

GO!

*30 Meditations on How Best to Love
Your Neighbor as Yourself*



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Your Neighbor as Yourself*

Fr. John Bartunek, L.C., S.Th.D.



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Introduction

IF YOU ARE a follower of Christ, you have received a mission in this world. You are called not only to know and love God more and more, but also to be God's partner in bringing others to do the same, thereby lovingly helping them discover the "pearl of great price" (Matthew 13:46). Those two loves—love for God and love for neighbor—constitute the only path of true, lasting fulfillment. That's why Jesus summarized the meaning of human life by giving us the two greatest commandments:

One of the scribes, when he came forward and heard them disputing and saw how well he had answered them, asked [Jesus], "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus replied, "The first is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."
(Mark 12:28–31)

In my previous book, *Seeking First the Kingdom: 30 Meditations on How to Love God with All Your Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength*, we explored in detail the first great commandment and its implications for our day-to-day relationship with God. In this book we will explore the second: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 28:31).

The Connection Between Love and Mission

The essence of our mission in the world is to love as God loves—we are created in his image and likeness, and his nature is love (see 1 John 4:8), so our fulfillment flows from entering fully and consciously into the stream of divine love. Loving means, essentially, affirming the goodness of someone else's existence and doing good to that person in such a way that his or her existence can truly flourish. Love involves desiring, giving, and working to help others be all they can be, all God calls them to be. And since every human being is "made to live in communion with God, in whom he finds happiness" (CCC, 45), the best way to love someone is to help that person discover, establish, and deepen that communion with God.

That is our most basic and indispensable mission in the world; that is how we best fulfill the second great commandment and find the meaning we most yearn for. Pope Benedict XVI put it well:

To make Christ known is the most precious gift that you can give to others.... When you work to help others and proclaim the gospel to them, then your own lives, so often fragmented because of your many activities, will find their unity in the Lord. You will also build up your own selves, and you will grow and mature in humanity.¹

What You Can Expect to Get Out of This Book

Each person's mission of love unfolds in a unique and unrepeatable way, since each of us is a unique and unrepeatable person. Yet within that unique unfolding, certain elements and patterns are shared by all Christians. Jesus has told us a lot about them in the Gospels, and the Church has become more acutely aware of them through her two thousand years of being involved in this mission. These are the elements that this book will present and explain.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the Twenty-Eighth World Youth Day 2013.

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Discovering them—or rediscovering and reflecting more deeply on them—is essential to being fully engaged in the Christian quest, and only full engagement in that quest will quench the existential thirst we have for meaning and happiness. We are created for more than simply making a living and trying to have a good time. And we all recognize that, deep down inside. Each of us is looking for the deeper meaning of our lives, and that meaning is connected with Christ's call to mission, with his call to making a lasting impact on the world by loving our neighbor as ourselves. The mission is there to be discovered, and this book can help.

Maybe, however, you already have been consciously engaged in spreading the message of Christ. Maybe you are an old hand at evangelization and apostolate (other names for the Church's mission), at sharing the faith, at finding creative and innovative ways to further the Church's goals, at sincerely and consistently seeking to love your neighbor as yourself on a daily basis. If so, this book is still for you.

A common—and spiritually dangerous—development in the life of conscious and intentional Christians is burnout. We can overextend ourselves, take on too many duties and responsibilities at the parish, for example, get involved in so many projects that they actually begin to interfere with our relationship with God, with our family life.... You might be thinking, *Aren't we called to save the world? Isn't that what the Church is all about? So don't I need to fill every waking moment with some kind of apostolic outreach?*

Yes and no. Yes, we are indeed called to do everything through, with, and in Christ, as St. Paul reminds us: *"And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him"* (Colossians 3:17).

But no, frenetic and overcommitted activity is not the path to Christian maturity and fruitfulness. How can we properly discern how much we should take on, and how can we put a discordant, out-of-control life back in order and harmony? Reviewing the Church's vision for what we are each called to do and going back to our Lord's own teaching about the apostolate will help show the way.

How This Book Is Arranged

Not all Catholics realize they are called to be missionaries. Many of us simply assume that this aspect of the Church only has to do with priests, nuns, and other consecrated persons who have been called to explicit missionary status. The rest of us laypeople, so the misunderstanding goes, are off the hook. The first part of the book, “You Are Called,” then, will address what the *Catechism* calls every Christian’s “share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ... By Baptism they share in the priesthood of Christ, in his prophetic and royal mission” (CCC, 873, 1268).

Every Catholic truly is a missionary, and the first step to discovering and fulfilling our mission is to let that fact seep into our consciousness. The meditations in this first part focus on the call that each of us has received to be missionaries, evangelizers, apostles (as we will see, those terms are almost synonymous, though each has its own specific connotations)—to be part of the solution God wants to bring to the troubled world through his Church. You will have to be a little bit patient in Part One, since it requires dealing with some theological concepts that might appear to be abstract. But if we don’t get those on the table right away, our missionary identity can never really take the firm root it needs to take in our self-awareness.

The universal call to mission, however, does not mean that every individual Christian should be searching through uncharted lands seeking to convert those who have never before heard of Jesus. That is only one kind of mission, though critical. Nor does it mean that every Christian has to have a PhD in theology. And so the second and third parts of this book (“Things to Keep in Mind” and “Your Modes of Apostolate”) both explore some key presuppositions that will help us accept and rejoice in our call to be missionaries and also reflect on three dimensions of our Christian mission—the “priestly, prophetic, and kingly” dimensions that the *Catechism* refers to. Many

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readers will find surprises in this section as they discover how, as Christians, every single thing we do can have a missionary impact that reverberates into eternity. It's easier than you think to be the missionary you are called to be.

Having delved into our call to the apostolate in part 1, having cleared the air of some mistaken attitudes in part 2, and having explicated the different forms or dimensions in which we can and should fulfill our share in the apostolate in part 3, we will be ready to set a few expectations in part 4, "What to Expect." This part highlights some pitfalls and challenges that every Christian apostle has to face sooner or later. Jesus gives plenty of advice about dealing with these, and part 4 will serve up some healthy portions of it.

How to Use This Book Wisely

The ideas contained in this book are not new or complicated. They are basic ideas that make up our Christian identity. But they are ideas that all too often don't sink into our hearts—they stay in our heads. We agree with them, but we don't really allow them to have a deep impact on the way we see ourselves and the way we live our lives. That's why I decided to present them in the form of meditations. A meditation gives us a chance to take one or two critical ideas, reflect on them with calm focus, and allow them to penetrate our souls.

The division of this book's explanations and reflections into thirty short chapters is also meant to make it easy to use, either individually or in a small group. Reading prayerfully through one chapter a day can give you a monthlong spiritual retreat. The abundant biblical quotations are presented in red in order to make prayer and meditation on God's sacred Word easier, if you use the book in this way. Working through one chapter a week together with a group of friends can provide a richly rewarding path of Christ-centered fellowship for the better part of a year.

GO! 30 MEDITATIONS ON HOW BEST TO LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

The questions for reflection at the end of each chapter can serve either as aids for personal reflection and prayer or as helps to spark invigorating small-group interaction. Each chapter's concluding prayer, drawn from various sources that make up the vast, two-thousand-year-old treasury of Christian spirituality, can be prayed individually or as a group. The introductory quotations from either canonized or beatified popes are meant to focus the reader's attention on the chapter's theme, as well as to reinforce the message by showing how deeply rooted these ideas are in the Church's self-understanding.

Jesus's last words before his ascension into heaven launched the Church on her mission. "Go!" he commanded:

"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." (Matthew 28:19–20)

This passage is known by tradition as the "Great Commission," and in a sense it sets the Christian quest in motion; it shows us how best to obey Jesus's earlier commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself." Let's start there.

PART I

You Are Called

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. Going out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’ So they went off.... [And] he went out again around noon, and around three o’clock, and did likewise. Going out about five o’clock, he found others standing around, and said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’ When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first...’” (Matthew 20:1–3, 5–8)



Chapter 1

There Is Work to Do

The gospel parable sets before our eyes the Lord's vast vineyard and the multitude of persons, both women and men, who are called and sent forth by him to labor in it. The vineyard is the whole world (cf. Mt 13:38), which is to be transformed according to the plan of God in view of the final coming of the Kingdom of God.

—St. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 1

IN THE EARLY Church, some fresh Christian converts had the wrong idea of how Christ's followers were supposed to behave in this world. They focused so much on Jesus's promise to come again and bring human history to its fulfillment that they unplugged themselves from normal life. They idly awaited the Lord's Second Coming, refraining from any productive activity besides prayer. This caused problems, as can be imagined, for the Christian communities. St. Paul actually had to address it explicitly in one of his letters, correcting those Christians in Thessalonica who were remiss in even the most basic responsibility to make a living:

In fact, when we were with you, we instructed you that if anyone was unwilling to work, neither should that one eat. We hear that some are conducting themselves among you in a disorderly way, by not keeping busy but minding

the business of others. Such people we instruct and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to work quietly and to eat their own food. But you, brothers, do not be remiss in doing good.
(2 Thessalonians 3:10–13)

Hearts in Heaven—Feet on the Ground

This problem has cropped up at various times in the history of the Church. Outsiders criticized members of the Church for being so focused on the life to come that they disengaged from life here on earth. Perhaps in certain cases the criticism was valid. Yet the actual doctrine of the Church has always stressed the importance of Christians staying engaged in earthly life in order to redeem human experience and shape it in accordance with God's wise plan. Here is how the Second Vatican Council expressed the critics' point of view in its modern context:

Not to be overlooked among the forms of modern atheism is that which anticipates the liberation of man especially through his economic and social emancipation. This form argues that by its nature religion thwarts this liberation by arousing man's hope for a deceptive future life, thereby diverting him from the constructing of the earthly city.¹

And here is how that same Council asserted the proper understanding of the relationship between hope in heaven and active engagement here on earth:

This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the gospel spirit. They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 21.

*that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation.*²

In other words, Christians should be hard workers. A follower of Christ knows that this earthly life is an opportunity to develop one's potential and make a difference in the world. As Christian disciples, that opportunity is the arena we are given to exercise our love, to show and grow our commitment to God and neighbor by putting our lives and talents at the service of others.

A Fruitful Partnership

The landowner in the parable of the vineyard goes out to look for workers, and he gives them work: *"You too go into my vineyard."* The vineyard image appears throughout the history of salvation as recorded in the Bible. As St. John Paul II pointed out: "The vineyard is the whole world (cf. Matthew 13:38), which is to be transformed according to the plan of God in view of the final coming of the Kingdom of God."

The vineyard is a powerful image for the Christian adventure, even on a merely natural level. The Lord owns the vineyard, and the Lord gives the vines the power to produce grapes. He also provides the sunshine, air, and water the vine need to grow and bear fruit. But those God-given elements will only reach their full potential through cultivation by human beings. The vineyard needs intense labor from many workers in order to produce the fine wine it is capable of producing.

It is no coincidence that Jesus's first miracle consisted of turning water into wine. In a sense, the reproduction of that miracle throughout history is the primary work of the Church. Through the cultivation of the vineyard of the world, the Church infuses God's grace into human affairs, transforming the basic elements of the

² Ibid., 43.

earthly community into the fine wine of “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own” (1 Peter 2:9).

Our Best Work

There truly is work to do—both normal earthly work that needs to be seasoned with Christian love and grace in order to reach its full potential, as well as the more directly supernatural work of spreading faith in Jesus Christ. This is the work Jesus calls us all to engage in by sending us into his vineyard. This is the work his Church was established to accomplish.

And it is this work that will give the deepest meaning to our lives. As Pope Francis explained it:

When the Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfillment. For here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means.³

And so the Church wisely and lovingly invites each one of us, today and every day, to take our unique place in the vineyard of the Lord:

The mission of salvation is universal; for every person and for the whole person. It is a task which involves the entire People of God, all the faithful. Mission must therefore be the passion of every Christian; a passion for the salvation of the world and ardent commitment to work for the coming of the Father’s kingdom.⁴

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³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 10.

⁴ St. John Paul II, Message for World Mission Sunday, 9; October 24, 1999.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. What idea in this chapter struck you most and why?
2. How fully do you feel part of this work that God has given us to do? In other words, to what extent do you feel you are working in the Lord's vineyard?
3. When you think about this work the Church is called to be engaged in, how does it make you feel? Excited, eager, intimidated, overwhelmed? Why do you think you feel that way?
4. Various secular sociological studies point out that an important ingredient for a happy life is meaningful work. This coheres with the biblical account of the creation of man and woman. When God created us, he gave us work to do—"to cultivate and care for" the earth (Genesis 2:15). Our very nature requires that we feel in some way useful and productive in order to feel fulfilled. The rest of this book will explore the different ways God gives us for meeting this fundamental need as completely as possible. But for today, how will you raise your awareness of this need and seek to fulfill it more healthily?
 - I will take time to think about how even my most mundane activities can be useful and meaningful in in God's eyes, and I will try to live them with a greater sense of purpose.
 - I will identify one of my talents or gifts that tends to be underutilized and find a way to make it productive today.
 - I will reflect on which of my duties and responsibilities seem to be the least fulfilling to me and try to figure out why. Then I will commit to a practical or attitudinal adjustment that may help them become more fulfilling and meaningful.
 - (Write your own commitment) I will _____

Concluding Prayer

*O God, Creator of all things,
who laid down for the human race the law of work,
graciously grant that
by the example of Saint Joseph and under his patronage
we may complete the works you set us to do
and attain the rewards you promise.*

—*Roman Missal, Collect for May 1, Feast of St. Joseph the Worker*

Chapter 2

The Church's Deepest Identity

Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.

—Blessed Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14

WHEN YOU THINK of the Catholic Church, what's the first thing that comes to mind? For many, the Catholic Church is primarily an organization. It has a hierarchical structure that moves from a local parish priest up to a local bishop and then all the way up to the pope, the head of the Church. And all the individuals who call themselves "Catholics" are members of that organization, similar to the way soldiers are members of an army, or college students are members of a fraternity or a sorority.

That is true, as far as it goes. The Catholic Church is an organization, with a structured hierarchy and a wide membership. Yet to think of the Church primarily in that way is like thinking of a human being only as a skeleton holding together different muscle groups and biological systems, not as a real *person*. The concept is too reductive.

More Than Just an Organization

What does this organization do? Where does it come from? Where is it going? What is its purpose? And what characterizes the Church's members? These questions point toward a more robust understanding of the Church's identity—and therefore a more robust understanding of our own identity as Catholics.

And at the core of everything is the Church's mission to spread the gospel: "Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize..."

The word *evangelization* can be used in many different ways, but we need to distill it down to an essential meaning in order to achieve clarity in our search for understanding the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Here is how the *Catechism's* glossary defines evangelization: "the proclamation of Christ and his gospel (Greek: *evangelion*) by word and the testimony of life, in fulfillment of Christ's command."¹

The Greek word *evangelion* literally means "good news." From it derive the English words *evangelist*, which means one who proclaims the good news, and *evangelize*, which means to proclaim or spread the good news, and other cognates like *evangelism* and *evangelization*. The English word *gospel* is a translation of those terms. Just as *gospel* in Old English comes from two words meaning "good story," so the original Greek word comes from two words meaning "good announcement, or news." Latin adopted the Greek word itself, Latinizing it into *evangelium* and sometimes translated it literally into *bona anuntiatio*. The same Greek root gives us our word *angels*, the spiritual beings who often serve as God's "announcers" or messengers throughout the history of salvation.

In the early years of Christianity, the word *evangelion* referred

¹ Libreria Editrice Vaticana (2011-11-02). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Kindle Locations 27410–27411). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Kindle edition.

primarily to all the Church's activity of spreading and promoting the Christian faith and message (the content of the "good news"). And since all Christians were involved in that activity, all Christians were evangelizers. Eventually the four authors of the written accounts of Jesus's life and ministry were referred to as Evangelists in a more technical sense, and their individual accounts were entitled Gospels (the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John).

Today these technical senses are the most well known, and unfortunately that reflects a general diminishment of the everyday Catholic's understanding of the Church's true mission. After all, if the four Evangelists have already written down the gospel definitively in the Gospels, then what's all this talk about evangelization? It's already happened, hasn't it?

The Dynamism of Evangelization

Yes and no. This particular piece of good news is more than simple information, though it includes information. The Word of God—what God speaks to us and announces to us in Jesus—is actually alive. It takes root and grows, like a seed, bearing spiritual fruit and transforming human lives, communities, and cultures. The Book of Hebrews alludes to this:

Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

So the gospel, the good news about the salvation of sinners through God's grace and mercy, refers to something that has indeed already happened (the coming of Jesus Christ and the accomplishment of his mission on earth). But it also refers to something that is ongoing: a multi-dimensional process of spreading this grace and mercy that will continue until the very end of history, when Jesus comes again to put an end to all evil and suffering.

The Dimensions of Evangelization

The work of evangelization, then, the spreading of the gospel, involves three basic activities, and engaging in these activities constitutes the deepest identity of the Church. The Church's organization is at the service of these activities, of this mission that announces and promotes the good news of Jesus Christ. Here are the three dimensions or "moments" of evangelization:

- *Spreading the knowledge of Jesus Christ and his saving mission to those who have not yet heard about it.* This is traditionally called the "mission *ad gentes*," which is Latin for "to the peoples." Many times, when we think of missionaries, we think of people who are primarily engaged in this work of spreading the gospel to those corners of the world that haven't yet heard it even for the first time. Though a critical dimension of evangelization, this is not the only sector of missionary activity.
- *Instructing and initiating into the life of the Church those who have heard and accepted the gospel but are not yet mature in their faith.* The traditional term most often associated with this work is *catechesis* (another word with Greek roots—this time the Greek origin refers to "instruction by word of mouth").
- *Cultivation toward full spiritual maturity and fruitfulness of the seed of grace in the lives of those who have received it, such that it transforms individuals, families, communities, and entire cultures in harmony with God's will for the human family. This is often referred to as the work of *sanctification*, or "making holy."²*

The Church's mission is to evangelize, and evangelization involves all these dimensions, along with all their logical corollaries and implications: "The Church 'exists in order to evangelize'; that is

² For this tripartite description of the Church's evangelizing mission, see the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 49.

the carrying forth of the Good News to every sector of the human race so that by its strength it may enter into the hearts of men and renew the human race.”³

This is what the twelve apostles and the rest of Christ’s first followers were sent out to do by the Lord; it is the Church’s reason for being.

He [Jesus] said to them, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.” (Mark 16:15)

In fact, the word *mission* comes from the Latin word for “sent out” (*missio*), which in Greek is related to *apostello*, the same root that gives us *apostle* and *apostolate*. Mission, evangelization, spreading the gospel, apostolate—this lexicon begins to unveil the richness of the Church’s deepest identity—which, as we will see in the next meditation, also gives us a clue about our own deepest identity.

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Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. What idea in this chapter struck you most and why?
2. When you think about the Catholic Church, what images or concepts come spontaneously to mind? Why? What do they tell you about your attitude toward the Church?
3. Try to explain in your own words the different nuances of these terms related to the Church’s deepest identity: mission, evangelization, apostolate, gospel.
4. The concept of evangelization is so rich that it can’t really be defined exhaustively with mathematical precision. The Vatican’s *General Directory for Catechesis* points out: “However, no such definition can be accepted for that complex, rich and dynamic reality which is called evangelization. There is the risk

³ Vatican Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 46; vatican.va.

of impoverishing it or even of distorting it.... Evangelization must be viewed as the process by which the Church, moved by the Spirit, proclaims and spreads the gospel throughout the entire world" (46–48). Considering how rich and multi-dimensional this reality is, what will you do today to engage more intentionally in the Church's work of evangelization?

- I will make a visit to the Eucharist and pray for missionaries who are struggling against taxing and dangerous difficulties.
- I will take five minutes to write a thank you note to God for all the evangelizers whose efforts went into my receiving the Catholic faith (try to list as many of those people as you can think of).
- I will get together with a friend and talk about how the Church in my area is continuing the work of evangelization. Then I will pray for the success of those efforts and brainstorm about how I can join in.
- (Write your own commitment) I will _____

Concluding Prayer

*O God, in the covenant of your Christ
you never cease to gather to yourself from all nations
a people growing together in unity through the Spirit;
grant, we pray, that your Church,
faithful to the mission entrusted to her,
may continually go forward with the human family
and always be the leaven and the soul of human society,
to renew it in Christ and transform it into the family of God.*

—*Roman Missal, Collect for Mass for the Church, B*

Chapter 3

You Too Go into My Vineyard!

“You go too.” The call is a concern not only of pastors, clergy, and men and women religious. The call is addressed to everyone: lay people as well are personally called by the Lord, from whom they receive a mission on behalf of the Church and the world. . . . The voice of the Lord clearly resounds in the depths of each of Christ’s followers, who through faith and the sacraments of Christian initiation is made like to Jesus Christ, is incorporated as a living member in the Church and has an active part in her mission of salvation.

—St. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 2–3

DEEP WITHIN EVERY human heart burns a desire for lasting purpose, for a truly meaningful life. In some hearts, this desire burns quietly, like a small ember waiting under thick layers of cold ash. People in that condition may try to fill their lives with earthly comforts and achievements, thinking that those things will be enough to satisfy them. They try to ignore or quench the deeper yearning.

In other hearts the desire flames out violently, impatiently belittling anything that doesn’t directly contribute to whatever particular cause such individuals have dedicated themselves to. In this case, life can lose its balance and harmony, and people can turn even legitimate and necessary human works (i.e., curing cancer, ending world hunger) into a kind of idol. This can even lead

to violence and destruction when the adopted cause or chosen means to promote it contradicts human dignity. Killing people in order to save an endangered animal or plant species, for example, is dangerously off-kilter.

The Source of Meaning

Neither earthly comforts and achievements nor ideological idols can fulfill the longings of the human heart. Our hearts are made for God and his kingdom, for everlasting life. Nothing on this side of eternity can truly satisfy them. Here we can only begin to experience the fullness of life to which God is leading us, but even that beginning is far superior to anything the secular world can give us.

God wants us to find and follow that path of true meaning. He wants us to experience the growing fullness of life that comes with following that path. In fact, Jesus summed up his life's mission in those terms: "I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

Being evangelized by the Church gives us access to this path. It actually sets us on "the road that leads to life" (Matthew 7:14) by uniting us to the source of life himself—Jesus.

Through baptism we become members of this Church that is Christ still present in the world, renewing and redeeming the human family from within. Our spiritual DNA is enhanced by baptism, so that in a sense every Christian becomes another Christ. As St. Cyprian put it way back in the third century: "*Christianus alter Christus*"—"Every Christian is another Christ." The other sacraments nourish that divine life of Christ in each baptized person, as does the instruction and guidance that each receives from more mature members of the Church—parents, teachers, priests, and so on.

Healthy Plants Bear Fruit

The healthy growth of this divine life of grace tends irresistibly

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to produce fruit. Healthy Christians naturally share with others the gifts of grace they have received. As they grow to spiritual maturity, they produce spiritual fruit analogous to how mature plants produce material fruit. Jesus used this image to describe the growth of his kingdom:

He said, "This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26–29)

A healthy seed grows and bears fruit—that's what it does. The seed of grace, according to the Lord, is no different. The urge to help others live life to the fullest, the desire to help them discover the liberating truths of the gospel and experience the revitalizing mercy and love of Jesus Christ, surges up from within every mature Christian. It's part of who we are. It's a spiritual vital sign.

The classic expressions of this yearning to spread the love we have been given are found strewn throughout the New Testament writings of St. Paul, the quintessential missionary. *"For the love of Christ impels us,"* he wrote to the Christians in Corinth (2 Corinthians 5:14). In a previous letter, he had explained his own sense of mission with another phrase that has been taken up by every Christian generation since: *"If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it!"* (1 Corinthians 9:16).

People versus Plants

Of course, human beings are different than plants. Plants grow and bear fruit unconsciously. In the spiritual life, however, growth and fruitfulness are linked to our free cooperation, to our decision to

listen and obey as “the voice of Lord clearly resounds in the depths” of our souls, to quote St. John Paul II again. As baptized Christians we are evangelizers in our very nature, but we are capable of denying that nature, of starving it or hiding it or otherwise acting against it. When we do so, we impede the Church’s mission, we fail in our call to love, and we deviate from the path of meaning that alone will satisfy the deepest longings of our heart.

Jesus’s description of this missionary aspect of our Christian identity illustrates both these dimensions—that we are evangelizers by nature ever since our baptism, but that we can act against that nature. During his Sermon on the Mount, for example, he explained:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.” (Matthew 5:13–16)

Christ’s followers *are* the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Our identity involves bringing flavor and illumination to a world deadened and darkened by sin. As St. John Paul II said:

God calls me and sends me forth as a laborer in his vineyard. He calls me and sends me forth to work for the coming of his Kingdom in history. This personal vocation and mission defines the dignity and the responsibility of each member of the lay faithful.⁴

And yet it is possible for us to become insipid salt or obscured light.

⁴ St. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 58.

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As members of the Church, we are sharers in her mission, but we have to decide to live in accordance with that identity, to let our light shine before others and thus fulfill the commandment of love. That's what we are created to do, that's what we are called to do, that's what the world needs us to do, and that's what will satisfy our existential thirst for lasting fulfillment—for making a truly meaningful contribution to history. When the Lord of the vineyard looks at you and says, “You too go into my vineyard” (Matthew 20:4), he says it with a warm, eager, loving smile.

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Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. What idea in this chapter struck you most and why?
2. When have you experienced most acutely the thirst for meaning and purpose God has placed in the depths of your soul? What did you do about it?
3. How deeply do you identify with this aspect of being a follower of Christ? How does your condition of being a missionary, being salt and light for the world, make you feel? Why?
4. Becoming aware of this missionary dimension can be overwhelming. We don't always feel up to such a high calling. We don't always feel properly equipped, trained, gifted, or talented. And yet the fact remains that we all share “the common vocation of all Christ's disciples, a vocation to holiness and to the mission of evangelizing the world” (CCC, 1533). In coming chapters we will explore the many different ways that mission can be lived out, which can help it be less overwhelming. But for today, how will you consciously express this core aspect of your deepest identity and deepest source of meaning?

GO! 30 MEDITATIONS ON HOW BEST TO LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

- I will visit my parish church and take a few moments to reflect on all the artwork and decoration inside of it, asking myself what those images say to me about my identity as a Christian missionary.
- I will read a description of the life of my favorite saint, paying special attention to how that person lived out the missionary dimension of being a Christian.
- I will bring up my faith in a conversation where it wouldn't usually come up, even if indirectly, and see how God uses that.
- (Write your own resolution) I will _____

Concluding Prayer

*O God, you have willed that your Church
be the sacrament of salvation for all nations,
so that Christ's saving work may continue to the end of the ages;
stir up, we pray, the hearts of your faithful
and grant that they may feel a more urgent call
to work for the salvation of every creature,
so that from all the peoples on earth
one family and one people of your own
may arise and increase.*

*Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.*

—*Roman Missal*, Collect for the Mass for the Evangelization
of Peoples

Chapter 4

Thy Kingdom Come!

The kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society, and the world. Working for the kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word, the kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness.

—St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 15

WHEN JESUS BEGAN preaching his message to the world, he referred to a kingdom:

Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14–15)

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he instructed them to aim all their desires at that same kingdom:

"This is how you are to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven..." (Matthew 6:9–10)