

# **Make Disciples of All Nations**

## **Prison Ministry Day**

St. Andrew Kim

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### ***Introduction***

At the outset, before reflecting with you on Our Lord's very last words to his disciples before ascending into heaven, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:20), I really want to express my profound gratitude to all of you who share in the work of Catholic Charities Justice Services in prison ministry as chaplains, volunteers and prayer warriors.

You all deserve not only my meagre thanks but the profound appreciation of the whole Archdiocese which benefits from your witness. By your presence and activities among the incarcerated and recently released offenders, as well as by your support for victims and for prisoners' families, you are proclaiming the Gospel of mercy. And, although the Jubilee Year of Mercy ended last December, you continue afterwards, as you did before, to "be merciful just as your heavenly Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36).

All of you are involved in a ministry "steeped in mercy,"<sup>1</sup> because you bring the goodness and tenderness of God to those who commit or suffer from crime. And, if I may draw a conclusion from my

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 5

observation, you are able to show mercy because you recognize that God mercy has first been merciful to you. You do not hold on tightly to this gift, but receive it gratefully and then re-gift it to others.

Thank you for your re-gifting, for sharing in the Church's mission, which is "to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel."<sup>2</sup> And this announcing, this making disciples of others is what I now wish to speak with you about this morning. What I am going to talk about is how those who believe in Jesus Christ and experience, through him, the tender mercy of God's love can share its transforming power, so that those who are already disciples can also become proclaimers of the Gospel to others.

### **I. Our Mission of Evangelization**

As an Archdiocese, as a local Church in the great communion of Churches around the world, we have – all of us have – an evangelizing mission entrusted to us by Jesus himself and by the teaching of the Church, most recently expressed by Pope Francis. Your ministry to the incarcerated, recently released and the families of both victims and the incarcerated, as well as your advocacy for prison reform all belong to this wider mission. I want you to realize that you are swept up in a much broader undertaking that involves, or should involve, every Christian.

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<sup>2</sup> Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 12.

Our mission, as individuals and as parishes and other groups and associations, must be an evangelizing one. I cited previously the last words Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, but St. Mark records the same great commission: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). This mandate is for the Church of every age. It was not just a directive to the few apostles gathered on the Mount of Olives. It was Jesus’ command – and not just his vague wish! – for all believers at all times, right down to us in the Archdiocese of Vancouver today. Obeying this mandate of the Lord is therefore not an option for us personally, for our parishes or for our ministries. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, proclaiming the Gospel to others is the Church’s “essential task,”<sup>3</sup> for she is “missionary by nature.”<sup>4</sup>

In an address just days after his election as Pope, Francis emphasized the importance of all Catholics responding “faithfully to the Church’s perennial mission: to bring Jesus Christ to mankind and to lead mankind to an encounter with Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life.”<sup>5</sup> “Evangelizing – which is the word for proclaiming the Gospel – is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest

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<sup>3</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Ad Gentes*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Ad Gentes*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, Address to the College of Cardinals (15 March 2013).

identity; she exists in order to evangelize,”<sup>6</sup> and all our pastoral efforts must be put “in a missionary key.”<sup>7</sup>

### ***1. Personal Encounter with Jesus Christ***

Where do we begin these efforts? It is clear that reaching outwards first begins by taking the long journey inwards. Before we proclaim to others, before we are active evangelizers, we must first be evangelized ourselves. No surprise there. It’s the same as mercy or forgiveness. We must first recognize that we are beneficiaries of mercy before we can share that with others. We all need to be continually evangelized, transformed and renewed by the Gospel. “The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself.”<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, before addressing the question of *how* to communicate the greatest story ever told: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is necessary to recognize that first we must be evangelized ourselves. This, of course, is an ongoing journey. But it must begin somewhere – and that somewhere is in a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. I am convinced that making disciples of all nations begins with the individual having “a vital, personal, authentic and solid relationship

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<sup>6</sup> Blessed Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15.

with Christ.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus Christ and friendship with him are the foundation of the Church’s mission.

That’s why the Holy Father began his first and programmatic 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; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her.<sup>10</sup>

The Pope, like all great spiritual writers, is absolutely clear that such a personal relationship is the *sine qua non* of the “missionary conversion” he is proposing for the whole Church. We are all called, he says, in a now oft-repeated phrase, to be “missionary disciples” who go forth, proposing the Gospel to others. But, following the wisdom of the adage, “you can’t give what you haven’t got yourself,” we must *first* be disciples before being missionaries.

Change in our various ministries, such as prison ministry, so that they move into the missionary mode can only come about if those involved have a personal, one-on-one relationship with the Lord. We can

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<sup>9</sup> Francis, Address to the Roman Curia (22 December 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 3.

never forget that our faith begins with “a living knowledge of Christ, a personal relationship with God who is love.” The Holy Father has himself described how his own becoming a disciple was shaped by a personal encounter with the Lord. This is what he has said, and you might think back to the moment or the occasion when you could tell a similar story:

For me, faith was born of an encounter with Jesus. It was a personal encounter that touched my heart and gave new direction and meaning to my life. At the same time, it was an encounter made possible by the community of faith in which I lived and thanks to which I gained access to understanding sacred Scripture, to new life in Christ through the sacraments, to fraternity with all and service to the poor, who are the true image of the Lord.<sup>11</sup>

For some people, the encounter with Christ is an earth-shaking “Damascus road” kind of experience; for others – probably most of us – this coming to know Jesus personally is a more gradual process. In either case, encountering Jesus is like meeting the person you are going to marry: you are overwhelmed by this encounter and cannot imagine

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<sup>11</sup> Francis, Letter to Italian Journalist on Church’s Dialogue with Nonbelievers, *Origins*, 43:17 (26 September 2013), 262.

going forward in life without that person.

One word of caution. In stressing the importance of a personal relationship with the Lord, Christians cannot forget the indispensable role played by the community of the Church. Our relationship with Jesus is likewise founded in our relationship with the community of Jesus – of his Body, which is his Church.

## ***2. From Disciple to Missionary***

While coming to know Jesus personally in the family of the Church is an indispensable first step in becoming a missionary disciple who will engage in making disciples of others, it is not the last step. The Good News we have come to embrace must be spread; it must reach out to others; it must be shared, just as you are doing in so many different ways in our prisons and afterwards. We cannot keep God's love bottled up just for ourselves, for then it would be like a lamp that is hidden under the bushel basket rather than the stimulus to share that same experience of God's love and so give him glory (cf. Mt 5:14-16).

Pope Francis fears that we have become too insular in our concerns and that we have abandoned missionary outreach for the comfort of the sacristy, by which he means that we like to hang around others just like ourselves, content to remain within groups, ministries or associations of the like-minded. He wants us instead to open the Church's doors, literally and figuratively, to the world and its people outside those doors,

whom we refer to as the “unchurched” or the “non-practising” or the “lapsed.” “A Church closed in on herself,” he maintains “is a sick Church.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, a “self-referential Church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him out.”<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup>

But this defensive hunkering down will not do if we are serious

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<sup>12</sup> Francis, Address to the Ecclesial Movements, Vigil of Pentecost (18 May 2013); cf. “General Audience (16 October 2013): “A Church that is closed in on herself and in the past, a Church that only sees the little rules of behaviour, of attitude, is a Church that betrays her own identity; a closed Church betrays her own identity!”

<sup>13</sup> Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Address before the Conclave (12 March 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Francis, Address to the Ecclesial Movements, Vigil of Pentecost (18 May 2013); cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49: “More than by fear of going astray, my hope 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).”

about Jesus' command "to make disciples of all nations" because "missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church's activity."<sup>15</sup>

## **II. How to Make Disciples**

On "how" to make disciples of others whom you encounter in the various situations where your ministry takes you, as well as in the interactions of ordinary daily life, I now have a few practical tips or suggestions. By no means exhaustive, this list is offered to assure you, "you can do it!"

### ***1. Proclaim the Core of the Message***

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?

Missionary disciples concentrate on the *kerygma*; that is, the very core, the "guts" of the Gospel message. What is that? It is the "proclamation of God's love, mercy and forgiveness, revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."<sup>16</sup>

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

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<sup>15</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Francis, Homily (12 October 2014).

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 moment.<sup>17</sup>

Two important consequences follow from this kerygmatic emphasis in talking about Jesus to others, including prisoners or formerly incarcerated or their families.

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

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<sup>17</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 164.

intellectualism foreign to our people.”<sup>18</sup>

Today’s rapidly changing culture demands that we constantly seek new ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their freshness.<sup>19</sup> But that demands of the proclaimer the need to study and pray.

Second, in initial discussions, I would suggest that you not deal with so-called “hot button issues.” Rules – moral, liturgical, canonical and so on – are necessary, 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 for many people in sharing the Gospel, “the reason for their hope,” is the sense they have of their own unworthiness. Perhaps they even fear being hypocritical in talking to others about Jesus when they are keenly aware of falling short of the mark themselves, aware of their 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

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<sup>18</sup> Francis, Address to the Bishops of Brazil, Aparecida (28 July 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 41.

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).<sup>20</sup>

### ***3. Talk as Friend to Friend***

The invitation to another person to recognize how much God loves them, despite their sin, must always be personal. “Heart speaks to heart,” as Cardinal John Henry Newman put it. An attentive evangelizer presents the Gospel in such a way that it is not perceived as the word of a superior to an inferior, but that of a friend to a friend. Trusting relationships are key to the whole process of leading others to 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.

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 only exposed 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.” Yet looking

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<sup>20</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 121.

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***

Personal testimony plays an indispensable role in evangelization. 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).<sup>21</sup>

#### ***5. Do Not Be Afraid, but Be Bold***

If you are to bear fruit as a missionary disciple who engages in

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Archbishop Allen Vigneron, Pastoral Letter, “Unleash the Gospel” (2017), p. 12.

making disciples you must be obedient to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit within you. 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 our ongoing 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 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***

We have the Good News in our hands. It is our treasure. But it is a treasure to be shared for each one of us – in our own particular time and place – and not in some imagined future – has a mission to make

disciples of all nations. You are doing this in your prison ministry, but, of course, the Lord's command extends to every area of your life. And always remember that, ultimately, what you are doing is not your work but God's work in which we are cooperating. "Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth" (1 Cor 3:7).

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