

The Art of Accompaniment: Authentic Friendship On the Journey Toward Christ

BY JIM BECKMAN

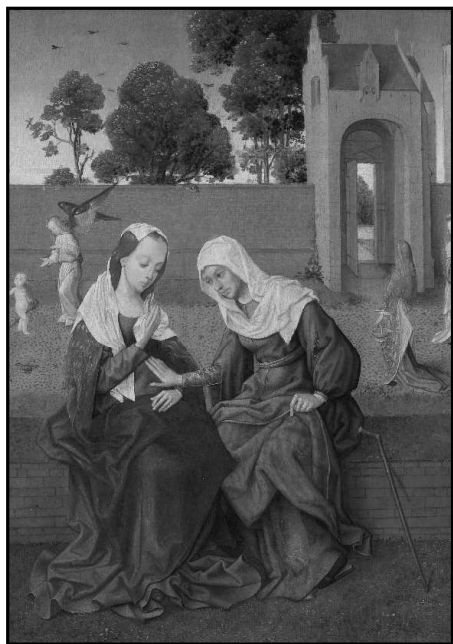
“The spiritual life needs human accompaniment precisely because we are *not* divine. Despite all the great riches of truth, Scripture, doctrine, and belief, without other human beings most of us would struggle to know exactly how to put all those riches into practice in our day-to-day lives.”



“**W**ALKING WITH,” commonly referred to as “accompaniment,” is a critical aspect of discipleship. And while it’s one of the new buzzwords these days, I’m not sure those who use it always understand what the word exactly means. Pope Francis has used it many times, particularly in his statements and writings to young people. For example, we hear him say in *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), “The Church will have to initiate everyone—priests, religious and laity—into this ‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other. The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze

which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.”¹

What exactly does accompaniment mean? I had an



experience a long time ago during my single young adult years. At the time, I was living with a family with small children. One night, the parents were trying to get their five-year-old down for bed. Instead of going to sleep, the young girl kept coming up with all kinds of “needs”—one more drink, one more story, one more hug and kiss, etc. I had trouble not laughing as her poor father kept getting more and more frustrated with her pleas. Finally, in a hopeful and exasperated attempt, her dad grabbed the crucifix off the

wall in the family room and brought it into her room. He laid the cross on her bed, prayed with her, and asked Jesus to be with her in a special way and help her go to sleep. My eyebrows raised as I watched the scene; *that was a good idea*, I thought. I was taking notes for my eventual parenting days. But I’m not sure any of us could have guessed what would happen next. After almost 15 minutes of silence, we heard from her room:

“Daddy?”

“What?!” her father replied.

“I need someone with some skin on.”

As frustrating as the whole experience was for her parents, that five-year-old might have come up with one of the best definitions for accompaniment I have ever heard. The spiritual life needs human accompaniment precisely because we are *not* divine. Despite all the

1 Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 169.

great riches of truth, Scripture, doctrine, and belief, without other human beings most of us would struggle to know exactly how to put all those riches into practice in our day-to-day lives. Some of that accompaniment can be “virtual” or indirect, as when we are accompanied by the saints—holy men and women whose lives we hear about or words we read. But a large part of it needs to be personal and direct, meaning from a real person who is walking beside us and modeling for us how they are living out the faith.

What Exactly Is Accompaniment?

The Catholic Apostolate Center published a book in 2019 called *The Art of Accompaniment*. It’s a great resource for understanding this topic, and I highly recommend reading it. One thing the authors make very clear is that it is ultimately God who accompanies:

Throughout Sacred Scripture, relationship unfolds as a sacred space of love, mission, and transformation for God and his people; the Old and New Testament reveal the Trinitarian God to be a God who *accompanies*. This relational model is foreshadowed in the Old Testament through God’s guidance of his Chosen People, explicitly manifested in the New Testament in the ministry of Jesus, and continued under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit after the Ascension of Jesus. In the unfolding of his plan for humanity, God draws near to humanity in love through *accompaniment*.²

We could even point to themes of divine pedagogy to unpack that modeling in many rich and meaningful ways. Yet, as we have established, God often employs others “with skin on” to further his accompaniment.

² Colleen Campbell and Thomas Carani, *The Art of Accompaniment* (Washington, DC: Catholic Apostolate Center, 2019), 5.

What does it look like for us to walk with others the way God has walked with us? *The Art of Accompaniment* provides a helpful list of terms associated with accompaniment: the one who accompanies, the one accompanied, apprenticeship and learning, and missionary discipleship.³ The authors further develop the various dimensions of accompaniment: mentoring, witnessing, spiritual friendship, and spiritual motherhood and fatherhood.⁴

I have been privileged for the past couple of years to work more closely with the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS). It's inspiring to be around so many young people who are on fire for evangelization and discipleship. The terms above get fleshed out quite well in their approach. Accompaniment is woven all throughout their efforts to reach the typical college student. At the heart of the FOCUS vision is what they refer to as the three essential habits: divine intimacy, authentic friendship, and clarity and conviction about spiritual multiplication.⁵ FOCUS is also beginning to get traction with discipleship in the diocesan and parish spheres as the new FOCUS Parish, a division of Lifelong Mission, has emerged over the past several years.

Practical Challenges with Accompaniment

True accompaniment also incorporates apprenticeship and mentoring. In his recent book *Intentional Accompaniment: An Apprenticeship for a New Generation of Builders*, Michael Hall explains it like this:

Apprenticeship is a process that involves a high level of on-the-job training that teaches the particular skills and knowledge needed to succeed in that trade. Experienced tradespeople invest time to teach the next generation of skilled workers in their trade through

3 Ibid., 11–13.

4 Ibid., 14–18.

5 Curtis Martin, *Making Missionary Disciples* (Genesee, CO: FOCUS, 2018), 9.

one-on-one mentorship and training. They invite the apprentice to join them in their work, intentionally sharing with them the skills, knowledge, and wisdom they have acquired throughout their career.⁶

Apprenticeship is exactly what we are invited to do as evangelists and catechists. The term is used six times in the *General Directory for Catechesis* to describe the work we do in helping new believers and converts grow in their faith. “How do we develop apprentices for the next generation of builders? We do it through intentional accompaniment.”⁷

I have a friend who has been in the health care industry for years. Throughout nursing school and the subsequent training for her master’s degree and to become a nurse practitioner, a common phrase used in her training was “teach, show, try, do.” I have found this framework helpful for discipleship and mentoring relationships, particularly with young people. I could teach them some concept or aspect of the faith, then I could show them how I put it into practice in my life. I then would give them an opportunity to try to do it themselves, with me still close by and able to help them tweak their application. Finally, they were able to do it on their own without me helping at all. I have seen this approach work with everything from overcoming struggles with lust and sexual sin to helping someone learn how to pray.

Another tricky challenge with accompaniment is the tendency to try and fix things. Never try to help a caterpillar in the struggle to break free from its cocoon—you will cripple it and prevent it from ever being able to fly. There’s a dimension to accompaniment that requires the heavy lifting to be done by the one being accompanied. Typically, when I have tried to do something for someone that they could do for themselves (including my own children), it has gone badly. I can *teach* them

6 Michael Hall, *Intentional Accompaniment: An Apprenticeship for a New Generation of Builders* (Ottawa, ON, Canada: Catholic Christian Outreach, 2021), iv.

7 Ibid.

about some aspect of the faith. I can *show* them how I do it in my life. But at some point, they must *try* to do it themselves. I can be nearby, and even help, but only a little. Accompaniment is like spotting someone when they are lifting weights: The spotter is not supposed to actually lift the bar, only assist, and only then if absolutely necessary. A spotter takes over the lift only if their partner starts to drop the bar altogether. Most of us struggle with that kind of holding back. When we see someone struggling, we tend to take over and show them how to do it the “right” way, which typically means *our* way.

A further challenge is our basic tendency to want to give lots of advice without really listening. Don’t get me wrong; we need good teachers and even good teaching. But has there ever been such a plethora of content? Not only teaching in the classroom but on streaming platforms, in podcasts, on blogs, in inspirational viral social media posts, and on and on. We are inundated every day with information. I meet many Catholics whose primary struggle is not really with *knowing* the faith but with putting it into practice in their daily life.

This is exactly why authentic accompaniment is so important. In my experience, what most people need more today is a *coach* rather than a *teacher*. At the heart of coaching is knowing the best questions to ask and then *really* listening. Michael Hall calls this “Prophetic Listening.” I love the concept! It’s a deeper listening assisted by the Holy Spirit. It’s listening not to just what is said, but what is *behind* what’s being said or asked—the “QBQ,” the question behind the question. Hall gives several real-life examples in his book that help flesh out the concept practically.

Finally, many who walk the path of accompaniment often confuse *acceptance* with *affirmation*. We are living in a very divisive culture. The driving modern progressive agenda will not tolerate opposition. Benedict XVI had some great articulations of this when he coined phrases like “a dictatorship of relativism,” and “a new religion of tolerance.” Some make the error of thinking that, when confronted with opposing beliefs and even lifestyle choices, to remain in friendship means supporting someone’s belief system

regardless of what they believe. This is a dangerous and slippery slope. It may start with something seemingly insignificant, but typically moves to doctrinal issues that could completely contradict what the Church teaches to be true. Authentic accompaniment never needs to stray from the truth. God never calls us to abandon or disregard something we believe in order to be an authentic friend to someone. I would argue that the minute we do so we would actually be abandoning *authenticity*.

By way of example, I'll diverge slightly to tell you about an episode of *Restore the Glory*, a podcast hosted by Dr. Bob Schuchts and Jake Khym. In 2022, they featured a Catholic guest who had come out as a homosexual and was even planning to get married to his partner later that year. His whole story was further complicated by the fact that he had been involved in many well-known Catholic communities. In other words, he was very well versed in everything Catholics believe. Yet, this person had still come to the conclusion that he was meant to pursue a secular, gay lifestyle. Dr. Bob and Jake carefully navigated the entire conversation, somehow doing two things: first, the guest felt accepted, even loved and embraced in authentic friendship; but it was also very clear that both Dr. Bob and Jake did not believe the same things their guest did and could not affirm the choices he had made. How is this even possible? In all honesty, I don't know, exactly. But they did it. If you would like a model in how to navigate a very delicate conversation without succumbing to relativism and a mistaken notion of tolerance, this episode is definitely worth a listen.⁸

Conclusion

We are living in desperate times. It is sometimes easy to be discouraged by what seems like too daunting a task. You might find yourself asking, "How can I make any significant difference?"

8 Bob Schuchts and Jake Kyhm, "Episode 64: Same-Sex Attraction, Part 5, with Christopher Dowling," in *Restore the Glory*, podcast, <https://www.restoretheglorypodcast.com/episodes/64>.

In his book *Making Missionary Disciples*, Curtis Martin devotes a whole section to the habit of “clarity and conviction about spiritual multiplication.” He stresses that the principle of spiritual multiplication “beautifully illustrates the amazing potential impact one person can have in changing the world!”⁹ He goes on to say, “God deeply desires for every person in each generation to come to know his love and mercy. He modeled the method to make this possible, and then commissioned us to imitate him by making disciples . . . this generation is waiting for us to become what we were meant to be. Everyone on earth is experiencing poverty of some kind, and they are waiting to be cared for by people who have experienced the enriching reality of life in Christ.”¹⁰

Authentic accompaniment allows us to show the love of the Father to those who need it most. It allows us to be present, “with skin on,” to the lost sheep Christ seeks. And it allows the Holy Spirit to work through relationships to deepen faith and restore the broken. Let us walk with others so that we may all walk home— together.

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9 Martin, *Missionary Disciples*, 30.

10 Ibid., 31.