



# The Holy See

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POPE FRANCIS

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall  
Wednesday, 11 January 2023*

**[[Multimedia](#)]**

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**Catechesis. The passion for evangelization: The believer's apostolic zeal. *The call to the apostolate (Mt 9:9-13)***

*Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!*

Today we begin a new series of catecheses, dedicated to an urgent and decisive theme for Christian life: *the passion for evangelization*, that is, *apostolic zeal*. It is a vital dimension for the Church: the community of Jesus' disciples was in fact born apostolic, born missionary, not proselytizing. And from the start, we had to make this distinction: being missionary, being apostolic, evangelizing, is not the same as proselytizing. They have nothing to do with one another. It concerns a vital dimension for the Church. The community of disciples of Jesus was born apostolic and missionary. The Holy Spirit moulds her outwardly — a Church which goes forth, which goes out — so that she is not closed in on herself but outgoing, a contagious witness of Jesus — faith is also contagious — reaching out to radiate his light to the ends of the earth. It can happen, however, that the apostolic ardour, the desire to reach others with the good news of the Gospel, may diminish, become tepid. Sometimes it seems to be eclipsed; there are “closed-off” Christians, they don't think of others. But when Christian life loses sight of the horizon of evangelization, the horizon of proclamation, it grows sick: it closes in on itself, it becomes self-referential, it becomes atrophied. Without apostolic zeal, faith withers. Mission, on the other hand, is the oxygen of Christian life: it invigorates and purifies it. Let us embark, then, on a process of rediscovering the evangelizing passion, starting with the Scriptures and the Church's teaching, to

draw apostolic zeal from its sources. Then we will approach some living sources, some witnesses who have rekindled the passion for the Gospel within the Church, so that they may help us rekindle the fire that the Holy Spirit wants to keep burning within us.

And today I would like to begin with a somewhat emblematic Gospel episode. We [just] heard it, the call of the Apostle Matthew. And he himself tells the story in his Gospel, which we have heard (cf. 9:9-13).

It all begins with Jesus, who, the text says, “saw a man”. Few people saw Matthew as he was: they knew him as the one who was “sitting at the tax office” (v. 9). He was, in fact, a tax collector: that is, someone who collected taxes on behalf of the Roman empire that occupied Palestine. In other words, he was a collaborator, a traitor to the people. We can imagine the contempt the people felt for him: he was a “publican”, as they were called. But in the eyes of Jesus, Matthew is a man, with both his miseries and his greatness. Be aware of this: Jesus does not stop at the adjective — Jesus always seeks out the noun. “This person is a sinner, he’s that kind of person...” these are adjectives: Jesus goes to the person, to the heart, “This is a person, this is a man, this is a woman”. Jesus goes to the essence, the noun, never the adjective. He leaves aside the adjectives. And while there is distance between Matthew and his people — because they see the adjective, “publican” — Jesus draws near to him, because *every man* is loved by God. “Even this wretch”? Yes, even this wretch. Indeed, the Gospel says he came for this very wretch: “I have come for sinners, not for the righteous”. This *gaze* of Jesus that sees the other, whoever he may be as the recipient of love, is really beautiful and it is the beginning of evangelizing passion. Everything starts from this gaze, which we learn from Jesus.

We can ask ourselves: how do we look upon others? How often do we see their faults and not their needs; how often do we label people according to what they do or what they think! Even as Christians we say to ourselves: is he one of us or not? This is not the gaze of Jesus: He always looks at each person with mercy and indeed with predilection. And Christians are called to do as Christ did, looking, like him, especially at the so-called “distant ones”. Indeed, Matthew’s account of the call ends with Jesus saying, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (v. 13). And if any one of us considers themselves righteous, Jesus is far away. He draws near to our limitations, to our miseries, in order to heal us.

It all starts, then, with the gaze of Jesus. “He saw a man”, Matthew. This is followed — second step — by *a movement*. First the gaze: Jesus saw. Then the second step, movement. Matthew was sitting at the tax office; Jesus said to him: “Follow me”. And “he rose and followed him” (v. 9). We note that the text emphasizes that “he rose”. Why is this detail so important? Because in those days he who was seated had authority over the others who stood before him to listen to him or, as in that case, to pay taxes. He who sat, in short, had power. The first thing Jesus does is to detach Matthew from power: from sitting to receive others, He sets him in motion towards others, not receiving, no: he goes out to others. He makes him leave a position of supremacy in order to put

him on an equal footing with his brothers and sisters, and open to him *the horizons of service*. This is what he does, and this is fundamental for Christians. Do we, disciples of Jesus, we, Church, sit around waiting for people to come, or do we know how to get up, to set out with others, to seek others? Saying, “But let them come to me, I am here, let them come”, is a non-Christian position. No, you go to seek them out, you take the first step.

A look — Jesus saw; a movement — “he rose”; and third, *a destination*. After getting up and following Jesus, where will Matthew go? We might imagine that, having changed the man’s life, the Master would lead him to new encounters, new spiritual experiences. No, or at least not immediately. First, Jesus goes to his home; there Matthew prepares “a great feast” for him, in which “a large crowd of tax collectors” — that is, people like him — takes part (cf. *Lk 5:20*). Matthew returns to his environment, but he returns there changed and with Jesus. His apostolic zeal does not begin in a new, pure place, an ideal place, far away, but instead he begins there where he lives, with the people he knows. Here is the message for us: we do not have to wait until we are perfect and have come a long way following Jesus to bear witness to him, no. Our proclamation begins today, there where we live. And it does not begin by trying to convince others, not to convince: but by bearing witness every day to the beauty of the Love that has looked upon us and lifted us up. And it is this beauty, communicating this beauty, that will convince people — not communicating ourselves but the Lord himself. We are the ones who proclaim the Lord. We do not proclaim ourselves, we do not proclaim a political party, an ideology. No: we proclaim Jesus. We need to put Jesus in contact with the people, without convincing them but allowing the Lord to do the convincing. For as Pope Benedict taught us, “The Church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by ‘attraction’” (*Homily at the Mass for the Inauguration of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, Aparecida, 13 May 2007*). Do not forget this: when you see Christians proselytizing, making a list of people to come... these are not Christians; they are pagans disguised as Christians, but the heart is pagan. The Church grows not by proselytism, it grows by attraction.

I remember once, in a hospital in Buenos Aires, the women religious who worked there left because they were too few, and they couldn’t run the hospital. And a community of sisters from Korea came. And they arrived, let’s say on a Monday for example (I don’t remember the day). They took possession of the sisters’ house in the hospital and on Tuesday they came down to visit the sick in the hospital, but they didn’t speak a word of Spanish. They only spoke Korean and the patients were happy, because they commented: “Well done! These nuns, bravo, bravo!” “But what did the sister say to you?” “Nothing, but with her gaze she spoke to me, they communicated Jesus”. Not to communicate ourselves but communicating Jesus, with a gaze, with gestures. This is attraction, the opposite of proselytism.

This attractive witness, this joyful witness is the goal to which Jesus leads us with his loving gaze and with the outgoing movement that his Spirit raises up in our hearts. And we can consider whether our gaze resembles that of Jesus, to attract the people, to bring them closer to the

Church. Let us think about that.

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### **Special Greetings**

Lastly, as usual my thoughts turn to young people, to the sick, to the elderly and to newlyweds. With the drive and generosity of those who believe in Christ, may you be builders of peace and harmony, through a constant commitment to dialogue with those who are near you.

And let us not forget war-torn Ukraine, which is always in our hearts. Let us express our affection, closeness and our prayer to these people who are experiencing cruel suffering. And now I will pause in silence for a few minutes before the icon known as Our Lady of the People, who is venerated in Belarus, to pray for that country and for peace. I invite you to join spiritually to my prayer.

I offer my blessing to all of you.

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### **Summary of the Holy Father's words**

Dear brothers and sisters: Today we begin a new series of catecheses on apostolic zeal. Christ's Church, founded on the apostles, was born with missionary zeal, sent by the Holy Spirit to radiate the light of Christ to every land and people. Apostolic zeal is the very oxygen of our Christian life and an index of the Church's spiritual health. Drawing upon the Scriptures and the Church's living tradition, we can find a first, eloquent example of this in the calling of the apostle Matthew. The Gospel tells us that Jesus "saw" this despised tax collector; he looked at Matthew with eyes of mercy and called him to become his disciple. Matthew then "got up and followed him"; now a changed man, he left behind his ill-gotten gains and embraced, with Jesus, a life of discipleship and service to others. Significantly, the first thing Matthew did was bring Jesus to a dinner with many other "tax collectors and sinners". He went back to where he lived and introduced Jesus to others. This can be our primary lesson in apostolic zeal; in the words of the late Pope Benedict, it proclaims Jesus not by proselytism but by attraction, out of a joyful desire to share with others the loving gaze of Jesus and the call to follow him as his disciples.

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