Columns
Ministry



Pope Francis holds up a medallion of St. Therese of Lisieux aboard the papal plane Jan. 15, 2015. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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October 3, 2022

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The joy of an encounter with the Lord Jesus crosses all barriers. There's no fear or the feeling of being ashamed of what others might think or say. An encounter is like holding something in our hands and feeling its texture, seeing the color, the way it is woven and the like. Yes, a tangible encounter has a radical effect, is visible on our face, and lights up our countenance! Joy and peace come from an encounter of compassion and mercy — especially when experienced in the worst situations of our life, when everything seems over, all our resources are emptied, and we are feeling hopeless and forlorn!

Our *mission of compassion* need not involve going to far-off places outside our city. It begins first in our homes, our convents, our presbyteries, our neighborhoods — and with the members of our families: older parents; in-laws; members with disabilities or illness; erring children; or the black sheep of the family.

Everyone is called to be a missionary, not merely priests and nuns and catechists. In Acts 9: 10-19, we see Ananias, a disciple in Damascus, sent to heal Saul of Tarsus. He was only a disciple, not even an apostle. The whole story of Saul's conversion manifests his deep tangible encounter with Lord Jesus.

World Mission Sunday — which is celebrated on the second to last Sunday of October — is a day set aside for the Catholic Church throughout the world to publicly renew its commitment to the missionary movement. It was created by Pope Pius XI in 1926 as a day of prayer for missions related to the Society for the Propagation of The Faith.

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In 2020 Pope Francis said that, though "marked by the suffering and challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the missionary journey of the whole Church continues." His message for World Mission Day 2021 emphasized the need for a "mission of compassion." I would second that, and add that it flows from a deep personal encounter with the living God. Like (or unlike) Archimedes, we say, "Eureka!" Like the woman at the well we proclaim what we have seen and heard — "He has told me everything … come and see" (Jn. 4) — and begin our missionary journey.

The 2021 theme chosen by Pope Francis for World Mission Day was "We cannot but speak about what we have seen and heard." This theme reminds me of a couple of times when I saw people beaming with joy, waiting to share their lived experiences of what they have seen, heard and experienced, and how their life has no longer been the same! So too we have experienced the Lord's companionship and friendship, compassion and mercy that left indelible marks on our life, and like the disciples or apostles we are amazed and grateful.

In his message the pontiff said that today life may be difficult, but he reminded us of the challenges and hardships that the early Christians endured, while staying firmly rooted in Christ. They turned their difficulties into opportunities for mission. He reminded us that in pandemic times we need "the mission of compassion" to overcome "the worst kind of skepticism: 'Nothing changes, everything stays the same.' " He also said:

> The pandemic has brought to the fore and amplified the pain, the solitude, the poverty and the injustices experienced by so many people. It has unmasked our false sense of security and revealed the brokenness and polarization quietly growing in our midst.

It is an invitation for us "to bring to others what we bear in our hearts." When we become isolated and withdraw, and lose that personal missionary confidence, he said, "Our life of faith grows weak, loses its prophetic power and its ability to awaken amazement and gratitude. … By its very nature, the life of faith calls for a growing openness to embracing everyone, everywhere."



Fr. Peter Ambting, pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in De Pere, Wisconsin, greets a parishioner before Mass in this June 14, 2020, file photo. Pope Francis, in his 2021 message for World Mission Sunday, said that during the pandemic there is an "urgent need for the mission of compassion." (CNS/The Compass/Sam Lucero)

This missionary invitation comes at a time when we are relaxing and life is settling down to normal, with children and youth back to school and colleges. We are each left with the responsibility to be persons filled with hope, empowering others with the promise of the Lord, "Fear not I am with you always," (Isaiah 41:10) and sharing the experience of hope, of being alive and part of the mission of compassion. The pandemic is a great opportunity to exhibit our gut level love, empathy, understanding, generosity, selflessness and self-control, towards those who need these gifts.

The little flower of Jesus, St. Therese of Lisieux, became a great missionary without leaving the four walls of the Carmelite convent. She said, "Without love all works are nothing, even the most dazzling." And indeed she walked the talk! Her vocation was

to love and to love all!

Jesus commanded: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). It is indeed a great task to be on mission willing to think as Christ did, and believe that those around us are my brothers and sisters.

Through our compassionate love, may we touch hearts and make people say spontaneously that *we cannot but speak about what we have seen and heard*, and experienced. In serving the the mission of compassion, we will be true missionary disciples like the little flower, St. Theresa of Lisieux, a great soul who was a true missionary by practicing the mission of compassion!