

Who are We doing the Fasting and Abstaining?
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As people hunger for the “key” to Catholicity, we can be thrown off by changing vocabularies. This was good-intentioned as various parts of the Church try to describe the heart of discipleship. Remember that a disciple is a learner, and Jesus is our main teacher. The problem is that some people think that there is too much to learn to be a Catholic. However, it is not information, but relationships that are the foundation of our learning: with God, with oneself, with the community of believers. This does not change.

Not long ago, the term “evangelization” was the focus. Then we heard about the new evangelization. This was followed by servant leadership. Today’s expression is “missionary discipleship.” The expressions differ, but each centers on Christ as the light of the world. Each variation of wording is an attempt to improve or clarify lived faith. This is the work of theologians and catechists.

Some of our parishes and councils are today reflecting upon the book “Living as Missionary Disciples,” a guide to evangelizing produced by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. After we discussed the utility of this text at the last Presbyteral Council meeting, I was encouraged to provide a copy for each active priest. (Thank you, Fruitful Harvest.) There is a Spanish translation to assist ministry with Hispanic people.

Certainly Pope Francis has highlighted two words that help to characterize missionary discipleship. These terms are encounter and accompaniment. Only in the past two years have I learned that the “program” the pope envisions is mostly laid out in an important book. “The Aparecida Document” came out of a 2007 Conference of Latin American and Caribbean bishops. The index to the English version lists lines of page numbers for each of these terms.

This group of bishops represents 480 million Catholics. This number gives some perspective on “encounter.” In these days of rising populism in our own country, there is some resistance to encounter. This comes with a danger that we will reject any viewpoints but our own. For our Lent, some of us may want to encounter some aspects — historical, religious, economic — of other countries. This might add a smidgen of useful perspective on what it means to be one, holy, catholic (small c) and apostolic. It only takes a few of us to add salt and leaven to our prayer and conversations.