

## A Vision for the Broad Transformation of Catholics as Missionary Disciples in the Parish Context

**A special request:** In listening to this talk please put on a pastoral mind; not an administrative mind, nor an organizational mind, but a pastoral mind, which implies the caring for our brothers and sisters the way they *actually* are and the way they *really* come to us. We must come to them with God's wisdom and with a very practical consideration of human weakness, family disorder, and the woundedness and brokenness of many individuals today.

**Introduction:** We are living in times where the Church is trying to respond to what the Spirit is saying to Her.

What the Spirit is saying to Her is both *old* and *new*: It is *old* in that the work for which She was sent is to remain the same until the end of time! It is what Jesus said, *"Go and make disciples of all nations"* It is *"to preach the gospel to the whole creation."* And we have heard so many times in these recent years, *"The Church exists to evangelize"* EN 14.

It is **Old** in that the perennial call to believe in the gospel with its life-giving promises and invitations has existed for 2000 years.

It is **New**, in that we find ourselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the formidable task of re-evangelizing many Catholics who still practice religious or pious *customs and habits*, but lack a vital personal awakening in Christ, which is so crucial for living a vibrant life of faith and needed more than ever in the present day.

Yet the call is also **New** in its summons to redeem a Catholic culture that has adopted so many failing and harmful behaviors from the secular culture of our time.

We have for the past three years, here in the Archdiocese of Detroit, *begun to initiate* the work of the New Evangelization. We have been calling on the Holy Spirit to set our *hearts ablaze with the fire of God's love*. We have been calling on the Holy Spirit and earnestly praying for the release of *power from on high* for the purpose of raising up Spirit-filled evangelizers.

In the Archbishop's pastoral letter, *Unleash the Gospel* we have been called to respond to what Pope Francis describes as "*missionary conversion,*" which implies a focus on being God's agents to bring about *change in our culture, such that every person at every level of the Church, through a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, embraces his or her identity as a son or daughter of God and, in the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Programs and activities such the "Come, Encounter Christ" missions, evangelistic tools such as Alpha, Christ Life, The Life in the Spirit Seminars, along with other local initiatives are being activated to help ignite that spark in the hearts of many Catholics. And we can already observe some of the first fruits of those efforts. We can say without hesitation that we in the Archdiocese of Detroit are underway with *Unleashing the Gospel*.

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We are a Church being challenged to *shift* from being a culture of *maintenance* to becoming a Church whose *culture* is *mission*.

Despite the initial evidence of some conversion taking place, the process of changing a culture of an entire diocese so that it acquires an *evangelizing heart* takes time and persistent effort, and not without resistance.

Almost everyone these days is aware that the mode in which the Church needs to orient herself must move from simply a "Church management" approach to an "apostolic approach," from maintenance to *mission*. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the historic assumption that people will simply "come to us" and receive Jesus and join the Church is erroneous. Time does not permit us to go over the stats that verify this observation.

And there are some other assumptions that may block us from truly seeing the need for some critical changes within the life of the parish community: attitudes and mentalities we contend with.

1. Viewing the church as the local service station; I *get* my grace for the week and then I depart.
2. Or "My faith is a private matter," instead of a shared experience with brothers and sisters with whom I share a covenant.
3. Or a mindset that spiritual renewal in a maintenance mode involves just a little spiritual shot in the arm instead of a call to

**radical** discipleship and following of Christ. “Let’s just have an old-fashioned church mission and get everybody in spiritual shape.” (By the way, attendance at parish missions has gone down markedly).

Instead of viewing Christ and the life and mission of the Church as being one’s first priority, that is, the *center of my life and activities*, many give to the Church or serve within the Church, as long as it doesn’t infringe on their personal lives and priorities. Clearly, with this mentality there is precious little room for a missionary orientation. It doesn’t reflect the *“mind of Christ.”*

4. Finally, the change so profoundly needed is both individual and corporate. It’s a ripe time to open our eyes and seek a new way of seeing and doing things.

## 2. Mission ‘**within**’- mission “**without**”

When we consider the mission of the Church, we must contemplate two dimensions and not just one. There is the mission “**within,**” to its own people, and the mission “**without**” to those yet to be brought into the Body of Christ. Both dynamics are necessary and, must in some real way, occur concurrently.

In order to be truly effective, our **pastoral-evangelistic** understanding must be *realistic*, that is, *in touch with our real situation*.

As St John Paul II has said, in his encyclical *Christifideles Laici*

*“Without doubt, a mending of the Christian fabric of society is urgently needed in all parts of the world. But for this to come about, what is needed is to first remake the Christian fabric of the ecclesial community itself present in these countries and nations.”*

This mending or remaking the ecclesial fabric of the Church has two dimensions to it: 1. on the level of the individual and 2. on the corporate level of the parish.

We cannot and should not underestimate the vital importance of our mission **“within.”** Without the presence of a happy, healthy, holy people of God who are living out Christ’s teachings in a context of mutual love and support, many people will not be drawn to our parish communities.

The call issued to us in Archbishop Vigneron’s pastoral letter, *Unleash the Gospel*, to show radical hospitality to those on the “outside” will not amount to much if the local community is not vibrantly alive in Christ, and witnessing to Christ’s message to *love one another as he loves us* on the “inside” of our Catholic communities.

This need to have a mission **“within” the Church today** doesn’t require much argumentation when we consider the spiritual and communal redemption we have all needed (and continue to need), so as to become true leaven within the Church...and leaven with a potency to eventually cause our parishes to rise as well!

We are not unaware of how hyper-individualistic and often highly compromised we were in our marriages and families before that encounter with Christ. We ourselves needed this redemption! So, we can have profound sympathy for those whose daily lives are in disarray, and as such, have been blocked on their way to genuine discipleship to Christ.

Serious attention must be given to the fostering of “faith environments,” where people are excited about living the gospel in their everyday lives. Success with our mission **“within the Church”** will make a tremendous contribution to the mission **“without.”** *“See these Christians how they love one another!”*

If you haven’t already guessed it, “mission within” has everything to do with “transformation” into Christ and into a new way of life.

St. Paul exhorts us ***“to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Ep 4:1).***

## A Critical Step: Moving from Initial Conversion to Transformation

In the Archdiocese of Detroit, we have been using an expression to describe a specific kind of spiritual movement in three phases as a way of capturing the dynamism of New Evangelization activity. The expression can be expressed as “Convert”, “form”, and “send”, or “make”, “mold” and “mission”).

These three phases **do** have an order to them based in sound, spiritual logic and experience. These phases are not completely linear. That is, even while you are initially being converted (phase One) you could be on mission at some level at the same time, (Remember the woman at the well). Likewise, one must experience being transformed in Christ by having Jesus become more and more the Lord of *all* areas of his or her life and growing in the life of grace (phase Two). And yet, in that phase, God is profoundly active in the life of the Christian making him a light shining in the darkness. From this growth and docility to the Spirit’s action, the faithful acquire a confidence and zeal to become the *witnesses throughout the ends of the earth!*

Now there is another noteworthy phrase in the pastoral letter, *Unleash the Gospel*, that describes the pastoral letter’s Foundational Convictions, which says, *“he or she is formed and sent as a joyful missionary disciple”*

There is a significant implication here that whenever we employ the word “formed” or “transformation” or even “missionary”, there is a call to a *greater generosity*, a call to a *fuller surrender*, a *deeper commitment to Jesus and his mission*, not only for our sake but for the sake of others as well.

If, indeed, we do accept the call to a fuller surrender and offering of ourselves to God, we will surely experience a more complete access to the realm of grace.

Everyone who is involved in the work of evangelization is aware that initial conversion, although essential, is the critical **first step** in a process.

Yet, the Scriptures speak to us repeatedly of this indispensable *next step* which is the call to *maturity*, to the full stature of Christ. *Going on to maturity.*

In the letter of Hebrews, we read, *“Let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ, and go on to maturity” (Hb 6:1)*. Or, as Paul speaks of his apostolic ministry he boldly asserts, *“Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me” (Col 1: 28-29)*. There are a host of other texts urging us to growth and to be *transformed by the renewal of our minds, that we might know or discern the will of God” (Rm. 12: 2)*.

**It is precisely this crucial word “formed” that led Dcn. Bob and I to develop this transformational ministry effort we call New Leaven. In the following talks we will “dial in” on the ministry of New Leaven as a tool for discipleship formation and all its transformational implications.**

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In this first presentation we feel that it is necessary for us to look with **“pastoral realism”** at our present circumstances and the challenges we face as we seek to move ahead with God’s strategic plan for transformation of life and culture in the Church.

**We must clarify our thinking: Looking at the current state of affairs:**

Broadly speaking, the practice of bringing people into the life of the Church, to the Eucharistic table through the RCIA process, is not a guarantee that those who have been initiated are presented as mature in Christ. The process intends to help new believers repent of more serious sin and begin to follow Christ faithfully.

The RCIA process itself it calls for the **“neophyte year,”** which is intended to aid and accompany those new believers in their walk with Christ and establish them in solid patterns and spiritual disciplines that foster their growth in the very first year. Too often the **“neophyte year”** experience doesn’t become a reality.

In addition, we can truthfully admit that in too many cases very few parishes are providing the **“mystagogical period”** for the newly initiated, which was to be a **“deeper dive”** into the sacramental mysteries of our faith, immediately following their entry into the Church on Easter Vigil.

Instead of there being a natural process for maturing in the faith built into the ordinary life of parishes, we *suffer* from the lack of a pastoral vision and practice for achieving this goal.

We are being naïve if we believe that simply joining the Church through the initiations process is sufficient to effect a substantial transformation of life where we have effectively *remade the fabric which implies closing the gap between the gospel and everyday life*", as expressed by St. John Paul II. Something more is needed.

**Adjusting our Perspective: Transformation in an investment:**  
St. Paul describes some of his apostolic effort by saying,

*“. . . That we might present every man mature in Christ. For this we toil, striving with all the energy he mightily inspires within me.” (Col 1:28).*

Growth in Christ is not a simple task. We know we need, more dying to ourselves in order to allow “new life” in the New Man to emerge. We often read in the more recent documents of the Church that evangelization is an “urgent task” (EN, LG, CFL).

It certainly is! But *transformation* doesn't operate according to **the same principles**, as are used in the conversion process. It is a slower and more laborious process **that has to be respected allowed for.**

An analogy of the **seed of the word** can help: it is planted, and new life is activated. During this maturation stage the effort necessary is that of watering and nurturing the soil, providing proper sunlight and also protection against “choking by weeds.”

So, tending the young plant, the young Christian demands attention and timely responsiveness so that the seed might develop and come into full maturity. This process can't be rushed, but as faithfulness to God's grace and

obedience to his word are responded to, growth and deepening in Christ and Christian character transpires. Observable change becomes manifest in many cases!

When we try to rush the process of transformation we suffer something *analogous to* when powerful fruit companies, who are hungry to make money, attempt to pick the fruit too early and put it on the market. The fruit lacks its rich flavor, and often the nourishing qualities of the fruit are lacking or underdeveloped.

The attempt to move people from conversion to mission before transformation will often *compromise the spiritual grounding and foundation in a life of holiness and peace that our Lord desires of those servants and disciples* He calls into his service.

## A Vital Role of the Holy Spirit and our cooperation for Transformation

An indispensable influence for the realization of this process of transformation is the active working of the Holy Spirit in us. If it is *by the Holy Spirit that the love of God is poured into our hearts (Rm 5:5)*, then it becomes incumbent upon us all to receive the fullest expression of the Holy Spirit in us as is possible.

Unwittingly, we tend to limit the Spirit's action to the "empowerment dimension," that of signs and wonders, attending the evangelistic proclamation.

Yet Scriptures lead us to see the other dimension of the Spirit's work which is *"being filled with the Spirit" precisely so that we can be strengthened with might in the inner man" (Ep. 3:16)*. If in fact *"The Spirit helps us in our weakness" (Rm 8:26)*, then learning how to call upon and invoke the Spirit's aid for growth into Christ is not to be considered an optional extra, but rather **essential**. It is the Spirit who gives the growth!

On the practical side, the establishing of a mature foundation for Christian living implies a number of things:

1. A re-ordering of priorities according to the values of the kingdom, and the insertion of those values in all the areas of our daily life especially in the family context. To achieve that step requires *Real work*, that is,



“rolling up our sleeves” and getting into this challenge with commitment and patience.

2. As our efforts progress, the results will become observable and we will witness its fruit. Setting up clear patterns of Christian living can bring about change and new enthusiasm for the way we live our Christian lives. It will impact family prayer, having meals together, building healthy relationships, handling our finances, and he like.
3. We must embrace the process of transformation with genuine humility and without fear. Too often we have “accommodated to the spirit of the age”, as the well-known Preacher to the Papal household, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, has taught, and it is hard to admit it, and it takes courage to change these practices. Think of what he has said, we have “accommodated to the spirit of the age.”

The various forms of entanglement in the world require the disciples to respond in accordance with some key biblical images in the New Testament: 1. dying to sin and rising to a new righteousness, 2. allowing the potter (The Lord) to remold the clay (us), and finally “putting off” the “old nature” and “putting on” Christ. Notice that it is about God’s initiative and our cooperation!

And all of this requires a **carrying of the cross**: definite actions to be taken that are often quite necessary, e. g. terminating a relationship, closing off old habits, abandoning ungodly speech, internet usage, media attachments, re-examining the patterns of family life, and so on... imply the redemptive and, at times, a painful process leading to healing and restoration.

4. In a spirit of humility, we must learn to accept encouragement, wisdom, and help from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

### Coming to Grips with some modern deceptions

We face **modern deceptions** that we must disabuse ourselves of.

The **first** is this: Too often, when we think of the Church’s mission, we miscalculate thinking that the needed work can be done quickly. “A new course on Scripture will do it”, “a special weekend focused on mission will do it!” a

practical course on prayer will be the game-changer. As if the process of transformation is *simply a matter of giving out helpful information and learning certain facts, or even spiritual refreshment.*

Therefore, it is imperative that we consider the human person *as he really is* and accept with joyful realism that **authentic Christ-like transformation must go way beyond the informational level to where one's heart, will, and mind become formed for the Spirit-led life.** Rome was not built in a day, and neither will our transformation into Christ.

The **second modern deception** –Catholic maturation as a ***Do it yourself activity.*** The individual thinks, “I read certain books, make private resolutions, go more often to confession.” These are all blessed activities. However, the Christian vision is all about **helping one another in our growth in Christ** *“encourage one another as you see the day drawing near”, build one another up in love”, “love one another with brotherly affection” teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.”* And there are so many more exhortations to God's people to take real concern for one another. Our modern American, hyper individualistic culture militates against this all of the time!

### True Discipleship: a quick summary

Here we have a profile of a genuine disciple. He is a person who:

- has acquired the habit of turning to the Lord for grace and strength
- **Who is in the world but no longer of it**
- who feeds upon the living word of God, and is nourished through a faithful sacramental participation in the Church
- who has joined him or herself to some other like-minded body of Catholics for mutual care and support
- who hungers to grow in Christ and serve the Lord.
- and who knows how to bring his or her needs ***to the Lord***, calling upon the guidance and light of the Holy Spirit, and has acquired the heart of the Master, our Lord Jesus Christ.

**The “cost/effort” required to help facilitate maturation unto Christ**

Our goal is to foster the formation of genuine disciples who are ***“equipped and ready for every good work” (2 T 4:17)***

We are starting from a human condition of many frail, undisciplined and disoriented people.

We can't assume that just telling them the truth or giving them Christian literature will do the job. They desperately need accompaniment, encouragement and true, practical wisdom modeled and imparted to them.

They need to view their lives as having joined the company of disciples, those who know and love Jesus just as they do!

So, giving ourselves to this ***labor of love*** is a noble task, a necessary task and in the spirit of our times an urgent task.

I have attempted to give you the broad sweep of a vision for discipleship. This afternoon we will discuss very specifically how New Leaven ministry fits into this vision.