

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
July 12, 2015

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Today's gospel describes the first independent mission of the apostles. It was their maiden voyage and must have been exciting. The Lord Jesus gave His disciples some very general instructions, some of which were discretionary. But Christ's Church has determined that some of them are *not* open to interpretation or negotiation.

The fact that some of the Lord's directions were changeable is reflected in the slightly different lists of what to do and what to bring, as recorded in the three synoptic gospels. In some of these lists a staff and shoes were forbidden, while in others these items appear. Clearly, the length of the journey and the season of travel were reasons for a bit of leeway.

There was, of course, another instruction which is not often thought of in this context. In Gethsemane, just prior to His arrest, Jesus gave specific direction to carry a purse with money in it, and a sword. These instructions reflect the dark condition of the Passion and the hostility that would greet the disciples in the aftermath of the death and resurrection of Christ.

The early Church looked back into the incidents of Christ's earthly life for the missionary guidance she later followed. That stands to reason. Jesus had made His followers take these trips. These men are called *apostles* because they were **sent out** from Him. As His deputies, the apostles were under His orders. And that is what His Church will continue to do until the end of time. *Apostolicity is part of what is non-negotiable.*

Having said all that, this preaching activity was a *trial run*. It was a trial run because Christ was not yet crucified and risen. The proclamation of the Gospel is Christ crucified and risen. That is the Gospel good news. We preach "Jesus is Lord." None of that could have been proclaimed on the missionary journey described in today's gospel texts. The great saving events which inaugurated the Church and her sacramental life came later. So we can think of these first missions of the apostles as *preview performances* before opening night. In the theatrical world critics understand they are to withhold comment until the finished product is

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presented. For the Church, the finished product is Christ's Cross and Resurrection, Ascension into Heaven, and the coming of the Holy Ghost.

Still, the Church adopted the basic missionary plan outlined by Our Lord. From the beginning, it was indeed the work of pairs of itinerant preachers bringing the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. These men were told to have a common mode of travel and operation. Jesus also gave them instructions to speak and teach according to His plan. That too is part of what is non-negotiable. *To be the Church means to speak and teach according to Christ's plan.*

The disciples were to travel lightly and live simply, as the circumstances would dictate. There is a quaint detail that when they entered a town the apostles were to settle in one place *and stay there*. That way people would know where to find them. This instruction always reminds me of Father Barks, who was my parish priest when I was a boy. Behind the entrance building to the main church, and before the front wall of the parish house was an open outdoor space that didn't get much sun. It was the perfect place for growing ivy as a ground cover. But the ivy needed water during hot dry months. Coming home late in the afternoon from school I would notice Father Barks out watering the ivy, and I would wave as I passed by. One day I stopped and said it seemed he always watered the ivy at that time of day. And his reply was that yes he did, and it was so people would know where he was. Between 4 and 5pm you could count on seeing Father Barks in the churchyard. That meant anyone who wanted to talk to the priest but didn't want to make an appointment could stop by. And I was reminded our Lord told His followers to *stay in one place* so people could find them. That meant *the local police* might also find them! Traveling lightly and living simply had as its object to show the apostles' complete trust and reliance upon Almighty God.

The Franciscans picked up this style of missionary effort 800 years ago. We know more about how they operated than about apostolic activity. The Franciscans had a spirit of joyfulness, of trustfulness, and love. But although they emulated the apostles and many times lived heroic lives even to martyrdom, still the Franciscan enterprise was different. Saint Francis developed a movement *within* the Church. The apostles went out *as the Church* herself.

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We are to copy the spirit of apostolic simplicity. This does not necessarily mean selling our property and other assets. It *does* mean to stay focused on the Lord and His mission to the world. That is the life Catholics are called to live.