

“Who is a Christian (identity)? How is Christian commitment related to Christian mission (life at the margins)? How is Christian mission realized today (discipleship)? Only a theologian and anthropologist as learned and wise as Anthony Gittins can help us answer these three questions with ‘courage and conviction.’ And don’t be fooled by the subtitle of the book. Gittins’s answers are anything but ‘unpretentious’ because they are deeply rooted in the Bible (each chapter being a challenging meditation on a biblical text!) and born of a lifelong missionary practice at the margins of society. Pick up the book and read and your life will not be the same.”

— Peter C. Phan
Ellacuría Chair of Catholic Social Thought
Georgetown University

“*Courage and Conviction: Unpretentious Christianity* is a must-read for those who long to deepen the living of their faith in the contemporary global and ecclesial realities. Once again Gittins’s experience, wisdom, and insights draw the reader to a depth of reflection on what is asked of us if we are to be intentional about responding to the call to discipleship. The seamless integration of Scripture in each chapter challenges readers to ponder how they are being called to live their baptismal commitment and be the presence of love in a world where so many hunger and thirst for justice. Honestly facing the questions posed throughout the book while making one uncomfortable can move one from complacency to commitment to ongoing discernment of the Spirit’s invitation and action.”

— Joan Marie Steadman, CSC
Executive Director
Leadership Conference of Women Religious

“Delighting in the joy of revelation, so much more life-giving than mere ‘religion,’ Gittins is a helpful companion no matter what road you have taken. Precisely because he knows he has not yet discovered all there is to know and love, Gittins can help you find even initial answers to the questions that won’t go away.”

— Thomas McCarthy, OP
Former editor of Dominican Publications, Dublin
Rector of the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome, Italy

“The urgency of this writing is not in the offering of new ideas for growing into our Christian call but in living out that call—courageously, collectively, and faithfully—in the world in urgent need of hope, healing, reconciliation, and Good News. Courage is needed to see beyond comfortably held understandings and to risk falling into the full embrace of the deeper truth and beauty of Christian discipleship. Conviction is not presented here in the tone of insistence but as participation in—and cooperation with—the Divine gifting of creative imagination and Jesus’ model of discipleship. The urgency is at hand; so also is the mission ‘where we are, not somewhere else,’ for compassionate and inclusive encounter, upholding the dignity of diversity, loving the least among us, intercultural and countercultural witness, giving hope, and living ‘holy madness.’ In this book, Fr. Anthony honors Christian adults in this mission to be the vision and presence of Jesus in the world.”

— Colleen Gregg
Director of Retreat Center, Sisters of Mercy

“This book is the fruit of years of deep reflection on what it means to be a Christian in today’s world. Savor the wisdom, faith, and practical insights that fill every page. This is a book that should be underlined, used for prayer, and shared with others.”

— Fr. Anthony Ciorra
Vice President for Mission
Professor of Theology and Catholic Studies
Sacred Heart University

“Drawing on New Testament foundations as points of reference, Gittins raises a number of soul-searching questions in ways that are provocative and unsettling, yet magnetic in their power to draw readers into deep and critical reflection on matters of conscience and consequence for mission and ministry.

— Margaret Eletta Guider, OSF
Associate Professor of Missiology
Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

COURAGE AND CONVICTION

UNPRETENTIOUS CHRISTIANITY

Anthony J. Gittins, CSSp



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INTRODUCTION

Three issues or topics have converged in my consciousness in recent years, provoking reflection and an intellectual, pastoral, and faith-driven response. That part of this response should take the form of a book is itself the result of a rather longer process of interaction with a variety of individuals and groups, from the United States to Europe, Australia and elsewhere; in classrooms and convention halls; among Roman Catholics, within the much broader Christian community, and beyond the structures of institutional religion.

The first stimulus was Pope John Paul's call for a New Evangelization (which goes back thirty years), and the response it generated, from confusion to commitment and from apathy to passion. The word "New" was intended to encourage renewal rather than to imply novelty, and its intended focus was on baptized but apparently only nominal Christians, not (fully) committed to living a vibrant and identifiably Christian way of life. But considerable confusion followed the papal call to action: within a very short time, upward of ninety different definitions of "New Evangelization" had appeared in print. People who were committed to the pope's initiative sometimes found themselves arguing against each other about the real meaning and application of the phrase "new evangelization." Adding fuel to the fire was the fact that the word "evangelization" was widely (mis)understood to be synonymous with proselytization or biblical fanaticism—and therefore highly distasteful to contemporary Christian

palates. Traveling to Australia, *en route* to giving talks about (new) evangelization, I fell to reading a book—at the bishop’s urging—about Australian Catholics. The very first paragraph contained the stark statement that Australians hate the word “evangelization”! I wished then that I could turn the plane around, but in the event I learned much, about evangelization, about Australians, and about the power of words.

My understanding of evangelization is that it is first and foremost a description of the way Jesus himself undertook his mission, and only then is it derivatively applied to the Church and its members. If its first meaning in the New Testament is “to preach the Gospel,” then Jesus was evidently its first exponent. If it is taken out of the gospel, however, and intended to mean “to convert to Christianity” as the dictionary also has it, then it is not surprising that so many people have found it distasteful. But the noun *evangelion*—the Greek origin of the English word—simply means “good news,” and in the gospels its primary referent is Jesus himself. Consequently, to speak of “new evangelization” strikes many people as confusing, and some as outrageous: Jesus both proclaims and—critically—embodies the good news. His message *is* good news and so is he, for he actually incarnates it. Jesus does not merely talk about love or forgiveness, reconciliation or bonding: he does these things on a daily basis and instructs his followers to do likewise. He *is* love and forgiveness incarnate, and he exemplifies reconciliation and bonding. That is evangelization. And unless we in turn attempt to do and to be as Jesus was, whatever we might do is not authentic evangelization. And the only way we can legitimately speak of a “new” evangelization is if what Jesus himself did two thousand years ago is re-presented or renewed in our words and brought alive in our bodies wherever we may be.

The following pages attempt to describe elements of both Jesus’ proclamation and his incarnation of the good news, and to identify the challenges facing each of us, called as disciples and sent as apostles.

The second impetus for this book is the living example of Pope Francis. His insistence that every Christian is called to be a

“missionary disciple” is a timely reminder to us all. And his example of choosing the margins and encountering the people who live there is itself evangelization in action. Through these pages we will be referring to and quoting from Pope Francis, especially his Apostolic Exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel.”

The third issue that has served to kindle some passion is the conviction that many adult Christians today are hungry for biblical and spiritual food. Saint Paul chided the people of Corinth, saying that initially he offered them “milk, not solid food,” because they were “as infants in Christ” (1 Cor 3:2), and that “even now you are still not ready.” But multitudes of Christians today seem to have received very little solid food, and the “milk” they received as children—while perhaps perfectly appropriate then—simply cannot nourish or satisfy them any longer. They know that adults cannot live on milk alone, and they are hungry for more solid food. That is readily available to theologically sophisticated people, and courses or lectures on the Bible or New Testament are increasingly popular. But that leaves too many people still hungry, for they cannot undertake formal courses or gain a theology degree.

This book, then, is addressed to what used to be called “the educated layman,” but most certainly to women too, whether lay or religious, single or married, waxing or waning. But it is also intended for the adult palate; it is not a book for children. Nor is it a “pious” book, in the disparaging sense of filled with pretense or hypocrisy. Such bogus piety is odious. The book is offered to people who do not lack courage or faith yet who might be further encouraged and sustained in their following of the Way of Jesus; people who go about their business with simplicity but also with passion. Hence the title, *Courage and Conviction*, and the subtitle, *Unpretentious Christianity*.

One further point might be pertinent here. It concerns culture. No one is born with culture, but everyone acquires culture. There are no mature human beings without culture. Culture is what human groups do to their environment, for good or ill. It is the form of social life, a meaning-making system, and a way of being human contextually. Language is a feature of culture,

and there are more than ten thousand languages on earth. There is no way to communicate adequately except through language, spoken, written, signed, or symbolized. But faith too can only be expressed culturally. There is no way to live one's faith except culturally. In a global church, the significance of culture as a shaper of people's faith should not be underestimated. Although every Christian is called to discipleship, each person must live his or her faith culturally (through the medium of a native or an acquired culture). This can be seen in the myriad ways in which people pray (language), worship (ritual), use their bodies, perceive nature, and approach God. Some insights from cultural anthropology are interwoven in these pages. They might help sensitize us further to the interplay of culture and faith and demonstrate that there are almost as many ways to be a disciple as there are people willing to follow the Way of Jesus. Each of us can learn much from fellow disciples.

Finally, a word about the specific content: it derives from my own encounters over recent years, with people of faith, people seeking and asking for faith, and sometimes people who feel, like the disciples, that they are, at this late stage, still "of little faith." Each chapter has been shaped around the book's theme, but the content and focus originated or saw the light of day in many different contexts.

Chapter 1 was originally a talk for the clergy of the Diocese of Albany, New York, in 2009. That was reworked much later as an address at the Convention of the National Council of Priests of Australia, in Brisbane in 2014, and that also elicited the present chapters 2 and 3. Versions subsequently appeared in the Irish Dominican Publication, *Religious Life Review* in 2015, as did several of the other subsequent chapters, between 2010 and 2016. The content for the present chapter 4 was also part of the Brisbane Convention. Those chapters are the result of rethinking, revision, and realignment for the present context and audience. Chapter 5 was born many years ago, in a place I cannot recall. But it has been reworked on several occasions, almost always for live audiences and therefore with a different presentation style.

The subject matter of a conference in Adelaide, Australia, in 2014, for an Ecumenical Association of Mission Studies (AAMS) Convention, provided the topics appearing here in a modified form in chapters 6, 7, and 8.

The issue explored in chapter 10 was presented to the Third Order Religious (TOR) Franciscans in Assisi, Italy, in 2013, while chapter 12 was a keynote for the Annual Conference of Major Superiors of Men Religious (CMSM) in Burlington, Vermont, in 2006.

In 2013 I was blessed to participate in the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (ACLRI) for New South Wales, Australia; the present chapter 13 is a condensed version of two talks at that venue. “The Marian Lecture” delivered at the Catholic College, Bendigo, Australia, in 2014 has been transmuted into chapter 14.

Finally, a presentation at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress (LAREC) in 2012 provided the topic for chapter 15, reworked and redirected from a live auditorium to the pages of a book.

Some, indeed many, but not all of the topics addressed here were first proposed to clerical and religious audiences. But every presentation offered here has been rethought and redirected to a much broader and more inclusive audience, largely because we all share the same vocation to discipleship, to which we respond in myriad appropriate and contextual ways. The chapters not otherwise identified as formal presentations grew from ideas mooted in seminars or talks and gestated over a long period, sometimes years. In all cases, any appropriate releases have been secured and the publication rights are mine as much as are the errors.

My hope is to have woven whole cloth from a variety of different strands, to have avoided repetition as much as possible, and to have produced a narrative whose component chapters flow together easily and smoothly. And my simple wish would be that whoever picks up this book will be able to find some solid food rather than simply a milk pudding or a helping of comfort food. But those who read through these pages will soon notice

my emphasis on movement from the center to the margins as a focal point of discipleship as modeled by Jesus. Writer Stephen Hunt puts his finger on the tender spot: “If you’re not living on the edge, you’re taking up too much space.”

Christian disciples should never be pretentious, loud, or self-important, and we are not absolutely necessary. But we are contingently necessary, because God has called every one of us to live for others and make a difference in the world. So we are, in a sense, indispensable components in God’s providential plan. As a cord that connects a computer to its power source, a string that ties a kite to the one who flies it, or a pipe that brings water to a village, so we are instruments in the hands of God. We are not initiators or chief executives but part of the history of salvation, as a pen is an instrument that brings words to a page. “As the branches are to the vine,” so Jesus reminds us, “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). But if we abide in him, he promises that we will bear much fruit and become his disciples (15:8). With God then, all things are possible (Matt 19:26). And yet, paradoxically it seems, without us and our honest efforts, God’s plan is disrupted and God’s range is limited.

* I use “cripple” and other politically incorrect terms intentionally, since they represent the bias and judgmentalism of many of those in quadrant #1—the powerful and self-important—in relation to less fortunate human beings.

PART 1

IDENTITY AND COMMITMENT

CHAPTER ONE

"THE WIND WAS AGAINST THEM"

(Mark 6:48)

FACING LIFE'S CHALLENGES

A Nautical Note

Boats and sailing ships, and the sailors who navigate them, depend mightily on the wind; windless, they remain in the doldrums, floating aimlessly. Without wind, all the sailors' experience and ingenuity is of absolutely no help. But if the wind should suddenly get up and blow against them—directly head-on or broadside—it can destroy and sink even the biggest boats and the surest sailors. So whoever sets sail must learn, first to read the winds carefully and with respect, then to interpret and respond to them appropriately. Fighting against the might of the wind is ultimately a lost cause.

Paradoxically, a seasoned mariner can actually sail into the wind. It is even possible to move forward in the teeth of a head-wind, and the most dexterous navigators can achieve twice the speed of the wind itself, even though the idea seems counterintuitive. But this can happen only if the boat is "close-hauled" or carefully angled in such a way that the wind's power itself becomes an asset, a positive force rather than the bearer of destruction. An alternative is "tacking": sailing at an angle of forty-five degrees to the wind, and then shifting the sail and alternating the direction of wind-to-sail. Then the boat will cover a greater distance to reach its destination, but this may be the quickest and

most efficient way to advance. It is a calculated tactic, and success depends on the sailor's ability to read the wind correctly. Every mariner relies on the wind but knows that the same force that can generate additional speed can just as easily bring about disaster.

Mark's gospel describes an incident in which the wind and its destructive power threaten the lives of the disciples until Jesus comes to the rescue in the most dramatic fashion. But people of faith can read between the lines and discern a parallel and deeper story, more metaphorical than literal, but no less challenging to each of us. Just as the course of true love does not run smooth, so with life's unfolding; none of us can sail placidly through our days for very long without unexpected squalls or commotions that threaten to destabilize our previously uneventful lives. How we respond is a measure of our maturity and skill, sharpened through life's experiences, and also of our faith—a faith that should also have been maturing during the course of our lives.

Those first disciples, the apostles who lived by and on the Sea of Galilee, undoubtedly acquired skills, but they alone, as Jesus would show them, would not save their lives in a crisis like this. So what is really happening on that lake, in that storm, at the dead of night? Saint Mark has been building a composite picture of this group of men, eager but still immature in the faith. They have a lot to learn, even and ironically about sailing, their supposed *forte*.

As twenty-first-century would-be disciples of Jesus, we can profitably apply the lesson of this storm and the dramatic rescue to our own circumstances, by means of a little reflection, as we calculate our current position, the direction of the “wind” of the Holy Spirit, our expected destination, and our chances of safe arrival rather than shipwreck. Furthermore, we may need to reflect on the irony in our own lives, when our presumed strengths are exposed in all their fragility. But first we should identify the immediate context for this particular New Testament story.

Context, Challenge, Outcome

We are in chapter 6 of Mark's gospel. But in the previous chapter, after Jesus had raised Jairus' daughter, we read that these

same disciples "were overcome with astonishment" (5:43). The Greek word is *ekstasis*, which means everything from trance to complete distraction, through "utter astonishment," "amazement," "shock," "confusion," and "perplexity." The word occurs so often that we begin to realize that, rather than comprehension or commitment, astonishment or its equivalent is the disciples' standard response. Jesus then proceeds with this group to his hometown, where he meets skepticism and opposition. Now it is his turn to be "'amazed' at their lack of faith"; but Mark uses a different word (*ethaumazen*) that he applies only to Jesus, and this word "represents his own reaction to their lack of faith."¹ It is not the same as the incredulity of his disciples or the crowds so much as his own heavy-hearted disappointment as their teacher or mentor. Evidently Jesus expects more of people, especially his own extended family and these handpicked disciples. His disappointment would only increase to the very end, until the other "mighty wind"—heralding the Holy Spirit—would at last utterly transform them at Pentecost.

Nevertheless, Jesus commissions these disciples as apostles ("those who have been sent"), and they, often called "the Twelve," go off full of excited optimism and return full of themselves: "They told him all that they had done and taught," but Jesus immediately responds by saying with some urgency, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). The Greek verb implies recuperation from some depleting experience (like our own "R and R"), except that Jesus himself invariably seeks such revival or restoration through contemplation, connecting with his *abba* whenever he has been depleted or worn out by his ministry. But every time Jesus finds some badly needed temporary seclusion, enormous crowds seek him out and converge again, eager for more miracles.

This provides the testing ground for the apostles' maturity. Jesus once more "had compassion for [the crowds]; . . . and

¹John R. Donohue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 186.

began to teach them many things” (v. 34). But this compassionate response greatly irritated the Twelve, whose immediate reaction (their pastoral response) is to tell Jesus to get rid of the people! But Jesus says, very pointedly, “*You* give them something to eat” (exactly the same instruction that Jairus and his wife were given when their daughter was raised; Jesus will always challenge people to do whatever they can, before they look for miracles). The apostles’ bankruptcy becomes evident at this point, when they declare that they have nothing to offer: evidently they have even less imagination than resources. So Jesus intervenes and saves the day. By now it is late, and Jesus is even more in need of solitude, but also quite aware of the limitations of his disciples. So he dismisses them, with the simple instructions to sail to Bethsaida—surely, one assumes, something these fishermen sailors could manage without supervision or undue stress!

As we look back through Mark’s narrative, an interesting picture gradually emerges, only becoming fully focused when Jesus later joins the terrified disciples in the boat. Jesus never presented himself as a cheap miracle worker, much less a celebrity figure: hence the “messianic secret”—his vain attempt to persuade those he healed not to broadcast his miracles or works of power. Rather, he came looking for, and sowing seeds of, faith. Strictly speaking, Jesus was a *faith healer* rather than a *miracle worker*. He emphasized that faith makes miracles, and he knew perfectly well that rarely did miracles alone produce faith. There were plenty of charlatans around, promoted as miracle workers. So, first seeking faith in Israel, he had gone with the Twelve to his own hometown, only to be deeply saddened by their response. It is only later—after the pivotal encounter with the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24//Matt 15:21)—that Jesus will cast a much wider net and look elsewhere for indications of faith, among the marginalized and insignificant.

This leads us to a personal reflection on the storm on the lake, its literal and metaphorical messages, and its implications for us.

Contrary Wind or Contrary Disciples?

While Jesus is deep in contemplation far from the lake, the disciples are on the verge of disaster, "straining at the oars against an adverse wind." For veteran sailors this should not have been a reason for panic, but, significantly, something was already seriously amiss. Different translations locate the source of the problem differently. Mark says that *they* were the source of the problem, but if "*the wind* was against them," the problem is the wind itself. What should we make of this? Can we distinguish the aggressor from the victim here? This is important in view of the way the story continues. "[Jesus] got into the boat with them and the wind ceased"—or alternatively, "ceased/stopped/died down/abated" (v. 51).

The wind here clearly evokes the *ruah* or the breath of God. There is no distinct word for "spirit" in the biblical languages, and the words "wind" or "breath," are often used metaphorically. The Greek word *pneuma* carries explicit theological connotations of "spirit," but the word in this text is simply the meteorological referent, the "wind": *anemos*. Nevertheless, Mark has intentionally shown us a number of indications of the immaturity of the disciples' faith, and he may well be pushing a very theological point here, since, at the very moment Jesus got into the boat, "the wind ceased." As one commentator reminds us, "The wind is invisible, unpredictable, uncontrollable [and] bears down on everything in its way."² Up to this moment, the disciples have clearly been getting "in the way" of the Spirit, rather than following *the Way* of Jesus. And now they are fighting, unsuccessfully, against the wind (the Spirit of God). But when Jesus joins them, there is no fight left in them and no need to struggle. There is no disharmony between Jesus and the Holy Spirit, so once Jesus is with and among his disciples, tranquility is restored. Everyone is now on the same side and at peace: the disciples are no

²George S. Hendry, "Holy Spirit," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 287.

longer fighting against the wind (Spirit); nor is the wind (Spirit) against them.

Applying the Lessons

This sequence of events is marked once again by the characteristic “astonishment” or “amazement” of the disciples. It began with the raising of Jairus’ daughter, proceeded to Jesus’ visit to his hometown, and demonstrated the disciples’ impotence in the face of five thousand hungry men (not counting the women or children who would have increased the number to upward of fifteen thousand people if we know anything about family sizes or women’s interest and devotion). In this final scene, the disciples’ astonishment has turned to cold fear. All this can surely provide us with much food for thought. How might we apply the lessons to ourselves at this moment in the story of the church wherever we happen to be? In the forty verses of chapter 6 of Mark’s gospel, here is a potentially significant insight: Mark consistently shows the weak side of the disciples, the side Matthew covers up or overlooks.

After all the drama and even with the evidence of Jesus’ identity, the disciples are yet again “utterly and completely dumbfounded, [and] their minds were closed,” says Mark (6:52).³ They are exposed as men who still have an awful lot to learn (and “a learner/to learn” is simply the meaning of the word disciple). They have a long way to go; they are still very volatile; and Mark gives them a terrible midterm report that stands in stark and striking contrast to Matthew’s glowing assessment. He says that when Jesus joined them, “those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly, you are the Son of God’” (Matt 14:33): a completely different picture! Naturally, the author of Matthew’s gospel identifies himself with the apostles and consistently spares their blushes. He also blames the mother of James and John for asking for the seats on Jesus’ right and left (Matt 20:20). But she is not even present in Mark’s account! He, by contrast, puts the

³Jerusalem Bible (JB) translation.

blame squarely on the brothers and then says that the rest of the apostles were indignant—not, apparently, because James and John were out of line, but because they preempted everyone else (Mark 10:35). Mark exposes the disciples as only too human and their faith as wafer-thin: lacking understanding and with closed minds.

If we consider ourselves to be disciples, maybe we have chosen more Matthew-like images, and a dose of Mark’s realism comes as a much-needed, if painful, corrective. But Mark also constantly emphasizes that disciples need a deep and personal relationship with Jesus, as a way to strengthen and deepen their faith. This is surely an appropriate reminder for us all. The outcome, of course—after the strong wind of the Spirit blew at Pentecost—was that these very same immature disciples did finally come of age and fulfill the promise Jesus had placed in them from the beginning. Nevertheless, commentators in recent years have gone so far as to say that the Twelve (particularly in Mark’s account) are the negative blueprints of discipleship. In other words, if you want to know what *not* to do, look at these men. By contrast, the women—widely overlooked or undervalued (and no gospel ever applies the word “disciple” to a woman; only once in the entire New Testament is a woman explicitly called disciple: Tabitha in Acts 9:36)—the women are the positive examples.⁴ If we aspire to faithful discipleship, the women should be among our primary exemplars, although we can also learn a great deal from the men’s mistakes. In fact, their weakness can be a source of some encouragement to us. If Jesus’ handpicked chosen ones were so fallible and slow to learn, there is still hope for us.

Questions for the Road

Three questions might help focus our attention. Faced with an enormous crowd of needy people, the disciples seemed to panic

⁴Denis Sweetman notes Mark’s propensity to portray the Twelve “warts and all”; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has long advocated on behalf of the women as prime examples of courage and enduring faith.

or freeze. Their best response was to try to get rid of the problem. "Send them away," they said. We noted Jesus' command, that they should give them something. But that seemed quite unrealistic in the circumstances. Yet it raises our first question.

1. *What do we have to share, to give to hungry people dying for nourishment?* Perhaps we truly believe we have nothing left. Perhaps we have simply run out of ideas. If our conscience is sensitive to others' needs, maybe we resent the constant demands made on us. Or maybe we are frankly burned out. Although we might have some of these reactions, we have to believe that Jesus never asks for the impossible. He did warn the Twelve that discipleship is impossible for them alone. But he added that, with God, everything is possible (cf. Mark 10:27). And that is what must sustain us. The very fact that Jesus challenges and strains the resourcefulness of his disciples indicates that he knows very well that they can do *something*, even if they don't know it yet. Yes they are tired after their missionary journey, and Jesus has just called them to come away with him for some solitude and rest (Mark 6:3, 31). But suddenly the unexpected happened and a real pastoral need is evident. For Jesus to ask his disciples to take action rather than to seek the limelight himself shows a real spirit of affirmation and trust. But what can they possibly give? Their immediate reaction is negative, unhelpful, and defeatist: clearly they do not yet have the spirit of Jesus. But with his help their attitude changes, they involve the crowd, and they discover that there *are* indeed resources, meager though they seem. When Jesus then compensates for the deficiency, "all ate and were filled" (Mark 6:43).

For people of faith, the lesson is clear: we *do* have resources, though we may be stretched rather thin. But a great deal depends on the attitude, that spirit of hope that we bring to the pastoral challenges, individually and collectively. There is simply no place for defeatism and dis-spiritedness. As disciples, whatever our position, whether of leadership, of years of experience, or simply of example, we can no more turn away when others are hungry than a mother can turn a deaf ear to the cries of her own

hungry children. Mothers are not solely responsible of course, but they are indispensable. So too, we must take seriously our call to provide people with nourishment and the means to obtain it. Realistically, we may have good cause to be pessimistic about some things, but pessimism must never degenerate into hopelessness, because hope is simply a nonnegotiable for Christians.

2. *How do we recognize Jesus through our daily encounters?* When the disciples saw Jesus coming to them on the water, even though they had been with him immediately before and it was he who had instructed them to row across the lake, still, "they thought he was a ghost," and Mark says explicitly: "They *all* saw him and were terrified" (6:49-50). So what about us: do we recognize Jesus when he is unexpected and perhaps even heavily disguised? This is the measure of our faith: in Jesus' own words, whatever we do or fail to do to "one of the least," we do or fail to do to him (Matt 25:40, 46). The disciples at Emmaus recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. "He vanished from their sight" but not from their presence; he was there, fixed on their retinas, held in their trembling hands, and burned deep into their memories. And we encounter Jesus daily, in some of the most unlikely people and circumstances, but we often fail to recognize him, and yet we complain because he seems absent. "O you of little faith" is a constant refrain to the disciples and to ourselves. When Jesus is hidden from our physical sight, where is our insight, our perception, our discernment, our vivid memory, and our yearning—not to mention our imagination and our contemplative reflection on some of our daily encounters? How often do we fail to look closely at the faces of the people we pass each day, especially the needy poor who seem to be everywhere and will not leave us alone? What would it take, in fact, for us to recognize Jesus in the flesh, if we have already decided that he has abandoned or forgotten us?

3. *What have we failed to understand, or what do we need to understand?* The disciples "did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (Mark 6:52). Although constantly surprised, they consistently fail to learn from the lessons Jesus

offers them. So further questions might include: have our hearts become hardened and our minds closed? This is particularly pertinent when directed at some clergy or religious who seem less than totally committed to their own professional development. Having completed seminary, some give the impression they have now completed their education, and they continue to recycle old material rather than commit themselves to lifelong learning, which is another description of discipleship. From those to whom much has been given, much will be expected, and those in leadership positions in the church must be accountable for their personal example of discipleship.

The Twelve were tainted with this particular infection, sometimes overreaching themselves, looking for privilege, and expecting preferential treatment. Yet in the end, ten of them ran off and one killed himself. We too have failed to understand, about the loaves and about so much else. We remember when Jesus drew a metaphorical line in the sand, insisting, "My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink" (John 6:56), and provoking from "many of his followers" the response, "This teaching is difficult" (John 6:60; "intolerable language" in the Jerusalem Bible). Jesus asked the Twelve directly, "Do you also wish to go away?" and we might imagine that at this moment some of them did. But Peter, for once, spoke up and spoke for all. "To whom can we go? . . . We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69). This is the hope we cling to, though there is probably not one among us who has not struggled to answer the question, which is not "*Will* you go away?" but "Do you *want* to go away?" Sometimes we surely want to, but by the grace of God we will not.

Recognizing a Familiar Voice

Jesus identifies himself with the God of the Hebrew Bible by the phrase "I AM," or "I AM WHO I AM." But for me the opaque phrase holds a special meaning. As a young missionary in West Africa, having trekked to a distant village I met an old blind

man. He told me his name was Nabi Yagba and he asked for mine. *Kpelle wa* (“Big beard”), I said, the name the people had given me, for obvious reasons at the time. It was more than six months before I returned to the village—and there was none other than Nabi Yagba, sitting on a wooden chair in front of his hut! I had remembered him (and had practiced saying his name), and I greeted him by calling his name. He was blind, so he responded, “Who are you?” Instead of saying my special name, I simply said, “It’s me.” “Ah, *kpelle wa*, ‘Big Beard!’” he said immediately and with delight! My voice and his own memory were enough for him to identify me correctly after all that time.

When the disciples ask the ghostly figure on the lake to identify himself, I imagine that what Jesus is really saying is not the (to our ears) very obscure “I AM WHO I AM” but simply, “It’s me!” because he expects them to know who he is. We only say “it’s me!” when we are talking to someone who already knows us and whom we expect to recognize us by a combination of our voice and their memory. So Jesus says, “It’s me; do not be afraid.” And when I answered Nabi Yagba in his language by saying “It’s me,” what I was saying, literally translated from his Mende language into English, was “I am” or “I am the one”—effectively the same response as Jesus: “I am who am”!

We can ask again, therefore: do we really recognize Jesus in our daily encounters, or is he still a stranger like he was on the road to Emmaus? Do we have enough familiarity with his voice and the way it touches and stimulates our memory? And if so, does it make us afraid? Do we recognize his voice in the beggar on the corner; in the desperation of the person who phones late at night; in the pain of someone who asks us, “Why, why, why has my child died, my spouse abandoned me, my boss fired me?”; or in the anguish of the pregnant teenager who wants help and not condemnation? And do these voices make us afraid, make us want to run away, not pick up the phone or sit down and look into the suffering eyes? Deeper even than all that is another fear: the fear that our own faith is faltering and that it might already be too late. We recall that after the first flush of success, the apostles became

rather full of themselves, only to discover their powerlessness. And Jesus warned them that “only through prayer” would they be effective (Mark 9:29).

When the winds buffet and the seas rise up, when we fear our boat will sink or we will drown, what recourse is there for us, people of little faith? Who will care for us as we try to care for others? In a world with so many problems and among people with so many needs, how will we manage, not simply to survive, but to thrive?

A Provisional Conclusion

We return to the beginning: is the wind against us, or are we against the wind? If the former, causing us to feel victimized, paralyzed, or depleted, we may need to drop or trim our sails, go with the flow, and relax a little, lest we burn out by overwork and lack of support. Or we may need to tack into the wind, taking full advantage of the power of the Spirit, to push on further and deeper in our commitments, and to feel again the exhilaration and passion we once knew. But if we are against the wind, we need to be very, very careful. We cannot overcome the Spirit, however much we resist; and if we are contrary to the Spirit, we need a radical realignment, a real conversion of heart, lest we founder and capsize. Recall that the apostles would have been perfectly able to ride out the storm if they had adjusted the sails and turned into the wind. Their major failure was not incompetence but a collective loss of nerve. Immobilized by fear and nearly hysterical, they almost drowned.

Finally, here is a cautionary tale. As the nineteenth century was turning into the twentieth, the thoughts of novelist and poet Thomas Hardy were turning to thoughts of death. He was himself turning sixty years old, introspective and even melancholy. On a bleak winter’s day nothing stirred, nature seemed dead, and people were huddled in their homes. In a beautiful poem, he wrote that “every spirit upon earth seemed fervourless as I.” Suddenly a bird—the European song thrush—began to sing “in

a full-hearted evensong of joy illimited." It was, he says, "an agéd thrush," but it sang its heart out simply because it was a song thrush. By his judgment, all around was bleak and hopeless, but he was suddenly inspired by this insignificant bird and says that he felt the kindling of "some blessed hope" that inspired the bird but had previously deserted him. The song thrush is born to sing. It must sing, for that is its destiny, even though it is "frail, gaunt, and small." Henry David Thoreau said "some people lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them." The song of the thrush enkindled Hardy's spirit, and he lived a further twenty-eight very productive years.

The Darkling Thrush

*I leant upon the coppice gate,
When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky,
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted night
Had sought their household fires.
The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.*

*At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;
An agéd thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.*

*So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.*

—Thomas Hardy, 1840–1928

We too are called to sing, because that is our destiny: to sing the praise of God in prayer and good works as disciples of Jesus. We will not give up hope or succumb to the contagion of depression or dis-spiritedness, because we are people of faith and hope who also ask for greater faith and more abiding hope. So, for God's sake and for the sake of ourselves and the people we encounter, let us not go to the grave with the song still in us; let us sing it—in Thomas Hardy's words—"in a full-hearted even-song, of joy, illimited."