As we conclude our time together for this annual mission conference, I trust we all know by now the overall theme of this conference: “Gospel Justice: A Living Challenge to the Church in Mission.” In my presentation this morning, I develop three topics that constitute—what I am calling—an “algebra of mission,” namely that meditating on and praying with Scripture, complemented by an understanding and personal integration of Catholic Social Teaching, gives us a clear road map for living together as Church, a true People of God. Or, more simply, if you throw a Bible and the Church’s Compendium of Social Teaching into a blender, out would pop a missioner with a game plan for Christian living.

1. CSM: Christian Scripture Meditating

The Holy Spirit is the God of justice and has been breathing on suspecting and unsuspecting disciples from the dawn of creation, from when Jesus handed over his Spirit from the cross, and at the first Pentecost, to name just a few moments.

We see, especially, in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, which some Scripture scholars say should actually be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, that the Spirit of God breathes life and energy into the early disciples to help them address immediate needs: taking care of widows, healing the sick, and sharing all in common. The Holy Spirit inspired those disciples as they went from being fearful and pusillanmious to becoming mature women and men who were heroic—thinking and acting in magnanimous ways—all of this coming from the radical inspiration of Jesus in his paschal mystery, into which we are all baptized!

This first of my three-part conversation with you this morning invites us to look always to the Scriptures to discover the meaning of Gospel justice. And, specifically as missioners, when we do, we discover that the Holy Spirit does not really solve the problems we face each day, but as the song goes, stirs and troubles the waters we wade in from the moment of our baptism. What do I mean? Listen to the poetry, “When We Let the Spirit Lead Us,” by Alice Walker:

When we let Spirit lead us
it is impossible to know
where we are being led.
All we know
all we can believe
all we can hope
is that we are going home
that wherever Spirit takes us is where we live.
We cannot choose when to be alive. We are born and live in this time and place, and as both Don Senior and Marie Dennis stated in their talks, it is a rather uncertain era. I especially loved Marie’s description that we live in a time that is “breathtakingly” complex – how true!

We know global crisis, institutional decline, and some very peculiar dynamics in the U.S. including political ineffectiveness, as well as a variety of challenges within our church. The deep-down tensions between the west and the Muslim world and the alarming economic disparities between the northern and southern hemispheres, as Don Senior put it. We also know the destruction of peoples’ lives by poverty and violence and all the stressors of living in our world today.

But this moment is our time, the only time we have. And, the Holy Spirit stirred and troubles the waters of our baptisms to leave us with a sense that we need to do something – not everything, but something! This is the problem that I suggest we all wrestle with – what am I to do in this vast universe of ours? How do I bring the justice of God to the zip code I live or mission in? Yes, the Holy Spirit takes us to places near and far and wide.

Let’s take a look at Acts 2:1-13, and even meditate on it, as I think it is a superb text to conclude this weekend of engagement on living the challenge of gospel justice as a Church in mission. As I do so, I will rely heavily on the scholarship of Dr. Laurie Brink, a Dominican sister and professor of Scripture at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

**Acts 2:1-13**

*When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together.*

*And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them.*

*And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.*

*Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language.*

*They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, "Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? Then how does each of us hear them in his own native language? We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God."*

*They were all astounded and bewildered, and said to one another, "What does this mean?"*

*But others said, scoffing, "They have had too much new wine."

Note that as Acts opens, the disciples were huddled in that upper room, and as I said earlier, they were at prayer – not playing BINGO or some other Catholic activity that sometimes can trump contemplative prayer in church gatherings! They were fearful in their outlook on the future. In
Acts 1, Jesus had appeared to them and promised that they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to become witnesses of the resurrection in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8). As St. Paul reminds us, our true citizenship is in heaven, not in the country that our passport announces.

We’re all loving Pope Francis – how many days since March 13, 2013 has someone NOT asked you what do you think of this new Pope? But, “there is no leadership-training program for popes-to-be. I don’t think he got a New Pope Handbook or Pontificate for Dummies as soon as white smoke started pumping into the Vatican sky. His fellow cardinals applauded his election, sent him to the “Room of Tears” to vest himself in white and to give him some prayerful privacy to recollect himself, parted the red curtains and then pushed (well, escorted) him onto the loggia of St. Peter’s Basilica to assume leadership of 1.2 billion Catholics” (Chris Lowney, Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads, Loyola, 2013).

And, like the pope, we sometimes find ourselves thrust onto that metaphorical balcony: step up, it’s time to lead this parish, this mission, this diocese, or, as the case may be, the whole Catholic Church. The Pope wants a church bruised and dirty and he says to us in Italian, avanti, meaning let’s go!

Looking at the experience of those early disciples after the resurrection is instructive for us. They had nothing, not a body to cling to, not a creed to profess, not a Catechism to consult, not liturgical rubrics by which to pray, nor 2000 years of tradition to reflect on.

No, they had their web of relationships centered in Jesus, their memories of life with him, and the Spirit calling them to life amid death. We are called to reclaim this post-resurrection pneumatology. It is relational and creative.

In that section from Acts, some time has gone by and the disciples are back in the upper room. St. Luke tells us they were “all together in the same place.” But, if everyone is together, aren't they in the same place?

One can see that the Acts of the Apostles is not really about a group-hugging set of disciples who are in the same place geographically; rather, it is a window into fervent and prayerful disciples who do not always agree (cf. Brink). And, I believe the same can be said of us—as we, missioners from many locales, we are gathered here in this same place but we do not always agree. Think of the Synod on Family and Evangelization which concluded in late October 2014!

Listen to Pope Francis:

[This Synod] has been “a journey” – and like every journey there were moments of running fast, as if wanting to conquer time and reach the goal as soon as possible; other moments of fatigue, as if wanting to say “enough”; other moments of enthusiasm and ardor. There were moments of profound consolation listening to the testimony of true pastors, who wisely carry in their hearts the joys and the tears of their faithful people. There were moments of consolation and grace and comfort hearing the testimonies of the families who have participated in the Synod and have shared with us the beauty and the joy of their married life. A journey where the stronger feel compelled to help the less strong, where the more experienced are led to serve others, even through confrontations.
And since it is a journey of human beings, with the consolations there were also moments of desolation, of tensions and temptations.

Back to Luke --- he also uses the word *suddenly* when referring to the noise that came from the sky. “Suddenly” is a word that means without warning or unexpectedly. Brink points out that when we hear this word we usually think of a heart attack, a stroke, a car accident. But, in this text, there is a rushing wind coming down from heaven that fills the entire room. And, in this scene, there are the tongues of fire that rested on everyone in the room. Each one of them in that room received the gift of the Spirit, not just the Apostles, but everyone in the room is filled with the Spirit. Even St. Peter quotes the Prophet Joel as saying that God “will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh” (Acts 2:17). Upon ALL flesh – no stratification here. God’s largess meets the fear of those gathered. Brink states, “this motley crew from Galilee, a rag-tag group of fishermen and peasants, suddenly, unexpectedly, can speak other languages.”

And, the “Holy Spirit gave the Apostles and disciples the ability to speak multiple languages,” (Brink) but those gathered outside did not receive a gift to hear in those many languages. Thus, “the responsibility for translating the Word of God is not upon the hearers but upon the preachers. We are called through the gifts of the Holy Spirit to be missionaries for God’s word, to inculcate it, so that it may be heard” (Brink).

This past summer I listened to Sherry Weddell who discussed her newest book, *Forming Intentional Disciples* (2012). One thesis of her book is that forming intentional disciples is not forming a spiritual elite but to create a spiritual culture that openly honors both the inward and outward dimensions of sacraments and liturgy. She posits that so many Catholics are sacramentalized but not evangelized. This is another way of saying that as missionaries of God’s word, it is incumbent upon us that we create that spiritual culture so that God’s word may be heard.

Brink, rather humorously, says the list of nations from where the pious Jews have assembled reads like a drop-down window for Expedia.com. And, how often have we sat through a Liturgy of the Word when the lector strangles the pronunciation of these places. But the list demonstrates that holiness is to be found even in the most remote corners of the Roman Empire – the world. Many traveled great distances to be present for the Festival of Pentecost, and they are utterly amazed that so far from home, they find someone speaking their language. The same for us – we come here from the Washington Metro area, Wilmington DE and NC, Virginia Beach, Philadelphia, etc. to listen to one another – through prayer and the breaking of the bread.

“In a real sense, then, Pentecost was not, contrary to what is usually called the ‘birthday of the church’; rather, the church is born only as the disciples of Jesus gradually and painfully realize that they are called beyond themselves to all peoples” (Brink). This essential, baptism-impelled call to go beyond the self to others is grounded in the fundamental dignity inherent in all of God’s creation, which brings us to our second movement, Catholic Social Teaching.

II. Catholic Social Teaching

The phrase, “Catholic Social Teaching,” is usually applied to a limited body of literature written in the modern era dealing primarily with issues of life in modern society. The moral theologian and Franciscan priest, Ken Himes, says it best when it comes to the foci for CST: “Human
beings are made in the image of God and that the God who is Creator of all entered into history through the Son and became human. In other words, the doctrines of creation and incarnation, central affirmations of our creed, lead us to affirm the dignity of each person” (Kenneth Himes. 101 Questions & Answers on Catholic Social Teaching, 2nd ed., Paulist, 2013).

Himes says no official list of documents exists, but Rerum Novarum, Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, is on everyone’s list. In it, Pope Leo attempted to persuade Catholics to concentrate less on politics and more on the social question. He insisted that wages be determined not by economic considerations alone, but by taking into account the basic needs of the individual – introducing the notion of human rights in the economic order.

Some say CST is the Church’s best-kept secret, but I am not sure that is apt today. I suggest that the list of teachings is more elastic and many Catholics really do intuit these teachings.

Again, Ken Himes states that “the Church does not take up social issues because it is driven by some partisan agenda, but as a result of the theological claim that human beings are creatures of dignity and worth. If that claim is not to be reduced to pious sentimentality, then it must lead its adherents to work for the promotion of people’s dignity and protection from whatever threatens that dignity.” So, this is the story of the development of CST.

It is so important to avoid pious sentimentality. Nathan Mitchel, who writes for Worship, in his “Amen Corner” says it bluntly: “Perhaps the greatest threat to Christian Eucharist is precisely a moral numbness that prevents our seeing God’s presence in the least and littlest, that prevents our seeing the Risen One among the most vulnerable citizens of our chaotic world. The greatest threat to Eucharist is world hunger. It is not for nothing that the great Indian teacher of nonviolence, Mohandas K. Ghandi, once said that “if Christ ever comes to India, he’d better come as bread”” (Nathan Mitchell, Worship 86:3, May 2012, 256-268).

Flowing naturally from all of this is the belief that our God is a God of justice who always acts in history to set relationships right, defend the poor, the weak, the widow, the wanderer, and the oppressed—and is still acting in this fashion. And, since God acts this way, we believe that certain human rights emerge as a result of our human dignity. It was St. John XXIII who first attempted to list the human rights endorsed by the Church in his classic Pacem in Terris; and St. John Paul II who provided an updated roster of some of the most important human rights in 1979 before the United Nations General Assembly: life, liberty, and security of the person, right to food, clothing, housing, sufficient health care, rest, leisure, right to freedom of expression, education and culture; the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, etc.

Again, John XXIII wrote in that same encyclical that “in our time the common good is chiefly guaranteed when personal rights and duties are maintained.” Himes comments that human rights spell out the standards of personal wellbeing that any conception of the common good must embrace.

Just a few weeks ago, retired Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany, New York, writing on the beatification of Pope Paul VI, said that Pope Paul uniquely understood that Vatican II was largely a European and North American dominated agenda. Paul knew the social question must become worldwide. Thus, he was on the side of any effort for the development of poor nations—and poor peoples. What an honor that Pope Benedict XVI referred to Paul’s encyclical
Populorum Progressio as the “Rerum novarum of the present age” of globalization. And, we know globalization may make us neighbors – but does it really make us brothers and sisters? Furthermore, Pope Benedict XVI heaped high praise on Pope Paul in what he said, as Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical Rerum Novarum, issued in 1891, launched the modern period of papal social teaching. In Populorum Progressio, Paul VI underlined the indispensable importance of the Gospel for building a society according to peace and justice.

Paul VI’s vision communicated two important truths:

1. Promoting human development is integral to the Church’s mission, not something added or peripheral.

2. Authentic human development concerns the whole person in every dimension (personal, social, political, economic, and spiritual).

These two truths are not only foundational to our lives as disciples, Christians, and thoughtful citizens of the world. I would suggest that they are essential elements of the very Kingdom of God and certainly constitutive dimensions—of the highest order—the personality of the missioner.

On a lighthearted note, I recall an Al Smith dinner in New York a few years ago which featured Stephen Colbert. Knowing there is a lot of ribbing at this annual event, Colbert commented on Cardinal Dolan’s vesture by saying, “I have great respect for you, Cardinal Dolan, though I do have to say, sir, it is not easy when you are wearing that outfit.” The cardinal, in his house cassock, gave a broad grin. “In that cape and red sash, you look like a matador who’s really let himself go,” Colbert said.

The dinner welcomed President Obama and Governor Romney, one of only four face-to-face encounters they had before the 2012 election; and, this was with the Catholic Church for a Catholic Charities dinner! Quips abounded, and my favorite was that Cardinal Dolan would have preferred Governor Christy to be there instead of Romney so he would look thin.

Concluding the evening, Cardinal Dolan described the church as a big tent encompassing lots of people, ideas, thoughts, and beauty. He spoke of the Catholic Church in the public square as being concerned with the “uns”: unemployed, uninsured, unwanted child, unwed mother, unborn baby in mother’s womb, un-housed, undocumented, unhealthy, unfed, under-educated. Yes, we are a church of the “uns,” and whether it is our work on behalf of immigration reform, eradicating poverty, stopping war, or dealing with the environmental destruction all around us, we need, as Marie Dennis challenged us yesterday, to engage our hearts and ask not only WHY but WHAT can we do?

As one way of answering the WHAT question, a part of my process for developing this talk was to view websites of colleges who feature CST. I wanted to see what is being done to involve young adults in this arena. On Fordham University’s webpage I noted The Francis and Ann Curran’s Center for American Catholic Studies which states:

2016 will mark the 125th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s groundbreaking encyclical, Rerum novarum, “On the Conditions of Labor.” This document initiated a new era of public dialogue and engagement between the Catholic Church and the modern “social
question”—the opportunities, problems, and dangers wrought by the industrial revolution. Leo used the Catholic tradition to engage and evaluate the modern economy’s nature and purposes, as well as the roles of states and citizens, businesses and workers, and civic associations and families in addressing economies’ capacity to generate reasonable levels of material well-being and flourishing for all. Recognizing the vast differentials of power across a complex, international, and increasingly global economic system, Leo focused particular attention on the plight of the poor and workers struggling to eke out basic livings for themselves and their families.

Thus, since the time of Pope Leo and Rerum novarum, the Church has continued to reflect on and to promote this engagement and dialogue. And a defining feature of CST has been its confidence in all people’s capacity to understand, embrace, and collaborate toward the common good in its cultural, political, economic, and ecological aspects.

I conclude this second part of my conversation placing Pope Francis in our view. In his apostolic exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium, he says that the economy should serve the human person and not the other way around, and that profit is not the highest motive in economic activity:

The Church which goes forth is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances; it is willing to abase itself, if necessary; and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others (EG §24, p. 13).

A great talk by a church ecclesiologist, Dr. Richard Gaillardetz of Boston College, titled “A Missionary Council Has inspired a Missionary Pope to Create a Missionary Church” is worth some consideration here:

It’s interesting, if you were to go back and look at the corpus of Pope John Paul II’s writings, the passage that John Paul II quoted more than any other was Gaudium et spes §22, which is a Christological text about how Jesus Christ comes to reveal humanity to itself. It’s a beautiful passage.

I suspect that when we get to the end of Francis’ pontificate and people look back and say, “What passage from Vatican II did Francis cite more often?” The early returns suggest that it will be Ad Gentes §2.

Ad Gentes is the Decree on the Missionary Life of the Church is the most profound ecclesiological text of the Council, approved at the end, and so, in some ways, it takes in a lot of the Council’s teaching.

And Ad Gentes §2 makes a very bold statement. It says, “The Church is missionary by its very nature.” And Francis has already quoted that on a number of occasions. Now that might seem to you to be a rather tame, or abstract, or even, in some ways, traditional statement, because, of course, we think of mission in terms of “The Missions.” And many of us grew up as Catholics, supporting the missions, always prefaced by “The Foreign Missions.” Mission work is what you do somewhere else. And it’s largely about
two things: winning souls to Christ; and what was called the *plantatio ecclesiae*, planting of new churches in unchurched countries.

Gaillardetz continues:

But *Ad Gentes* §2 is recovering a much more profound biblical insight that perhaps, as Steven Bevens has put it, “It is not so accurate to say Christ founded the Church and gave it a mission; but rather, Christ called forth disciples, sent them in mission, and consented for there to be a Church in service of the mission.”

So, Pope Francis is direct in saying the Church needs to be reformed in light of mission – but listen to his clarity:

We don’t reform the Church just to make it more administratively efficient. In fact, one of my real concerns about the reform of the curia is there is going to be a mighty temptation on the part of the Council of Cardinals to think of reform precisely an organizational flow chart. I have a real concern that some of those reforms of the curia are going to be about efficiency, better communication, overcoming silos in the Vatican.

Pope Francis is blunt: what leads to a change of heart in Christians, is precisely missionary spirit.

### III. Church Social Living

Here we get to the heart of the matter. All of the aforementioned can seem an intellectual conversation—it needs to become a personal transformation. Now, here’s where we get to the heart of the matter. Roger Bergman, a professor at Creighton University, published a book titled *Catholic Social Learning: Educating the Faith That Does Justice* (Fordham, 2010). He argues that the canon for Catholic social teaching spreads to six hundred pages, yet fewer than two pages are devoted to Catholic social learning or pedagogy. How do we correct this gross imbalance? How do we educate the faith that does justice? How is commitment to social justice provoked and sustained over a lifetime? Bergman raises these incredibly provocative questions, and I hope this third and final part of my conversation with you is a response to some of these worthwhile questions.

Transformation happens in the presence of images and relationships—not concepts. If we want to inspire others to change the world we need to transform them – not change ideas in their heads! We need to see others in mission to come to love being in mission ourselves. As an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, I have heard people say that Salesian spirituality is “better caught than taught,” because it is such an interior spirituality. And, as I prepared this talk, I thought of how I have come to appropriate what it means to be a Salesian through role models of men I have lived with over the past 30 years who all model it in different ways.

Picking up again on Sherry Weddell whom I mentioned in Part 1, Archbishop Diarmud Martin of Dublin says something similar: Ireland is the most catechized country in Europe, but the least evangelized.”

Pope Francis:
I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her; since no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord (EG 3).

Gabriel Marcel, the French existentialist philosopher who turned to religion late in life explained the roots of his radical shift: “It happened though personal encounters. Nothing else ever changes anyone in an important way.”

This is why encounter experiences are so important to help people see and touch an issue rather than just read about it. As Greg Boyle, SJ says in *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (Free Press, 2011): “You can’t demonize someone you know.”

Professor of ethics at Boston College, Jesuit priest Tom Massaro, wrote that the guild of Catholic social ethicists and teachers of CST could stand to profit from the reminder that there is no substitute for attention to personal encounter in social justice education and ministry. Ideas are valuable, but right thinking must be complemented with direct human experience.

Go back to that Pentecost text that I discussed earlier: Steve Bevans of Catholic Theological Union says, “In a real sense, then, Pentecost was not, contrary to what is usually said, the ‘birthday of the church;’ rather, the church is born only as the disciples of Jesus gradually and painfully realize that they are called beyond themselves to all. This suggests that mission is the essence of life. Bevans even goes on to say that mission is God’s job-description! Pointedly, as we may have heard before, but we need to hear it more frequently—the mission has a Church … the Church does not have a mission.

We are graced with a desire to be missioners, proclaiming the Good News with renewed enthusiasm and commitment. Anything less is unworthy of our baptism. And, again, it is our baptism that missions us for mission.

I heard once that if you had to explain the entirety of the proceedings at Vatican Council II you could simply use one word – BAPTISM.

In his excellent book, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church* (Orbis, 2008), Richard Gaillardetz discusses the recovery of the priority of baptism, discipleship, and mission at Vatican II. He suggests that “even though the Council tried to deal with the second-class status of the laity, it still had not done so as they prepared the document on the Church. The early drafts discussed ‘States of Evangelical Perfection’ and those who pursued the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience were presumed to achieve the highest level of holiness. There was virtually no consideration of the 99+ percent of the church who were not called to religious life or ordination. But, as we know, that tenor changed dramatically. The consistent theme of the Council was that any adequate reflection on the universal call to holiness must begin with Christian baptism” (p. 186).

So, let’s look at the *Rite of Baptism* itself. I will highlight briefly the five rituals at the center of the rite and illustrate how this primary sacrament of initiation is, at its core, a sacrament of mission. I consider the baptism of a child, named Meghan, in this instance.
There is deep, deep value in explicating, in ritual fashion, the mission-based elements implicit in this sacrament and the Christian life which it initiates. As we may recall after the renewal of baptismal vows, there are five key moments.

First, there is the baptizing of the child with the Trinitarian formula. However, this is preceded with a question; in fact, it is a repeated question to the parents: “Is it your will that Meghan should be baptized in the faith of the Church, which we have all professed with you?” When they affirm it, the child is baptized. I think that the question is telling. Parents are reminded that their child is entering into a vast and infinite network of relationships at whose foundation is mutual responsibility. Like a family takes care of each other, this vast family of faith will take care of each other. This is where the basic theme of solidarity emerges from CST!

Second, the anointing with chrism. As the child’s head is anointed with sacred chrism the following prayer is prayed:

*God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life.* Amen.

Note the relational words again: *welcomed you into his holy people and may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life.* This is a significant assertion: We baptized are eternally related. Nothing will ever undo our eternal interconnections. Not our denials, sins, even death. We belong to God—and one another!—forever. Furthermore, we will always, always have royal dignity, which must be respected, honored, and advanced at all times. This in itself is a mission!

Third, clothing with the white garment. Again, the prayer:

*Meghan, you have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven.* Amen.

Indeed, this is not just about the white garment. Recall Paul’s letter to the local Church at Colossae:

*Put on, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one Body (Col. 3:12-14).*

Once again, sound qualifications and excellent exhortations for missioners whether in Colossae or the cities and towns where we are missioned more than 2,000 years later.

Fourth, the lightened candle. Usually the task of tallest godparent, lighting the baptismal candle to the words “Receive the light of Christ” is a clear commissioning within the missioning that is
baptism. The parents and godparents are charged, if you will, with keeping the flame of faith alive.

And, finally, the last movement of the explicatory rites, is the Ephphetha or the Prayer over Ears and Mouth. This marks the end of the actual baptism ceremony, for only the Lord’s Prayer and Blessing remain. In this simple prayer with the celebrant touching the child’s ears and mouth, we see the deliberate missioning in which we now participate:

*The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the mute speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.*

“To proclaim his faith”—no wonder these words conclude the Rite of Baptism. This is the mission. This is God’s mission, and it is given to us. It is the punctuation mark on the ceremony, and it is the exclamation point for the Christian mission!

Earlier this morning, I mentioned that Jesus handed over his Spirit from the cross. It is this cross and the resurrection into which we are baptized and through which we grow into our vocations, that countless array of charisms in the church to bless the world and advance the mission given to us in baptism. St. Francis de Sales tells us that “the Church is a garden patterned with unlimited flowers.” This beautiful image from this doctor of the Church illustrates the vast diversity that is both available and necessary in the loving, fulfilling work enabled through the grace of the Holy Spirit. As missioners, we all cooperate in and through the grace of God.

I conclude with how I began, with the algebra of mission. I think it is fair to offer here a full disclosure: I am not a mathematician. In fact, I am really not that good in math. But I do like most basic elements of algebra: Something, usually letters, represent something else. A friend of mine once quipped, “I loved math until they threw in the letters.” Yes, it is important to have the ability for one thing to be represented by something else. On one hand, letters are wholly different from numbers. Yet, on another, they are so related that they actually equal—share full identity with—what they are representing.

We are like that with our God and with God’s mission. Yes, we are wholly different from our Triune God. Yet, made in God’s image, we are so related that we, through our creation expressed in baptism, share an identity with God that is loving, Christic, and creative. This is both a divine esteeming and a sacred trusting given to us by the Trinity. Imagine, we have been entrusted with the mission of God! Our response continues to unfold, for God is counting on us to get the job done. And, so are our brothers and sisters: Fellow missioners, let’s get to work!