

INTRODUCTION



“Go forth! Proclaim!”

In many of his addresses during his visit to the United States, Pope Francis raised the call to discipleship and reminded everyone who heard him that this call is not limited to the few—to the ordained and consecrated—but is meant for all of us by virtue of our baptism.

In *Laudato Si'*, he spoke of our need for one another and our responsibility for one another. If we take our faith seriously, we are to go out and share the gospel in every way we can. Following the approach shown by one of Pope Francis' favorite saints and role models, Francis of Assisi, we are called to preach the gospel always, and in all ways, using words when necessary.

So our call is to look and to *see*, to hear and to *listen*, to reach out and to *touch*, and to share God's good news. These thirty reflections based on Pope Francis' words are meant to guide us and point the way.

The quotes from Pope Francis were chosen by Deborah McCann, who also wrote the reflections and the “Ponder” and “Pray” pieces.

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1 | GIVING OURSELVES AWAY

*We will discover the real joy of the gospel
when we give it away, giving of ourselves.*

Oscar Hammerstein II once penned a lyric that spoke about love not being love until it's given away. This is what Pope Francis was speaking about at the canonization of Junipero Serra. Our faith is not lived in isolation; we need the community around us—within the parish and outside its doors—to put flesh on the words of the gospel. And Pope Francis lives this example, always reaching out to others (often to the consternation of his security team), fearlessly and lovingly. We are asked to do the same.

PONDER

When I read the gospels, do I find myself filled with eagerness to share the good news?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, fill me with the desire to serve you and serve you well. Help me to greet all people as my brothers and sisters.

2 | MEETING MY NEIGHBOR

*What does this encounter with “the other” look like?
How do we reach out in love?*

It's not hard to see in Pope Francis' example that he loves people. When asked why he decided not to live in the papal apartments, preferring to live in more modest surroundings, he replied that he needed to live with people. He knew that his role as pope could be very isolating and could separate him from all those he considers his neighbors. Sometimes we prefer to stay in our own “neighborhood,” where everyone is known. But to be true to our baptismal call, we need to learn to go beyond ourselves, reaching out to others as they reach out to us in return.

PONDER

Am I comfortable where I am? How might I be more truly open to the opportunities in front of me where I work, where I shop, where I live?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me awaken to the needs of all I meet, and make me useful!

3 | LOOKING FOR THE LIGHT

When we put the gospel into action, this adds to the real light of the church, the light of faith and grace.

Pope Francis warns of the tendency to think of ourselves (or to put ourselves) in positions of power. This, he says, sheds the wrong kind of light. Sometimes we have to step out of our own spotlight to see where the real light shines! Acts of service done in the name of the Lord bring lustre and brightness to the whole church. This is the true light of the gospel—that which illumines from within, based in prayer and humility and a real desire to help others to grow into this light as well.

PONDER

Am I tempted by the lights of power and “being known”? How can I really seek the light of the gospel?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, sharpen my focus on service to you. Help me to remain faithful to my call to serve others.

4 | WELCOME FOR ALL

*The church is everyone's home.
How good are we at communicating the message
of Christ's love for all?*

Pope Francis frequently contrasts the image of the church as a place of richness and finery and pomp with the vision of the church out in the streets—not being afraid of getting dirty, finding no one unworthy of welcome. In statement after statement, he speaks of our duty to reach out in love and joy. The pope encourages us to accept this challenge and see the neighbor in the stranger. Sometimes, our witness may be the only face of Christ others see—and reaching out will help us to see Christ as well!

PONDER

How often in the course of a day do I see everyone as a neighbor?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, open my eyes to see you in each face I see today.

5 | STARTING THE CONVERSATION

*It's all in how we engage one another in dialogue.
A real conversation is much more
about listening than speaking.*

A hallmark of Pope Francis' papacy has been his willingness to *listen* to others. He reminds us that sharing the good news of the gospel doesn't mean beating people over the head with it but being patient in listening to others' doubts and fears, respecting their positions and viewpoints, and responding to them with eagerness to continue talking. Really listening to others is one of the greatest ways we can ever be of service.

PONDER

What might I do to become a better listener?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, open my ears and my heart to the viewpoints of others so that I might hear them without prejudice or preconceptions. Help me to listen as I would like to be listened to.

6 | KNOW WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

We are most effective in service when we look at others from the perspective of one whom God has anointed and healed.

It is true that we often feel very close to those who have shared some of the same sorrows in life that we have experienced. Pope Francis tells us that our eyes will be opened to mercy and mission when we remember the times we ourselves have received mercy—from God and others—and been healed. If we have been healed, we can offer that assurance to others!

PONDER

Have there been times that I have been less open than I might have been to others' needs?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me to remember my forgiveness at your hands, so that I may share that mercy!

7 | THE BEST SERVICE

*As Mary raced to help her cousin Elizabeth,
so we should be ready to hasten
to serve others.*

Pope Francis uses the image of Mary, after the Annunciation, going to help her cousin Elizabeth. That selfless attention to others at a time of great personal need is a hallmark of how our service should look. The best service, Pope Francis reminds us, is that service done on behalf of others even when we'd rather focus on our own problems. Our own attention to prayer, Scripture, and worship will prepare us to see the need in another's eyes.

PONDER

Whom might I help right now, today, with God's help?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, I am so inadequate to serve you, but I trust that you can empower me, and I will try to be ready.

8 | EACH SIMPLE ACT

Our reaching out does not need to be world-changing or surrounded by great fanfare. The simplest actions on behalf of another are enough.

Sometimes—when we’re working for social change, for example—we need to step into the public arena. But most often, says Pope Francis, it’s attention to a grieving mother, a despondent adolescent, a hungry family, or the lonely, homebound parishioner that makes all the difference, not only in their lives, but in our own. When we embrace another’s suffering, we can begin to understand the ways God is giving us to be present to others. Everyday, ordinary mercy can be extraordinary!

PONDER

Who is sitting near me every Sunday who might need a kind word or a little help?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, I know there are problems that I cannot solve, and people I cannot help. Guide me to where I can make a difference, so that I may serve you well!

9 | SHARING HOLY GIFTS

*God's holy gifts are all around us,
and we find the gifts others possess
by sharing our own.*

Pope Francis has been very clear in his language to his brother priests and bishops that their place is on the “front lines” with their people, getting to know them and learning from them as much as teaching them. How often in our own lives have we discovered the immense gifts given back to us a hundredfold from reaching out a hand to help? We have so much to learn from one another, and the light of Christ shines more brightly when we open ourselves to being vulnerable to one another.

PONDER

When have I been amazed to find out that someone I've just talked to for the first time is really very much like me?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, I am shy about the gifts you have given me to share. Increase my confidence, that I may share them where they will do good!

10 | ARE WE READY?

*Who gets our attention?
Whom are we neglecting?*

The church often takes up major issues—climate change, dialogue with other faiths, issues of war and peace—and sometimes we can think that the church has all the bases covered. But Pope Francis reminds us that we also need to look at our smaller “churches”—the church of our family, the church of our parish, the church of our workplace or neighborhood—and see where the light of Christ is dim and where we might help it to shine. Do we care for the world and ignore the neighbor at our doorstep?

PONDER

Is my parish a place where all worship together in shared love of the gospel? Do we all get along? If not, what might I do to help change this?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, when you chose Mary as our guide, you showed the power that the weak and lowly possess. Help me to see what I can do, right here and right now, to be of help to others!

11 | MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

*We shouldn't be waiting for people to come to us—
we have to go out and find them.*

The parish is not a place of “regulating” the faith, Pope Francis says; it’s a place where faith is “transmitted.” What does this mean for us? It means we don’t sit back and just greet the people who find their way in—rather, we practice our faith everywhere we go and in everything we do. We have to model welcome and openness to serve in all that we do. When we meet people where they are, we can invite them in. But we have to be sure we’re inviting them to something worthwhile!

PONDER

Is my parish truly welcoming? Are we on the lookout for ways to serve everyone in the community?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, give me the courage to seek out those who need my help, and equip me to help them!

12 | WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

We are not Christians without the church. We are not whole without community.

Pope Francis says bluntly that a Christian is not someone merely baptized and sent on his or her way. We are baptized into the church, into a community of faith, where we are part of a much greater whole. He stresses that as Christians we belong to one another; we belong to the body of Christ. As such, our call is to bring others to Christ. Words alone won't accomplish that—it's our actions as a faith community that will attract others to our doors. And a welcoming smile, handshake, or warm greeting can be a perfect beginning.

PONDER

How often do I truly consider my role as a member of the body of Christ?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me never to turn inward to self-interest, but to take my place proudly as a member of your body.

13 | THE HARVEST WILL BE PLENTIFUL

*We must be the good soil in which the life of God
takes root and grows.*

In reminding us that God gives us all we need to do his work in our world, Pope Francis speaks of the parable of the sower and the seed. He reminds us that when we give our full attention to listening to Scripture, when we share in the sacraments, and when we apply all this to the service of others, we will bear fruit. When we welcome this grace into our lives, knowing that what we are doing is for the greater glory of God, our commitment to justice and mercy and peace will become second nature.

PONDER

Being totally open to living the faith is a tall order.
Am I ready to commit?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, strengthen my resolve to listen better and open myself to your word, so that I may serve you eagerly and effectively!

14 | DON'T WORRY ABOUT MAKING A MISTAKE

We fail when we are so afraid of doing something wrong that we do nothing at all.

Pope Francis has a vision of the church as alive, always in “seeking” mode, and never settling for just being “nice” and “safe.” We are called to adopt the missionary courage of St. Paul and look well beyond the boundaries of our parishes for both those who are physically hungry and those who are spiritually hungry for the word of God. We may make a wrong move in reaching out, but this should not discourage us—we never know what effect we may have for good in the long run. We can’t be afraid to try!

PONDER

When have I stayed put in my tracks for fear of making the wrong move?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me to see the needs of others everywhere I look, and then give me the courage to act to meet them!

15 | GOD WILL PREPARE US

Trust always that when God calls upon us for action, we will be prepared to take it up.

Have you heard the phrase “God doesn’t call the qualified, God qualifies the called”? This is what Pope Francis is telling us when he asks us to trust that God will equip us for our service. It’s when we give ourselves over completely to this trust that we become courageous disciples. And how do we arrive at this trust? Through prayer and scriptural reflection and sharing with others. This is truly a *life* of faith that we are asked to live—it’s not just a lifestyle. And we are asked to live it trustingly and joyfully, knowing that God will be with us in our work.

PONDER

Have I accepted my faith as my life? How does this acceptance guide my path?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me to trust you more and more, so that my witness will speak to others of your goodness.

16 | THERE ARE MANY GIFTS...

*Each of us has a God-given charism
that is meant to be used at
the service of others.*

Pope Francis says that all of us have been gifted in some way or another by God. But these gifts, or charisms, aren't given to us so that we might use them for selfish ends. Instead, they are given to us so that we may find exactly the right way to reach those we are called to serve. Each grace, each charism, is for the sake of the entire community. Take a moment to look around at the people in your parish and consider how their many gifts are put to use each and every day for the good of all. And consider what you add to the mix!

PONDER

What is my particular charism, and how can I best put it to use?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me to see the gifts that others possess, and open my eyes and my heart to my own, so that I may use them well!

17 | WHAT IS MY GIFT?

*We don't have to guess at our own charisms;
most often people around us will point them out.
And that is God speaking!*

When we pray to discover what our charism is, we may be surprised to hear the answer from others in the community. Pope Francis says wryly that we should never try to name our own gift—he says we are often mistaken about what we think we do best! But others will let us know where our gifts match the needs of others, and if these are wise and reliable people, people you trust as really living their faith, you can be pretty sure that you're on the right track!

PONDER

All of us are part of Christ's body with gifts to share. Am I listening well to what God is calling me to do?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, I thank you for the gifts you have given me. Help me nurture what will bring you the most glory!

18 | WE ARE ALL AT ONE ANOTHER'S SERVICE

*The Spirit unites the great profusion
of gifts into the body of Christ.
We all play a part.*

Pope Francis says that the charisms that we all possess give great beauty and diversity to the church. When we look at all the different gifts we bring to God's work, we might wonder how all these gifts can work together. But the Spirit is at work, bringing unity out of this diversity, creating a colorful mosaic that shows the face of Christ to all who seek it. And none of us is on our own in this work. A truly vibrant, alive Christian community is one that works together, realizing that even the smallest detail, the smallest contribution, makes the whole possible.

PONDER

Do I feel myself part of a great "whole" in what I do in God's name?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me to see where I "fit," and help us all to join together to bring you to the world.

19 | WE GIVE WHAT WE HAVE RECEIVED

God's influence in our lives lets us see that the greatest gift we can share with another is the assurance of God's grace.

How can we share knowledge of God's grace with others? By sharing what we ourselves have received. Personal testimony is the greatest witness there is. Pope Francis reminds us that Christians are those who have let God's light transform them with his love and mercy. When we have let God's light overcome our indifference or our fear, we have a tremendous amount to share with others who find themselves in darkness.

PONDER

Do I believe that sharing my darkest moments may be revelatory to another?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, give me the words to open others' eyes to your goodness!

20 | OPEN THE DOORS!

The purpose of Christian life is to share it abundantly. Don't be stingy in your witness!

Pope Francis stresses over and over how important it is to take God's good news out into the streets. When we allow God to nourish and transform us in the Eucharist, and when we deepen our faith by prayer and reflection on Scripture, then we can be confident that God will strengthen our gifts and guide our steps as we throw open the doors of our parishes and serve those most in need. We are meant to give of ourselves in society at large—not to remain “parochial,” but to become enthusiastic missionaries.

PONDER

What can I do to increase my missionary focus?
Am I ready to accept the challenge?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me to see that there are no boundaries to true Christian service. And remind me that you are with me!

21 | TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

*Everything that is given to us is to be shared.
In that way, we will come to know the great gifts
that others have to share with us.*

When God gave us our gifts, we were not supposed to keep them for ourselves. They are to be given away freely and without measure for the good of all. Pope Francis says that when we truly engage with those whom we serve, we open ourselves not just to give but to receive, and we become aware of the gifts they are sharing with us. In this way all are ennobled; all begin to see their equal worth in God's eyes. More than that, we find ourselves securely on the road of following Christ, who calls us all his brothers and sisters—one family in Christ.

PONDER

Do I think of everyone I meet as a member of my family? What would happen if I did?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me to follow your path completely and without reserve.

22 | ALIKE IN OUR HUMANITY

Communication is more than just understanding the other. It is seeking to become like the other—not people on opposite sides of a fence, but together.

Pope Francis sees a dimension in communication that goes beyond mere conversation and recognition of shared qualities and vision. If we are truly to serve the other, then we must become like the other. Jesus “shifts our understanding,” Pope Francis says, so that we can accept everyone we meet as a fellow human being, a fellow pilgrim, a fellow traveler, on the road to the kingdom. It is when we see others’ needs from their viewpoint that we become the true servants of all.

PONDER

Have I been reluctant or afraid to “let myself go” and really accept everyone as a child of God?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, it is difficult sometimes to accept others as they are. Help me to realize that I too may be hard to accept, and help me do better.

23 | ACCEPTING THE TOTAL PACKAGE

Real understanding encompasses multiple dimensions of faith, spirituality, and values.

When our service leads to discovering all the richness that different cultures and traditions bring to the table, it can't help but cause deeper, more profound changes in the way we relate to our faith as a whole. Pope Francis says that this commonality of vision reinforces our Christian values in many ways—marriage and the family, our common humanity's basic rights, engaging the political sphere—leading to more ways of working together as Christians to bring about needed change.

PONDER

What preconceptions of “the other” have I been harboring? Has being of service changed this in me?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, prepare me to take on ever more involved challenges so that my brothers and sisters in need may live more comfortably and peacefully.

24 | WHAT IS MY VOCATION?

Mutual love becomes mutual service.

So often the word “vocation” gets relegated to the realm of those in religious life or the clergy. (And perhaps the rest of us breathe a sigh of relief at the thought!) Pope Francis reminds us that we *all* have vocations to follow Christ, born in us at our baptism. We do not manufacture our own vocation. It is given to us by God, discovered in the needs of the community, and lived out with others in mutual service. But the basis is the community that fosters and sustains growth. A faithful people deeply involved in service to the least and the lost will grow in authentic witness, inspiring others to see what Christian life looks like!

PONDER

How do I see my vocation? Does it go beyond my own needs and wants?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me to live out my baptismal call to bring your light to others in whatever way will help it shine most brightly in their lives!

25 | WALKING THE TALK

Be fearless! Be humble! Be merciful!

Pope Francis is never more prophetic than when he is exhorting Catholics to action. He hopes we will take up a life of service, however this plays out. But just as Jesus sent his disciples out with instructions, so Pope Francis guides us as well. We are to be *fearless*—trusting in the Spirit. We are to be *humble*—embracing the world as it is and not as we wish it were. We are to meet people where they are—not expecting them to come to us. And we must be *merciful*. We speak and act in the name of a God ready to forgive anything—such is the depth of his love! We will only be truly effective when we believe all this ourselves.

PONDER

Do I sincerely believe in God's love for me?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me always to be fearless and confident in sharing your good news. And help me always to believe it too!

26 | IT'S NOT ALL UP TO ME

We must always remember that we have been inserted into a community as a great grace.

It is a great human temptation to think that everything depends on us. It is clear that Pope Francis has adopted what his Jesuit founder, Ignatius of Loyola, once said in a letter: “You must have patience and not think that God our Lord requires what man cannot accomplish.” In other words, salvation is not up to us. We need to do the best we possibly can, but we don’t have to worry that we alone are responsible for the outcome. This is the beauty of the church, Pope Francis reminds us—to provide the community from which these graces flow.

PONDER

Do I breathe a sigh of relief that it’s not all up to me?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me to remember that I cannot predict outcomes, only lay the groundwork for your grace to flourish!

27 | IT'S ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

The dignity of the human person is the focus of everything we do, our reason for serving.

It sounds so simple, but is really very multifaceted, and not all that easy to live out. Pope Francis stresses that the dignity of the human person has to be at the center of all that we do. What does this mean? It means that everyone I serve is equally capable of serving me, not in material terms perhaps, but as an equally beloved child of God, made in God's image and likeness. How often in our service do we set standards or categories for people but not realize that they have as much to give us as we have to give them?

PONDER

What new brother or sister do I need to meet and greet today?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, help me to remember that all work done in your name is acceptable to you. I don't need credentials, just an open heart!

28 | THE FREEDOM OF SERVICE

*Sinners that we are, we are meant to call
to other sinners by living our faith
with joy and courage.*

Pope Francis says that a life lived in God's service frees us from petty jealousies, rivalries, and negative feelings that may be all around us. True service acknowledges our identity as sinners as much in need of forgiveness as those to whom we reach out. If we are able to see everyone through this lens, then we can grasp the true nature of what Christian community is supposed to be—a place of harmony and peace, where all work together for God's glory, sharing the joy and unconditional love of the God who has loved us first and so deeply.

PONDER

Who in my community witnesses the real joy of Christian service?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, make me ready to greet everyone as your child, as my own family, walking the same road, always searching to grow closer to you!

29 | COMMUNITY BEGINS HERE

*The church is not a relief organization,
but a community infused with the light of Christ,
deeply engaged in sharing that light with all.*

So what should our service look like? Pope Francis says it should look like people undertaking whatever tasks they perform with joy and purpose, always working not for self-interest or celebrity, but for the building of God's kingdom. It should be rooted in the community of the local church, a place that celebrates the wonder of encounter with Christ that inspires us to share that good news with all we meet. Most of all, it must look like a people rejoicing in the news of our salvation, and making that joy felt.

PONDER

How can my parish community become even more alive to the Spirit's call to service?

PRAY

God of love and mercy, fill me with your joy. Fill my parish with fire and conviction, that we may fashion a place of welcome for all!

