

[Readings: Is 11:1-10; Ps. 72; Rom 15:4-9; Matt 3:1-12]

Three years ago, Pope Francis wrote a pastoral letter on evangelization, *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The Joy of the Gospel,” a favorite topic of Pope Francis. One of the four pillars of evangelization which he outlines is the pillar of “accompaniment.” The journey of faith is never travelled alone. God sends us special people, to accompany us, to walk with us from the day of our birth to the day of our birth in eternity. So, we look at three groups of people: those who have been our faith companions, how well we are faith companions for others, and who in our lives need the gift of our accompaniment.

It may be fair to say that the first people to accompany us in faith are our parents, or those who served as parents for us. We are blessed by the previous generation of Catholics who were dedicated to handing on their Catholic faith and traditions to us.

If we had the privilege of attending Catholic schools, or Christian Faith Formation and Religious Education, we shared in the legacy of the priests, brothers and sisters of religious congregations who passed on what Isaiah calls in today’s First Reading “a spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength, knowledge and awesome reverence of the Lord.”

In our studies in preparation for the celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation, we also learned a seventh gift of the Holy Spirit – piety. To grow in holiness. We learned what St. Paul refers to in today’s Second Reading: What was written for our instruction, to think in harmony with each other, and to welcome each other for the glory of God.

Throughout our nation today, we will be able to say thank you to those religious men and women who laid the foundation for our life of piety – living as faithful, committed and conscientious Catholics. We will offer our thanks by praying for all retired religious, maybe by sending them a note of thanks, and by sharing our generous support of the Retirement Fund for Religious.

One child describes his religious teachers as “people who knew people, who knew people, who knew Jesus!”

Our best tribute to all retired religious is for you and me to be the same kind of people who think, speak and act as “people who knew people who knew Jesus.” Do I know my Catholic Faith, the teachings and practices of the Church well enough to instruct others? If not, how am I continuing my own faith formation by attending classes, reading and participating in faith-sharing groups, either in person or on line?

Am I praying for and being an authentic Catholic witness to those who do not practice the Catholic Faith, or who no longer practice their Catholic Faith? Am I as engaged as I can be in the life of the Church – at home and in my parish? How can I deepen my faith in Jesus Christ and in His Church?

And now, those who are in our lives who need the gift of our accompaniment. What family member, fellow student or co-worker needs me to accompany them at this stage of their life? How can I do it?

What member of my family can I encourage with charity and patience to return to the Church? How? Which of my parents, children, siblings or relatives need to feel a special sense of welcome, and how can I give it to them?

Can I share my own story of who has accompanied me on my journey of faith? Am I praying enough for family members to return to the Church?

Today’s Gospel gives us St. John the Baptist who minces no words about what we are to do to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord.

To repent, to produce good fruit. To turn our lives around.

An angel is defined as a messenger, sent by God to deliver God’s message, God’s Word, to us. The difference between heavenly angels and earthly angels is that earthly angels are flawed, weak and yes, sometimes sinful. Yet they are still given the sacred mission to assist, protect and to guide people and all of God’s creation. Earthly angels are very real and constant companions. They are trustworthy mentors who can inspire and guide us daily. May we be God’s earthly angels to our families, our parish, our nation, our world.

Come, Lord, Jesus! AMEN!