

Fisch-ing Lines by Deacon Howard Fischer



Between 1769 and 1823, Fr. Junipero Serra and his assistants founded 21 missions along the coast of California stretching from San Diego to Sonoma. Over the years, I have had the joy of visiting at least half of these missions. Thinking about these visits and reading today's Gospel about the sending of the disciples, I have been reflecting on the fundamental missionary nature of the Church and how well we are living up to this prime responsibility and purpose.

Pope Francis has said: "Jesus does not want to act alone. He has come to bring to the world the love of God and wants to spread that love with a style of communion and fraternity. For this reason, he forms immediately a community of disciples, which is a missionary community. The purpose is not to socialize, to spend time together. No, the purpose is to proclaim the Kingdom of God, and this is urgent! There is no time to waste in small talk, no need to wait for the consent of all; there is need only of going out and proclaiming."

In Matthew's Gospel, the last instruction that Jesus gives to his disciples is: "*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*" (Mt. 28:19-20) For most of us being a missionary is performed not in a distant land but by spreading the word among the people we encounter in our daily lives here at home. But while we may have to travel far or leave family and culture, you and I often shrink from Jesus' instruction. At times we turn the Church into a self-supporting faith group with the bulk of our energy being devoted to those on the "inside" rather than seeking those who live outside our self-inscribed boundaries, comfort zones and routines.

To carry out the Jesus-given task of spreading the Gospel, you and I can start by reaching out to those who have become separated from the Church, whether that distance is the result of some hurt or a faith crisis or due to "spiritual drift." Numbers alone indicate that we have been neglectful. With only one-third of U.S. Catholics attending Mass each week, that means more than 40 million U.S. Catholics are not fully practicing their faith. As many as 400,000 baptized Catholics in the U.S. drift away from the Church **each year**. 13% of the U.S. population describes themselves as former Catholics. We are spiritually diminished by these separations. Then there is the 22.8% of our population that practices no religion at all. Undoubtedly all of us have family members who are included in these numbers.

You and I need to take a more active role in teaching the importance of having an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and living his Gospel through the community of disciples (whom we call "the Church"). This work should be performed **not** through lecturing, badgering and judgments, but by journeying alongside others while engaged in considerate dialogue. The disengaged must see that our religion isn't primarily about rituals, but first and foremost about having an intimate relationship with a loving and forgiving God. They must see how our faith magnifies our joy in good times and sustains us and gives hope in bad times. They must see that our relationship with the Lord overflows into works of charity, compassion and forgiveness.

To be a missionary, start by including mentions of your spiritual life in conversations at lunch or on the sidelines at soccer. If you are active in a ministry seek, invite and welcome newcomers. Encourage someone who has been away to come back; offering to go to Mass together can be powerful. Let others see and hear a connection between your faith and how you live. Invite someone to come with you to hear one of our faith formation speakers during the year. Invite a friend to join you in a ministry that serves the poor, even if only for an evening. Be willing to gently share how important your faith is to your life and happiness without sounding like a nag or being overconfident. Be willing to have your invitation ignored or rejected.

May the great faith and passion that motivated Christian missionaries since the time of Jesus now motivate you and me to energetically tackle the challenges of our age. If you wish to contact me, please send an email to deaconhfw99@yahoo.com.