

Sent Out from the Upper Room

Vancouver Convention Centre

26 October 2019

Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Welcome

What a privilege, and what a joy, it is for us to be here today for this Upper Room Conference. The good Lord has gathered us as his disciples to celebrate the Extraordinary Missionary Month commemorating the centenary of a letter of Pope Benedict XV in which he issued a pressing appeal to all the baptized to embrace Jesus' words to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19-20) by proclaiming the Gospel. And here we are this morning in Vancouver, one hundred years later, taking up with renewed vigour and enthusiasm that same appeal.

To help us set the Lower Mainland ablaze, I am very happy to welcome Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Archbishop of New York, to this Upper Room Conference. Last year we spent a week together in Lebanon visiting various projects sponsored by the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, and I'm delighted that he agreed to join us for the day. Also, I would like to welcome Sister Miriam James Heidland, a much-loved speaker at events in Vancouver, as well as our own Brett Powell, the Delegate for Development and Ministries. My thanks as well to the luncheon hosts Shaila Visser, National Director of Alpha Canada and International Vice President, and Angèle Regnier, Founder of

Catholic Christian Outreach Canada (CCO). To the leaders of the

breakout sessions, I am likewise very grateful.

And a warm, very warm, welcome to all of you who are striving to live as disciples of the Lord Jesus and have a desire to share the Good News with others. Today is designed to help you do just that: to become an effective proclaimer of the Gospel – an evangelizer – and to encourage you to become part of the great new missionary initiative that we are launching – as you saw and heard in Brett’s video presentation.

Hope for Conference: Becoming “Missionary Disciples”

My hope for this Conference – and that of all the organizers – is that it will not only help you to deepen your life as a disciple but add to it a new modifier, that of “missionary.” The initiative we are beginning depends on you becoming “missionary disciples.” Let me explain what I mean.

Intentional Disciples

A person can inherit a “Catholic identity” – sometimes such a person is referred to as a “cultural Catholic” – but to be a “disciple” is an *intentional* decision to be a follower of Jesus Christ. In any sphere of life, a disciple is someone who is *attached* to a Master; he or she is more than a student who learns the rules.

For Christians, an intentional disciple is a person who is interiorly

attached to Jesus, an attachment which governs the whole of one's life. Put simply a disciple clings to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.¹

Like Pope Francis, I am convinced that all genuine renewal in the Church – and that's what we need and want – begins with each of us having “a vital, personal, authentic and solid relationship with Christ.”²

That's why he began his Apostolic Exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel,” with this plea: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them.”³

To be a disciple is not to be confused with being a “saint” – at least not yet – but to be a person on the way, to have taken to heart the response of Peter to Jesus, when he left his nets by the sea shore to follow the One who called him. Certainly the Apostle wasn't perfect – he later denied Jesus three times! – but on that day he placed his life, with all his faults and failings, into his Lord's hands.

Jesus called his disciples to “be” with him, to a communion of life with him. At the Last Supper he said to them: “no longer do I call you servants but friends” (cf. Jn 15:15). They could later be sent on mission as witnesses of him because they were close to him as disciples and

¹ Cf. St. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 33.

² Francis, Address to the Roman Curia (22 December 2014).

³ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 3.

friends.

“Only one who is ‘with him’ comes to know the Lord and can truly proclaim him. And anyone who has been with him cannot keep to himself what he has found; instead, he has to pass it on.”⁴

“Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus.”⁵ Intentional disciples must share the Good News that has penetrated their heart. Following the wisdom of the proverb, “you can’t give what you haven’t got yourself,” we must *first* be disciples, intentional disciples, before becoming missionary disciples.

Missionary Disciples

An experience of God’s merciful love cannot be bottled up, for then it would be like a lamp that is hidden under a bushel basket rather than a stimulus to share that same experience of God’s love and so give him glory (cf. Mt 5:14-16).

Is it possible that too often we have failed to share the Gospel with others because we prefer the comfort of being around others just like ourselves, content to remain within groups, ministries or associations of the like-minded? Should we not instead open the Church’s doors,

⁴ Benedict XVI, Marian Vespers with the Religious and Seminarians of Bavaria (11 September 2006).

⁵ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.

literally and figuratively, to the world and its people outside those doors, whom we refer to as the “unchurched,” the “non-practising” or the “lapsed?”

As Pope Francis has noted, a “self-referential Church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him out.”⁶ To drive his point home, the Holy Father draws on an image from the Book of Revelation. Jesus is standing at the door and knocking; he knocks to be let into our hearts (cf. Rev 3:20). However, Francis gives this traditional image a twist. “But, ask yourselves this question: how often is Jesus inside and knocking at the door to be let out, to come out? And we do not let him out because of our own need for security, because so often we are locked into ephemeral structures that serve solely to make us slaves and not free children of God.”⁷ “My hope – the Pope says – “is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: ‘Give them something to eat’ (Mk 6:37).”⁸

Any defensive hunkering down will not do if we are serious about

⁶ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Address before the Conclave (12 March 2013).

⁷ Francis, Address to the Ecclesial Movements, Vigil of Pentecost (18 May 2013).

⁸ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49.

Jesus' command "to make disciples of all nations" since "missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church's activity."⁹

Because we are baptized, we have received the calling to be missionary disciples (Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or level of instruction in the faith, are called to be agents of evangelization, directed by the Holy Spirit. Being a missionary disciple is not a work to be carried out by religious professionals or by those who have a "knack" for it, but by every baptized Catholic. Remember that "No Christian proclaims the Gospel 'on his/her own,' but is only sent by the Church which received the mandate from Jesus himself. Indeed it is Baptism that makes us missionaries."¹⁰

The Scriptures confirm that everyone who has been captivated by the love of Jesus Christ and is his disciple is also *ipso facto*, by that fact alone, a missionary. Recall those first disciples who, immediately after encountering the gaze of Jesus, went out to proclaim him joyfully to others: "We have found the Messiah!" (Jn 1:41). Likewise, the Samaritan woman became a missionary immediately after speaking with Jesus, and many came to believe in him "because of the woman's testimony" (Jn 4:39).

The very last words Jesus spoke to his disciples before he ascended

⁹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 15.

¹⁰ Francis, Angelus (15 July 2018)

into heaven were the commission to take the Gospel to all people: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15): to “make disciples” of all nations (cf. Mt 28:19-20). This mandate is for the Church of every age. It is the commission for the Church in Vancouver of our time.

The Time Is Now

Yes, the time is ripe in Vancouver for renewing with fresh enthusiasm this “missionary outreach.” I am convinced that we have received this calling from the Lord, even though many of our contemporaries view the Church, especially her leadership, with suspicion and distrust rather than as the trusted lighthouse she was once held to be. Such hostile opinions could tempt us to batten down the Church’s hatches, make it through the storm, and hope for better days. But this is *not* the time to play it safe. Right now, the Lord is asking something else of us.

Despite the challenges facing the Church, now is the right time to embrace anew the Great Commission which Jesus gave to his disciples, and which he continues to give to each of us personally at Baptism. We are a people “baptized and sent.” That’s why this is *precisely* the time to be bold and audacious in embarking on a new and – dare I say it? – exciting initiative. Let me cite the words of St. John Paul II at World Youth Day in Denver, which apply to our situation in Vancouver: “This

is no time to be ashamed of the Gospel (cf. Rom 1:16). It is the time to preach it from the rooftops (cf. Mt 10:27). Do not be afraid to break out of comfortable and routine modes of living to take up the challenge of making Christ known in the modern metropolis.”¹¹

And our metropolis, that of the Lower Mainland, is mission territory. Here 40% of the population report that they have no religion and here, in our Archdiocese, more than 50% of baptized Catholics no longer take part regularly in the Church’s sacramental life. Occasions for evangelization are everywhere.

The Church, our Church here in the Archdiocese of Vancouver, therefore, has a vocation, a calling given to us by the Lord. Like the universal Church, our local Church “exists in order to evangelize.”¹² Now is the time to focus our pastoral efforts in such a way that they will “be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world.”¹³ Everything we do in our parishes, schools, associations, ministries, and movements has to be put into “a missionary key,”¹⁴ leaving models of maintenance far behind.

This is the time and place *we – you and I* – have been given to

¹¹ St. John Paul II, Homily, World Youth Day (15 August 1993), 6.

¹² St. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.

¹³ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 27.

¹⁴ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 34.

evangelize. We can neither be paralyzed with nostalgia for a past long gone nor can we wait around for the future to arrive. St. Paul got it right when he wrote to the Christians of Corinth: “Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation” (cf. 2 Cor 6:2).

Why Our Conference is Called the “Upper Room”

This place, this auditorium is today our Upper Room in Vancouver. It is from this place that you and I are being called forth to launch a new movement in our Archdiocese. In that original Upper Room in Jerusalem, on the first Pentecost, the Apostles, with Mary and other women and men disciples (cf. Acts 1:14) were filled with the Holy Spirit and sent out “to make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). The doors were flung open, and filled with the Holy Spirit, they went and thousands heard their preaching and were baptized.

This Conference is called “The Upper Room” because that original Upper Room was a place where fear and timidity were transformed into courage and zeal. Moreover, the disciples didn’t stay there. The Holy Spirit sent them out of there.

On that day a movement was launched, a fire was kindled which changed the face of the earth. On this day, that is, today, we are launching a fresh missionary impulse called Proclaim. I am confident that if we respond with generosity and holiness of life, the Proclaim Movement will be a catalyst for the spiritual transformation of many

souls in the Lower Mainland.

Where Are You Being Sent?

It's natural to ask the question, "If being a missionary is someone who is 'sent out,' where am I being sent to?" Pope Francis talks a lot about going out to the "peripheries," and this is often – and rightly – understood to mean those on the outskirts of society – the poor, the abandoned, the marginalized – or in the developing world far from the center in Europe and North America. But a wider meaning of "periphery" other than a geographical one also makes sense. Anyone far from Jesus Christ is on the "periphery," distanced from the One who is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6).

For this reason, the Proclaim Movement will focus on the missionary vocation of the domestic Church – the "nearby periphery" of the home. The missionary dimension of the lay vocation, in particular the witness of Catholic families and Catholic homes, has never been more important. As the domestic Church assumes its role as a missionary Church, it will bear an abundant harvest and a new springtime of faith in Vancouver.

In our day and age the Church needs missionary disciples who will bring the Gospel to where people are at, and that's not – at least usually – in our churches and parish halls. Because only a few on the periphery take the initiative to come to the Church, we must go out to them. As

disciples, dear friends, you have the relationships, the influence, the keys to the doors of those who do not yet know Christ. These are the places where you are missionaries. Not at all far from home or work or play.

One of the most captivating images Pope Francis uses to describe the kind of missionary Church he envisions is that of the “field hospital.” “I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; – he has said – it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle.”¹⁵

This image is central to the Proclaim Movement. The hospital, that is, the main building, is comprised of Church structures familiar to us: parishes, schools, retreat centres, movements, associations, and so on.

The field hospital is an extension of the main hospital. It goes to where the needs are the greatest – to those wounded on the battlefield of life, the places where people need healing and care. These are places where personnel from the main hospital can’t reach. The field hospital goes to those unable to find their way to the main hospital.

Where are the field hospitals in our Archdiocese? They are your homes, your minivans, your soccer fields, your office cubicles, your workshops, your local Starbucks or Tim Hortons. The field hospital is

¹⁵ Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: A Conversation with Pope Francis,” *America*, vol. 209:8 (30 September 2013).

everywhere that you are, because as disciples, you are the first responders sent from the hospital to the battlefield.

You are the first on the scene by the proximity of your relationship. You are the first on the scene when a friend or associate is struggling and needs an encouraging word. You are the first on the scene when someone moves from curiosity about the faith to seeking a life of faith.¹⁶

What we find everywhere today are people who are spiritually gravely wounded: alienated from God, adrift with no sense of direction or purpose. They need healing by direct personal contact with disciples who will lead them out of their darkness to the light and life of Jesus.¹⁷

How to Bring the Good News to the Battlefield

How to do this? That's what I would like you to think about for a few minutes. I have five suggestions to make that I think might be of help to you.

1. Proclaim the Core of the Message

First, in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, we have to begin somewhere if we are to talk about him to others, to let them know what we have experienced and want to share with them. Where to begin?

¹⁶ I have taken this image from Brett Powell.

¹⁷ Cf. Robert Barron, "The Church Is a Home for Everybody," *Catholic Register* (13 October 2013), 13.

That's the million-dollar question.

Missionary disciples learn to concentrate on the *kerygma*; that is, the very core, the “guts” of the Gospel message. What is it? It is the “proclamation of God’s love, mercy and forgiveness, revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹⁸

It is consoling to know that we never need to be afraid of repeating ourselves or of not explaining enough. We need not be afraid of “leaving something out.” Catechesis, the explanation and unfolding of the rich doctrine of the faith, comes *after* a person has come to know Jesus personally. That’s why

the first proclamation must ring out over and over again:

“Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.” This first proclamation is called “first” not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the *principal* proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and

¹⁸ Francis, Homily (12 October 2014).

moment.¹⁹

Two important consequences follow from this kerygmatic emphasis in talking about Jesus to others.

First, express yourself simply. Why this simplicity? Because, “at times we lose people because they don’t understand what we are saying, because we have forgotten the language of simplicity and import an intellectualism foreign to our people.”²⁰

Today’s rapidly changing culture demands that we constantly seek new ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their freshness.²¹ But that demands of the proclaimer the need to study and pray.

Second, in any initial discussion, I would suggest that you not deal with so-called “hot button issues.” Rules – moral, liturgical, canonical and so on – belong to the fullness of the Catholic faith, but they make sense only in light of what is truly primary: the person’s encounter with the mercy of the living Christ.

2. Don’t Let Your Own Weakness Impede You

A big stumbling block that many of us have in sharing the Gospel, of giving “the reason for our hope,” is the sense we have of our own

¹⁹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 164.

²⁰ Francis, Address to the Bishops of Brazil, Aparecida (28 July 2013).

²¹ Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 41.

unworthiness. Perhaps we even fear being hypocritical in talking to others about Jesus when we are keenly aware of falling short of the mark ourselves, aware of our own sinfulness. Pope Francis offers some good advice on this score:

Our falling short of perfection should be no excuse; on the contrary, mission is a constant stimulus not to remain mired in mediocrity but to continue growing. The witness of faith that each Christian is called to offer leads us to say with Saint Paul: “Not that I have already obtained this, or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil 3:12-13).²²

3. Talk as Friend to Friend

A third piece of advice I would suggest is this. Your invitation to another person to recognize how much God loves them, despite their sin, must always be personal. “Heart speaks to heart,” as St. John Henry Newman put it. Be an attentive evangelizer who presents the Gospel in such a way that it is not perceived as the word of a superior to an inferior, but as that of a friend to a friend. Trusting relationships are key to the whole process of leading others along the path of discipleship. Prepare the ground by first establishing trust, and then offer accompaniment to the person along the challenging road to life in Christ.

²² Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 121.

Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:5-42) illustrates how we should approach others. When the woman came to the well for her daily task of drawing water, Jesus engaged her in conversation, showing that he cared for her as a person. As the conversation went on, he brought out areas of sin and woundedness in her life, implicitly calling her to repentance: "you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband" (Jn 4:18). Yet looking into his eyes, she saw no condemnation, only a love and mercy she had never experienced before.

Because of that encounter the woman herself ran back to her village, exclaiming to everyone who would listen, "Come see a man who told me everything I have done! Could he possibly be the Messiah?" Her message was neither eloquent nor complete, yet it was spectacularly effective. The joy of her new life was evident to all who saw her. This formerly isolated, outcast person was now forgiven, healed and reconciled to God.

4. Tell Your Own Story

Fourth, in recent years I have become increasingly aware that give personal testimony plays an indispensable role today in evangelization. When I was young, giving testimony was associated with Evangelical Protestantism. Thanks be to God, that is no longer the case.

Testimony has a unique power to touch hearts, since it is almost

impossible to ignore the witness of someone who has encountered Jesus personally and whose life has been transformed by him.

The townspeople of the Samaritan woman at the well came to faith in Jesus because of her testimony, which eventually led them to encounter him themselves (Jn 4:39, 42).²³

5. Do Not Be Afraid, but Be Bold

Lastly, if we are to bear fruit as a missionary disciple who engages in making disciples, we must be obedient to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit within us. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, it is evident that the Holy Spirit was the initiator, guide, and driving force of the early Church's evangelizing mission (cf. Acts 4:31; 8:26-29, 39-40; 10:19; 13:1-12 15:28; 16:6-10).

After giving his disciples the Great Commission, Jesus told them to “stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Lk 24:49). As the first evangelization could not have taken place without the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, so the Proclaim Movement mission cannot be accomplished without an outpouring of the same Spirit.

A quality that stood out among the early Christians was their boldness in proclaiming the Gospel, even in the face of hostility and persecution (cf. Acts 4:29,31; 28:31). They did not hesitate to proclaim

²³ Cf. Archbishop Allen Vigneron, Pastoral Letter, “Unleash the Gospel” (2017), p. 12.

Jesus as the one Saviour whom God offers to the whole human race, and to call their listeners to repentance and conversion. Their boldness was not a human personality trait, but a result of their intimate union with Christ (cf. Acts 4:13) and their docility to the work of the Holy Spirit within them.

Conclusion

Allow me now to conclude with the words of Pope Francis in “The Joy of the Gospel” where he wrote about each of us as a missionary disciple, even though he was unaware of the Proclaim Movement being launched:

My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an “extra” or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. *I am a mission* on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing.²⁴

We have the Good News in our hands. It is our treasure. It is to be proclaimed as we go forth “to make disciples of all nations.”

Through the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, may each

²⁴ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 273.

of us respond to the call today to be sent forth as missionary disciples who will bring the words of eternal life to the peripheries of our world.

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