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Pope Francis is urging us to take up the challenge—and gladness—of being a missionary disciple.

One point the pope makes in *Evangelii Gaudium* is that what attracts others to Christ (and some of them to religious life) is true love for God and neighbor. Pictured here is Father Mike Bassano, M.M. providing support to a man with AIDS.

“The Joy of the Gospel” has messages for us

By SISTER THERESA RICKARD, O.P.



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POPE FRANCIS' APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION on the new evangelization, *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of Gospel”), has implications for religious life today. It challenges all pastoral workers, and particularly consecrated women and men, to be joy-filled missionary disciples. This document is a new chapter in evangelization, and in it, Pope Francis calls us to be more missionary, merciful, bold, and creative—to be bridge builders and witnesses to the love of God. The pope exhorts us to have the courage to transform not only our personal lives but also the systems and structures that have supported our religious communities, parishes, institutions, and even and most especially the Vatican or curia (32).

The pope calls this “pastoral conversion.” Some of these structures and systems are barely working; some are completely broken and are no longer in the place of service. In this article my concern is for the pastoral conversion of religious life as a “life form” and the recommitment of religious to

missionary discipleship. We can't transform religious life by going back but by moving forward and creating a new way in response to the signs of our time in fidelity to the Gospel and our particular charisms.

Pope Francis' invitation to pastoral workers to be selfless, joyful, and hope-filled has a special meaning for consecrated women and men. His exhortation includes both the pastoral and social dimensions of evangelization, calling us to share the Gospel in today's world through word and, more importantly, through the pulpit of our lives—through charitable works, just acts, and social dialogue as a contribution to peace.

Woman at the well

I will begin my reflections by exploring the story of the woman at the well (John 4:1-42). It is the story of one of the earliest women evangelists, the Samaritan woman. She is among the first Christian preachers. She has an encounter with Jesus and immediately goes forth with passion and conviction to share her living encounter with others.

The Samaritan woman lived on the margins of her society, and she encountered Jesus not in a synagogue or in another holy place, but at a well. She came to the well as part of her everyday work routine. We might wonder why she came at noon, the hottest time of the day. Could it be she was ostracized by the other townswomen? Maybe she came at noon because she was sure that no one else would be there. Have you ever done something like that? I have. She must have been surprised and at first not very happy that Jesus was there waiting for her. Much to her dismay, Jesus engaged her in conversation, and as the conversation went deeper her heart slowly softened until she allowed Jesus' compassionate presence to reveal God to her in a new and life-changing way.

Eventually she offered the empty, slightly cracked jar of her life to him and he filled her with the life-healing water of salvation. She came to know him as the Christ—her life was changed, and she went forth empowered to preach the joy of the gospel to the rest of the town. She moved from the well to the town, and the townspeople moved from welcoming her witness story to personally experiencing an encounter with Jesus, and they proclaimed: "We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that Jesus is truly the savior of the world" (John 4:42).

Like the woman at the well, we are called to be evan-

gelizers who preach the gospel with joy—with every part of our being. At its heart the mission of evangelization is inviting another to an encounter with Christ and to embark on the life-long journey of missionary discipleship. The goal of evangelization is not simply to get more people in the pews or more vocations to priesthood and religious life. First and foremost the purpose of evangelization is to make disciples, joy-filled disciples, what Pope Francis names *missionary disciples*. Missionary disciples are women and men fully committed to the Gospel—loving God and loving their neighbor. Is this not the

heart of vocation ministry—calling and forming and sending forth disciples to transform the world through our congregation's or order's particular charism?

What if Jesus stayed in his comfort zone and chose not to venture to the well because it was too hot or because he was too tired or busy? What if Jesus went along with the societal norms of his time and judged that woman unworthy, or worse yet, not worth it? In Jesus' time men did not

talk with women in public, and they especially did not engage women in theological discussion. To make matters worse, she was a Samaritan, unorthodox—she did not have all the doctrine quite right. What if he listened to his well-meaning disciples who were scandalized by his conversation with this woman and reprimanded him as he continued his conversation with her?

The Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus impelled her to take the most important step in her life—to choose to leave her water jar behind. The water jar literally represented life and death. Yet she discovered something more critical to life than even the element of water—eternal life in the company of a God who is all merciful and all loving. Our work as agents of the new evangelization, baptized Christians, missionary disciples, consecrated women and men, and vocation ministers, is to bring others with joy to take that next step.

Pope Francis gave us a modern-day example of our call to be evangelists that for me parallels the story of Jesus and the woman at the well: the example Francis set by washing the feet of those young people at the prison in Rome on his first Holy Thursday as pope. Instead of the traditional 12 priests, he washed, dried, and kissed the feet of 12 young inmates, outcasts who live on the margins of society. He went even farther, daring to wash two young women's feet and the feet of a Muslim. He

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Missionary disciples side with those in need. After Hurricane Katrina, the Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans had to decide whether to leave New Orleans or remain and rebuild. They chose to rebuild. Sister Clare of Assisi, S.S.F. (president) and Sister Jennie Jones, S.S.F. (principal) of St. Mary's Academy are here with members of the school's award-winning marching band several years after the destructive storm. The rebuilding continues.

did not have to say anything—he just did it! His simple, loving action reverberated around the world. Speaking to the young offenders, Francis said that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion in a gesture of love and service. “This is a symbol, it is a sign. Washing your feet means I am at your service. Help one another. This is what Jesus teaches us,” the pope said.

I can only wonder what this encounter with Christ through the pope's gesture of foot-washing meant to these young people. And what will this encounter with the welcoming and merciful Christ mean for their lives in the future? Yes, evangelization matters. The pope's example at that prison was not only a living out of the indiscriminate love of Christ but a call to everyone who witnessed it to do the same. The pope was renewing the challenge we hear first from Jesus, succinctly expressed in the song *The Lord Jesus* by the monks of the Weston Priory:

The Lord Jesus after eating with his friends,
washed their feet and said to them:
“Do you know what I, your Lord, have done to you?
I have given you example, that so you also must do.”

As the pope reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium* evangelization is the joy-filled work of touching peoples' minds and hearts and lives with the saving, healing, liberating good news of Jesus Christ who came not to be

served but to serve. Evangelization is bringing the joy of the gospel to the heart of our world by making God's reign of justice and peace a reality in all members of the community of life. The unlimited love of Jesus bends before us, washes us clean, and urges us to go forth and be foot washers especially to the least among us. Jesus sends us out with the joy of the Gospel to attract other foot washers and accompany them on their journey of becoming missionary disciples.

Art of accompaniment

The pope writes about the need to initiate everyone—priests, religious, and laity—into the “art of accompaniment” (169). He writes “this art of accompaniment teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (Exodus 3:5).” The ministry of accompaniment is a primary work of vocation ministers, actively listening with an open and patient heart to a person seeking a vocation. The pope writes:

Genuine spiritual accompaniment always begins and flourishes in the context of service to the mission of evangelization. Paul's relationship with Timothy and Titus provides an example of this accompaniment and formation which takes place in the midst of apostolic activity. Entrusting them with the mission of remaining in each city to “put in order what remains to be done” (Tim. 1:5; cf. 1 Tim 1:3-5), Paul also gives them rules for their personal lives and their pastoral activity. This is clearly distinct from every kind of intrusive accompaniment or isolated self-realization. Missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples (173).

In September, in my role as president of RENEW International, I attended an international meeting at the Vatican on *Evangelii Gaudium*. The purpose of the conference was to translate this document into practical implementation in each of our local places and cultural contexts. I was delighted that Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, opened the meeting with a witness entitled, “Listening to the Poor.” I believe it was critical to begin a conference on the Pope's exhortation on the new evangelization with a moving call to be a church that is poor and is for the poor. Jean Vanier said: “By washing the feet of the poor we carry out the work of evangelization.” He went on to speak about the need to incarnate the love of Christ not only by our works but also by our words through sharing with others the cause of our joy and the source of our service.

This is a particular challenge for us as religious. We are committed to serving people who are poor and working for justice, but we do not always share the cause of our joy—our relationship with Christ that flows out in gospel service. Francis writes: “Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society’s most neglected members (186).”

What will attract others to Christ (and some of them to religious life) is our commitment to being missionary disciples: passionately in love with God and our neighbor, especially the poor; our zeal for peace and justice; our daily commitment to prayer, community, and simple living. It is through consecrated women and men living the Gospel with joy, dedicating our lives to deep prayer, loving communion, and passionate service that people will discover vocations to religious life. Evangelization, the pope reminds us, does not happen by coercion but by attraction. This is also true of vocation promotion. In *Evangelii Gaudium* the pope writes, “Wherever there is life, fervor, and a desire to bring Christ to others, genuine vocations will arise (107).”

By choosing the title and theme, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis has done in this document what he has been doing since he was elected: challenging all of us with the question of whether we believe what we say we believe. And although the popular image of Pope Francis may focus on his simplicity, his good nature, his casual demeanor and emphasis on mercy, the pope uses clear and blunt language when he writes or speaks about matters that are at the heart of his message.

A blunt message

He is so blunt and so clear at times that he makes some of us uncomfortable. Maybe some are worried about propriety, or the dignity of the papal office. Some of us would rather not face what he is saying, much less apply it to ourselves. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he writes about the pervasive attitude toward the poor:

To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own (54).

The pope refers to the profound problems of poverty,

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refugees of economic and political injustice, mindless consumerism, the idolatry of money, human trafficking, slavery, abortion, war, genocide, and the destruction of the environment. And he still writes about the *joy* of the Gospel.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* the pope speaks plainly about the church’s own ailments including scarce vocations to priesthood and religious life, seminaries accepting vocations with any motivation, the scandal of sexual abuse, clericalism, priests not committed to joyful and fraternal life, pastoral workers (including consecrated women and men) with an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, polarization within the church, and the loss of engagement with many adults and especially young people. And what should make us a bit uncomfortable is his poignant and plain talk about the temptations that face pastoral workers today, including consecrated women and men. The pope addresses the lack of vocations:

Many places are experiencing a dearth of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. This is often due to a lack of contagious fervor in communities which results in a cooling of enthusiasm and attractiveness. Wherever there is life, fervor, and a desire to bring

Christ to others, genuine vocations will arise (107).

In the section “Yes to the Challenge of Missionary Spirituality,” the pope writes:

Today we are seeing in many pastoral workers, including consecrated men and women, an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, which leads them to see their work as a mere appendage to their life, as if it were not part of their very identity. At the same time, the spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which does not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization. As a result, one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though

they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervor (78).

Our way of doing things needs to be reimagined, reinvigorated, and transformed by the Holy Spirit working in and among us for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for self-preservation.

The pope continues by exhorting us to say no to selfishness and spiritual sloth, no to sterile pessimism, and no to spiritual worldliness and warring among ourselves. He addresses the polarization in the church as a scandal that is an obstacle to evangelization: “In

some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel will have a real impact on God’s faithful people...” (95).

In others, he writes, “This spiritual worldliness lurks behind a fascination with social and political gain, or their pride in their ability to manage practical affairs, or an obsession with self-help and self-realization” (95).

He continues to challenge us:

It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts (100).

And he still writes about the *joy* of the Gospel.

The heart of evangelization, the pope reminds us over and over again, is first and foremost to make missionary disciples. We can’t make missionary disciples

unless we *are* missionary disciples, on fire with the love of God and a passion for God’s people. I believe we will have more people in the pews, more lay leaders, more lay ecclesial ministers, and more vocations to religious life and priesthood if we fully renew and recommit ourselves to be missionary disciples.

Pope Francis writes:

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 channeled for the evangelization of today’s world, rather than for her self-preservation (27).

I believe this dream of a missionary option can be applied to religious life today, and this call to transformation is a serious challenge to us and to our congregations, provinces, and institutes. Our way of doing things—times and schedules, language and structures—needs to be reimagined, reinvigorated, and transformed by the Holy Spirit working in and among us for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for self-preservation. Our focus, time, and conversation cannot be on diminishment or fear or an inordinate worry about who will care for us in the future, but by both individually and communally saying yes to the challenge of a missionary spirituality. We need to put energy, resources, and creativity into creating an enduring future for religious life, beginning with how we live it more authentically today. We need to “hospice” the current state of our communities while we “co-evolve” and “co-create” the new (the two loops theory of change, berkana.org).

The call of joy

The disciples of Christ who will create the “new” are called to be joyful, missionary, merciful, bridge builders, bold and creative, and witnesses to Christ’s unconditional love. The whole exhortation is filled with the call to be joyful. One of my favorite sayings of Pope Francis is “Don’t be a sourpuss!” In the same vein he writes: “an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral (10)!” For us to “co-create and “co-evolve” a new way to live religious life we need consecrated women and men who are joyful and committed to being missionary disciples, who are not afraid of uncertainty or insecurity, willing to put our collective energy together and work toward a pastoral transformation of religious life. The new way has to be centered in mission with a focus on serving people who are the most

poor, vulnerable, and marginalized, and living a vibrant community life of prayer. All the while we bear witness to God's grace and mercy, respecting the dignity and rights of all members of the community of life.

Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm for being missionary disciples committed to Jesus the Christ and his poor. Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm for being members of the church, the body of Christ. Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm for the great privilege of living out our missionary discipleship as religious

sisters, brothers, and priests. I conclude with the words of Pope Francis:

“And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient, or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of the Christ” (6). ■

TELL YOUR STORIES!

Telling our stories is a powerful way to attract people to Christ. We don't tend to move people through apologetics or finger pointing, but rather through stories of Jesus' presence in our lives. Here's an example of how a story about faith alive in our lives can move us.

On my way to the airport one day, I was telling the driver that I was going to give a retreat to priests on “faith in everyday life.” The driver was a faith-filled Catholic, and she said to me, “You know, last year my daughter was diagnosed with fourth stage colon cancer.” Her daughter was in her 30s, she had two little ones, and she was a devout Catholic. Her fervent prayer was that she would see her daughters grow up. She just wanted to live long enough to get her girls on the right path, and she had everyone she knew praying for her.

The day of the surgery came, and she was in the little pre-op room waiting for it to begin. The surgeon came in and explained the operation and the aftermath.

She looked at him and she said, “Doctor can I ask you something?” He said, “Sure.” And she said, “Do you pray before you do surgery?” And he didn't say anything to her. So she said, “I just want you to know that there are a lot of people praying for you.”

The doctor said, “Wait a moment.” He walked over to the supplies and took a square of gauze. He wrote this message on it: “I know well the plans I have in mind for you. Plans for your welfare and not for woe so as to give you a future full of hope.—Jeremiah 29:11.”

He handed the gauze pad to that young mother, and she clung to that message as she went into surgery.

God continues to give that woman a future full of hope. She continues to battle cancer, but she's in remission right now, thank God.



There's more. Last year around this time, I found that I was a little hoarse, no big deal. I went to the doctor and it turned out I had a lesion, which is cancerous, on my right vocal chord. So here I was a preacher, someone who likes to talk—it's my whole life—and I have cancer on my vocal chords!

Not long after I found myself in the hospital waiting for surgery. I had everybody praying for me, and my Dominican sisters were all there, joking around with me. But I was scared. Then before I knew it, I was in a room with the person with the anesthesia mask. I was terrified.

What came to my mind at that moment? That story of the gauze and that Scripture passage—as clear as a bell. “Terry, for I know well the plans I have in mind for you. Plans for your welfare and not for woe so as to give you a future full of hope.”

That testimony moved me through that surgery with great gratitude and trust, and I knew that all would be well.

—Sister Theresa Rickard, O.P.