



Go and Make Disciples: A Vision and a Plan

Reflection

Matthew's Gospel concludes on a challenging note, "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' " (Matthew 28:18–19). These words are more than an ancient challenge to the disciples. They are a call to make evangelization a way of life, an invitation to move out beyond the four walls of our churches and into the world around us.

We need to explore this challenge, beginning with a look at the way we were awakened to faith in Jesus Christ and brought to life within the Church. How has God touched our lives? What stories of faith lie in our hearts? Then we need to learn how to bring others to Christ using our gifts, stories, and personalities.

¹ Evangelization can be as simple as sharing a glimpse of our ongoing relationships with Jesus and with our parish community. To begin with, evangelization is often experienced over a cup of coffee, at the office, or in a quiet moment with a friend. It is simply an honest and intentional sharing of who we are and what our faith in Christ means to us. Evangelization is planting the seeds of the gospel message.

Pope Paul VI provides a broad definition of evangelization when he states, "evangelization means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new."² This Good News has a power that becomes evident in the spoken word and enlivened by the silent witness of a Christian way of living. It begins with the acceptance of the Word of God that becomes "like a burning fire" within us. As we grow in that Word, our lives are transformed. Not only do we speak that Word verbally, but we also live it more concretely. The goal of evangelization is a change of heart and joy-filled lives, for Christ tells us in John's Gospel: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Evangelization is like lighting a candle to set hearts ablaze with Christ's love.

In *Go and Make Disciples*, the U.S. Catholic Bishops speak of a "fire" burning within the hearts of the disciples as they encountered Jesus on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). That same fire is meant to burn in us. We are called to burn with a passion for the Good News of Jesus who loves us without condition and offers us divine life through his death, his resurrection, and his own Spirit.³ More than a program, evangelization is an attitude. It is a manner of sharing, of inviting, of welcoming people into the joy of communion with Jesus Christ and with God's people.

Go and Make Disciples explains the three-fold nature of evangelization: beginning with personal inspiration, leading to invitation and resulting in transformation. The three facets are:

- **Goal I:** *To bring about such an enthusiasm for their faith in Catholics that, in living it out, they share it freely with others.*⁴

It is important to note that those in small Christian communities are especially assisted in reaching this goal. This is true for several reasons: faith sharing deepens faith and creates great enthusiasm for evangelizing; those in small communities are enabled to talk freely about Jesus and their faith; communal sharing and support give people the courage to share their faith with others outside the community.

- **Goal II:** *To invite everyone to hear Jesus' message of salvation, whatever might be their social or cultural backgrounds, in order that they may join us in the Catholic faith.*⁵

We note again that those participating in small Christian communities are particularly supported in Goal II of the bishops' document. Inviting others is generally facilitated: when we are able to share a rich communal and conversion experience; when we experience a warm, welcoming, informal community to invite others into. Small communities are well suited to support and encourage these kinds of experience. They are, furthermore, ideal for carrying through any precatechesis that may be needed.

- **Goal III:** *To promote values of the gospel—dignity of the human person, importance of family, common good—so that our society will continue to be transformed by Christ's saving power.*⁶

By their very definition, small Christian communities attempt to carry out Goal III of the U.S. Catholic Bishops. Members gather “for the common purpose of applying gospel values to every aspect of their lives ... [committing] themselves to the mission of Jesus in the world.”⁷ Small Christian communities attempt to deal with all aspects of life, fostering a spirituality that strives to impact everyday life.⁸ Through their approach of “Observe, Judge, Act,” small communities move out into the world, as a very way of life. Using this methodology, small communities are well suited to make real changes and have a real impact in transforming our world.

This topic, “Go and Make Disciples: A Vision and a Plan,” is designed as an introduction to evangelization and a basic approach to these three goals. If we have an appreciation for all three goals and can freely move from one to the other, then evangelization will be like a sturdy, powerful three-legged tripod that we can use often in ministry.

Recall that beautiful Pentecost moment in our Church when the disciples were gathered as a small community, frightened and confused. The Holy Spirit came upon them and gave them the power to go out into the whole world to proclaim the message of Jesus. There was power and mystery. That moment is happening again today. We are called to be transformed and changed. We too are called to go forth, as Christians supported and inspired by other Christians, to the whole world to proclaim the good news that Jesus is alive, he is risen, he is here!⁹

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1993), p. 21.

² *On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii nuntiandi)*, (December 8, 1975), Paul VI, 18.

³ *Go and Make Disciples*, p. 3.

⁴ U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1992), p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Excerpt from *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope for the 21st Century*, Revised and Updated by Thomas A. Kleissler, Margo A. LeBert, and Mary C. McGuinness, Copyright © 1997 by RENEW International, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Newark, NJ. Used by permission of Paulist Press. www.paulistpress.com, p. 272.

⁸ See *IMPACT* Series to read about the kinds of issues that small Christian communities discuss and implement. *IMPACT* Series (available from RENEW International) aims to connect faith to the wide range of human concerns and personal issues. In the process, participants will be led not only to prayerful reflection and fruitful sharing, but also to concrete actions that influence for the better human attitudes and behaviors. For more information about the *IMPACT* Series, see RENEW bookstore (<http://www.renewintl.org/Resources/Pages/faithshare.html>).

⁹ *Small Christian Communities*, p. 215.