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## MISSION MESSAGE

### Going Home Another Way: The Call to be Missionary

*By Shannon Kowalski  
Diocesan Director,  
of Pontifical Mission Societies*



The beginning of a new year often stirs something hopeful within us. We make New Year's resolutions because, at our core, we desire change. We want to become better versions of ourselves and leave behind habits or mindsets that no longer serve us.

The Feast of the Epiphany of the Lord seems to arrive at just the right moment, when so many of us are already thinking about doing things differently. In the Gospel of Matthew, the Magi encounter Christ and then return home "by another way." Their physical detour reflects an inner shift after meeting Jesus. They couldn't go back the same way they came because something within them has changed.

I recently came across a video reflection from Bishop Ronald

Hicks, Archbishop-designate of New York, that stuck with me. Bishop Hicks reflected on the Epiphany through the lens of his own experiences living as a missionary in El Salvador. He spoke about how immersion in another culture, especially with people who live with fewer material comforts, has a way of changing you.

Life slows down. Relationships take priority. Faith becomes less about convenience and more about trust. After experiences like that, he says, it becomes impossible to return home unchanged. He reminds us that an authentic encounter with Christ *always* reorients our lives.

Bishop Hick's reflection resonated so deeply with me because it reminded me of a transformation I experienced while on mission in Guatemala. The country suffered through a 36-year-long civil war that left scars still visible today. Many people suffered from extreme poverty and inadequate education long after the war ended. But faith was not an accessory to the daily life of the people of San Lucas Tolimán; it was the foundation. Through all this, the Catholic Church was the epicenter of the community, offering dignity to its people through education, healthcare, and vocational programs.

There was an acceptance of hardship that did not breed bitterness, but resilience and hope. The people I encountered lived with a sense that God was not a distant presence, but a constant companion. That witness stays with you long after you leave, and

it challenged my own assumptions about comfort, dependence, and what it truly means to live the Gospel.

When I returned home, I found myself more aware of the global Church, more conscious of injustice, and more attentive to the ways my daily actions reflected solidarity. The experience did not give me a checklist of resolutions; it gave me a new way of seeing and living.

This is where Epiphany and our New Year's instinct for change intersect. While resolutions often focus on self-improvement, Epiphany calls us to deeper conversion. It asks us how an encounter with Christ — often revealed through other people and cultures — should redirect our lives.

Bishop Hicks' reflection reminds us that missionary experiences are not meant to be memories we tuck away. They are meant to reorder our priorities. They challenge us to slow down, to value people over productivity, and to trust God more deeply. These are lessons learned profoundly in communities that rely on Him daily.

Most of us will never follow a star across the desert, and many will never travel on an international mission trip. Yet we are all offered moments of encounter that call us onto a different path. As we move forward in this new year, may we allow those encounters to shape us. And may we, like the Magi, have the courage to walk home another way, becoming the missionary people our world so desperately needs.

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