

Upper Room Conference

Mary Pattison Chapel

18 September 2021

Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord Jesus Christ:

Welcome

What a joy it is for us to be gathered together, under the heavenly guidance of Mary and the Apostles, for our Third Upper Room Conference.

Two years ago at this event, 500 of the faithful – clergy, consecrated women and men, and laity – signed a letter to Pope Francis pledging to dedicate themselves with renewed ardor to the Church’s mission of evangelization. An enlarged copy of all the signatures from that letter hangs in the John Paul II Pastoral Centre as a constant reminder of our joint commitment to set the Lower Mainland ablaze with a bold and creative missionary initiative.

The Proclaim Movement launched at that Conference has been on the forefront of providing pastoral tools that are indispensable if we are to be holy disciples and effective missionaries. Under the direction of Eric Chow, working with a fantastic team of gifted collaborators, Proclaim has awakened in hundreds of parishioners an awareness of their call to live out in a practical way their identity as missionary disciples. They provide training, especially in Alpha and Discovery, evangelization tools that have been extraordinarily successful in our Archdiocese, but they also encourage disciples to use other proven evangelization tools. They offer missionary training in the areas of invitation, Spirit-led boldness, building

relationships, and accompaniment. We are all grateful that so many of these initiatives went ahead full speed, despite the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Now that a return to “normalcy” is on the horizon, my prayer for today is that an even greater number of laity and clergy, working together as those responsible for proclaiming the Good News, will transform our parishes into communities of robust evangelization.¹ We can never forget that the Church “exists – that means our parishes exist – in order to evangelize.”²

The Time Is Now

I believe that the Risen Lord himself has given us this calling – in this time and in this place. I recognize that many of our contemporaries view the Church, especially her leadership, with suspicion and distrust. The clergy sexual abuse scandals and the heartbreaking disclosure of unmarked graves at Indian Residential Schools could tempt us to batten down the hatches, make it through the storm, and just hope for better days. Although this is a time for reflection and healing, it is not the time to recoil from the Great Commission the Lord has given each of us at our Baptism: to go forth and “make disciples” (Mt 28:19).

Our metropolis, that of the Lower Mainland, is mission territory.

¹ Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 27.

² St. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.

Here 40% of the population report that they have no religion and here, in our Archdiocese, more than 50% of baptized Catholics no longer take part regularly in the Church's sacramental life. Occasions for evangelization are everywhere.

The Church, our Church here in the Archdiocese of Vancouver, therefore has a vocation, a supernatural calling given to us by the Lord. Now is the time to focus our pastoral efforts in such a way that they will “be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world.”³ Everything we do in our parishes, schools, associations, ministries, and movements should be put into “a missionary key,”⁴ leaving models of maintenance behind us.

The new evangelization that has been launched is an “opportunity,” or more properly a “grace,” for the Church. It must first of all focus on what constitutes the purpose of its existence and its mission, that is, the question of Jesus Christ and of the God of Jesus Christ, the question of belief. Benedict XVI affirms that the evangelizing mission of the Church today “has been particularly challenged by an abandonment of the faith – a phenomenon progressively more manifest in societies and cultures that for centuries seemed to be permeated by the Gospel.”⁵ That would be us.

³ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 27.

⁴ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 34.

⁵ Benedict XVI, In the apostolic letter in which he created the new Pontifical

End of Christendom: Blessing in Disguise?

Some forty years ago, the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge whose book *Something Beautiful for God* put Mother Teresa on the world stage, wrote that he saw the up-until-then social acceptance of Christianity as “sinking” in the Western world. Why? Because of the Church was being compromised by its association with what he called “Christendom;” that is, the worldly structure of the faith that, unlike the faith itself, is “constructed by men,” and therefore perishable.

In the era of Christendom – our situation in Canada until perhaps fifty years ago – the culture – its laws and generally accepted moral principles were more or less aligned to Christian truths. Great institutional achievements naturally emerged from this culture: Catholic hospitals, universities, cathedrals. The pastoral emphasis was on maintaining and strengthening this status quo, which upheld or at least didn’t undermine Christian beliefs.

Evangelization was active, yes – but to foreign lands, such as those in Africa, where, in the last hundred years, the growth of the Church has been phenomenal. There was no talk of evangelization on the home front.

Rise of Secularization

Today, we are, unfortunately, no longer living in a world shaped by Christianity. People no longer view the world through a lens shaped by

Christ. Modern men and women don't know who God is, what it means to be human, and what true love is.

Our current culture is characterized by secularization; that is a culture in which God tends more and more to disappear from the public consciousness. Sometimes, too, we talk about an “eclipse of the sense of God,” a phrase made popular by Benedict XVI: “we see a certain ‘eclipse of God’ taking place, a kind of amnesia which, albeit not an outright rejection of Christianity, is nonetheless a denial of the treasure of our faith, a denial that could lead to the loss of our deepest identity.”⁶

“A secularized society is a society that is not open to the transcendent, to God. It is a society where the option for the transcendent, for God, becomes a question of choice. Religion is pushed into the sphere of private choices.”⁷ You can see the problem for evangelizers. The reaction to them in this context is basically, “my religion is none of your business; just leave me alone.”

In fact, today, to practice one's Catholic faith is seen as merely a personal option, another lifestyle choice. It is no longer an integral component of belonging to a particular culture or a particular nation. We used to talk about Irish or Italian Catholicism, assuming that nearly

⁶ Benedict XVI, Message for the 2011 World Youth Day, 1.

⁷ Benedict XVI, Address to German Bishops (10 November 2006).

everyone was baptized. That's no longer the case. As has been said many times already, we are moving "from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."⁸

Secular culture no longer pretends to give an account of reality but rather becomes a set of beliefs that help people deal with the stress of existence. God, then, if personal at all, takes on the role of a therapist, not the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, who guides his people by his providence.

Another way of looking at the men and women who are no longer practicing is to say that they are, in fact, *practical* atheists; that is, they don't deny God's existence but, for them, God just doesn't really matter. He makes no difference to how they live their lives.

Another issue that fills social media and everyday conversation and that affects many baptized Catholics is the appeal they make to what they falsely believe to be a conflict between religion and modern science on subjects such as evolution. Most of us mistakenly presume that, because this is not a theological issue and has been laid to rest, it is not an issue for Catholics generally. However, it *is* an issue for many.⁹

⁸ Charles Taylor.

⁹ Cf. John C. Gallagher, *A New Dawn, or the Fading of the Light?* (Bloomington: Westbow Press, 2019), 17.

When we look around us – and closely to our family, friends, colleagues, co-workers, and neighbours – we also notice that some of those who are Catholics identify with the Church and her traditions – practicing – but their reasons are shallow. They are more like “fans” of Jesus and the Church than his disciples. They do so out of loyalty, to maintain the peace in the family, out of inertia or because they find comfort in the trappings of religion, even if conviction and discipleship are absent. Others are attached to Jesus, but their faith in the Church has been shaken, and so they may no longer participate in the Eucharist and some may even join non-Catholic denominations. This is a not insignificant number of Catholics to whom the Proclaim Movement is directed.¹⁰

In light of the forces that influence people today, we have these new factors to confront and a new solution to find if we are to proclaim the Gospel with power.

Clearly, in the face of such a variety of different possible subjects of evangelization there is no one method and approach that will meet all needs. We need to be aware of the various states of mind of the person to whom we address the word. We should diagnose before we prescribe.¹¹

¹⁰ Cf. John C. Gallagher, *A New Dawn, or the Fading of the Light?* (Bloomington: Westbow Press, 2019), 18-20.

¹¹ John C. Gallagher, *A New Dawn, or the Fading of the Light?* (Bloomington:

I believe that our problem as evangelizers is that many of us still have a mindset largely fashioned by what has been called the “Christendom mode” of being the Church. Without any ill will on our part, this often unconscious attitude, makes us rely on outmoded strategies for proclamation that were devised for a religious culture that is no longer present. This way of seeing the Church’s mission, makes us ineffective in evangelizing the current culture. As Monsignor James Shea pointed out in his important, and very readable, book, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*, “institutional and ecclesiastical strategies that are suited to Christendom do not work well in an apostolic setting”¹²

So, What Do We Do Today?

Before addressing specific pastoral strategies, the first thing needed, therefore, is a conversion of attitude, to acquire a new way of seeing the world; really, to see it as it is, with all the influences that it brings to bear on those whom we are trying to reach.

So, what can we do? In order to be faithful to our mission in today’s world, we must continually return to the New Testament. “When Christianity first spread it followed the example of Judaism in resisting

Westbow Press, 2019), 22.

¹² James P. Shea, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age* (Bismarck: University of Mary Press, 2020), 31.

integration into prevailing society.”¹³ This means that we must adapt the essential content of the witness of Jesus and the Apostles to our own times: the *kerygma* – what is most essential – and the style of proclamation.

When we look at Scripture, we see that it reveals that the Apostles, following Jesus’ example, used various approaches in bearing witness, depending on the context they found themselves in.

In light of the adaptability shown in the Apostolic age, the new situation of the faith in our secularized environment in British Columbia pushes us to transform our traditional ways of defining the message, the agents, and the approaches to evangelization. In a nutshell, this is what we have to do. Thinking of those who have distanced themselves from the Church, we can affirm that “the Church’s evangelizing action . . . must constantly seek the proper means and language for presenting, or re-presenting, to them God’s revelation and faith in Jesus Christ.”¹⁴

Accounting for the Hope within Us

This task can seem daunting, because it *is* daunting. Here is the place to remember a couple of truths that we already know well. The founder of Christianity was Jesus Christ, who promised to build the Church on the foundation of Peter’s faith, a Church which would prevail over the assaults

¹³ John C. Gallagher, *A New Dawn, or the Fading of the Light?* (Bloomington: Westbow Press, 2019), 67.

¹⁴ St. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 56.

of hell (cf. Mt 16:18-19). The founder of our lost Christendom was Constantine, a Roman Emperor in the early fourth century. Therefore it's not real Christianity that today is floundering, but the Christendom already condemned by Jesus when he announced that his Kingdom was not of this world (cf. Jn 18:36).

We can, therefore, reject – or at least take with a grain of salt – those social analyses that forecast the end of Christianity. Such methods fail to see that the Church is a spiritual reality with its roots in Heaven. “What sociological survey could have predicted the conversion of an ancient and sophisticated civilization at the hands of a small group of uneducated laborers? What numerical analysis could have surmised the explosion of the monastic movement? Or the conversion of all the pagan peoples of Europe? Or the appearance of a St. Francis and his thousands of followers in a few short years?”¹⁵

Ultimately, we are to seize the adventure of working with the Holy Spirit to live and share the saving message given to us by Jesus Christ. We just have to understand that we're living in a new apostolic age, to trust that the Holy Spirit is at work, and as St. Paul says, the more that evil is present, “the more grace abounds” (Rom 5:20).

We are, then, in a new apostolic era, and we must engage this new

¹⁵ James P. Shea, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age* (Bismarck: University of Mary Press, 2020).

era is a new way, leaning on the eternal, unchanging, and yet ever new Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Pope Francis's Call to a Missionary Conversion

No one has been more forceful about engaging our present era with the Gospel than our Holy Father. Building on the teaching of his two saintly predecessors, Paul VI and John Paul II, in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis called for the “reform of the Church in her missionary outreach” (n. 17). A “pastoral and missionary conversion” (n. 25), he stated, is needed “on every level” (n. 27) of the Church’s life. Although he didn’t invoke the Christendom-Apostolic Age paradigm, he did insist that we “cannot leave things as they presently are” (n. 25), if the Church is to be faithful to her mission. That’s why we have to “put all things in a missionary key” (n. 34), so that “missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity” (n. 15).

This missionary reform is needed because the reality of how the Church is living does not match its ideal (cf. n. 26). In brief, the Pope urges us to become Spirit-filled missionary disciples. Furthermore, we have to come to grips with the fact that there are customs in the Church – habits of thought, practices, attitudes, and ecclesial structures – that, he says, “can hamper efforts at evangelization” (n. 26). The Pope does not describe these in detail, but he alerts us to the fact that the Church cannot stand still, and rest on her laurels that belong to a different, even if praiseworthy, time. To

be true to her calling, the Church must change the way she proclaims the Gospel.

This missionary transformation of attitude and strategies calls for more and more of the baptized to live a more missionary form of being a Catholic. This is what the Proclaim Movement has been striving to do: to equip you – the faithful – to be missionary disciples, for whom missionary activity is intrinsic to their very being and identity. “My friends,” he says to us, “the Lord needs you! Today too, he is calling each of you to follow him in his Church and to be missionaries. The Lord is calling you today! . . . Listen to what he is saying to you in your heart.”¹⁶

To engage in mission means “going forth,” coming out of ourselves and drawing near to others. It means closeness or encounter. Proclaim has been working to equip disciples to implement the Holy Father’s insistence that “one cannot evangelize without closeness.”¹⁷ This was his point when he famously told us pastors to be “shepherds with the smell of the sheep.”¹⁸ But this admonition, I think, is for every missionary disciple. We need to be close to people. The whole point of the Proclaim Movement is

¹⁶ Francis, Address at the Vigil for World Youth Day, Rio de Janeiro (27 July 2013).

¹⁷ Francis, Address to the Rectors and Students of the Pontifical Colleges and Residences of Rome (12 May 2014).

¹⁸ Francis, Homily at Chrism Mass (28 March 2013).

to be “outward bound.” Our natural tendency is to be safe and comfortable with our friends and associates. Missionary disciples, on the other hand, extend themselves outward to others in a significant way.

Trust: God Can Do It: Light shines in the darkness

As we navigate our increasingly secular culture, we also discover new and exciting opportunities for our apostolic mission. It’s in these times of the statistical decline of the faith that we must look again at how the early Apostles evangelized and how the early Church spread the Gospel. The Lord gave the Apostles the task of “making disciples” of the whole world (cf. Mt 28:19), so how did they do it? Looking at Scripture, we can see that they put their complete trust in Jesus. Our strength is in him and in the power of the Holy Spirit working through us. Although the Church of Christendom has largely passed away, we must believe that the faith will still be passed on, if we allow Jesus Christ to transform our hearts, minds, and souls.

Everyone on Board

A superficial reading of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles can give the impression that proclaiming the Gospel and awakening faith in others is a ministry that Jesus gave only to his Apostles. If this understanding is transferred to our own context, it seems to suggest that it is their Successors, Bishops, priests, and some lay people who have been specially designated for this mission.

You’re at this Conference because you know this is not so. Every

Christian is called to be a witness, that is, a missionary in the world in which they live. The mission is not a ministry reserved to a few. Each and every believer, in his or her own way, is called to bear witness to Jesus Christ and the rich and full life that is given in him. “In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization.”¹⁹

With this perspective, let’s look at the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. During his earthly life, Jesus sent not only the Twelve on mission (cf. Lk 9:1-6) but he also “appointed seventy-two others whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit,” giving them a missionary mandate (Lk 10:1). These seventy-two disciples were likely all those he had gathered up to that point or at least all those who were disposed to commit themselves seriously to follow him. In a word, Jesus sent every disciple – every man and woman on mission.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the book dedicated to the Church’s initial mission, Luke reports the coming of the Spirit on the disciples, so that they would be his witnesses, his missionaries. The model of the first church in the Acts of the Apostles, manifested in the Upper Room, clearly teaches that all those who become Christian receive the Spirit of Pentecost, in order to bear witness to Jesus Christ and his Gospel in the world. To be Christian is to be a witness, to be a missionary. Pope Francis, with

¹⁹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 119.

characteristic directness, puts it this way, probably thinking of those who hang back or think themselves as not up to the challenge:

The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus.²⁰

Is Evangelization the Same as Proclamation?

I think some people are hesitant about becoming personally involved in evangelization and Proclaim because they equate evangelization with proclamation. Such equivalence, however, is certainly not always the case.

An evangelization centered on Jesus Christ does not necessarily imply a direct and immediate proclamation of the Good News. Certainly all evangelizing initiatives must be aimed at proclamation, as St. John Paul II wrote in *Redemptoris Missio*: "All forms of missionary activity are directed to this proclamation."²¹ How soon in the encounter between persons this "directness" must take place the Pope did not specify. Francis

²⁰ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.

²¹ St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 44.

reinterprets this teaching by broadening the meaning of the word “proclamation.” He says: “You are called, first of all, to proclaim, with your life even before . . . words, the reality of God: to speak God.”²² “Speaking about God, bringing the message of God’s love and salvation in Jesus Christ to men is the duty of all the baptized. And this duty involves, not only speaking with words, but in all one’s actions and way of doing things. Our whole being should speak of God, even in the ordinary things.”²³ For Francis, proclamation is witness because actions always speak louder than words. For us, this means that Proclaim is for everyone.

Where Are You Being Sent?

It’s natural to ask the question, “If being a missionary is someone who is ‘sent out,’ where am I being sent to?” Pope Francis talks a lot about going out to the “peripheries.” This is often – and rightly – understood to mean those on the outskirts of society: the poor, the abandoned, the marginalized. But he has in mind a wider meaning of “periphery” other than the geographical. Anyone who is far from Jesus Christ is on the “periphery.” distanced from the One who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6).

Where are these people? Not usually in our pews and parish halls.

²² Francis, Address on the Occasion of the Jubilee of the Consecrated Life (1 February 2016).

²³ Francis, Address to the Bishops of Austria (30 January 2014).

Because only a few on the periphery take the initiative to come to the Church, we must go out to them. As disciples, dear friends, you have the relationships, the influence, the keys to the doors of those who do not yet know Christ. These are the places where you are sent. These peripheries are not at all far from your home or your work or your play.

In this Year of the Family, let's recall that the family is a privileged place for evangelization and the living transmission of the faith. Much work needs to be done to fulfill in our concrete circumstances what St. John Paul wrote about the family's vocation: "The Christian family, in fact, is the first community called to announce the Gospel to the human person during growth and to bring him or her, through a progressive education and catechesis, to full human and Christian maturity."²⁴

The missionary dimension of the lay vocation, in particular the witness of Catholic families and Catholic homes, has never been more important. As the domestic Church assumes its role as a missionary Church, it will bear abundant fruit.

Two Virtues for Going Forth: Hope and Humility

I would like to conclude by drawing your attention to two virtues that, I believe, are particularly necessary to cultivate if you are to be effective missionary disciples: hope and humility. Let me just say a few words about each of them. These are four signs of spiritual health each of

²⁴ St. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 2.

us can reflect upon to gauge our individual missionary condition.

1. Hope

A spiritual ailment that undermines missionary motivation is despair or lack of hope.

Hope matters to the missionary disciple because in mission we seek to change peoples' lives for the better. But change or conversion to Jesus rarely comes easily. You know how many difficulties and challenges you have encountered, tempting you to break your resolve. We need hope to weather on. Looking at the Church, Pope Francis sees a good deal of the pessimism that, mixed with indifference, can easily lead people to say, "The world won't change, so what's the use of trying?" Sometimes this pessimism can pass itself off as a kind of realism, which only the naive fail to see.

Nonetheless, a living faith leads us to believe that Jesus' Resurrection truly gives Christians hope that every evil can be overcome. He calls us to live out this hope and to struggle forward. As Francis puts it, "Jesus is not one who adapts to the world, tolerating in it the persistence of death, sadness, hatred, the moral destruction of people. . . . Our God is not inert, but our God . . . is a dreamer: he dreams of the transformation of the world."²⁵

²⁵ Francis, General Audience (17 May 2017).

2. Humility

A second spiritual ailment of the Church that needs treatment if we are to proclaim Jesus is pride or self-satisfaction. To move to a more missionary way of life necessarily requires ongoing conversion and constant change. We can easily tell ourselves that we are already good enough, and so we don't need to grow or change our ways. Pride blinds us to our faults and makes us refuse to budge in our ways. Pride is the great obstacle to mission because it is the great obstacle to conversion of any kind.

To treat this ailment, the wise spiritual doctors prescribe humility. We need the humility that recognizes that we are always sinners in need of God's mercy; that we are never spiritually self-sufficient; that we never gain salvation through our own efforts; that we always need God. And if we recognize all this, we are always open to change and to receiving God's grace, which prompts us to love others more.

Experiencing God's mercy renders us open to be missionaries of his mercy and understanding to others. We are then able to walk the humble path of Jesus, who did not put himself above others but made himself a servant to all (cf. Mk 10:45). Only a truly humble person can be effective in proclaiming the Good News. Your witness to the Lord is meant to edify others and not to serve as path to self-promotion.

Do Not Be Afraid, but Be Bold

Lastly, if you are to bear fruit as a missionary disciple you must be obedient to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit within you. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, it is evident that the Holy Spirit was the initiator, guide, and driving force of the early Church's evangelizing mission (cf. Acts 4:31; 8:26-29, 39-40; 10:19; 13:1-12 15:28; 16:6-10).

As the first evangelization could not have taken place without the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, so the Proclaim Movement depends upon a continual outpouring of the same Holy Spirit.

Let's pray fervently, then, that the Spirit will stir up in us a fresh boldness in proclaiming the Gospel, even if there is a cost to our discipleship. The boldness of the early Christians was not a human personality trait. Nor is it for us. Our boldness will be the fruit of our intimate union and relationship with Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 4:13) and our docility to the work of the Holy Spirit at work within us. With the intercession and guidance of the Blessed Virgin Mary may we joyfully proclaim the salvation found in Jesus, her Son.

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