



“Lay down your burdens and rest in Jesus – then invite!”

The catechetical theme of 2023 comes from Matthew's gospel, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28 NABRE). Three spiritual components emerge to strengthen our catechetical efforts in parish ministry. These three phases in Matthew's text - invitation, freedom from burdens, and rest - also connect with two popular African American spirituals while inspiring the second year of the Eucharistic Revival theme, *Parish Revival*.

Beginning with the invitation phrase "Come to me," Matthew's gospel portrays a sensitive Messiah caring for our wellbeing by extending an invitation to the community. Jesus avoids distinguishing any group or showing favoritism. Jesus' directive is for everyone to come. His' words reflect the sentiments of the Prophet Isaiah when prophesying, "Come to the water! You who have no money, come, buy grain and eat; Come, buy grain without money" (Is. 55:1-3 NABRE). Both passages show that the invitation is all-inclusive; your social or financial status is of no concern. This invitation is to everyone.

In our following freedom phrase, Jesus singles out those toiling under a load, "all you who labor and are burdened," come to me. These people need the *euangelion*, the good news. And the good news is that Jesus makes it possible for us to "Cast [our] burden[s] upon the Lord, and He will sustain [us]..." (Ps. 55:22 NABRE). Jesus is inviting all of us to take the burdens off our shoulders and lay them on him. We can all sing along with the African American spiritual, *Down by the Riverside*, "I am gonna lay down my burden, down by the riverside." When we come to Jesus, laying down our burdens and casting them upon Him, there is a spiritual awakening at the riverside where we find rest from our burdens, we are free from our worries.

The final phase allows us to rest because Jesus freed us from carrying heavy burdens. Examples of these burdens are Church hurt or perhaps the sinful acts of unending strings of gun violence, racism, redlining, sexism, and poor health care programs, to name a few. We experience God's love by resting with Jesus, who promised, "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20 NABRE). This is the ultimate rest, to know Jesus will always be with you. The Spirit teaches in the Book of Revelation, "Let them find rest from their labors..." (Rev 14:13 NABRE). With Jesus, we can rest from carrying our burdens.

Juxtaposing Matthew's text with another African American spiritual, *Wade in the Water*, we glean the same three components from the gospel: invitation, freedom from burdens, and rest. This spiritual is a resource for adding a historical and spiritual context to our catechetical theme. Unpacking this spiritual through the lens of African American history, we see that the soloist in this spiritual is similar to our catechist today as they both model the actions of Jesus. The soloist in *Wade in the Water* sings out an invitation that was originally addressed to a people that had been kidnapped, sold, and brought in chains to a different continent to toil in the fields for the enrichment of others: "Wade in the water, children/Wade in the water/God is gonna trouble these waters."

Underscoring this critical piece to this spiritual is vital. Like the soloist singing this song, catechists are called to share their own stories. The soloist in the spiritual knew something about the water being chilly and cold. He or she knew their body was cold, but his or her spirit was on fire because God stirred the waters, leading to freedom. Today, the pearl of wisdom in this spiritual is how the soloist, after experiencing freedom, did not forget the other enslaved people after traveling through troubling waters. He or she returned and extended an invitation to freedom. The singer tells those burdened to Wade in the Water because God will be there: "God is gonna trouble these waters." Those who composed the spirituals, such as this one, shared their faith story of how God helped them to lay down their burdens by the riverside, freeing them to rest with Jesus.

The catechist's responsibility is also to reach out to their faith community. Pope Francis said, "be shepherds with the smell of sheep." A faithful catechist will be a kind of shepherd with the *smell of sheep* when present with the parish's adults and children. Catechists must be like shepherds who invite everyone to celebrate the sacraments. The lost, disgruntled, confused, and those affected by Church hurt need someone to ask them to meet Jesus in the sacraments so that they may lay down their burdens and rest.

For this reason, catechists must be ready to explain why they have hope. Catechists are to share their stories, in the same way as the disciples on the Emmaus Road, who were wounded followers of Christ. Their hurts, struggles, and burdens blinded them spiritually. They forgot their encounter with Jesus before the crucifixion. Jesus reminded his disciples, with their damaged faith, of the scriptures and of their previous conversations. The disciples found relief from their burdens while talking with Jesus at this juncture. They walked out of their darkness and rested with Jesus by the riverside. As catechists, we share our stories when inviting families to begin a new season of touching Jesus' garment of hope, faith, and love. The journey starts with the catechist's stories of how they came to Jesus and found relief from their burdens and rested with Jesus.

For this reason, as we enter the year of *Parish Revival*, our catechetical theme from Matthew's gospel challenges us to look for creative ways to invite people to our faith community. The bishops' divided the *Parish Revival* into four invitations: the *Art of Celebration*, *Monthly Encounter Nights*, *Preaching Series and Small Groups*, and *Missionary Sending*. Here, pastors, church leaders, and catechists are called to invite everyone to come to Jesus through our liturgy, monthly gatherings, messages from the pastor, small group gatherings, and other events that help individuals come to know Jesus in the breaking of the Bread.

Upon further reflection, Matthew's theme is apropos. When responding to the bishops' prayerful instruction for the year of *Parish Revival*, we must be intentional. Everyone should receive the invitation to participate in the celebration of the Mass and to encounter Jesus, to "learn from [Him]" for "[His] burden [is] light" (Mt. 28:29, 30 NABRE). Flyers are good, and bulletin announcements are okay, but being intentional means also physically looking our parish members and unchurched friends and neighbors in the eye, saying, "Come!" People need one-on-one invitations and conversations to help them to wade in the water and find rest because Jesus is the Way! Let us proclaim these words from the rooftop, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28 NABRE).

Reflection Question?

1. What obstacles can you remove in your life to come closer to Jesus?
2. Who helped you recently to turn to Jesus to find relief from your burdens?
3. How can you be a better inviter when inviting others to your parish?

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