

Aside from the fact that John's First Letter is so beautifully written, one of the reasons I recommend it as a wonderful introduction to the Christian faith is that it gets right to the heart of what it means to be a disciple of the Lord. It's really very simple, John writes. "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love,"¹ as we heard this morning.

So why, in Christian circles, does that seem to be something that's sometimes honored more in the breach than in the observance?

In Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov," there's a scene in which a monk recalls a conversation he once had with a doctor who said to him:

*'... the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons. In my dreams,' he said, 'I often went so far as to think passionately of serving mankind, and, it may be, would really have gone to the cross for people if it were somehow suddenly necessary, and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days ... In twenty-four hours I can begin to hate even the best of men: one because he takes too long eating his dinner, another because he has a cold and keeps blowing his nose ... On the other hand, it has always happened that the more I hate people individually, the more ardent becomes my love for humanity as a whole.'*²

As he so often does, Dostoevsky puts his finger on one of the central paradoxes of faith: it's sometimes the case that as people become more ostensibly religious, they become less and less charitable. There are a variety of reasons for this, I'm sure, but one of them surely involves failing to recognize something that the late Pope Benedict XVI taught, may his memory be a blessing. In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), Benedict wrote that, "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction ... Jesus united into a single precept [the] commandment of love for God and the commandment of love for neighbor

¹ 1 Jn 4:7-8 (NAB)

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokonsky, trans., Kindle Edition (New York: Picador, 2021), 110-111.

...”³ Benedict added that, “In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant.”⁴

“The encounter with an event, a person ...”.

The phenomenon that Dostoevsky described is often the result of mistaking the ideas of faith (or its rituals and devotions) for the practice of faith. One can hold all sorts of “lofty ideas” in the abstract, to use Benedict’s phrase, while being, as he lamented, hateful and vengeful in practice or while adhering to or supporting a set of hateful and vengeful ideas that are antithetical to the essence of the Christian faith: the practice — the *practice* — of the Good News of Jesus Christ in our relationships with others.

It’s the *practice* of faith through which one encounters the Risen Lord, because in continuing the Lord’s works of love, mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation, we’re helping to make Him present for others so that they, too, may encounter Him. There’s enough research to stack from floor to ceiling telling us that the ever-declining numbers in the pews of the Catholic and other Christian communities has little to do with people not knowing about Jesus. They’ve usually heard about Him for years and years. The problem is that all too often they don’t *experience* Him in those who profess to be His disciples, and oftentimes what they *do* experience is completely inconsistent with what the community professes to be about.

The Christian faith doesn’t get any more basic than inviting others into the *experience* of Christ. Why we as individuals and we as a Church often overlook this is puzzling, particularly given that, by definition, the Christian faith is an incarnational one. The Christian faith rests on the recognition that God became man in Christ. He is Emmanuel, “God among us”. We, in turn, are to incarnate Christ’s presence in us by opening ourselves to His grace, and then manifesting His presence to others.

This is hardly a new observation.

³ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* 1, The Holy See, vatican.va, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html

⁴ Ibid.

Nearly fifty years ago now, Pope St. Paul VI emphasized that “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”⁵ He went on to describe what an authentic Christian witness looks like.

*Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one.*⁶

Paul VI was hardly naive, however, and he identified one of the Church’s principal obstacles in presenting its witness to the world. “The Church is an evangelizer,” he wrote, “but she begins by being evangelized herself” because, he continued, “[the Church] is immersed in the world, and often tempted by idols ... this means she has a constant need of being evangelized, if she wishes to retain freshness, vigor and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel.”⁷

When the Christian faith is reduced to the set of “lofty ideas” about which Benedict XVI warned, it becomes just one set of ideas among others, and, as a result, oftentimes the answers we convey to others regarding the set of questions Paul VI listed — why we’re the way we are, why we live as we do, what inspires us — come more from the “idols” of our time than they do from the Gospel. The fact is, the Christian community is always teaching something, is always witnessing something, is always evangelizing for something. But what is it teaching? What is it witnessing? And for whom or what is it evangelizing?

⁵ Paul VI, *Evangeliū Nuntiandi* 41, The Holy See, vatican.va, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangeliū-nuntiandi.html

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15

In the Collect of the Vigil Mass of Epiphany this past weekend, we prayed, “May the splendor of your majesty, O Lord, we pray, shed its light upon our hearts, that we may pass through the shadows of this world and reach the brightness of our eternal home.”⁸

May others, too, see the splendor of the Lord’s majesty in us.

May the Light of Christ that we carry guide others through the world’s shadows.

May the practice of our faith, our witness, be an epiphany that guides others home.

⁸ *The Roman Missal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 187