

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time A - Imitation or Participation?

Jan 25, 2026

We are now at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. We hear proclaimed in the Gospel some beautiful and powerful words from Jesus. He says to the four fishermen: I will make you fishers of men. In his public ministry, one of the first actions Jesus took was to begin to call disciples to himself, to form a community. The encounter between Jesus and the apostles reflects the humble origins of the church. Ordinary people with no special training are called to the extraordinary task of bringing the knowledge and love of God to the whole world. God chooses the weak of the world to confront the strong and the simple to confound the wise. It was not out of the ordinary for a Jewish rabbi to have disciples. The disciples of a rabbi would learn from him and model his way of life within the Jewish faith. Since books were not a common household item, learning new things and new ideas was not as easy as it is today. Back then, to learn, one had to engage in conversation with others and listen to a Rabbi speak. As such, when Jesus called the first apostles, they understood what was happening to some degree. But there was something very different about Jesus' call for discipleship:

- Whereas the Jewish rabbis shared ideas, Jesus shared himself.
- Whereas the Jewish rabbis repeated a message, Jesus was the message.
- Whereas the Jewish rabbis had disciples who imitated their way of life, Jesus had disciples who participated in his life.

So what's the difference between imitation and participation? A lot! Kids may idolize a sports star and want to throw a football or shoot a basket just the way a famous athlete does. In this sense, these kids imitate their favourite athlete. Other kids may idolize a superhero, and they may want to wear a mask, or a cap to save the world the way the superhero does. But when we Christians follow Christ, we are not merely imitating Christ. We are actually, because of baptism, participating in his life in a real way. By baptism, we are *in Christ*. That's why our charity springs from the charity of Christ, our prayer is joined to the prayer of Christ, our sufferings are in Christ's sufferings. We have a participation in Christ's sufferings because Christ is really in his mystical body. We are the body; he is the Head. For these four fishermen, they are not going to just follow Christ; they are going to, by their baptism and the laying on of hands, become another Christ (*Alter Christus*) in the world, taking on his mission in a way that they are participating fully in this work of God.

On the day of his inaugural mass, Pope Leo XIV spoke about the mission of Peter. Pope Leo told us that Peter was given a mission by God with two dimensions. He was to love and to unite. Being a uniting element within the Church will be a welcome gift to all Catholics. Revealing the charity of Christ will be a welcome gift to the whole world. The Gospel passage that the pope used was the miraculous catch of fish in John 21, which is a post-Resurrection episode. Peter is the first to come to the shore, leading the other disciples to Christ. Peter also brings in the net full of fish, all united together. This symbolizes his role of unity within the Church. Today, as back then, the Pope is to be a "fisher" of humanity, as was Christ. The pope says "After the resurrection, it is up to them to carry on this mission, to cast their nets again and again, to bring the hope of the Gospel into the "waters" of the world, to sail the seas of life so that all may experience God's embrace." Pope Leo then tells us about the sacrificial love that Peter, in particular, is to have: "When Jesus asks Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (Jn 21:16), he is referring to the love of the Father. It is as if Jesus said to him, "Only if you have known and experienced this love of God, which never fails, will you be able to feed my lambs. Only in the love of God the Father will you be able to love your brothers and sisters with that same 'more', that is, by offering your life for your brothers and sisters." (Taken from Pope Leo XIV's Inaugural mass, May 18th, 2025). In an analogous way, as Catholics, we should all feel called to live with a deep and sacrificial charity towards all, and to be a person who brings together and unites as opposed to being someone who divides and causes disunity. A person becomes an instant christian after baptism. But to be a true christian with faith and love is a gradual process and a life-long struggle. It involves all the ups and downs of turning aside from a life of sin and self-centred existence to one of obedience to God's call. In order to grow and resolve the tensions

within ourselves we need the constant light of Christ which gradually illuminates the way ahead. It is a light that grows brighter as we become more familiar with the gospel and God's message in it that drives away our darkness.

The "what would Jesus do" tagline should be changed to "What is the living Jesus in my soul asking me to do right now?" Too often, we divorce the Ten Commandments from the person of Christ, and we are left with a bunch of guidelines to follow, much like rules in a classroom. A version of Christian life that seeks mostly to help us be good people is too subjective. The focus is too much directed toward oneself. Today, Andrew and Peter are beginning a new life in Christ. Their lives were never the same once they left behind their boat and followed Jesus. If we can say the same thing, that my life is different because I am a Christian, we are on the right track. We are not called to just imitate Jesus. That's a start. Deep within our Catholic understanding of our faith, we are called to more. We are to participate in the very life of Christ through the Mystical Body. WWJD is good. But it is not enough!

By their baptism and the laying on of hands, Andrew and Peter will not just be two men who learned ideas from Jesus and who then repeated them to others. These men were transformed into disciples and apostles. Likewise, today, Jesus calls us to leave behind our boats. These boats are more invisible. What are they? They are all the things that keep us from following Christ: material possessions, vices, addictions, toxic relationships, lust, greed, pride. We can imagine these boats as false places of refuge that tempt us and keep us locked away in the darkness. These boats may give us temporary pleasure or escape, but ultimately, they lead us to spiritual desolation. Jesus invites us to a life of freedom and grace, where our hearts are not weighed down by sin. In John 8:36, we are reminded, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." To truly embrace this freedom, we must courageously step out of our boats and onto the shore, and begin to follow Christ. As Isaiah says in the first reading (Isaiah 9:1-4): "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shone". And in the gospel, Matthew says, "people who sat in darkness have seen a great light and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." The light of Christ has come into the world, have we seen it? In this new year, what will help me to leave behind the false safety of my boat (darkness) and to step out with more faith in Christ our light?