

Going to the Peripheries
Convocation of Catholic Leaders: The Joy of the Gospel in America
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Earlier this year I had the opportunity to spend one week in South Korea. During that time I had the privilege of meeting one of our great American missionaries—a priest and a Knight of Columbus who has traveled into North Korea more than 50 times, most recently to treat desperately ill North Koreans who have no other hope of medical assistance.

I asked him why he spends so much of his life traveling and living under such dangerous and harsh conditions. His answer was simple: “Where there is great suffering, Jesus is there and where Jesus is we must be also.”

Through the Incarnation the Lord has united himself forever with suffering humanity—not as an abstraction but throughout history with each suffering person.

Jesus is already at the peripheries.

The question for us is whether he will be there alone or whether his disciples will be there with him.

At the Knights of Columbus we are committed to going beyond our own comfort zone and even beyond our own nation to reach those peripheries.

For example, we help AIDS orphans in Uganda, homeless refugees in Ukraine, persecuted Christians in Egypt, Christian survivors of genocide in Iraq, child refugees from North Korea, typhoon survivors in the Philippines, flood victims in Mexico and the physically disabled in Vietnam, Cuba and Haiti.

As Catholics we profess a universal church. As missionary disciples we must make our universal church increasingly present at the peripheries as the process of globalization accelerates.

Yet the most difficult challenge may not be in reaching out to the world. The most difficult challenge may be in reaching out to our own neighbor.

Going to this periphery requires us to not only go beyond our comfort zone to *do* more—it requires us to go beyond our comfort to *be* more.

Pope Francis recalls the observation of Blessed Paul VI that today “people prefer to listen to witnesses: they ‘thirst for authenticity’ and ‘call for evangelizers to speak of a God whom they themselves know.’” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 150).

And those closest to us are precisely the ones who discern most clearly the authenticity of our witness.

This “thirst for authenticity”—and indeed this very convocation itself—calls us to a fundamental question about our own identity—who are we today as a Catholic community?

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis calls us to be “an evangelizing community that is filled with joy” (24), a community that is “permanently in a state of mission” (25), and a community that practices a “fraternal communion and missionary fruitfulness” (89).

Pope Francis urges us to “live in fraternity” (91) and to share “a fraternal love capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbor, of finding God in every human being” (92).

He writes: “I especially ask Christians in communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another” (98).

This great task is for each of us.

Evangelii Gaudium states, “In virtue of their baptism, *all* the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples” and that “the new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of *each* of the baptized” (120).

Missionary discipleship leads us to a deeper reality. Could it be that the periphery closest to us—is not our neighbor after all?

Perhaps we ourselves are the first periphery.

In 2012, I had the privilege of serving as an auditor to the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization.

The documents of the synod observed that the new evangelization is most profoundly the Church becoming “what she is by her nature” (*Lineamenta*, 2). Which is to say that the “Christian faith is not simply teachings, wise sayings, a code of morality or a tradition. The Christian faith is a true encounter and relationship with Jesus Christ” (*Instrumentum Laboris*, 18)

The synod further pointed out that the family is “the model-place for witnessing to faith because of its prophetic capacity for living the core values of the Christian experience” (*Instrumentum Laboris*, 110). Moreover, the family bears “responsibility in the formation and transmission of the Christian faith from the very beginnings of human life” (*Instrumentum Laboris*, 111).

For this reason, as St. John Paul II taught us, the family too is essentially missionary. In *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II wrote, “the family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love.” The family is called “to become what it is”—an icon of God’s love (17).

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis writes that Christ “gives spouses the capacity to live that love, permeating every part of their lives of faith, hope and charity. In this way, spouses are consecrated and by means of a special grace build up the Body of Christ and form a domestic church” (67).

But who can hope to fulfill this high calling of married and family life? *Amoris Laetitia* counsels us to approach this task with confidence. “Through his Church,” writes Pope Francis, “Christ bestows on marriage and the family the grace necessary to bear witness to the love of God and to live the life of communion” (63).

This means there is a fundamental connection between family life and parish life. Both the family and the parish must become what they are: places for “a true encounter and relationship with Jesus Christ.”

Pope Francis tells us in *Amoris Laetitia* that “the Church is a family of families” (87).

If so, then the parish too is called to be a true icon of God’s love. And the parish also has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love.

Today, missionary disciples should also see the family and the parish as peripheries into which they must go.

If we go deep enough into the peripheries we will find the boundaries between us beginning to disappear. We will realize that as the poet said, “No man is an island, entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”

We might ask, “If Christ is already present in a place, can it really be a periphery? Or is the problem one of our own short sightedness?”

As that great hymn says, “In Christ there is no East or West, in him no

South or North, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.”

The sense of missionary discipleship that Pope Francis is calling us to—a discipleship of fraternal communion and fraternal love—is a radical repudiation of the extreme individualism that some today champion. It cannot be realized without our renewed commitment to community.

As Pope Benedict wrote in *Deus Caritas Est*, “The Christian’s program—the program of the Good Samaritan, the program of Jesus—is ‘a heart which sees.’ This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly” (31).

It seems to me that Pope Francis is calling for a great pastoral initiative to help all of us have a heart, which sees more clearly and every parish and family should be included both as an object and as a subject of this initiative.

It has been said that it is a beautiful if difficult task to spend one’s life living and helping others to live the mystery of Christian existence as a life devoted to charity and love, to promote unity, not as a strategy for success, but as the relation of love with God and other men, and to see fraternity, as a communion of persons who accompany each other and help each other to follow Christ more closely.

In these ways, we find the parameters of authentic Catholic identity, discipleship, witness and community.

So, we have much to do. And where to start?

In *Redemptoris Missio*, St. John Paul II said this, “The call to mission derives, of its nature, from the call to holiness.... It is not enough to update pastoral techniques, organize and coordinate ecclesial resources, or delve more deeply into the biblical and theological foundations of faith. What is needed is the encouragement of a new ‘ardor for holiness’ among missionaries and throughout the Christian community” (90).

But he also made clear that since the two calls are linked they must proceed together; we cannot wait for perfection in the spiritual life before we begin to answer the call to mission.

I began these remarks by quoting an extraordinary Catholic missionary and Knight of Columbus. And I would like to conclude by quoting another extraordinary Catholic witness who was also a Knight of Columbus.

Vince Lombardi once said, “we will chase perfection, and we will chase it relentlessly, knowing all the while we can never attain it. But along the way, we shall catch excellence.”

Of course, the spiritual life is not a football game. But do not our brothers and sisters in the faith and all those who we hope might one day join us in faith deserve the same sort of relentless determination from those of us who have been entrusted with a special mission in the Church?

One final thought.

We are a community that exists not only in space but in time. The life of our community over time shapes both our identity and our witness.

The sacrifice, contribution and legacy of the Catholics who have gone before us have helped to make us who we are today.

As we think about going to the peripheries and specific areas of ministry, we should look to those missionary leaders who are our heritage as Catholics in America—especially those who combined mission and holiness—men and women like Elisabeth Ann Seton, Junipero Serra, Francis Cabrini, Kateri Tekakwitha, Michael McGivney and Stanley Rother.

Among these Catholics and others we will find inspiration and intercession for today's task of missionary discipleship. We might even see them as patron saints of the peripheries.

For centuries, Catholics in America have been a home to great missionary disciples.

Pope Emeritus Benedict has often spoken of the importance for the future of the Church of what he terms "creative minorities."

As we reflect upon the "unity of vision and purpose" that he told us in St. Patrick's Cathedral was "the secret of the impressive growth" of the Church in America, we see stretching across time countless creative minorities of clergy, religious and laity building Catholic communities of churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages, charitable associations throughout what was in their day the great periphery of North America.

We meet today not far from the city of St. Augustine—one of the first great Catholic missionary settlements in America, a settlement later destroyed for reasons of geopolitical competition and to remove the Catholic presence from this land. And yet today Catholics comprise the largest Christian denomination in the United States.

Catholics in America have never feared to go to the peripheries. It is who we are and who we will continue to be in the future. Pope Francis calls us to "embark upon a new chapter of evangelization" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 1)

Let us arise and be on our way!