



Nine Days of Grace: Novena 2018

Hosea 6:1-6 Luke 18:9-14

Today, I would like to preach about the call to mission that each one of us has as a Christian. This is a good topic for a few reasons: First, the inspiration of this Novena of Grace flows from the life of St. Francis Xavier, the great Jesuit missionary of the 16th century, whose vocation led him to India, Indonesia and Japan to preach the Gospel and invite people to Christian faith. We've been hearing vignettes from his life at the beginning of each liturgy. Second, serving as a Maryknoll Lay Missioner in El Salvador recently was a powerful experience for me, and rooted mission more deeply in my own faith. Finally, in my experience serving Catholics over the years, I have observed that many, many of us are uncomfortable talking about mission, even though it is a central aspect of Christianity, and since I like to make people uncomfortable, today I'll preach about mission. Seriously, if there is some aspect of our life as Christians with which we are uncomfortable, then a Novena of Grace is the perfect time to lift this up to God and as for the grace to embrace whatever is difficult for us.

I think it's worth reflecting on, in part because Francis Xavier lived and ministered in a completely different world, so what inspiration can we draw from this man after four centuries of a changing world? My guide in drawing inspiration from Francis Xavier is Pope Francis. In 2013 he wrote "The Joy of the Gospel" about each believer's call to mission, and there are three themes prominent in the life of Xavier that are echoed by Pope Francis. The three themes are joy, dialogue, and solidarity with the poor.

The first theme is joy. Xavier lived within a completely different worldview and that worldview shaped his missionary endeavor. He understood his mission as bringing Christ to distant peoples, people he described as pagan, and to offer them a chance at salvation through the sacraments. It drove him onward for 20 years, to the furthest reaches of Asia. He left his home at 19, never able to return. We may admire his drive, but his letters home speak over and over of his joy in his ministry, in those he met, in living his mission. Joy kept him going, beyond the dedication to his vocation.

Today, we don't understand mission work the same way. We cannot bring Christ to foreign lands and other people because Christ is already there! And, although we happily welcome people to the sacraments, we believe that God makes the salvation available to everyone, with or without our approval.

I went as a missioner to El Salvador, a country where the majority of people have practiced Catholicism for over 300 years. At the same time, the people there suffer from persistent poverty, inequality, and pervasive violence. I was not going to change any of this, and the Salvadorans knew this – they never expected me to change their society. Over and over



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again, they invited me to share their joy – in their Christian Base Communities, working together in community gardens, and the processions of every feast day.

Pope Francis writes that mission is sharing your joy, that joy that is a gift from God. It may be expressed and celebrated and shared in Church, but he's talking about a joy that bubbles up in us from a deeper source or surprises us. That joy extends beyond any church; indeed, when that joy is shared with others, the Kingdom of God is making an appearance. When we invite people to the Catholic Church, we think about what we should say. Mission is not what we should say; it's about what we want to share with others.

The second theme is dialogue. Dialogue may be a generous word to describe the mission encounters of Xavier, but his respect for the people he encountered, for their learning and culture and history, that he wrote about in the letters to his superiors in Europe, was nothing less than radical in the time. His vision of God in the world was too big for religiously embattled 16th century Europe. Francis, like St. Paul before him, was open to dialogue with the cultures of India, Indonesia, and especially Japan so that he could engage Christianity with their learning, philosophy, and wisdom.

In El Salvador, the most difficult culture I encountered, the culture that felt furthest from my worldview, was the culture of the gangs. Make no mistake, the gangs are a culture, though a culture that would not share so many values we here would embrace. I quickly learned from the Salvadorans that they gangs are not “somewhere else” in El Salvador, they are people living in every pueblo and barrio, not strangers, but neighbors and relatives. And the Salvadorans have learned after years of pervasive violence, that the only sure path to a peaceful future for the nation will lie through dialogue with the gangs.

Pope Francis tells us that dialogue with others is where we share our joy, not just our ideas. If that joy is rooted in God, it won't be threatened when shared with others whose ideas, culture, race, class, or religion is different from our own – even when we don't know where that dialogue will take us.

And the final theme that Pope Francis draws from Xavier is that of solidarity with the poor. In Xavier's ministry, as he moved across Asia over twenty years, he always lived a humble, simple life –living in a simple hut and sharing his meals with people who were poor – famers, fisherman, laborers, outcastes, slaves. It is mostly they who received him and his message of Good News. In Japan, he put on noble dress in order to seek an audience with the Emperor and his court, but without much success. Xavier, like Jesus, lived as a poor man among the poor.

Like the US, El Salvador suffers from a horrible economic inequality and inequity. Theirs has improved over the last few decades, while ours has gotten worse. Maryknoll missionaries,



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like myself, live in poor and working-class neighborhoods, because it's poor people there who realize their dependence on each other, and who know from experience that only through struggling in solidarity can they build together the quality of life for their children that no one family can afford on their own. They know from experience that solidarity with each other is their only path to the common good, even though it's no easier there than it is here.

From his writings and his ministry, I've concluded that Pope Francis isn't really interested in mission that doesn't live out real concern for poor and marginalized people. Mission is for God's people, and people who are poor suffer the most from violence and injustice, and lack of power. So if mission isn't addressing those things together with those involved, it isn't really about the Kingdom of God. Francis asks us a Church to be poor for and with the poor.

Let me add one more reflection. This morning I was attending the Immigration Summit at Seattle University. I think it might open up our understanding of mission and our response to the call to mission if we see the recent immigrants in our nation as missionaries to us – white, English-speaking, native-born Catholics (people who look like me!). They are missionaries to us, and their presence – especially the presence of vulnerable yet resilient undocumented people – helps us understand what mission looks like.

They have come to this country from all over the world to share the joy of their life – their families, their future, their hopes, desire for a new, safe home, and their great faith. They invite us into dialogue; I've never met a recent immigrant who did not want to share their story and was not eager to hear my family's immigrant story. And they invite us who are native here to enter into dialogue across the political spectrum here about what we sincerely hold dear as a people, what it means to be home, who we are as a nation. And finally, recent immigrants invite us into solidarity – not as an issue or even a virtue, but as persons, our neighbors, for whom we want the same life as we enjoy.

So this week, I invite you to pray for ...

What's your deep joy? How is that deep joy a gift from God? How do you want to share it?

And from this place of deep joy, how is God calling me into dialogue with others, especially those different from me who share my faith, or my neighborhood, my city. Or those who share my legal status, but hold very different visions of the common good?

And from this joy shared in dialogue, how is God calling us to live in solidarity with those who are poor, so that together, like Francis Xavier, we seek God's Kingdom?

Joe Hastings
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