Living as Missionary Disciples: Walk the Talk
By Dr. Ansel Augustine

Does this Really Matter?

It matters more than you know. Today’s youth are bombarded by all kinds of information. Whether it comes from television, radio, internet, cellphones, or billboards, our youth take in more “messages” than we did when we were their age. In fact, scientists tell us that the average young person’s brain is programmed to receive information differently than adults of today; thus widening the “generation gap.”

Pastors, youth ministers, catechetical leaders, campus ministers, and any other person trying to engage youth find it more difficult to link youth with their faith. Is this impossible? Not at all, but we are called to meet our people where they are at, just as Jesus and the early disciples did, so that we can teach our young people to be better evangelizers to the world they live in. The blessing in all of this is that we have a perfect model of just how to do this living among us today.

Our Leaders in Faith and Ministry...

One priest said it best when he stated, “Pope Benedict XI represents the head of the church, while Pope Francis represents the heart of the church.” Both popes shared their gifts to make the world a better place. Pope Benedict XVI led the church and shared his great intellect to empower people to understand and take more ownership of their faith. Pope Francis calls the church to its roots and challenges all of us to be a voice for the “voiceless” and to make the poor and marginalized our priority. Simply put, both of these great men of God show us that we are called to use our God-given gifts to help others.

In his Encyclical Letter, Lumen Fidei (The Light of Faith), Pope Francis wrote that we must nourish our faith so that we can illuminate our lives and the world we live in. Our faith calls us to be an active part of the world we live in, not separated from it and only practice our faith with those we go to church with. He writes that being faithful means, that we are, “building in charity, a city based on relationships.” (Lumen Fidei, no.51)

Pope Francis is challenging us to be in the world. This is exactly what it means to be a “missionary disciple.” He continues to tell faithful Catholics that we are called to step
out of our comfort zones, our church walls, neighborhoods, schools, cliques, and communities. We are called to bring the message of Jesus’s love to those around us. In other words, we have talked about it but now we are called to do it. Unfortunately, this is an “all about me” culture, and it is up to us to help the young church to see how their faith is relevant to them. The best way to do this is to show them they were created for the purpose of making the world a better place. This is done by putting their faith into action.

**So...What is this New Evangelization Stuff?**

According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “the New Evangelization calls each of us to **deepen our faith, believe in the Gospel, and go forth to proclaim the Gospel.**” This is what we are called to do as youth workers. Our goal is to help our young people learn more about their faith and go proclaim it.

Unfortunately, we can focus so much on deepening the faith that the “going forth” part is an afterthought. How do we proclaim the Gospel in the digital age? How do we empower our youth to live out church teachings in a world where immediate gratification is the expected norm or where it is acceptable to say or do whatever, or post pictures dressed however, as long as people “like” or “comment positively” on them. Where does our faith fit into all of this? How do we, as youth workers, deal with the problem of improperly catechized parents, and sometimes grandparents, who look at church as another thing to “do” rather than a way to live? Our outlook on how to do ministry must change. By “walking” our faith and not just “talking” it, we are supposed to live it out through love, charity, and actions. As Pope Francis said during his general audiences, “Words without witness are hot air. Words do not suffice.” (Addresses, 5/18/13 and 6/17/13)

**Jesus...The Original Missionary**

The best model for being a missionary is the Son of God himself. He came to be with us and like us so that we could be made right with Him. Being a missionary disciple calls us to be in the world, but not of it, or as Romans 12:2 states, “Do not conform to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing, and perfect will.”
Does this mean we should be separate from the world? Of course not! Just as our faith and Pope Francis continue to tell us, we are called to bring our faith outside of our church walls and into the public arena. At the end of Mass, the priest or deacon says, “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.” At this point we are sent forth to share the good news of the Gospel to all we encounter. This is what Jesus did. This is why St. Paul was so effective. All who are effective in ministry meet people where they are at, but they know that ministry is bigger than their ego or agenda. Ministry is about what God has sent us to do. Jesus knew this.

Here are some scriptural examples of how Jesus kept his focus on his true mission:

- “I can do nothing on my own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” – John 5:30
- “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” – John 6:38
- And Jesus cried out and said, “He who believes in me does not believe in me, but in Him who sent me. And he who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me.” – John 12:44-45
- “For I did not speak on my own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent me has given me commandment, what to say, and what to speak.” – John 12:49
- “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.” - John 13:20
- “For the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received them, and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You did send Me.” – John 17:8
- “As You did send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.” John 17:18
- Jesus therefore said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” – John 20:21

**How to Walk the Talk**

As it was stated earlier, the key aspect of effective ministry is meeting people where they are at. We are called to be in the culture of the world but to be different from the culture. This does not mean to stand in criticism of others for it is not our place to judge, but to challenge the destructive cultural norms by bringing God’s love to those affected by it.

Some critics of our faith say that we do not go out into the communities and serve enough. But this is not true. As many people have pointed out over the years, the biggest secret in...
the Catholic Church is our service to those in need whether it be parish, diocesan, nationally, or internationally based. We do serve others in many ways. We have many organizations that help those in need around the world.

The problem is that some in the pews have become selfish with their faith. In the era of iPods, iPads, iPhones, we have made our faith life about “I” instead of “we.” We are all connected and it is our responsibility to share our faith with those around us, whoever they are. When you are out in public, do people know you are a follower of Christ? Can people see a joy that is in you or do people run from you due to your judgment or criticism of others because they do not “fit in” to our definition of “normal”?

Jesus calls us to be “unselfish” and share our faith with those who are on the fringes or forgotten. The people in the prison need to hear about him. The homeless need to realize their worth by knowing who they are children of God. The orphans, the poor, the vulnerable, those who have left the faith, or those who have never known the faith need to know that they are part of not only a master plan, but the Master’s plan. They are not a mistake or an accident, but that they were created for a greater purpose. For some of us, the fringes or forgotten may be within our family and friends. Nonetheless, we are called to step up and step out in faith to bring God’s love to all.

**Being missionary disciples**

As missionary disciples, we are called to live and act in a way that witnesses to the Gospel. We are called to live in joy. As one of my church mothers used to say, “You attract more bees with honey, baby.” Jesus and Pope Francis remind us that we are called to encounter others. In short, we must meet, talk with, share with, and love in others. We are not called to think of others and their needs abstractly or to theorize what others need, but we are called to put our faith into action; to get into the mess of others’ lives and journey with them. As William J Toms once wrote, “Be careful how you live. You might be the only Bible someone might read.”

This is what being a missionary disciple is about: bringing the faith we love to those who need love most. The concept is simple enough, but we must fight the evils of individualism, apathy, and relativism. When we step out in faith, we will get things that try to distract us. We will be under spiritual attack (Ephesians 6:12), but we must keep
focused on who we are and Whose we are. We must remember that life is not about us, but about what God does through us.

We must live out what Mark 2:17 states, “On hearing this, Jesus said to them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’” Although our churches are filled with healthy and unhealthy folks who need to know Christ’s saving love, we must focus outward on the world that needs to know his love as well. When we go into the world, human nature tends to put people into categories. Our upbringing, way of life, media we are exposed to, prejudices, etc. tend to make assumptions about people around us. This, in and of itself, is sinful because it limits the dignity of the person.

Being a missionary disciple challenges all of these notions. We are challenged to step out of our comfort zones and cliques to commune with others who may not be like us. Although there may be many causes for disagreement, a missionary disciple engages the other person and looks for common ground to have further dialogue.

The main focus of missionary discipleship is to build healthy and holy relationships. At times, this may call us into conflict or situations that make us uncomfortable. We must remember that those are the “risks” that come with “walking the talk.” We must remember that we are not alone and God calls us to not be afraid on this journey because we are doing his will.

In the world of community organizing, the relationship is the most important aspect of the work. When an organizer meets someone, they are called to hear the other person’s story. They find out what is important to that person and what their needs are. After doing this, the organizer shares their own story. In doing so, they find what they share in common and develop a new story together.

Missionary discipleship is about the relationship. We build the relationship with others so that we can help others build their relationship with Jesus. Missionary discipleship is not just about sharing the story of what Jesus has done in our lives with a world that needs hope. We are supposed to listen to one another’s story. We are called to build that trust with the other person to discover where they are lost, hurt, or seeking and to fill those areas with the love, hope, and joy that a life in Christ brings.
5 Things to Remember about Being a Missionary Disciple:

1. **Relationship > Program**: We are called to connect people with Jesus, not to “fit” into our model of ministry.

2. **Be Open To Transformation**: Some of the most profound encounters occur when we have an open mind. Get ready to encounter Jesus in new ways when you enter a setting. Be open to new ideas and new ways of thinking.

3. **It’s Not About You**: As you step into ministry remember that God is in control and that it is not about you, but about what God does through you to help others grow closer to Him.

4. **Stretch Yourself**: Remember that Jesus is everywhere already. Look for ways to connect others with the good things that already exist within themselves. Avoid the “savior mentality” of knowing everything and that there is only one way to be a follower of Christ.

5. **Pray JOYFULLY**: Share the “Good News” with joy. Pray unceasingly that you may have a joyful heart as you are a missionary disciple. Remember people want to be loved not condemned so bring the message with joyful spirit.

5 Things to Keep in Mind When Trying to Reach Today’s Youth:

1. **Meet Them Where They Are At**: We are always called to minister as Jesus did. He was effective in His ministry because He “got down on peoples’ levels.” When working with youth, this does not mean to act juvenile or immature. This means loving them in their mess, trying to understand their mess, and helping to bring them to where God wants them to be. We are called to “journey with them” as St. John Paul II said at World Youth Day 1993 in Denver, CO.

2. **Affirm Before Criticizing**: This is one that many adults struggle with. Some adults are so focused on “fixing” the next generation that they sometimes miss the blessing that the next generation brings. We have a “five times” rule in my ministry program that states “You must affirm a person at least five times before you have the right to criticize them one time.” Our young people are faced with negative stereotypes (e.g. body image, economic situation, etc.) all day via media images. Shouldn’t the church be a place where they can be built up rather than torn down? Of course it should also be a place where they can be challenged to grow in a loving way.

3. **Don’t Be Afraid To Let Them Lead In Their Way**: In this new era of rapid technological change, unless you are an expert techie, you need the assistance of someone else to learn how to use the new phone app or piece of equipment. Some of our young people are experts in this field. Also, they have the ability to lead in
their own unique way that usually reaches their peers better than we ever could.
Don’t be scared, because you might learn something.

4. **Help Them Turn Their “Mess” Into a Message**: Great youth leaders aren’t afraid to meet their young people in their “mess.” None of us is perfect, and many of us have made mistakes that we were ashamed of. Help the youth you work with to see that everything they are going through (relationship issues, school trouble, health scares, faith issues, etc.) are connected to God’s ultimate plan, and His love, for them; especially in times when life doesn’t make sense. Help them mold and strengthen their faith through these events.

5. **PRAY! PRAY! PRAY!**: None of us are experts. Working with youth is challenging. Demands are high and resources are slim. Other church folks think all youth ministry is just fun and games without realizing that most real youth ministry happens before and after a meeting or event occurs. We must remember that these youth are in our care for only a certain period of time. They are ultimately God’s children and our role is to bring them closer to Him. It is this reason that we will be engaged in our own “spiritual warfare” (Ephesians 6:10-20). We must stand true to who we are and Whose we are as Children of God knowing that ultimately He is in control, so anything we face personally or that any young person we are ministering with may be facing is given to God through prayer so that the correct advice and direction is given.

In conclusion, a joyful missionary disciple is one who is about helping others see the joy and goodness that they already have in themselves as someone “made in the image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:27). It is not about just saying the right things, but also doing the right things. This is what it means to be a true missionary disciple in today’s world – we are called to walk the talk. So strap up your sandals, tighten your shoelaces, or slide on your boots because there is work to do!
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**Additional Resources**
