

CHAPTER FOUR

Intentional Disciples: Bearing Spiritual Fruit That Sustains

Bobby Vidal

Several years ago I found myself in the presence of an extraordinary lay apostle — a woman who was on the verge of discovering her personal vocation and where she was being “sent” to carry the light of the Gospel. As I listened to her story of how God was using her to reach others, I was struck by the magnitude of creative energy and profound boldness that flowed through her so naturally. Every week she arranged to meet with two female friends. They prayed, asking God to use them to touch the lives of the people they were about to meet, and then this woman led the others to a nearby neighborhood that was overcome with prostitution.

After determining it was safe to do so, she would go and knock on a motel-room door. It wasn't always the case that someone came readily to the door, but when the door finally opened she would introduce herself and ask the woman who stood before her if she wanted to pray. Surprisingly, only rarely did she meet with a negative response. Then, as she prayed, something astonishing would happen. The woman

she was praying for would begin to find herself clothed with an overpowering sense of love and mercy. As this lay apostle continued to pray and then talk about Jesus, layer upon layer of trauma, anger, fear, and shame would begin to melt away.

This weekly apostolate was producing remarkable spiritual fruit. A large number of women who were stuck in a life of prostitution soon found hope and a restored sense of their dignity as children of God. God was doing something remarkable.

As I listened to her story, however, it became shockingly clear that the work of God in this woman was encountering remarkable obstacles. Equally shocking — those obstacles were coming from her parish community, which failed to support and understand her work.

As more and more women who were trapped in the life of prostitution encountered the love of God, new challenges emerged in her apostolate that were too complex and demanding for her to deal with on her own. Not knowing where to turn for help, she sought the aid of her parish — but no one was willing to help her. Not only were her fellow parishioners unwilling to help, but no one could assist her in discerning what God was calling her to do next.

She felt certain that God had called her to this work, but she began to ask herself: Was she called merely to pray with these women and talk to them about Jesus, or was God calling her to something more? She recognized that she needed to maintain her current employment to help support her family financially. And she recognized that she couldn't spend more time away from her young children. On the other hand, the spiritual fruitfulness she was encountering felt like a sign that God wanted her to continue to help these women, but she was at a loss regarding what God wanted her to do for their ongoing care. She was at a crossroads in her apostolate and had no one to guide her in understanding and discerning her call.

Several weeks after hearing this lay apostle's story I began to contemplate what would happen in our parish communities if we had more lay men and women like her. How would we nurture and support them and the fruits of their work? The vast majority of our pastoral practices make no room for individuals like her, and yet what she was experiencing was the normal life of discipleship.

When I shared her story with several national diocesan leaders, they were quick to canonize her and set her apart as someone who was an exception. They advised that she get a spiritual director because there was nothing more that could be done for her on the parish level. A spiritual director certainly would have benefited this lay apostle, but her spiritual needs were raising a broader and significantly more challenging issue. It was becoming clear from her experience that parish communities are not only challenged in welcoming those farthest from God but also that parishes are challenged in welcoming individuals who are beginning to live out their vocational call.

Individuals who are beginning to live out their vocational call challenge our parish communities because they point out the boundaries and confining limits we place on our understanding of ministry and vocation. What this lay apostle was encountering was the gap that exists between the Church's pastoral practice and its teachings. The Church teaches that the whole Church bears responsibility for the discernment of each individual's charisms and vocation. Not only that, but the whole Church bears responsibility for every man's and woman's vocation reaching its maturity (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 40). What we find instead in our parish communities is little or no support or formation for an individual discerning a vocation within the secular world as a layperson.

When God moves in the lives of his people, his movement tends to also involve raising up a means of sustaining and nurturing the grace that he gives. It is not enough for an individual

or a group to simply prepare for and receive the graces God sends. It takes a whole community to support the work of God in an individual. The seeds of grace grow more easily in an environment that nurtures and sustains the seed in its cycle of life. From the preparation of the soil to planting the seed to the seed's germination and its growth and its maturity and production of fruit, every part of the development of grace in the life of individuals needs tending to.

The seeds of grace mature not only through the personal response of the individual who receives them, but much of the development and growth of these seeds are dependent on the communal environment that can hinder or enhance the personal response of an individual. An individual person grows in receptivity to God when surrounded by a community that collectively strives to care for the whole cycle of the life of grace.

COMMUNAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND THE BIG THREE

If we want a parish community to care for the whole cycle of the life of grace, it will have to grow spiritually — not as isolated members but rather together, as a body. One of the central things we can learn from salvation history is that communities grow in stages. As a parish develops spiritually, its members grow in their collective understanding of their identity and mission. And so, if we are to cooperate with God in his work of renewing and transforming parish life, then we need to understand where a community is and where it needs to go.

Determining where a community is and its future direction is not something that is decided merely by the subjective observations of an individual or small group of parish leaders. Nor is the current state of the parish and its future direction defined solely on the perceived needs of the local neighborhood.

Understanding the current spiritual state of a parish community is not an invitation for the community to engage in self-referential reflection. Rather, it is an invitation for the parish to observe its pastoral practices and the spiritual needs of the local neighborhood through the eyes of Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Parish renewal can begin only when we can look upon the parish community and the needs of the people with the eyes of Jesus.

Pope Francis provides us with a beautiful starting place for parish renewal in *The Joy of the Gospel*. He writes:

“The Church must look with penetrating eyes within herself, ponder the mystery of her own being.... This vivid and lively self-awareness inevitably leads to a comparison between the ideal image of the Church as Christ envisaged her and loved her as his holy and spotless bride (cf. Eph 5:27), and the actual image which the Church presents to the world today.... This is the source of the Church's heroic and impatient struggle for renewal: the struggle to correct those flaws introduced by her members which her own self-examination, mirroring her exemplar, Christ, points out to her and condemns.” (26, quoting Blessed Pope Paul VI)

The actual image a parish presents to the world is what we might call a parish's culture. Every parish has a culture — it's who we are as a community. As with any culture, we can't label an entire group of people and say they are all one way, but we most certainly can say there are particular expressions, perspectives, and ways of living that are dominant traits and characteristics of a group of people. These characteristics and dominant traits are clues for uncovering the spiritual condition of parish life.

As we try to understand the pastoral realities of a parish, it's important to note that a parish's culture does not tell us — and never can tell us — where every individual is in his or her personal spiritual development. History stands as a witness to the fact that countless saints grew to the heights of sanctity in the midst of the most spiritually harsh environments.

We can and should, however, look at the traits of a community: its language and how it talks about God, its goals, its questions and concerns, what it perceives to be the spiritual needs of others, its sense of mission, what it regards as fruitful ministry, its structures and processes, how it uses its resources, how it describes the community, and what its engagement with the secular world is like. From there we can adequately discern what areas of parish life need renewal in order for it to better carry out its divine mission of making disciples.

It's difficult to make a journey without a clear destination. What is the destination — the overarching goal — of parishes as they cooperate with God in the work of renewal? Peter Maurin, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, offers a maxim that provides an entry point toward greater clarity. Peter was fond of saying, "We must make the kind of society where it is easier for people to be good." Apply this spiritual maxim to the ecclesial society of the parish and we get a clear picture of the type of culture we want to assist God in forming. The overarching goal of parish renewal is this: to create a community where it is easier for individuals to become intentional disciples, live as intentional disciples, and make intentional disciples.

Is our parish community a place where it is easy for someone to become and live as an intentional disciple, and to help make intentional disciples? What enables a parish culture to become a disciple-making culture? Where does a parish community begin when it wants to shape its culture to achieve the goal of making disciples?

In the 1980s, Pope St. John Paul II called for a new evangelization, and he gave us the critical elements — the Big Three — of a disciple-making culture. The new evangelization is not new in its content, which is always the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but it is new, he said, in its ardor, method, and expression. These three characteristics reveal where we need to focus our community's energy in order to transform the parish into a culture where discipleship is normative.

What would it look like if we took these characteristics of new ardor, method, and expression and shaped the culture of the parish to achieve the overarching goal of parish renewal? We would see a community focusing its communal energies in three ways.

First: New Ardor

A community would strive to instill in its members a strong passion to help others overcome the obstacles — the spiritual challenges — that prevent them from becoming disciples. The individuals in the community do this by listening carefully to the life experiences of others, determining where someone is along the journey to discipleship, and discerning the best means to help each person move further along on the journey. Disciples would be tireless in drawing individuals to Jesus by the divine power of the kerygma and in living a life that witnesses to the truths of the Gospel (cf. Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization, 8).

The Acts of the Apostles, chapter four, provides a clear image of a community filled with new ardor. Peter and John were put into custody for "proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead." When they were brought before the leaders, elders, and scribes, they were ordered "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" to which Peter and John respond, "It

is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:2, 18, 20).

After being released, they shared with *their own people* what the elders and chief priests had told them. The response of the community was astonishing: "they raised their voices to God with one accord," the place they were gathered shook, "and they were all filled with the holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:24, 31).

Second: New Method

A community would seek to create communal methods that facilitate and sustain the overarching goal of parish renewal. Communal methods are the disciple-making strategy the whole community owns, cares for, and supports as a top priority. From the pastor to staff, ministry leaders, and those involved or minimally involved in the life of the parish — each of them is given clear practical steps on how to promote, participate, and take ownership of the disciple-making process.

Four years ago one parish decided to create a communal method for reaching the unchurched and unbelieving. They chose a seven-week evangelizing experience. To introduce this communal method as part of a permanent first step in the parish's disciple-making process, they gathered together all of their ministry leaders, staff, and interested parishioners and presented the plan so that all would feel a sense of ownership and participation.

Next, prior to the main seven-week evangelizing experience, they presented to parishioners — over the course of three weeks — simple ways they could reach out to loved ones, neighbors, and coworkers who were unchurched and unbelieving. When the evangelization experience started, they were surprised to

find that over 220 individuals had signed up and most of the participants were in fact unchurched and nonbelievers.

After four years of offering this seven-week experience once a year, over 600 individuals have participated in this communal method of evangelization. The impact on the parish's identity has been enormous, as this approach slowly moves the whole community to focus its energies and resources outward and is making the work of evangelization the work of all the baptized. It is also breaking down barriers that once existed between ministries and creating real opportunities for collaboration to take place. This parish is now discerning the next communal method that should be introduced to further form the community on how to live as disciples.

Third: New Expression

The community would work toward shaping its language, mentality, customs, and behaviors to make disciples. They would recognize how ecclesial culture impacts individuals who feel like outsiders in the parish community. They would also communicate clearly the demands of the Gospel.

Pope Francis, while speaking to the bishops of Brazil, touched on the importance of language. He said, "At times we lose people because they don't understand what we are saying, because we have forgotten the language of simplicity and import an intellectualism foreign to our people."¹

The story of Pentecost provides us with a powerful symbol of reaching each person in his or her own language: the apostles preach in their own language, but the crowd, from many nations, understands. The effects of this experience opened the crowd

¹ Pope Francis, Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil, World Youth Day, July 28, 2013.

to hear Peter proclaim the Gospel message. We need to reach people where they are in their relationship with God. The only way we can do that is by speaking in a language that is familiar and compelling to them.

* * *

In order to build a culture of discipleship and to bear long-lasting fruit, the parish must develop, facilitate, and sustain each of these three areas simultaneously. Jesus asked his followers not merely to bear fruit but to “bear fruit that will remain” (John 15:16). This demands our stewardship if we are to sustain the spiritual fruit God wants to produce through us. This is precisely the reason we were chosen and appointed in the first place — to bear fruit that will remain! Yet in our pastoral practice, we can tend to focus on only one or two areas of the new evangelization rather than on all three. The result? Limited, or poorly sustained, or *no* spiritual fruit. In order to form long-lasting fruit that is evident in the spiritual growth of the individual and the community, we must care for all three areas.

When we focus only on new ardor, we end up with individuals who encounter Jesus and become disciples but have no visible community to support them. Without ecclesial structures that are “owned” and recognized by the whole community, the work of evangelization becomes compartmentalized, something cared for by a few people. Evangelization, siloed, becomes “just another ministry” the parish does. Communities that have evangelization retreats or evangelization teams that are divorced from the whole of parish life frequently experience this stunted growth. Their evangelizing experiences yield fruits of conversion and the release of baptismal grace, but the small fire they have stirred up has no way to sustain itself without a community to support it.

When we focus on new method alone, we merely adjust our parish programs and structures but fail to center on or impact an individual’s personal relationship with Jesus. A parish that approaches its transformation from this standpoint isn’t really developing an evangelistic approach centered on discipleship; it’s trying to answer the challenges merely by doing things differently. As Pope Francis cautions in *The Joy of the Gospel*:

There are ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelization, yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them. Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church’s “fidelity to her own calling,” any new structure will soon prove ineffective. (26)

When we focus on new expressions alone — and this is perhaps the most deceiving hazard — we can find that our community is talking about evangelization and discipleship but is taking no long-term action. Discipleship simply becomes something we think and talk about, not something actually transforming people or the way we do things.

MOVING FROM HERE TO THERE

Several years ago my family sought to do the impossible. We decided to move! As everyone who has a big family knows, moving from one place to another is a huge operation. Often, as I struggled with the details of our move, I found myself contemplating the biblical story of the Exodus. This gave me comfort because it occurred to me that I had a much easier task than Moses. I had to move a family from one place to another, but Moses had to move a whole nation.

I began to think about what it was like to have an entire nation pack its bags, gather its livestock, and begin the journey: “The Israelites set out from Rameses for Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, not counting the children. A crowd of mixed ancestry also went up with them, with livestock in great abundance, both flocks and herds” (Exodus 12:37-38).

Moving a nation sounds like an impossible task, but these two little details nearly pushed me over the edge: “[*The Israelites*] asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing.... [*T*]hey let them have whatever they asked for” (Exodus 12:35, 36, emphasis added). So the Israelites not only were carrying their own belongs, but they also decided to take the Egyptians’ items as well. But wait, there’s still more. Scripture also says, “*They did not even prepare food for the journey*” (Exodus 12:39, emphasis added).

Exodus tells the story of a people who had to be on the move and who, in the process, found that their communal identity and the way they related to God as a people were forever changed. The journey a parish community must make in order to be renewed is similar. The parish needs to move from one place to another — from their current parish culture to another — and this renewal process will happen again and again. Like the exodus of the Jews from Egypt to the Promised Land, the transformation of a community — both internally and externally — can be done only by the grace of God.

So where are we as a parish? What are some of the characteristics of our current parish culture? More important, where are we going? What are the characteristics of a parish culture that makes disciples?

A parish needs to move from being a maintenance-driven community to being a mission-oriented community. In my work in evangelization at an archdiocesan level, regional level, and parish level, I have found that most parish cultures possess

certain recurring characteristics that earmark them as maintenance-driven. While it might be an overstatement to say that all parishes have all of these maintenance-driven characteristics, I have yet to find a parish that doesn’t have at least one embedded in its makeup and identity as a community. Having just one or a few of these maintenance-driven characteristics is a sign that a parish still has work to do in becoming mission-orientated.

Let’s look at the characteristics of a maintenance-driven parish and contrast them with a mission-oriented one.

Characteristics of a Maintenance-Driven Parish

The parish, fragmented into a community of communities, has many programs and rarely talks about its communal identity. Pastoral practice in a maintenance-driven parish focuses energy, time, and resources on:

1. Getting parishioners involved in the many events, activities, and experiences of the parish.
2. Recruiting and training individuals to take on leadership roles.
3. Getting parishioners to commit to different tasks that would have them give more time, talent, and treasure to the parish.
4. Sustaining the current structures of the parish, thereby maintaining the number of people in the parish.
5. Relying solely on catechesis as the means of transmitting the faith.

6. Sustaining the inward life of the parish by providing formation for ministries exercised only for the parish (for example, parish catechist, lector, extraordinary minister of Holy Communion).
7. Communicating parish events and experiences with language that only “parish insiders” would understand.

In contrast, here are the signs of a community that is mission-driven.

Characteristics of a Mission-Driven Parish

The parish is diverse in its makeup but united in how it understands its communal identity. The parish has different evangelizing experiences that connect and relate to one another, creating a clear and simple path for individuals to become intentional disciples. This path is visible and the community understands that it has priority — all other experiences of the parish flow from this path or flow to it. The parish regularly talks about its communal identity as one that makes disciples.

Pastoral practice in a mission-driven parish focuses energy, time, and resources on:

1. Helping all people to encounter Jesus Christ and experience conversion through parish events and activities and also in life and events outside the parish.
2. Forming individuals in discerning their individual charisms and their God-given vocation.
3. Helping individuals to commit their entire life to Jesus and then to live out that commitment daily.

4. Sustaining a culture of discipleship, thereby nurturing and sustaining the work of conversion in individuals.
5. Transmitting the faith through pre-evangelization, the initial proclamation of the Gospel (kerygma), and catechesis in a systematic way within all of the parish events/activities.
6. Answering the outward call of the parish to the secular world by providing formation for individuals to take on parish ministries and equipping individuals to transform the secular world.
7. Communicating events and information with language that parish “insiders” and “outsiders” would understand and be welcomed and challenged by.

Pope Francis has a dream that we can make our own in our parish communities — a dream rooted in a desire to make the journey from being a maintenance-driven parish to a mission-driven parish:

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. 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, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those

whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. As John Paul II once said to the Bishops of Oceania: "All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion." (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 27)

TRANSFORMATION BEGINS WITH A QUESTION

Questions have a spiritual power that can transform our destiny forever.

- "[W]ho do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29)
- "Whom shall I send?" (Isaiah 6:8)
- "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" (Luke 1:34)
- "Do you reject Satan and all his works?"
- "Do you take this woman to be your wife?"

Questions have spiritual power because they can invoke a personal response. Questions have the power to transform because they create self-awareness and reflection. Questions carry the potential to form the minds and hearts of others. Just as questions have the power to transform the course of someone's life, they also have the power to change our parish culture. All pastoral planning starts with a question (*Omnes Christifideles*, 4, 9). No matter whether we are members of the parish staff or persons in the pew, if we want to help renew our

parish we need to start by asking the right questions. What are those right questions?

We will never develop a missionary culture by asking maintenance questions. For the most part, that's what we've been doing as a Church, and it's one of the reasons we haven't developed the evangelical imagination necessary for reconstructing parish structures to focus outward and be mission-driven. We can't grow and develop an evangelizing imagination and evangelical creativity in the confines of "what we have always done" or by asking the same questions we have always asked.

If we want to make the new evangelization a reality, we need to begin by asking new questions. New evangelistically oriented questions and creative, imaginative solutions are beginning to emerge in the Church today, not simply because the Church is being exposed to new realities and is feeling the need to respond to them but because God is *asking us to cooperate with him* in creating new realities for our world, realities that we have yet to envision.

We can start the transformation of parish culture by continually raising these missionary questions for ourselves and for others:

1. How can we create the opportunities for individuals to encounter Jesus Christ and experience conversion through this event or activity?
2. How can we form individuals to discern their charisms or vocation?
3. How can we assist individuals to commit their entire life to Jesus?

4. How can we create a path to discipleship that is owned, supported, and sustained by the whole community?
5. How can we transmit the faith through pre-evangelization, the proclamation of the kerygma, and catechesis in a systematic way?
6. How do we form others in the task of transforming the secular world with the light of the Gospel?
7. How do we communicate an event or experience we are planning in a way that parish outsiders and insiders will understand and will feel welcomed and challenged by at the same time?

We can ask these questions in planning meetings, in prayer groups, in staff meetings, and at parish socials. These missionary questions will help uncover what the community knows and doesn't know, the next steps the community should take, and what type of formation is needed to move forward. These missionary questions will stretch your parish's imagination and creativity and help all to see their ministry and themselves in a new light. More importantly, if we ask these questions without assumptions and really listen to the answers people share, the parish will begin to dialogue about the things that make up a missionary culture.

So ask missionary questions! The missionary question you ask might just be the one that begins the process of transforming a parish community's spiritual destiny.

BOBBY VIDAL is the Director of Evangelization and Lay Formation for St. Kateri Tekakwitha Church in Santa Clarita, California. Drawing on nearly twenty years of parish-ministry experience, Bobby provides vision, spiritual formation, and direction to St. Kateri Church in order to help shape the parish culture so that the community might become one of intentional discipleship. Bobby and his wife, Shannon, have five children.