

On the Road Again: The Emmaus Model of Accompaniment

By: Sara Blauvelt

The work of disciples has been, and will always be, to bring the Gospel to the world in which they live. The Second Vatican Council invited us to consider social discernment an essential element of discipleship, “The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (*Gaudium et spes*, 4). Though the cultural landscape is an ever-changing reality, our history of passing on the faith can and should inform our present and future approaches to ministry. This does not mean we carry along every program and resource of the past, rather, it means we are called to mine our rich tradition of evangelization and catechesis for the wisdom and methods that remain perennial. Too often, when we try to engage young adults, we think we must develop a new program. We should instead engage in a spirit of inculturating prevailing elements of culture with the wisdom of past methodologies. No single method of engagement is applicable to the needs of all young adults, but there is a universal model of accompaniment.

I suggest that the baptismal catechumenate should inspire our approach to encounter as it accommodates and adapts to each person’s journey of faith in Christ, and is, at the same time, directed toward participation in the life and mission of the community. The catechumenal process is modeled on a perfect encounter with Christ himself on the evening of the first Easter on the road to Emmaus. Done well, the baptismal catechumenate recognizes the necessity of identifying and addressing the particular needs of each individual and their experience of God. The catechumenal model recognizes that growth in faith happens in discernable periods, which vary from person to person. In educational terms, we learn about our lives before we focus on formation in the faith, only then do we choose faith, which leads to a life-long deepening of faith and sense of mission. Following in the footsteps of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, we find a Christocentric model of encounter, accompaniment and sending. The remainder of this paper will explore the movements exemplified in the Emmaus story and offer suggestions for how this should shape our engagement with young adults today.

Encounter – *“Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him”*(cf. Lk 24:15).

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus draws near to listen and walk with the disciples. Authentic encounter is not planned, but rather is born of two hearts meeting on the road. To become adults of encounter requires that we be flexible, humble, determined and patient. We must learn to suspend our preconceived notions of what comprises encounter. Encountering young adults will take place beyond traditional parish boundaries and programs.

A practical application is to expand our understanding of who is on our “young adult ministry team”. Attention everyone, we are all on the young adult ministry team! As is true of the

catechumenal process, every baptized person is on the team. We are each uniquely qualified to be an instrument of God's grace to help young adults to "discover little by little the face of Christ and feel the need of giving themselves to Him (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 44). We must stop talking in terms of ministry "to them" – we are all one Body in Christ ministering to one another. With this shift in mindset, we can expand our hearts to see that "we" are not doing this ministry for "them", but are doing it because the Body of Christ is less when some are away.

Accompany/Form Community – "*Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is over.*" (cf Lk 24:29).

Unsure but interested, the disciples begged Jesus to stay. They desired to know him more closely and be known by him more deeply. Likewise, many young adults seek such a relational experience. Moving from the threshold of encounter we must, like Jesus, remain with young adults as they move from seeking answers to seeking meaning. This meaning will take the form of a lived relationship with Christ in the community of the faithful. Mirroring the catechumenal model, we are present as a community accompanying young adults; it is the Holy Spirit who opens their hearts to commit to the Lord.

For many young adults there is a sense of uncertainty in affiliating with a community. However, all young adults share the inherent desire to be in communion with others. The dynamic of the catechumenate provides a model for engaging in community through small group faith sharing experiences, the whole purpose of which is to provide an opportunity for each member of the community to deepen its own conversion. To accompany and form young adults through small group ministry we must first create a space where listening and sharing are normative. Our efforts to accompany will fail if we do not first truly listen to their stories and concerns. Ministers in the process of accompaniment should see themselves as facilitators – listening, synthesizing, encouraging and keeping the group focused on the purpose of deepening conversion. Our work is to be a conduit of the grace of the Holy Spirit.

One practical application, born of the fruit of authentic listening, is to use the concerns/questions young adults share with us in shaping how best to accompany *their* spiritual needs. As in the catechumenal process, our formation is only effective when we have listened to the questions of those we accompany and provide space for conversation, worship, prayer and service, to support integration of faith and life. In a multi-faceted approach to accompaniment, we are poised to assure young adults of our lasting support through their inter-deepening relationship with Christ and his Body the Church. With this approach of addressing identified needs, we are in a better position to overcome the perception that the Church is irrelevant.

Send – "*Then they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning (within us) while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?"*" (Lk 24:32).

We see in the disciples a burning transformative love that impels them: they cannot wait to tell others about their encounter with Christ, and how it changes the way they see the world. The mystagogical practices of the catechumenate provide an opportunity to move deeper into faith in light of experience.

We must facilitate encounter in such a way that the missionary spirit is born from within. Pope Francis speaks of this when he says, “The joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore. The apostles never forgot the moment when Jesus touched their hearts (Jn 1:39). The believer is essentially ‘one who remembers.’” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 13). If we have encountered and accompanied well, sending will be the natural next step.

Practically, we must be able to share our own moment of encounter and help young adults to do the same. The influence of secularism on young adults stifles, if not extinguishes a desire to share the Gospel. In engaging in mystagogy with young adults today, we must unpack the mysteries of faith and the meaning they hold in everyday life. At the same time, we must provide them with the tools they need to articulate their faith story. Offering opportunities to learn basic story telling skills will help young adults build their confidence in sharing their experience of Christ. Gathering young adults to share their story of faith is a necessary first step. As we gather with young adults, we must invite them to consider elements that shape their story: how has/does God work in their life, what has been their experience of God, who has accompanied them along the way, were there catalyst moments that sparked their faith. In telling our stories, we deepen our conviction and may deepen personal conversion in others.

On the Road Again. We are a Church on pilgrimage. Along the journey of faith, we will encounter, accompany and send others by our word and witness. Seeing every person – young or old – as an essential person in the Body of Christ will enable us to see with fresh eyes the necessity of sharing the mission. Pope Francis challenges each person to claim the title missionary disciple, “The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 120). At this moment in our pilgrim journey, we must ensure that every young person is invited to share in the gift and responsibility of encountering, accompanying, forming community and sending.