



## CALL TO MISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP

The Gospel readings over recent Sundays present Jesus teaching his disciples about what it takes to be his follower. To be a disciple of Jesus, a missionary disciple, is to choose an alternative way of thinking and living.

During his recent journey of reconciliation to Canada, Pope Francis addressed priests, bishops and pastoral workers about the vocation to missionary discipleship. In this National Vocation Week, the following extracts from Pope Francis' address, speak to the call to missionary discipleship we share through baptism.

## CHRISTIAN JOY

Christian joy is about the experience of a peace that remains in our hearts, even when we are pelted by trials and afflictions, for then we know that we are not alone, but accompanied by a God who is not indifferent to our lot. When seas are rough: the storm is always on the surface but the depths remain calm and peaceful. That is also true of Christian joy: it is a free gift, the certainty of knowing that we are loved, sustained and embraced by Christ in every situation in life. Because he is the one who frees us from selfishness and sin, from the sadness of solitude, from inner emptiness and fear, and gives us a new look at life and history: "With Christ joy is constantly born anew"

So let us ask ourselves a question: How are we doing when it comes to joy?

Does our Church express the joy of the Gospel? Is there a faith in our communities that can attract by the joy it communicates?

## WHAT THREATENS THE JOY OF FAITH?

If we want to go to the root of these questions, we need to reflect on what it is that, in today's world, threatens the joy of faith and thus risks diminishing it and compromising our lives as Christians. We can immediately think of secularisation, which has greatly affected the style of life of contemporary men and women, relegating God, as it were, to the background. God seems to have disappeared from the horizon, and his word no longer seems a compass guiding our lives, our basic decisions, our human and social relationships. Yet we should be clear about one thing.

When we consider the ambient culture, and its variety of languages and symbols, we must be careful not to fall prey to pessimism or resentment, passing immediately to negative judgments or a vain nostalgia. There are two possible views we can have towards the world in which we live: I would call one "the negative view", and the other "the discerning view".

The first, the negative view, is often born of a faith that feels under attack and thinks of it as a kind of "armour", defending us against the world. This view bitterly complains that "the world is evil; sin reigns", and thus risks clothing itself in a "crusading spirit". We need to be careful, because this is not Christian; it is not, in fact, the way of God, who

– as the Gospel reminds us – "so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

The Lord detests worldliness and has a positive view of the world. He blesses our life, speaks well of us and our situation, and makes himself incarnate in historical situations, not to condemn, but to give growth to the seed of the Kingdom in those places where darkness seems to triumph.

If we are limited to a negative view, however, we will end up denying the incarnation: we will flee from reality, rather than making it incarnate in us. We will close in on ourselves, lament our losses, constantly complain and fall into gloom and pessimism, which never come from God.

## GOD CREATED US TO BE FREE

We are called, instead, to have a view similar to that of God, who discerns what is good and persistently seeks it, sees it and nurtures it. This is no naïve view, but a view that discerns reality.

God does not want us to be slaves, but sons and daughters; he does not want to make decisions for us, or oppress us with a sacral power, exercised in a world governed by religious laws. No! He created us to be free, and he asks us to be mature and responsible persons in life and in society.

It is up to us to make these distinctions, to make this discernment. If we yield to the negative view and judge matters superficially, we risk sending the wrong message, as though the criticism of secularisation masks on our part the nostalgia for a sacralised world, a bygone society in which the Church and her ministers had greater power and social relevance. And this is a mistaken way of seeing things.

## A CHALLENGE FOR PASTORAL IMAGINATION

Instead, as one of the great scholars of our time has observed, the real issue of secularisation, for us Christians, should not be the diminished social relevance of the Church or the loss of material wealth and privileges. Rather, secularisation demands that we reflect on the changes in society that have influenced the way in which people think about and organise their lives. If we consider this aspect of the question, we come to realise that what is in crisis is not the faith, but some of the forms and ways in which we present it.

Consequently, secularisation represents a challenge for our pastoral imagination, it is,

an occasion for restructuring the spiritual life in new forms and for new ways of existing.  
(C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge 2007, 437).

In this way, a discerning view, while acknowledging the difficulties we face in communicating the joy of the faith motivates us, at the same time, to develop a new passion for evangelisation, to look for new languages and forms of expression, to change certain pastoral priorities and to focus on the essentials.

## PASTORAL CREATIVITY

The Gospel needs to be proclaimed if we are to communicate the joy of faith to today's men and women. Yet this proclamation is not primarily a matter of words, but of a witness abounding with gratuitous love, for that is God's way with us.

This calls for a pastoral creativity capable of reaching people where they are living – not waiting for them to come – finding opportunities for listening, dialogue and encounter. We need to return to the simplicity and enthusiasm of the Acts of the Apostles, to the beauty of realising that we are instruments of the Spirit's fruitfulness today. We need to return to Galilee. There is our encounter with the Risen Jesus: returning to Galilee is – if you permit me to use the expression – beginning anew after failure. Each one of us has our own "Galilee", the place of the initial proclamation. We need to rediscover this memory.

In order to proclaim the Gospel, however, we must also be credible. Here is the second challenge: witness. The Gospel is preached effectively when life itself speaks and reveals the freedom that sets others free, the compassion that asks for nothing in return, the mercy that silently speaks of Christ.

Finally, the third challenge: fraternity. Again, the first is to make Jesus known and the second is witness. The third is fraternity. The Church will be a credible witness to the Gospel the more its members embody communion, creating opportunities and situations that enable all those who approach the faith to encounter a welcoming community, one capable of listening, entering into dialogue and promoting quality relationships.

## LOVE WITHOUT BORDERS

We are talking about living in a Christian community that in this way becomes a school of humanity, where all can learn to love one another as brothers and sisters, ready to work together for the common good. Indeed, at the heart of the preaching of the Gospel is God's love, which transforms us and makes us capable of communion with all and service to all. As a Canadian theologian has written:

*The love that God gives us overflows into love...  
It is a love that prompts the Good Samaritan to  
stop and take care of the traveller attacked by  
thieves. It is a love that has no borders, that  
seeks the kingdom of God... and this kingdom is  
universal*

Bernard Lonergan, *The Future of Christianity*,

The Church is called to embody this love without borders, in order to realise the dream that God has for humanity: for us to be brothers and sisters all. Let us ask ourselves: how are we doing when it comes to practical fraternity between us?

And how about our relationships with those who are not "one of our own", with those who do not believe, with those who have different traditions and customs? This is the way: to build relationships of fraternity with everyone, with indigenous brothers and sisters, with every sister and brother we meet, because the presence of God is reflected in each of their faces.

## VOCATIONS WEEK PORTAL

<https://catholic.org.au/vocations>

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has set up a new online portal to highlight vocation in its many forms. National Vocations Awareness Week is celebrated each year across a week that includes the August 8 feast day of Australia's first saint: St Mary of the Cross MacKillop. The week runs this year from August 7-14.

The new portal on the Bishops Conference website showcases the vocations of priesthood, the permanent diaconate, consecrated life, marriage and the single life.