

## 1. INTRO

A young man, after much careful discernment, made the decision to enter the monastery but in doing so, knew he would have to leave behind his beloved pet cat, who had accompanied him throughout his youth. After a tearful goodbye, he packed his few belongings, left home, and began his life as a monk.

Years later, as he was tending the garden one day, he found a young kitten that had jumped the monastery walls. Overjoyed, he grabbed the cat, ran to the Abbot, and begged him to allow him to keep the cat, but the Abbot would not have any of it. Some days later, as the monk was heading back up from the local town, he again found the kitten just off the main road leading back to the monastery. This time, he said to himself, I'll get the cat to stay! He again picked up the little cat, hid it under his robe, and continued on his way. But as he entered the monastery, he ran into the old Abbot, who questioned him about the odd bump in his robe.

"Father Abbot," he pleaded, "I have found the same cat just now, the same one from the other day. He reminds me so dearly of the cat I had before. Please allow me to keep him. He will not disrupt the life of our community or distract me from the work you have set for me to do." Begrudgingly, but moved with compassion, the Abbot allowed the monk to keep the kitten. Later that evening, as the community of brothers were gathered in the chapel for their night prayers, the door creaked slightly open, and in strolled the cat, right down the center aisle, up into the sanctuary, and it jumped onto the lap of the Abbot.

"Father Abbot!" exclaimed the monk, "I am so sorry about this. Please do not make me get rid of the cat. I promise you it will not happen again!" The Abbot, again moved by the monk, agreed to let the cat stay, so long as it never interrupted prayer again. Night after night, then, as the community prepared for night prayer, the monk would go and find the cat to tie it up so that it would not interrupt the prayers.

Eventually, the old Abbot passed away, and as the new Abbot came in, he observed this daily practice, and though perplexed by it, said nothing of it, allowing it to continue. Sometime later, the cat, too, grew old and it died. As the monk grieved the loss of his

beloved pet, the Abbot came to him, quite flustered, and invited him to accompany him into town. “Where are we going, Father Abbot?” the monk asked. And without hesitation, the Abbot answered back, “To find another cat to tie up tonight, of course! How else are we supposed to say our night prayers??”

## **2. THE LANDSCAPE - NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

Earlier this summer, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops convened an unprecedented gathering of diverse leaders from dioceses and Catholic organizations from across the country to assess the challenges and opportunities of our time, particularly in the context of the Church in the United States. The convocation, under the theme of “The Joy of the Gospel in America,” presented the Church with a unique chance to examine today's concerns, challenges, and opportunities in the light of the Church's mission of evangelization. It aimed to equip leaders to go forth, ready to dialogue with the world with the joy of the gospel, to form missionary disciples to animate the Church and engage the culture.

Over the 3 days of the Convocation, through a variety of addresses, keynotes, panels, and breakouts - many, if not all of them, led by our bishops themselves – a fascinating trend surfaced, one that is supported both by research and experience:

The Church in the United States is rapidly evolving and we must find a new way forward to address those changes.

Over and over, what was put forth by our bishops and agreed upon by the leaders gathered there was a call to reimagine a new paradigm for a Church on the move, a Church permanently “on mission” – in evangelization, in catechesis, in education, in the very way we “are” Church.

As we dream big in our respective circles of influence, it's important that we understand the reality of mission field we are working in and called to minister to.

The Church in the US is indeed changing – both geographically and demographically. In groundbreaking research led by Dr. Hosffman Ospino out of Boston College, statistics

are showing a major movement of Catholics both to the South and to the West. The Northeast, once a hotbed and the pride of American Catholicism, is facing closing schools, merging parishes, and declining numbers in Church attendance, registered parishioners, and school and religious education enrollment.

But in the South and in the West, the numbers are exploding, and churches, schools, and facilities cannot be built fast enough!

Yet still, overall, for every 1 new Catholic who joins the Church, six are leaving – many of these teens and young adults.

Demographically, in only 50 years, the Church of the United States has moved from one that was between 80-85% of European Descent to one that today, is made up of 50% NON-Europeans, including 40% Latinos, 5% Asian and Pacific Islanders, 4% African American and 1% Native American.

It is worth pointing out, as we consider these statistics and think to our own reality of Church at Little Flower, St Theresa, and the Archdiocese of Miami, that we find ourselves in a rather unique situation. In many ways, we've already faced and lived through the challenges of changing populations and demographics that the rest of the country is just now wrestling with. But we are not exempt from the work ahead either...

Indeed the broader Church we find ourselves in today, the mission field which has been laid out before us, is a much different place than that of only one generation before us. And yet, much of what we do when it comes to evangelization, catechesis, and ministry is largely the same. We're still tying up the cat before night prayer, "just because it's what has always been done before." And when that cat grows old and dies, we're often going out to find a new one to tie up, because, as the Abbot remarked, "how else are we supposed to go on?"

The call, then, for each of us gathered today is clear. The language of "it's always been done that way" needs to be thrown out. We can no longer be a church, a school, a community that sits back and rests on its laurels, because the Church and the world around us are ever-changing. If we are to take our collective role as catechists, as

evangelists, as missionary disciples seriously, we must be bold, brave, and creative in finding the way forward.

The future of U.S. Catholicism is being forged in areas once not central to U.S. Catholic life... Are we paying attention? This is happening in our own FRONT YARD, right before our eyes. Are we responding whole-heartedly to the challenge?

We don't need to scrap the whole thing and start from scratch. It's not all doom and gloom. There is plenty that is going WELL, plenty that we are doing RIGHT. The Joy of the Gospel is alive and well. But can we do more? Can we go wider and deeper, not for our own sake, not for the sake of the parish or even the institution of the Church, but for the sake of those souls we are entrusted to minister to, those children and families who are worthy of our best.

### **3. MISSION**

During the closing Keynote Address, Bishop Robert Barron summed it up quite nicely: "The saints always loved and good fight and we should like a good fight too!"

One of the key "battlegrounds" is the new buzzword in the Church – "the peripheries."

In the words of Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, "The peripheries are places on a map, places where people live. The peripheries are parts of our cities and the rural areas that we never visit. The other side of the tracks. They are where the poor live. They are the prisons and the tent cities in our public spaces. The peripheries are the bitter fruits of neglect, exploitation and injustice. They are all the places our society is ashamed of and would rather forget about."

He continued, "But for Pope Francis, the peripheries are more than a physical location or a social category. They are places where poverty is not only material but also spiritual. They are places where people are wounded and feel their life has no meaning and makes no difference, trapping themselves in sin, addiction, slavery and self-deception."

Earlier today we heard of the beautiful work of Amor en Accion on the physical peripheries in places like Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. Surely, supporting their work through prayer and action, through fundraising and donations is a good first step to becoming “missionary disciples.” But is it enough to address the peripheries that we, specifically, as the Parish Staff of Church of the Little Flower and St. Theresa School, have been called to?

I want to pause here and give you a moment to reflect on your own lived experiences. What are the peripheries in our own parish community and how are we going out on mission there? What other peripheries exist within the boundaries of our parish that we are hesitant to address, because they might make us uncomfortable and it’s easier to just forget or ignore?

How many of our students are just going through the motions with us because a private school education is preferable to a public school education, money isn’t something to be concerned with, but neither is the practice of the faith?

Who among our parish families are spiritually poor because they have outsourced the faith formation of their children to us, the school teachers and church catechists, and do just the minimum at home, if even that much, to nourish and strengthen their faith?

Who among our children and students hunger for the love and affection of their parents, who as lawyers, doctors, or high-powered executives have only the bare minimum of time available to devote to the family and are never home?

How many in our community are caught up in outward appearances and in the rat-race of “keeping up with the joneses,” that they are living beyond their means, stressing from paycheck to paycheck, and never at peace?

Who are the children in our flock who come from broken homes, who live with only one parent, who have witnessed or been the victim of verbal or physical abuse, or who have been affected, directly or indirectly by drug or alcohol abuse?

How many of our parish families include someone who is gay or lesbian, opening up the full spectrum of delicate questions regarding the practice of the faith, the struggle with human attraction, and the reconciling of the two?

How many of us, perhaps even as we gather here today on this Day of Recollection, take at best a lukewarm approach to the practice of our own faith, directly affecting that which we are entrusted and missioned to pass on?

These are but some of the very real peripheries that exist not “OUT THERE,” but right in our midst. These are the peripheries that exist in our classrooms, in our offices, in our hallways, even in our break rooms and teachers lounges.

#### **4. BEING EVANGELIZING, MISSIONARY DISCIPLES**

Thanks be to God, it's not mission impossible. In the words of Bishop Barron: “It's an exciting time to be an evangelist!” And what might that look like?

Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington DC described 5 key characteristics of the “evangelizing disciple.” As I close today, I challenge you to think on each of these carefully.

*The Evangelizing/Missionary Disciple must be:*

**BOLD** – we must be ready to “put out into the deep,” going out to the unknown, even if this means simply greeting the anonymous neighbor who lives next door or sits down next to us at Mass.

**CONNECTED TO THE CHURCH** – if we are to be true evangelizers, we must be in communion with that which we are sharing. We cannot give what we do not have!

**A SENSE OF URGENCY** – You've heard but a small amount of the startling statistics on the reality of the Church we face. We cannot be complacent in the face of this reality and we can no longer put it off until tomorrow to do something about it. Are we listening to the stirrings of our heart?

COMPASSION and MERCY – We may not be as well versed in Scripture as we'd like to, but often what attracts people most is the PRACTICE of the faith. The greatest evangelist of our time was not a pope or preacher, but a humble religious sister, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, who ignited a worldwide spiritual revolution through simple acts of compassion and mercy.

JOYFUL - the follower of Christ has an abiding joy, knowing that he is loved eternally by God. As I love to quote Pope Francis, "The Church has no need for more sourpusses." Joy is the most infallible sign of God's presence. We have the words of eternal life. How can we be anything BUT joyful!?

How many of these are applicable to you? How can you deepen them in your own life and in your own Mission to the Peripheries? Which ones do you want or need to work on over this next year of ministry? Much hangs in the balance, but we need not be afraid, for we have the Holy Spirit within us and Jesus Christ beside us!

Indeed, this is NOT mission impossible. LET US ARISE AND BE ON THE WAY – TOGETHER, FORMING DISCIPLES, WORSHIPPING THE LORD, SERVING IN THE NAME OF JESUS – with the Joy of the Gospel as our inspiration and our guide.