



Creating Missionary Parishes

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Abstract:

Recent popes have developed the teaching of Vatican II on evangelization in general and the new evangelization in particular. This article focuses in a specific way on the teaching of Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* on the creation of missionary parishes. Following introductory comments, this article suggests that what the Pope has emphasised three main elements, namely, the need for a mission statement that prioritises the new evangelization; the experience of baptism in the Spirit as a result of attending kerygmatic courses such as Alpha and Life in the Spirit Seminars; and the provision of ongoing faith formation in order to develop groups of intentional disciples who would have both a desire and the ability to evangelize. Because the Congregation of the Mission has many parishes¹ it needs to take account of what Francis has taught in order to be true to its charism.

Los papas recientes han desarrollado las enseñanzas del Vaticano II sobre la evangelización en general y la nueva evangelización en particular. Este artículo se centra de manera específica en las enseñanzas del Papa Francisco en su Exhortación Apostólica *Evangelii Gaudium* sobre la creación de parroquias misioneras. Tras comentarios introductorios, este artículo sugiere que lo que el Papa ha enfatizado son tres elementos principales, a saber, la necesidad de una declaración de misión que priorice la nueva evangelización; la experiencia del bautismo en el Espíritu como resultado de asistir a cursos kerigmáticos como los Seminarios Alfa y Vida en el Espíritu; y la provisión de formación continua en la fe para desarrollar grupos de discípulos intencionales que tengan tanto el deseo como la capacidad de evangelizar. Debido a que la Congregación de la Misión tiene muchas parroquias, necesita tener en cuenta lo que Francisco ha enseñado para ser fiel a su carisma.

Les papes récents ont développé l'enseignement de Vatican II sur l'évangélisation en général et la nouvelle évangélisation en particulier. Cet article se concentre de manière spécifique sur l'enseignement du pape François dans son Exhortation apostolique *Evangelii Gaudium* sur la création de paroisses missionnaires. Après les commentaires introductifs, cet article suggère que ce que le Pape a souligné trois éléments principaux, à savoir la nécessité d'une déclaration de mission qui donne la priorité à la nouvelle évangélisation; l'expérience du baptême dans l'Esprit suite à la participation à des cours kérygmaticques tels que les séminaires Alpha et Vie dans l'Esprit ; et la fourniture d'une formation continue à la foi afin de développer des groupes de disciples intentionnels qui auraient à la fois le désir et la capacité d'évangéliser. Parce que la Congrégation de la Mission compte de nombreuses paroisses, elle doit tenir compte de ce que François a enseigné pour être fidèle à son charisme.

Keywords: Missionary, maintenance & mission, mission statement, kerygma, baptism in the Spirit, discipleship formation, parish groups.

¹ Statute 10.1 of the *Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission* states, "Parishes are included among the apostolic works of the Congregation, provided that the apostolate which the members exercise there is in accord with the purpose and nature of our Institute, and provided also that the small number of pastors requires it (General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission 1989).



Introduction

In recent years the corpus of papal teaching on the new evangelization, has not only been first class, it is highly relevant today.² In this article I am going to presume that most readers are acquainted with the main gist of that teaching. What I want to do in this input is to focus on an important and distinctive contribution which has been made by Pope Francis. It has to do with the central role of parishes in the new evangelization. It was first proposed in his Apostolic Declaration *Evangelii Gaudium* (Hereafter *EG*). Since then, his teaching has been amplified in a document entitled, "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church." It was issued by the Congregation for the Clergy in 2020.

Parish conversion

When I first read, *EG*, the section that struck me most were pars 25-33 on conversion. I would have assumed that the word conversion would have been understood primarily as a willingness by individuals to turn away from sin in order to put Jesus number one in their lives. While Pope Francis would heartily endorse such an understanding of conversion, he focused on the need for structural conversion in parishes. He made a number of points about them.

Firstly, in par 28 the pontiff said, "The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community."

Secondly, parishes need to move from maintenance to mission. In *EG* par 27, Pope Francis wrote, "I dream of a "missionary option," that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language, and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her *self-preservation*. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission oriented."

Parishes devoted to maintenance devote most of their energies and resources to meeting the needs of the diminishing number, of mainly elderly people, who still come to church. If an inventory was made, it would indicate that very little of their energies or resources are devoted to reaching out in order to evangelize the large majority who no longer come to church and know very little about its teachings.

A questionnaire

Here is a short checklist of questions which could be used to gauge how missionary a parish actually is.

1. Has the parish a mission statement, one that includes a clear and explicit commitment to the new evangelization?
2. Does the parish have a yearly plan that states what and how each parish group will do to evangelize the un-churched in the area?
3. What does the parish do to evangelize young adults between the ages of 18 and 35? Is there a trained, salaried youth leader?

² For a summary, see appendix two, "New Evangelization in Church Teaching: A Summary," in Pat Collins CM, *Reflection on the Life and Spirituality of St Vincent de Paul*. (Collins CM 2022c, 211–26).

4. Does the parish council have an evangelization committee that plans evangelistic courses of a kerygmatic kind such as Alpha or Life in the Spirit Seminars?
5. Is there a Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) group in the parish?
6. Is there an evangelization team that does house-to-house visitation, such as the Legion of Mary, or a parish visitation team?
7. Does the parish provide any training for parishioners who want to learn how to evangelize effectively, e.g., by means of person to person contact or in groups?
8. Does the parish newsletter contain regular pieces to do with the nature of evangelization, the motives parishioners have of engaging in it, and practical means of doing so?
9. Are there any groups in the parish, such as the housebound or an intercessory prayer group, who are praying in an intentional way for parish renewal and effective evangelization in the area?
10. If parishioners come to have a personal relationship with Jesus as a result of a conversion experience, is there any provision for on-going faith formation in discipleship such as *Lectio Divina*, Parish Cell Groups, A Catechism Class, a Prayer Group etc?

If a parish cannot answer yes to at least six of these questions, it probably means that it is too inward looking.

Three essential things that are needed

Although many changes will be needed in order to create the missionary parishes of the future, we will look at three essential ones that priests and their parishioners need to focus on

1. Creating a mission statement that highlights the importance of evangelization
2. The central role of baptism in the Spirit.
3. The formation of communities of missionary disciples

1. Creating a mission statement

Every parish needs a mission statement, one which prioritises its missionary purpose.³ Mission orientated parishes are places where the parish priest with the help of as many parishioners as possible, leads a process of prayerful discernment which seeks to answer questions such as the following:

- a. What is your vision for the future of your parish over the next five to ten years?
- b. In the light of that vision what are you attempting to do?
- c. What are the main ways in which you will achieve your goals?

The discernment process should lead to the production of a concise, inspiring, but realistic mission statement, one which focuses on evangelization. It acts as the spiritual Sat-Nav for those responsible for leadership and planning in the parish. It guides their decisions, actions and use of resources. As Pope Francis has observed in *EG* par 33, “Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: “We have always done it this way.” I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective

³ Cf. Pat Collins CM, *Providence and Blessing: Living a Purpose Filled Life* (Collins CM 2022b).

communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory.” Having formulated and promulgated the mission statement, the parish needs to plan a year ahead. Besides having such things as pastoral, liturgical and financial goals, it has to give primacy to the missionary aim,

- a. What will be done to reach out to the unchurched?
- b. Who will do it?
- c. When and how will they do it?
- d. How will their efforts be resourced in terms of personnel, training and money?
- e. When and how will the evangelization goals be assessed?

There has been a good deal of helpful writing in this regard such as White & Corcoran’s *Rebuilt*,⁴ and Mallon’s *Divine Renovation*.⁵ Such books have helped some progressive bishops and priests in Ireland and Britain to create missionary parishes. Here is a maxim I think you can rely on. Instead of being like a rudderless ship, a parish with a mission statement knows what its guiding priority really is. But, in the future the parish that focuses its attention on the alleviation of urgent pastoral needs to the exclusion of its evangelical priority will contribute by default to its own decline.

2. The central importance of baptism in the spirit

Nowadays there is a widespread recognition that, although many Catholics have been sacramentalised and catechised, to one degree or another, many of them have not been fully evangelized. They may know about the person of Jesus without knowing him in person. In the words of St John Paul II, many of them have not yet crossed the threshold of faith to “total adherence to Jesus Christ.”⁶ It has two predictable effects.

Firstly, our catechesis is often ineffective because it is built on sand insofar as the parishioners have not been fully evangelized.

Secondly, St Paul VI said in par 24 of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, “the person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize others. Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelization: it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn.” The fact that so many Catholics in our parishes fail to evangelize anyone, in all probability indicates that they have not been fully-evangelized themselves.

As many Christians know from personal experience, baptism in the Spirit is a prerequisite for effective evangelization.⁷ Nowadays millions of Catholics are receiving this precious gift as a result of attending kerygmatic type courses such as Alpha, and Life

⁴ *Rebuilt: Awakening the Faithful, Reaching the Lost and Making Church Matter* (Corcoran and White 2013).

⁵ *Divine Renovation: Bringing Your Parish from Maintenance to Mission* (Mallon 2014).

⁶ Par. 19 of his *Apostolic Exhortation, Catechesi Tradendae* (John Paul II 1979).

⁷ “Baptism in the Spirit is a life-transforming experience of the love of God the Father poured into one’s heart by the Holy Spirit and received through a total surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This grace brings alive sacramental baptism and confirmation, deepens communion with God and with fellow Christians, enkindles evangelistic fervour, and equips a person with charisms for service and mission”; *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Doctrinal Commission 2012), 15. See also Pat Collins CM, “Baptism in the Spirit and the Magisterium” in *Life in the Spirit Seminars Revised* (Collins CM 2022a), 101-112.

in the Spirit Seminars.⁸ That is why Pope Francis said to Charismatics gathered in Rome in 2015, “I ask all of you, each of you, that as part of the stream of grace of the Charismatic Renewal to plan to put on Life in the Spirit Seminars, in your parishes, in your seminaries and schools ... share your teaching on the Baptism of the Spirit, because it is produced by the work of the Holy Spirit through a personal encounter with Jesus, which changes lives.” Speaking to charismatics in 2019 Pope Francis said, “What does the Pope expect of you? I expect this movement to share baptism in the Spirit with *everyone* in the Church.”

Like many others I have found that

- Alpha courses are better suited to the needs of who know little or nothing about Christian faith and unbelievers,
- Life in the Spirit Seminars are better suited to the needs of people who go occasionally or often to Church but who are not yet fully evangelized.

To be truly effective in renewing a parish they need to be run over-and-over again.

3. Formation of missionary disciples

I worked for Alpha Ireland for 25 years. A question we were repeatedly asked, was this. What do you do with people who are on fire for the Lord as a result of baptism in the Spirit? Having enjoyed a positive experience of feeling connected, heard and welcomed at an Alpha course, or for that matter a Life in the Spirit Seminar, it is not enough to say go back to the relative anonymity of life in the parish. A number of other things are also needed.

Firstly, evangelized Christians have a need to belong to a smaller group where the members know and care for one another. As Nicky Gumbel, of Alpha says, "People will come to church for many reasons, but they will stay for only one - friendship. People aren't looking for a friendly church; they're looking for a church where they can make friends."⁹

Secondly, Baptism in the Spirit is the beginning of a new beginning. What is needed afterwards is ongoing formation which helps the parishioners to become intentional disciples. Speaking at a talk I attended on Nov 4th 2023, Pope Francis said, “the Seminars need to be followed up by suitable methods of continuing formation that can fan into flame the graces received and encourage ongoing growth in faith and prayer, the moral and sacramental life, the practice of charity and cooperation in the Church’s mission.” Although many parish websites contain a list of groups, it is disappointing to find how few of them focus on faith development and training in the nature and means of engaging in the new evangelization.

Not surprisingly many parishes, in spite of their good intentions are resource poor. That is why every diocese needs an Office for Evangelization, one which can offer parishes the assistance they need, e.g., by conducting formation for evangelization courses. Charismatic communities, and sympathetic members of religious orders can also assist parishes by running online Life in the Spirit Seminars, conducting training courses on various aspects of evangelization, and helping to makes good catechesis available for those who have been baptised in the Spirit. Currently, for example, The New Springtime

⁸ There are alternative kerygmatic courses such as Christ Life, Philip Retreats, and Cursillo Retreats.

⁹ Spoken in the course of an address to an annual Alpha Leadership Conference in London, May 4th 2014.

Community in Dublin is conducting a 72 week long course on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, both online and on Radio Maria, Ireland.

Thirdly, not only should the parish have an evangelistic mission statement, every group in the parish should identify and state how it can respond to the evangelical imperative. The American bishops wrote, “Every element of the parish must respond to the evangelical imperative—priests and religious, lay persons, staff, ministers, organizations, social clubs, parochial schools, and parish religious education programs. Otherwise, evangelization will be something a few people in the parish see as their ministry—rather than the reason for the parish's existence and the objective of every ministry in the parish.”¹⁰ Speaking about the parish, Pope Francis said in *EG* par 28 of *The Joy of the Gospel*, “It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.” In other words, there is still a great deal to do yet.

Conclusion

We can be sure that the call of Pope Francis to create missionary parishes, lies at the very heart of God’s will for us at this time. As a result, we can also be sure that no matter what obstacles we have to overcome God will empower us to do what he wants. As Paul stated in Phil 2:13, “God is at work within you to will and to do his good pleasure.” This process of on-going transformation will require personal, parochial and diocesan conversion. Not only will it necessitate a willingness to make sacrifices, it will also require great courage and boldness. We can conclude with these sobering words, “If the parish does not exude that spiritual dynamic of evangelization, it runs the risk of becoming self-referential and fossilised, offering experiences that are devoid of evangelical flavour and missionary drive, of interest only to small groups.”¹¹

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¹⁰ Par 85 of *Go Make Disciples* (American Bishops Conference 2002).

¹¹ Par 17 of the Instruction, “The pastoral conversion of the parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church.”