

Fr Tom's reflection on the book by Sherry Weddell, Making Disciples and Forming Apostles.

Making Disciples and Forming Apostles – Sherry Weddell reminds us that 21st century Western Christianity bears some surprising resemblances to the early Church. The early Church was a minority group in a sea of religious and cultural pluralism with many different local expressions.

In the same way, Christianity is now much less concentrated within traditional Christian countries and has spread all over the world to every country.

In 1900, 95% of all Christians lived in majority Christian countries. But in 2022, only 53.7% of Christians lived in majority Christian countries. By 2050, it is estimated that a slim majority of Christians (50.4%) around the world will live in non-majority Christian nations. Only 25% of all Christians and Catholics will live in the West. Consider the experience of St Francis Xavier, the great Jesuit missionary to Asia. When Francis was living in Rome, he was living in the heart of Christendom and could reasonably expect that the vast majority of the people he met in the course of his daily life had more or less absorbed a set of basic Christian assumptions, ideas, values, language, and images just by living in that Christendom setting. Some were still “bad” Catholics and did not really believe or live the Faith. But they were all culturally Catholic at a basic, bone-deep level. If Francis Xavier said the word “Jesus”, everyone would know who he was talking about, and everyone presumed that Jesus was a man who had really lived. Christendom rules applied, and Xavier was used to evangelizing and ministering within the framework of those norms of communication. But when he first set foot on the shore of Japan, he entered a world where only one other man besides himself was Catholic, and where there was no trace as yet of Catholic concepts, values, categories or language. Xavier was starting from absolute zero – he did not speak the language, he was not familiar with their way of life, their values, their mental categories or their manner of speech.

The most basic attempt at communication was going to be a long, difficult process as he attempted to decipher both the language and the mindset of the Japanese. He could not go about his mission in Japan the way he had in Rome. Today in the UK we can meet people who do not know Jesus. We need to be spiritually alert and ready for the shift into mission territory and rules because it is going to be a regular component of almost all our lives in the 21st century. We need to prepare ourselves to enter Missiondom settings and have Missiondom conversations with a confidence in God that understands that even though communication and relationship is going to be tricky, this is the conversation of our generation to which God has called us. He is already there ahead of us, speaking to each person in his or her heart language, which we ourselves do not yet know. We must trust that the Holy Spirit has gone before us, preparing the way. As disciples of Jesus today we are called to be apostles. Through discipleship we seek a deeper, personal relationship with Jesus in the midst of the Church.

As apostles we are sent by Christ to share his message of truth, love and mercy. In Christendom settings, Catholics historically thought of lay-people as the recipients of the ministry of the ordained and religious, not as people anointed by Jesus for mission at baptism. But whenever and wherever the Church exists outside an intact Christendom, the immense value and importance of lay apostles always comes to the fore. Times of genuine revival and transforming mission are always the fruit of a wide variety of apostles – lay, religious and ordained – who were each dynamic catalysts and creatives in their own areas, and who simultaneously encouraged and supported other disciples and apostles. As we get closer to Jesus in friendship and love, we pray that we may have the courage to bring Jesus to the people in our own neighbourhoods.



Therefore go and make
disciples of all nations,
baptising them in the name of
the Father and of the Son and of
the Holy Spirit,
Matthew 28:19

