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FOCUS: Hope for the New Evangelization

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In his *Letter to a Suffering Church* Bishop Barron suggested that FOCUS (the Fellowship of Catholic University Students), and organizations like it, are among the most hopeful prospects for renewal within the Church. On another occasion he said, “I don’t know any other group or institution in the Catholic Church today that’s fulfilling its mission and living up to its charism more than FOCUS.” Since its founding in 1999, FOCUS has exploded from two missionaries on a single campus in Kansas to the international apostolate it is today, with nearly one thousand full-time staff serving on 170 campuses in the United States and Europe. Many have wondered about the charism animating this outreach, and as a FOCUS missionary, I am able to offer at least a basic description. FOCUS’ vision can be understood as a specific understanding of *discipleship* and *evangelization*. This vision takes much of its inspiration from the life Pope Saint John Paul II, so it seems appropriate to begin my explanation with the story of one of John Paul II’s most influential mentors: Jan Tyranowski.

The Nazis who dominated 1940s Europe were not neutral towards religion. They sought to destroy the Catholic Church, sending thousands of priests and religious to concentration camps, silencing opposition from religious leaders, prohibiting most public expressions of faith, and outlawing education in the Christian life. In this time of crisis, some heroic laypeople stepped up to lead underground groups in passing on the faith, often behind closed doors or under cover of darkness. Jan Tyranowski led just such a group, accompanying a dozen or so college-aged men in regular recitation of the rosary and faith-filled conversation. Jan was a tailor in Poland. He was not a priest and had no formal training in theology. Nevertheless, at the risk of his own life, he opened his apartment to instruct several young men in the spiritual life, training them to form Living Rosary groups of their own with peers at their university. He was intentional in his ministry, reinforcing the basics of the Faith and helping the men to deepen their relationship with Christ. He taught them how to root out sin, progress in prayer, and discern God’s will. He revealed for them the beauty of the rosary and the wisdom of the saints. He also trained them for mission, sending them out to reach their peers with the Gospel. Jan’s underground ministry had such a deep impact that ten of the men involved eventually became priests. One of those, the young Karol Wojtyła, would eventually become Pope Saint John Paul II, and it is his call for a New Evangelization that gave rise to the mission

and vision of FOCUS.

While FOCUS takes inspiration from the witness, legacy, and thought of John Paul II, its core practice, its method of discipleship, is perhaps more closely exemplified by the apostolate of Venerable Jan Tyranowski. This little-known tailor may be one of the most influential people of the 20th century, not because he rose to wealth, fame, or power, but rather as a result of the way he invested himself personally in a few good men, leading them to encounter Christ in the interior life and training them to go out and do the same for others. It is this type of personal accompaniment that lies at the heart of FOCUS' mission. At its core, FOCUS seeks to bring the lived reality of the Gospel to the daily lives of college students through the conduit of peer-to-peer relationships, something which we at FOCUS refer to as "the Little Way of Evangelization."

The *Little Way* is a distinctive mode of evangelization. Unlike televangelism or Christian publishing, it is essentially personal.^[1] FOCUS missionaries do not operate through printing presses or mass media. Instead, they invest in individual college students, spending their time in places like dorm rooms, sorority halls, and dive bars. Their goal is to invest in a few students, accompanying them into a deeper faith. The hope is that those few will in turn invest in a few more who will then invest in a few more, etc. So, the *Little Way* brings about a multiplication of evangelizing disciples, something referred to as *Spiritual Multiplication*.

We at FOCUS aim to bring about Spiritual Multiplication through a simple paradigm which we refer to as "Win, Build, and Send." In short, this is the method by which those involved with FOCUS *win* students over to the Gospel, *build* them up in imitation of Christ, and finally *send* them to do the same with others. Each of these phases is presented in greater detail here:

Win

The first step in forming missionary disciples is to lead people to a life-shaping encounter with Jesus Christ—one in which they become a true disciple, where Christ is not just a part of their lives but the very center. Many people might know about Jesus and the Catholic faith, but a disciple is someone who knows Jesus in the same way John and Andrew did. Disciples live in abiding relationship with him. For the disciple, Jesus is not merely informing; he is proposing a new way of living, including a willingness to make any sacrifice in order to follow him. Jesus himself says, "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3). In the "win" stage, we invite people to form this kind of friendship with Christ. We do this through our prayer and example, as well as through investing our lives in authentic friendships, sharing the Gospel message, and inviting them to say "Yes" to Christ—to surrender their lives to Him.

Build

At FOCUS, we have noticed that there is often a period of transition from the "win" stage to the "build" stage. That is to say that most disciples have a period of their life in which they set their life's trajectory toward sanctity. Once a college student has so surrendered his life, it is crucial that we "build" him up in the faith. As Paul VI says in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

Proclamation only reaches full development when it is listened to, accepted and assimilated, and when it arouses a genuine adherence in the one who has thus received it...an adherence to the truths which the Lord in his mercy has revealed; still more, an adherence to a program of life—a life henceforth

transformed.

In other words, we need to help students deepen their intimacy with God by growing in prayer, fellowship, the sacramental life, and their rootedness in Christ's teachings (Acts 2:42). The act of building answers two questions: What do people need to know so they can think with the mind of Christ? And with which habits ought they be formed so they take on the character of Christ? The goal is to help them become more and more like Jesus. But we don't just talk about these things, we model them as we accompany the students.

Send

"It is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn."^[2] After "serious preparation,"^[3] FOCUS encourages students to go out and share the Gospel themselves: winning, building, and sending their own friends for the rest of their lives. At FOCUS we do not believe that we have been true to our charism until we have launched students as spirit-filled evangelists who become disciple-makers themselves. A true disciple is someone who seeks to make more disciples. St. Paul did not merely pass on good Christian teaching to his disciples. He sent them out to find other trustworthy people to train them to do the same for others (2 Tim 2:2)—in other words, he trained his disciples to become disciple-makers. This is our task as well. We train others in the mission of making disciples. Within FOCUS, we call those in the "send" phase "commissioned disciples."

I began with a story about Jan Tyranowski, but I would be remiss if I did not say more about the influence of John Paul II on our apostolate. As a good pastor, Fr. Wojtyła went out to his people. He didn't simply schedule talks at a parish and wait for people to come to him. He went out and got involved in their lives. He planned outdoor excursions involving kayaking, camping, hiking, and skiing. He entered into the lives of the young people who joined him—learning about their hopes, dreams, and fears, understanding how they experienced friendships, love, and the moral life. He truly shared life with them. They sang. They laughed. They told jokes. They recited poetry. Fr. Wojtyła was a master of "accompaniment," walking with people amid their daily joys and struggles, ever witnessing Christ's love to them. He said that God called him "to live with people, everywhere to be with them, in everything but sin."^[4] One friend said of him, "We felt that we could discuss anything with him; we could talk about absolutely anything."^[5] Others said that he "had mastered the art of listening," that he "was always interested," and that he "always had time."^[6] Another simply said, "He lived our problems."^[7]

Taking John Paul II as an example, FOCUS has articulated three key virtues which it encourages among its staff and students:

1. Divine Intimacy

As men and women committed to forming disciples, FOCUS students' first goal is to have a deep, personal friendship with Jesus Christ. Evangelization is first and foremost the work of God, and we will be fruitful in the mission of sharing the Gospel only to the extent that we ourselves are abiding in deep union with him. The Gospel tells us, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). As Pope St. Paul VI explained, "Only your personal and profound union with Christ will assure the fruitfulness of your apostolate whatever it may be."^[8] Thus, before all else FOCUS encourages faithfulness to prayer, fellowship, the sacraments, and intellectual formation in accord with the teachings of Christ (Acts 2:42). In a manner reminiscent of Jean-

Baptiste Chautard's *The Soul of the Apostolate*, FOCUS missionaries are encouraged to place a regular prayer life over any evangelical activity. Thus, all FOCUS missionaries commit to spend at least an hour in silent prayer each day and to attend daily mass. Authentic evangelization ought to be an overflow of the interior life of the missionary and his own lived encounter with the Gospel. Anything else would constitute a disingenuous witness. It is prayer, the interior life, nothing more and nothing less, which constitutes the wellspring of FOCUS' apostolic work.

2. Authentic Friendship

It is so often the case that the mysteries of the Gospel are realized within the context of communities, or groups of friends. In forming missionary disciples, it is not enough to pass on the Gospel message and the teachings of the Church. That is essential, but we must do more. We must genuinely love the people we are serving, accompanying them in life by personally investing ourselves in them through authentic friendship. Like John Paul II, who met people not merely at the altar rail or death bed, but throughout the ordinary course of their days, we seek to meet people everywhere. We want to bring the light of the Gospel into contact with all the complexity of contemporary life. This meeting certainly includes religious activities; but it includes much more! St. Paul models this in the way he himself evangelized—giving people not just the truths of the faith, but also pouring his life out for the people he served. In 1 Thessalonians 2:8, he writes, “So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” Personal investment matters. A true missionary disciple gets to know the people he serves. He doesn’t passively wait for people to come to him but goes out to them. As Pope Francis says: “An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives.... Evangelizers thus take on the ‘smell of the sheep’ and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.”

3. Spiritual Multiplication

Jan Tyranowski and Father Karol Wojtyła invested their entire lives in the people they served. And, from the beginning, they sought to prepare those people to be evangelists themselves, just as St. Paul exhorts Timothy to do. “What you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). It isn’t enough to teach people the Christian life; we must also teach people to teach others the Christian life. Disciples must not only seek to be faithful but fruitful. As we strive to make disciples, we must have both clarity and conviction about spiritual multiplication—the method by which we imitate Jesus, who invested in a few and commissioned them to do the same.

Within the context of the Win, Build, Send paradigm, the three virtues of Divine Intimacy, Authentic Friendship, and Spiritual Multiplication constitute the cornerstones of FOCUS' apostolic work. Together, they make up the charismatic life of the organization. By practicing these virtues in their own lives and among the small communities they form, FOCUS missionaries have been able to walk tens of thousands of students from a place of sin to sanctity.

Having personally seen FOCUS work miracles in the lives of so many students, it makes sense to me that FOCUS has gained such an overwhelmingly positive reputation, owing in part to the constructive criticism it has received. For instance, some have expressed concern that in the use and application of concepts like *spiritual multiplication*, FOCUS missionaries treat people like numbers, subtly downgrading the nuance of the Gospel and the dignity of the person. Also, some see various elements of FOCUS' charism and ministry as too Protestant. After all, FOCUS

takes some of its inspiration from Protestant organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ (now Cru). Fortunately, FOCUS has responded to such criticism. For example, its leadership has made intentional efforts to keep the people, not the numbers, at the center of our work, encouraging missionaries to maintain the integrity of the mission, even if doing so yields lower results. As for the concern regarding undue Protestant influence, it has always been the practice of saintly Catholics to integrate the goods realized outside the faith into the fullness of Catholic thought (here one might think of Greek philosophy). To this end, I am consoled by and grateful to those individuals who have prudently guided FOCUS in our process of integration. Such individuals have helped FOCUS staff to incorporate insights from other Christian communities, while cultivating fidelity to magisterial orthodoxy, a deep appreciation for the devout life, and a love for the mystical tradition of the Church.

Bishop Barron is right. If we are to move forward in this present time of confusion, organizations like FOCUS can provide a way forward. Personally, I have seen FOCUS transform non-believers into daily communicants, lost fraternity brothers into professed religious, and secular couples into faithful spouses. I have seen addictions broken. I have seen relativism overturned. In short, I have seen the ills of our contemporary world healed and wounded souls made new! Further, for me and for others, FOCUS has been a vehicle for connecting with other apostolates. For example, it is through FOCUS that I encountered the thought of Luigi Giussani and Josemaría Escrivá. It is in part as a result of FOCUS that my intellectual disposition flowered into a love for the intellectual tradition of the Church. And it is for similar reasons that FOCUS itself is indebted to the various apostolates, communities, and institutions which have cultivated its good and supported its charism.

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Travis Todd and Stephanie Parks work alongside John in FOCUS' formation department, each overseeing substantial curriculum development initiatives.

[1] This, of course, is not to say that FOCUS discourages these media as vehicles for communicating the Gospel. On the contrary, FOCUS partners with many of the most successful writers and speakers of the day. FOCUS' annual conferences, for example, have featured notable figures like Bishop Barron, Jim Caviezel, and Father Mike Schmitz. FOCUS benefits from the work of such accomplished individuals and sees their work as complementary to its own.

[2] Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22.

[3] *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22.

[4] George Weigel, *Witness to Hope* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 104.

[5] Ibid., 105.

[6] Ibid., 102, 105.

[7] Ibid., 107.

[8] *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 17.

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