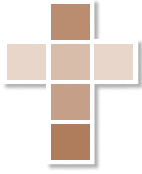


# Beyond the Pews

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From Parishioners to Disciples

Frank P. DeSiano, CSP



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Frank P. DeSiano, CSP, is President of Paulist Evangelization Ministries.

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**PAULIST  
EVANGELIZATION  
MINISTRIES**

Paulist Evangelization Ministries  
PO Box 29121  
Washington, DC 20017

[www.pemdc.org](http://www.pemdc.org)

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# Preface

**B**eyond the pews . . .

For decades, we've heard of the infamous "Catholics in the pews"—a way to reference the approximately twenty-five percent of Catholics who regularly go to Mass and support their parish.

But what lies beyond the pews? What lies beyond the formula of Catholicism that evolved in the twentieth century, that predictable Catholicism revolving around obedience and private devotion? What lies beyond the pews is exactly where Catholic attention has to be in our times. It's the world of dialogue with others, of encounter, invitation, engagement, accompaniment, and potential conversion.

For many decades now, our Church has used the word "evangelization"—still a word that turns many people off because of its connotations of pushiness and righteousness. But Catholic evangelization has always aimed at being something quite different from pushy and righteous. For Catholics, evangelization means receiving the Gospel more deeply in our own lives and sharing it with others, as is appropriate and tactful, when others are capable of hearing it.

This idea of sharing faith has gained greater momentum since 1974, when the Church held a large meeting in Rome on the theme "On Evangelization in the Modern World." The momentum has grown because the need for sharing the Gospel has grown as people have adopted new behaviors regarding regular worship and new patterns of forming their identities. We now live in a world where *having choices is the presumed starting point in our lives*.

So it's harder to pass faith on to future generations "automatically"—that is, with one's culture or one's family tradition. Rather, faith must be chosen again and again at different points in one's life. This will happen only if the option of faith is placed before people by Catholics who see themselves as disciples. We who place faith at the center of our lives will give others greater chances to respond to the invitation of the Holy Spirit, that they may also come to place Christ at the center of their lives.

Pews do not exist in vacuums. Rather, pews exist in parish churches where the Mass is celebrated, the Gospel is proclaimed, and people selflessly serve each other and the world. In this way, pews have always spoken about evangelization and mission, even if implicitly. Seeing this more clearly and explicitly is crucial now more than ever.

As you go through the ten units of this book, I invite you to think about your life as a believer and how this life has been speaking to you about discipleship and mission.



At the end of each unit, you'll find a process for group reflection and conversation. Here is the outline of how you can share with others so that we all can see more clearly how God is calling us beyond the comfort of our pews today.

**Start:** Welcome each participant, and pray together the Prayer for Sharing Joy:

*Father of infinite love, you have encountered us through Jesus, your Son. This encounter has transformed our lives through the Holy Spirit. Renew in us the joy of knowing and loving you. May your Son show us the way to live as disciples. Help us accompany each other on our journey of faith, and accompany all those whom you call to the joy of friendship with Jesus. Let us experience your love such that we radiate this love to all. We pray this through Jesus in the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

**Step Two (10-15 minutes):** Invite each participant to briefly share:

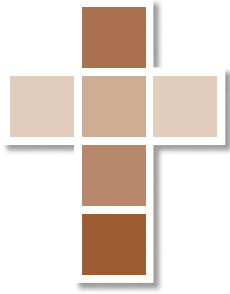
1. anything significant that has happened in their lives in the past week
2. their reaction to the material presented in the unit and how they think it might apply to their lives and their parish

**Step Three (20 minutes):** Have someone read the “Consider This Situation” material in the box. Allow each participant to share, and then seek reactions from them about their approaches and ideas.

**Step Four (30 minutes):** Have someone slowly read the Scripture passage, and then invite everyone to spend five minutes in silent contemplation, concentrating on one word or image in the passage. Then, use the discussion questions to open up sharing among the group.

**Conclude (5 minutes):** Invite participants to offer petitions (as we do on Sunday at the Prayer of the Faithful during Mass), and then conclude by praying the Our Father.

**Enjoy any hospitality you have planned.**



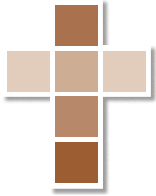
## **Part One**

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### **Parish Formation**

SAMPLE





*How can we conceive of our parishes  
as communities of missionary disciples?*

## Unit 1 **The Missionary Parish**

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Our parishes can become as familiar to us as our living rooms. The expectations we have create a sense of belonging that we just assume. There's where the sofa is; there's where the altar is. Something just makes us feel at home.

This is one reason why change is so hard for parishes. It's the space in which the family of faith has gathered Sunday after Sunday (for those fewer families and individuals who still decide to get out of bed or prioritize their schedules to attend) so that celebrating Mass and receiving Holy Communion seem like perfectly natural things to do. It's the predictability of the lives of us Catholics who commit ourselves to worship—the same parish, the same pastor, the same music, the same pulpit, and, for many still, the same seat Sunday after Sunday—that makes change difficult.

So we are not happy when something disrupts this feeling of familiarity. Once we get used to our parish church, our inertia kicks in; we expect the same thing week after week. If someone is going to do something different, we expect careful explanations. “This is why we moved this statue from one spot to another.” “This is why our music will be a little different at the ten o'clock Mass.” Or perhaps most disruptive, “This is why we have to renovate our worship space.”

We might be surprised, then, to hear just how much Pope Francis wants our parishes to change. In 2013, soon after he was elected pope, he wrote an apostolic exhortation called “The Joy of the Gospel.” He used ideas and directions that bishops from around the world had discussed in 2012, six months before his election. In one of the early sections of this apostolic exhortation, the Pope says:

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 (#27).

So however much we want our parishes to be predictable and familiar, Pope Francis has a very different desire. The “missionary option” he talks about means that the focus of parishes is not looking inward but outward—not looking, that is, to the assumed needs of those who regularly attend Mass but, rather, to the often-neglected needs of those who do not find themselves at ease in their parishes. The Pope’s list is pretty extensive—customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures. But, again, just look at what happens in a parish when it decides to shift Mass from eleven to eleven thirty! Parishioners stomp around grumbling, “How dare they change the time? Now that messes up my whole day. I’m going to find another parish that listens to me.”

In that same section, Pope Francis goes on to say this:

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 (#27).

The phrase “pastoral conversion” should make our eyebrows rise. Here, the Pope is talking about the priorities and agenda of a parish. For most Catholics, we summarize that agenda as celebrating the sacraments and teaching religion to our children. Most of the money from our contributions to the parish goes to keep the church open and running and to provide schooling or religious education for our children. But Pope Francis wants us to accomplish something more: to make our ordinary parish life “more inclusive and open” at every level. And to make our pastoral workers—our priests, deacons, parish ministers, and staff—inspired to “go forth.” As one Latin American priest put it: “Blessed are the feet, not the seat.”

Clearly, the Holy Father doesn’t think if we are celebrating the Eucharist and running a good religious education program that we are fulfilling what parish is all about. Clearly, Pope Francis is thinking about the large number of people whom Christ is calling to friendship but who have not heard the invitation—and who are not hearing the invitation because of the normal way we are doing parish. Obviously, there’s an agenda that parishes should undertake if they are

going to be “missionary oriented”—namely to be passionate about people who are not involved in the parish’s life.

We should pause and consider what this means. Part of having a familiarity with the parish points to the “automatic pilot” way in which we do things—how long Mass is, whom we usually see at Mass, who chats with whom after Mass. Could it be that just this kind of familiarity keeps parishes from the missionary responsibility they have? Could it be that taming parishes to our expectations actually keeps them from putting in the prayer, attention, and effort that being missionaries demands?

Our parishes have not begun to fulfill their roles as missionary communities . . . and we, Catholic parishioners, have barely begun to think about ourselves as missionaries, as ambassadors whom Christ uses to call others into friendship with him. In fact, unfortunately, the familiarity of our parishes often hides what Catholic life is all about . . . being friends with Jesus in such a way that we continue his mission in our world.

### **Missionary Disciples**

One of the challenges that the Holy Father has put before all of us Catholics is to get outside our comfort zones . . . to be “missionary disciples.” “The Joy of the Gospel” tells us this:

Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries”, but rather that we are always “missionary disciples” (#120).

There are two parts of this challenge to think of ourselves as “missionary disciples.” One part calls us to take for real the experience we have had of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. “Anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love” . . . we have to ask ourselves if we see ourselves as part of this group. Just as we get familiar with our parish participation, so also we can get familiar with our religious language. So often we use the words “Savior” and “grace,” but so rarely do we let these terms penetrate our actual, personal experience.

And, for the other part of this challenge, if we are missionaries “to the extent that [we have] encountered the love of God in Jesus Christ,” then we clearly have to be willing to face and engage that love in our normal Catholic lives. Many things in our Catholic history have led us to shape our Catholic thinking around obligations, ceremonies, or actions that we do almost unthinkingly. Certainly, the centuries-long battle that Catholics had with Protestants led us to rely on memorizing parts of the Catechism and striving to prove we were right about one thing or another, but these did not make it easy for us to see ourselves in the Scriptures. Every one of us can remember one or another powerful moment in our past experience as believers, but few of us think of the entirety of our Catholic lives as encounter in love with a God whose passion is to love us and save us.

So part of becoming a missionary parish will involve not only reorganizing the priorities of our parish activities to direct them more outwardly toward others but also rediscovering what has been going on in our own personal, spiritual lives—what God continues to do in our lives—layered behind the actions and feelings that we associate with “being Catholic.” This means being confident enough to start mining the relational, feeling part of what it means to be a Catholic: to be a believer in a relationship of love with God.

This is what can make us consciously missionary. To the extent that we realize the foundational love behind every moment of our Catholic lives, we will feel an incentive to let that love motivate our daily lives . . . and motivate us to help others experience that love as well. Our experience of God’s love in Jesus through the Holy Spirit—in the multiple ways and shades that happens in our everyday lives—is the fountain that can spill out to others. Overflowing with God’s love, that love can then flow more obviously into the lives of others.

Some of us have felt this powerfully when we were, say, on retreat. Some of us have felt this when we celebrated a sacrament, maybe watching our children receive their first Holy Communion. Some of us have felt this at moments of strong personal prayer, such as when we felt desperate and found consolation sitting in the back of a church late in the afternoon. The goal, however, is to make this perception of God’s love an ordinary part of our Catholic life—every day, every Mass, every prayer, every work of charity that we do.

It’s not as if the love isn’t there and we have to find it. Rather, God’s love is overwhelmingly present all the time. We mostly have to let it show itself . . . not

for our own sakes, but for the sakes of those growing numbers of people who are not in an explicit relationship with God and not celebrating this relationship through regular prayer and worship.

To be a missionary parish, to be a community of missionary disciples . . . that's the invitation, and challenge, laid before us Catholics today.



## **Conversation**

### **Prayer for Sharing Joy (together):**

*Father of infinite love, you have encountered us through Jesus, your Son. This encounter has transformed our lives through the Holy Spirit. Renew in us the joy of knowing and loving you. May your Son show us the way to live as disciples. Help us accompany each other on our journey of faith, and accompany all those whom you call to the joy of friendship with Jesus. Let us experience your love such that we radiate this love to all. We pray this through Jesus in the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

### **Sharing:**

1. What is something significant that has happened in your life in the past week?
2. What is your reaction to the material in Unit 1? How do you think it might apply to your life and your parish?

### **Consider This Situation:**

*A new pastor has been appointed to St. Margaret parish. This is his first time as pastor because he has been teaching New Testament in the seminary for the past fifteen years. After his installation, he brings together the pastoral council and begins to explore pastoral directions with them. They are concerned about the growing short-*

*fall of income over the past three years, now more than \$30,000 a year. He asks them to think about the parish they can imagine ten years into the future. What kind of parish would they want to see? They express ideals of a robust parish, a successful school, and many ministries offered by the parish staff and volunteers. He then asks them to consider the role that the Scripture can play in their plans—how it can motivate, gather, and empower people to serve as ministers in the parish and beyond. Some members of the pastoral council are skeptical. “We’ve never had much success with adult education,” they say. But their new pastor says that only by forming small groups and sharing the Scripture together can they come to new behaviors and that only in this way can parishioners come to see themselves as disciples.*

**Discuss as a group:**

How might this parish grow through putting the Scriptures at the center of its formation?

What might the obstacles be? How could these obstacles be overcome?

What steps might you take to move the new pastor’s agenda forward?

What do you think the results might actually be?

**Scripture:**

*After hearing the passage aloud, spend some time in contemplation, concentrating on one word or image in the passage.*

Luke 4:16-21

[Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring glad tidings to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”

Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion:**

- 1.** Imagine Jesus visiting your parish and going into the pulpit to read this passage from Isaiah. What do you think your parishioners would make of the passage from Isaiah? What do you think they would say the passage means to them as a parish community?
- 2.** Jesus gives a list of people to whom he feels called to minister, using the images of Isaiah the prophet. What do you make of the different images presented (the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed), and what might they be saying in terms of today’s experience? Jesus also talks about a “year acceptable to the Lord”—a time of mercy and conversion. Translate this idea into today’s situation; what would this look like today?
- 3.** Jesus boldly says he will be carrying out this vision of Isaiah, starting with this very announcement to the crowd in Nazareth. How do you see your parish carrying out the vision of Jesus in its priorities and ministries?
- 4.** If parishioners saw themselves more fully as disciples, how do you think your parish would be different?

### **Petitions and Our Father**

**Enjoy any hospitality you have planned.**



**Notes:**

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**Notes:**

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