

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Seventh Sunday after Trinity
July 15, 2018
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Today's Gospel is an account of the first independent mission of the Apostles. It was their trial trip! And it must have been exciting. First is exciting. Our Lord Jesus gave His disciples some very general instructions. Some of these were changeable. But Christ's Church has determined some of the instructions were *not* open to interpretation, negotiation, or revision.

The fact some of our Lord's directions were changeable is reflected in the slightly different lists of packing instructions in the three synoptic gospels. For instance, in some of these lists a staff and shoes were forbidden, while in others these items are included. Clearly, the length of the journey and the season of travel were factors for the discrepancies.

In the Garden of Gethsemane *another* instruction was given which is not often thought of in these apostolic missionary trips. Do you remember what it is? Just before His arrest the Lord 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 tense climate after the death and resurrection of Christ.

It is obvious the early Church looked back into the incidents of Christ's earthly life for the missionary instructions she later followed. The Church followed these instructions because Jesus had made His disciples take these trips. These men are called Apostles for that very reason. The word *ἀποστελλω* means "sent out" and that is what they were. They were sent out from Christ as His deputies and ambassadors, *and under His orders*. That is what Christ's Church will continue to do until the end of time. Apostolicity is part of what is non-negotiable.

Having said that, the missionary activity described in the Gospel is what I said it was: *a trial run*. For Christ was not yet crucified and risen. The proclamation of the Gospel is the preaching of Christ crucified. The Gospel good news is "Christ is risen." And because of that, we preach: "Jesus is Lord." None of that could have been proclaimed on the missionary journeys described in our Gospel texts. Do you get that point? The great saving events which inaugurated the Church, and her sacramental life, came later. We can think of these first missions of the apostles as

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the preview performances before opening night at the theatre! The critics understand they are to withhold comment until the finished product is presented. For the Church, the finished product includes Christ's Cross and Resurrection for the sins of the whole world, His 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 teaching *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 circumstances dictate. And there is the quaint detail that when they entered a town they were to settle in one place for the duration of their stay. In 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 vestibule of St Margaret's Church was an open outdoor space before the front wall of the attached parish house. This area got little sun and was the perfect place to grow English ivy as a ground cover. But the ivy needed water. Late in the afternoon, coming home from after-school practice, I often noticed Fr Barks watering the ivy and would wave to him as I headed home. One day I stopped and said it seemed he was *always* watering the ivy at that time of day. He said yes, and gave me the reason: it was so people would know where he was. Between 4 and 5 o'clock you could count on seeing Fr Barks watering the ivy. It meant anyone who wanted to talk to the priest, but didn't want to make an appointment, could stop by. Sometimes those conversations were important. And I remembered our Lord told His followers to stay in one place so that people could find them. This meant too, of course, 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 on this style of missionary effort 800 years ago. We know more details about how they operated than about the apostolic activity. The

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Franciscans had a spirit of joyfulness, trustfulness, and love. But although they emulated the Apostles and many times lived heroic lives leading to martyrdom, still it was a different enterprise. St Francis developed a movement within the Church. The Apostles went out *as the Church herself*.

We are to copy the spirit of apostolic simplicity. This does not mean selling our property and 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.