

Going forth

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**Following Jesus
is not a polite etiquette
to be observed,
but a journey to be undertaken.**

Pope Francis
Homily for Epiphany
January 6, 2018

One of the central themes of *Evangelii Gaudium* is the **“Church that goes forth”**. Pope Francis continually emphasizes the necessity of “going forth”. Speaking to us religious he said, “I also expect from you what I have asked all the members of the Church: to come out of yourselves and go forth to the existential peripheries... Don’t be closed in on yourselves, don’t be stifled by petty squabbles, don’t remain a hostage to your own problems. These will be resolved if you go forth and help others to resolve their own problems, and proclaim the

Good News.” (Apostolic Letter to all the Consecrated, II 4, November 21, 2014).

But if we talk of going forth, where are we leaving from and where are we going to?

Two key moments in the life of **the Good Father** can inspire us as we look for ways to get moving and go forth today.

Leaving the granary (1792)

On October 20, 1792, the young priest, Pierre Coudrin, left his hiding place in the granary of the Motte d'Usseau. He was 24. After five months in hiding to avoid the perils of the revolution, he was impelled to go forth after a process of prayer and meditation. His immediate objective: to exercise his ministry clandestinely in Poitiers and surroundings. In his heart, there was a long term vision: to establish a society of men and women dedicated to proclaiming the Gospel.

The risk was evident. His friends' prudent advice did not hold him back.

"When I left Maumain's," he tells us, "I prostrated at the foot of an oak tree which was not far from the house and I offered myself even to the point of death. For I became a priest with the intention of suffering everything, to sacrifice myself for the good God and to die if necessary in his service."

Only by going out could the Good Father carry out his ministry as Marche-à-terre during the time of the Terror and meet Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, with whom he would found the Congregation. He left his hiding place just a few months after his ordination. It showed clearly the spirit that inspired him to consecrate himself to God.

Think of the professions and ordinations we celebrate now. Look at the language we use and the signs that surround the candidates and how the life of the newly professed or newly ordained changes. At times, they seem more a graduation celebration for someone who has achieved a goal and become someone important. It's more like "arriving at the castle" than "leaving the granary." However, these special moments should be the point of departure for a servant of the poor, ready to even die for the mission.

Departure from Picpus (1820)

Twenty-eight years after he left the granary, the Good Father was faced with a new exodus. The dangers of the revolution were past. The community was well established at Picpus (Paris), where the Congregation had a school, the novitiate and a seminary. Brothers, sisters and students numbered some two hundred in Picpus.

In 1819, Father Lemercier, the local pastor of Saint Marguerite's parish, got into a conflict with the community at Picpus. He demanded that they renounce their rights and submit completely to the authority of the pastor and the jurisdiction of the archbishop. The Archbishop sided with the pastor. The Good Father, deeply hurt by the mistrust he felt they had for him, decided to leave Picpus and take the whole community to Troyes.

In a letter to one of his friends, the Good Father explained that what was happening could be "a warning from the Sovereign Controller of our destiny who is ordering us to break our

poor camp and to take elsewhere the feeble efforts he sees fit to inspire among us for his glory and the education of the poor. Thanks be to God, we can say: *non habemus hic manentem civitatem*. **Our tents are easy to move**, and, for that matter, perhaps we will find others all set up for us there where he is calling us.” (Letter to Elicagaray, June 27, 1820).

Leave Picpus! Leave the place that had already become the principal reference for the young Congregation. The founder’s freedom is surprising; he was able to consider leaving the most stable establishment of the new institute, which had just recently been approved by the Holy See (in 1817). It was clear for him that the group’s identity did not depend on symbolic places but on availability to work for God and the poor.

With the insistence of the Archbishop of Paris, in the end the two communities remained in Picpus. However, the Good Father left Paris in October and settled in Troyes. A community of brothers and another of sisters followed him. There a new chapter in the history of the brothers was begun, priority was given to the apostolate of popular missions for the first time. “Eternal mercy calls us to imitate the evangelical life of our Savior Jesus Christ”, wrote the Good Father on November 26, 1820, announcing the beginning of the new community’s apostolic work. Father Coudrin would not return to live in Picpus until thirteen years later.

Just as leaving the granary made possible the ministry of Marche-à-terre and the foundation of the Congregation, so the Good father’s departure from Picpus made possible the beginning of our community’s mission and evangelizing work. It is difficult to go forth. It’s risky. It also bears fruit.

It would do us well **to share this freedom of our founder**. There are houses and works, where we have been for many years. But they can become a trap, if all we do is a pastoral ministry of mere conservation and if the burden of all that prevents us from living our religious life and going to the peripheries that *Evangelii Gaudium* speaks of. It can be unimaginable for us to leave places that have lots of history, where people appreciate us and where we feel our identity reinforced. However, those provinces that have dared to lift camp and take their tents elsewhere (as the Good Father said) can witness to the joy that creates among the brothers.

May the Lord give us light to know where we should go and bless all our humble efforts to go forth.

