Walking in the Footsteps of Christ

Religious Orders as Followers, Disciples, and Apostles

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The terms “follower,” “disciple,” and “apostle” are not interchangeable. In fact, they refer to different levels of response and belief in the message of Jesus. Locating ourselves among the three terms can help us clarify our own response and grow in our calling, risking love to encounter the other and recognizing the way of the cross.

As men and women religious—brothers, priests, and sisters—we readily identify with ministry and service. We use terms like follower of Christ, disciple, and apostle to explain what it is we do and how we view ourselves within the church. But how does being a disciple differ from simply being a follower of Christ? What does it take to be an apostle? We may desire to be a disciple, but apostles, like martyrs and prophets, do not choose their calling. Before sorting through the characteristics and specifics of each term, we must first be clear about the assumptions that underlie this attempt to discuss the foundations of discipleship.

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Unmasking Presuppositions

M y first assumption is that each of us is personally nearsighted. One image that helps me more fully understand our differences is that of vision; more specifically, nearsightedness. I wear glasses because I can’t see clearly things at a distance. That which is closest to me is most in focus. Whether or not we all actually wear glasses, we are, indeed, all nearsighted. We view most vividly that which has been part of our immediate life and experience.

My grandmother remembered seeing the ice truck deliver blocks of ice for the “ice box” when she was young. My niece thinks ice comes from the refrigerator door. You push a button and get either crushed or cubed. Both are nearsighted—seeing their experience more clearly while being a bit fuzzy on the details from the other’s perspective.

We have lenses that allow us to see with greater distinction. Perhaps it would be helpful to keep that in mind: our lenses limit our vision. Together we can expand what we see and maybe come to better clarity. Therefore, collapsing our differences for the sake of unity can be counterproductive.

The second assumption is that we do not envision a religious vowed life within the Roman Catholic Church without Jesus Christ as its center. How Jesus is understood as the Christ, how his identity, mission, and his own self-awareness are comprehended may differ, but the historical person of Jesus who was raised by God as the Christ is our fundamental starting point. With Jesus as the center, my reference point is the New Testament. I can’t help myself. I’m a biblical scholar who has the privilege of being a Dominican.

The third assumption is that, as religious, our primary reason for being is not doing. My ministry does not make me a good religious. My goal should be personal holiness—I distinguish that from piety. Holiness in its ancient biblical understanding is to be set apart for God, to be distinct, to pursue the Divine and to allow myself to be pursued. Piety is often expressed through visible actions. She is pious because she prays the rosary. He demonstrates his piety by tithing. But holiness—kedushah in the Hebrew—is not an action but a state of being.

I understand that the history of religious life has not always made the distinction. In fact, it has focused on separation from the world as the evidence of holiness. But this is most definitely not what we mean today. A paragraph from Vatican II’s Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life is enlightening:

The purpose of the religious life is to help the members follow Christ and be united to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels. It should be constantly kept in mind, therefore, that even the best adjustments made in accordance with the needs of our age will be ineffectual unless they are animated by a renewal of spirit. This must take precedence over even the active ministry. (no. 2e)
The pursuit of holiness was a theme echoed by the late Pope John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (On the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and the World). “Consecrated persons,” he says, “at the deepest level of their being . . . are caught up in the dynamism of the Church’s life, which is thirsty for the divine Absolute and called to holiness. It is to this holiness that they bear witness” (no. 39).

We are to be about the pursuit of the holy: to be set apart for God. Originally, this very Jewish concept became a part of our eschatological waiting. We were to be holy, sanctified, and pure, anticipating Christ’s return. As we hear in 1 Peter 3:10-13:

> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be found out. Since everything is to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought (you) to be, conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved in flames and the elements melted by fire. But according to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

The call to holiness needs to be updated. Not too many of us are awaiting the Parousia, though one of my colleagues has a bumper sticker on his office door that reads: “Look busy, Jesus is coming!” We may have lost the sense of Jesus’ imminent return, but we should, nonetheless, be searching for the divine, for an intimate connection with the God who calls us and must sustain us if we are to be holy and loving men and women.

My fourth assumption is that context matters. We are human and we tend to be tribal. We set up boundaries—real or imaginary—that distinguish us from the “other.” It is a long-ingrained survival technique. There is a certain amount of boundary making and setting that allows for an organization to exist. But we do ourselves—and our world—no service if we forget the larger stage on which our personal narratives are set. As important as pursing holiness is for our relationship with the Divine, we must remember that the gift we pursue is the one we are called to share broadly, deeply, and without limits. We are part of a larger global context.

*Apostles versus Disciples*

Throughout our New Testament texts, those who are attracted to the message of Jesus are known by various terms: followers, disciples, and apostles. Each word denotes a slightly different set of characteristics.
Followers seem to be the least committed. In fact, often their “following” seems to be in order to seek verification. They are awaiting some “sign” in John’s gospel, some mighty deed in Mark’s. These curious onlookers are designated by the Greek verb *akolouthein*. It means literally “to follow someone.” It would seem to be the preliminary step toward a deeper relationship and commitment to Jesus. In John 1:38, Andrew and another person “follow” Jesus at the urgings of John the Baptist. When Jesus turns and sees he’s being tailed, he asks, “What do you seek?” They respond with what seems a silly question. “Where are you staying?” It’s actually less strange a question when you recognize that the Greek *menein* meaning, “to stay or to dwell,” has a spiritual connotation in John’s gospel. “Dwelling in Jesus” becomes a Johannine circumlocution for discipleship.

In John’s gospel, those who follow become disciples when they “bring” someone to Jesus. Andrew fetches Peter (John 1:41); Philip goes for Nathanael (John 1:45). But not everyone who follows necessarily takes the next step, since as we see in Mark’s gospel, the costs of such a move are high. Jesus invites Simon and Andrew to “follow” him (Mark 1:17), which requires abandoning their nets. We hear in Mark 10:21, Jesus, looking at [the young man], loved him and said to him, “You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to (the) poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

From the Q source, found in Matthew and Luke, we hear:

> As they were proceeding on their journey someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus answered him, “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.” And to another he said, “Follow me.” But he replied, “(Lord,) let me go first and bury my father.” But he answered him, “Let the dead bury their dead. But you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” And another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to my family at home.” (To him) Jesus said, “No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.”

(Luke 9:57-62)

The term most frequently used to denote a follower whose curiosity has given way to belief is “disciple” or *mathētēs*, which is the Greek for “learner.” In the ancient world, those who wished to learn a particular philosophy, a specific trade, or the religious tenets of one’s religion would attach themselves to a teacher. We know from our New Testament texts that Jesus was called *rabbi* (which in Hebrew is “teacher”). In fact, that is how Andrew first addresses Jesus, “Rabbi, where do you stay?”

So those following Jesus who desired to know more fully what he taught became his disciples. The goal of such an association seems clear in Luke 6:40: “No disciple is superior to the teacher; but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher.”
Jesus is to be our example. We are to be like Jesus while fully reaching our own potential. Luke’s parable of the talents seems to indicate that we are measured against ourselves. How have I used my talents? How have I pursued holiness? How have I followed Jesus as a model but not a mirror? As John’s Jesus says of Peter:

“Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, “Follow me.” (John 21:18-19)

When John was writing, Peter had already been crucified, according to tradition, upside down. Disciples are to strive to the same level of knowledge and commitment not so that they “become” equal to their teacher, but to become as their teacher. Saint Paul’s quoting of a liturgical hymn emphasizes this theology:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5b-8)

In my own struggles at discipleship, I have often been reminded that when one arrives in heaven, the question is not how have you been like Jesus, but how have you been as “Laurie” or “Robin” or “Maria.”

Those closest disciples who seemed to have grasped the essence of his teaching were designated with a different title: that of apostles. Our two thousand years of church history and teaching have crowned this term with exalted authority and power. In reality, it is from the Greek verb *apostellein*, “to be sent with a mission.” Mark 3:14 reads: “He appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach.”

An apostle thus becomes a disciple who has followed Jesus and is now sent to proclaim the Gospel. While we tend to think the Twelve were the only apostles, we hear in Acts that Paul and Barnabas were called “apostles” (Acts 14:14). Second Corinthians 8:23 speaks of many apostles for the churches.

I point out this distinction among the terms—“follower,” “disciple,” and “apostle”—because I think we tend to overlook that the words are not interchangeable. In fact, they refer to different levels of response and belief in the message of Jesus. Locating myself among the three terms helps me clarify my own response. I must admit there have been times when I have been a curious follower because I hoped for a great show of power. I have needed a sign to prove to me that this is the one.

I would like to think most often I am a good disciple. I am open to learning along the way, to putting into practice the aspects of my faith and teachings. And I wish
to aspire to apostleship: to be sent by Jesus. There is a longing to be part of something great and noble and worth the cost of one’s life, to have a mission from Jesus.

But there is a catch (there’s always a catch!). We are at a crossroads. Or rather, there’s a cross in the road that leads to true apostleship, and we have a choice to make.

The Crossroads

Some reflections from Viktor Frankl provide us with a map for our journey. Wrestling with the horror of his experience of Auschwitz, Frankl recognized that discovering meaning in painful circumstances makes life bearable. He summarized his insights this way: to live you must choose; to love you must encounter, to grow you must suffer (Frankl). His insights, in many respects, are foundational to the true discipleship that leads to mission. They are—in some respects—an examination of conscience.

To live you must choose: life happens, so the bumper sticker reads, but that is not God’s adage. We are told in Deuteronomy 30:19 to choose life. We are to seek actively the good for ourselves and our neighbors. We are to strive toward God, to desire holiness. What are we choosing today? Have we really chosen to spend this time in honest pursuit of the God who calls us? Or are we living the bumper sticker and hoping as life happens, so does our faith?

Love presupposes an encounter. According to Frankl, human encounter is how we know and love. You cannot read about it in a book. You cannot listen to it on TV or your iPod. You cannot love in the abstract. Love is a human thing. It is a messy thing. It is an unpredictable, uncontrollable, and a wholly gratuitous thing. To love God you must encounter God, which for us as Christians becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus. Are we open to encountering a human Jesus? Or do we prefer a high Christology: A savior who is enthroned, un tarnished by the dust of daily life. Do we prefer a superhero rather than a flesh-and-blood person? Can we let Jesus be fully human as he walks his way to the cross? And can we walk with him, the true test of a disciple?

To grow you must suffer. Perhaps an apt gospel passage to illustrate this is found in John 12:24: “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” As my colleague Tony Gittins writes:

When we encounter suffering that we are unable to remove, we can either turn in upon ourselves and become overwhelmed by it, or we can attempt to turn ourselves and our suffering “inside out.” In this way suffering can help us grow. Then it can become redemptive. (xviii)
Frankl does not mean for us to like suffering or even to accept it, but to grow through it. The way of the cross for Jesus was filled with pain, heartache, disappointment, loneliness, fear. But there was no way to Easter except through Good Friday. If we hope to participate in the way of the cross in our own lives as Christians, then we cannot avoid the difficult. We cannot sidestep our failings or the failings of others. If we hope to grow in our faith, to mature as Christ believers, we must acknowledge our own crosses and the crosses we heap upon others.

The foundations for discipleship are quite simple. It involves a choice on our part to risk love in order to encounter the other and to recognize that growth occurs in suffering. To live you must choose. To love you must encounter. To grow you must suffer.

**Easter Insights**

Frankl’s insights sum up Mark’s gospel, which is read in cycle B of the *Lectionary for Mass*. Discipleship for Mark is not something one gets right away. In fact, the disciples in Mark fail miserably and repeatedly. They argue about who is first and where they will sit beside Jesus:

> Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” He replied, “What do you wish (me) to do for you?” They answered him, “Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left.” Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” They said to him, “We can.” Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right or at my left is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared.” When the ten heard this, they became indignant at James and John. (Mark 10:35-41)

Part of the disciples’ difficulty in Mark’s gospel is not unfamiliar to us. They and we do not always understand who it is we are following. We have a preconceived idea of who Jesus should be, what service should look like, what a good religious must do or be. Our own images and expectations are projected onto Jesus. That Mark was dealing with this problem in his own community is made painfully clear in his triple predictions of the passion (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Each time he has Jesus discuss his upcoming passion, he adds a bit more detail. It is almost as if Jesus does not want to unveil the whole, bloody affair too soon.

If Jesus is the suffering Son of Man, then to follow him necessarily entails suffering. That is the “learning” these disciples find hard to grasp. The textbook is the cross. And thus discipleship requires embracing that cross. Jesus must an-
nounce three times that his passion nears. The disciples misunderstand all three times, necessitating a triple teaching on discipleship:

Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? What could one give in exchange for his life? Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels. (Mark 8:34-38)

“If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.” Taking a child he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it he said to them, “Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.” (Mark 9:35-37)

“But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43-45)

Discipleship—true discipleship—requires taking up the cross, embracing the least among us, and becoming a servant to all. But as we see, the disciples in Mark are oddly oblivious.

Peter, chief among the disciples, cowers, sinks, disbelieves, and denies Jesus. These are our ancestors in the faith. Peter, James, and John present us with very human characters. They are ambitious, bold, impetuous, and argumentative. On face value, they do not fit our ideal of a disciple. They look too human. Nonetheless, they are part of the privileged group that witnesses the risen Lord. Perhaps, through the course of their travels, those very human character flaws were crafted by Jesus into character traits on behalf of the Gospel.

These disciples were men and women not unlike ourselves: ones who aspire to greatness and fall short; those who serve humbly and those who roar like thunder; ones we are anxious, angry, eager, enthusiastic, misguided, and clueless. Indeed, learners is an apt title, for we are all in the process of learning what it means to follow Jesus in his mission of preaching and teaching.

At the close of Mark’s gospel, we are left with a perplexing statement. “Then the women went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8).

Where are the experiences of the risen Jesus? Where is the excitement over the resurrection? Where is the “aha” moment?! Only in the second century were resurrection appearance stories added to Mark’s gospel, and these were rewrites from Matthew and Luke. Mark originally left us with the words of the messenger in
the tomb: “Jesus has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him. But go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you’” (Mark 16:6-7).

To Galilee—not the Holy City of Jerusalem—is where the risen Lord sends his disciples. In Mark, the point of the resurrection encounter, the point at which the doubtful disciples will be commissioned to be apostles is right in their own backyard; from there, they are called to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19).

The paradox of Easter is that the frustrations, the suffering, the challenges that all disciples experience in the course of our regular lives can serve to strengthen us. We are called to be as Christ in our own Galilees. How do I proclaim the reign of God where I find myself? In my local community? In my ministry? Among my family and friends? Luckily we have a long history of excellent examples.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

To endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. When it comes, it is not an accident, but a necessity...the suffering which is an essential part of the specifically Christian life. (98)

Closer to our own day and age is Maryknoll Sister Ita Ford, one of the four churchwomen martyred in El Salvador on December 2, 1980. She wrote in a letter home once:

Am I willing to suffer with the people here, the suffering of the powerless, the feeling impotent? Can I say to my neighbors—I have no solutions to this situation; I don’t know the answers, but I will walk with you, search with you, be with you. Can I let myself be evangelized by this opportunity? Can I look at and accept my own poorness as I learn it from the poor ones?

The Good News of Jesus, through the experience of resurrection, transforms suffering and transcends the boundaries of neighborhood and religion and even ethnic identity. Far from being a private revelation for a specific group, the Good News is meant to be shared. The cross is not the final word. But embracing it fully is how followers become disciples who learn through the experience of Easter to be apostles.

**References**


