

MISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP

Pope Francis' heartfelt call to Catholics today

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INTRODUCTION

A Short Response to Three Important Questions about Missionary Discipleship

WHAT IS MISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP?

WHAT DOES IT HAVE TO DO WITH ME?

WHERE ARE THE MISSION FIELDS IN MY LIFE?

This booklet offers brief “responses” (not answers) to these questions, along with explanations given in the form of story, reflection, and prayer. Why only “responses” and not “answers”? Because only you, dear reader, can truly answer these questions; that is, only you can know how God is calling you, personally, to become a missionary disciple. How you respond to this call is unique to your situation in life, your gifts, and personality. This is your journey!

CABBAGE *and* CONVERSION

To understand what missionary discipleship is, let's begin with a story. Each story in this booklet is personal in nature. The "personal touch" adds something that is persuasive and memorable in a way that a generic story cannot. Moreover, stories help to drive home a point; they can stir up our hearts and minds to consider a new view and way of doing things. The Church today needs to be thinking about (and doing) evangelization in new ways. The Church needs missionary disciples!

At the beginning of my first book, *Becoming a Parish of Mercy*, I introduced a friend of mine, Fr. Mike Phillips, who has played the role of spiritual companion for almost eighteen years. Through his accompaniment, I have learned to embrace God's mercy and share it with others. Now, I am introducing two more "characters": Joshua and Inga. Each in their own unique way, and out of their individual experience of Christ's love for them, has helped me to understand and see missionary discipleship in action long before there was a term for it. This story, and those to follow, are stories of people choosing (and sometimes daring) to put love into action.

This story is not a model per se. It's an unusual example of accompaniment, in that the people involved are a little intrusive, even pushy at times. Accompaniment tends to work best when it is a gentle, gradual growth process. But this is what happened. This is my story.

I was attending the University of Iowa at the time. No dates are needed. All you need to know is that I am older now than I was then. It was my senior year, and I was worried about whether or not I had chosen the wrong major (a little late for that!). Mom, can I have some more money for tuition, please? Answer: I took a part-time job at Barnes and Noble, working in their Starbucks café.

Management soon hired a young man named Joshua. Joshua was nineteen and had just converted to the Catholic Church from a Southern Baptist tradition. He was on fire for the faith, and he wanted everyone to know it! For some mysterious—perhaps, providential—reason, Joshua and I were always scheduled to work together. At first, Joshua’s zeal for God was endearing, but it soon became annoying. I hate to admit it, but what bothered me so much was how I envied the joy he was experiencing, the joy of being loved by God and not being afraid to share it.

Joshua was a humble guy when it came to most things, but he was boisterous, even over-the-top about his newfound Catholic faith. Each work day, Joshua kept hidden underneath his register a copy of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. While he was reading the *Catechism*, he would elbow me once in a while and say something like “Hey, man. Did you know that the Eucharist is really the Body and Blood of Jesus and not just a symbol?” or “Hey, man. Isn’t it awesome how the Catholic Church goes all the way back to Jesus?” While I thought his talking points were interesting, I would hardly have said they were “awesome.”

The fact was I just wasn’t interested in Catholicism, even though I was a card-carrying Catholic who went to Mass once in a while and definitely at Christmas and Easter. (Shout out to all my fellow “C & E-rs.” Keep doing what you’re doing. Just know that you are loved and welcomed, and that the calendar includes fifty-two Sundays a year, not just two!)

Joshua’s excitement and zeal were the fruit of his response to having come into full communion with the Catholic Church. He had no idea what “missionary discipleship” was, but he knew God’s love for him. He wanted to share the good news of Jesus that he had discovered in the Church, especially in its teachings, which is what made them so awesome.

Joshua soon allowed God's love for him to move him into action. He eventually invited me to go to weekday morning Mass with him at St. Wenceslaus in Iowa City. First off, I didn't even know there was such a thing as "weekday morning Mass." Second, I couldn't figure out why anyone would want to go during the week, especially since morning Mass began at 7 AM. (I was a college student. "Sunrise" meant nothing to me.) Joshua convinced me to go by offering me breakfast afterward. Clever as a serpent, that boy (Mt 10:16)!

After Mass, I met Fr. Mike Phillips for the first time. He smiled at me and shook my hand. I remember being almost giddy, giving him a big smile in return. Father probably thought it was the Holy Spirit, but I was thinking about breakfast! But rather than go to IHOP or Denny's, Joshua drove me to a residential area and parked in front of this little ranch-style home. Out comes Inga with arms outstretched in greeting. This was the first time I had met her.

She kissed both of my cheeks—she's Austrian—and invited us into her home for breakfast. When I entered the living room, I smelled what could only be cabbage cooking. Inga handed me a copy of the Bible, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the latest edition of *Butler's Lives of the Saints*—not the four-volume set, thank God. During our conversation, Inga told me that she was the owner of the local Catholic bookstore, the Mustard Seed. It soon became apparent that I had been ambushed! She and Joshua were set upon saving my soul with strong-smelling cabbage and Catholic literature.

(After getting to know Inga I learned that she had fallen in love with Christ, in part, through her reading of Scripture, the saints, and theology. Responding to God's love for her, she chose to become a missionary disciple by opening up the Mustard Seed bookstore, touching the lives of many local Catholics and seekers: another example of love leading to action.)

During breakfast, Inga asked me, awkwardly, when I had last gone to confession. She didn't mince words. Reluctantly, I told her it had been eight years. She gasped and quickly picked up the phone and speed-dialed the St. Wenceslaus rectory. She said to the priest on the other end, "Father! Father! I have a young man here who hasn't been to confession in eight years. I am driving him over right now!" So off we went, back to the church I had just left. (Inga's missionary zeal was a bit overwhelming, to say the least! But her boldness paid off. I am grateful each day that she rushed me back to Fr. Mike and to Jesus, who had been waiting eight years to give me the gift of the assurance and the experience of being forgiven by God's great mercy.)

Inga pulled up in front of the rectory, handed me my new books, and told me to knock on Father Mike's door. Father greeted me and invited me into his house and we proceeded to have a two-hour conversation. This is not to suggest that I had two hours' worth of sins to confess. Father invited me to share a little bit about myself and to reflect upon the times I thought God had accompanied me along the way and the times I had tried to lose God at every turn. His willingness to listen and to affirm my goodness were remarkable. Yes, he is a priest; but he didn't have to answer Inga's phone call, and he certainly didn't have to open his door to me. He allowed God's love for him to stir him into action.

It was a liberating confession. I felt renewed. My spirit was a little lighter, which helped to compensate for the weighty books I had received. I did eventually open them...and later received my Ph.D. in Catechetics from The Catholic University of America. Today, my home is wall to wall with books containing a lot of wisdom, which, like Joshua, I can only describe as "awesome."

We are called to discover the joy of the gospel and to share that joy with others. Fundamentally, this discovery is made through the

witness of missionary disciples: people who, in their own unique (and sometimes awkward) way, demonstrate how the good news of Christ is alive in them, people who are willing to put God's love for them into action.

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CHAPTER ONE

A “New Discipleship” for the New Evangelization

Responding to the first question proposed in the Introduction—*What is missionary discipleship?*—this chapter will touch on two things: First, the rise of the New Evangelization in the Catholic Church which, today, requires a renewed focus on the missionary element of discipleship. Second, how the shape of missionary discipleship points to the “accompaniment” of others into a deeper encounter with Christ in the Church (as Pope Francis said in *The Joy of the Gospel*, no. 169). This accompaniment is rooted in the disciple’s desire to receive and share the mercy and love of God with others.

CHARISMATA *and* CONVENTS

As before, let's begin with a story of missionary discipleship in action. I was two days away from beginning my first semester of graduate studies at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. My car was packed, ready to make the long trek from Des Moines, Iowa, to the university. My phone rang, and the person on the other end told me that I no longer had an apartment to rent in Steubenville. A water main had burst, ruining the entire building.

I was shocked. I had no idea what I was going to do. I needed a place to live. I am no St. Francis, so sleeping on God's good earth, or in my car, while going to class was not even a remote possibility. I am a creature of comfort, for better or worse.

I couldn't find another apartment before I left Iowa. So I drove to Steubenville, figuring I would rent a hotel room until I could find a more permanent place. When I got to campus, the hotels in town were booked with families dropping their kids off at school. Also, it was a "Festival of Praise" weekend at the university, otherwise known as a "FOP." This is a charismatic event featuring witness talks, music, praise, and worship. It was my first FOP, and definitely the most memorable.

During the festival, a priest named Fr. John approached me and asked me if I was okay. I guess I didn't realize I was wearing my anxiety on my face. I told him my situation: that I didn't have a place to stay. He immediately called a friend of his (Fr. Dunfee) and asked if I could stay at the parish convent over in Mingo Junction, a town about five miles from Steubenville. (The sisters who lived in the convent had recently moved out.) Father John and I were soon on the way to my new "home": a massive house with several bedrooms and baths, scented candles, tea sets, floor to ceiling wood paneling, shag carpeting, and pastel colored wallpaper

and doilies everywhere you looked. There was also a little chapel, which later became a space for a young adult group I started with Fr. Dunfee's permission. Thanks to a missionary disciple, I had a place to call home.

GETTING UNCOMFORTABLE CAN MAKE OTHERS COMFORTABLE

Fr. John is a great example of the simplicity of missionary discipleship, and the power of doing small things with great love. Had he not taken notice of me and the anxiety I was showing, I don't know what I would have done about my housing dilemma. Fr. John was there at the right time, and he seized the moment. He took the opportunity to "go out" of his way to meet me—"going out" of his comfort zone to engage a stranger. Seizing the moment to go out to others and offer them the mercy and love of Christ is the foundation of missionary discipleship. It is an action of accompaniment, which is how we encounter and walk with others along their journey of faith, much like the resurrected Jesus, going to Jerusalem, walked out of his way (Emmaus is in the opposite direction of Jerusalem!) in order to accompany the two disciples (Lk 24:13–35). How many countless "spiritually homeless" people would be able to find a home in the Catholic Church if others were willing to go out to them and say, "Are you okay? Is there something I can do for you?"

Missionary work has traditionally been thought of as the work of, you guessed it, missionaries: generous and courageous priests and religious brothers and sisters who, over the centuries, have traversed the globe sharing the good news of Jesus. However, since