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INCARNATIONAL EVANGELIZATION

THE ART OF ACCOMPANIMENT

Optional *Lectio Divina* Prayer

1. Read Matthew 9:10–13.
2. Meditate on the words.
3. Speak to Christ about this passage.
4. Rest and listen in God's presence.
5. Discuss together.

As a young priest, Fr. Karol Wojtyła lived in troubled times.

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His native Poland had been taken over, first by the Nazis and then later by the Soviet-influenced Communists. As his people struggled to live under the Communist regime, laws were put into effect to limit the work of the Church, especially priests. The young people of the time often found themselves lost amid the chaos.

As a good pastor, Fr. Wojtyła went out to his people. He didn't simply schedule talks at a parish and wait for people to come to him; he went out and got involved in their lives. He planned outdoor excursions involving kayaking, camping, hiking, and skiing. He entered the lives of the young people who joined him, getting to know their hopes, dreams, and fears, how they lived their friendships, their struggles in dating relationships, how they made moral choices. He truly shared life with them. They sang. They laughed. They told jokes. They recited poetry.

Fr. Wojtyła was a master of "accompaniment," walking with people amid their daily joys and struggles and witnessing Christ's love to them. He said that God called him "to live with people, everywhere to be with them, in everything but sin."[1] One friend said of him, "We felt that we could discuss anything with him; we could talk about absolutely anything."[2] Others said that he "had mastered the art of listening," that he "was always interested" and that he "always had time."[3] Another simply said, "He lived our problems."[4]

After years of serving as a priest and investing deeply in his friends, Fr. Wojtyła eventually became a bishop, then a cardinal — and then he was elected pope. Many of his friends wondered whether this new responsibility would destroy their friendship. One of them lamented, "We've lost [him]."[5] Only a little while later, however, they found themselves invited to the Vatican. Each year, even with his strenuous schedule as pope, he made time for them in Rome. Just hours before he died, he sent one last message to these same old friends. He loved and cared for these men and women. Being with them wasn't part of his job, a program he was working on, or a task

> *Everywhere to be with them, in everything but sin.*
>
> *— Pope St. John Paul II*

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to be completed. He genuinely loved these people and invested his life in them.

The men and women in whom Fr. Wojtyła invested were changed. Some became priests and religious. Others committed themselves to holiness in marriage. All of them lived their Christian lives more faithfully because of his influence. Fr. Wojtyła, now known as Pope St. John Paul II, was a great evangelist — not just as a pope who preached to millions throughout the world, but as a man who went out and invested his life deeply in the people he served in Kraków.

DISCUSS

What stands out to you about the way that Pope St. John Paul II evangelized? How does his example challenge you? How does it encourage you?

INCARNATIONAL EVANGELIZATION

Pope St. John Paull II evangelized by going out, getting involved in people's lives, and sharing his own life with them — a practice that can be called "incarnational evangelization."

Incarnational evangelization is the model of how God evangelized. God didn't stay in heaven waiting for us to find him; he entered our world and sought us out. He came down from heaven, took on

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human flesh and became like us in all things except sin. He entered our world so that we might one day enter his. This is how God evangelized us.

Jesus also modeled this concept throughout his public ministry. He didn't wait in a synagogue for people to come to him; Jesus went out and built relationships with people by sharing meals with them, conversing with them, praying with them, and hanging out with them. His life revolved around his friendships with people: fishermen, Jewish leaders, tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. Jesus calls us to imitate his way of evangelization, to go out to others in the same way he did.

We can also see this principle of incarnational evangelization in the life of St. Paul. During his missionary journeys, while ministering to the people in Thessalonica, Greece, he was willing to give everything of himself so that the people would be able to accept the Gospel. St. Paul sums this up in 1 Thessalonians 2:8: "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us." He didn't only go around preaching to large audiences and giving talks. He invested himself in people's lives and invited them not only to listen to his message, but also to imitate his way of living — and we are called to do the same.

DISCUSS

What might it look like to "share our very selves," as St. Paul talks about? What do you think the result would be if we just tried to give people the Gospel but not share life with them? Why?

LIVING INCARNATIONAL EVANGELIZATION

How can we begin to live out this model of incarnational evangelization in our lives? Let's discuss a few keys for embracing this important missionary practice.

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An Incarnational Heart

One of the first things we need to have to live out incarnational evangelization is what can be called an "incarnational heart" — a heart that yearns, that has a pressing desire, to go out to the peripheries and enter into the lives of those who do not know the Lord. Evangelization can't simply be an obligation. Jesus didn't choose to enter this world because he felt *obliged* to do so or because it was his job, something to check off his list. He was driven by love: love for souls, love for the lost, love especially for those who have no one to love them.

We need to have this same incarnational heart for the lost — a longing to go out to them, to meet them, to share the love of Christ with them. Like Jesus, our desire should be for "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tm 2:4). Do our hearts ache for people who don't yet know God in a deep, personal way? Like Christ, true disciples desire to befriend the lost, even in their brokenness.

I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

— 1 Corinthians 9:22

But how can we develop an incarnational heart if we don't already possess it? Here are two suggestions: First, remember what God has done in your own life — how he changed you, healed you, and saved you. When we watch a great movie or eat at a great restaurant, we often tell people about it. How much more then should we share the greatest blessing in our life, the love of Jesus Christ? Like the first apostles, we should be saying, "we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

Secondly, we need to develop an *eternal perspective* — that is, understanding our life and the lives of others in light of eternity. In the end, every person will either be in heaven with God or lost without him forever. This changes how we think about our daily lives. When we recognize that life is short and that worldly honors, comforts, pleasures, and successes are as nothing compared to knowing Christ Jesus (Phil 3:8), then we are primed to see the work of evangelization as more than

simply a duty or an obligation. It becomes an earnest desire, welling up within us and inspiring us to bring others to Christ, motivating us to reach out to those who do not yet know Christ, even when it's hard or uncomfortable.

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Go Out

Another key to living incarnational evangelization effectively is this: We need to be willing to *go out* and meet people in the midst of their ordinary, daily lives. We need to be willing to hang out where they hang out, to visit their house, to go to their favorite events, to enter their world. As Pope Francis exhorted, "The word of Christ wants to reach all people, in particular those who live in the peripheries of existence. … We are called to go, to come out from behind our fences and, with zealous hearts, to bring to all the mercy, the tenderness, the friendship of God: this is a job that pertains to everyone."[6] Incarnational evangelization, therefore, requires that we go out to those on the margins, specifically those who are lost and have not yet accepted the Gospel.

The call to go out was Jesus' last command to his apostles. He didn't tell them to wait in Jerusalem for people to come to them, join their programs, attend their meetings, or sign up for their Bible studies. He told them to *go out* to the world: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). Like the apostles, we shouldn't wait at our homes, the parish, or the campus ministry center and hope people will come to us and seek us out. We must go out to them. We must get involved in their lives, take an interest in their activities, and hang out where they hang out. The Gospel is not a "come to me" Gospel. It is a "go" Gospel. It is a Gospel that is meant to go out.

Sometimes, however, it can be tempting to settle for "Jacuzzi" Christianity. Have you ever sat in a warm Jacuzzi, enjoying time with friends, yet dreading the moment when you have to get out and allow the cold air to whip against your wet skin? Something similar can happen in the Christian life. We can get

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so comfortable in our Christian community that we become hesitant to go out to the cold, hurting, and broken world. Instead, God calls us out of our Jacuzzi. He calls us out of our comfortable Catholic bubble to invite others to experience the same joy that we have found in Jesus Christ.

Even the apostles faced this temptation to remain comfortable instead of going out. At the Transfiguration, Peter wanted to build tents and remain on the mountain instead of continuing to Jerusalem where Jesus would suffer. But Jesus leads him back down the mountain. He knows that Peter and the apostles can't simply sit back and remain comfortable. Jesus must continue his mission to the cross and teach his disciples to do the same. Going out, therefore, isn't simply "the FOCUS way" or the way for some; it is *the* way. Every disciple of Jesus is called to go out on mission.

Investing Outside of Formal Settings

Third, after going out to meet people, we need to share life with them and accompany them. On this point, Pope Francis emphasizes, "We need a Church capable of walking at people's sides, of doing more than simply listening to them; a Church which accompanies them on their journey."[7] Evangelization is not simply speaking from a stage, leading a Bible study or faith formation program, or getting together regularly with others for a discipleship meeting. We are called to share our lives with one another: to eat meals together, to hang out on the

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weekends, to share common interests (including nonreligious ones), and to become part of one another's lives. In sum, we're called to live authentic friendship with the people we serve. It's often when we share life with people outside of formal meetings and faith formation settings that the seeds of faith take deeper root in their souls. All of this helps in sharing the Gospel and inviting people into a deeper encounter with Christ.

Will we invest ourselves personally by giving people not only the Gospel but also our very lives? Will we share life with the people God has entrusted to our care? Will we love them enough to spend time with them outside of Bible study or formal discipleship sessions? Or will we treat them like projects and just schedule meetings?

We should be so willing to get involved in others' lives that we even engage in activities that aren't our preference. If someone loves hiking but we prefer to stay indoors, we'll go hiking. If someone prefers to talk and get coffee, we'll go get coffee. Maybe it's even sacrificing our time and energy. Whatever it might be, we must strive to say with St. Paul, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22).

DISCUSS

How do you need to grow in having an "incarnational heart"? Are you going out or are you living in the Christian Jacuzzi? Are you willing to "become all things to all people" for the sake of Christ and the Gospel?

TAKE ACTION

Incarnational evangelization can look very different depending on the people to whom you are reaching out. Take some time to reflect on the interests of the people in your life. What do they like? Where

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do they spend their time? What is important to them? How could you enter their lives?

Next, take a minute to write down the names of people in your life. Feel free to use the Prayer and Accompaniment Chart on pg. 171. This resource can help you keep track of the people in your life and discern how you can lead them closer to Christ. Try not to skip anyone, then take a little bit of time to pray about those people God might be asking you to reach out to. Additionally, brainstorm ways that you might be able to share life with these people. Discuss your ideas together and come up with a plan for beginning to live out incarnational evangelization.

KEY CONCEPTS

Incarnational evangelization is the model of how God evangelized. Just as God entered our world, we too must enter other people's lives and meet them where they are to bring them the Gospel.

"Go" Gospel vs. "Come to Me" Gospel: We must go out to share the Gospel. We can't wait for others to come to us. The Gospel is not a "come to me" Gospel. It is a "go" Gospel.[8]

Avoid Jacuzzi Christianity: We must get out of our comfortable Christian community and share God's love with the cold, hurting and broken world.

1 Thessalonians 2:8: "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Notes

Witness to Hope by George Weigel, Ch. 3: "'Call Me Wujek': To Be a Priest"

Evangelii Gaudium, an apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis, Ch. 1: "The Church's Missionary Transformation"

SLS20 talk on focusequip.org: "Authentic Friendship & Incarnational Evangelization" by John Zimmer

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[1] George Weigel, *Witness to Hope* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 104.

[2] Ibid, 105.

[3] Ibid, 102, 105.

[4] Ibid, 107.

[5] Ibid, 256.

[6] Francis, "Homily of His Holiness, Pope Francis, at the Piazza del Plebiscito, Naples (March 21, 2015)," accessed March 30, 2020, Vatican.va.

[7] Francis, "Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil, Address of Pope Francis (July 28, 2013)," accessed March 30, 2020, Vatican.va.

[8] See Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, accessed October 2, 2020, Vatican.va, 20.