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Carine George

Loyola Marymount University, kareen.george@gmail.com

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The *imago Dei* as a Response to Consumerism and Individualism within the Church

A Pastoral Synthesis Project

By

Carine George

Presented to

The Faculty

Of Loyola Marymount University

Department of Theological Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts in Pastoral Theology

Los Angeles, California

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Narrative:

The pastoral problem I am addressing has to do with the culture of consumerism and individualism that have influenced the culture of the Church. Within Western society, the “ism” culture, consisting of factors such as: hedonism, consumerism, materialism, secularism, relativism and individualism, has become very prominent.

As Matthew 5:13-16 lays out, Christians are called to be salt for the earth and light for the world, but so many of us are not living up to this calling. Many of us are unaware of this calling, others do not see the value of the calling, and still others desire it but lack support. This reality that we struggle to live out our calling is not just an issue for us personally, but impacts the rest of society, even outside the Church. Many people are familiar with the famous hymn, “They’ll know we are Christians by our love,” but is that truly something we can claim, given the current state of our Church? When a person watches the news and sees “Catholics” doing some very “un-Catholic things,” that does not leave them with a desire to inquire about the faith or even leave a positive reflection of what Christianity is about.

Many Catholics are struggling because although the faith has so much to offer, they have not discovered it yet. Those who are far from the faith do not see it as something of value because the ones who claim to be Catholic are not showing its potential.

I have chosen to address this problem because the Church is going through an identity crisis that is rooted in the “ism” culture. We have a calling to be a light for the world, yet it seems that we are becoming just like the rest of the world. God calls us to so much more and equips us to be more for the world, yet we are not living up to this calling and this is a disservice, to God, to ourselves and to others.

I find it troubling when non-Christians point out Christians and say “If being Christian looks like that, then I do not want to be one.” Granted no one is perfect and sometimes people use that as an excuse to not take a risk, however, there is also some truth to it. When a Christian repeatedly behaves in a manner that is unethical and shows no repentance, it does not send a good message to non-Christians.

As a pastoral theologian and employee of the Church, I think it is crucial that we remind Christians of our calling and reveal the beauty behind the faith. There are many people who are Catholic because they were born into it, but that should not be the immediate answer. Our faith is beautiful and life-giving, and it needs to be realized. Many of us claim to be Christian or Catholic, but our way of life says otherwise due to the influences of the “ism” culture and this needs to change. In John 15:19, we are told that we were not made to be of this world, so we need to stop being influenced by the culture and instead allow the beauty of the Christian faith to influence the world.

What I am proposing here is not just a hope to overcome consumerism and individualism, but an entire revamping of what it means to be Christian. I am suggesting the need for a culture change, which if we focus on, has the power to solve other pastoral and ethical issues as well. I am not claiming to solve all the problems within the Church, but I am claiming that such a cultural change will lead to vibrancy among believers and will bring in more people, as well.

Case Component:

When I meet new people, they often ask what I do for a living. When I state that I work for the Church while studying theology, their jaws drop. The reason behind this is usually one of two. Either they express sympathy because they think this is the only position I am capable of

attaining, or they express their confusion at why I would choose to work at a Catholic Church, of all places.

In the former example, when such people have had an opportunity to ask a little more about me, they very honestly express that they think I am well-educated, have a loving personality and could easily find a job elsewhere. I thank them and respond that I am aware of this reality, but I have freely chosen to be here and thoroughly enjoy it. In the latter example, people often bring up issues they have with Catholics, including sex-abuse scandals, pastoral issues they experienced when they used to attend Church and other frustrations with people they know who claim to be Christian. I strive to be understanding while allowing people to express their frustrations. Following that, I express that I choose to be Catholic and dedicate my life to this vocation because it is life-giving and I am not here for the people, who are sinful, I am here because of Christ, who gave himself up for me. As you can imagine, people in both scenarios come out feeling quite confused, and this usually leads to a much longer conversation about faith and personal life experiences.

The many experiences I have had along these lines illustrate how much people are hurting, how much they have misunderstood the Christian faith, and how much they desire to have the sense of peace that is possible through Christ. Often times I sit back and wonder how easy it is to light a fire in these individuals, simply by being authentic. I have struggled in learning about who God is and who I am, but an exploration of these large questions led me to feel an overwhelming sense of love that nothing and no one else in life has been able to provide. I find it troubling that most Christians have not had such an experience, yet they continue going through the routine actions of the faith, never stopping to ask why they do what they do. I find it even more troubling that they are surrounded by people who want to explore Christianity on a

surface or deep level, yet the Christians they turn to often have little to offer in terms of guidance and witness. What hurts and troubles me even more is that Christians who want to bring others close to Christ think that you have to be a professional theologian in order to do so, when in reality, all you have to do is be your sincere and authentic self.

This is the problem with the culture of consumerism and individualism, that it has forced us to close ourselves off from others and believe that having more somehow fulfills us. In reality, consumerism and individualism in extreme forms only bring about emptiness and isolation. We need to take off the masks, walk away from the facades and recognize the beautiful reality that although we are unworthy, God chooses each of us to become worthy.

Overview of the Project:

Although we are made by God and for God, the reality is that God is not tangible and difficult for us to grasp. The historical Jesus existed, but he is not currently walking among us and in the 21st century, people want more than written testimonies. Even those who are able to believe in Christianity face struggles in living out the Gospel message. Laying down your life in imitation of Christ is no small order.

It is understandable that people struggle to live up to the Gospel values, yet each of us has a void within ourselves and we seek to fill the void in any possible way. The “ism” culture does not happen overnight, but in baby steps. We have now reached a place where it dominates the Western world and has infiltrated into the culture of the Church. In seeking to be fulfilled, we fall for the promises of receiving quick fixes and instant gratification, but the problem is that those things do not last and actually do more harm to us than good.

In order to overcome the culture of consumerism and individualism, we have to take a deeper look at our relationship with God in order to discover the purpose for which we were

made and how we can go about attaining that fulfillment. An exploration of the *imago Dei* will reveal that the two greatest Commandments given to us contain the answers concerning who we are, and also the means by which we can overcome the influences of consumerism and individualism.

Context Component:

The reality that the Western part of the world is dominated by a culture of consumerism and individualism is no surprise and the reasons for why this is the case are multidimensional. I do not claim to have an answer as to why this culture of consumerism and individualism exists, nor is that the focus here. Instead, I am operating under the assumption that these two “isms” exist in the current culture of Western society and have influenced the culture of the Church.

My goal will be to demonstrate how the culture of consumerism and individualism is indeed prevalent in the culture of the Church, and to attempt to explain why this has become the case. This will be done by first investigating the demands of an average American’s life and analyzing how religion fits in. That will lead into an exploration of how Christians, especially Catholics, perceive the role of the Church and faith in their lives. From there, we will discuss how Catholics are quite polarized, not differing much from Americans overall. This will bring forward the reality that the Church is called to be united and it will demonstrate how we have strayed from this because we have been impacted by the culture of individualism. Finally, I will entertain the theory of the “religious seeker” as a potential answer to why the culture of consumerism and individualism exist in the Church, noting that seeking is not a problem, but not having a reason for why we believe what we believe, is the actual problem that has contributed to why the Church has been so influenced by the “ism” culture of Western society.

Robert Bellah, a sociologist, proposes that cultural influences such as consumerism and individualism impede our way of practicing the faith because we live in a world of compartmentalization. People have to struggle to balance their job, family, self-care, finances, Church, recreational activities etc. They have multiple areas of their lives desperately competing for their attention and religion becomes just another compartment among many that people seek to juggle and keep alive in some capacity. ¹ In the best case scenario, he sees religion as an element that helps people to deal with the other compartments in their lives. With that said, the problem is not that we have too many elements to juggle, but that each item exists with its own set of logic and values. This causes us to internalize the conflicts that exist between each element and compartmentalize them, almost as if to have multiple personalities and switch between them depending on which sphere of life we are currently in.

This is similar to “The McChurch Mentality” described in an issue of *Christianity Today*, which is a term that the authors coined to describe the consumer mentality that has influenced the Church. The authors succinctly state that “The Church is just another retail outlet, faith is just another commodity.” ² This understanding of compartmentalization means that faith becomes just one compartment among many others in an otherwise secular lifestyle. The problem with this mentality is that faith becomes something that people only live out on Sunday and it never influences the other areas of our lives, such as work, family, politics etc. At best, we live out virtues such as being a good neighbor on Sunday, but once we get back to work on Monday, being

¹ Christian Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 15.

² “Welcome to McChurch,” *Christianity Today* 36, no. 14 (1992):29, <https://electra.lmu.edu:2084/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9301100124&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

conniving and trying to get ahead becomes our god in that sphere. Teachings about being good stewards go out the window since we are no longer in the religious sphere and now success and/or money become our god.

The reality is that many people often do not make the connection between their faith and other aspects of their lives, precisely because everything exists in its own compartment. This allows the culture within a particular sphere to affect how we behave while in that sphere, regardless of what our faith teaches. Unless we are educated about a teaching and are convinced of why we should follow it, then we will just be swayed by the people and the values of whatever sphere we are currently in. This is what allows us to be taken by the media, advertisements, our work colleagues and others. To demonstrate how influential others around us can be, we can look to a survey done by *Pew Research Center*, which reveals that like overall Americans, U.S. Catholics are sharply divided on various political issues, including ones where the Catholic Church is explicit in her teachings and leaves little room for doubt.³

Take for example, abortion. Among Catholic Republicans, 55% say abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, which is the same as the number for non-Catholic Republicans. Similarly with Democrats, 64% of Catholic Democrats say abortion should be legal in all or most cases while 76% of Democrats overall share that view. The same study reveals that regarding the topics of climate change, government aid to the poor and a border wall, Catholic votes are divided in much the same way that the rest of the country is divided. In the case of U.S. Catholics, they are no different than non-Catholic Americans in that they favor a specific political party and its stances

³ Michael Lipka and Gregory A. Smith. "Like Americans overall, U.S. Catholics are sharply divided by party," Pew Research Center, January 24, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/24/like-americans-overall-u-s-catholics-are-sharply-divided-by-party/>.

rather than choosing to favor a party based on whether or not its stances are in line with what the Catholic Church teaches.

Now it is not always clear what the Church teaches regarding all political topics, but in the case of abortion, the Catholic Church has been quite clear in its opposition to it. It would seem that Catholics are polarized about many topics and are not necessarily following magisterial teachings on certain subjects, but rather, following their own subjective beliefs or those of the wider society that influences the non-religious spheres of their lives. An example of this polarization can be seen in another study conducted in 2015 by *Pew Research Center*, which revealed that 57% of Catholics believe that having an abortion is a sin, while 23% believe it is not a sin. This is quite disturbing since the Church is very clear that abortion is a sin, yet almost half of Catholics are unsure or think it is not. The *Didache*, dating back to 70 A.D. states that the second commandment teaches you shall not murder, you shall not procure an abortion and you shall not destroy a newborn child (*Didache, 2:1-2*). Similarly in 1995, Pope John Paul II produced an encyclical where he declared that the Church's teaching on abortion is unchanged and unchangeable. He stated that "abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God, is transmitted by the Church's tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium" (*Evangelium Vitae* 62).

Yet because we Christians live in a world of compartmentalization and have allowed the non-Christian spheres of our lives to influence our beliefs, we have adopted the argument that abortion is not murder, therefore it is not a sin. People, including some clergy, rationalize that as long as the procedure is done "early," it is not murder because the fetus or "clump of cells" is not yet formed. Notice the language, refusing to say that the "baby" is not yet formed, since that would

imply that what is inside the womb is actually a human. However, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* leaves no room for interpretation in this matter nor allows for the manipulation of language. Paragraph 2270 states that “Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person - among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life.” The topic of abortion does not get more explicit than this, yet Catholics are so divided, even on a topic that the Church has been very clear about.

As Catholics, we are supposed to be united, professing in the Nicene Creed that “We believe in one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church.” We are united in our teachings, in the Sacraments and in the hierarchical structure that is based on the apostolic succession throughout history. There is diversity among our members, but we are united in the same mission of Jesus, who makes himself present to us, his Body, the Church. We are all seeking the same objective truth, who is God, even though we experience him differently. The influences of the world tempt us to think we do not need the Church, but God makes himself universally present in the Church and has commissioned us to work together in order to evangelize the world (Matthew 28:19).

Christians have not only been influenced by the culture of consumerism that is made explicit through our compartmentalized lifestyle, but we have also been impacted by individualism. We turn inwards and think that matters of faith and truth are entirely subjective, having nothing to do with the person next to us or a religious institution that exists beyond ourselves. Consider that 81% of Americans say they can find the truth about God without referencing the Church.⁴ As a Christian and a theologian, I find this troubling, for God made

⁴ “Welcome to McChurch,” *Christianity Today* 36, no. 14 (1992):30, <https://electra.lmu.edu:2084/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9301100124&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

himself known through his son, Jesus, who revealed himself to the apostles, who then handed over the Gospel to the Church, giving her the authority to teach with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The truth is that God is interested in the corporal witness of the Church, not just in individuals. God created the Church for the redemption of humankind, but because we have been influenced by individualism, we fail to recognize the role of the Church in our lives and the role that we as individuals must play in the lives of others. As the authors of *Habits of the Heart* rightly point out, we need to find a balance to individualism where we maintain autonomy and dignity, while recognizing that it is only amidst others that we can find fulfillment.⁵

In an article written by Robert Aaron Wessman, he points out that one of the key issues of our time is the prevalence of privatized and individualized forms of religion. He states that this problem developed because of the religious “seeker,” which are people who are not restrained by predetermined religious practices and who are able to choose whichever option they think will best satisfy their spiritual needs.⁶ I personally find Wessman’s argument that having too many options creates uncertainty, to be troubling. I agree that the “religious seeker” is part of the problem, but it needs to be clarified that this is not due to them being seekers; it is due to them having a poor foundation and follow-up in the faith, which causes them to seek out something different in the first place. Having options is not a problem and in fact, many great people who initially sought to

⁵ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 143-144.

⁶ Robert Aaron Wessman. “The church’s witness in a secular age: A Hauerwasian response to privatized and individualized religion,” *SAGE Journals* 5, no. 11 (2016): 56-57, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0091829616673400>.

disprove Christianity and studied relentlessly ended up converting, including St. Paul, C.S. Lewis and Gilbert West, to name a few.

The problem is that we as Catholics focus on catechesis, teaching rules and having people memorize the “what” of the faith, but we spend little time authentically witnessing, focusing on the encounter with God and sharing about “why” the faith really matters using stories to testify to what God has done for us. With a background that is lacking meaning and zeal for the faith, it is no wonder that the religious seeker explores other options and stumbles upon the overwhelming influences of consumerism and individualism in an effort to find an ideology that claims to fulfill them. We need to have a strong foundation that is grounded in the teachings of the Church, but follow-through, dialogue and experience are also required. The influences of consumerism and individualism are strong, so if Christians do not give witness to the beauty of their faith and invite others to experience the joy of being Christian, the culture will keep preaching false forms of fulfillment to the Church until we lose sight of our mission to be light for the world because we will have melted into the “ism” culture that dominates Western society.

Theological Component:

In order to overcome the prevalence of consumerism and individualism within the Church, we need to examine 1) Who God is, 2) Who we are as humans, 3) How sin affects us, 4) What our purpose is, and 5) How we can be fulfilled. All of these elements will be discussed in dialogue with other theologians, while being examined through the lens of what it means to be created in the *imago Dei*. I will briefly outline what other theologians have to say about various themes, such as who God is, but my goal will not be to prove why I hold a certain view of God or how I think sin affects us, for example. To do so would require an entire paper dedicated exclusively to each of these topics and will take attention away from the topic at hand. Instead, I will define what I

believe about the themes mentioned above, in dialogue with other theologians, then discuss the implications based on the views I present. By examining theological anthropology through the lens of the *imago Dei* and by relearning where we come from and what we are made for, I hope to present a plan that assists Christians in overcoming the influences of consumerism and individualism.

The meaning behind Genesis 1:26-27 has been so heavily debated, bringing forth various interpretations of what the “image of God” means. A reformed scholar, Millard J. Erickson interpreted the *imago Dei* in three ways: substantive, relational and functional.⁷ The substantive looks to psychological similarities between humans and God, such as rationality and affections. The relational view and proponents of it, such as Karl Barth, believe it has to do with our capacity to reflect the internal communion that exists within God. In contrast, the functional view looks outward, seeing God’s image in what we do, mainly our ability to exercise dominion.

Building off the relational view, Augustine was one of the first to point out a Trinitarian connection between God and humans, but pointing specifically to the areas of a human’s intellect, memory and will.⁸ Unlike the substantive view, which looks to the mind of God, Augustine sought to reflect on the essence of God. By examining the words “let us make” in Genesis 1:26, he pointed out that this reveals an inter-Trinitarian dialogue whereby God exists in a plural form by referring to himself as “us.” Luther hesitated with this definition of the *imago Dei*, fixating instead on how God is revealed as beauty and perfection. These two men have some disagreements about the

⁷ Burnell F. Eckardt. “Another Look at the Imago Dei: Fulfilled in the Incarnate One,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 79, no.1-2 (2015): 68, <https://electra.lmu.edu:2084/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAn3816522&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁸ Ibid, 71

specific traits of God, but they are similar in that they both focus on the essence of God rather than what is in the mind of God.

We might ask ourselves, what is this essence? If we go back further in time to the early church, we discover that Irenaeus looked to the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of Scriptures, declaring that the image of God was made evident in human form through the nativity. Irenaeus states that God “became himself what was His image” and through this incarnation, we become assimilated to the invisible Father through the visible world.⁹ Tertullian echoes this view, believing that the creation of man is the most important way that the Scriptures foretell of the coming of Christ, who is the perfect human.

The views described above bring forth many elements of what the *imago Dei* is, all of which I find to be plausible to some extent. I, too, find that human traits such as our ability to reason, resemble traits of God. I recognize that our ability to act in certain ways and having dominion over other things in nature is another way we resemble God. With that said, I find myself most drawn to the relational view, focusing on the essence of who God is, revealing himself in a Trinitarian form through the incarnation of Jesus, and as we will later discuss, through the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in our everyday lives.

Since we are made in the image of God, it only makes sense that we should explore who this God is, in whose image we have been made. As mentioned earlier, I do not have the ability here to explore every characteristic that comprises God, such as justice and mercy, so instead, I will focus on a few attributes that will be beneficial in explaining how we relate to God. Let us begin with the first two chapters of Genesis, which reveal that God is a creator who made

⁹ Ibid, 74

everything that exists outside of himself. God has no reason for creating than his love and goodness. We know this because our existence does not add to God's power or knowledge, those traits of God already exist, regardless of our presence or lack thereof. Saint Bonaventure tells us that "God created all things 'not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and to communicate it.'"

10

Love is not merely an attribute of God, it is God's very nature. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is identified in a special way with God as the word who became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1-14) and this Johannine vision developed into the doctrine of the Trinity that was defined at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE.¹¹ There are many interpretations of this doctrine, but the key point behind it, which I will assume as my own, is that God is not conceived as being completely "beyond" or distinct from creation, but rather, unites himself with human nature through Jesus. Our hope for redemption comes from sharing in the form of God by being incorporated in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The view of God I present is a fusing together of the Old and New Testaments. It presents God as an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent and good creator, as is shown throughout the Old Testament; at the same time, it reveals that the relationship between God to creation involves the transformation of finite humans into the infinite life of God.¹²

In 1 John 4:7-12, we learn that God who is love, has revealed himself to us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have life. God's nature is shared with us when God makes his image visible through Jesus. Through this action, because God loved us into existence and set

¹⁰ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed., 293.

¹¹ Robert L. Wilken, "The Triune God of the Bible and the Emergence of Orthodoxy," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Peter Byrne and Leslie Houldren (London: Routledge, 1995), 343.

¹² *Ibid*, 343

forth an example of love through his Son, we learn how to love and we have an obligation to do so by imitating Christ's example. Just as Jesus is in relation with his Father, so too are we called to be in relationship with God through Jesus. In John's Gospel, we learn from The Vine and the Branches that we must cling to God if we wish to bear any fruit in life. Jesus continues on to say, "As the Father has loved me, so I also love you" (John 15:9). We receive love in our relationship with God and experience his love in our relationships with others. It is God's love which enables us to love others, so relationships are an essential component of the *imago Dei*.

Some people find it problematic to view the *imago Dei* in terms of relationship. It is unclear if the term "relationship" refers to the God-human relationship, if it has to do with relationships between people reflecting God's image or if it is about the relationship among the persons of the Trinity reflecting how we perceive God's relationship with others.¹³ I acknowledge the complexity of attempting to define the word "relationship" in this context and will focus on God's relationship with the persons of the Trinity, as well as our relationship with each other as an expression of the Trinitarian relationship.

Many theologians, including Karl Barth and myself, view Christ as the *imago Dei* by interpreting this concept in a Trinitarian context. God exists not as a solitary being, but as a being in fellowship, specifically between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ As God incarnate in the person of Jesus, he reveals the essence of his being, which is love and sacrifice. God loves us so much that he gave up his only Son for our sake (John 3:16). The Philippians Hymn reveals that

¹³ John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 211.

¹⁴ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 14.

God became human, humbled himself and even accepted death willingly so that we could have a model of how we are to live (2:5-11). This model is echoed throughout Jesus' life. God gives us the gift of himself through creation by being incarnate and sharing in our humanity. God reveals himself in the Trinity as a self-giving God who is love and discloses himself through the mystery of salvation.¹⁵ When God created the world, we see in Genesis that the word "good" was repeatedly used to signify that God has no other reason for creating than his love and goodness. God creates man to share in his own life and this is the utterly gratuitous gift of creation. God invites us to share in his very essence, which is love and self-gift. He initiates his self-gift by creating us in his own image and for our own sakes.

We have gathered thus far that God is: 1) The Creator, 2) Who is self-gift, 3) Revealing himself through the Trinity by becoming incarnate for our sake. As humans who are created in God's image, this means we share in this reality of who God is. At the same time, we must recognize that as created persons, we have limitations, a main one being our dependence on God.¹⁶ We are indeed given the ability to co-create with God and we are able to become a self-gift for others, however, humans are not perfect like the incarnate word who became flesh.

How can we claim to be created in the image and likeness of God or seek to become more like God when we are so flawed? John F. Kilner shares the frustration of trying to summarize what it means to be created in the image of God and seeks to approach this topic by speaking of humans

¹⁵ Thomas P. Rausch, *Systematic Theology: A Roman Catholic Approach* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 59.

¹⁶ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 5.

as “representing” God before others.¹⁷ He explains that both terms used for image, *tselem* and *eikon*, have to do with standing for something or presenting a likeness of something. Kilner very succinctly explains that humans are not in God’s image in the way that Christ is, since Christ was perfect, but we are far from that. Rather, we are so intimately connected with God because his image is the blueprint for our humanity.¹⁸ When we say we are in God’s image, this is not to say that we are carbon copies of God, but that God is transforming us into his image in Christ (2 Cor 3:18). God has shown us the standard of what he ultimately wants us to be, through the example of his Son, Jesus.

Humanity was intended to imitate God, but is not like God due to sin. Theologians generally agree that humans are sinful, but there are disagreements about other issues surrounding the topic of sin. For the purposes of this paper, I think it is worth examining a couple of popular views about sin and state where I stand on this topic. One view is associated with a Platonic view of dualism which devalues the material world in favor of the spiritual world. It argues that things associated with the material world and bodies are sinful while those associated with the mind and souls are superior. I personally reject such a view of sin because body and mind/soul alike are not inherently bad, but can be used for sinful actions or thoughts. When I argue against the harms of consumerism, it is not to suggest that all material and bodily elements are bad. There is nothing wrong with acquiring material possessions, but it depends on what we do with the things we acquire, how much we acquire and in what ways they are acquired. Problems arise when we

¹⁷ John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 118.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 92

consume and discard goods at absurd rates in the midst of a “throw-away” culture.¹⁹ It is when we fail to acknowledge the human dignity that everyone is owed by their existence as created children of God, and when we seek to use them for our own selfish interests.

With that in mind, I want to connect with what Kilner claims are four “misunderstandings” about God’s image. These four common “misunderstandings” are: Reason, Righteousness, Rulership and Relationship.²⁰ I note these four because Kilner makes a good point that God’s image is not about attributes that one possesses, such as reason or righteousness. To say so would indicate that someone who does not have the ability to reason or who is not righteous in their actions is not in God’s image, and this is a fallacy. God created all humans and willed for them to attain perfection through his Son, Jesus. To subscribe to such a fallacy and think that someone who has the ability to reason is superior to someone who is unable to do so would just be falling into the trap of dualism mentioned above and failing to recognize the *imago Dei* that is present in everyone, regardless of their attributes.

The four misunderstandings mentioned above are all aspects of what it means to be in God’s image, but we have to look beyond attributes and look at the essence of who God is, which as I have indicated, is revealed in the Trinitarian communion of love. Even relationship describes an attribute of God, but it does not capture the essence of what is relationships reveal about who God is. Since specific attributes are not what make us in God’s image, it is refreshing to think that

¹⁹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gadium*, of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, (November 24, 2013: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), 53. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

²⁰ John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 113.

even when we sin, this in no way takes away from us being in God's image. Paul tells us that "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). There are consequences to sin, but we remain children of God, even when we sin.

The other common view towards sin that I want to reference is that of Augustine, which has to do with total depravity. While I do acknowledge the vast effects of sin, especially in extreme situations such as addictions where it is difficult to exercise free will, I still believe it is possible to do so. Total depravity implies that one is unable to choose God because of how enslaved we are to sin. I agree that we are enslaved to sin, but still suggest that we are able to choose to do good, or at the very least, desire good, even if we do not realize that the good is God. I am against saying that we are completely powerless, waiting for the puppeteer to change us, rather, I think we have a responsibility to grow in virtue. At the same time, I do not want to eliminate Augustine's approach because in it lays a truth, that we are dependent on God. Yes, we have free will, at the same time, we are created beings who cannot do it alone and must rely on God's grace to get through every day.

There is a very fine line here that divides Catholics and some Protestants, especially Calvinists, and I want to be careful not to blur this line. I agree with Calvinists that we are completely dependent on God, at the same time, I recognize a temptation to ignore our obligations because everything is up to God, anyway. In contrast, I agree with Catholics in emphasizing our personal responsibilities, but the temptation to take matters into our own hands and forget our need of God, as the individualistic culture promotes, is also a very real temptation.

This reality about human nature reveals an eschatological tension where we constantly long for more, yet will never be complete. We desire to grow and seek to improve ourselves, yet no matter how good we become, we will never attain the perfection we desire, at least not on

earth. Humans are a mystery, each one of us a unique embodied life statement. Within each human is an ambiguity and lack of clarity. At times we experience lucidity and fulfillment, only to have this followed by confusion and a radical sense of absence.²¹ This eschatological reality reveals that humans are incomplete, constantly longing for more. The question is, how do we respond to this reality? We can acknowledge our incompleteness and dependence on others, or we can shy away from this frightening reality in an attempt to escape our personhood.

Often times in our desperate attempt to fill the void, we seek fraudulent methods of self-validation that the world offers us through means such as consumerism. We fall into a trap that causes us to believe possessions bring about happiness by saying to ourselves, “If only I had a larger house or more money, I would be happy.” Sometimes we take this a step further and begin seeing people as commodities, convincing ourselves that “If I had a spouse who met the criteria I need, then I would be fulfilled.” It is not to say that money does not have the ability to make our lives easier or that a compatible spouse does not make life more enjoyable. Those things can help, however, we seem to think that if we collect, produce and consume enough, we can achieve fulfillment. This is never the case, is it? If it were, you would never find a poor person who is happy or a wealthy person who experiences grief, but that is far from the truth.

The same can be said for individualism and this need to convince ourselves that we can go through life on our own and need not depend on help from others. Sometimes this happens if for example, a loved one, such as a parent, abandons us. On the one hand, this can cause us to feel hopeless and dwell in our misery as victims. On the other hand, it might push us to build ourselves up to the point of thinking we can do everything on our own and have no need of help

²¹ John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981), 78.

from anyone. The former scenario is problematic because we fail to acknowledge the Good News, that regardless of what we do or our circumstance, God continuously pours out his love for us and wants us to rejoice in that love, not be weighed down by problems of the world. In contrast, the latter scenario can lead to an overwhelming sense of pride and denial, making sure to avoid vulnerability or ask for help because we are too afraid to ask for help and potentially get rejected. This scenario is a rejection of the reality of our personhood, which is that we were made for each other, as a means of imitating the self-giving that is demonstrated through the Trinitarian communion.

In our desperate plea for security, we reject the conditions of our humanness, mainly our finitude. Since people can be so hurtful, we turn inwards and convince ourselves that we do not need others and can do everything on our own. We deprive ourselves of true intimacy and vulnerability, accepting shallow relationships and a feeling of emptiness. We often do the same with God, rejecting his love and seeking to fill the void with other means because: 1) God is not tangible and it can be challenging to experience his love and, 2) We do not love ourselves enough and struggle to believe that God could love us for our own sake, just as we are. The result of seeking to fill the void that is present in each of us is an escape into sin through means such as consumerism and individualism. Rather than accept our limitations and turn to God, we seek to be God, consistently falling back into the trap of original sin that Adam and Eve fell into. What needs to be rediscovered is that there is a revelation of our true personhood in the acceptance of our ontological poverty. In each of us is an incompleteness and we can hear the

echoing of Augustine's words, "Our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."²² Whether we acknowledge it or not, at our core, we are searching for God.

Human nature is intrinsically and gratuitously ordered towards the supernatural.²³ Despite what our individualistic culture preaches, none of us deserve supernatural union with God or are even capable of attaining it on our own. Nonetheless, union with God is the end result that we desire and which we were all made for. Thomas Aquinas states that human beings "attain their last end by knowing and loving God."²⁴ Everything is made for a purpose and has a telos, or an end goal. For humans, that telos is union with our Creator, who made us and knows us more intimately than we even know ourselves.²⁵

I have established that God is relational, briefly explaining that God reveals himself in the Trinity through his self-sacrificing love. I have also pointed out that as creatures made in God's image, we share in God's essence and have responsibilities to move towards perfection, while recognizing we are limited due to the impact of sin. So where does this leave us? Ryan S. Peterson explains that there are two theological implications for canonical interpretations of the *imago Dei*.²⁶ The first one, which we have already explored, is that human identity is revealed by God. This

²² Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (Mount Vernon: Peter Pauper Press, 1945), 1.1.1.

²³ Randall S. Rosenberg, *The Givenness of Desire: Concrete Subjectivity and the Natural Desire to See God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 23.

²⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1911-1925), I-II.1.8.

²⁵ Psalm 139:13-16, Isaiah 44:24

²⁶ Ryan S. Peterson, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation* (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 2016), 84.

was established by recognizing that we are created by God, who forms us and puts in us the desire to seek God as our final end. The second implication that Peterson discusses is that human identity involves becoming like God.

Kilner has made a similar claim that was discussed earlier, mainly that the term “likeness” in reference to the *imago Dei* has more to do with the who God intends us to become rather than a descriptive statement of who we are presently. This model of how we are to become is fully revealed in Jesus. The beauty of this reality is that although sin affected our ability to reflect God, the image of God is not impacted since God’s image has been made manifest in Christ.²⁷ This reveals that it is not God who needs to be changed, nor even the concept of the *imago Dei*, but it is we who have been severely damaged by sin and require renewal according to the image of God in Christ.

We have a responsibility to grow in the image of God, but must also recognize that it is only after death that we can fully be transformed into the image of God. Until that time, we are dependent on God to increase our likeness to him. It is by virtue of our journey towards God’s image in Christ that we possess dignity as beloved sons and daughters of God (1 John 3:1-2). Thus far we have seen that God’s love was shown when he created us. God’s very nature is love and this is revealed through the gift of Jesus’ death on the cross. As Kilner explained, we need to grow towards the standard that Jesus set as the image of God incarnate. How do we do this in spite of our sinfulness? The answer is that we do not need to do it alone, God sent us his spirit to transform us into his love.

²⁷ John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 132.

Jesus promises that he will give us the Holy Spirit in John 14:15-31. Jesus tells us that the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, will help us and remain with us forever. Even when Jesus had ascended, he promised that we will not remain orphans because he will be present to us through the Holy Spirit, who lives within us. It is through this Trinitarian bond that Jesus says we will realize that he is in his Father, that we are in Jesus and that he is in us. When we strive to grow in his commandments and seek to love and imitate him more, the Holy Spirit assists us to bring those desires to fruition. Jesus makes it clear that if we love him, we must obey his teachings. The connection between Jesus and the other persons of the Trinity is made known again in verse 23 where Jesus says, “Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him.” In referring to himself, Jesus says “we,” indicating that he is made up of more than one person. He had just referenced the Father at the beginning of this verse, and the entire second half of this chapter is dedicated to the Advocate, which hints at the Trinity, similar to what we saw earlier when God used the phrase “Let us make man in our own image” in Genesis.

All this is to say that attempting to live up to the standard of the *imago Dei* is a tall order, but God equips us for this mission. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, “*Dei Verbum*” states that “In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4)”.²⁸ Echoing what Irenaeus, Tertullian and Eckardt said earlier, this means

²⁸ Vatican II Council, *Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, Promulgated by Pope Paul VI, (November 18, 1965), 2.
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

that the invisible God, out of love, made himself known to us through Jesus by becoming one of us, and remaining to live among us in the form of the Holy Spirit. It means that God loves us so much that he invites us to be his friends and be in fellowship with him.

In reading chapter fifteen of John's Gospel, which is about the Vine and the Branches, we discover that Jesus no longer calls us slaves since he has revealed everything to us which he has received from his Father. Verse 15 points out that Jesus has called us friends, but we must not be too quick to overlook the previous verse, which points out that we are his friends, *if* we do what he has commanded us. We have been rescued from bondage and invited into friendship with Christ, but like any relationship, it is a two-way street. Verse 10 illustrates this by presenting Jesus as the model who remained in his Father's love by keeping his commandments, and revealing that we must do the same if we wish to remain in his love.

What are these commandments? Well we know The Ten Commandments given to us in Exodus 20:2-17, but we are also told that the entire law depends on two commandments, which are pointed out in Matthew 22:36-40. Jesus tells the Pharisees that "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" is the greatest and first commandment, and the second one, which is like it, states: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The Vine and the Branches just confirmed the importance of seeking to love God above all things, which is what Jesus reveals in his relationship with his Father. Returning to chapter fifteen of John, we see a parallel with the second greatest commandment in verse twelve and seventeen, which is that if we wish to remain close to God, as is the innermost desire of every human heart, which was revealed earlier, then we must love on another.

That is a tall and rather vague order. How exactly do we love one another? In verses twelve and thirteen, Jesus specifically stated, "Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater

love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends". Jesus has redeemed us and called us to be his friends. We know this because he literally laid down his life for all of us, his friends, regardless of our status or personal qualities. There are many instances where Jesus reaches out to the lowly and the outcast in society, and I will point out five specific categories of people he reached out to, along with relevant Scripture passages, to illustrate this point.

The first category of people that Jesus reached out to is Samaritans. The parable of the Good Samaritan immediately precedes Jesus talking about the two greatest commandments described above, which are to love God above all things and to love your neighbor as yourself. When Jesus was asked how one should define "neighbor," he presented this parable in Luke 10:29-37 in order to show that being a neighbor has to do with our ability to treat others with mercy. This surpasses racial and cultural boundaries, calling to mind that we have an obligation to care for all God's children, regardless of their background.

The next category of people that Jesus reached out to is women, and this is seen in John 4:7-12 in the story of the Samaritan woman. The cultural barriers are brought forth again, but this time they are amplified because Jesus is dealing with a woman. During his time, women had very little status in a culture that was largely patriarchal. An ordinary Jew would have never spoken with the Samaritan woman, and would certainly have never used something in common with her, such as a bucket. However, Jesus tears down the walls of division. In Luke 8:43-48, the woman with a hemorrhage with great faith touched the tassel on Jesus' cloak with the hopes that she would be healed. Jesus reveals that his healing powers are not reserved for those who we consider worthy, but for anyone who has faith and desires to be healed. In verse forty-eight, Jesus even calls her "Daughter," revealing her inherent dignity as a beloved child of God.

Another group of people that Jesus reaches out to and specifically teaches about are the poor. In Luke 14:12-14, we see that Jesus had been teaching about the need to humble oneself and in doing so, states, "...when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind." Given the wider context of this passage, it is clear that Jesus is not saying to only invite strangers and not our own friends. Rather, he is inviting us to receive the blessings in our lives with gratitude and to bless others in a similar manner. It demonstrates the need for us to recognize that we are not superior to others because of what we have or what we do, but that we are all beloved children of God. In this parable, Jesus is teaching us to give without counting the cost. If we only invited the people who could return the invite, then none of us would be invited into friendship with God or would be offered the gift of salvation since we certainly cannot repay God in a similar fashion. What this reveals is that it is not the interpretation of the *imago Dei* that needs to change, for it expresses sheer beauty about the value of every human being, rather, it reveals that we are the ones who need to change in terms of how we view one another.

The fourth group of people that Jesus reaches out to is the unclean. People avoided those who were unclean, including those who had contagious diseases. Such people were ostracized and forbidden from entering holy places. Jesus was approached by a leper in Mark 1:40-45, who asked Jesus to cleanse him, if he willed it. Jesus did will it, reaching out his hand, touching the leper and cleansing him of the leprosy. In this example, Jesus did not just heal him, but actually touched him, which is something that others would avoid at the rest of becoming unclean themselves.

Now I am not saying that we all have to go out and seek people with contagious diseases and put ourselves at risk, since we are told to be prudent and have a responsibility to take care of our personal health, which is a gift we are blessed with. At the same time, how often do we come across someone who has been ostracized or is feeling lonely, and ignore them? How often do

people ask us to pray for them and we quickly respond, “I will,” without thinking about what that entails are following through with it? Perhaps we are nice to such people and might even acknowledge them from a distance, but is that all we are willing to do? We know that Jesus could have healed the man from a distance by raising his hand toward the man, but he touched him, despite his uncleanness. This means that if we believe the *imago Dei* exists in everyone, then we too should be willing to reach out and touch those who are hurting. I do not just mean physically, but I mean, are we willing to truly reach out to those who are hurting?

The final category of people I will mention who Jesus reaches out to is probably the most surprising and challenging for us, but which also displays his unconditional love for us, and that is our enemies and those who do us harm. In Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus challenges the prevailing mentality at that time, which assumed that “neighbor” was in reference to one’s fellow countryman. Psalm 139:19-22 in the Old Testament assumed that hatred of evil persons was the natural and proper thing to do, but Jesus challenges this mentality, commanding that we love everyone, even those who do evil or hurt us. He demonstrated this by forgiving the very people who were wrongfully accusing him and crucifying him, even going so far as to intercede on their behalf (Luke 23:33-34). This is what God does with us, continuously pursuing us and blessing us in seen and unseen ways, despite our stubbornness and hardened hearts.

In the passage about loving your enemies, Jesus is not only pointing out a specific category of people that we must reach out to, but there is a very important underlying reality that we must acknowledge here, which is that as his disciples, we are called to go above and beyond the ordinary standards. In Matthew 5:46-47, Jesus reveals that there is no merit to loving those who love you. Even those of other religious beliefs do that. This directly relates to the pastoral problem at hand in that we must not be content with mediocrity or follow the standards of the culture, we are called

to go above and beyond. Looking around us today, Christians are struggling to surpass the ordinary standards because we have become content with following the ordinary and even less than ordinary standards of the world. In fact, sometimes what exists in the non-Christian realm seems better than what is taking place inside the Church because we have allowed ourselves to succumb to the temptations of the “ism” culture and have forgotten what it means to be created in the *imago Dei*.

This is so far from what we are called to, though. Jesus continues on in verse forty eight to say, “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This does not mean that we are able to be divine and sinless right now, for as Kilner described earlier, perfection is modeled in Jesus, who we are called to imitate. In the Lucan parallel of this passage, Luke says, “Be merciful, just as [also] your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Although we do not deserve what we have and are certainly unworthy of salvation, God, out of his love, creates us in his image. He gives us the gift of himself through his Son, Jesus, providing a model for us to imitate and opening up the possibility of eternal life for us. He even goes so far as to provide us with an advocate through the Holy Spirit so that we may have help in attaining what our heart ultimately longs for, and that is union with the one who loves us.

Jesus gave us the ultimate example of how we are to live by dying on the cross. He reached out to everyone, including the outcast and the lowly, regardless if they were worthy or not, because the reality is that none of us - even those who are most valued in society, are ever worthy since we have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Since God is love who reveals himself by making himself a gift for others through Jesus, and we are called to imitate Jesus, then we too are called to become a gift for others. Fulfillment does not come from acquiring much and turning inwards on ourselves, but in sharing, by blessing others in the way that we have been blessed and by turning out towards others.

Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves is not just a command; it is also a fulfillment of our human identity. It summarizes who God is and also who we are called to be as we seek to live up to the blueprint of the *imago Dei* that is made visible through the incarnation. Loving others is our gratuitous response to God's love for us. Since we do nothing to deserve such self-sacrificial love, yet God offers it to us anyway, the only natural responses, if we understand the magnitude of his gift, are humility, gratitude and admiration, which leads us to want to imitate his perfect example by becoming a gift for others as well. Henri De Lubac says that we desire the supernatural end, but the means to attain it remains gratuitous.²⁹ It follows, then, that if the essence of God is self-gift and we are made in God's image and likeness, then we too are called to become self-gifts. As humans created in the *imago Dei*, we can infer that we can only find ourselves through the sincere gift of self.³⁰

Plan Component:

The Catholic Church is undergoing an identity crisis and many Catholics have been influenced by the "ism" culture that has overtaken modern-day Western culture. Included in these cultural "isms" are consumerism and individualism, which have caused many Christians to focus on the acquisition of goods and on their own selfish desires. As people created in the *imago Dei*, Christians need to rediscover the purpose for which we were made and how we are called to live in relation with others.

Being a Christian and an employee of the Church, I am shocked by the number of Christians I encounter who go about living their day-to-day lives as ordinary people, as if their

²⁹ Randall S. Rosenberg, *The Givenness of Desire: Concrete Subjectivity and the Natural Desire to See God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 23.

³⁰ Catholic Church. *Gadium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1965), 24.

faith background has no impact on how they conduct themselves. It is so easy to get caught up in the “business” of life, thinking we have to produce in order to have value as humans. Those of us who do not keep up are sometimes belittled and made to feel less important. We forgo meaningful relationships because there is no time to develop them and they require too much effort. Many people have succumb to the fallacy that having more and doing whatever pleases us personally will lead to ultimate happiness. The Christian faith calls out such fallacies, revealing that as people who were loved into existence by a relational and self-sacrificing creator, our happiness is found by imitating our creator and becoming a gift for others.

This reality is what the pastoral plan seeks to bring to the surface. The truth is there, but in the midst of temptations by those around us and worldly pressures sneaking up on us from every corner, it is easy to lose our identity in Christ. It should be noted that the pastoral plan I am proposing is not a quick fix and it requires a cultural change, but if applied, it has the ability to remind Christians of their identity in Christ, and overcome the facades promised to us by the “ism” culture. The pastoral plan I am suggesting involves evangelization, leadership and discipleship, with stewardship at the heart of each of these elements. I will seek to define what I mean by each of these terms, then to explain how they fit together and the proposed plan.

When I use the term “stewardship,” I mean the act of having a gratuitous disposition. It flows from an understanding of the *imago Dei* that we have been discussing thus far, which involves recognizing: 1) God’s goodness, 2) God’s ultimate self-gift for us through Jesus, 3) God’s plan for us to imitate Jesus despite our unworthiness and 4) God’s continuous love and strength that is poured out to us through the Holy Spirit. Stewardship stems from recognizing that everything we are and all that we possess are gifts from God. It is not because we deserve much

or have acquired things on our own, but because the creator, who is love itself, has given himself up for our sake.

This realization creates a sense of humility and gratitude in us because we recognize we are so blessed and this is when we can begin to see the good around us, even in the midst of negative circumstances. After having reflected on the many instances where we were blessed without deserving and were spared from harm in times when we deserved punishment, we become filled with a desire to bless others as we have been blessed. There develops a joy of knowing God, of encountering love himself who has brought us this far in our lives and wants to give us even more. Out of gratitude to God, we become motivated to cultivate the gifts that we have been given and to share them lovingly with others so that they may experience the transformative joy of knowing Christ that we have experienced. One need not be a theologian to experience stewardship, only to realize that everything we have is a gift and for this reason, we should be grateful to God.

Stewardship is at the heart of Christianity and without the realization of the sacrifice that Christ made for us on the cross, we would be preaching about our own perceived goodness, not the Good News that Christ gave himself for us out of sheer love, despite our unworthiness. Once we reflect on our lives and accept the Gospel message, we can begin to “evangelize.” This term I use to refer to spreading or sharing the Good News about God’s love for us. By looking at Scripture and examining salvation history, it becomes evident that God constantly pours out his love and reaches out to us, and we constantly reject him. Despite all this, God never gives up and continues to pursue us. A little self-examination will reveal that this reality is not only true of the stories in Scripture, but even in our own personal lives. We disobey God’s commandments, yet he invites us to repent through the Sacrament of reconciliation and to be united with him in the Eucharist. We often try to keep God out of our lives, insisting that we know better, but God still blesses us

and does not cut us off from having a relationship with him. Such instances are Good News because they reveal that despite our wretchedness, God still loves us and pursues us.

When we understand this reality, we become transformed. As 1 John 4:19 tells us, we become capable of loving others because God first loved us. This overwhelming sense of love leads us to share this news with others, in hopes that they too may experience the joy of knowing Christ. We are surrounded by people who feel unloved and harm themselves because they think they are unworthy, but this news of God's love gives them hope. By sharing about our inadequacy and the blessings that are received nonetheless, people will be drawn to God and slowly realize that fulfillment does not come from acquiring much or even necessarily having things go our way, but from having an encounter with love itself and sharing that experience with others.

This process takes time, but thankfully you do not have to be the only one evangelizing in your community. There is strength in numbers, so the goal should not be to merely evangelize people, but to evangelize leaders, who will go out and evangelize more people. I do not mean to make evangelization sound like a robotic action, but I am pointing out that there is a process, one that becomes natural because it is fueled by gratitude. This process can be seen in Jesus, who is the Good News. He did not keep it to himself, rather, he empowered twelve apostles to go out and spread the news so more people could be reached. The apostles were stewards who did not have all the answers, but like Peter, they recognized that Jesus has the words of eternal life, and for that purpose, they were willing to give up everything and follow him. These willing apostles were formed and trained in the ways of Christ. The apostles were sent out to reach more people, with the Holy Spirit alongside them, so they could reach more people.

This process of being sent out is what transformed the apostles into disciples. They had originally made the decision to follow Jesus, and after having been formed, they responded to

Jesus' calling in The Great Commission. When our eyes are opened to the reality of what God has done for us, we cannot help but be filled with gratitude and a desire to share this Good News with others. This leads to us sharing stories about our personal lives, which are contagious for those who are suffering and seeking relief from the facades that the world has offered them. The world that is impacted by consumerism promises that if you work non-stop and acquire a lot of money, you will be happy, but that it's not true. You find yourself listening to those promises, only to discover that you have no time to spend with your loved ones, your health is declining, you do not remember the last time you did something you enjoy, and the list goes on. When we hear people share such stories, we cannot help but nod because we, too, have fallen for the same empty promises.

In contrast, when we listen to someone who says that they have overcome such challenges or that they feel a sense of peace in the midst of the trials in their lives because they trust in God, we cannot help but desire such experiences or reflect on similar experiences of our own, if we have had them. When we share about our lives with others, we realize that despite the external differences, we are all quite similar due to our common fallen nature and the desire to be with God, which is inherent in all of us, as we have discussed through an analysis of the *imago Dei*. When we share and seen the hunger of others for the true bread and their joy at encountering him in small doses, we are reminded of the times in our lives when we experienced a similar joy in encountering Christ. This leads to us being on mission to share this Good News in all outlets of our lives. We become living testaments of God's grace, inviting people to come and experience the joys of knowing Christ, and our interactions with others become intentional. It is as if our lives echo the words, "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord."

I outlined each of these terms in great depth because they portray a model that can be used to counter the overwhelming “ism” culture that is so prevalent in our society today. I will preface this by saying that as is the case with most things in a parish setting, the level of “buy-in” from the pastor will necessarily affect the success of such a plan. That is not to say that the steps cannot succeed on an individual basis, but it will take longer and will involve more challenges. The goal of the plan is to create an evangelizing community within parishes, forming individuals in the ways of stewardship, evangelization, leadership and discipleship.

For the purposes of this plan, I will assume a parish setting where the priest agrees with the importance of the four elements described above and is committed to creating a culture of evangelization within his parish. From there, he can seek to share his vision of evangelization and leadership with parishioners, gauging where they stand and their level of interest in such a goal. People may express ideas of how to go about doing this and might offer to help bring this vision to fruition. After speaking with various individuals, the priest can gain a sense of who comprehends the mission and is willing to commit to making it happen, thus forming a leadership team comprised of these keen individuals.

Once this initial step has occurred, the leaders can go through formal training with organizations such as *The Evangelical Catholic*, *The Amazing Parish* or *Be My Witness* as a means of equipping themselves with the tools to build up evangelizers. After this initial six months to a year of intense training for the leadership team with one of these organizations, I propose a three-year plan to lead the remainder of the parish community in the methods of stewardship, evangelization, leadership and discipleship. This can be compared to the mission process of Jesus identifying the twelve apostles, forming/training them and sending them out.

The first year will be dedicated to identifying and training leaders within the parish setting. The leadership team, in consultation with the pastor, will identify a small group of eight to ten parishioners who are grateful stewards and who seek to bless others as they have been blessed. This first group is made up of individuals who are coming to church regularly, are open to learning and are striving for spiritual growth. They ought to be people who can see how God has been at work in their lives and who desire more, both for themselves and for others. This group of people will go through a 6-week formation process that is centered on strengthening their relationship with Christ alongside others who are doing the same. This series of weekly meetings will consist of videos, Scripture passages, magisterial teachings, discussion questions and faith sharing that center around topics of faith. The topics will range and include themes such as the exploration of who Christ is, prayer, Scripture, the Eucharist, community, evangelization, and other themes that are designed to help people deepen their faith.

In addition to meeting with each other as a group, each of these individuals will have an opportunity to meet with someone from the leadership team on a bi-weekly basis. Group sharing is powerful, but it is in this one-on-one setting that substantial growth occurs. Extemporaneous prayer will be emphasized, encouraging each individual to get comfortable talking to God and having moments of silence to be in God's presence. Additionally, the Holy Spirit will be a focal point for the group and individualized meetings. The leaders will be encouraged to invite the Holy Spirit into the discussions and people will slowly start to notice the small ways that he makes himself present in their lives. A relationship is formed and the member of the small group receives attention and care that assists them in their spiritual development. Having experienced the power of the Holy Spirit, who is fueling this encounter, similar to the experience of the apostles with Jesus, the members of the small group will be eager to invite others into their own small group.

The content of the small group can be flexible, ranging from a spiritual book they agree on to Scriptural meditations for the upcoming Sunday readings. The content will not be the focus here; rather it will be about forming friendships and trust between the facilitator and the members of their small group, as well as witnessing to the power of the Holy Spirit among them.

During the second year of this plan, the original small group of stewards will be formed by the leadership team in the larger vision of evangelization, leadership and discipleship. The leadership team must have clarity of mission and be able to express why their vision is important. The small group of stewards will be trained in how to share their faith with others, while intentionally forming others and keeping an eye out for potential future evangelizing leaders. In addition to evangelizing, this year they are being trained to recruit and empower new leaders from within their small group. After developing trusting relationships with their members, the facilitators will be trained to identify a select few from the group who they can meet with on a personal level and accompany more closely. Even Jesus had a special relationship with Peter, James and John, one of whom ended up being the rock upon which the church was built. This method of closely accompanying future potential leaders is not revolutionary and will be the focus as facilitators mentor certain individuals to become future facilitators.

After having gone through this journey with the small group as a whole and with select individuals in a one-on-one setting, the facilitators will feel empowered in their role as disciples who now have the seeds of evangelization ingrained within them. The third year will be focused on sustaining the mission at the parish level and also sending people out. The potential leaders who were identified will repeat the process and start with step one of being trained and formed in the mission, which ensures the process is sustained. Meanwhile, the original facilitators can graduate to seeking people outside the parish. In line with Pope Francis' urgings to go out and

search for the lost sheep, the original facilitators will now be equipped to share the Good News where it may not currently exist. In this context, that not only refers to secular areas such as homes and workplaces, but even within the church. There are many within the church itself who are lost or who attend out of routine but have no zeal for their faith, and these are the people we need to minister to. These are the people who are often taken by the temptations of consumerism and individualism, in need of other Christians who can be witnesses of the Good News.

In the midst of all these steps, the leadership team must continue guiding and bringing the stewards together, just as Jesus brought his apostles together to pray. The goals of this proposed plan include: 1) Identifying people, 2) Developing them and 3) Encouraging them to share what they have received with others. In addition to the 6-week formation session and the small group meetings, other opportunities for spiritual growth need to be offered. An annual retreat should be hosted for all of the people discussed in this plan, regardless of which step they are on. Themes such as stewardship, evangelization and discipleship need to be emphasized, with a focus on loving others as Christ loves us, which is revealed in the *imago Dei*.

Bishop Barron says you have to start with the beautiful, which is God. This is how you get people out of their “isms,” it is what gets people out of worshipping themselves towards worshipping the creator. This can be done by having an event centered on a specific theme in the faith, then using things of beauty, such as music, artwork or stained glass, to help people discover the beauty in those themes. For example, someone can read Luke 1:26-38, the announcement of the birth of Jesus. On the screen, an image of the angel, Gabriel, appearing to Mary, can be displayed. After the reading, people are given time to reflect in silence before the reading is repeated. Following this, relevant music can be played, such as, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” or “Mary Did You Know,” in this particular case.” People receive information in varied ways, and

such an activity helps all people to see the beautiful. This can be followed by a discussion where people share about their experience and the Holy Spirit will move within people's hearts.

We also need to encourage people to practice giving testimonies and sharing stories. Gatherings can be facilitated to walk people through the steps of how to share their story in a way that reveals their humanity, pointing out the struggles as well as the blessings, which will help people to visualize how God works through us when we invite him in.

Additionally, spiritual inventory workshops need to be offered to people at all stages. A workshop such as *Called and Gifted* can be administered by the leadership team to the staff as a way of helping them identify what their personal gifts are, because the staff ought to be working with the pastor and leadership team to bring the mission to fruition. This can then be passed on to ministry leaders and facilitators who go through the 6-week process, once they enter the second year. Being aware of what one's personal talents are will help them to be grateful, to identify the specific ways in which they can minister to others and will help them develop an appreciation for others who possess gifts that they themselves do not possess. In line with this, parishes can offer ministry fairs where those who have gone through such a workshop can lead the fair and assist other parishioners in identifying what their strengths are and how they can get involved in the appropriate areas. To ensure the leadership team remains on track, every year they can conduct an evaluation to discuss which steps are working and which ones need adjustments.

The suggestions made here are quite elaborate and require a lot of work. I realize it is not easy to find many pastors and lay leaders, who will be on board with all that has been mentioned, but it is possible and I have seen it played out in multiple settings. Perhaps it would be best if a few pilot parishes were identified where pastors believe strongly in the vision of evangelizing leaders. They could identify a few leaders to help bring this plan to fruition. The pastor can show

support by including aspects of this plan in the budget, by offering resources and even sending potential leaders for training and conferences. It will take time, but when a parish commits to evangelizing leaders, not only will people who have drifted into the “ism” culture be reached, but they will also be reached sooner. The evangelizers who have an understanding of what it means to be created in the *imago Dei* will be grateful stewards and this authentic witness is the most powerful testimony one can give. They will gladly want to imitate the mission process of Jesus in hopes that others can experience what they have. Hopefully when other parishes witness the success and vibrancy of the pilot parishes, they will be motivated to follow in a similar manner by giving witness to how the Good News has transformed their own lives in the midst of a culture influenced by “isms.”

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