

Discipleship: Pope Francis' Lexicon; Advent Spiritual Reflection; Baltimore Area Federal Association, Order of Malta

I. Introduction

A. What a pleasure to be with all of you this evening to spend a little time together during this season of Advent to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord. I've had the privilege of being with a number of you for breakfast - the Catholic Charities Leadership Breakfast at Our Daily Bread took place this morning and now I have the privilege of being with you again this evening for dinner & prayer. I just want to assure you that lunch just wasn't the same without you!

B. One of my favorite Advent meditations comes from St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the great Cistercian Abbot, preacher, and reformer who hails to us from the 12th C. St. Bernard speaks of the three comings of Christ: the first coming of Christ in the humility of human flesh in stable at Bethlehem; the second and glorious coming of Christ at the end of time; and a third coming, that is to say, the presence of Christ in our daily lives through Word, Sacrament, especially the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance, through daily prayer, interactions with others as well as works of charity and mercy. During Advent we are called to attend to this third or intermediate coming of Christ so that our hearts will be prepared to celebrate in love the first coming and ready to greet the Lord at the end of our lives and at the end of time when Christ will come to judge the living and the dead.

C. In the meantime, as the Lord comes to us each day, he calls us to be his followers, he calls us to be his disciples. The word "disciple" is very much a part of our Christian vocabulary. The notion of discipleship is found everywhere in the New Testament (250 X!). We read how Jesus sent out his disciples two by two to preach the Good News and heal the sick. We remember his words, "This is how all will know

you are by disciples— by your love for one another” (Jn. 13:35). We think of examples of discipleship among Jesus’ friends: Martha who attended to the details of hospitality and Mary, her sister, who sat at the feet of Jesus listening to his words. These are but a few of the examples of discipleship in the New Testament.

D. As the Church in the United States and beyond really focuses on evangelization, you and I hear the words “disciple” and “discipleship” bandied about more often. In fact, I sometimes think that around here I am the ‘bandier-in-chief’ because I’m always running around talking about our becoming missionary disciples. In fact, that is at the very heart of plans that are underway to revitalize parishes in every part of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. But do we stop and reflect enough on what it means to be a disciple? Do we take time to find out what Scripture means when it uses the words “disciple” and “discipleship”? And have we understood Pope Francis’ call that we be disciples in name and in fact, something about which he is indeed very insistent?

E. I think it is good Advent preparation to reflect prayerfully on discipleship. For if we greet the Lord at Christmas and on judgment day as his true disciples, as followers who know and love him so much that we are like him, then we shall experience joy in this world and complete joy in the next. So what I propose to do this evening is to talk about discipleship but using what I call the Pope Francis “lexicon” – the key words that Our Holy Father uses to describe discipleship, confident that his way of thinking and speaking about this subject will help us to live out our calling to be the Lord’s disciples more fully.

II. Brief Look at the Scriptural Notion of Discipleship

A. Before we get to Pope Francis’ key words, however, it is good to remind ourselves what the very word “disciple” and “discipleship” mean in the Scriptures. Of course, that could occupy volumes so all I’m giving you are the Cliffs Notes merely to stimulate your thoughts, your prayers, your questions. We shouldn’t be surprised that the notion of discipleship pre-dates Jesus’ earthly life. There were disciples in the Old Testament – students who studied the Law under a prominent and accomplished rabbi. These students kept their distance from the rabbi and during

the time of their apprenticeship were his servants. And while they absorbed knowledge from the rabbi and respected him deeply, they did not model their lives on the rabbi but rather on the observance of the Law.

B. Jesus himself was often addressed as “rabbi” and his followers were also presumed to be rabbinical students. Nonetheless, Jesus transformed the OT notion of discipleship when he said, “Come, follow me!” – not only “learn from me” but “give me your all” and “become like me”. He issued this call not merely to promising students of the Law but to people with no particular qualifications at all, except a willing heart. Among those whom the Lord called was a tax-collector, St. Matthew, as well as Peter, who would describe himself as “a sinful man”. Whereas the rabbis demanded that their students dedicate themselves completely to the study of the law, Jesus demanded that his disciples give up everything, even family and possessions. So Matthew left the tax-collector’s post and Peter, James, and John their nets. As the Messiah, as God’s Incarnate Son, the Lord asked his followers – the Twelve to be sure but indeed all his disciples – to put their entire life and destiny into his hands – to trust him completely, to listen to him intently, and to follow him unreservedly.

C. Jesus addressed the call to discipleship to all who came after him – those who would become his apostles (and their successors in Holy Orders) and those who, in our day, we would think of as lay men and women. It is a call that is deeply personal for we are called to resemble the Messiah in depth of our hearts but it is also a call that is very public for we are called to follow Jesus in some vocation, some state of life and our words and actions are to be indicative of a mind and heart conformed to Christ. What’s more, Jesus’ disciples were never called as solitary individuals but rather as members of a community of disciples, of which the twelve apostles were (and are) the core. So it’s not merely a matter of how individuals are formed in the following Christ but how whole communities are formed to bear witness to Christ. To put it more clearly, “discipleship is a team sport!”

III. A Call Too Lofty?

A. Right about now, you and I may be getting the “willies”. The biblical notion of discipleship seems so exalted, so out of reach. Who of us has a heart completely

conformed to the Christ of the Beatitudes? Who of us spends the bulk of our time listening to Jesus speaking words of life to us? Who of us has left everything behind to follow the Savior? Most of us find ourselves leading busy distracted lives, rightly absorbed by the needs of our families and also by work and other pursuits. with not enough time for prayer, reflection, evangelization, and charity. How can we respond to the radical idea of discipleship we find in the Bible?

B. You can see how and why dedicated followers of Jesus soon found themselves organizing what today we know as religious orders, religious communities, based on prayer, common life, and the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. Even today there are flourishing religious communities and a good number of lay women and men who have consecrated themselves to Christ while living in the world. Yet most of us, myself included, do not belong to a religious order and often, like yourselves, find myself living a busy distracted life. By the time I get to my umpteenth meeting for the day, I find myself asking the Lord, “Is this really want you me to be doing?” And so we might say, we’d love to be follow the Lord wholly and entirely yet it isn’t feasible to join a religious order or to be a hermit or even to a consecrated lay woman or man living in the world. What should we do?

C. In our times and in these days in particular, Pope Francis offers us good guidance. You might say that he brings discipleship down to earth without diluting it. By his own example and by his way of explaining the faith, he strives mightily to take away our excuses – mine and yours – for not being and becoming the Lord’s wholehearted discipleship. And he does this by providing us with what I call “a discipleship lexicon” – not merely words but not merely abstract ideas but a way of discipleship based on lived experience – a notion of discipleship that really related to the way we are and the way we live. In Pope Francis faith meets life and life meets faith. So let us take a tour of the Francis lexicon of discipleship.

IV. The Francis Lexicon: Mercy

A. The first word in the Francis lexicon is mercy. We have just completed an extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy but that does not mean that God’s mercies are any less generous this year than last. Pope Francis called the Year of Mercy because he wanted to call our attention to the enduring truth that God’s mercy is at the very

heart of our faith: “God so loved the world that he sent us his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him might have life eternal” – the famous John 3:16. God so loved the world, God so loves us, God wants to draw close to us that he will go to the greatest length to reveal himself to us, to teach and admonish us, to draw close to us in human history – even to the point of sending his Son to assume our human and to die for our sins. The Pope makes the point the mercy is not merely one attribute of God among many. Rather it is how God reveals himself to us: Jesus is “the face of the Father’s mercy”. Jesus reveals the Father’s merciful heart & communicates his mercy through the Spirit. Thus, Pope Benedict’s first encyclical took up the Scriptural truth, “God is love” and Pope St. John Paul II, following the inspiration of St. Faustina Kowalska, made mercy a central theme of his pontificate and gave us the beautiful letter *Dives in Misericordia*, taken from St. Paul’s words, “God who is rich in mercy” . . .

B. And so the whole of the Church’s ministry should be all about mercy – Mercy is the substance of what the Church preaches from the pulpit and celebrates at the altar, and dispenses in her day to day ministry . . . a mercy that encourages us such that we begin to think that discipleship is in reach. Once we allow mercy to find us and allow God in his mercy to forgive us, we experience the joy of all those healed by Jesus in the Gospel – not just physically healed but spiritually healed – “Go,” he says, “and sin no more!” Just to think that God is love and mercy itself and that Jesus came to reveal the merciful heart of God should make us happy. If anything should put our priorities in order and put our preoccupations in perspective – this should be it: We are in the hands of a loving and merciful Father. Pope Francis is trying his best to ensure that the Church, like Jesus, always has merciful face that smiles and invites in a world where mercy and joy are in short supply.

C. This, of course, is not how many people think of the Church. The Church is often seen as bastion of rigidity and legalism. When the Pope extended the faculty to priests of forgiving the sin of abortion, Chris Cuomo on CNN commented, that this was a great change because the Church always ostracized those women who had abortions. That isn’t true; in fact, the Church is dedicated to caring for and healing those women yet, Mr. Cuomo voiced a view of the Church that is all too prominent and sadly, sometimes, even often, is buttressed by pastoral insensitivity. Pope Francis knows that this impression will not be erased by a stroke of the pen but

rather by the gentility and love of those who of us whose hearts have been touched and transformed God's mercy, such that we ourselves will be merciful like the Father, such that you and I will be agents of God's love in the Church and in the world. "They will know we are Christians by our love!" we used to sing.

D. So the starting point is that the Lord's disciples are not prefabricated saints but rather, real flesh and blood human beings with faults, foibles, and failings, who need forgiveness from God and from others and who strive and stumble but are picked up by God's grace, dusted off again, and set upon the way of salvation. That's us! God wants us all to be saved! He's on our side! Let us rejoice!

V. The Francis Lexicon: Encounter

A. Now, we might say at the point, that's just great. God has phone and a pen so he can issue an executive order decreeing that I've been justified and thus can go on about my merry way. Then at the end of my life and at the end of time I can hold up the legal decree that will admit me into heaven which I envision to be something like a cruise ship or a country club. Not so fast!

B. The God who is love wants only this from us - that in his grace we love him in return. He isn't interested in legal decrees, in merely declaring us innocent - as if he looks at the whole mass of humanity, throws up his hands and says, "Okay, you can all come to heaven but stay out my sight!" No, the Lord knows us and loves us and he wants us to know and love him in return. And thus, he sent us his Son, the face of his mercy, so that we could encounter him. God the Father wants us to encounter him . . . The English word "encounter" does quite get to the heart of what the Pope is saying. In Spanish, "encuentro" means more than an unexpected or casual meeting; rather it means a deeply interpersonal meeting, a looking into one another's depths, heart speaking to heart, the divine and human will intermingling. Jesus became one of us, he took upon himself our humanity, spoke to us in human language, and extends his humanity to us in the visible signs of the sacraments, precisely so that we can encounter him in this much deeper sense, and through him encounter the God who is rich in mercy.

C. In our experience, encountering Jesus involves moving from a cold, formal, even

correct relationship with the Lord to a moment when we truly fall in love with Jesus, when he becomes, not a distant figure of history, but real and living, the Redeemer who knows us, loves us, and who lives in us. Encountering Jesus is a lot like falling in love – you might strive for it or it might just overtake you (surprised by joy!). Once we’ve falling deeply with Jesus, everything looks different – every relationship, every decision, every teaching, every quandary, every suffering.

D. How necessary for discipleship that we encounter the Lord – in word and sacrament, in private prayer, in our relationship with others, including our families, friends, and enemies, in the persons of the poor. Only when we listen to the Lord and experience his love for us can we become his followers, his disciples, his apprentices... for what we are called to learn is not merely a body of content but rather to follow Jesus himself, to commune with him, so as to follow him in a community of disciples which we call the Church.

VI. The Francis Lexicon: Missionary, Attraction, Joy

A. The next word in the lexicon is “missionary”. We are called not merely to be disciples but “missionary disciples”. That is to say, that when we encounter the Good News in the Person of Jesus, when we have the joy of being forgiven, the joy of the Gospel in our hearts, then we are unable to keep this truth, this joy, this love to ourselves. Rather, we are want to share it.

B. But it is more than merely our desire to share it. Pope Francis tells us that the Lord sends us forth to share it. That’s who is missionary is: “one who is sent”. And all of us are sent forth every Sunday at Mass to be missionary disciples when the priest or deacon says, “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” or “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.” We are sent into the world to be the Lord’s witnesses, people who manifest the presence of the Lord in our lives by the way we treat others, by our generosity, by our charity, and by our readiness to give an accounting of our hope. This does not mean that the Lord wants us to be obnoxious zealots for Jesus himself was neither obnoxious nor a zealot. He was meek and humble of heart. He hungered for holiness. He was a maker of peace. His yoke is easy, his burden light. And in this way, Jesus attracted others to his love and to his heavenly Father. Pope Benedict famously said that one who has hope lives

differently. And that critical difference in our lives attracts others.

C. So, hand-in-hand with the word “missionary” is the word “attract” – for Pope Francis tells us that we should not browbeat people into belief nor should we try to argue them into orthodoxy but rather we should attract them by that special something in our lives. I think it’s called joy... another big word in the Francis lexicon of discipleship. St. Theresa of Avila said, “God deliver us from gloomy saints” and Pope Francis is telling us that only a joyful disciple, only a disciple whose heart is full of gratitude will successfully spread the Gospel. We should ask ourselves what our thoughts and attitudes are like when we’re not engaged with others – when we’re in neutral, so to speak. Left solely to our own thoughts in the silence of our rooms, are we habitually grateful? joyful? focused on the needs of others? Or do we harbor bitterness, resentment, and gloom?

VII. The Francis Lexicon: Accompaniment

A. Yet another word in the Francis lexicon of discipleship is “accompaniment”. We are called not only to encounter the Lord in joy, not only to go out and bear witness to Christ, but to accompany others, to walk with him in their journey of life, helping them in their questions, needs, sorrows, and joys to find the joy of the Gospel.

B. Yet, thankfully, accompaniment is a two way street. Disciples are those who are conscious that the Lord is walking with them – like the disciples on the Road to Emmaus. How beautiful the biblical description of the encounter of the Lord with a few of his disciples only a short time after his Resurrection. The disciples are filled with gloom after the death of Jesus, convinced that the One in whom they put their hopes was defeated, skeptical, very skeptical of the sketchy report that he was seen alive, when the Lord joined them on the road as a stranger, upbraided them for their lack of faith, opened their minds to the understanding of Scripture, and revealed himself in the breaking of bread, in the Eucharist.

C. Disciples are those who invite the Lord to accompany them in their daily lives especially by their life of prayer, centered on the Eucharist. So when we open our hearts to the Lord each morning and root our lives in the Lord’s Eucharistic presence, we know he walks with us in our daily journey, like the Good Shepherd

who brings us through the valley of darkness to green and abundant pastures, made fertile by the living waters of Baptism. We allow the Lord to accompany us when we welcome into our lives other disciples, seeking out those who know and love the Lord, whether it's a parish priest or a friend or a family member who exhibits deep faith and abiding love for the Lord. We need to be accompanied in our doubts and problems and weakness.

D. In turn we need to accompany others, to walk with them in love. The Pope famously tells bishops to acquire "the smell of the sheep" - to be shepherds after the heart of the Good Shepherd, the Shepherd who became himself the Lamb of Sacrifice who takes away our sins. This is no small order and it is not Pope Francis' personal whim - it's what the Church has said to her shepherds from the very beginning. But it's not merely priests and bishops who accompany; you too are called to reach out to those who have left the faith, and to walk with them in their journey.

E. How do we walk with them in their journey? By listening to them. As disciples, we do not present ourselves as religious experts but rather as representatives of a loving God who listens to us. Pope Francis said that a church which fails to listen to the reasons why people have left the practice of the faith will not be a good position to give them reasons why they should return. So we need to listen, to engage, to look for the invitation to share the reason for our hope that we, like the Lord Jesus, may help to open the minds of those we encounter to the understanding of Scripture.

VIII. The Francis Lexicon: Discernment

A. As we honestly encounter our own situation before the Lord and as we listen to the experience of others, we realize that along the way faith and life must meet - faith in all its beauty and purity and life in all its complexity and messiness. This calls for discernment and when the Pope uses that word I am sure he means this in the sense of St. Ignatius of Loyola's 'rules for discernment'.

B. Discernment requires us to prayerfully sift through our experience; to read and understand our experience in the light of the Gospel and in light of the Church's

teaching and practices. We may well find a dissonance between our lives and the Gospel. We need to discern, that is to say, to find out what God's will really is in changing the things that can be changed, & in working on those things which, for whatever reason, cannot be readily changed. The Pope is not calling us to compromise or dilute the faith but rather, as we make our own faith journey and walk with others, not to present the Church's teaching as a matter of 'law and order' but to learn ourselves and to help others find out how to live the faith in the concrete circumstances of their daily life. Think of the difficult decisions we all face that call for discernment each day. How to hand an abusive boss; how to break bad news to someone we love; whether to attend a wedding of a loved one getting married outside the Church. So too we should not be surprised that as we attract others to the faith, they too will have difficulties and complexities. We may not feel ourselves entirely qualified to help them along the path of discernment but we should not cut them off but rather help them find their way.

IX. The Francis Lexicon: Peripheries

A. Another word in the Francis lexicon of discipleship is "the peripheries" – the Holy Father is always talking about going out to the peripheries. In some cases this means those who are marginalized by society – the poor, the homeless, the mentally disturbed, the refugee and the immigrant. They may be close by but far removed from our experience. In other cases, going to the peripheries means reaching out to those who are angry and upset with the Church, those who have been victimized by church personnel, especially clergy, those who are alienated from the faith and those family members and colleagues from whom we are alienated. Paradoxically, the peripheries are close at hand.

B. After encountering the Lord we are sent forth to walk with others, not just a mile or two but to the very margins of society and far beyond our comfort zone, as the Pope likes to say.

X. The Francis Lexicon: Welcome

A. The final word which I'll mention tonight in the Pope's discipleship lexicon is welcome. How many people would return to the Church if they thought they would

be gently and consistently welcomed, if they thought they would not be made to feel embarrassed, if they thought they would not meet entrenched leadership either on the part of the laity or the clergy.

B. When I was a student, I thought that all the emphasis on hospitality was fluff but soon after I began working in parishes, I saw how wrong that was. If we've met the Lord and accompanied others on a journey back to the Church, then we must welcome them truly as our sisters and brothers and strive to integrate them into the life of the Church according to their readiness so to be integrated.

C. I visit a lot of parish communities on a weekly basis and it is really easy to see which ones are welcoming and which are not. To be sure the pastor sets the tone but it is often the parishioners who are the face of the parish. A handshake, a smile, an invitation to serve, go a long, long, way.

XI. Conclusion

A. At this point, you might think you're getting the whole Francis dictionary, so I'll conclude with gratitude for your kind attention and with a word of encourage to you as members of the Order of Malta - to see your participation in the good works of the Order as a means of discipleship - a way of encountering the Lord more deeply, a way of walking with one another in proclaiming and cherishing the faith, a way of reaching out in love to those who are sick and suffering, a way of welcoming all to the Church that worships the God of love and mercy.

B. May the Lord bless you in your commitment to the Order, prepare your heart for the coming of his Son, and keep you always in his love!