The Apostolate of Good Example Is Not Enough

A reflection on Benedict XVI’s message for the 45th World Day of Prayer for Vocations

“The Church is missionary as a whole and in each one of its members.” Many of the ideas that come up in this year’s message are likely to sound familiar to readers of Vocations and Prayer. Jesus, we are reminded, sent his first disciples to preach, to heal, and to drive out demons. Thus today’s ministers of the Gospel are likewise living out the mystery of simultaneously being with Jesus and being on mission. Every calling is in some sense a sending, a pattern set by Jesus himself: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). His oneness with the Father was dynamically ordered toward mission.

The Pope singles out priests: “the missionary aspect is specially and intimately bound with the priestly vocation.” And again, “Among the persons who dedicate themselves totally to the service of the Gospel, there are, in a special way, [missionary] priests . . .”

The Pope also mentions religious men and women, quoting the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (Ad gentes): “Religious institutes of the contemplative and active life have so far played, and still do play, the main role in the evangelization of the world” (no. 40). Then he writes: “It is necessary to maintain alive in the faithful an active sense of missionary responsibility and a shared solidarity with the peoples of the world.” Once more the Pope appears to be picking up on the conciliar decree. For the
Council wrote: “The Church is not really established, it does not fully live, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among humankind, unless, together with the hierarchy, there exists a genuine and active laity. For the gospel cannot be deeply impressed on the outlook, life and activity of a people without the active presence of the laity” (Ad gentes, no. 21). Earlier the decree states: “It is not sufficient, however, that the Christian people be present and established in a particular nation, nor is it sufficient that they practice the apostolate of good example. The purpose for which they are established, the purpose for which they are present, is to proclaim Christ to their non-Christian fellow citizens by word and deed and to help them receive Christ fully” (Ad gentes, no. 15).

Although the decree is speaking here about Christian communities founded by missionaries in non-Christian lands, the point it makes has wider relevance. The “apostolate of good example” is not enough for a Christian; we need to undertake more than that if we want to be faithful to our baptismal commitment. Christ must be proclaimed “by word and deed.” Still, the words of Paul VI are important to remember: “for the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one’s neighbor with limitless zeal” (Evangelii nuntiandi, no. 41).

Benedict XVI is writing, therefore, that everyone in the Church—priests, lay men and women, and religious—has an important role to play in evangelization. And the principal way by which they do this is through fidelity to the call they have received to embrace the Gospel.
Calling, bearing witness, and mission

The theme of the Pope’s message is “Vocations to the service of the Church—mission.” This phrasing contains three inter-connected points. First, to be called is to be sent. It makes little sense to speak of having a “calling” without adding what we have been called to. Moreover, calling is correlative to desire; and holy, wholesome desires are excited in us by the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit of God has called us to become followers of Jesus, that is, if the Spirit has awakened in us the desire to be with Jesus, then the same Spirit prompts us to bear witness to the faith in him with which we have been blessed.

Second, bearing witness is itself a form of service. And here the sentiments of Ad gentes are timely. The example of virtuous living needs to be accompanied by words, in keeping with the instruction of 1 Peter 3:15—“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”

Third, mission belongs to the very nature of the Church. Not only does the Church carry on a ministry of the word out of obedience to Jesus’ instructions to his followers, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20). But the Church is also missionary by nature; it is not a community closed in on itself. “In fact,” the Pope writes, “the Christian communities, which live the missionary dimension of the Church in a profound way, will never be inward looking.”

Clearly, not everyone in the Church has the freedom or the ability to leave everything and follow a call from the Spirit to travel “the roads of the world announcing the Gospel.” The Pope notes that from among those who followed him during his ministry, Jesus selected just twelve to be apostles. After Easter,
of course, the definition of apostle would be broadened to include anyone sent on mission by the risen Jesus. The point Paul makes in chapter 12 of his first letter to the Corinthians, however, is important. Paul asks, “Are all apostles?” And by this he means that in a community where there are different gifts not everyone is going to be an apostle. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (1 Cor 12:4-6).

Nevertheless, the Spirit still draws men and women to be apostles in the sense that Paul understood the term. In a world that is religiously pluralistic, the need for voices that bear witness to the distinctiveness and richness of Christian religious experience becomes all the more urgent. In addition, however, the need for evangelization seems to be more pressing now than it was 2000 years ago. “For you always have the poor with you,” Jesus said. Yet poverty can take many forms. People can be suffering the poverty that is ignorance of God: ignorance of where they come from, why they are here, and where their lives should be heading. They are “like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34).

**Being on mission in a time of globalization**

Some missionaries—that is to say, some apostles—will still travel to foreign lands either to establish or to support the work of local churches. Increasingly we see lay men and women, sometimes singly and sometimes as married couples, becoming partners in mission with veteran missionary groups. Of course, priests and religious still leave their own countries and travel elsewhere. They may travel from North America to other parts of the world, or they may be leaving India, Africa, and South
America to labor in churches in North America. Other missioners, animated by love of the Gospel, take to internet highways and websites, ministering to the word in ways Saint Paul or Francis Xavier would never have dreamt of.

Paul VI understood that evangelization—service of the Church-mission—includes making the world more human; preaching the Gospel entails the promotion of authentic human development. He wrote: “Between evangelization and human advancement—development and liberation—there are in fact profound links. . . . [H]ow in fact can one proclaim the new commandment without promoting in justice and in peace the true, authentic development of man? We ourselves have taken care to point this out, by recalling that it is impossible to accept ‘that in evangelization one could or should ignore the importance of the problems so much discussed today, concerning justice, liberation, development and peace in the world’.”

Another way of stating Paul VI’s insight is to say that the service of faith is inseparable from the promotion of justice. Whatever form service of the Church-mission takes, because it is modeled after the example of Jesus the impulse of faith is to reach out to others and to share one’s experience of God. And central to that experience is the realization that the God of Israel—who is always the God of Jesus—is the God who intervened in history in order to liberate his people (Exodus 3:7-10). It was for this mission, Benedict XVI notes, that God called Moses.

Religions should never be in the business of competing for adherents, and the “success” of a religion is hardly to be measured in terms of the number of converts it makes. The mystery of God cannot be commercialized any more than it can be politicized. First and last, mission activity has to be
motivated by a love of God’s people. Passion for his people is what moved God to call Moses, according to the memorable scene depicted in Exodus 3. Jesus’ mission likewise originated in God’s love for his people: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). Mission without love would be theologically meaningless. In the end, what matters is that men and women should become free to love and to live for one another. And this will happen in the measure that they come to know and experience God. The call to mission is a vocation to love and care for the people. Indeed, it is a call to embrace the world.

**Keeping missionary awareness alive**

“It is necessary to maintain alive in the faithful an active sense of missionary responsibility and a shared solidarity with the peoples of the world.” What Benedict XVI says in this sentence invites elaboration. We have a great deal of work to do in terms of evangelization within the Church, certainly within the context of North Atlantic culture. The belief profile of young Catholics today that Thomas Rausch presents in his book *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice* (Liturgical Press, 2006) is cause for concern. Given the weak faith formation of so many people, it is all the more urgent that believers who take their faith seriously view themselves as men and women on mission. “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Matt 5:15). Jesus expects his followers to let the light of their faith “shine before others.” But letting our light shine is not enough; Jesus also expects that there will be words of testimony.

The Pope’s point, however, seems to be that a sense of responsibility for the Gospel is not reserved to ordained
ministers and religious. All of us are responsible for the story of Jesus, for the good news of the kingdom. Awareness of our mutual responsibility for the Gospel has to be cultivated.

Yet the Pope links this evangelical awareness with a second: “a shared solidarity with the peoples of the world.” By making this linkage, perhaps Benedict XVI is suggesting that living in solidarity with the peoples of the world promotes our sense of being responsible for the Gospel; and living the Gospel—hearing the word of God and putting it into practice—leads to a oneness with others that is at once both spiritual and concrete. For solidarity is not simply a matter of inner union with others; solidarity has political and economic expressions as well.

Solidarity was the virtue that John Paul II spoke of frequently. For an apostle, this virtue is indispensable. Before apostles preach they need to understand the people before whom they stand. They need to understand the culture. They need to understand social and economic conditions. They need to recognize the form or shape of a people’s spiritual yearning. Above all, effective apostles become inwardly one with the people, especially the world’s poorest. They are keenly sensitive to the assaults people endure against their dignity as children of God, and they share the passionate, blessed desire of oppressed people everywhere who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt 5:6). Solidarity is the great antidote against the individualism of consumer culture. “Shared solidarity,” as Benedict XVI writes, is crucial to vocational awareness. In an age of globalization, the Church cannot promote vocations without cultivating this essential virtue.
When suffering creates apostles

The third paragraph of the Pope’s message mentions those “whose missionary vocation results from providential circumstances, sometimes painful ones.” The example he has in mind comes from Acts 8, when persecution forced disciples in Jerusalem to flee the city. “Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word” (Acts 8:4). Those first Christians had to leave their homes, but their faith traveled with them. The Pope concludes, “The Holy Spirit permits this trial to be changed into an occasion of grace.”

Saint Paul wrote of power being made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9), and most of us could probably confirm Paul’s experience with examples from our own. Sometimes the cost of remaining faithful to Christ creates the conditions for the Gospel to spread. Yet this does not necessarily mean fleeing a place of persecution and carrying the faith to places where the Gospel has not been sown. Difficulties of any sort can stretch and challenge our faith, and cause it to deepen. And as faith is purified and made stronger through adversity, we may find ourselves speaking with greater conviction about the things of God.

Frequently, because of suffering, our lives bear witness to the Gospel more clearly and credibly, and such witness attracts others to a closer relationship with the Lord. Of course, not all suffering arises because believers “have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:26). Nevertheless, things that happen to us often turn out to have been providential, although we might not have recognized God’s hand at the time. The reach of the Spirit is not shortened even when the circumstances of our lives become painful. The Christian who hopes and prays that through his or her life others
will be brought to the Lord is living “the missionary dimension of the Church in a profound way.”

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