



Interview with the National Catholic Register – September 2020

Questions for Jeff Runyan

I read that your ministry is about inviting college students to have a personal relationship with Christ through friendship. Can you share a couple concepts that missionaries follow in getting to know students?

Incarnational evangelization is how we describe our approach toward evangelization. Just as God entered our world, we too must enter other people's lives and meet them where they are to bring them the Gospel. After being transformed by a relationship with Jesus, his disciples carried the message of the Gospel to the ends of the world. In a like manner, once students have made Jesus the Lord of their lives, missionaries and student leaders accompany them as they pursue lives of virtue and seek to share Jesus with others. FOCUS Missionaries share the vision and skills so that the students in whom they are investing, then likewise form other friendships of deep investment and ultimately share the message of the Gospel. These same principles apply to our missionaries and alumni who are sharing the gospel in their neighborhoods and parishes.

Practically speaking FOCUS Missionaries strive to be present in environments where students live, study and have fun. Missionaries share their lives with students, getting to know them at a deeper level. The quality time missionaries spend with students can look like playing sports, cooking a meal, praying or attending events together. The bottom line is that life spent together inherently demonstrates genuine concern for the life of the other and gives credibility to the message of the Gospel when it is shared.

Every activity in which a missionary partakes is called to be done with intentionality and love. Authentic friendship is actively pursued through getting to know the other at a deep spiritual level. Getting to know the other comes through both purposeful questions about the deeper things in life and organic conversation generated in shared experiences.

I know that the goal is helping young people know Jesus, more than engaging them in discussions about racism and the protests that have followed George Floyd's death. But in meeting students where they are, how might a missionary talk to them about these issues?

The issue of the sin of racism is going to be at the forefront of almost every student's mind when they start school in the fall. We have worked hard to provide our staff training and formation so that they are able to effectively engage in conversations about issues of racism and the death of George Floyd.

We are doing a few different things to help our missionaries, three of which I will mention. First, we are emphasizing that missionaries need to be committed to listening and having compassion. Listening is often a much more effective way to share Christ's love than feeling the need to talk and regularly share one's opinion. We have encouraged our staff to take time to really listen to people who have suffered from racism, starting with our own missionaries of color.

Second, we have also emphasized the great need for learning. We teach our staff about the dignity of the human person, and the importance of respect toward every person, all of whom are made in the image and likeness of God. All FOCUS missionaries are required to read the US Bishop's pastoral letter against racism "Open Wide Our Hearts" and we will be blessed to have Bishop Shelton Fabre, the head of the U.S. bishops' ad hoc committee on racism, teaching a class to all of our FOCUS missionaries specifically on this letter.

The final piece of conversation that cannot be omitted: Out of love for others, we share the truth of Jesus Christ. We don't leave people alone with their pain. We share with them the source of healing which is fully contained in the grace and mercy of the Gospel.

Tell me about the FOCUS 153 program? What is it about? How is it helping you train missionaries and build bridges with students of different backgrounds/ideologies?

FOCUS has always had a genuine desire to effectively reach all students on college campuses. Equipping our missionaries to effectively reach out to all ethnic and racial demographics is a top priority. To address this priority, FOCUS assigned specific leadership to this task and developed initiatives to make every aspect of our evangelization efforts more effective to all peoples.

The initiative was eventually given the name "FOCUS 153." The name comes from the miraculous catch of fish in the gospel of John, when Jesus appears to the disciples on the sea of Tiberias after his resurrection (John 21). After Jesus appears and the disciples follow his instructions to cast the nets on the right side of the boat, the disciples drag the net ashore full of 153 large fish. St. Jerome teaches that Greek zoologists at that time had identified 153 different species of fish (i.e. the whole of every species of fish known to mankind at that time in history). This anticipates how the apostles, made fishers of men by Christ, will gather believers from every nation, race and ethnicity into the Church.

The endeavors of FOCUS 153 touch almost every piece of the FOCUS apostolate. At our SEEK conference we have purposefully made strides to include music, programming, imagery and speakers that would give a sense of belonging and home to every participant. We are working proactively to support our missionaries of color and diverse backgrounds with enculturated approaches for outreach, evangelization, and fundraising. We also have specific formation classes for our staff on cultural competency and cross-cultural outreach.

If students are burdened by the issue of racism, how will missionaries talk to them about it?

Missionaries are trained to listen, learn and ultimately do what they are best trained to do: lead people to cast their burdens on Jesus who is the ultimate healer. A missionary may work with a student to seek answers in Scripture or share some of the social teachings of the Catholic Church. We recognize that FOCUS staff are not experts in helping others overcome these burdens. Missionaries are trained to recognize issues that are beyond their competency and reach out to others who can help: chaplains, campus ministers, counselors, and other professionals who are best equipped to address these situations.

Do you have any thoughts about the death of George Floyd and the protests that have followed as seen from a spiritual and evangelization perspective?

As Mr. Louis Brown, Esq., a member of the 153 Board of Advisors stated, "George Floyd was made in the image and likeness of God. Tragically, his right to life was not defended with maximum determination. His life was unjustly taken by the immoral act of a police officer whose duty was to protect and defend. The fact that it happened and can happen again is a serious moral injustice."

Mr. Brown goes on to say that Catholics fail to show the full power of the Catholic witness if we refuse out of fear, indifference, ignorance, or inconvenience, to speak out against the unjust killing of human life.

In sum, as Catholics there is a lot of work to be done to lift human dignity in this country. We also recognize that, ultimately, only in the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ can there be authentic reform, reconciliation, healing and repentance.

Are there ways missionaries can bring in the Gospel and Church teaching to foster healing in this area?

The message of the Gospel is core to all our missionary activity. Anytime there is pain and suffering there is an opportunity to point people to Jesus Christ, the Divine Healer. People are seeking answers and we need to be ready to point them to where answers can be found.

There is also an opportunity to reiterate God's plan of sheer goodness and that racism, oppression and injustice are not a part of this plan. Sin is real. It has consequences. There is need for repentance. And most importantly, there is redemption in Jesus Christ.