worked with the Twelve plus some holy women and only they were present for His Last Supper, post-Resurrection appearances and Pentecost...

So, a community gathered in a place of a scale to allow a certain intimacy was a feature of the life of the early Church. It was in this context that the first

Christians practiced "the Breaking of the Bread and the prayers", proclamation and witness, and works of charity. And while all the Christians of a particular city or district would gather in one place on a Sunday, these were often in domestic settings and thus presumably fairly intimate groups. In due course there were Christian groups in centres beyond Jerusalem and these had an apostle or bishop as their founder and thereafter as their leader. The world was gradually divided in dioceses.

In the centuries that followed, as diocesan congregations became too big to congregate with their bishop in a house or even in a cathedral, presbyters were appointed to celebrate on behalf of the bishop in local

communities and so dioceses were divided into multiple territories. Our English word for those territories, 'parish', comes from the Anglo-French *parochie*, the Latin '*parochia*' and the Greek *πάροικος* (from *πάρα* which means near and *οίκος* meaning household, clan or neighbourhood): the word means a group of faithful who are neighbours or fellow-travellers in a particular district.

Dividing the world into dioceses and the dioceses into parishes was never an entirely neat arrangement. There were monasteries, and later more active religious orders, with their own churches, ceremonies, charities and lay associates. There were shrines and pilgrimage sites and the private chapels of the up-



per classes. Cathedrals became rather unusual city parishes as well as centres of much else in diocesan and even civic life. Missionaries were sent out to areas where people were yet unevangelised or little catechised. But for most people the parish church was the centre of their Church life and this often mirrored the people and boundaries of their neighbourhood or municipality. 'Closer to the ground' than cathedrals and monasteries, the parish system allowed for the provision of many kinds of pastoral care and evangelisation—even if levels of faith and activity varied enormously from time to time and place to place.

Thus the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the parish as a place "where all the

The very logic of parishes is proclamatory or missionary: they are there precisely to ensure that the Good News of salvation spreads...

faithful can be gathered together for the Sunday Celebration of the Eucharist", where Christians are initiated and Christ's teachings elaborated, where the Gospel is lived in charity and concretely expressed in good works. So, while there is an undeniable territorial aspect to parish as the 'somewhere' that Christians

gather—whether it's a house, a catacomb or a 'bricks-and-mortar' church appointed to serve a particular district—its true essence is the participation of a group of people in the Paschal Mystery of Christ who may or may not be perfectly circumscribed by the geography of their domicile. Sunday Mass may be at the heart of the parish idea, but no-one will come to Mass unless they are brought to faith and practice by evangelisation, family, culture; and Mass itself should equip and project people back into the world they must influence for the better. Thus, if parishes are to be Mass centres, they must also be centres of evangelisation: the one feeds the other.

What's more, the baptismal

vocation of every pastor and parishioner mandates solicitude for those attending but also for those beyond the present attendees. Healthy parishes are, as it were, infectious: while their pastor may focus much of his energy on the care of those who already identify as his flock, those he shepherds must themselves extend the faith, love and worship of that community to others, especially to those who have not known it or have forgotten it. This means that the very logic of parishes is proclamatory or missionary: they are there precisely to ensure that the Good News of salvation spreads ever more widely and penetrates ever more deeply in a particular district. They are the local vehicles of evangelisation for an evangelising Church.



II THE FOR WHOM OF THE MISSIONARY PARISH

Our parishes, then, are not static entities, designed to keep the ‘in-group’ of the committed comfy. They are more like organisms, with numerous dedicated cells and organs, each working together towards a common goal of nourishment and growth, self-rejuvenation and reproduction. The DNA directing this organism’s mission—its Great Commission—comes from the Lord’s last words to us (*Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:14-18*), with its four-fold mandate:

- *to evangelise*—“go out to all the world, preaching the Gospel” and “making disciples of all nations”
- *to sacramentalise* those disciples—“baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”
- *to catechise* those disciples—“teaching them to obey everything I commanded you” and
- *to memorialise* His presence with us—“remembering that I am with you

always, to the very end of time”

Successful parishes, then, are like farms constantly sowing new Gospel seeds in people’s hearts, or like nets always trying to draw new ones in—to use two Gospel metaphors. But this ‘growth’ is more subtle than corporate growth for profit’s sake or bureaucratic growth following some five-year plan. The fruits of evangelisation are not always immediately obvious and parishes must engage in the ‘inefficiency’ (as this world sees it) of the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine in search of the single lost one, or the Good Farmer who casts his seed everywhere, hoping that in some place it will take root and sprout and fruit. This growth is more subtle but no less intentional: we must be quite deliberate about making our parishes places that radiate the love of God, places where Jesus is encountered not only within church walls but where he is taken to those outside, calling them in to his life-giving love.



III THE WHY OF THE MISSIONARY PARISH

The Church in Sydney is living out the mission of Jesus Christ in a time of unprecedented change. Sydney's population continues to grow, while the sources of meaning and way of life for many have radically changed. Fewer people engage with our parishes or other community groups for that matter. Not as many are as active or effective in transmitting faith to the next generation. Some are disillusioned by the child abuse crisis. Others are victim of the relentless march of secularisation. The recent census found that many no longer identify with any particular religion and are happy to tick 'no religion' in a culture inimical to faith. Others are gradually drifting away, not through any conscious choice against, faith, God or the institution, but by attachment to competing narratives and interests and distractions of many kinds. The pandemic and associated restrictions on worship were also keenly felt. Some traditional methods and supports for mission are no longer effective; others might yet be rediscovered and rein-

vigorated; but some new directions must urgently be taken.

This concern to propose the Gospel ever ancient, ever new, to our times sparked renewed thinking about evangelisation at and following the Second Vatican Council. This drive to recapture the missionary nature of the Church has been a very strong one in the recent papacies. In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Pope Paul VI taught that God's kingdom is built up by those who sincerely accept the Good News into their hearts, gather in the name of Jesus in faith-filled communities, and then share this with others. This means that evangelisation is incumbent upon all of us who have received and accepted the Gospel, not just the official *missionaries* to 'deepest darkest Africa' We are all called to be evangelisers, but in our case to deepest darkest Yagoona! And our reason is simple: every human person is, we know, made for truth and goodness and beauty, and ultimately for communion with God and fellows; none of us will truly thrive without this. So love for each individual should drive our evangelising, not some numbers game, not some target of parishioners

or collections, not so we can feel good about ourselves. No bureaucracy or grand plan can love you: only a person can love you, a divine or human person, and so mission is always one to one and one by one.

Evangelisation is no numbers game. But should we care about numbers nonetheless? Of course we should. Some parishes are moribund. They lack the people and the depth of faith to generate much by way of worship, evangelisation, or service. They depend upon Father, a parish secretary, and a few exhausted lay volunteers. They are incapable of replacing themselves. They serve a declining group of rusted-ons, and neglected all the other souls in the district. The whys and wherefores of this are for another day. But our parishes must accept that they will no longer be carried by the culture. If they don't take evangelisation seriously, the cradle Catholics will stop coming, the next generation won't even be cradle Catholics, and the parish will die. Jesus' promise that the Church will survive is for the whole Church, not for any part. The future of every parish depends on evangelisation.





IV | THE HOW OF THE MISSIONARY PARISH

So, what is required to do this effectively? Pope St Paul VI told us that it first requires witness. As effective and as necessary as teaching is, it is uninspiring and neutered if it is not an expression of the love of Christ. Put simply, to be effective evangelisers we must be people who themselves live and breathe the Gospel. In a sense, then, it is not so much ‘what’ we do as evangelists but rather ‘who’ we are that spurs people’s interest, curiosity and wonder. Silent proclamation tills the soil that will eventually receive the seeds of Christ’s teaching and allow them to take root and grow. If we lack the passion and authenticity, the words fall flat. As Pope Francis asks, how can a proclaimer of what is supposed to be Good—indeed the

very best—News look like they’ve just come back from a funeral? Parishes must be families of people who give joyful witness to what Christ has done in them and for all humanity.

Witness is first; then comes *proclamation*. Pope Paul noted that “There is no true evangelisation 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.” Some think it is enough to talk social justice or ecology or some other low fat Christianity, without being too specific about what or whom we believe in. But as the recent popes have all observed, we are not here to preach the altruism of the NGOs, the humanist wisdom of the ideologies, or some version of the nice person, as if

In many places the old formwork of Catholic identity and practice no longer exists or serves as once it did.’

faith in Jesus Christ can be reduced to creeds, creedal faith to feel-good mantras, spirituality to moral living, moral life to social justice activism, activism to woke formulas and actions. No, instead of the faith equivalent of Coke Decaf and No Sugar, we proclaim a full cream Christianity—beginning with an encounter and relationship with the Lord, together with the mysteries of our faith in their fullness. Parishes must be

broadcasting studios for such a full-on faith.

Following witness and proclamation in this evangelisation blueprint are *adherence* and *assimilation*. To receive the Gospel is to be inaugurated into an entirely new way of thinking and living, a “new way of being.” This reveals itself concretely in the gathering of eucharistic communities, especially parishes. This newness of life, manifested in the ecclesial community, is the Church, the visible sacrament of salvation. Here we are taught and converted ever more deeply, spiritually nourished by the sacraments, supported pastorally, and fuelled by the power of the Holy Spirit to make us saints and evangelisers.

It’s not always straightforward or easy. From the first Pentecost onwards, Christians have pon-



dered how best to transmit the essential content of the faith in different times, cultures and circumstances. Put another way: how do we connect God's timeless Person and truth to the contingencies of history and culture? What does this mean for us as Sydneysiders in the twenty-first century and the communities that we are part of?

It was St John Paul the Great who first talked of a 'New Evangelisation', the impetus behind this being that in many places the old formwork of Catholic identity and practice no longer exists or serves as once it did. Seismic cultural shifts make a recalibration of the Church's missionary mandate necessary. He identified three particular mission fields: *the unconverted*, that is anywhere and anyone that have not

yet received the primary proclamation of the Gospel or not yet established communities of faith; *the converted*, that is those who already believe, but still need faith education, pastoral support and community building aimed at deepening faith and action; and *the diverted*, those formerly Christian individuals and communities that have lost their sense of faith or affiliation, and now live a life "far removed from Christ and His Gospel". We need new energies, strategies, methods, supports for evangelisation in such an age.

The challenges to our evangelising mission occasioned by militant secularism, family dysfunction, values disorientation and new technologies were also major themes in the papacy of Benedict XVI. It was he who es-

tablished the Pontifical Council for promoting the New Evangelisation and held a Synod on the subject in 2012. He encouraged all Christians to recapture the zeal and courage of the early missionaries and to re-evangelise those places where the Gospel had fallen away. Although there is no magic bullet for doing this, the fundamental principle is always the same: a personal encounter with Jesus. Pope Benedict framed it in the following terms: "Being Christian is not the result of ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."

Pope Francis echoes much of this also. Already as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio taught that whereas ordinary

evangelisation brings people to encounter Christ for the first time, the goal of re- or new-evangelisation: those who have disconnected back into relationship with Christ and the Church; that the Holy Spirit is continually inspiring the Church with new ways to evangelise and re-evangelise; and that, while well-chosen words are important, the witness of just and compassionate lives is even more persuasive. The call to focus outward is all the more crucial when Christians feel inclined to batten down the hatches and hideaway while the storms pass by. To use his simple image: the Church is supposed to be more than a baby-sitter for other people's children; she is supposed to be a generative mother and nurturer of new children.

V | THE WHAT NEXT OF THE MISSIONARY PARISH

To sum up what I've said so far: the Great Commission was addressed to all the baptised and all Christians have a sacred duty to evangelise and then sacramentalise, catechise and memorialise in Christ's name. As parish structures evolved these became centres of all four activities, but especially of the Sunday Eucharist. They also had a proper concern for those in their district who were not yet Christian or did not attend. By witness, proclamation, adherence and assimilation, we are ourselves deepened in and assist others to be inaugurated into a new way of being. The call of the new evangelisation is to find new energies, strategies, methods and supports for evangelisation in an age where many cultures, institutions or individuals that should already be Christian have lost their way. The challenges of our time in Australia and the call of the post-Vatican II Church mean parishes must demonstrate a renewed missionary impulse, motivated by a love for the lost sheep and recognise that it really is a case of "populate or perish".

We are not the first generation to face such a challenge. The liturgical calendar might warrant our calling August "The month of evangelisers". From the early Church we celebrate on Wednesday (24th August) St Bartholomew, the great apostle who made his suffering for Christ into his greatest preaching and demonstrated that beauty is more than skin deep. On 10th August it was another martyr, St Lawrence, who converted the poor by his Christian charity and his gaoler by proclaiming the kerygma; he even turned black hu-

mour to his purpose, telling those barbecuing him to death to turn him over as he was done on one side. On the 27th August St Monica will be the star, the mother who talked and prayed her son Augustine into Christianity, priesthood, the good life, and the next day (28th August) we celebrate Gus himself, one of the greatest preacher-pastor-theologians in history, who brought his intellectual, rhetorical and professional gifts from his previous life with him and put them at the service of the Gospel; he has been described as a patron of the new evangelisation.

From the Middle Ages we have St Bernard tomorrow (20 August), whom *Word on Fire Ministries* commends for keeping love front and centre in evangelisation, and St Dominic (3 August in Australia) whose whole life was either talking to God or about God, and who founded an order of preacher-evangelists. Dominic's passion is told in the story of him talking all through the night to a guy in a pub until finally at dawn the man recanted his heresy and re-joined Christ's Church. In the same generation St Clare (11 August) abandoned herself to Christ through holy poverty, and adopted her friend Francis' aphorism of always preaching if only seldom using words; she is remembered for protecting her monastery from rape and pillage by holding up the ciborium with the Sacrament so that the enemies of religion fled.

From early modern times we remembered St Alphonsus Ligouri at the beginning of the month (1st August), whom Pope Benedict XVI described as "a model of missionary action which can also

inspire us today for a *new evangelisation*, especially among the poorest" through the missionary order and prayer groups he established. Tuesday (23rd August) will feature St Rose of Lima, "Little Flower of the New World", who joined others hiding in the local Dominican church from Dutch Protestant pirates. When the marauders burst into the church, they were confronted with the terrifying spectacle of this young girl ablaze with light, holding a monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament in imitation of St Clare; they turned and fled. On the 12th August it was St Jane de Chantal we remembered: a wife, mother, widow and nun, who taught us that catechesis is all about keeping our eyes on God and allowing Him to do the work.

From the nineteenth century we acknowledged St Peter Julian Eymard on 2nd August and St John Vianney on 4th August, who converted the radically secular culture of post-revolutionary France by promoting closeness to Christ in the Eucharist and Confession. For our own Mary MacKillop (8th August) in the same era, it was through education of the young and poor, never losing sight of the fourth 'R' in *reading, writing, 'rithmetic and religion*.

The twentieth century opened with the pontificate of the great reformer pope St Pius X, remembered on 21st August for seeking to purify and renew the Church so she could better project herself into the world. We also have two martyrs of the Nazis: on 9th August St Edith Stein who turned her own conversion story and the life of the mind to inspiring intellectual and spiritual conversion in others; and

on 14th August Maximilian Kolbe, who founded a spiritual 'army' to convert sinners, operated a publishing house, and took another's place in the death cell in Auschwitz. Like St John the Baptist, whose feast falls on the 29th, he was fearless in proclaiming Christ and executed for speaking truth to power.

On the 15th August we solemnised the completion of Our Lady's earthly mission of showing Christ to the world as if she were of living monstrance herself, and of joining Jesus' Father in declaring "This is my beloved Son: listen to Him!" And on the 6th August we had the Transfiguration, when Christ let His men glimpse His glory and set for us the pattern of all evangelisation, which must always be about revealing Him as God-and-man, risen in glory, the promise of salvation and transfiguration for us all. What a month—a month of examples to us of the different ways we can each evangelise!

Soon after my installation as Archbishop in 2014, I initiated a five-year pastoral planning project entitled 'Parish 2020', with the goal of examining the situation and mission of the Archdiocese, its challenges and opportunities, the spiritual gifts of its people, and the structures that can best support the new evangelisation and renewal of our local communities. This enabled me and my collaborators to hear the voices of clergy and lay faithful, in our deaneries, parishes, migrant communities, schools and agencies. The fruit of that research, consultation and discernment is our Archdiocesan Mission Plan 'Go Make Disciples' which was launched on the Feast



of our Lady of Guadalupe in 2020. Providentially it will also serve as our post-COVID recovery plan. Our Mission Plan speaks to the fundamental reality that “every pastor, every member of the faithful and all our parish communities are called to deep spiritual renewal as disciples, to being better connected with each other, and to reaching out better to others.” The goal of this will be realised when each of our parishes and parishioners makes the Great Commission their mission statement and where evangelising, sacramentalising, catechising and memorialising are the very fabric of our parish lives.

In this bid to renew our faithful and transform our parishes specific emphasis is placed on five themes: *evangelisation* geared towards bringing people to encounter Jesus Christ and enter into friendship with him: *leadership* that empowers people to contribute to building God’s kingdom; *community* that is a meaningful experience of belonging to the communion of saints and saints-in-the-making; *formation* that en-

ables growth in faith, understanding and holiness; and *worship* that is an encounter with God’s mercy in the sacraments, devotions and prayer.

Throughout her two-thousand-year history, the Church’s call to go make disciples has enjoyed periods of great fruitfulness and other periods of merely hanging on amidst grave challenges. At times there has been harvest a hundredfold and at other times drought. Yet even when the land of people’s souls is lying fallow, God can be readying it for new planting, new rain, new abundance. Crucifixion and Resurrection, Pruning and New Life, are the ordinary rhythm of our Church’s history, and we should not imagine we are uniquely cursed: that is not just despair it is vanity! Statistics can be sobering, an important catalyst for a shake-up, but they are not the sole metric by which we gauge our successes and God always has surprises just around the corner for his Church. We should not forget that the Church of Sydney also has many strengths upon

which to build: a proud history, a multicultural population many of whom are hungry for God, some very helpful plant and resources, some excellent pastors, above all people of faith and practice, at higher rates than normal in Australia, led by the Holy Spirit of the Great South Land.

And so, I invite all of you to enter into this conference with an open heart so you can be part of the solution. I pray that we may all ponder the ideas from the many wonderful speakers we will hear from over the next couple of days and contemplate faithfully how we can implement them in our own parishes and beyond, so that we may truly be a nation of missionary disciples. Thank you for your faith, hope and love. God Bless you all!

¹ <https://dispatch.m.io/eric-yuan-zoom/>;

² <https://www.theceomagazine.com/executive-interviews/it-electronics/eric-yuan/>

³ *Mt* 16:18; 18:15-21; *Acts* 5:11; 8:3; 15:22; *Rom* 16:16,23; *1Cor* 10:32; 11:6; 12:28; 14:4-35; 15:9; *2Cor* 8:18-24; 11:28; *Gal* 1:13; *Phil* 3:6; *Col* 1:18,24; *1Thess* 2:14; *2Thess* 1:4; *1Tim* 3:5,15; 5:16; 6:2; *Rev* 22:16.

⁴ *Acts* 9:31; 11:1,19,22,26; 12:5; 13:1; 14:23,27; 15:3-4,41; 16:5; 18:22; 20:17,28; *Rom* 16:1-5; *1Cor* 1:2,10; 3:1; 4:17; 6:4; 7:17; 11:18; 16:1,19; *2Cor* 1:1; 8:1; 11:8; 12:11-13; *Gal* 1:2,22; *Eph* 1:22; 3:10,21; 5:23-32; *Col* 4:15-16; *1Thess* 1:1; *2Thess* 1:1; *1Pet* 5:13; *3Jn* 1:6-10; *Rev* 1:4-3:22.

⁵ E.g. *Mt* 4:23; 6:2,5; 9:18,35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54; 23:6,34 *et par.* in *Mk* & *Lk*; *Jn* 6:59; 9:22; 12:42; 16:2; 18:20; *Acts* 6:9; 9:2,20; 13:5,14-15,43; 14:1; 15:21; 17:1,10,17; 18:4,7-8, 17-19, 26; 19:8; 22:19; 24:12; 26:11.

⁶ *Mt* 14:13-21; 15:32-39; *Mk* 6:31-44; 8:1-9; *Lk* 9:12-17; *Jn* 6:1-14.

⁷ *Jn* 2:1-12.

⁸ *Acts* 12:12; 16:40; *Rom* 16:3-5; *1Cor* 6:19; *Col* 4:15; *Philem* 1:1-2.

⁹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/parish>

¹⁰ CCC 2179.

¹¹ *Mt* 13:1-9,18-30; 18:10-14; *Mk* 4:1-20; *Lk* 8:4-15; 15:4

¹² *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 10-13.

¹³ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21.

¹⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 10.

¹⁵ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22.

¹⁶ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 23.

¹⁷ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 23.

¹⁸ The key documents for this are: Pope Paul VI (in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*), Pope John Paul II (e.g. *Christifideles Laici* 44; *Redemptoris Missio* 3; *Ecclesia in Oceania* 18 & 13; *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 40; *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, pp. 113-114) and Pope Benedict XVI (e.g. *Ubicumque et Semper*).

¹⁹ *Redemptor Missio*, 32-33.

²⁰ *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.

²¹ Sergio Ruben and Francesca Ambrogetti (eds), *El Jesuita: Conversaciones con el cardenal Jorge Bergoglio* (Vergara, 2011), 45-47.

²² <https://www.faithandculture.com/home/2020/8/12/augustine-as-patron-of-the-new-evangelization>

²³ <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/gems-of-wisdom-from-st-bernard-of-clairvaux/>

²⁴ <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/22236/pope-proposes-st-alphonsus-liguori-as-model-for-new-evangelization>.

²⁵ <https://www.nashvilledominican.org/community/our-dominican-heritage/our-saints-and-blesseds/st-rose-lima/>

²⁶ <http://www.catholicdigest.com/from-the-magazine/quiet-moment/st-jane-frances-de-chantal-hold-your-eyes/>

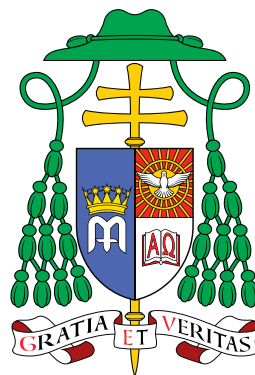
²⁷ <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/restoration-in-christ-and-the-spirit-of-st-pius-x/>

²⁸ *Mt* 3:17; *Jn* 2:5.



JULIAN PORTEOUS DD ARCHBISHOP OF HOBART

Archbishop Julian Porteous DD was born in Sydney and ordained a priest for this Archdiocese in 1974. Having served in numerous parishes and as Rector of the Seminary of the Good Shepherd, he was then ordained an auxiliary bishop for Sydney in 2003. Archbishop Julian has been an advocate of the New Evangelisation called for by Pope St John Paul II. He was responsible for evangelisation and renewal in the Archdiocese of Sydney until his appointment as Archbishop of Hobart in 2013. His episcopal ministry in Tasmania has focused on the renewal of parishes, the encouragement of religious life, the development of youth ministry, marriage and evangelisation among numerous other initiatives.



I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS: LIVING CHRIST'S GREAT COMMISSION WITH COURAGE

ARCHBISHOP JULIAN PORTEOUS DD

Parish Renewal Conference, St Mary's Cathedral College Hall,
20 August 2022

You know this very short parable well: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (Mt 13:44). When the man discovered the treasure, he sold all he had (note: 'with joy') and bought that field.

Our faith is a treasure, isn't it? What would we do without our faith? For most of us it is something we have had all our lives – and it means everything to us. Perhaps some others here today have discovered the faith further on in life. They can see the contrast between life without faith and now life with faith. You know what coming to faith has meant for your life.

What has our faith offered us? Consider for a moment. Each would offer a personal account – it would be wonderful to listen to each one's story. Let me offer some possibilities:

- My faith is the sure foundation to my life
- My faith has been a consolation in times of difficulty
- My faith has called me on in virtue and goodness
- My faith always gives me a sense of hope and confidence for future
- My faith is the source of peace and joy.

We cannot keep it to ourselves. We must share it. We must enable others to discover what we have discovered'

I could go on, and on. Let's go a little deeper:

- My faith has enabled me to know a God who loves me, personally
- I know that I have the dignity of being a son and daughter of God and can truly say, 'Abba', father.
- My faith has brought me into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He has become my daily companion, my protector, my guide
- My faith, too, has given me a spiritual mother in the Blessed Virgin Mary and many times I have turned to her and know my prayers have been heard.
- My faith has opened up the spiritual life to me. Prayer is an essential part of my life. I live not just on the physical



plain but also on the spiritual plain.

- My faith has revealed an eternal destiny that awaits me. I live in hope of heaven.

And we could consider some other elements:

- My faith has enabled me to hear the voice of God in Sacred Scripture – I know God is revealing Himself to me and leading me in the ways of truth and goodness.
- My faith reaches a special moment of intimacy with Christ each time I receive Holy Communion. I love going to Mass.
- My faith has enabled me

to be forgiven. Going to Confession is a time of the healing of my soul and renewing my spirit

- My faith has introduced me to the saints and angels. I now live in a broader communion with these holy ones.
- My faith has drawn me to worship of God and I rejoice to unite my heart and voice with the songs of the angels who cry out, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts”.

What a treasure is our Catholic faith.

My brothers and sisters, we cannot keep it to ourselves. We must share it. We must enable others to discover what we have discovered. We must enable

others to taste the goodness of God as we have tasted the goodness of God.

How did Christianity Spread?

You may be familiar with a book by a then agnostic sociologist, Rodney Stark. It is entitled, “The Rise of Christianity”. Its full title is “How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries”.

Stark’s research led him to the following conclusion:

“Christianity did not grow because of miracle working in the marketplaces (although there may have been much of that going on), or because Constantine said it should, or even because the martyrs gave it such credibility. It

grew because Christians constituted an intense community, able to generate the “invincible obstinacy” [against paganism] that so offended the younger Pliny but yielded the younger Pliny but yielded immense religious rewards. And the primary means of its growth was through the united and motivated efforts of the growing numbers of Christian believers, who invited their friends, relatives, and neighbours to share the “good news.” . . .”

Stark argues that it was not so much great preachers or outstanding leaders or even the occurrence of miracles, but it was the joyful lived faith of ordinary Christians that firstly intrigued and then attracted their pagan acquaintances, friends and family members.

In other words, the Catholic



faith spread through the witness of ordinary believers.

Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, said, “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness” (EG 1). Embracing faith in Jesus Christ does set us free and we find joy. And joy is infectious.

The Pope later comments, “Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others. As it expands, goodness takes root and develops. If we wish to lead a dignified and

If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good.’

fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good. In this regard, several sayings of Saint Paul will not surprise us: “The love of Christ urges us on” (2 Cor 5:14); “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:16). (EG 9)

Pope Francis comments that life grows by being given away. He says “For here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission

means” (EG 10)¹. As we share our faith we will find that we actually grow in faith and the experience of seeing someone come to faith enriches our own joy in being Christian.

Sharing our faith

How then do we share our faith? Firstly, it is not a question of becoming a preacher and even an apologist. It does not require us to study theology and have sophisticated answers for tricky questions. It just requires us to be ourselves – ourselves as joy-filled Catholics.

Pope Francis has encouraged all Catholics to see themselves as ‘missionary disciples’. In encouraging us to view ourselves in this way he is not placing any particular demand or burden on us. He says,

“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 evangelisation, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelisation to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelisation calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptised.”

Note that the Pope says that being a missionary disciple does not mean becoming a professional. He explains this in these words: “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” (ibid).

In a sense it is very simple. Perhaps the best way is to note what Jesus said to his disciples after the Resurrection. He said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Jesus said that they are to be witnesses. Now to be a witness means two things. Firstly, it means simply being who you are. Secondly, it means giving testimony to who you are.

Be who you are. Jesus said that his disciples are the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Mt 5:14-16). Do not underestimate the profound truth in these words. Especially as the world grows darker with the loss of faith, those with faith will shine out more clearly. We will be different.

People will sense we have something they don’t have.

And we must be ready to give testimony to what it is that makes us who we are. The testimony here is simply our story. It is an account of the impact of our faith on who we are. It is good to prepare some words of witness – to have reflected on what God has done in us; to be able to recount moments when God has touched our lives. Our testimony is not about ourselves but about the marvels of God.

We are witnesses to what God has done; as Pope Francis says, to share our experience of the love of God.

Parishes becoming missionary

And this is not something that needs to be done alone. As Catholics we all belong to a local parish community. This day is about parish renewal. Parishes are the natural places where missionary disciples are nourished, encouraged, and inspired. We have brothers and sisters in the faith within our local parish. We do need to identify

Our parishes can become centres of missionary activity. Not necessarily in grand events, but all that is needed is a group of parishioners who want to bring the joy of the Gospel to others around them. Then the parish community can welcome and nurture them to full Christian life.’

those in our parishes who are full of faith and want to live out and share this faith. So, find your fellow missionary disciples. Begin to speak with them, share with them – plot and plan with them!

Our parishes can become centres of missionary activity. Not necessarily in grand events, but all that is needed is a group of parishioners who want to bring the joy of the Gospel to others around them. You may take up some particular initiatives like running an Alpha course, but that is not absolutely necessary if there are some people who really want to reach out to others and invite them into a new life in Christ.

Then the parish community can welcome and nurture them to full Christian life.

Christ is with us

So, we all know we have a treasure of inestimable value in our Catholic faith. We know too that the way the faith best spreads is through ordinary, everyday believers living their faith to the full such that people around them notice that they are different.

People sense that they have something and they are attracted.

Then when the time is right we share humbly yet boldly what God has done in our lives. And we let the light of faith shine forth.

The final words of St Matthew's Gospel are very important. They are given at the Ascension and follow the giving of the Great Commission – “Go, therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19).

Jesus has given his apostles – and us – the mission to take the Gospel to all the nations. Then he adds the important and encouraging post-script: “I am with you always to the end of time” (Mt 28:20). With you always. These are the final words in St Matthew's Gospel. They are like the final words Jesus wants his disciples to hold on to – “I am with you always”. We do not walk alone. We do not have to carry out our mission as isolated individuals.

Hear the Lord saying to us: “I am with

you. Invite me into every conversation. I will give you the prompting when to speak. I will give you the words to speak. I will guide you as to what to do next. Let me speak and act through you. And I will produce the fruits in the life of the person”.

And the Lord reminds us: “But I need you. I need your faith. I need your willingness to be my witness. I need you to allow me to work in and through you”.

My brothers and sisters, the Lord needs us, each of us. Will you let the Lord use you?

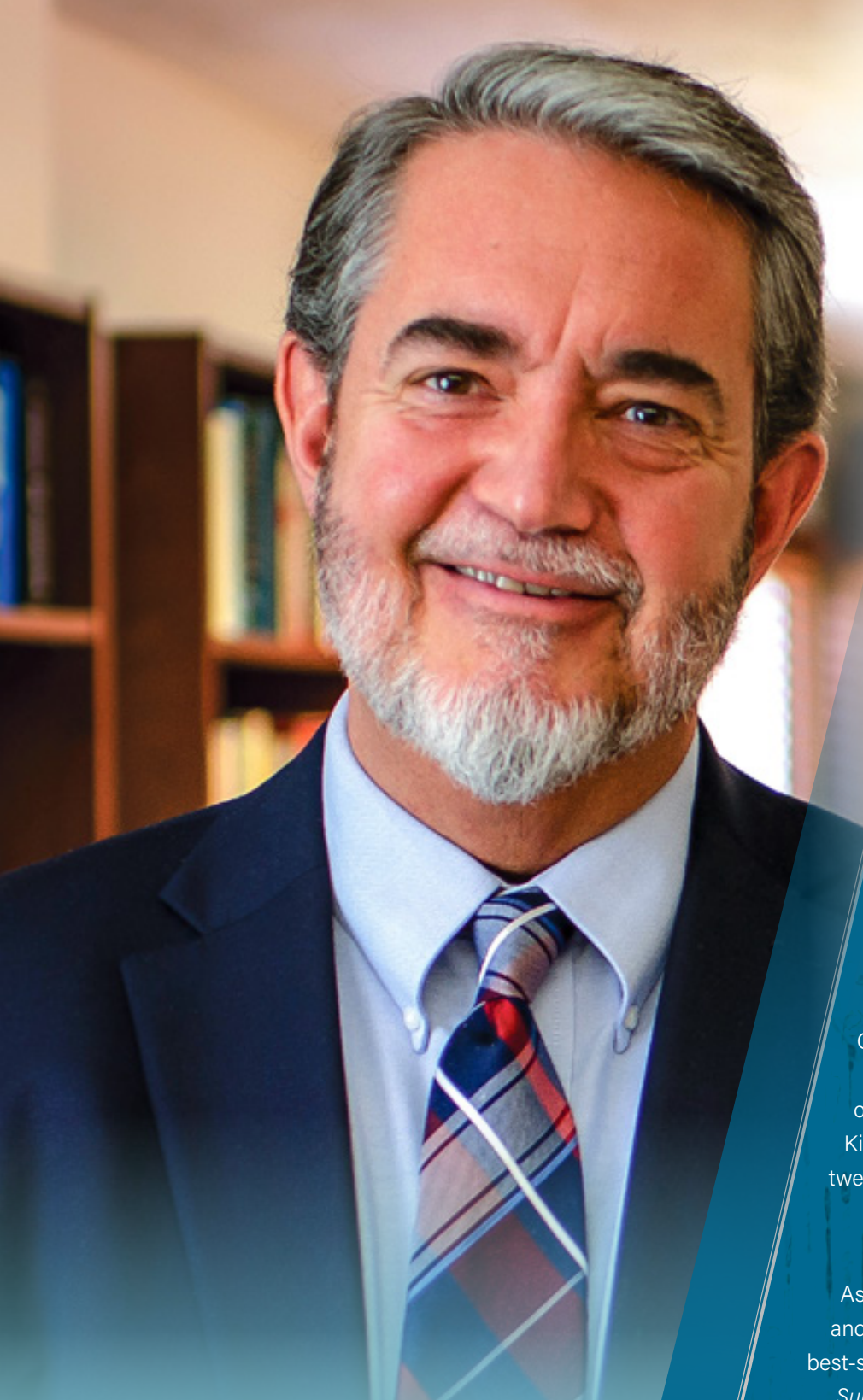
Do not be afraid

Jesus said to his disciples, “there is no need to be afraid little flock, for it has pleased the Father to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32).

We do not need to be afraid. We have everything we need. ●

¹Pope Francis is here quoting from Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, Aparecida Document, 29 June 2007, 360. He was one of the key authors of this document.





DR SCOTT HAHN

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Dr Scott Hahn is the Fr Michael Scanlan Professor of Biblical Theology and the New Evangelisation at the Franciscan University of Steubenville. He is the Founder and President of the St Paul Center, an apostolate dedicated to teaching Catholics to read Scripture from the heart of the Church. Dr Hahn has been married to Kimberly for 43 years. They have six kids and twenty-one grandkids. They also have one son ordained to the Diocese of Steubenville, Fr. Jeremiah Hahn.

As the author and editor of over forty popular and academic books, Dr Hahn's works include best-selling titles *Rome Sweet Home*, *The Lamb's Supper*, and *Hail Holy Queen*. His most recent releases are titled *Hope to Die: The Christian Meaning of Death and the Resurrection of the Body* and *It is Right and Just: Why the Future of Civilization Depends on True Religion*.



EVANGELISING CATHOLICS: A CULTURE IN NEED OF THE GOSPEL

DR SCOTT HAHN

Excerpts of the Keynote Address given by Dr Scott Hahn via Zoom at the Parish
Renewal Conference, St Mary's Cathedral College Hall, 20 August 2022

I want to thank Archbishop Fisher and all of the people who have made this day possible. It is exciting for me to Zoom around the world while [being] less than one mile from my house. It is also a singular privilege and joy for me to be addressing this topic of *Evangelising Catholics: A Culture in Need of the Gospel*.

I'd like to break down my remarks according to three main plot lines. The first one builds upon what Archbishop Fisher has already shared, and that is, the background of the New Evangelisation. Then I would like to focus upon practical ways that ordinary Catholics can advance the New Evangelisation. And then finally I'd like to focus on what we mean by the *Evangel* i.e. what we mean by the Gospel as Catholic Christians, focusing in particular upon the language that is found in the catechism and Vatican II, going all the way back to antiquity, particularly the early Church fathers who spoke about the Paschal Mystery, I would propose is the heart of the Gospel, which we

You cannot simply pick and choose those things that we think that the secular culture is ready, willing and able to accept. No. We've got to proclaim the whole counsel of God'

wish to communicate to every man, woman and child.

I would like to begin though, by focusing for a few moments upon the old evangelisation – the *magna carta* of the old evangelisation found in Matthew 28. We also call it the Great Commission. I have heard people refer to it as the Great Omission, in so far as many Catholics have failed to develop the skills

needed to share their faith. Regardless, in Matthew 28, Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' I want to pause for a moment to reflect upon the fact that He does not say, 'All authority in heaven on earth will be given to me at the end of time, when I return.' No. It is now in his possession. As He prepares to ascend, He is not taking it up to heaven, and withholding it from us on earth. No. 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'

'Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.' We could spend at least an hour unpacking the key terms in that phrase. Let me summarise briefly.

'Go,' means that we are commissioned like the disciples themselves, to go out into the world. It's a 'Go Ye' Gospel. It isn't, 'Come to our meetings and our programs.' Rather, 'Go therefore, and make disciples.' The Greek term for disciple, *mathētēs* comes from the verb 'to learn,' 'to study.' [Therefore], a disciple is a disciplined student.



‘Make disciples of all nations.’ I want to underscore one point here: that Jesus does not say, ‘Make disciples in every nation.’ He says, in the Greek and English translations, ‘Make disciples of all nations.’ Now, when we hear the term ‘nation’, we generally think about a gigantic secular nation-state. That is not excluded from Jesus’ teaching here. However, the Greek term is, I think, more significant and that is, ‘Make disciples of all *ethne*’. [Therefore], we get the word ‘ethnicity’ – an ethnic group – and an ethnic group is not reducible down to genealogy. It really is what we mean by culture. To fast forward, I think what Jesus recognised back then is that if we don’t evangelise culture, if we simply evangelise individuals, one on one, and stop there, the culture is going to end up de-evangelising, that

is, taking down the work that we’re trying to build up in the souls of individual persons. So, ‘Make disciples of all nations’ or ‘all *ethne*’, is a reminder that we need to evangelise culture. We need to transform culture. If we don’t, if we stop short, if we simply relegate that to the secular forces, we’re going to find that culture will be transforming and deforming us as Catholics, as we have witnessed in the last 50, 60 or 70 years, if not longer.

‘Make disciples of the nations.’ Of course, that means beginning with persons and we go from person to person. It is an individual sort of thing that we do. On the other hand, it’s not a reductionism to individualism, and a person’s experience that might be fleeting. No. People are sons or daughters, they’re brothers, they’re sisters, they’re husbands, they’re fathers and

they’re mothers, they’re wives, they’re neighbours, they’re citizens. We are not just rational animals. As Aristotle reminded us, we are also social animals. Jesus wants the Gospel to go forward and address human beings at every level, personally, privately but also socially and publicly. I think that is the point of departure for what we want to see, as we discuss *Evangelising Catholics* and recognise that our culture is in sore need of the Gospel. Jesus continues on though; it doesn’t stop there.

‘Make disciples of all nations, baptising them.’ I want to state what is somewhat obvious, that I think it needs to be restated. That is, the Sacraments are not accidental, but essential to what we mean as Catholics by evangelisation. That’s not because we’re imposing something extrinsic upon the simple Gospel, that I

could share in three or four minutes apart from the Sacraments, when I was an evangelical Protestant. No, our starting point are the words of Jesus Himself: ‘Baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’ It’s not just the Sacrament of Baptism as a ritual; it is precisely the divine means by which God fathers us as his sons and daughters. We become members of the Mystical Body of Christ sharing from his own divine sonship, essentially by means of the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not reducing it all down to one ritual – baptism – or to one doctrine, the Trinity. This is taking the truths of the faith, and realising that these are sacred mysteries. In the process, when we are baptised, we are doing something, for sure, however, God is doing much more for us and in us than what we are doing for Him.



What are the chances that fishermen and tax collectors and zealots from Palestine are going to take on the Roman Empire?... the chances of success would seem to be zilch. Yet, against all odds, even secular historians describe the transformation of the Roman Empire over the course of, not years, not decades, but centuries!

'Baptising in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.' This is where it gets really tricky, because back then, the Roman Empire was the target audience of what we've called the old evangelisation. Talk about a culture of death, and decadence, broken families, relativistic morality, and an antagonistic spirit towards anything having to do with Judaism, much less this international expression known as the Christian faith!

'Teaching them to observe whatsoever I have commanded you.' You cannot simply pick and choose, and isolate those things that we think that the secular culture is ready, willing and able to accept. No. We've got to proclaim the whole counsel of God.

Finally, perhaps the most re-

assuring part of this Great Commission is Jesus' closing words. 'And know, I am with you always even until the close of the age.' He's with us in the power of the Holy Spirit. He's with us in the interpersonal bond of communion, which is more than community structures. That really is what makes us experience the truth of being the family of God the Father, in the Catholic Church.

I want to pivot here for a moment because here's what Jesus gave. This the command performance not just of the disciples, but of all believers in the first few centuries: to go forth and to make all of these ethnic groups disciples of Jesus Christ, out of the Roman Empire, or culture of death.

What are the chances that fishermen and tax collectors and zealots from Palestine are

going to take on the Roman Empire? I mean, the chances of success would seem to be zilch. Yet, against all odds, even secular historians describe the transformation of the Roman Empire over the course of, not years, not decades, but centuries! The disciples were faithful to the task of doing the seemingly impossible, transforming this culture of death into what even secular historians will acknowledge to be Christendom, the Holy Roman Empire.

It was always far from perfect; it was never even close to utopia, [but] at the same time, as the agnostic sociologist and historian of religion, Rodney Stark, points out, you can see that the early Church started at around the rate of 40% growth per decade. This was prior to TV and radio, apart from the internet and Facebook. We have to recognise that it's



not just the disciples, it's not just the martyrdom, it really was through friendship, a point that I want to come back to later on.

This is the old evangelisation and gives us, I think, a paradigm or blueprint for much of what we mean by the New Evangelisation, which goes back to the Second Vatican Council.

When John XXIII died and was replaced by Paul VI, there hadn't been a pope named Paul for literally centuries. When they asked him why, [Paul VI] said, because I want to be an apostolic pope. Perhaps it's so close to us in a time that we don't recognise how unprecedented this was. Even before Vatican II concluded in 1965, Pope Paul VI began making apostolic journeys, [starting with] the Holy Land in 1964, as a pilgrim to be sure, and also, by his own account, as an evangelist. Then he went to India later that year and to New York to address the United Nations in 1965. After Vatican II concluded, to Portugal to Turkey in 1967, to Colombia in 1968, Uganda in 1969, Iran, Pakistan, the Philippines, Australia, Indonesia, Hong

Kong and Sri Lanka.

All of these things were new. We did not have a pope since Peter himself venture out into other continents for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel. We now, fifty years later, take all this for granted. In a certain sense, we associate this with the job description of a pope, because what Paul VI [began], John Paul II took to the next level: over 100 apostolic journeys clocking in well over a million kilometres. We couldn't begin to enumerate all of the places he went to and returned to. In the background of all of this is the notion of evangelisation.

In the 1970s, Paul VI published *Evangelii Nuntiandi: On Evangelisation in the Modern World*. His thesis statement back then was rather radical, and nowadays it seems almost self-evident. He says, 'Evangelising is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelise... 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.'

As much as Paul VI described the Church's central task as evangelisation, he never used the term New Evangelisation. John Paul introduced that phrase in a talk that he was giving there in Poland. Looking out at a sea of his fellow countryman's faces, he could see the ravages of the German Nazis, the Soviet communists, and he recognised the need for what he called the New Evangelisation, which he went on to explain briefly as re-evangelising those who have been dechristianised, and very few people even noticed.

He didn't use that phrase, again, until in 1983, addressing the bishops of North Central and South America, he began to use it over and over again, dozens, literally hundreds and hundreds of times. Once again, he explained that the New Evangelisation is not new because the Church had stopped evangelising. The New Evangelisation is new because of the need that the Church confronts to really re-evangelise the dechristianised world, those parts that have lost their faith.

Again, what Paul VI did, John Paul II also did, only at a higher level. I mentioned that document *Evangelii Nuntiandi: On Evangelisation in the Modern World*. Now, besides the thesis statement that I quoted, there's one other statement that is one of the most frequently quoted teachings of Pope St Paul VI. He said, 'Modern people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers. And if they do listen to teachers, it's because they are witnesses.' Now, he wasn't calling for the retirement of teaching, he was pointing out that teaching doctrine is not the same thing as bearing witness to the truth of the doctrine in terms of the sacred mysteries as you encounter them.

John Paul II picks up right where that leaves off. In 1990-1992, he began to talk about bearing witness to Christ, and how the Eucharist is the centre, the source and the summit of what we call the New Evangelisation.

To be honest, when I first read that I was a little troubled. The Eucharist: where does that even fit? Well, what I began to realise was, this is really setting the stage for a deeper understanding of conversion. If St Paul VI emphasised witness, John Paul emphasised the Eucharist and then his successor, Pope Benedict XVI emphasised what we as Cath-

olics mean by the term conversion.

Evangelisation, for me as an Evangelical, always had one goal, and that was to bring another conversion. We always had our elevator version so that if you're going down four or five stories in a building, you could turn to a person and say, I hope you don't mind that I want to share with you the fact that God loves you, but, like me, you've sinned. Christ died for you and for me and for our sins, so we could decide right now what to do, and enter into a personal relationship. The elevator doors open, and you could lead that person in a prayer and invite Jesus into your heart. That's the moment of conversion or so we thought. We thought that was the goal.

What I've discovered, especially in Scripture is that for us as Catholics, conversion is not one and done. It's not over and done in the past. It's not simply what happened to me for fifty years ago, when I was 14, finding my way out of a lifestyle of juvenile delinquency and criminal behaviour. When I found Christ, He found me.

No. Conversion has to be something ongoing. It's not just what happened to me, 36 years ago, when I entered the Catholic Church, at the Easter Vigil in 1986. No. Conversion is what has to happen to me this

morning and tomorrow morning. As Jesus Himself said, 'If anyone would follow me, he must take up his cross daily.' A cross was an implement of torture and execution. That alone should remind us of why Pope Benedict emphasised that the kind of relationship that we have with Jesus is more than just a personal relationship. It has to be more, not less, but much more.

When you look in to the Scriptures and the early Church, the writings of our recent holy fathers, you discover that, as the Catechism states in paragraph 1229, becoming a Christian is accomplished as a journey in several stages in which certain essential elements have to be present.

First, the proclamation of the Gospel and acceptance – that entails initial conversion. Secondly, a profession of faith; and finally, baptism itself, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and admission to the Eucharist. That's Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist.

That's sort of like when I asked Kimberly out on a date. I was thrilled when she agreed to go. After the second or third date, I had a personal relationship with her that was more than my personal relationships with my roommates. This was courtship; however, that was not the goal. The goal came on January



23 1979, when I got down on my knees, and I pulled out the ring on Rainbow Bridge in the lightly falling snow, and I popped the question. She accepted my proposal on the spot. We had gone from courtship to engagement, but that too wasn't the real end game. That's what happened on August 18 1979.

We celebrated our 43rd anniversary yesterday together. On that day, we didn't just tie a knot. It was more than a contract. It was a covenant. It was a sacred sacrament. It was an interpersonal bond of communion. We crossed the finish line.

What's true for the covenant relationship, in the natural order, we call marriage, is the model, the pattern, the paradigm for our relationship with Christ, which is not just a personal relationship. It's a kind of marital bond. When I married Kimberly I realised the obvious truth that when you marry someone, you don't just marry them, you marry into their whole family, her siblings and her cousins and all of that. As Catholics, we realise that when you enter into the fellowship of grace that we call salvation, it's never an individualistic thing. It is always covenantal; it is always a kind of sacred family bond: in a parish setting, in a prayer meeting, at Mass most especially. This is something of a breakthrough for us as Catholics – to embark upon the task of bearing witness to our faith, and focusing especially on Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

Pope Francis has built upon Pope Benedict, Pope John Paul II, Pope Paul VI and Vatican II: this unprecedented explosion of emphasis on evangelising, on the New Evangelisation, on re-evangelising. This is not just us reaching out to 'them', but recognising that we are 'them', that we our-

selves need to be converted in an ongoing way, on a frequent basis, going to Confession, and receiving the grace of penance, of pardon, of reconciliation. Likewise, going forward to receive Christ in Holy Communion.

What Pope Francis did in his first major document, *Evangelii Gaudium*, I think has gone largely unnoticed. This was entitled, *The Joy of the Gospel*. I am convinced that he put his finger right on the heart of the matter. He said, 'The joy of the Gospel arises from a heart which, in its poverty, rejoices and marvels at the works of God, like the heart of Our Lady who all generations call blessed.' He said, 'Evangelisation in our time, will only take place as a result of joy, contagious joy.' That's what it was all about. *The Joy of the Gospel* was trying to get us to rediscover not only the truth of the Gospel, the power of the Gospel, but the fact that it gives us joy in a way that nothing else can. I think we have to wake up and recognise something that we would certainly circle true on an exam, but [which] we don't always experience. I believe that what he handed us could prove to be the master key to the New Evangelisation. Why? Because even if you can't explain all of the doctrines, even if you can't defend the faith, or prove it from Sacred Scripture, what you can do is this: enjoy being Catholic! I know! Radical, isn't it?

I'm convinced that enjoying our faith as Catholics together may prove to be the single best way to evangelise family members, friends, co-workers, neighbours, and everyone else. Why? Think about it. Our world today offers us countless pleasures, but not a single joy that lasts, whereas Jesus Christ gives us the joy of salvation, even in the midst

of hardship and sorrow, the joy that can withstand suffering and death, a love that is stronger than death. It is joy that other people are going to find irrefutable, more than any argument you can give them. They're going to find it irresistible as well.

Whenever we find ourselves without joy, as Pope Francis reminded us in *The Joy of the Gospel*, it's God's gentle reminder that you're not just out to reach 'them' with the joy of the Gospel, you are 'them'. You need to be reached again and again each day, and sometimes more than once in a given day, so that you can really experience the power of the joy of the Gospel, the grace of conversion that isn't over and done in the past. No, it's ongoing. In fact, it's lifelong, it needs to be daily, and it's never going to get easy, or Jesus wouldn't have called it 'carrying the cross'.

What I'd like to do now is to begin to tie together a lot of what we said at the start. Looking at the old evangelisation that stemmed from the Great Commission that we find at the end of Matthew's Gospel, I'd like to draw some lessons from [the following]: Vatican II and the great emphasis on evangelising in the modern world; Pope St. Paul VI who gave us the *magna carta* of this evangelisation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*; and perhaps most of all, Pope St. John Paul II who didn't just coin the phrase, the New Evangelisation, but he explained it in terms of re-evangelising the de-christianised and called us to do it in terms of Jesus Christ, whose real presence is there in the Holy Eucharist. I've also emphasised Pope Benedict's contribution in terms of this theology of conversion that is ongoing, ever deepening, lifelong. Then Pope

Francis, who identifies the heart of it with the joy of the Gospel, that joy we come back to again and again and again.

The Eucharist. I don't know what's going on 'down under', [however], in the US, all of our bishops have identified the next three years as this great mission to bring about a Eucharistic revival. No wonder. We have this recent statistical study that showed us that 70% of Americans who call themselves Catholics would say that the Eucharist is nothing more than a symbol, whereas almost 30% say that no, there we find the real presence of Jesus Christ. I think it's a challenge, and it's also an opportunity for us to blow the embers and to recognise that Christ wants to renew, He wants to re-ignite, this Eucharistic faith, perhaps more than we want Him to.

Before John Paul II died, he shocked the world by issuing one more encyclical, *The Church of the Eucharist, Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. The thesis in *The Church of the Eucharist* was that it's not enough to renew Eucharistic faith. That's essential. We can't go without that. To renew our faith in the Eucharist, in Christ's Real Presence is just the starting point. What else we need is Eucharistic devotion. That is, not just once a week in the Mass; we ought to have adoration. We also ought to have benediction as a parish and that sort of thing. Then he turned it up to a level because what he spoke of really wasn't ever heard before: not just Eucharistic faith, not just Eucharistic devotion, but, he said, we need to cultivate Eucharistic amazement.

Eucharistic amazement? What exactly do we mean? What did he intend by Eucharistic amazement? I can look back at what I discovered 37 years ago. Right





before I became a Catholic, I began attending Mass. Scripture came together in an entirely new way. I had been studying the Bible for more than ten years, the Old and the New [Testaments], however, it was by going to Mass for the first time that the eyes of faith were opened. I was rather stunned to realise that's not bread. That wafer is nothing less than the resurrected body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ. By the time [the priest] consecrated the chalice, I was literally in the back pew, beginning to drool with this holy thirst for Christ's precious blood. By the time everybody else was going forward for communion I was in the back pew looking down on my Bible, going back into the Book of Revelation, where 'Lamb of God, Lamb of God, Lamb of God' occurs 28 times in 22 chapters. I was seeing 'holy, holy, holy, 'Amen,' 'Alleluia,'

all of these liturgical elements I had never noticed before I went to my first Mass.

Let me take it out of my own private experience as a Protestant, whose personal study led him to this eureka moment way back in around 1985. I would like to propose to you that we have in Scripture at the end of Luke's Gospel, the paradigm for ongoing conversion in terms of the Eucharist. There are two men, Clopas and his companion, walking on the road that leads from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It's seven miles long; it was hilly; it was long and windy. It would have taken a few hours. At the beginning of the journey, an apparent stranger met up with them [who] begins opening up the Scripture, starting with Moses and the Law, with Genesis, and Exodus going through all of the prophets.

[When] they reached Em-

maus, He [Jesus] looked to be going further. They convinced Him to stay. There at the table, something happens. Actually, four things happen. He takes, He blesses, He breaks and He gives the bread. What happens next? Their eyes are opened. That exact expression only occurs one other time in the Scriptures, and that is back when the old covenant had been established. Our first parents had partaken and their eyes were opened to nakedness and shame because of the disobedience. [However], this is not the old covenant but the new. When they partake of this breaking of the Eucharistic bread, their eyes are opened to the resurrected body of the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings.

The Emmaus road experience comes in two parts. The first part is what we call the Liturgy of the Word, where the Scriptures are

opened. The second part is the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the breaking of the bread. This is what it was back then and there; this is what it is here and now.

So [we are meant] to base the New Evangelisation on the Eucharist, to see that Jesus Christ is extending the New Covenant to us to make us his family. It's as if the good news is almost too good to be true. That is no longer bread. This is the resurrected body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ, not just on the table there at Emmaus, not just in the upper room on Easter Sunday, but [at every Mass].

I honestly believe as Catholics, as we profess our faith, we don't recognise how truly fantastic these sacred mysteries are. We would almost do better looking at them as though outsiders would see it. It's almost like fantasy. It's too good to be true – of course,



unless it's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth of the Catholic Gospel, in which case, I have to say, it's amazing how unamazed we are at the amazing grace of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist.

[Now], I want to propose to you that if you went to work on Monday, and you shared with your co-workers at the coffee break, that you had seen a great movie that had just come out, or had gone to a new restaurant that had just opened, no one would turn on you and say, 'Who do you think you are, shoving your culinary tastes down our throats? I'll find my own restaurant. And as to your theatrical judgments, keep them to yourself!' No! They might go to the movie, they might not; they might visit the restaurant, they might not. They would

Our world today offers us countless pleasures, but not a single joy that lasts, whereas Jesus Christ gives us the joy of salvation, even in the midst of hardship and sorrow, the joy that can withstand suffering and death. It is joy that other people are going to find irrefutable.'

take it in because that's what friends do: They share the things that they've experienced that brought them joy. Well, as we open our hearts to experience Christ in the Holy Eucharist, we might be able to say to a friend or a co-worker, 'I grew up Catholic, however, I've taken all of this grace for granted practically all of my life. Now I'm kind of waking up and discovering the joy of the Gospel.' Now they are probably not going to say, 'We've got four minutes left in the coffee break, preach us a homily sister.' However, they might invite you out for dinner or for lunch or a coffee break, or they might come to you later on and say, 'Hey, do you have some time to talk about a difficulty in my own marriage, in my own family, or even here at work?'

[This task then] is friendship, it's joy, it's bearing witness, it's

opening yourself to conversion that is ongoing. It's also re-discovering Christ in the Eucharist and leading people back to Him, his body, blood, soul, and divinity in the Holy Eucharist. This is who we are as Catholic Christians. This is all we do when we share our faith, the joy of the Gospel, when we bear witness to the truth that we have professed all of our spiritual lives. So many people out there might never darken the doorway of your parish or mine, the only homily they might ever hear is the kind of friendship that you establish with them. ●



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TANIA RIMAC

PARISH RENEWAL TEAM

Tania is in the Parish Renewal Team, in the Sydney Centre for Evangelisation. She supports parish priests and parish teams in renewal specialising in mobilising teams in all things evangelisation and mission. In 2020 Tania completed the Arete Centre for Missionary Leadership course as part of the inaugural cohort and holds a Bachelor of Management majoring in Hospitality. She is a wife and mother of three children and enjoys road trips and hiking in her spare time.



5 STEPS TO BUILD AN INVITATIONAL CULTURE

TANIA RIMAC

Excerpts of the talk given by Tania Rimac at the Parish Renewal Conference,
St Mary's Cathedral College Hall, 20 August 2022

Invitations are offered each day. We have all given invitations and we have all received invitations – to birthday parties, to weddings, to dinner, for a coffee, to watch a movie. We invite people to things all the time.

What does an invitation mean and speak to?

Think about a time when you were invited to someone's special event, a birthday party, a wedding – this is an invitation to share in something special of that person. How does that make you feel? Do you feel special, seen, loved? Ultimately it is love, as the person that invited you, invited you because they wanted to share that time with you in a special way at their event.

When we invite as a Church we are ultimately inviting people to meet Jesus, and we invite them because we love them. We want others to share in the life that Jesus offers; we understand the difference Jesus makes to a person's life and we therefore

‘We have the best thing on offer – Jesus Christ! He makes all the difference and how would it be that we would keep this to ourselves!’

extend an invitation to them to meet him and hear his message.

What does a culture of invitation mean and why would we want to be a Church with a culture of invitation?

To be Church with a culture of invitation would mean that we are *a parish where everyone was open to receiving an invitation and was also offering invitations* all the time, all year round. It would mean that everyone understood that we are a parish and Church that goes out and invites people to meet Jesus and to grow in relationship with him. This does not mean only

parish priests, clergy or religious are inviting, but includes them and all the baptised! That means you and me. It would mean that we all recognise as a Church that invites, we are expecting people in the pews that have never been to a church as well as those who are not regular attendees. This is important to understand as it changes the way we behave, our attitude and everything we do in our parishes, at every Mass, in every ministry, and every interaction we have at the church and in our daily life.

What (OR WHO) are we inviting people to?

We have the best thing on offer – Jesus Christ! He makes all the difference and how would it be that we would keep this to ourselves? We are called to go out, Jesus invites us, to go out and proclaim the good news. This is what we do when we extend an invitation. We are saying this is something special and important to me, I want you to be part of this! In a world that



is broken and hurting we know what brings healing, peace and joy and this is what we are to invite people to - Jesus Christ.

Culture is a way of living and being and we are invited to be a people who invite others to draw close to Jesus in different ways according to where people are in their own unique journey of faith. For a person who has not yet met Christ inviting them to something like Alpha or a parish family BBQ could be the way to go. For another who is already in relationship with Jesus inviting them to something such as a Bible Study, a Lenten prayer group or to serve in a ministry according to their spiritual gifts can help them grow deeper in relationship with Jesus.

Why don't we invite?

Research shows that the number one reason that people do not invite is because they fear rejection. This is a natural human fear though we must be reminded what we are inviting

people to and what is at stake. We need to put our faith in place of fear and trust that God is working and understand that if someone does not accept an invitation it is only the invitation they have declined; it is not a direct offense to us. God's timing is perfect and nothing is impossible with God, so in trust we extend an invitation understanding that when it is time for that person to accept they will, and our invitation was one part of that person's journey.

The Five Steps

1. Pray, and trust in God

Prayer is foundational in all that we do and Jesus continually invites us to share in his mission to "Go, make disciples" therefore, before we go we pray to the "Lord of the Harvest" to equip and strengthen us as we labour in His harvest, which is so plentiful today (Matt 9:38). We often rely on ourselves and when we do

we are not properly equipped. We are to pray individually and as a Church, for boldness and courage to be able to go out into the world and take the message of Christ out to others. We need to be intentional and pray continually for an openness on our part to recognise opportunities that are placed before us and pray for an openness of heart of those we approach and invite; ask for divine appointments, for the Spirit to create opportunities.

When we are praying intentionally and desire the opportunity to invite others to draw close to Jesus, we are then less likely to lack the courage needed for this mission and will be less fearful of rejection. It is important to remember that we are responsible for the invitation and we leave the response to the Holy Spirit.

Note: a prayer card is available to download on the resources page at <https://www.gomakedisciples.org.au/>, it can

be used for individual prayer or as a parish initiative.

2. Understand 'why'

Our 'why' is Jesus Christ. Each person in the parish must understand that the reason we extend an invitation to others is that an invitation is often the first step which leads people to know the peace, love and joy that only Christ can give.

The Church is the hands and feet of Jesus in the world today, and he asks us to cooperate in his mission to reach the nations for no other reason than to share his good news. We have no agenda - it is not what we want *from* people but what we want *for* people. Inviting people is not for the sake of having large numbers present in the pews but is for the sake of saving souls, this is what is at stake. By the virtue of our baptism we are called and commissioned to go out in Jesus' name and invite others to encounter him, for the first time or more deeply.



3. Invest in relationships

God created us as relational beings, to be in relationship to support and love one other. It is important to take time in a busy world to build trusting relationships, where we can rely on people and they can rely on us. These relationships give us opportunities to share how our Christian life supports us in our daily life and allows others to see what a difference Jesus makes in life.

People are never projects, and we are encouraged to love people, do 'life' and journey with them, this includes our family and friends, colleagues and neighbours. Over time, through experiences and conversations, we are able to understand where people are in their faith journey and then can invite them to something that is appropriate for them, accompanying them along the way, one step closer to Jesus. This can only be achieved through authentic relationships built on trust.

The Church is the hands and feet of Jesus in the world today, and he asks us to cooperate in his mission to reach the nations for no other reason than to share his good news.'

4. Have somewhere to invite people to (other than Mass)

Having places other than Mass to invite people to in our parishes makes it easier to invite the unconverted and those who are away from the Church currently. In many parishes the only thing on offer to invite people to is Mass, however Mass is generally more suited for those who have been evangelised and fully initiated

into the Church, and is not necessarily a good starting place for someone who is not evangelised.

Some suggestions for places to invite the non-converted to in the parish could be Alpha, a book club, Adoration, a parish trivia night, a parish BBQ and many more.

When we have such offerings for those who are not church, it is imperative that we welcome in a way that they feel that they belong and are free to come as they are so that they will be open an invitation to something in the parish in the future.

5. Just do it!

Start personally inviting today! There is so much power in a personal invitation and the first few times might be clunky and the words might not come out right, but the more we do it the better we will be at it. You learn to walk by walking, you learn to invite by inviting.

Get comfortable with people saying no, don't take it personally and make it about yourself, make it about loving that person in front of you; remember, we celebrate the invitation and leave the response to the Holy Spirit!

Take a risk in good faith, take courage! Don't vet your invitation and make a decision for the other person. Allow them the opportunity to make their own choice of whether they would like to accept an invitation. We take this away from them when we deny them the invitation. We have to trust that God is already working in people's lives. All we have to do is invite them, don't assume they won't be open to an invitation.

Jesus invited continually and invites you today to 'go and make disciples' and proclaim the good news. The question is are we open to saying 'yes' to this invitation? ●



FR CHRIS RYAN MGL
PARISH PRIEST ST DECLAN'S

Fr Chris Ryan MGL is currently the parish priest of St Declan's, Penshurst and our Lady of Fatima, Peakhurst. His PhD explored the RCIA as a source for youth ministry in a secular age, and he is the founder and director of the Arete Centre for Missionary Leadership, which focuses upon formation for the Church's ministry of evangelisation. He is the co-editor of *Australian Catholic Youth Ministry: Theological and Pastoral Foundations for Faithful Ministry* and a co-author of *Preaching on Purpose: A Divine Renovation Handbook for Communicating the Gospel Today*. Fr Chris is passionate about the need for parishes to be evangelising communities.



AN ELUSIVE BUT INDISPENSABLE GIFT: FOSTERING AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY

FR CHRIS RYAN MGL

Parish Renewal Conference, St Mary's Cathedral College Hall,
20 August 2022

I remember racing down to St George Hospital in 2018 to see one of our parishioners. Monica had not long finished an 'Alpha' course we had been running at St Declan's Parish, and had returned home from a holiday feeling quite unwell. Emergency surgery followed. She had had a reaction to the medication she was on and was now in a much more serious condition. I went into the ICU, anointed her, and by the time I had made the 20-minute drive back to the parish I had received another call informing me that Monica's condition had actually gotten worse. Feeling helpless, wanting to express our care for her, and very conscious of her husband and three kids at home, I texted one of the members of her Alpha table and explained the situation. For the next three weeks the family had a meal on the table every night, provided by her new friends from Alpha, as Monica at first recovered in hospital and then at home. Eventually Monica was well enough to tell us that she had a freezer full of leftovers

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and was giving away extra meals such as the care and generosity of parishioners.

There's a critical thing I want you to notice about this story – which is that the parish's generous and loving actions didn't rely on me as the priest. I sent one text message. One. Monica's friends from the parish cared very practically for her and her family in their hour of need. Fast forward to 2022 and Monica is part of a small group in the parish which includes most of that original Alpha group plus some extras. Monica experienced back then in 2018,

and is continuing to experience now, what I have described as an elusive, but indispensable gift – authentic Christian community.

In this talk I want to offer initial answers to the questions: What is authentic Christian community? Why is it elusive for so many people in our parishes today? Why do our parishes need it? And practically speaking, how do we build authentic Christian community in our parishes?

Friends in faith

But for now, let's all start with a simple definition: authentic Christian community is the experience of "friends in faith". I'm going to return to why I think that's a good definition, but, for now, go with me and accept that this is what we want for our people – faith-filled friendships.

Why is the experience of authentic Christian community elusive? It is because we haven't prioritised it in our Church. At the risk of being too simplistic, I think two key things happened



historically. Some of you here will be able to remember the experience of sectarianism – when Catholics banded together against a common enemy – the Protestants – and built an enclosed Catholic world. People went to Catholic school, played in a Catholic tennis club, saw their friends at Mass, met their future spouse at the Catholic Youth Organisation dance, and so on. At its best there was a strong sense of community there, and Catholic faith was a part of it, but it wasn't necessarily central. It was more tribal, and as the psychologist M. Scott Peck warned us many years ago, the group that forms against a common enemy is a false kind of community – but it is seductive. Belonging to the Catholic *tribe* isn't an experience of genuine Christian *community*. Why? Because it

isn't sufficiently centred upon Jesus.

Sectarianism – conflict between Catholic and Protestant – is basically a relic now, and so the Catholic tribe has fallen apart. The temptation now would be to find a new enemy – maybe secularism – and try and recreate a Catholic tribe that is now united against the cultural evils present in our secular age. Now, there are all manner of things in our culture that are contrary to and opposed to Christian faith. However, to try and build a new tribe that is more focused upon opposition to our age's idols is to make the same mistake, and be insufficiently centred upon Jesus.

But perhaps the most significant problem in creating genuine community in our parishes is the impact of the

consumer mindset that reduces faith to a commodity, that makes the Mass a product. It's this attitude that says that coming anonymously to Mass each week, smiling benignly at the people around you at the sign of peace, and at best remembering the names of the people who sit each week in the pew in front or behind, and being vaguely concerned if they aren't there for a few weeks, is somehow enough. This minimalist approach is the product a mentality that says that all that matters is me receiving 'my little piece of Jesus' and then trying to be a good person on the basis of that for the rest of the week.

Why community is important

For many in our pews the response to this might be bewilderment – 'Why does my

parish need to be a community? Why should I be friends with the people I see at church? That's not what I come to church for, I just want God. Community, friendship? That's not for Sundays at Church, that's for my time, for me. I'm not actually looking for community.' But of course, one of the deepest needs in the human heart is to belong.

So, it can look like our problem in relation to authentic community is inertia – trying to shift people who are used to showing up each Sunday (or more commonly now, even less than every week) and who perhaps feel disinclined to do anything over and above that.

Sometimes this perspective – that Sunday Mass is enough and we don't need to do anything else as Catholics – is defended by poor theology. I



have heard people defend their hour-a-week commitment to Sunday Mass as being enough by actually citing the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II's document on the liturgy says that the Mass is 'the source and summit of the Christian life' (Sacrosanctum Concilium 10).

And, of course, it is! Our salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is mediated sacramentally to us through the Mass. There is nothing more important to our faith than the Eucharist, properly understood. But to say that the Eucharist is 'the source and summit' of the Christian life is not to say that it makes up the *entirety* of the Christian life.

There's a curious fact about Australia's geography that helps to make this point. Australia is the only continent in the world in which the source of its

We cannot do without the Eucharist, but we also need the rest of the mountain, and the rest of the river.'

largest river can be found on the continent's highest mountain. The source of the Murray River can be found on the slopes of Mt Kosciusko. It's fascinating when you think about it. But here's the thing – what does the summit of Mt Kosciusko look like without the rest of the mountain? A hill? A blip on the landscape? What does the source of the Murray look like without the rest of the river? Well, it's a pond, or a marsh. The summit is the top of something and the source is

the beginning of something. We cannot do without the Eucharist, but we also need the rest of the mountain, and the rest of the river. We need more than the Eucharist if we are to truly live a Christian life.

You might well be sitting there right now and saying to yourself, well 'duh Fr Chris', of course there is more to the Christian life than the Eucharist. There's personal prayer, reading the Scriptures, living a moral life, and the other sacraments. And that's right – those things are all important, absolutely necessary for the Christian life. But so is genuine, authentic Christian community. It wasn't so necessary when we lived in Christendom, when we assumed that everyone was a Christian. They may not have been from our 'tribe', and they may or may not have

been especially committed to their faith, but you don't need the same sense of community when Christianity is an assumed dimension of the culture. In a post-Christendom culture, genuine, authentic and distinctive Christian community assumes a new importance.

But what if the real problem is not the cultural inertia of Catholics who say that in the past we have never needed to be friends with the people with whom we go to Mass. I think the real problem is, as Michael, one of the leaders at St Declan's regularly says, "you don't know what you don't know". In other words, if people have never seen, never witnessed, never experienced, authentic Christian community, how do they know what they are missing?



When you experience genuine Christian community, when you have truly become friends in faith, when you have experienced what it is like to have friends *because* of your faith in Jesus, and what it's like to live out your faith in the context of those friendships, you will realise that Christian community is vitally important, necessary, in fact *indispensable* for living out your Christian life.

My suspicion is that if you have been convinced of my argument to this point you are champing at the bit for some practical tips. After all, this is a how-to session isn't it? It is supposed to be practical. The problem with jumping to the practical at this point is that we are likely to come up with some tired old suggestions that you may well have heard before – have welcomers at the door at Mass, say hello to the newcomers in the announcements and tell them how they can sign up for credit card giving, and have more dinners, social events and other opportunities for people to gather. The problem with going straight to practical ideas now is that in so doing we reduce Christian community

to a merely human reality, to something we can construct ourselves. The best that will be said of such an approach is that they are a lovely friendly bunch of folks at St Christina the Astonishing Parish in Mt Elsewhere, so welcoming, so warm. The people who occasionally walk in will say to one another, they're so ... 'nice'. Well, 'nice' never set the world on fire. 'Nice' never convinced anyone that the Church is the bearer of the Good News of the salvation of the human race. 'Nice' never created an oasis in the desert where desperate people could have their thirst quenched. 'Nice' never changed lives or stopped anyone in their tracks and made them say, how can I be saved? 'Nice' never renewed the face of the earth.

Self-giving Christian love

Genuine Christian community is not the product of being nice.

You might well be thinking, 'You know what Fr Chris, I'll be honest with you. My parish hasn't even got to nice yet. We are not even nice. Forget oases in the desert, forget changed lives, let's not aim too

high. I'll take people actually smiling at each other, saying hello to a newcomer, being welcoming to a stranger!'

I get that. However, the road to genuine Christian community does not go through 'nice'. 'Nice' is not a way stop on the way to genuine Christian community. In fact, there is no way other than self-giving love. 'Nice' doesn't produce 30 meals in three weeks for a family with a desperately ill mother. 'Nice' doesn't produce small groups where people are invested in each other's spiritual growth, and in their daily lives. 'Nice' doesn't compel non-believers' attention because they see and experience a quality of relationship they cannot find elsewhere. Again, 'nice' doesn't set the world on fire. Let's not settle for 'nice'. Let's aspire for self-giving love in the model and manner of Jesus, who never taught us anything about being nice, but who taught us everything about loving to the very end.

So authentic Christian community is something God does with us and in us. How does the Lord create such communities? The earliest Christian

community is our guide here. The first description of the early Church occurs in Chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles. It reads:

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common;

⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,

⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The grace of Pentecost

Before we get into the *content* of the

passage, we need to look at the *context* of the passage. We get this description of the early Church, of the first Christian community right after the story of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is poured out upon the disciples gathered in the Upper Room, and then Peter goes out to preach. He explains to the people the Good News – that the Jesus they crucified is the Messiah, the true King of Israel, and Lord, because God has raised him from the dead. This is the kerygma, or the foundational proclamation of the Gospel.

When those listening are cut to the heart and ask Peter what they should do, Peter tells them: Repent, and be baptised in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the Holy Spirit just like we did. So, Acts 2 begins with Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Peter's preaching of the Gospel, and the response of faith and conversion which continues the grace of Pentecost. Then we have our passage – Acts 2:42-47, the description of the early Christian community. What's

the point here? That authentic Christian community is created when the Gospel is preached, when people respond with faith, and when the Holy Spirit is received. True Christian community is a work of the Holy Spirit.

This is the 'secret sauce' of Christian community. If we are struggling to form communities of faith, it's almost certainly because the Gospel has not been sufficiently preached and responded to; and/or we are not relying sufficiently upon the Holy Spirit. So, the first step in creating authentic community is to make sure the Gospel is preached and by giving permission for the Holy Spirit to move and act in our midst.

The context helps us better understand the content of the passage: when we read that the early Christian community were devoted to the Apostles' teaching we understand that the Apostles' teaching of course encompassed all that Jesus said and did, but it especially focused upon the kerygma, the saving death and resurrection of Jesus that accomplished the forgiveness



of our sins and brings us into the experience of the unfathomable love of God through the pouring of the Holy Spirit into our hearts.

It is also helpful for us to know that the scripture scholars tell us that the way to read our passage is that each element in verse 42 is unpacked in verses 43-47.

One heart and one soul

This means that they didn't just listen to the Apostles' teaching, but they also witnessed the signs and wonders that the Apostles performed. Immediately after this passage, Peter and John heal a crippled man in one of the outer areas of the Temple. In other words, the Apostles did what Jesus told them to do and what they saw Jesus do himself: they healed the sick and worked wonders, which were signs that the Kingdom of God had come broken into the world.

Second, they devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread – that's the Eucharist, they spent time in the temple each day in prayer, and they praised God. We have here an image of prayer both formal and informal, in the temple and at home, and in which the Eucharist, but also having ordinary meals together, is central.

For our purposes today, the most important term in our passage though is 'fellowship'. The Greek word is *koinonia*, which might be translated as 'communion'. The passage goes on to unpack that term by saying that they were 'together, and had all things in common'. A little later, in Chapter 4 of Acts, Luke will describe the early Church again, and he says that the believers were 'of one heart

and one soul'. Both of these were references to well-known proverbs cited by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. The proverbs are about friendship – that friends hold all things in common, and friends are one soul. By describing the early Church using these two well-known proverbs about friendship, Luke is saying that the first Christian community was a community of friends.

Let's take a moment to think about this: C.S. Lewis says that "Friendship... is born at the moment when one person says to another 'What! You too?'". In other words, friendship begins with a shared appreciation of a third reality. It is akin to two people who discover they like the same books or poets, or sport, or pastime. Friendship starts here. Aristotle calls this kind of friendship 'the friendship of pleasure'. It is a friendship based in the enjoyment of a shared activity and the pleasure associated with that.

Aristotle also talks about another kind of friendship, which is based in their mutual usefulness. For example, two of my closest friends are two guys I did my PhD with. Our friendship began with us critiquing and encouraging each other's writing and research. We were useful and helpful to each other. An important element to note is that both of these kinds of friendships can end if one no longer finds the activity pleasurable, or if one or both people are no longer so useful to each other. Aristotle realises that there's a self-serving, even selfish element in these two kinds of friendships, but he is not completely dismissive of them either.

Fellowship as friendship

Aristotle suggests that there is a third kind of friendship, and it's rarer than first two. He calls it 'true friendship' or 'the friendship of virtue'. The two key qualities of true friendship are that you like and care for the person for themselves, and you motivate each other to be better people. Importantly, true friendship originates in the friendship of pleasure or utility. The friendship starts in how each is useful to the other, or the shared enjoyment they experience. However, over time, it deepens into a genuine concern, a valuing and care for the other. Going back to the concept of fellowship as friendship in Acts of the Apostles, I think it is important to realize that Luke is saying that the early Christian community was characterised by true friendship and not simply because they enjoyed similar interests or were helpful to each other. However, if the friendship of pleasure or utility is a necessary precursor to true friendship, then paying attention to, rather than dismissing, those levels of friendship will also be necessary as we seek to foster true friendship in our parishes. I'll return to that point.

So, you can see now why I have defined authentic Christian community as 'friends in faith'. It's because that's how Luke described the relationships between believers in the early Church.

The last thing I want you to notice about our passage is that it has a profoundly relevant outcome for our Parish Renewal Conference. Luke finishes his description of the early Church by saying

that 'day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47). There's a profound relationship between all that has gone before and this final verse. The outcome of the early Church's devotion to the Apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and the prayers, was that the Lord kept sending people to them in order to experience the saving love of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ. The passage says that people were being evangelised every day as they encountered that first Christian community.

A powerful missionary strategy

Why is Christian community indispensable then? Why should we do all we can to foster it in our parishes? It's because it's the most powerful missionary strategy there is. It's the most effective form of evangelisation. Authentic Christian community draws people like moths to a flame. Or better, when people experience genuine Christian community, they sense the presence of the Risen Jesus in our midst, and the Lord sets them on fire with the love of God through the power of his Holy Spirit. To paraphrase St Catherine of Siena, if we would only actually *be* the Church, we would set the world on fire.

Now it is time to talk about practicalities, about how to put all this into action. I want to briefly speak about four things we have been doing at St Declan's Parish, Peshurst, to try and incarnate the ideal presented to us in the Acts of the Apostles. I want to say at the outset that we have made a bunch of mistakes, that we





still haven't got it right, and if you are looking for the perfect embodiment of Acts 2:42-47 in our Archdiocese of Sydney, then St Declan's will deeply disappoint you. We have not 'arrived'; we live Christian community out so imperfectly. However, I do go to sleep at night really believing that we are failing at doing the right things. To put it more positively, I believe we can see, amidst the intrinsic messiness and challenge of building community, really beautiful signs that the Lord is at work in our midst. So four things: Alpha, Life Groups, building community at Sunday Eucharist, and other community-building events.

Alpha: the genesis of Christian community

The heart of our strategy

for building community is running Alpha. Why? Well, most importantly, it's because Alpha contains an opportunity for people to hear the kerygma. Alpha also invites people to respond with faith, and it helps them to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in a new way. As we saw earlier, these are the three critical conditions for the creation of Christian community. Alpha is also an opportunity to build friendships in faith as people break, not the bread of the Eucharist yet, but the bread of an actual meal and share their lives over dinner. People also experience prayer on Alpha. So, for us Alpha is the genesis of Christian community because it contains an introduction to all the essential elements of community that we saw in Chapter 2 of Acts. You might say that at Alpha

people get a taste for authentic community, of the unique power of being friends in faith.

People also need to get a taste of community when they come to Mass. I believe with all my heart that the Body of Christ in the Eucharist builds the Body of Christ that is the Church – but that beautiful theological truth needs experiential flesh put upon it. We do three simple things at St Declan's to try and do build community at Mass, especially because we recognise that for most people this will be their primary, and most important, experience of the parish. We welcome people personally at the door before Mass. I do it, and so does a team of welcomers. Secondly, we offer some hospitality at Mass provided by our coffee cart team. And thirdly, we keep extending invitations to join, or

to participate more fully, in our parish community.

Nurturing parish life

As a parish, we also run several other large, whole parish community events a year. These include an annual carols service, as well as our parish feast day. We don't try and do too many of these because they are resource consuming, but it is important to try and gather the whole parish a few times a year. We also try and make sure that these events are geared for and especially welcoming of newcomers and visitors to the parish.

The final plank in our strategy for building community are our Life Groups. These are an extension of the experience of Alpha, and they focus on building faith-filled friendships. We want them



to be a place where people grow as missionary disciples, but we want them to do that through the experience of faith. These groups meet regularly over food, they reflect upon and share their lives in the light of faith, and they pray. If that sounds like a conscious attempt to incarnate Acts 2 you are completely right. And if it sounds a fair bit like Alpha too, you would also be right.

Building these groups at St Declan's has been hard – people don't know what they don't know, and so they don't always realise how important it is to have friends in faith to support, encourage, accompany and care for one another on the journey of faith. However, every time I feel discouraged in this task I remember Monica's story, of the experience of Christian community that not only met her

So, for us Alpha is the genesis of Christian community because it contains an introduction to all the essential elements of community that we saw in Chapter 2 of Acts. Alpha people get a taste for authentic community.'

when she was in great need, but has also continued to meet her in the years since, and remind myself that authentic community

is completely worth it.

Another way of describing the challenges we have faced is that people often come to friendship with the largely unconscious expectation for friendships of pleasure or utility – and so they enjoy being friends in faith for 'what they get out of it'. However, authentic Christian community is created when true friendship kicks in – when people are loved for themselves and they encourage each other to really grow as disciples of Jesus.

We think true friendships are indispensable, so we are persevering, and Life Groups are growing. The other thing I want to say about Life Groups is that they are an intentional structure in the parish for fostering faith-filled friendships. People have made, and are making, great faith-

filled friendships in the parish outside of Life Groups. And that's great. We just don't want to leave the formation of those groups to chance. They are small groups because, as should be obvious by now, authentic community requires the parish to be what Pope Francis calls a community of communities, because we cannot be true friends with hundreds of people. It's got to be face-to-face, and it's got to be personal.

St Declan's is a messy, imperfect work in progress. And I am ok with it always being so. But I am grateful to God every day that I see the signs of authentic community in our midst, because the Lord is regularly, maybe not every day, but regularly, even consistently, adding to our number those who are being saved. ●



FR MICHAEL DE STOOP RECTOR OF SEMINARY OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Father Michael de Stoop was born in Eastwood, a son of six children. He was ordained to the Priesthood on 8 June 2001. As a priest, he has ministered in numerous parishes such as All Saints' Parish, Liverpool, St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, St Benedict's Parish, Broadway, and Our Lady of the Rosary Parish, Fairfield.

Father Michael also served in various roles such as Master of Ceremonies to Cardinal Pell, the Director of Vocations, chaplain for Catholic Youth Services, and the NSW Chaplain for the Knights of the Southern Cross. Fr Michael was also invited to study at the Institute for Priestly Formation and Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska, USA during Summer Intensives where he completed a Masters of Christian Spirituality and a Graduate Certificate in Spiritual Direction and Directed Retreats. Then, he completed a Graduate Certificate in Pastoral Supervision at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology, Saint Meinrad, Indiana, USA. From 1 January 2021, Fr Michael commenced his appointment as Rector of the Seminary of the Good Shepherd.



HOW TO ALLOW THE HOLY SPIRIT TO LEAD OUR PARISHES

FR MICHAEL DE STOOP

Parish Renewal Conference, St Mary's Cathedral College Hall,
20 August 2022

Diving into the Deep End

Before you jump into a lake for the first time, you usually wade into shallow water, first. Then, you wade around to get a feel for where the lake gets deeper. This approach enables you to ascertain if there are any protruding rocks or debris below the surface of the water. You certainly don't want to jump into the deep end of the lake before you check that the way is clear. An introduction to a talk usually serves a similar purpose. An introduction provides broad brush strokes regarding the main themes that will emerge in the talk. Consequently, you become better prepared to engage with the up-coming content, lest you suddenly end up beyond your depth of understanding.

This talk will be unusual, then, as the conference organisers have asked me to dive in the deep end right from the outset! The topic? Essentially, it's about communal discernment. Among

Some people use the word "communal discernment" as a pretentious means of grasping for their disordered attachments. Clearly, this approach is no way to spread the Gospel!

the *charisms*¹ of the Holy Spirit that St Paul identified, discernment is one of these gifts (1 Cor. 12:10). Discernment is also a skill "because it can be developed and honed by prayer and practice."²

In this talk, I'll be identifying how the baptised, together with their parish priest, can be attentive to the interior movements of

the Holy Spirit. We'll see how this contemplative approach helps the discernment group to allow the Holy Spirit to lead their parish. Indeed, if we're to bring about faith renewal in parishes, we need "to be guided by the Spirit" (Gal 5:18; Rom 8:14). Having said this, as only about an hour has been allocated for this talk, there's risk that you'll leave thinking that not much is involved in discernment. Whereas, in fact, discernment is a profound spiritual exercise. Essentially, important dispositions are required and as the apostle St John said, "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn. 4:1 NIV). To assist you further, then, the transcript of this talk will be made available online. If you want to delve more deeply into it, the transcript includes footnotes and appendices, including a practical step-by-step guide on how to engage in communal discernment.



You Can't Swim in Shallow Water

Having introduced the analogy of wading into the shallow water first before we plumb the depths, there is at least one shallow end that you need to avoid. The shallow end of communal discernment is no place to swim. This body of water has no depth, precisely because it's *superficial*. On this point, I'm referring to the misguided, pre-conceived ideas of communal discernment that some people have. Some people use the word "communal discernment" as a pretentious means of grasping for their disordered attachments. Clearly, this approach is no way to spread the Gospel, for such people attempt to enslave others with their own disordered emotional needs. Such people struggle to appreciate that exercising *indifference*

is essential to discernment.

Indifference does not involve being *blasé*, *careless*, and *apathetic*, but being detached, impartial, unbiased, and interiorly free from the things that don't lead us closer to God. Among other important dispositions, St Ignatius of Loyola taught that we can only discern God's desires for ourselves if we're not "reaching a decision through some disordered affection" (*Spiritual Exercises*, [22]).³ Indifference is epitomised in the parable of the treasure hidden in a field. The man who finds the treasure hides it again, goes off happy, sells everything he owns and buys the field" (*Mt.* 13:44). This man exercises indifference in relation to everything he owns, as he knows that all his material possessions are *nothing* compared to God, to whom he is united. Indeed, *God is his*

treasure; hence, he prays Psalm 16, "My happiness lies in you alone" (*Ps.* 16:2 GP).

St Ignatius understood that indifference is an essential "means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God's will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul" (*SpEx*, [1]).⁴ Indeed, the salvation of souls is the ultimate treasure that should motivate every effort in parish renewal.

Example of Indifference in Communal Discernment

To illustrate how indifference is needed in communal discernment, I'll give you an example. I heard someone tell me about a pastor in the USA who was put in an awkward position. He received a letter from

his local Council that notified him of a Development Application (DA) to build a brothel just across the road from his church. He sought advice from one of the committees in his parish. Surprisingly, every single committee member strongly advised the priest not to make any objection to the DA. *What was their rationale?* "If the Council approves the DA," they said, "the parish would have an opportunity to provide pastoral care for the prostitutes and their clients." Clearly, this rationale didn't square with a priest's call to participate in Christ's identity as the Good Shepherd. As a good shepherd sees a menacing wolf approaching his sheep, can you imagine him, thinking: "I think this wolf deserves a fair go. I won't defend my sheep from his blood thirsty teeth, but you know what? I can put bandaids



on the sheep who survive and nurture them back to health." Needless to say, the answer to this question is self-evident. So, *what prevented the committee from seeing what the Parish needed to do?*

Before I answer this question, let me explain two important factors about *synodality*. We've heard much about the synodal process given that the Plenary Council has just taken place in Australia. When Pope Francis first explained the synodal process, he emphasised that it is "an exercise in mutual listening."⁵ The first factor about synodality that warrants our attention is this: the motions deliberated by the Plenary Council need to be submitted to the Synod of Bishops and ultimately be decided upon by the Bishop of Rome.⁶ Even outside of the Plenary process, priests do

This fear . . . consisted of what St Ignatius calls a "disordered affection."

well to engage in similar mutual listening by consulting their parishioners.

Communal discernment can take place, then, in a Parish Pastoral Council, Finance Committee or any other committee, even a general assembly of all the parishioners. We must remember, though, that synodality is not a parliament, nor is it *congregationalism*.⁷ Rather, each pastor is responsible for the Parish.⁸ When the parish priest consults his parishioners, they *make* a decision in result of their

consultative discussion. The pastor's responsibility is to *take* the deliberative decision, which may or may not exactly mirror the parishioners' advice. Nonetheless, this process involves the parish priest taking his decision with the benefit of his listening to the grass roots.⁹ Additionally, as this decision-making process is *transparent*, "Those who will be affected by a decision should have the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and express their view before the decision is taken, to the extent that this is possible and appropriate."¹⁰

Ideally, any synodal process culminates in a consensus. However, consensus doesn't lead to truth; rather, truth leads to consensus. Even so, such a general agreement cannot always be found. After all, consensus is a means, not an end.

In fact, Brian J. Gallagher, MSC PhD contends: "I do not believe that majority opinion is necessarily a sign of the Spirit of God." Because "the communal experience of the [Holy] Spirit and of any spirits not-of-God" that affect the group are "distinct from the many separate individual experiences of the spirits."¹¹ Nonetheless, by inviting everyone to provide their advice, parish priests give their parishioners a greater incentive to engage in the Church's mission. Accordingly, Pope Francis declared: "The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium."¹²

Another important factor

about synodality is worthy of note. In addition to consulting those who are within his Parish, the Parish Priest does well to consult people outside of his community and summon their collaborative assistance, too, when appropriate. Thus, when the pastor in the USA whom I referred to earlier received the letter regarding the DA, he also sought advice from his Diocese's Communications Office, which among other things, is the agency in his Diocese that specialises with the Church's presence in the media. The pastor was advised to go to the media so that his objection against the DA would be effective. Indeed, a strong objection was needed. Despite the fact that US Government's guidelines don't permit brothels to be built right next to a place of worship, the Council went ahead and allowed the developer to get so far as to submit his DA.¹³

At that stage, the Director of the Communications Office – a fervent Catholic lay woman – had been in the media for over 30 years. So, the priest knew she would have good judgment. She told him, "There's a journalist I've known for 20 years who has written many articles for newspapers against such DAs to good effect. I can assure you that this man is a journalist whom you can trust." The priest discussed this advice with the members of the committee in his parish. But, they were all against this advice, too, and they became very anxious. *Why?* Because they were afraid of what their non-Catholic friends and acquaintances would think of them if the church where they worshipped ended up in the newspaper. They didn't want to be seen by the general public to have been part of the parish's effort to voice its objection against

the DA to build a brothel. In this context, this fear that influenced the parish committee members consisted of what St Ignatius calls a "disordered affection."

Testing Spirits by their Direction and Origin

Let me explain. Think of the word *dis-ordered*. Your heart can be *ordered* towards God or away from God. The committee's fear was *mis-directed* away from God towards the spirit of the world. It's OK to experience fear, but how we respond to this feeling or any other interior movement – even subtle feelings – is what matters. Because spirits always have a *direction* (i.e., an intended trajectory), either towards God or away from God). To give other examples, what spirit would move me to feel humble gratitude in response to God's love, which I did nothing to merit? What spirit would be moving me if I took delight in your suffering? As Brian Gallagher clarifies, "the direction in which the spirit leads is the surest sign of which spirit is operating."¹⁴ In other words, we can test the origin of a spirit by testing its direction. According to this understanding, the parish committee's fear was *dis-ordered*. Clearly, their interior reaction was not ordered towards God, nor the plight of those who are vulnerable to sins against chastity with authentic compassion. Rather, it became evident over time that their fear appeared to be ordered towards their own reputation in accord with worldly esteem. Their motivations may have varied from one member to another. By and large, however, they indicated that were afraid that people in the general public who are sub-

ject to an anti-Christian sentiment would read the newspaper article and think poorly of them for advocating for Gospel values. Their worldview appeared to be influenced by the mass media in the manner well described by Robert Francis Prevost, OSA, who is renowned for being media savvy:

*Western mass media is extraordinarily effective in fostering within the general public enormous sympathy for beliefs and practices that are at odds with the Gospel ... The sympathy for anti-Christian lifestyle choices, that mass media fosters is so brilliantly and artfully engrained in the viewing public that when people hear the Christian message it often inevitably seems ideologically and emotionally cruel by contrast to the ostensible humaneness of the anti-Christian perspective.*¹⁵

As disciples of Jesus, the pastoral decisions we make need to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, not by the spirit of the world. Accordingly, Pope Francis explained, "The worldly spirit drives us to concentrate on our own problems and interests, on our need to appear relevant ... Let us invoke [the Holy Spirit] each day, so that he can remind us to make God's gaze upon us our starting point, to make decisions by listening to his voice."¹⁶ Our attempt to be faithful to the Gospel is "not to measure how far the world lives from the truth [the Good News] contains, but in order to attract the world, to enchant it with the beauty of love, to seduce it with the beauty of the offer of freedom which is given by the

Gospel."¹⁷

If the members of the parish's committee had exercised indifference, they would have enjoyed the interior freedom to think with "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). St Paul speaks of this need to remain detached from the spirit of the world. "Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you," he says, "but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do" (Rom. 12:2).

As we clarified earlier, indifference doesn't mean that we remain *apathetic*. Rather, indifference is the disposition by which we can be free to act according to God's desires. Theology professor Dean Brackley, SJ PhD (1946-2011) clarifies that such interior freedom provides "the capacity to sense and then embrace what is best, even when that goes against our initial inclinations." Essentially, indifference "is neither stoic in passiveness nor the extinction of desire that some currents of eastern religions advocate." Rather, indifference "means being so passionately and single-mindedly committed, so completely in love, that we are willing to sacrifice anything, including our lives, for the ultimate goal."¹⁸ Accordingly, we pray in Psalm 63: "Your love is better than life itself." Imagine how *meaningful* this Psalm was to Jesus when he prayed to his Father, "Your love is better than life itself" (Ps. 63:3).



Indifference, thus understood, disposes us to be like “a good shortstop” in a baseball game, as we’re “ready to move in any direction at the crack of the bat.” Obviously, “we are not indifferent to murder or adultery. Nor are we indifferent to our spouse, family, church, or anything else that serves the ultimate goal here and now.” On the contrary, once we are determined that something is more conducive to the goal than the alternatives, God expects us to pursue what we’ve chosen *passionately*.¹⁹

If a person isn’t aware that he’s lacking interior freedom, he simply cannot discern. The Founder of the Christian Spirituality Program in Creighton University Richard Hauser, SJ (1968-2018) emphatically taught, “Without having experi-

enced a spiritual awakening, discernment is impossible.”²⁰ I believe Hauser is correct because if we’re not consciously aware of our desires that are complicit with the dark spirit, these “deceptive desires” (*Eph. 4:22* ISV) will hijack the discernment process.²¹ If you want to read further examples that illustrate what can happen when authentic conversion and interior freedom are lacking, you can look at **Appendix A**, available at www.gomakedisciples.org.au.

Desire for God is Foundational to Discernment

You must not underestimate how foundational desire for God indeed is for sound group discernment. Let me give you an example. Imagine you’re attending a meeting of the Parish

Pastoral Council (PPC). The Parish Priest is seeking advice about how well the parish’s Confession times best serve the needs of the parishioners. One of the members of the PPC expresses her concern: “Allocating 30 minutes before the Vigil Mass for the Confession schedule isn’t enough. I, as a single mother, can become easily delayed by the needs of my children from being able to get to Confession on time. My baby suddenly needs a nappy change. Or, my four-year old son loses his shoe and can’t find it. Or, I need to run after my pet dog Rex, lest he become lost, because Rex has bolted down the street when I opened the front door of my house to go to my car! Many other instances like these pop up without warning. Consequently, by the time I arrive in the church,

Confession is over and the Vigil Mass has started. If more time was allocated for Confession, I’d have a better chance of getting to the church on time.”

Another member of the PPC *scoffs* at what this single mother said: “You don’t know what you’re saying! You’re treating this problem as if it’s outside you, but you hold the solution within you. All you need to do is get your children in your car earlier.”

This parishioner doesn’t realise that her lack of sensitivity towards the single mother is influenced by what she feels about Confession. She hasn’t been to Confession for over 10 years, as she feels rather threatened by the prospect of having to confess her sins. Nor has she ever spoken to God about her fear of Confession. She deems feeling threatened by



Confession to be *unwanted* because it's an unpleasant emotion, but by avoiding and disowning her fear, unbeknown to herself, she ends up projecting her discomfort onto the single mother by moralising: "You should be more aware of what's within your control rather than blaming your circumstances." Signs of the dark spirit are evident in this parishioner's comments, for in addition to blaming the single mother, she *devalues* her. Indeed, we have reason to suspect that the bad spirit is at work when we feel *inferior* in response.

By way of contrast, this member of the PPC could have thought to herself, "I haven't been to Confession for 10 years. I know I'm afraid of confessing my sins, but if I'm going to be attentive to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us in this meeting, I need to put myself in the shoes of this woman who values the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I might even learn something from her that may help me move beyond my fear, as I want to be close to God." In addition to exercising indifference, this example also illustrates

the importance of us having union with God as our ultimate goal in discernment.

Rose Mary Dougherty, SSND (1939-2019), who was a renowned formator of spiritual directors, emphasised: "The intention of seeking God together for one another ... becomes the litmus test for difficulties that come up in individuals and the group." Accordingly, she offers the following questions for the group to reflect upon:

- "How prayerful were we during the session? What was the quality of our silence? Our attention to God? What seemed to take us from attention to God?"
- "How did the difficulties affect the seeking? Do they obscure it by preoccupation with group maintenance? In spite of, or perhaps because of the discomfort they induce, do the difficulties make the seeking more authentic, the trust in God more real?"²²

Allocating 30 minutes before the Vigil Mass for the Confession schedule isn't enough. I, as a single mother, can become easily delayed by the needs of my children from being able to get to Confession on time...by the time I arrive in the church, Confession is over and the Vigil Mass has started!

When Desire for God Becomes More or Less Inverted

In communal discernment, sometimes the group's desire for God becomes more or less inverted.²³ In this situation, the members of the group might be mirroring the tendencies that exist among the parishioners in the wider worshipping community. This "mirroring dynamic"²⁴ is also known as a "parallel process,"²⁵ as what the group experiences first-hand among themselves *parallels* what they need to deal with among the parishioners in the wider community. In other words, the group sees how the parishioners in the wider worshipping community relate to one another reflected like a mirror among themselves in the discernment group.

Here's an example. As most parishes have a PPC, the following interaction among the members of such a group illustrates this dynamic. The PPC members notice that their desire for God has shifted towards competing for one another's attention and approval. This shift emerges as some members push for the parish to adopt a pastoral initiative that doesn't arise within the context of the agenda for that meeting. They insist that the parish's position of Youth Coordinator should be made redundant so that the parish could invest

in stock market shares. Additionally, their advice derives from much self-interest, as they own an investment broker company. Other members try to point out that conflict of interest appears to be at play. In this situation, the PPC need to be attentive to how they are relating to one another. Seeking one another's attention and approval might be mirroring the problem that they know exists among some groups and individuals within the parish who are inward looking and self-serving.

Affective maturity and trust needs to exist among the members of the group for these dynamics to be brought to the surface and explored; otherwise, all the members will remain non-the-wiser about what spirit is affecting the whole group. You can expect this kind of dynamic to be at play because whether they like or not, PPC members represent the wider parish, and parishioners influence them accordingly.²⁶ Regarding this dynamic, Brian Gallagher explains:

Groups too, are tempted away from life, away from God. Our vulnerabilities, our weak spots, are ripe ground for spirits not-of-God, appealing to the group's vulnerability. The voices of the counter spirits, the spirits not-of-God, tend to be louder, more demanding and in some sense more inviting, because of the group's vulnerability.²⁷

You might be quick to identify this example of the mirroring dynamic to be a problem; however, if the PPC are sufficiently self-aware, they can use this parallel process to good effect for the parish. Specifically, when the PPC engage in solid reflection upon their emotional needs that are operating underneath their conversation, they can experience a spiritual awakening. Consequently, rather than be inwardly looking and self-serving, the PPC can receive enlightenment on how they can move beyond the impasse of their obscurity and frustration to a deeper understanding regarding how the parish can engage in pastoral outreach.

This example illustrates a formidable means by which we can discover how we can allow the Holy Spirit to lead our parishes. This example is quite relevant to our era characterised by rampant individualism, for such individualism in secular society can influence the Church. In his pre-conclave speech, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio cautioned: "the Church, as an institution, is often tempted into a kind of 'theological narcissism.'"²⁸ Consequently, many Christians lack the ability to work together as a community to evangelise.²⁹ If the PPC's desire for God becomes more or less inverted, the following questions for reflection that Dougherty offers are apt:





As a listener for the others, where did my words or my silence seem to be coming from? A place of trust? A place of competition? My need to feel superior to others or appear learned? Am I willing simply to offer a question, an idea, or an image to a person for their consideration and then let go of it, or do I keep on pushing it? Do I listen to the questions of others, or do I hold onto my agenda for the person?³⁰

Reflecting on questions such as these releases the PPC members from their shackles. Consequently, they're no longer in collusion with the parishioners in the wider worshipping community who may be complicit with the dark spirit. Thus, they're no longer restricted from evangelising. This example illustrates how the PPC can

discern the deeper needs of the parish, as opposed to superficial ones. This example also demonstrates that authentic and transformative relationships primarily take place on the emotional and spiritual plane rather than simply the intellectual level.³¹ Whether you're aware of it or not, the emotions and passions that the good spirit and the bad spirit engender influence the decisions we make.³²

Authentic and transformative relationships is also the consequence of the group making their desire for God foundational to discernment.³³ Regarding this contemplative attitude, Spiritual Director and Pastoral Supervisor Maureen Conroy, RSM DMin affirms: "This gazing is done in God's presence, which allows inner truths to reveal themselves in a caring and contemplative atmosphere. It is

God who guides the revelation of unfree areas. It is God who brings darkness into the light and purifies the polluted waters."³⁴

This example also illustrates how our desire for God is a *reciprocation* of God's desire for us. For as St John of the Cross taught, "In the first place it should be known that if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more."³⁵ When God's love is heartfelt within ourselves, we can't help but want to respond to his desires for us. Consequently, interior freedom results, which correlates with St Paul's axiom: "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).³⁶ This liberation is not only freedom from what prevents us to listen to God speaking in and through the group. For this grace also

affords us to experience freedom for this depth of listening. Essentially, this interior freedom is the fruit of *humility*. St Alphonsus Liguori provides a comical image to illustrate the necessity of indifference:

He who prays to God to enlighten him ... but without indifference, and who, instead of conforming to the divine will, would sooner have God conform to his will, is like a pilot that pretends to wish his ship to advance, but in reality does not want it to: he throws his anchor into the sea, and then unfurls his sails. God neither gives light nor speaks his word to such persons.³⁷

Communal Discernment

In addition to individual discernment, communal discernment also requires



indifference. As this conference is focusing on parish renewal, the objective of communal discernment in this context is to distinguish prayerfully what God desires for your parish. Essentially, this undertaking involves discerning God's desires *together*. This undertaking is in stark contrast with someone who asks himself, "What do I want to do?" Or, "What do I want my parish to do?" Rather, communal discernment consists of asking ourselves, "What does God desire for the parish?" and "What is God saying not only to me individually but to me *through the group*?" What Clara Geoghegan asserted about this matter is worthy of note. Clara lectures in Church History and is a Co-director of the Sienna Institute Australia, which is

Somehow, as the work of Saint Ignatius and others has come down to us through the years, we have separated the will of God from God'

famous for its *Called and Gifted Workshop*. She maintains:

Discernment is not about me or you. It is about how the Holy Spirit wants to work through each of us – in our Church, in our families, in our workplaces, in our social gatherings, in our society, so that we can transform the cultures and societies in which we live to reflect the

*kingdom of God. It is about dying to self, so that we may have life in abundance.*³⁸

Because our objective is to listen to God speaking *in and through* the group, Dougherty explains that we need to depend on our prayer, not on our knowledge of each other person.³⁹ In this sense, communal discernment is like group spiritual direction. Communal discernment differs to receiving one-to-one spiritual direction in two ways, as Dougherty describes. Firstly, "The faithfulness of the group to its purpose is not the responsibility of any single person but rather of all the members together."⁴⁰ Secondly, rather than one individual, "The group becomes a spiritual director for each person in the group."⁴¹ Having said this, communal discernment

does require one person to facilitate the discussion.

Identity in Christ is Foundational to Discernment

Being attentive to the activity of the Holy Spirit is essential to authentic discipleship – not only as individuals, but as a parish – without which your local Church might as well be a non-religious charitable organisation or some other Non-Government Organisation.

Communal discernment is a *hallmark* of Christian disciples for another reason, which I'll explain this way. What *we do* as authentic disciples of Jesus is an expression of *who we are* in Christ. We've seen how a pastor needs to be grounded in his graced identity so that he can be faithful to his call to participate in Christ's identity as the Good Shepherd. In addition to

priests, participating in Christ's identity is also the vocation of the laity. Indeed, God calls all the faithful to bear Christ to the world by virtue of the Sacrament of Baptism. Ultimately, our mission can only be fruitful if we are grounded in Christ's identity. George Aschenbrenner, SJ went so far as to assert: "Until [our] identity [in Jesus Christ] has been cultivated, serious discernment is not possible."⁴²

An individual who is not grounded in his identity won't feel comfortable to be himself when he is pressured to conform to others who possess opposing values. This dynamic can also occur in a group. If a group isn't grounded in their identity in Christ, its members won't feel safe to be themselves. Essentially, if a group feels that they need to conceal who they are, they may not really believe in their gifts and virtues. Rather, they may feel like phonies and frauds. Go back to the example I provided about the parish committee that advised their pastor to voice no objection against the brothel from being built next to their church. Their advice illustrates that they didn't feel safe for the community of the Church to be true to their identity in Christ; namely: "the light of the world." Essentially, "A town on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house" (Mt. 5:14-15 NIV).

In light of this understanding, Dougherty provides a caution: "If the group has gradually taken on a new identity, this needs to be acknowledged. It might happen that people have not been aware that the group has shifted its focus."⁴³

For example, you may have heard of Catholic institutions that provide education or various forms of social welfare that have changed over time, such that their Catholic identity is no longer prominent or integral to the services they provide. Hopefully, knowledge about what discernment truly is will help prevent this shift from happening. Sound discernment will also help Catholic parishes, diocesan agencies, institutions, and associations of the lay faithful step more and more into their core function akin to their unique identity in Christ.⁴⁴

In addition to unity, what's a reliable signifier that a Christian community has a strong identity, whether that community be a family, a parish, religious community, educational institution, or seminary? May I suggest that the reliable sign is the *frequent sharing of memories*. If you'd like to know why, you can read **Appendix B**.

Discernment and Decision-Making are Related but Distinct

Another mistaken notion about discernment some people have is to think that engaging in discernment and making a choice are the same exercise. If you make this mistake, you're attempting to swim in shallow water. In contrast, the love of God is deep. The primary objective of discernment is not making good decisions. Rather, discernment is a means by which we can give primacy to our relationship with God in a world that would otherwise distract us; or worse, deceive us.

Without the gift of discernment, then, we could end up falling for a counterfeit of God's goodness, truth, and beauty; or worse, worship

a false God. If discernment was primarily about making choices that procure favourable results, then discernment could easily amount to no more than superstition. On the contrary, "daily living relationship with God is the pre-condition for good discernment."⁴⁵ Indeed, the Christian life requires us "to integrate the decisions of life into [our] relationship with God."⁴⁶ God is the ultimate point of reference in discernment, without which the choices we make mean nothing, for our decisions are not ends in themselves, but a means to a greater union with him. As you can see, discernment is not like a tool that you pick up and put down; rather, it's a lifestyle.

Dougherty explains: "Somehow, as the work of Saint Ignatius and others has come down to us through the years, we have separated the will of God from God."⁴⁷ Consequently, "discernment has come to mean a search for God's will which we must find in a game of hide-and-seek."⁴⁸ In contrast, the reality is, as religious historian and theologian Philip Sheldrake asserts, discernment "is a matter of attitude and of relationships – the quality of how we relate to our own self, to other people, to created reality, [and] to God."⁴⁹ Thus, the primary objective of discernment is to be attentive to God's self-revelation in order to deepen our relationship with him. As you can see, discernment is fundamentally a *relational* exercise, that is, it takes place in response to the ardent love God has for us.⁵⁰ Hence, Thomas Dubay, SM PhD (1921- 2010), who was a renowned retreat director and author, concludes: "Techniques [in discernment] are undoubtedly useful in some situations,

but without gospel holiness of life, they remain sterile."⁵¹

Regarding such holiness, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger affirmed: "Saints, in fact, reformed the Church in depth, not by working up plans for new structures, but by reforming themselves. What the Church needs in order to respond to the needs of man in every age is holiness, not management."⁵² I agree with Professor of Systematic Theology Gill K. Gouling, CJ PhD who contends that a group should only undertake communal discernment if it is characterised by "the growth in personal holiness of its members."⁵³ Likewise, Dubay declared: "Techniques and processes may be useful, but, like recipes, without ingredients they are useless."⁵⁴ In other words, what ingredients are to a recipe, prayer is to discernment.

Dubay's observation is indeed correct because the "discernment of spirits is linked to the decision making process," yet "is distinct from it ... Judging where interior movements come from and what they mean can be distinguished from making judgments about what they reveal about God or God's will or the content of one's decisions in life."⁵⁵

If you break down the word discernment into the two Latin words from which this word is derived, you get *dis* ("apart") and *cernere* ("to separate"). Accordingly, to discern means "to separate apart" in order to distinguish what is affecting and informing our motivations when we are faced with more than one choice. If both options are attractive, the best choice might not be obvious; hence, discernment enables us to distinguish our diversity of






feelings, conflicting desires, and contrasting thoughts. Consequently, we're able to perceive what is moving us interiorly, understand our motivations, and assess the reasons that provide the rationale for the best decision. Making wise choices doesn't always come easier for prayerful people. On the contrary, St Teresa of Ávila, the great mystic Carmelite nun of the 15th Century, cautioned: "the deceptions and illusions the devil brings on contemplatives are not few."⁵⁶ "Not few" appears to mean "not rare" in light of my own experience.

Is Discernment the Usual Basis for Making a Moral Choice?

To help you further avoid the shallow end of the lake, let me address one more misguided notion about discernment. Some people think discernment is a means of seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance in making a choice between something that is morally good and something that is morally bad. I don't need to discern, for example, if I, as a consecrated celibate, should take a woman out, alone, to watch a movie. Or, if you're a student, you don't need to discern

if you need to cheat an exam.⁵⁷

Who would think that choosing between something that is clearly morally bad and something that is morally good requires discernment? Let's face it, this way of thinking is very congenial for people whose thought is misguided by *moral relativism*. Yes, discernment does involve a *subjective* process; still, we must not overlook the fact that *objective criteria* is also involved in the discernment process. Ultimately, God has given to us divinely revealed objective truth in the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Christ and his Church's Magisterium, traditions, and the liturgy to help us make morally good choices. As Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM PhD explains: "God, the author of all good, cannot be calling us to do that which contradicts God's very nature ... In our contemporary world, however, what constitutes a moral evil is often not immediately clear. In this situation, discernment may indeed help us to clarify how to respond."⁵⁸ If you'd like to learn more about how the Holy Spirit can guide us in such ambiguities, you can read ***Appendix C***.

 This 'oxygen' of objectivity ensures that our feelings don't misguide us. As Margaret Silf declares, the discernment of spirits is like an 'inner compass.' Yet, directions are useless, unless you have a point of reference. Specifically, you need to know where you are located on the map.'

Criteria for Discernment

A good number of Catholics are aware that we can be guided by the Holy Spirit by engaging in the discernment of spirits. Such discernment takes place quite profoundly on an *affective* level, that is, by paying attention to our heart's interior movements. However, many people are ignorant of important teachings of the apostle St John that compliments the *affective* criteria of discernment. Dubay draws attention to "Johannine thought on how we may detect the false and true," a method that in addition to an *affective* criteria, also includes *doctrinal*, *communal*, and *obediential* criteria. Before we look at the affective criteria, which is subjective, let's look at this objective criteria.

Firstly, regarding the *criterion of doctrine*, St John taught that people moved by the dark spirit "profess erroneous doctrine and refuse to obey their leaders in the faith;" whereas, people moved by the Holy Spirit "possess true doctrine and listen to those who articulate the community's teaching (1 Jn. 4:2-6)." Indeed, "the world shows that it's not of God in its refusal to heed his spokesmen (1 Jn. 4:6)" and "men refuse the proclamation of the Church because they have previously refused God himself (1 Jn. 3:1)."⁵⁹

You might be aware that the Synod of

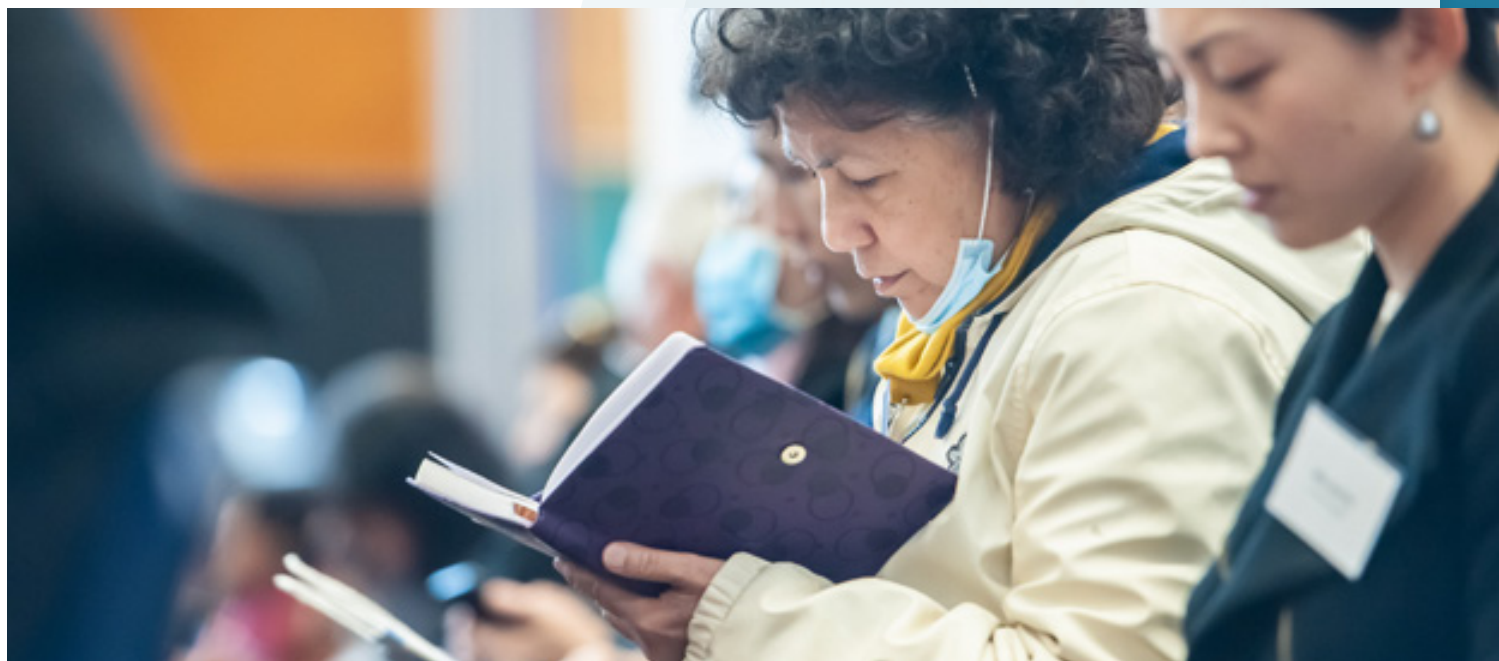
Bishops in Germany has caused some controversy, as they have motioned for changes to be made to doctrine and morals, despite their being held within the universal tradition of the Church.⁶⁰ In response, Pope Francis used satire in his attempt to disarm this threat to Church unity by saying to the Chairman of the German Bishop's Conference Bishop Goerg Bätzing in June 2022: "In Germany, there is a very good Evangelical Church. We don't need two."⁶¹ Subsequently, the Holy See issued a statement in July 2022, which includes the following clarification:

*...the "Synodal Way" in Germany does not have the power to compel the bishops and the faithful to adopt new ways of governance and new approaches to doctrine and morals ... it would not be permissible to initiate new official structures or doctrines in the dioceses, which would represent a wound to ecclesial communion and a threat to the unity of the Church.*⁶²

As for the *communal criterion* of discernment, are there evangelical marks by which a community can itself be known as possessing the Holy Spirit, as being authentic to their identity in Christ as a community? St John provides a resounding

and surprising yes to this question by recalling Jesus' intimate prayer to his Father: "With me in them and you and me, may they be so completely one that the world will realise that it was you who sent me" (Jn. 17:23). You might think that such remarkable unity is merely an ideal; that it is humanly impossible. Yet, this unity is patterned after the absolutely perfect one-ness of the Blessed Trinity! This very unity is a primordial mark of the presence of the Holy Spirit in a group. In fact, this sign of the Holy Spirit's presence is one of the most radical of biblical teachings on discernment.⁶³ You'll find more information about why unity is an important criterion for communal discernment in **Appendix D**.

As for the *criterion of obedience*, there's so much in Sacred Scripture on this criterion of discernment. Thus, the problem regarding obedience is one of superabundance. How do I not overwhelm you with Scriptural citations regarding this criterion of discernment, yet offer enough to achieve full impact? What the Bible reveals about the activity of the Holy Spirit among ecclesial communities and their leaders could be summarised with a fundamental principle. Specifically, they who believe that they are following the inner inspirations of the Holy Spirit are under illusion if



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they refuse to fulfil the outer directives provided by religious authority. Although the indwelling Spirit does enlighten us from *within*, to safeguard against any illusion, the Holy Spirit's inspirations must always be confirmed from *without* (Lk. 10:16; Acts 20:28; Gal. 1:8). As God identified himself with his representatives in both the Old and New Testaments, cooperation with them is a sure sign that the faithful are truly in accord with God's desires.⁶⁴

Subsequent to the Incarnation, Jesus, appropriated this fundamental principle to the apostles in whom he invested the authority he received from his Father: "Anyone who listens to you listens to me; anyone who rejects you rejects me, and those who reject me reject the one who sent me" (Lk. 10:16). Jesus so identifies with the decision of those he

sends, that whatever Peter and the other apostles bind or loose on earth is bound or loosed by God himself in heaven (Mt. 16:19; 18:18). As the apostles are Christ's representatives, the apostle St John declares, "Those who know God listen to us; those who are not of God refuse to listen to us. This litmus test helps us to discern (*dis-cenere*: "to separate") the spirit of truth from the spirit of falsehood (1 Jn. 4:1,6).

St Paul also affirmed obedience to be a criterion of discernment. He professed the Church to be "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). Accordingly, St Paul clearly instructed the disciples that they're not to accept a teaching from a messenger from heaven if it contradicts what they have received from the apostles (Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Cor. 14:37-38).⁶⁵ As we noted regarding

indifference, the obediential criterion of discernment also requires humility.⁶⁶

A disobedient person cannot claim to be listening to Christ because the word *obedience* comes from the Latin word *ob-audire*. "Ob" intensifies the word to which it is prefixed, while "audire" means to "listen." Hence, *obedience* means to "listen attentively" or to "perceive deeply." To help us listen attentively to what Christ reveals through his Church, St Ignatius of Loyola included a section in the *Spiritual Exercises* entitled, "Rules for Thinking with the Church" (*SpEx*, [352-370]). If you would like to know what some of these rules are that St Ignatius wrote and how they are still relevant to us in the 21st century, you will find them in **Appendix E**.

As for *testing spirits with affective criteria*, Dubay

affirms that this criterion of discernment is also revealed in Sacred Scripture: "St Paul numbers among the charisms given in the Church (the context speaks of miracles, prophecy, tongues) that of 'the ability to distinguish between spirits' (1 Cor. 12:10 ESV)."⁶⁷

On this point, we're now ready to dive in the deep end of the lake. In the event of doing so, we would do well to address the misconception that some people have, who don't trust their feelings. They believe that human passion clouds reason and clarity and that our emotions thereby mislead or even deceive us in our attempt to perceive the truth with sound judgment. There's some truth to this belief, which is why the discernment of spirits needs to begin with the *doctrinal*, *communal*, and *obediential* criteria.



This ‘oxygen’ of objectivity ensures that our feelings don’t misguide us. As Margaret Silf declares, the discernment of spirits is like an “inner compass.”⁶⁸ Yet, directions are *useless*, unless you have a *point of reference*. Specifically, you need to know *where* you are located on the map.⁶⁹ Accordingly, when Adam sinned, before God asked him whether he had eaten the forbidden fruit, God asked Adam, “Where are you?” (*Gen.* 3:9). In other words, “Where are you in our relationship? What is your orientation of heart: towards me; or away from me?” For a compass to be of any use, you also “need to stand still and let the [compass] needle come to rest.”^{70, 71} Accordingly, Dubay cautions, “the individual who spills himself out in sense stimulations, who is engulfed in mass media, is never a person

This practical resource will help you . . . by communicating the love of God not only through prayer and reason but also action.’

of deep prayer.”⁷²

Orientation of Heart

If there’s only one thing you remember from this talk, take note of this: being aware of what direction your heart is oriented (i.e., towards God or away from God) is fundamental to discernment. When you engage in the discernment of spirits, then, a factor that is even more important than being attentive

to which spirit is moving you interiorly is your *orientation of heart*. Basically, when we’re moving towards God, the Holy Spirit is met with *welcome* and the dark spirit is met with *resistance*; whereas, when we are moving away from God – even in a small unredeemed area of our life – the Holy Spirit is met with *resistance* and the dark spirit is met with *welcome* (cf. *SpEx*, [314]). Like a magnet, God’s love attracts us, sure! But when you place a magnet next to another magnet in a direction that’s incongruent with the magnetic field, they will not attract but repel. In **Appendix F**, you can learn more about this dynamic in St Ignatius’ own words, as this appendix features some of the rules he wrote on the discernment of spirits, which in addition to individuals, are particularly relevant to group discernment.

In addition to the rules he wrote on the discernment of spirits, St Ignatius also wrote rules on making a choice, which you learn about in **Appendix G**. Lastly, in **Appendix H**, you will find a step-by-step guide on how you can have a *spiritual conversation* in order to engage in Ignatian group discernment. This practical resource will help you to appropriate what Pope Francis recommends by communicating the love of God not only through prayer and reason but also action.⁷³

In conclusion, I can attest that communal discernment can be profoundly moving and inspiring. At other times, it can be messy, but it’s worth undertaking because of the apostolic fruit that it yields. ●

For footnotes and appendixes go to gomakedisciples.org.au







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The Parish Renewal Team, within the Sydney Centre for Evangelisation, supports parishes that are seeking to renew their communities as places of encounter with the living Christ and centres of evangelisation and outreach in love and mercy. We do this by providing practical support for parishes seeking renewal as outlined in the Archdiocesan Mission Plan, *Go Make Disciples*.

For more information and to discuss how we can serve and support your parish, contact us

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