

Three Spiritual Dispositions for Apostolic Planning: Joy, Imagination and Boldness

Matt Malone, SJ

August 2022

“And they named him Jesus.”

If I were to produce a translation of the New Testament, one rendered in contemporary American English, I might subtitle the story of the nativity something like “Notes on a Scandal.” By “scandal”, of course, I do not mean a lie that corrupts a truth, but rather a truth that subverts a lie; an irruption that causes the liar to stumble. The incarnation of our Lord—the astonishing act of love through which God entered a human body—is just such a scandal. The lowly, almost unremarkable character of the nativity scene—the kind of scene that would go unnoticed if not for who’s involved—it renders suspect all creaturely notions of power and plans.

The Church Fathers were always keen to point out that, in Mary’s womb, the Son of God took on not just *a* human nature, but human nature itself. In this one child then resided the best of who we are and who we might become. “And they named him Jesus.” The name of Jesus, then, signifies much more than a human person in the strict historical sense. It signifies the highest aspiration of *every* human person, the deepest desire of the human heart, the lover for whom we long and in whose absence our hearts are restless. Throughout the centuries, our forbearers prayed that the name of Jesus would pass their lips as they passed into eternity. That is not charming folklore but historical fact. Today Christians throughout the world continue to act in the name of Jesus. Amid the shadows of life in a culture of death, the Church of Jesus Christ—sinners called by God—continues to reconcile, to teach, to heal in the name of Jesus.

The “Church’s strength does not reside in herself and in her planning or organizational abilities,” Pope Francis has said, “but rests hidden in the deep waters of God. And these waters stir up our aspirations and desires.” The process of envisioning the future, in other words, of discerning our aspirations and desires, will come to nothing if it does not proceed from a living faith, from hearts that are seized by the name of Jesus. All of our efforts depend on the credibility of our witness to Him, as individuals and as members of a company. “A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody,” Francis wrote in *Evangelium Gaudium*. Yet what does such a person look like? What vital qualities are exhibited by people of faith who are “certain and in love?”

In the years I have served as editor in chief of **America**, I have traveled extensively throughout this country and in Europe. I have had a unique vantage point from which to observe the church in the western world. It has been deeply consoling. It has also helped me to better understand why our plans are sometimes frustrated, how the credibility of our witness can be enfeebled. Hearts seized by the name of Jesus have three things in common, which are not always present or visible among Catholic Christians: *joy, imagination and boldness*. If we are going to plan and execute effectively, then we must recognize the importance of these qualities to the credibility of our witness and the ultimate success of our efforts.

Joy

Of all of the many gifts my late mother possessed, the greatest one, which she bequeathed to me, was her faith. What she handed on to me, however, was not a history book, or a list of rules or pious platitudes. What she conveyed was the joy her faith brought her, not a giddy cheeriness, though sometimes it was that, but the deep consolation that comes from a heart inhabited by the risen Lord. Her joy was an Easter joy, the kind Peter describes as “inexpressible.” In other words, you know it when you see it. It’s the sort of thing that prompts someone to say, “I want what he has.” “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus,” pope Francis wrote. “Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.”

This joy is the Christian’s most effective tool for evangelization and yet it sometimes seems in short supply among us. Admittedly, the world is an awfully tough place to call home right now. In addition to the economic and public health crises, there is the general desolation that pervades the public discourse. Every time we turn on the television or pick up a newspaper, there is one group of people, who believe the world is ending, yelling at another group of people, who believe that it’s just beginning. Both groups have something in common: They are joyless. Some of the most visible Christians, for example, look as if they haven’t had a joyful thought in 10 years. Yet joy is what makes our faith attractive, even what makes it intelligible. Without it, to paraphrase St. Paul, we are but clanging cymbals.

A heart filled with Easter joy knows that the world is always ending and it is also just beginning. Both are happening all around us and within us. Easter joy helps us to stand in our present, on the bedrock of the past, and face our future: a future of our choosing yet also chosen for us. Easter joy stems from the consolation of knowing that whatever

happens, for good or ill, will have within it the possibility of calling forth from us a deeper response to Jesus and to one another. This is the freedom we need to both imagine and execute any well-laid plan.

Imagination

Nearly twenty years ago, as a novice, I was sent on a long experiment to Guyana in South America. I spent several months there traveling from village to village with a British Jesuit who was also a physician. Most of Guyana's Catholics are Amerindians who reside in the interior of the country, just about ten degrees north of the equator. The Jesuits first reached the interior in 1920, which means that the church there is barely a century old. As in many mission territories, the villagers see a priest about once a month. He says Mass and hears confessions and then moves on to the next village. In between visits from the priest, the laypeople preach, lead communion services, catechize, baptize, witness marriages and bury the dead. This is the only model of church these Catholics have ever known.

So it struck me one day on a walk from one village to another, that I had come to Guyana from Boston, where a study commissioned by the Archdiocese of Boston had concluded that if a person were standing at the plaza at Boston City Hall on a weekday at noon, then he or she would have a choice of attending any one of five masses, all within a ten minute walk. I began to wonder: How much of our talk about priest shortages and a vocations crisis are distorted by a lack of imagination? The Amerindians are no less Catholic than I am. And they did not consider themselves deprived because they saw their priest only once a month because they have only ever seen their priest once a month. Makes you wonder: How many of those things that we think of as indispensable really are? Are some of those things we think of as constitutive elements of Catholicism in fact merely culturally contingent?

It seems to me that apostolates just as often die from a lack of imagination as they do from a lack of financial resources. But hearts that are seized by the name of Jesus should also have eyes wide open for new, imaginative possibilities. That means carefully discerning what is and is not essential and then allowing God to speak to us through our imagination, in the way he would via the Spiritual Exercises. Saint Ignatius the mystic, for example, also turned out to be a shrewd administrator, effectively channeling human talent and desire to serve God and the Church into fruitful work in education and foreign missions. For his part, Pope Francis has called this a "propitious time to find the courage for a new imagination of the possible, with the realism that only the Gospel can offer us. Those who love, use their imagination to discover solutions where others see only problems. Those who love, help

others according to their needs and with creativity, not according to preconceived ideas or common conceptions.”

Boldness

In 2020, “the average lifespan of a company on Standard and Poor's 500 Index was just over 21 years. It was 32 years in 1965.” Those are said to be the most innovative and prosperous companies in the world. By comparison, the church is more than 2,000 years old, one of only two institutions—along with the synagogue—to have survived the fall of the Roman Empire. The Society of Jesus is more than 400 years old. And while the number of Jesuits is down from its post-war high, there are still more of us now than there were during our so-called golden age in the century following the death of Ignatius.

This longevity, not to mention the Lord’s promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against us, should enkindle within us boldness and audacity; a holy ambition “for the greater glory of God and the salvation of humankind.” The church and the Jesuits should be the most entrepreneurial, the most far-reaching, the greatest innovators. We should be willing to take risks; to be unafraid of earthly failure.

And yet, too often this is not the case. We can enjoy the comfort of modest ambitions. We are content to leave things as they are simply because that is how they have always been done. But that way of proceeding is not the audacity the world should expect of men and women laboring in the name of Jesus.

“We are called to be bold and decisive in seeking God's plan for our lives,” the pope has said. “Gazing out at the vast 'ocean' of vocation, we cannot remain content to repair our nets on the boat that gives us security, but must trust instead in the Lord's promise. The questions we must ask ourselves: Do we have great vision and impetus? Are we also daring? Do our dreams fly high? Does zeal consume us?”

Zeal is no vice in the service of the kingdom. The men and women we seek to serve should see within our ranks men and women who aspire not just to be good but to do good and to accomplish great things.

This then seems like a good place to start: To call upon the Lord by name, to ask Him to open our hearts, our minds, our whole selves to his love, his wisdom and his will. “We, Jesuits, want to be designated by the name of Jesus,” Pope Francis said, “to serve under the banner of the Cross, and this means: having the same mind as Jesus. It means thinking like

him, loving like him, seeing like him, walking like him.” It requires joy and imagination and boldness.

Our ultimate aim is not to possess some truth but to be possessed by the one who is the truth. “For if the God of surprises is not at the center,” Pope Francis has said, “the Society becomes disorientated. Because of this, to be a Jesuit means to be a person who is always looking to the horizon which is the ever greater glory of God.”

Do we have the courage to ask this person named Jesus—this God for whom love alone is credible—to truly possess our hearts? And if so, what untruths and cherished myths live within us, waiting to be scandalized by Him? What hopes lie there, waiting to be born, waiting for their incarnations? Most of all, what does this God of the unexpected want *for us*, for our least Society—itself a relatively fragile human body, yet one that still has the audacity to hope in the name of Jesus?