

THE STEPS IN THE FORMATION OF A “MISSIONARY DISCIPLE”

The call to be a missionary disciple in the mind of Pope Francis begins with our baptism. As most of us were baptised as children, we have the task of catching up on what this call means as an adult. This could lead to a course in theology or an experience of catechesis or taking up a ministry in the church. If we reflect on the disciples of Jesus and how they were called to ministry, it centres on their attraction to the person of Jesus. If we follow their journey in the gospels there are lessons that we can learn and can adapt to the circumstances of our lives. It will take us on a very personal journey that is hard to imagine until we allow ourselves to be open to journeying with him.

The steps outlined below are not sequential, but rather they identify aspects of the journey beginning with an inspiration and requires continual assessment and discernment as the journey with Jesus unfolds, as it did for him. At each step or encounter with Jesus, the “missionary disciple” can share with him as revealed in the gospels. Hence, the references provided may provide room for our own imagination in our relationship with Jesus.

Step One: Discovering the presence of Jesus - the call

- The attraction: John the Baptist said to two of his disciples “Look there is the lamb of God” (Jn 1:35)
- The response: and they followed him (Jn 1:37)
- A Query: “What are you looking for?” (Jn 1:38)
- The hesitancy: “where do are you staying?” (Jn 1:38)
- The invitation – “come and see!” (Jn 1:39)
- The initial response – “stayed with him that day” (Jn 1:40)
- The announcement of Andrew: “We have found the Messiah”! (Jn 1:41)
- Andrew brought Simon to Jesus: “you are to be called Cephas!” (Peter) (Jn 1:42)
- The challenge for the each of the apostles to follow Jesus as referred to in the gospels: they followed him into the country side to listen to his words about God, not just so that they should believe, but specially so that they (and we) should possess eternal life in which we may see, and love, and have all our desires fulfilled. (Jn:1/50)

Step Two: Listening and learning about Jesus – the reality of the call

“Christ is the lamp that illuminates the whole of Scripture: the gateway and foundation of the revelation of God’s presence.” Augustine

Jesus reveals his call to us through his actions (Jn: 2/1f), in his engagement with individuals (Jn:3/1), to communities (Jn: 4/1f), and to the disciples (Jn: 5/16f) For our reflection is what was their response?

- Jesus opened his followers to a deeper understanding the Father’s love: *the parables help us to appreciate a new way of living: they focus on how to love each other. (Lk: chs. 12-16)*
- Jesus sent them to ‘spread the good news’: it was not enough just to listen to Jesus and be guided and assisted their own lives, but they had the task of *discipleship: to reach out to those who were searching for God, and to bring the good news of Jesus to all they met on their journeys. (Lk: 10/1-20)*
- Jesus highlighted moments of revelation which focused on those in need: *curing the sick, raising the dead, identifying the marginalised, reaching out to goodness of others. (Lk: 8/22f)*

- Jesus chose individuals to continue to bring the good news: *he chooses those who responded to his invitation to be with him (Lk:6/12f), from the Transfiguration (Lk: 9/28f) to the Upper Room gatherings after his resurrection (Lk: 24/36f).*
- Jesus reached out to each person to be aware of their place in the Father's love: *Thomas here are my hands and my side.....doubt no longer but believe! (Jn: 20/24F)*
- Jesus shared the challenges of his life with his followers: some responded with faith and hope – *"who would we go to?" (Lk:9/57f)*
- Jesus confirms our relationship with him: *At the breaking of bread did not our hearts burn within us! (Luke 24/30f)*

Third Step: Recognising the gifts of the Spirit among the followers Jesus

Our relationship with Jesus, as his disciples, is more than a personal commitment to him, it is a commitment to all of his disciples: *"You are my friends – if you love one another". (Jn: 15/9f)*

- The Spirit distributes gifts to different people just as he chooses. There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit; *"there are all sorts of service to be done, but always to the same Lord. (1 Cor: 12/4-11)*
- Each of us has spiritual gifts to offer in the context of the Body of Christ (1 Cor: 12/18f): in our vocation as a disciple of Jesus is from God who *"has appointed various kinds of gifts"* for the sake of the whole Body of Christ.
- The love of Christ allows our gifts to be seen and accepted by myself and through the inspiration of others: mine are not the only gifts to be accepted. *(Eph: 3/8-12)*
- Identifying "the thorn in my flesh": in our commitment to Christ, we will undergo tests that recognise in my humility *"the graciousness of God towards me". (2 Cor: 12/7-18)*

Fourth Step: Four areas of life and ministry and ongoing reflection and discernment

The following aspects have been identified as essential elements in the lives of those who commit themselves to the service of the church. Initially, they focused on those chosen as priests and deacons (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1992).

- **The human dimension** – to see ourselves as God and others see us!
(Mentoring and Supervision – not naval gazing)
 - Humans as adults learn through experience: in the first place for most of us, our experience of family life has been enhanced by our parents, who at our baptism have undertaken the responsibility of "teaching their children of the love and goodness of God and the practice of the faith". (Baptismal promise)
 - As we move from childhood to adulthood, we have the task of developing our personal relationship with God. *When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child. Now that I have become an adult, I have put away childish things. (Eph: 13/11f)* In this context we rely on others to assist us to move beyond our childish ways in relationship with each other and therefore able to relate to God as an adult.
 - Human sciences have shaped ways and means of assisting us to discover the mysteries of creation, which include the dignity and beauty of the human person and the changing world in which we live. This level of experience enables the human imagination to move away from magic and fatalism to a trust in God's providence and love.

- This is the link between the personal experience of God's love and the challenges faced in everyday life, is the presence of Jesus Christ who lived, suffered, died and rose: he becomes the source of our faith, hope and love.
- **The spiritual dimension** – discovering the presence of God in everyday life
(*Spiritual Direction* enables us to be open to God's call)
 - Faith in God's love is ever evolving in the human person, as Jesus himself experienced: he sought solace from his Father "into your hands I commend my spirit"! (Lk: 23/46f)
 - As human beings we are moved beyond the practical and routine encounters in life, to be surprised and shaken to the core of who we called to be. This spiritual dimension begins with an encounter that moves us beyond what we expect. To respond to this dimension, we are called to share our experiences with others, we can't rely on ourselves. "Will you stay with me and pray with me!" (Lk: 22/40-43).
 - We are tempted to live, isolated from others. But through others with the sharing of memories and imagination we can discover more about ourselves. In this process, Jesus wants us to remember him, not just as an historic figure, but as he reveals aspects of God's love in our everyday lives. (Lk: 12/27f)
- **The intellectual dimension** – bringing the presence of God to others "*the widow's mite*" (Lk:21/1-4) (Theology and Philosophy)
 - Western civilisation is built on thousands of years of human experience. One of the oldest expressions of our relationship with creation is the work of astronomers. Today's astronomers strive to understand and evaluate the human experiences in conjunction with the mysteries of the universe: we reflect and build on the discoveries of those who have gone before us.
 - As we come to understand the world we live in, we can engage with the people who have explored, recorded, explained and managed the way we live today. This requires the research, debates and discussions to continue and expand our knowledge of who we are and what we can contribute to each other. As followers of Christ, we are called to be open to the human, environmental, universal challenges that change our way of being with God. To adapt to the circumstances the situations we encounter is to follow in Christ's footsteps. (Lk: 16/18f).
 - The moral question of today revolves around "what is truth?" (Jn: 18/39) If we are to add to this current debate (or reflect on the significance of Pilate's dilemma), we are challenged to bring the presence of God, of Jesus Christ, of the Spirit, and the graciousness of the Father with words and actions in ways our world can respond to the "good news" that Jesus brings. The questions of theology and philosophy today, require us to engage a secular world as a spiritual engagement that requires our trust and openness as Christ displayed himself displayed in his life and resurrection.
 - The church as an organisation is challenged to developed ways of assisting humankind to live better lives and support and care for those in need. (1Peter 5:1-4) Vatican II's statement on "the signs of the times" requires followers of Christ respond to the changes both in the human dimension of society and the circumstances of a changing universe. In includes all the facets of life, the human perspective and earth's evolving and living response to the physical changes to the environment. Pope Francis has reiterated the call of Vatican II for the church to look outwardly, he encourages listening as the first step in engaging the work of the Spirit in our lives and the lives of those around us, especially those who have no voice.

- Thus, scientific studies of the circumstances and situations we encounter are essential if we are to explore the graciousness of God, it applies to all areas of human endeavour and experience. Thus, openness to the thoughts and reflections of those around us is a challenge to a church that seemingly has had all the answers. These areas that face us that have no immediate answers: the fears, worries, concerns, traumas we encounter everyday either in our personal experiences or the pressures of the media. At the same time, we are called to share and celebrate our good experiences, especially as the basis of accepting and loving those around us. The church requires new words to reach out to those in need....as Jesus did. (Lk: 8/9F)
- **The pastoral dimension – “Who touched me?” (Lk: 8/45-47)**

Recognising and appreciating the concerns of others.

- **The sacraments** are the church’s outreach to others. The practice of caring for others is the essence of the sacraments that are steppingstones on our journey of faith. However, as Vatican II emphasised, the symbols, the actions and the words in the sacraments, require a reformation so that the mystery of the sacrament is easily understood and relates to the cultural and life of receiving the sacraments and those who support them. In the sacraments, pastoral practice is more than just ritual to be performed, but a moving celebration of God’s gift of faith.
- **Pastoral care:** the way to reach out to those in need is summed up by Francis: over and over he emphasises the ability of the church to listen to those in need and respond in ways that recognise their concerns. The “need” in the minds and hearts of others, takes an attitude of active listening, akin to the Clinical Pastoral Education method, listening and reflecting with the person in need, rather than being the “fixer” who solves problems. (Jn: 4/1-42)
- **There are specialists** who are trained to assist people in need. The art of listening or the experience of assisting those who are struggling to talk about their concerns, or can provide support and comfort without demanding a response. However, “not all are called to be teachers or prophets....all these are the work of one and the same Spirit, who distributes different gifts to different people just as he chooses”. (1Cor: 4f)

Conclusion

The missionary disciple will continually reflect and respond to the inspiration of the Spirit that comes to them from many areas of life and experience. The preparation of those who are called to serve in the mission of the church, involves the ongoing practices in self-knowledge, in assessing the commitment to serve, in ongoing reflection and discernment of their ministry and the openness to changes in the direction when the “signs of the times” challenge the depth of our commitment to Christ. This journey has steps to assist us respond to the promptings of the Spirit, often we can be caught up in outward responses that require ongoing reflection and discernment. (Lk:20/45f)

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Please note, this reflection is based on a longer paper entitled *Formation for Missionary Disciples*, which is available online.