



The Missionary Dynamic of the Parish Today

*Episcopal Commission for Doctrine
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops*

I. Introduction: The Current Situation and the Church's Call

Evangelization takes place in obedience to the missionary mandate of Jesus: '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). In these verses we see how the risen Christ sent his followers to preach the Gospel in every time and place, so that faith in him might spread to every corner of the earth.¹

1. Spreading faith in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of humanity, is the Church's fundamental and primary mission. We have been commissioned by the Lord to "go" and bring him to our world. But we do not receive this mission alone; we are sent forth as members of Christ's body, which is the Church. This Church, continually sustained and renewed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, is not only a mystical entity, but is also a structured, concrete reality² that is present in each diocese led by a Bishop in communion with the Successor of Peter, in a spirit of episcopal collegiality.³ The life and mission of the particular Church (that is, the diocese) has a primordial bond of communion with the universal Church and thus participates in "the Church of Christ, one, holy, catholic and apostolic."⁴ However, it is through the parish that most Canadians experience the Catholic Church.

For this reason, the Episcopal Commission for Doctrine is offering this reflection on the mission of the parish today, in light of the Church's call to the new evangelization. This reflection is directed primarily to pastors and those who serve in parishes, but also to all Catholics who wish to better understand the role of the parish in the Church's mission. It complements the Commission's recent work, *The Essential Elements of Evangelization Today* (2013),⁵ which outlines three fundamental components of evangelization.

¹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 19.

² *Lumen Gentium* 8: "Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation through which He communicated truth and grace to all. But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word."

³ *Lumen Gentium* 23: "The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and of the faithful. The individual bishops, however, are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches, fashioned after the model of the universal Church, in and from which churches comes into being the one and only Catholic Church."

⁴ Paul VI, *Christus Dominus* 11.

⁵ Commission for Doctrine of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Essential Elements of Evangelization Today*, 2013. The text is available online at ccb.ca, and can be ordered in printed form from ccbpublications.ca.

Our Current Situation

2. For centuries the parish church was the defining landmark and point of reference in many Canadian communities. Yet today, many parishes in Canada are being influenced by cultural, sociological and demographic changes. These changes show us that there are profound inequalities in society, growing tensions, an erosion of shared values, and a loss of the traditional points of reference.

In cities like Toronto and Vancouver, the Catholic population is growing rapidly, in large part because of immigration, and new churches are being built. On the other hand, due to aging and declining Mass attendance, many other dioceses throughout Canada have implemented reorganization plans, sometimes resulting in the closing, clustering, or merging of parishes.⁶ In many of the dioceses in the province of Quebec, for example, this process has been underway for some time. While these changes can at times appear discouraging from a certain point of view, they have provided an opportunity to refocus attention on the true mission of the parish and the diocese. When parishes have been closed, clustered, or merged, the goal in this restructuring is not simply “maintenance” but rather the reinvigoration of the missionary calling of the people of God. Bishop Gilles Lussier of Joliette, Quebec, describes the goal of reorganizing the parishes in his diocese in this way: “We are being called to move from a pastoral strategy of maintenance and supervision to one of mission and multiplication, and to form disciples who are missionary above all else.”⁷

3. As a communal structure, the modern parish has developed throughout history. For this reason, it is possible that future Church structures might develop that could dramatically alter the parish. To a certain extent, we already see this happening throughout Canada in cases where existing parishes are regrouped into a larger entity such as a “parish unit” or “community of communities.”⁸

All of this attests to the flexibility of parishes and their ability to assume the forms necessary to achieve their mission of evangelization. As Pope Francis clearly states:

The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish 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

6 Many Canadian Bishops have issued pastoral statements on the restructuring of parishes in their dioceses, including: Ronald Fabbro (London, 2006), André Gaumond (Sherbrooke, 2009), Yvon Joseph Moreau (Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière, 2010), Gilles Lussier (Joliette, 2011), André Rivest (Chicoutimi, 2013), Jean Gagnon (Gaspé, 2013), Gérald Cyprien Lacroix (Québec City, 2012), Pierre-André Fournier (Rimouski, 2012), Dorylas Moreau (Rouyn-Noranda, 2013), Luc Bouchard (Trois-Rivières, 2013), Paul-André Durocher (Gatineau, 2013).

7 Bishop Gilles Lussier, *Vers un nouveau réseau de paroisses au service de la mission* (Église de Joliette, June 29, 2011), 6.

8 This term, “community of communities” has been used by Bishop Luc Bouchard of Trois-Rivières in a 2013 pastoral letter (*Perspectives d’espérance pour le diocèse de Trois-Rivières*, 2013).

out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. 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. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. 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.⁹

It is in this present challenging context that the Church has been invited by Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis to embrace not only a "new evangelization" but a rediscovery of the Church's missionary dynamism. In order to achieve this, Pope Francis has called for a "missionary transformation" of the Church.¹⁰

4. There is no doubt that Christians today find it difficult to live by the words of the Gospel and to accept the person of Christ and his life-giving message. We live in an era and culture which are increasingly secularized. The explicit signs of this "cultural secularism" are the denial of any mention of God, the false opposition of faith and reason, and the loss of a transcendent view of the human person and his or her destiny. The implicit signs are evident in daily life: the cultural and moral relativism which questions the basic meaning of human life and relationships, often promoting self-centered aspirations, a consumer mentality, and a growing spiritual malaise. Thus Christianity is being pushed further and further to the margins of our society. This ultimately touches the very fabric of Christian life, but particularly our parish communities.

5. Given this cultural context – as witnessed by many of our particular Churches – parishes are exploring new ways of Christian living which will require sacrifice, prayer, discernment, and the ongoing action of the Holy Spirit whom Christ promised to his Church (Jn 14.16, 26). Cardinal Gérald Cyprien Lacroix of Québec City, commenting on the situation in his archdiocese, recently declared that "the challenges we face in evangelization, our shrinking human resources, and our precarious financial state have made the *status quo* no longer possible. . . . Since we are called to be a Church that is more and more missionary, we have to reconsider our parish structures."¹¹ The words of Bishop Jean Gagnon of Gaspé, Quebec, challenge us in the same way: "We must become more and more a missionary Church, living the Gospel and bringing the light of Jesus into our midst . . . Everyone must serve their parish with the attitude that they are united in the same mission: to make known the Gospel of Christ so 'that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (Jn 10.10)."¹²

9 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 28.

10 Chapter One of Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* is titled "The Church's Missionary Transformation."

11 Gérald Cyprien Cardinal Lacroix, *Ensemble pour la mission* (Église catholique de Québec.org, 2012).

12 Bishop Jean Gagnon, *Lettre pastorale : L'urgence d'agir dès maintenant pour l'avenir de nos communautés* (Diocese of Gaspé, March 19, 2013) 3, 14.

6. Parish communities throughout Canada are diverse in their origins, their history and in the current pastoral situations they face. They are found in urban centres like Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto, and in rural areas like those found in much of northern Canada. Some serve as missions in the remote parts of the country, while others were established in larger cities to serve ethnic communities and have now become multicultural. Nevertheless, the challenges which many parishes presently face are also the direct result of the following cultural and societal changes: an overall decline in weekly Mass attendance, the aging and shrinking of congregations, and the diminished relevance of the Lord's Day and the importance of the Sacraments, especially the Sunday Eucharist.¹³ The emphasis on the freedom to choose one's community of worship regardless of geographical boundaries has contributed to a loss of identification with a territorial parish community. This crisis of not being rooted in a community also affects the life of faith, as well as the promotion of vocations to the priesthood, consecrated life, the diaconate, and lay ministry. There are also new pastoral demands in some parishes due to the erosion of family life and the elimination of publicly-funded Catholic school systems in Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec. For some, the particular challenges noted may appear to be signs of crisis in the very life and mission of the parish, but they can also be viewed as opportunities for renewal.

The Church's Call

7. In an address to parishioners Pope Benedict XVI said: "Let us not wait for others to bring different messages, which do not lead to authentic life. You yourselves must become missionaries of Christ to your brothers and sisters wherever they live, work, study or pass their free time ... Faith must be lived together, and the parish is the place in which we learn to live our faith as part of the 'us' of the Church."¹⁴

Parishes, then, are called to be missionary – not necessarily to foreign countries – but primarily to those around them. This is the new evangelization: our primary evangelizing mission today is not abroad, but within our own cities and communities.

Yet, as Benedict XVI pointed out, in order for this outward mission to occur, the faithful must first be nourished and strengthened inwardly through the life of their parishes. The fact that the parish is at the heart of both the outward missionary thrust of the new evangelization, and of the inward strengthening of its members for mission, is what defines its *missionary dynamic*.

8. This commitment to mission is something the Lord requires not only of individuals, but also of families and of the whole parish community. Just as it pleased God to save us not only individually but as a people,¹⁵ so does he call Christian communities to

13 This has been observed by numerous Canadian Bishops. Cf, e.g., Bishop Gilles Lussier, *Vers un nouveau réseau de paroisses au service de la mission* (Église de Joliette, June 29, 2011), 5. Bishop Pierre-André Fournier, *Lettre pastorale : L'heure est venue* (En Chantier no 78) 1. Bishop Paul-André Durocher, *The Spirit of Change: Pastoral Letter on the Financial Situation of Parishes and the Diocese* (Archdiocese of Gatineau, 2013), 1. Bishop André Gaumont, *Vers un nouveau réseau de paroisses* (Archdiocese of Sherbrooke, 2009), 4.

14 Benedict XVI, Address to Parishioners of the Parish of San Giovanni Battista de La Salle al Torino (March 5, 2012).

15 *Lumen Gentium* 9.

“go forth,”¹⁶ joining in his mission of redemption. This mission is one of evangelization, a process comprised of three activities.¹⁷ In each of these activities, we are called to “go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.”¹⁸

- a. **Missionary:** directed toward non-believers and those who have distanced themselves from the faith.
- b. **Catechetical:** offered to those who have embraced the Gospel and for those who need to complete or strengthen their initiation.
- c. **Pastoral:** directed toward the Christian faithful growing in faith in the heart of the Christian community.

The new evangelization will require the parish community to find new approaches to missionary, catechetical and pastoral activity so as “to be Church” in today’s changing social and cultural milieu. Yet these new approaches are firmly grounded in the Church’s missionary identity.

9. As a concrete sign of the Church’s presence in society, parishes should be places for a new dialogue to occur between contemporary culture and the Gospel of Christ; and for a profound encounter between Christ, the Living Word, and those who have yet to meet him. This encounter will have a different focus and strategy according to the three elements of evangelization mentioned above.

Through “missionary activity,” a parish community reaches out to those who do not know Christ by welcoming them and sharing the Good News with them. Now more than ever, this is a mission to the baptized as well.

“Catechetical activity” will continue to support those who respond positively to God’s offer of grace so that they may learn more deeply about the mysteries of the faith. However, a fresh focus may need to be given to methods of invitation and initiation into the faith. The presentation of the Church’s teaching will require a more reasoned and explanatory approach so as to answer the questions of the day. Parish catechesis will also lead to a greater desire for the reception of the Sacraments, for prayer, and for the spiritual life.

Finally, the “pastoral activity” of the parish community must continue to spiritually strengthen parishioners to live their faith boldly and to share it through witness and outreach to others. These activities will also be shaped by the diverse make-up of parish communities and by the need to collaborate with the diocese and the local community.

All of this will require a profound conversion on the part of people and communities, part of what Pope Francis has called “the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are.”¹⁹

16 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 20.

17 Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* 49.

18 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 20.

19 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 25.

II. How can the Parish Carry Out its Call for the New Evangelization?

Missionary Activity

10. We live in a pluralist culture in which many have never heard the Gospel of Christ. Many Catholics, “baptized, but insufficiently evangelized,”²⁰ no longer practice their faith and need to hear a fresh proclamation of that Gospel. To carry out this proclamation, the parish community must be willing to step out into its neighbourhood and into the wider society. “But since the People of God lives in communities, especially in dioceses and parishes, and becomes somehow visible in them, it is also up to these to witness to Christ before the nations.”²¹ Parishes may choose to organize new and creative programs of outreach, which could be as simple as inviting people to Mass or informing them of the services offered through the parish. What is important, however, is that parishioners go out and bear witness to people outside of their parish community.

In all this, the goal should be to propose the faith and invite those who have not yet responded to the Good News or who no longer practice their Catholic faith to encounter Christ in and through a vibrant parish community. The Church, through the parish and its parishioners, must connect with them in a human way using everyday language, humbly inviting them to “come and see” the Lord (Jn 1.46). Saint John Paul II even went so far as to state that the effectiveness of a parish “must be measured in light of this missionary imperative,” which calls us “to come out of ourselves and to share with others the goods we possess, starting with the most precious gift of all – our faith.”²² As Francis puts it: “Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction.’”²³

11. The parish’s presence in society should be strengthened through involvement in social projects, particularly those that serve the poor and the marginalized and promote everyone’s right to life. Indeed, parish communities must continually “carry out a sincere review of their lives regarding their solidarity with the poor”²⁴ so that witness of word is matched by witness of life. The Gospel also places an obligation upon us that we love one another just as Christ has loved us (cf. Jn 13.34). Yet the poor are never to be seen as an obligation or as a project; rather, they are human beings loved by God and should be welcomed into the parish community. It is an important sign of the coming of Christ’s kingdom that “the humble and the poor are evangelized, become his disciples and gather together ‘in his name’ in the great community of those who believe in him.”²⁵

20 Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* 96.

21 *Ad Gentes* 37.

22 John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* 49.

23 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 15.

24 *Redemptoris Missio* 60.

25 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 12.

Catechetical Activity

12. While the Church is a teacher, she is also a community of disciples. As disciples we are all constantly discovering how better to know and follow our Lord. When parishes recognize their constant need for growing in faith, and embrace opportunities for formation and learning, they can also become more open to new and creative ways of carrying out this mission. The transmission of the faith involves the gifts and genius of the local community. This recognition of our constant need to know Christ better should give rise to programs and practices within parishes that allow for the ongoing formation of all parishioners, so that all may grow in their relationship with Christ.²⁶ It also calls for the continual evaluation of parish programs, testing them to see whether they are really helping the Church in her mission of proclaiming Christ to the world. Pope Benedict XVI stated that the word of God must be central in this regard: "This does not mean adding a meeting here or there in parishes or dioceses, but rather examining the ordinary activities of Christian communities, in parishes, associations and movements, to see if they are truly concerned with fostering a personal encounter with Christ, who gives himself to us in his word."²⁷

13. The importance and centrality of the word of God becomes particularly apparent when parish communities face extended periods without a priest to celebrate Mass. In such instances, liturgies of the word can serve to unite the community more closely to Christ as they await in hope the celebration of the Eucharist. Bishop Dorylas Moreau of Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec, makes this clear: "Turning to the scriptures remains a fundamental criterion in the revitalization of a community. For this reason, we are called to celebrate the word of God with creativity, even when the community cannot celebrate the Eucharist at its Sunday assembly."²⁸ This does not mean, however, that these communities are no longer called to be missionary. In fact, the Church's missionary imperative springs from the word of God, in which Jesus commissions his Church to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28.19).

14. New catechetical initiatives should be discerned by the parish community, under the guidance of the catechists, the pastor and the Bishop. These initiatives might begin to deepen in the parish the understanding and celebration of the Sunday Eucharist, preaching the word, *lectio divina* but also the growing hunger for spirituality by recovering forms of prayer such as devotions, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and contemplation, in a way appropriate to the circumstances of each community.

²⁶ Cf. *General Directory for Catechesis* 139.

²⁷ *Verbum Domini* 73.

²⁸ Bishop Dorylas Moreau, *Quel renouveau pour les paroisses?* (Diocese of Rouyn-Noranda, 2013), n. 2.

15. While the parish community fosters the means of growth in the interior life in which its members grow together “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4.13), it does not exist only for itself. Its mission is to make disciples for the Lord (cf. Mt 28.19) and to spread his kingdom. This requires the full participation of all the faithful in parish life. To many in our day, the call to go out and evangelize sounds foreign and its relationship to parish life can be difficult to see. Yet “evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.”²⁹ This sacred duty and privilege falls not only to the pastor, but indeed to all the faithful; it would be impossible to carry out without their involvement. “All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients.”³⁰

Pastoral Activity

16. Pastoral strategies of welcome and hospitality are important for the vitality of a parish. They strengthen a sense of belonging and the awareness of the need to invite others into a community actively living the Christian faith. As Cardinal Thomas Collins of Toronto states, “The witness of a dynamic parish can lead those who have drifted away to rediscover the gift of faith and to return home to a vibrant community. Just as the star guided the wise men to Christ, so too our parishes can serve as beacons of hope.”³¹ The best way for a parish to attract people is to have a vibrant pastoral life. This can be manifested in various ways, including the offer of information and assistance at the doors of the church before liturgies and parish events, flexible hours for parish services, and the creation of a parish committee or organization focused on helping newcomers or those who have not been practicing regularly to know about the parish. As a form of outreach, the parish should provide visits to the sick, outreach to the poor, contact information, Mass times, pastoral programs and services, catechesis for Sacraments, a website, and it should offer parish gatherings to address pastoral issues. Parish groups might be invited to survey the pastoral, sacramental and spiritual needs of the parishioners or to assess creative strategies and programs of outreach, especially to those who may have become indifferent or lax in their commitment to the Christian faith and their sense of belonging to the Church.

17. The building of community starts with the welcoming of newcomers, but it also relies on forming new relationships of commitment, of being called to invest oneself in the life of the parish and in creating a sense of communal identity. Community is built when people are given responsibility, and take that responsibility upon themselves. This may be especially challenging in urban, multi-ethnic or diverse parishes. However, large communal events can elicit gifts of service from parishioners and promote a spirit of generosity toward the pastoral needs in the parish or wider community. By welcoming newcomers and sharing meals as Jesus did (cf. Mk 2.15-17), we extend the hospitality of welcome given to us by the Lord.

29 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 14.

30 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 120.

31 Thomas Cardinal Collins, Archdiocese of Toronto Pastoral Plan (Archdiocese of Toronto: February 2013), 5.

The focus of a parish community must always give priority to persons over material goods such as the parish building and facilities. "An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others."³²

18. When considering the welcome and integration of people into the parish community, we must not forget the young and their families. The form of pastoral activity known as youth ministry is extremely important. In a visit to our continent, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of "our need to speak to the hearts of young people, who, despite their constant exposure to messages contrary to the Gospel, continue to thirst for authenticity, goodness and truth. Much remains to be done, particularly on the level of preaching and catechesis in parishes and schools, if the new evangelization is to bear fruit for the renewal of ecclesial life in America."³³ The fruit of effective youth and young adult ministry, then, not only brings a distinctive character to the Church, but also vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life, to lay ministry, as well as healthy and holy families.

19. There are various reasons for newcomers to become involved in a parish community. For some it might be to have their personal and spiritual needs met, for others it is the desire to share their gifts or to work with others in serving the vulnerable or marginalized. This welcome can also be continued through the formation of small faith communities within the parish.³⁴ Such lay-led communities can provide fellowship, a sharing of the word of God, and allow for a dialogue between faith and life to occur so that people can honestly share their joys and struggles and receive encouragement.

Such communities, like all lay movements and associations, bear real fruit when they remain rooted in the unity of the universal Church.³⁵ As Pope Francis writes, "Other Church institutions, basic communities and small communities, movements, and forms of association are a source of enrichment for the Church, raised up by the Spirit for evangelizing different areas and sectors. Frequently they bring a new evangelizing fervour and a new capacity for dialogue with the world whereby the Church is renewed. But it will prove beneficial for them not to lose contact with the rich reality of the local parish and to participate readily in the overall pastoral activity of the particular Church. This kind of integration will prevent them from concentrating only on part of the Gospel or the Church, or becoming nomads without roots."³⁶

32 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 24.

33 Benedict XVI, *Response to Questions Posed by Bishops of the United States*, Washington, DC, April 16, 2008.

34 Such communities have been recommended by the magisterium in, e.g., *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 58; *Redemptoris Missio* 51; *Verbum Domini* 73.

35 Cf. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 58.

36 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 29.

20. For many today – including Catholics who no longer practice the faith – the experience of the liturgy may seem foreign. Therefore, every effort should be made to assist them in fully understanding the liturgical symbols, actions and language so that they might grow towards a full, active, and conscious participation in it.³⁷ This can take place through catechetical programs intended for this purpose, as well as through the mystagogical experience of the liturgy itself at appropriate liturgical seasons, or through workshops and days of retreat. Indeed, “The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving.”³⁸ This is true for liturgies of the word as well as for Mass.

21. The fostering of a spirituality of communion and stewardship can inspire parishioners to offer a greater welcome to newcomers and to participate fully in parish life. Such a spirituality also leads to appreciation for the presence of diverse talents and gifts in a parish community, sacrificial giving, and collaboration with others to serve the pastoral needs of the parish, diocese and wider community. Thus, if the parish is to carry out its mission and be truly alive, it is necessary that all its members participate in its life.

22. The very nature of the parish is to be missionary. The life of the parish does not rest on the shoulders of a few volunteers, but on all the baptized, whose gifts are essential to the parish’s mission. When people are able to share their God-given gifts and respond to their baptismal vocation, they offer themselves more fully to the task at hand. In this regard, the faithful of the parish community should, as much as possible, be involved in creating a missionary plan for their parish. This could be done by the pastoral council or by other means.

23. The pastor of the parish, as a representative of Christ who is the Head and Shepherd of the Church, has as his principal mission the proclamation of the word of God and the sanctification of men and women through the celebration of the Sacraments.³⁹ To support this, the pastor should delegate appropriate temporal and administrative tasks to qualified and faithful laypersons, thereby fostering a broader participation of the laity in the parish’s affairs. This is all the more important when a pastor is responsible for more than one parish. When parishioners become closely involved in the life of the parish community, they themselves often become evangelized through the sharing of their own faith. When assigning particular ministries and responsibilities in the parish, care should be taken that the particular gifts of young people, new immigrants, and those often marginalized, are not passed over, for these groups have much to offer our parish communities by way of energy, vitality, and ideas.

37 Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14.

38 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 24.

39 Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* 15.

III. Conclusion

24. Although catechetical programs, committees, and pastoral initiatives are all important in the parish's mission, most important of all is prayer and trust in the Lord, whose love urges us on (cf. 2 Cor 5.14). According to Pope Francis, "without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out. The Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer, and to my great joy groups devoted to prayer and intercession, the prayerful reading of God's word and the perpetual adoration of the Eucharist are growing at every level of ecclesial life."⁴⁰

25. Without prayer, no parish community can succeed in its mission. As Benedict XVI stated, "Apostolic and missionary fruitfulness is not principally due to programmes and pastoral methods that are cleverly drawn up and 'efficient', but is the result of the community's constant prayer."⁴¹ Francis has more recently declared that "a Church which evangelizes must always start with prayer, with asking, like the Apostles in the Upper Room, for the fire of the Holy Spirit. Only a faithful and intense relationship with God makes it possible to get out of our own closedness and proclaim the Gospel with *parrhesia*. Without prayer our acts are empty, and our proclamation has no soul, it is not inspired by the Spirit."⁴² "Moreover, for the mission to be effective, communities must be united, that is, they must be 'of one heart and soul' (cf. Acts 4.32), and they must be ready to witness to the love and joy that the Holy Spirit instills in the hearts of the faithful (cf. Acts 2.42)."⁴³

26. The mission of the parish today is challenging indeed. Yet as Christians, we possess the Good News that our world needs, and is in fact longing for: "How important it is for our time to discover that *God alone responds to the yearning present in the heart of every man and woman!*"⁴⁴ The great treasure held within the parish is not any temporal wealth, but rather the living God revealed in Jesus Christ and made present to us by the power of the Holy Spirit, whom the world so desperately needs.

May our parish communities, within themselves and in their dealings with society, work to lead all men and women to a greater knowledge of, and love for, Jesus Christ, and by doing so truly become "the initial budding forth of [his] kingdom."⁴⁵ In doing this the faithful within our parishes demonstrate their love for the Lord who told us that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt 6.21).

40 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 262.

41 Cf. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 75.

42 Francis, General Audience, 22 May 2013.

43 Benedict XVI, *Papal Message for World Youth Day 2008*, 24 July 2007.

44 *Verbum Domini* 23.

45 *Lumen Gentium* 5.

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