



PROJECT MUSE®

---

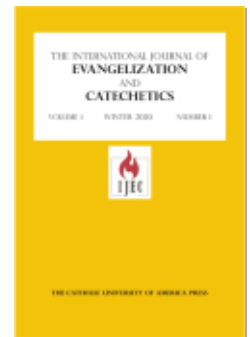
## Parish Orientation Toward Evangelization

Frank P. Desiano CSP

International Journal of Evangelization and Catechetics, Volume 1,  
Number 1, Winter 2020, pp. 67-80 (Article)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jec.2020.0002>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/757059>

# Parish Orientation Toward Evangelization

FRANK P. DESIANO, CSP

Since the publication of “On Evangelization in the Modern World” in December 1975, the word “evangelization” has become part of the common language and expression of Catholics. However, the acceptance of this word, and the ministerial implications behind it, seems begrudging at best on the part of most Catholics. The initial approach to evangelization, already made relatively complicated by the input of the synod of bishops in 1974, seems to have gotten even more complicated by the introduction of the term “new evangelization” by St. John Paul II in Haiti in 1983 when he addressed the assembled bishops of Latin America. The ever-complex conversation, as well as the expansion of the notions about evangelization, have made evangelization ministry in our parishes seem even more inaccessible. Probably no *locus* of tension around the word evangelization ranks higher than the parish.

Indeed, while many organizations and movements may claim a special stake in the ministry of evangelization, the local parish, as the center of the ministries of Word and Eucharist (and the various ministries that flow from these), deserves to reflect the Catholic commitment to evangelization in a clear and pronounced way. The very images of Word and Eucharist bespeak this, for surely the Word is hardly proclaimed just to those assembled at Mass, and the Table of the Eucharist directly invokes the eschatological vision of the Messianic Banquet. Indeed, no one has suggested that the stricter translation in the prayer of Consecration of *multis* to “many” in any way implies that Jesus did not die to save everyone. Images of the Eucharist call for more people to have a place around the table of the Lord.

So how can parishes more clearly orient themselves toward evangelization? Apart from the endless exhortations about parishes and evangelization throughout Church documents over these past thirty-five years, perhaps two sources might frame our discussion: the Code of Canon Law and Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel.”

Pope Francis' lament about the lack of missionary orientation in parishes (which we will look at in depth later) identifies a cause whose result can only be seen as lamentable and scandalous. In *Catholic Parishes of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Charles E. Zech *et. al*, Oxford, 2017), we find reported in a chart on p. 126 that of nine possible selections, parishioners in the Emerging Models Study ranked "Spreading the Gospel and Evangelizing" next to last in terms of priorities that parishes should have. At the same time, when it came to ranking elements that attract parishioners to a parish, the same group ranked highest a welcome spirit, a sense of belonging, and the quality of preaching and liturgy (p. 122). Clearly parishioners have one idea in their head when asked about "spreading the Gospel" and an entirely other idea when it comes to qualities that actually help a parish spread the Good News, even though welcome, a sense of belonging, and preaching comprise some of the very qualities that would draw many people to worship.

## Canon Law

St. John Paul II acknowledges in his Apostolic Constitution "*Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*," which serves as a prologue to the Code of Canon Law, that revision of the canons of the Roman Church could not begin until after the completion of the Second Vatican Council. In other words, the revision of the Code of Canon Law had the teachings of the Second Vatican Council as one of its essential grounding points. Indeed, St. John Paul II speaks about a "note of complementarity which the Code presents in relation to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, in particular with reference to the two constitutions, the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* and the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*."

In the section on parishes, the Code gives a succinct summary of what a parish is in our Catholic understanding: A parish is a defined community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop (515, 1).

Certain qualities of a parish can be immediately seen in this definition, qualities that reveal its evangelizing dynamic as well:

- A parish receives its mandate from the bishop, who is a successor of the apostles.
- A parish has a defined quality, which means it does not go in and out of existence but has an abiding quality reflecting its readiness to gather believers.

- A parish has a pastor who receives identity from the celebration of the Eucharist and the fulfillment of other obligations.
- A parish is a community of the faithful.

The Code, then, situates the parish within the overall ministry of the bishop, who has received an apostolic mandate (see Canon 375). It identifies the parish as a distinct community, which obviously is something different from a random or anonymous collection of people. It indicates the ongoing quality of parish, which means that its ministry is consistent and that people can identify it and easily belong to it. It further places a “pastor” as a eucharistic leader at the center of the parish, thereby instilling in the parish the qualities of gathering, welcoming, proclaiming, offering, consecrating, communion, and being sent that clearly mark the celebration of Eucharist.

Canon 528, 1 fills in the specific obligations of the pastor, beginning with the proclamation of the Word of God; the instruction of people in the faith (particularly through the homily); catechetical formation; instilling the works which the Gospel engenders, “including issues involving social justice”; and the education of children. These obligations go on to include some which, by most reckoning, Catholics hardly ever observe happening in their parishes—obligations that have a powerful dimension of evangelization in the special sense of reaching beyond an active Catholic membership. “[A pastor] is to make every effort with the aid of the Christian faithful, to bring the gospel message also to those who have ceased practicing their religion or who do not profess the true faith.”

While Canon 528, 2 goes on to speak of how the pastor is to make the Most Holy Eucharist the “center of the parish assembly of the faithful,” and the celebration of the other sacraments, most Catholics would be astonished to see reaching those Catholics who no longer practice their faith and teaching those who have no faith as among the principal obligations of a Catholic pastor. Moreover, how many Catholics would see these kinds of specific evangelizing outreaches as pastoral extensions of the Eucharist that they so proudly celebrate? Indeed, if the Eucharist is so valuable for those who attend church, should not that very value impel them to want to enrich the lives of others by inviting them to participate in the Mass? If the Mass provides Catholics with a solid grounding in the Word of God and the sacred food of the Eucharist, something that active Catholics particularly prize, why would any Catholic hesitate to invite people who had no regular faith family to come to the celebration of the community?

That Eucharist is prized so highly, but evangelizing activities prized at a relatively low scale, should strike an observer of Catholic life as contradictory to the extreme. Where does this contradiction come from? What does it say about parish life? Of course, parishes function differently in different parts of the world, perhaps having a more national culture flavor in Europe, where parishes have been planted for seventeen centuries and have related to national states for centuries, or a more communal tribal flavor in Africa where family origins still seem dominant. Asian Catholics celebrate as minorities in cultures that have experienced non-Christian faiths for millennia, whereas Latin American Catholics might readily view parish as the closest expression of the cultural mixing that came with missionaries accompanied by conquistadores.

In the United States, however, the parish has played a unique role in centering the various immigrant communities that came to settle, whether on coasts or in more agricultural settings inland. As part of an immigrant community, the erection of a church building that identified the arrival of an immigrant minority and gave it status, made the parish function in a more directly social way. Immigrants created a home in the United States, and parish was a way to stake a claim for themselves. The celebration of Eucharist, then, was mingled freely with Catholic education, the formation of parish societies, and the socialization of immigrant children. This community-centered function of parish has lingered even as Catholics have swelled well beyond their urban and small-town enclaves. The expansion of Catholics into the suburbs, which by definition flattens out ethnic distinctness, still seems to have preserved the immigrant impulse to make the parish an organization for one's own community and not the universal gathering of faith that Canon Law clearly envisions. This seems part of the high priority Catholics give to actions that enrich their sense of parish and the low priority Catholics give to evangelizing activity for others. Parish, in other words, exists to benefit mostly active Catholics.

## **The Joy of the Gospel**

When Pope Francis was elected in March 2013, documents from the synod on the New Evangelization already awaited him. This synod, called by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010, specifically wanted to address the situation of evangelization in those areas where secularism seemed to be sapping the energy of Christian faith. After two weeks of discussion in October 2012, mostly in the form of short statements made by partici-

pant bishops, the synod Fathers gathered in their own language groups to work on propositions—agreed-upon statements that seemed to capture the essence of their discussion. In Proposition 26, they asserted:

The bishops gathered in Synod affirm that the parish continues to be the primary presence of the Church in neighborhoods, the place and instrument of Christian life, which is able to offer opportunities for dialogue among men, for listening to and announcing the Word of God, for organic catechesis, for training in charity, for prayer, adoration and joyous eucharistic celebrations. In addition the Synod Fathers would like to encourage parishes to find ways to orient themselves to a greater emphasis on evangelization which could include parish missions, parish renewal programs and parish retreats.

Likewise, in Proposition 44, the synod Fathers spoke of the dynamism that should typify parish life: “the parish, in and through all of its activities, should animate its members to become agents of the New Evangelization, witnessing through both their words and their lives. For this reason, it is important to remember that the parish remains the usual environment for the spiritual life of the parishioners.” Not only, then, should parishes be evangelizing agents; they should also be forming their parishioners as “agents of the New Evangelization,” in the sense of parishioners being equipped to reach out to others in those environments in which faith is not highly prized or culturally instituted. Indeed, in a rather cynical way in that same proposition, the synod Fathers noted that “It sometimes happens that the parish is seen as only a place for important events or even as a tourist center.”

These propositions, along with the others approved by the synod Fathers, provided just the ingredients that Pope Francis needed for discussing parishes in “The Joy of the Gospel,” the first major apostolic work he gave to the Church. The Apostolic Exhortation covers a wide range of issues for the Church today, including several sections on preaching (nos. 139–157) and two powerful sections on what Pope Francis calls “personal preaching” but Americans might style more readily as “personal witness” (nos. 127–128).

When looking at the parish from the perspective of evangelization, Pope Francis seems particularly impatient with parishes that do not adopt a specific dimension of outreach. In fact, he prefers this outreach even above the self-preservation of the parish itself. In what many pastoral councils might find rather shocking, Pope Francis says in “The Joy of the Gospel”:

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 (no. 27).

While this remark might appear to smack against the note of stability that the Code of Canon Law gave to the notion of parishes, it rather more emphasizes the community-building actions that the Code presumes when it calls a parish “a defined community.” Pope Francis sees parishes setting things up for their own members’ convenience rather than for the “evangelization of today’s world.” He hits at those items mostly likely to be debated in many pastoral council meetings: customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures. Anyone observing a parish discuss whether to move a Mass at 8:30 to 9:00 would understand exactly the kind of self-preoccupation that holds sway over the concerns of most parishes today. Likewise, anyone looking over a typical parish bulletin would note the “language” that parishes form around their own activities, language that reflects how those inside the community relate rather than language suited for people who are not members of the community. One decisive piece of evidence of this would be the way most parishes talk about the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* as if this evangelizing process were some governmental program, complete with its alphabetical title, R.C.I.A. In fact, even calling it a “catechumenal process” would still reinforce the way believers create their own language almost as a clue to who belongs in the community, rather than find descriptions that would make this pastoral process appetizing and accessible for seekers today.

Pope Francis elaborates further on parishes in “The Joy of Gospel”:

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 him (no. 27).

Here the Holy Father specifically uses the term “pastoral conversion” as a direction for parish life. The conversion consists precisely in making parishes “more mission-oriented.” The idea appears to be that the parish does not drive the vision of mission, but rather the needs of mission today drive the agenda of the parish. The objective that pushes

mission clearly, in the mind of Pope Francis, is the friendship to which Jesus invites everyone. In other words, it is not primarily an organizational identity, but rather a profound relational identity that people form with Jesus Christ that motivates the activities of the parish. The friendship that parishioners have with Jesus should inspire them to bring others into friendship with Christ as well. So strong should this impulse be that it leads all pastoral workers to a “constant desire to go forth.” Does any observer of Catholic parishes today see this kind of pastoral conversion happening, one that leads parishes to constantly go forth? This is hardly likely.

Pope Francis expands on the missionary nature of parishes in the next paragraph:

While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if it proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be “the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters” This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed cluster made up of a chosen few. . . (no. 28).

Again, the Pope seems to take the hammer to the self-referential attitude that many have toward parishes (“self-absorbed cluster made up of a chosen few”), but he presumes that parishes can have a plasticity, an adaptivity, that allow them to engage with people in a very direct way. Francis quotes the synod Fathers when referring to a parish “living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters,” but that very sentiment becomes, for him, a way to insist on that outwardly directed activity of being in contact with the lives of people in the parish’s local area. At one point, say, in Philadelphia in the mid-1900s, it would be typical to talk about the annual visit the clergy made to all the homes of its parishioners; such activity today would strike most people as intrusive, if not outright dangerous.

There is almost a sense in which Pope Francis wants parishes to operate as permeable membranes, as organizations where the energy from those beyond the parish and the faith commitments of those active in the parish might intersect with each other. He says, for example, in the same section of “The Joy of the Gospel”:

It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to



review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented (no. 28).

The idea of a “sanctuary” where the thirsty can come to drink seems to be pointing to an open environment where anyone can drop in and find some kind of response to a question or to a need. People are on a journey in life; they need oases to provide water for them as they journey through life. Parishes should be just these oases. Pope Francis wants parishes to be “environments of living communion and participation,” obviously something directly opposed to the closed and protective stance that many parishes take. Pastoral observers almost universally note how frequently a visit from people to the parish office receives the same response: “Are you registered in our parish?”

Number 28 of “The Joy of the Gospel” yields yet one more precious gem for parishes, one that opens ways to explore evangelizing dynamics in the parish: “The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration.” Pope Francis here is specifying what the elements of permeability should be for parish life. Beginning with the sense of the parish that the Code of Canon Law specified, the Pope underlines the parish as the way Church becomes present in a specific place. This viewpoint speaks, right off the top, of the kind of social inculturation that should run through parish life. To be a presence in one territory means that a parish is not a presence in another territory. Each parish has to take on the culture of its area, its neighborhood, its social surrounding. Within this particular, incarnational context, the parish, then, exercises its various ministries, always with a view to how these ministries engage not only its own parishioners but also, more specifically, those beyond the regular membership of a parish.

The iteration that Pope Francis lists in this part of his Apostolic Exhortation provides a way to tease out the evangelizing dynamics inherent in the Catholic vision of the parish. Each provides a way to think about parishes and their ministries from the point of being “mission-oriented.”

### *1. An Environment for Hearing God’s Word*

The word “environment” indicates something more than those various ministries of the Word that the *General Directory for Catechesis* out-

lined in 1997 (call to conversion, process of initiation, ongoing growth in knowledge, liturgy, and theology). One may have many skills in connection with the Word, but one must also set up an ambience in which people are disposed to hear the Word, long to hear the Word, and put the Word readily into action. Clearly this means making the Word of God accessible on the various levels of human interaction, something far more than the study of Scripture, important as that is. The Bible, intimidating as it can be even for people long schooled in things of religion, offers a great richness when pursued on various levels at all ages of human life. Parishes must discover ways to make the Bible able to be opened by its parishioners; this means attending to the various ways parishioners are looking to engage in the Bible—be that study, or contemplative reading, or faith-sharing, or simple verses shared with the very young as children or the very old in hospice.

## 2. *Growth in the Christian Life*

Perhaps a ready word for what Pope Francis means here might be discipleship, understood as the way of life of people who, as a result of encountering Jesus and experiencing the grace of the Spirit, commit themselves to constant growing in their following of Christ. Obviously the aforementioned environment of the Word serves as an indispensable foundation for this lifelong process of growth. While much has been written about discipleship in recent years, with Sherry Waddell giving a large impetus through her influential book *Forming Intentional Disciples* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2012), Catholics do not yet instinctually think of themselves this way, let alone as the “missionary disciples” that Pope Francis expects us to be (“The Joy of the Gospel,” no. 120). This makes imperative every parish initiative to speak in terms of discipleship, to point out forms of discipleship as they are being lived and practiced, and to invite parishioners to more explicit growth in discipleship. Christian life never refers to a stable, achieved result. It always refers to an unfolding and deepening process. The incorporation of people into the Church through the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* envisions just such a process, not only during initiation, but throughout the life of a convert. If pastoral councils spent a few evenings exploring what “growth in Christian life” might mean in their particular setting, they would uncover a huge burst of evangelizing energy. Pope Francis opens “The Joy of the Gospel” with a strong reference to encounter: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask

all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (no. 3). Living our Christian life seems little more than the result of that encounter.

### *3. Dialogue*

This points to another pastoral dimension important to Pope Francis—accompaniment. If the Second Vatican Council gives us the image of the Church as the people of God on pilgrimage (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” nos. 48–49), then accompaniment follows as a necessary dimension of Christian life. Especially today’s culture, which was the impetus behind the synod for the New Evangelization in 2012, demands that people have the space and freedom to discover how God’s Spirit works in their lives. But the disciple never discovers by himself or herself alone. Pilgrimage means that we walk together, with some farther along a road than others, but all connected by their common destiny and the community they form on the way. Parish should be a place where people can engage the Gospel message at whatever stage they happen to be, whether they are caught in deep patterns of sin from which they need freedom, or whether they are entering upon a vocation, or whether they are facing an inevitable decline in life. Dialogue, as Francis makes clear in no. 128, never begins with oneself and one’s words. It begins with the other, where she or he is with whatever concern, and a slow opening of those concerns to the essential interpretation that only God’s Word can provide. One can think of many settings for dialogue in parishes—from youth ministry, to sacramental preparation, to engaging young adults, to small group sharing, to service groups reaching the marginal, to spiritual direction, to celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation, to hearing the stories of people in nursing homes. The process of dialogue seems just as important as the words of content. As Pope Francis says in “The Joy of the Gospel,” “One who accompanies others has to realize that each person’s situation before God and their life in grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without” (no. 72).

### *4. Proclamation*

What would happen if parishes inventoried themselves around the way they proclaim God’s Word? This would involve examination of one of the usual forms of proclamation that parishes experience, preaching in liturgical settings. Pope Francis indeed elaborates ideas around preaching in his Apostolic Exhortation (nos. 137–156), but proclamation rests on something more fundamental. How clear is the *kerygma*,

the proclamation of Good News, in the ministry of the parish? Here the focus has to be on the central, simple, intense way a parish expresses the essential Good News that radiates through every liturgy and ministry. It is no secret that were Catholics to be interrogated about what they think the central Gospel message is, most would be tongue-tied, not merely because they may not have been attentive in religion or theology classes but also because theology has a way of complicating things. The Pope urges us toward a first proclamation, first because it is prior to everything else and because any subsequent study only returns to the first proclamation with greater energy. In no. 156, Pope Francis gives us his version of the first proclamation: “On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: ‘Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.’” Pastors and pastoral leaders, themselves grounded in the power of initial *kerygma*, guide all the dimensions of the parish to express this Good News in the full range of ministry. Parishioners, visitors, inquirers, families—all must feel the point of this *kerygma* as the foundational instinct of their faith.

### 5. Charitable Outreach

The notion of dialogue, which we explored above, continues through the various ministries that parishes might undertake for the poor or the marginalized. Pope Francis clarifies how evangelizing the poor remains ever a two-way street. In no. 199, he states:

This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church’s pilgrim way.

Parishes need to serve the poor precisely because the poor experience the Gospel in a unique and powerful way—“they know the suffering Christ.” As a result, engaging the poor and marginalized brings us into deeper encounter with Christ and a deeper engagement with the Christian message. How humbling this must be for parishes who so readily concern themselves with the forms through which Catholic life happens, expending themselves on worship spaces and education centers, when the poor, by the simplicity of their dependence on God, already have the saving power of the Gospel at work in their lives! This

shows that the Gospel can be lived instinctually, almost at a pre-literate level, when people come to trust totally on God in their plight-filled lives. As parishes undertake various kinds of outreach to the poor, parishes will learn the Gospel in new ways; obviously, one key way involves coming to a clearer sense of our common dependency on God. A further implication of this dimension of evangelization involves the call of all parishioners to service. Perhaps here we can find a way to break apart the so-called classical “eighty-twenty” equation in parish life: twenty percent of the people give eighty percent of the resources and services, whereas eighty percent give only twenty percent of what parishes need.

### *6. Worship and Celebration*

Many parishes find parents who will do anything to make sure their children are baptized and receive first Holy Communion; the paradox is that not much seems to happen in the faith lives of many of the parents or children beyond these sacramental events. This observation shows both the strength of liturgical celebration in the lives of people and the Church and, also, the potential weakness. Whatever parents desire in bringing their children to the Church for sacramental preparation and experience, it does not always flow into life-changing decisions discernible in the disciple-like behavior of families.

When Pope Francis talks about “worship and celebration” as the last of his list of ways in which parishes live out evangelization, his words speak powerfully to the pastoral paradox that besets modern Catholicism. Without the social forms that an ethnic, immigrant Catholicism imposed on people, Catholic life can look, and be, formless.

The conjunction of the words “worship and celebration” remind us of the profound pastoral context of all sacramental celebration. No sacrament takes place in a vacuum. Every sacrament flows from lived experience and patterns of discipleship; the sacramental event both reveals the lived experience and puts future experience into a new context. Perhaps no sacrament shows this pattern as clearly as Matrimony, but the pattern is also discernible in the sacraments of Holy Orders, Reconciliation, Baptism-Confirmation, and, often, even in Anointing of the Sick. However, this pattern holds, perhaps most of all, in the regular celebration of the Eucharist, when people bring their ordinary lives (the fruit of the earth, the works of their hands) and unite them with the eternal offering of Jesus, confirming this self-gift by the reception of Holy Communion and being sent forth at the Dismissal.

Parishes that celebrate moments of worship must also cultivate the patterns of celebration that are happening, outside of and beyond, the sacramental moments themselves. That is, parishes have the opportunity to touch the lives of people in ongoing ways, relating those lives ever more clearly to our encounter with Jesus Christ and deeper reception of his Spirit. To celebrate what God is doing in the ordinary lives of believers by shining light ever more clearly on the evangelical dimensions of Catholic life provides parishes the wonderful opportunity to see their parishioners conjoin more fully the celebration of the sacraments with the celebration of Gospel vision as it grows more fully in the hope of believers.

## Conclusion

By their very nature as communities established by bishops who are understood as successors of the apostles, parishes have an intrinsic orientation toward evangelization. The Code of Canon Law provides not only an organizational definition of parish but also a detailed set of obligations that pastors, as leaders of parishes, accept. The eucharistic nature of parishes, providing the dynamics of Word and Table, show the vectors of parish life that must extend beyond the gathered congregation.

The somewhat unique role of parishes in the United States, formed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to serve immigrant populations, slanted the American understanding of parish as a community institution that facilitated inculturation into a new society. Parishes were centered on their parishioners at a time when immigrating Catholics experienced a great need to organize themselves, reinforce their national and religious culture, and educate their children for involvement in America. This inward impulse to take care of parishioners and “one’s own” has continued even though Catholics, by and large, have become suburbanites. This shifts parish energy away from dimensions of evangelization that emphasize sharing the Good News with others not involved in the parish community.

Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel,” which followed upon the synod on the New Evangelization that took place five months before his election, has directly challenged the inward-looking tendency of parishes not only in the United States but in all cultures. In calling for a “missionary option,” Francis sees parishes as adaptable communities that should attend, even at the risk of their self-preservation, to the marginalized and the poor, serving as permeable membranes between God’s Word and modern life today. The missionary

dimension of parish life entails a pastoral conversion in which every dimension of parish becomes a means of involvement with others and every parishioner becomes an agent of evangelization. Twin themes of encounter and accompaniment frame Francis' approach to discipleship and to ministry. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in fact, centers *Living as Missionary Disciples* (USCCB, 2017) precisely around these themes. Parishes, grounded in ongoing encounter with Christ, reach out to people who long for, and need, this same encounter. In reaching out to others, parishes accompany them in the various stages of their journey, humbly supporting and sharing with people, in various stages of conversion.

Francis provides ideals according to which parishes can evaluate themselves in terms of their openness, their orientation to mission, and their connection with the lives of people. He also asks that parishes evaluate themselves according to their capacity to engage in the missionary dimensions of providing an environment for God's Word, of stimulating growth in Christian life (discipleship), of being communities of dialogue with people and proclamation of the basic *kerygma* of the faith, of fostering outreach in charity to others (particularly the poor), and of being centers of worship and celebration. These ideas provide an ample agenda for parishes in their various local situations that vary greatly, of course, in their cultural situations.

Parishes deny an intrinsic orientation to evangelization only at the very risk of their meaning and also of their ultimate existence. Pope Francis openly questions if parishes have undergone enough pastoral conversion to fulfill their missionary tasks today; parishes can alleviate his concern by attending more completely to their fundamental nature of being missionary communities.

---

*Frank P. DeSiano, C.S.P., is President of Paulist Evangelization Ministries and Director of Formation for the Paulist Fathers. Email: fdesiano@pemdc.org.*