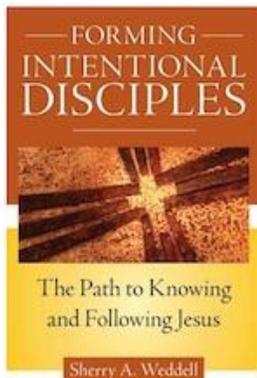


Forming Intentional Disciples

A message from Fr. Bennet Tran, Pastor: *One of the more significant books that has influenced my thinking and ministry is **Sherry Weddell's Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus**. I hope that we as a parish will engage with the insights offered by Weddell. I hope this book will spark interest in our discussions about what is happening in the Church among our family members and friends and to take action to respond to the signs of the time. The book is readily available on line. On the following pages you will find chapter summaries which I encourage you to read, reflect upon, and discuss. May the ideas presented encourage us all to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ and walk with others on the journey.*

Chapter 1: God Has No Grandchildren

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018



The first chapter is discouraging. Sherry Weddell has to explain the present situation of the Catholic Church in America before she begins to offer suggestions and solutions. So do not let this discouraging news below sit by itself. There will be insightful ways out of our present situation in the next chapters.

Sherry Weddell's reporting is done by reputable research into the thinking of present day American Catholics. The book begins by reporting that only 30% of Americans who were raised Catholic are still practicing - meaning they attend Mass at least once a month. Roughly half of these are at Mass on a given weekend; meaning that only 15% are practicing according to the teachings of the Church. Another 38% hold on to their Catholic identity but seldom or never attend Mass. The final 32% - **almost a third of all adults who were raised Catholic in the United States - no longer consider themselves to be Catholic at all.** 3% are now part of a non-Christian faith. 14% consider themselves unaffiliated. 15% are now part of some Protestant faith tradition. The lion's share of Catholics who enter the Protestant world become evangelicals. According to the third American Family Survey from 2017, **34%** of the U.S. population identify as "**nones**" ("atheists," "agnostics," "nothing in particular"), up from **32%** in 2016.

Fully 10% of all adults in America are ex-Catholics. 2.6% are converts to the Church. In other words, **nearly four times as many adults have left as have entered the Church.** The life blood of new members being transfused into the Church is a steady trickle, while the blood being lost is a hemorrhage. The annual number of adult converts received into the Church dropped over 35% from 2000-2009. Conclusion: God has no grandchildren.

In contrast, Catholic pastoral practices still assume that religious identity is largely inherited and stable throughout one's life span. So firm is our sense of Catholicism as a "faith into which one is born" that many Catholics are surprised to discover that millions of their brothers and sisters are converts.

Intelligent Catholics casually dismiss evangelical worship as mere "entertainment" while showing no understanding of what motivated millions of their former Catholic brothers and sisters to embrace that form of worship in the first place. The "entertainment" thesis reflects our Catholic insider judgments about what we presume must have motivated those who have left the Catholic Church for evangelical communities. But none of us had ever heard a living former Catholic use that language.

Nearly **half of cradle Catholics who become "unaffiliated" are gone by age eighteen. Nearly 80% are gone and 71% have already taken on "unaffiliated" identity by their early twenties.** Attending CCD, youth groups, and even Catholic high schools, made little or no difference in a decision made by an American Catholic to become Protestant or become "unaffiliated."

Our Catholic practice still operates on the presumption that although most Catholic teens vanish after Confirmation, they will find their way back when they are ready to get married and especially when they have children. One huge problem with this paradigm is that Catholic marriage rates are, in fact, plummeting. The **number of marriages celebrated in the Church decreased dramatically, by nearly 60%, between 1972 and 2010, while the U.S. Catholic population increased by almost 17 million.** The **35% drop in adults entering the Church through RCIA since 2000** may well be related to the dramatic drop in Catholic marriages.

If younger Catholics are not going to Mass or getting married in the Church, why would they bother to raise their children in the faith? We can no longer depend on the rites of passage or cultural, peer, or familial pressure to bring the majority back. If this trend does not change, in ten years it will cease to matter that we have a priest shortage.

The Builders of the Church in America will be largely gone, the Boomers retiring, and our institutions - parishes and schools - will be emptying at an incredible rate.

In the twenty-first century, cultural Catholicism is dead as a retention strategy, because God has no grandchildren. In the twenty-first century, **we have to foster intentional Catholicism rather than cultural Catholicism.** This is the theme of her entire book.

The **majority of American adults who change from their childhood faith do so in a series of steps rather than a single giant leap.** Changes of faith are, for most people, a journey and a search, not an instant, simple, and painless abandonment of belief. These people are already seeking. Our job is to reach out deliberately and intentionally to help them find the pearl of great price.

Nearly a **third of self-identified Catholics believe in an impersonal God.** On a variety of questions asked about how they view God, the research shows that only 60% of Catholics believe in a personal God. 29% said that God is an "impersonal force." Only **48% of Catholics were absolutely certain that the God they believe in was a God with whom they could have a personal relationship.**

So we live in a time of immense challenge and immense opportunity. Millions of American adults are seeking a religious identity and are at least potentially open to the Catholic faith. At the same time, huge numbers of self-identified Catholics are not certain that a personal relationship with God is even possible, and their actions reflect it. **The majority of Catholics in the United States are sacramentalized, but not evangelized.** They do not know that an explicit, personal attachment to Christ - personal discipleship - is normative Catholicism as taught by the apostles and reiterated time and time again by popes, councils, and saints of the Church... **We have to explore what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in the midst of his Church.**

G. K. Chesterton writes of the "unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander the world, and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread."

Does that description resonate with your experience of faith?

Does it remind you of any Catholics who have returned to the faith?

Can you describe the experience of someone you know who came back to the Church after an absence?

Chapter 2: We Don't Know What Normal Is

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018

After traversing the statistical landscape in Chapter One, Weddell opens Chapter Two with another discouraging statistic: only **6% of Catholic parishes agreed that spreading the faith was a high priority** compared to 57% of African American and 75% of conservative Protestant congregations. The Catholic statistic would be laughable if it were not such a brazen failure on the part of the Church to live out her identity - which Vatican II describes as "missionary by her very nature."

What is the problem? Perhaps then-Cardinal Ratzinger comes close to an accurate description, when, in a 2000 address to catechists, he said, "A large part of today's humanity does not find the Gospel in the permanent evangelization of the Church: That is to say, the convincing response to the question: How to live?" Humanity does not find the Gospel in the Church's efforts. Something is lacking, for one can give only that which he has received. Nothing to give indicates nothing received. Hence the Church finds herself in the midst of a new missionary age - the time of the New Evangelization has arrived.

But what is this New Evangelization? Pope Paul VI, in 1974, identified the need not only for the Church to engage in missionary activity *ad gentes* ("to the nations"), but to a rapidly growing audience in the midst of a secularized West: the baptized, but no longer practicing Catholic. Pope John Paul II carried this new missionary call forward for the Church, describing the New Evangelization not as a process of re-evangelizing ("going through the motions"), but an evangelization "new in its ardor, methods and expression." This evangelization would engage present-day culture and transmit the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ to the modern man. In preparation for the recent Synod of Bishops, the *Lineamenta* describes the New Evangelization as follows:

- In view of the significant changes taking place in our society, **the Church does not give up or retreat into herself; instead, she undertakes a project to revitalize herself. She makes the Person of Jesus Christ and a personal encounter with him central to her thinking, knowing that he will give his Spirit and provide the force to announce and proclaim the Gospel in new ways which can speak to today's cultures.**
- Transmitting the faith means to create in every place and time the conditions for this personal encounter of individuals with Jesus Christ.
- This personal encounter allows individuals to share in the Son's relationship with his Father and to experience the power of the Spirit.

In Weddell's words, "transmission of the Catholic faith is not just passing on an inherited religious identity. Genuine Catholic identity flows from the experience of discipleship." As noted in the *Lineamenta*, "What is not believed or lived cannot be transmitted."

In Chapter 2 the premise of the whole book is finally revealed: The New Evangelization is necessary for the genesis of a culture of intentional discipleship, and only from this culture of discipleship will a new springtime of evangelization blossom. **The call to evangelize cannot be separated from the necessity of intentional discipleship.**

When one encounters Christ and freely chooses to follow Him as His disciple, one does so with the intention of following a path, a road, a journey - even though he/she does not know exactly what the journey will require.

Weddell argues that **intentional discipleship must become normative within the Church**. But let's examine "normative Catholicism" more closely. Weddell describes it by identifying three concurrent spiritual journeys:

- The personal interior journey of a lived relationship with Christ resulting in intentional discipleship.
- The ecclesial journey into the Church through reception of the sacraments of initiation.
- The journey of active practice (as evidenced by receiving the sacraments, attending Mass, and participating in the life and mission of the Christian community).

Ideally, every Catholic should be making all three journeys simultaneously - "a conscious disciple of Jesus Christ, a fully initiated Catholic, and an active parishioner." Yet this is rarely the case. Nowadays "Catholic identity" refers simply to regarding oneself as Catholic and attending Mass with "reasonable regularity." No further questions asked! Thus Weddell concludes, "Many Catholics think one needn't ask about the first journey if the second and third journeys are in place." Unfortunately, the common assumption is that "personal discipleship is a kind of optional spiritual enrichment for the exceptionally pious or spiritually gifted." It is a mere accessory encouraged by a culture of "don't ask, don't tell."

If nobody talks about a personal encounter with Christ, the life-changing decision to follow Christ intentionally, “we are no more likely to think of it spontaneously than we are to suddenly invent a new primary color.” As a result of what could be identified as a “spiral of silence” surrounding the interior journey of discipleship, an unintentional chasm has been created “between what the Church teaches is normal and what many Catholics in the pews have learned to regard as normal. Many lifelong Catholics have never seen personal discipleship lived overtly or talked about in an explicit manner in their family or parish.”

Given the call to normative Catholicism and the unfortunate chasm created by a culture of silence, we can make at least three observations:

- “We can no longer presume that those coming for the sacraments still understand what it means to be a Catholic or are even committed to such. Nor can we presume that they know who Christ is and have made a commitment to him as savior and Lord” (R. Martin).
- A paradigm shift from “infant” to “adult” is needed. In other words, the current assumption is that the baptized infant Catholic will “pick up the Catholic faith from the family and the parish as naturally and inevitably as he or she learns language and culture.” The current position assumes that this Catholic identity will move seamlessly into adulthood in a process of slow and steady spiritual growth with little expectation of distinct turning points or overt “conversion.” Instead, Weddell proposes an “adult” paradigm that challenges teens and adults to become intentional disciples - this is a paradigm of (new) evangelization.
- **The Church must evangelize her baptized members in order to foster a Church that desires to share the faith with non-believers.** “You can’t give what you don’t have.”

“Faith is above all a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus, and to experience his closeness, his friendship, his love; only in this way does one learn to know him ever more, and to love and follow him ever more. May this happen to each one of us.” - Pope Benedict XVI

“In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization... Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus... So what are we waiting for?”

Evangelii Gaudium, - Pope Francis

The 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization states, “Transmitting the faith means to create in every place and time the conditions for this personal encounter of individuals with Jesus Christ. The faith-encounter with the person of Jesus Christ is a relationship with him, remembering him (in the Eucharist) and, through the grace of the Spirit, having in us the mind of Jesus Christ.”

Describe your faith-encounter with Jesus Christ and what it means to be in relationship with him.

Chapter 3: The Fruit of Discipleship

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018

Sherry Weddell begins this chapter by giving two examples of dynamic parishes that have made the move to forming intentional disciples. Both of these parishes are quite extraordinary in their evangelical spirit. Following this very good news Sherry begins to explain some very important points about discipleship.

Cultivating Discipleship: The presence of **a significant number of disciples changes everything**: a parish's spiritual tone, energy level, attendance, bottom line, and what parishioners ask of their leaders.

The Holy Spirit is planting charisms and vocations of amazing diversity in the hearts of all people. Like the grace of the sacraments, they are real, but they are not magic. Just as the gifts of children must be fostered deliberately and with great energy by parents if their children are to reach their full potential, so vocations must be fostered by the Church.

Our problem is not that there is a shortage of vocations but that we do not have the support system and leadership in place to foster the vast majority of the vocations that God has given us. **The whole Church bears responsibility for the charisms and personal vocations of each member.**

Pastoral Governance: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "The ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians" (1547).

"The ministerial priesthood differs in essence from the common priesthood of the faithful because it confers a sacred power for the service of the faithful" (1592).

The Church teaching spells out in considerable detail what this would mean. Priests are to do the following:

- Cooperate with the laity in their mission to the world.
- Listen to the laity.
- Recognize lay expertise.
- Awaken and deepen lay co-responsibility.
- Invite lay initiative.
- Help all explore and discern vocation.
- Form and support secular apostles.

Participation of the Laity: A dramatic increase in the number of baptized Catholics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is putting tremendous pressure on the priest-lay person relationship. The global population has quadrupled in the last century (from 291.4 million in 1910 to 1.196 billion as of 2010).

Priests have always loomed larger in the Catholic imagination than in actual fact. There were 48,415 more priests in the world in 2010 than in 1950 and 57,652 more seminarians than in 1950. But because of staggering growth in the number of Catholics, bishops and priests make up only a tiny fraction (0.035 percent) of the body Catholic. As of 2010, 417,340 priests and bishops were serving approximately 1,195,582,000 men and women. It is the laity - the common priesthood - that constitutes 99.962 percent of the Church. In 1978, lay Catholics were only 10.8 percent of the Church's recognized workforce. Thirty years later, in 2009, lay catechists and missionaries made up roughly 72 percent of the 4.8-million-person "Workforce for the Church's Apostolate."

In the twenty-first century, God seems to be doing something new again to meet the needs of our time. Millions of **lay men and women are answering God's call to evangelize and nurture the millions of new brothers and sisters God is sending us every year.**

No matter how many institutions we sustain or how much activity goes on in our parish or diocese, if new intentional disciples are not regularly emerging in our midst, our ministry is not bearing its most essential fruit.

The Heart of Vocation: Discipleship is the necessary seedbed without which Christian vocations of any kind cannot germinate and grow.

We cannot ask even good and talented people who are not yet disciples to undertake the works appropriate only to apostles. And yet we do this all the time.

Discerning ecclesial vocations, especially priestly vocations, is critical for the American Church, because half of our currently active diocesan priests will retire by 2018. Our Catholic population is about 77.7 million, approximately 75 percent higher than it was forty years ago, when it was served by roughly the same number of parishes. Most dioceses in the country are feeling a shortage of clergy. The good news is that **if we evangelize, it is not hard to turn our parishes into rich seedbeds of fertile vocational soil.**

Discerning Charisms: Our parishes need to become places where it is normal for adult Catholics to ask, “What is God calling me to do?” Over the years we have discovered that a powerful way to foster a parish culture of discernment is by beginning with the discernment of personal charisms.

Charisms are some of the many graces that we receive in baptism and confirmation. A charism is “a favor” or (in St. Thomas Aquinas’s terminology) a “gratuitous grace” given to a member of the body of Christ to empower him or her to build up the Church and to witness Christ to the world. Charisms are supernaturally empowered ways in which God’s mercy, love, healing, truth, beauty, and provision will reach others through us. Most importantly, charisms, unlike natural talents or skills, can never be kept to ourselves or used deliberately for evil.

Like personal vocations, charisms almost always manifest *after* the point in our life when our faith becomes personal and we begin the journey of discipleship.

When a Catholic community begins to foster discernment of the charisms, the disciples begin to experience the living reality that “I have been appointed and sent by Christ.”

We’ve seen over and over, with the 65,000 Catholics who have experienced the **Called and Gifted** process, that recognizing one’s charisms unleashes amazing creativity and initiative.

If we do not see the parish as a center of evangelization and apostolic formation, we are denying priests and their pastoral collaborators one of the great, abiding joys of ministry and one of the most powerful protections against cynicism and burnout.

If we focus on making disciples and equipping apostles first, the rest will follow. We won’t have to worry about our institutional gaps. The disciples and apostles we form today will found and sustain our institutions and structures tomorrow, and the Holy Spirit will gift and inspire them to do things that we have never dreamed of. What we are called to do is to truly see and then make disciples of the anointed ones who are wandering in and out of our parishes right now.

Weddell quotes a parish asking, “Would anyone besides parishioners notice if the parish wasn’t here?”

Why is this a good question to ask?

How would you go about answering it for our parish?

Chapter 4: Grace and the Great Quest

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018

Sherry Weddell begins this chapter with a quote from *The Woman Who Was Poor*, by Léon Bloy: “**There is only one sadness, it is to not be a saint.**” But she adds, there is a greater sadness than even the lack of individual saints: the *absence of the communal fruit* that God intends to manifest within our Christian communities and network of saints-in-the-making. This absence is an almost unfathomable loss because it affects the whole human race. Grace empowers our intellects and wills to understand God’s will and obey it, yet at the same time it leaves us free to resist if we choose. It is, in a word, love received and given. Sanctifying grace - the saving grace that makes us participants in the life of the Blessed Trinity and members of the body of Christ - is normally received by older children and adults through a properly disposed reception of the sacraments. What does properly disposed mean? Thereby hangs a tale of immense importance.

Grace and Disposition: In recent decades, there has been little or no serious discussion at the parish level about how an **individual receiving the sacraments can prepare his or her heart and soul, to live fruitfully**. The world waits, longs for this full manifestation. Yet in many, if not most, of our parishes, we have accepted a passive, notional “faith,” a general absence of fruit, and a lack of overt manifestation of grace as normal.

If our pastoral practice is to be life changing, then we must be acutely aware that the reception of a valid sacrament and the fruitful reception of sacramental grace are two different but related issues. Validity means that the sacrament was truly bestowed and the intended grace made truly present to the person receiving the sacrament. But validity does not guarantee that the grace made available has been actively received and is bearing fruit in that person’s life.

The Church has long distinguished between “objective” redemption and “subjective” redemption. By his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has reconciled our race with the Father; this is objective redemption. Subjective redemption is **the application of the saving gifts of Christ to individuals, the realization of salvific transformation in each of our lives**.

As adults we can do something infants can’t: we can throw up roadblocks or obstacles that stop the grace of God either in whole or in part. As St. Augustine famously observed, “God created us without us: but he did not will to save us without us.” The Church uses remarkably strong language in this regard, calling it superstition to treat the sacraments as though they were magic and change us without our active cooperation. The “positive disposition” of the sacraments is an eager seeking after God with the hope and expectation that “God will show up.” It means **we are prepared to change and we actively seek the grace of God in order to do so**.

Intention Matters: Passively receiving a sacrament is not enough. The grace we receive is directly related to personal faith, spiritual expectancy, and the hunger with which we approach the sacraments. Simply going through the motions to please others is not enough for fruitful reception. The issue at hand is whether or not someone is spiritually ready to receive both the sacrament and the sacramental grace in question. There are two common maxims that pastoral leaders often evoke as solution in these situations.

ONE: “**The Sacrament Will Take Care of It.**” People in ministry seldom talk about the effects of the sacrament and rather tend to assume that the individual will receive what the sacrament is supposed to offer. We often use the single English word *faith* to denote what is covered by two different Latin terms. The first Latin term, *virtus fidei*, means “the virtue of faith,” which is the power or capacity to believe but *not* the act of faith itself. *Virtus fidei* is the “capacity to believe” placed within us by baptism that can exist without explicit personal attachment to Jesus Christ. The Church uses a different term, *actus fidei*, for the explicit, personal act of faith that is at the heart of discipleship. For that virtue to become a personal act of faith, it must be activated freely, explicitly, however minimally... It is that personal act of faith, however minimal, and always under the grace of God, that transforms the human being from one who can be a believer into one who is a believer... It is that act of faith that is required for the right sacramental intention. The *virtus fidei*, the capacity to believe, must become *actus fidei*, explicit personal faith, for a teen or adult to receive a sacrament fruitfully.

TWO: “**The Church Will Provide.**” While this is true, it does not mean that the Church will “cover for us” if we don’t possess genuine faith and spiritual openness to the grace being offered. *Ecclesia supplet* means that the Church, out of her treasury of grace, may compensate for the sacramental and liturgical mistakes of priests who intend to do what the Church intends. However, the Church has never taught that she would automatically supply the response of personal faith and obedience that only the individual can make. If we receive the sacraments without faith, the grace of God can be “tied,” meaning that the fruit that should accompany the sacraments remains bound because of certain blocks that prevent its effectiveness. An adult must “drop his or her nets” and begin the journey of intentional discipleship in order to receive sacraments fruitfully.

Cooperating Grace: The Church uses this term for the process whereby **we choose our spiritual destiny by freely cooperating with God's initiative.** God first gives us the necessary "prevenient" grace to enable us to respond to his initiative towards us. But we are under no compulsion: we still freely choose to obey. And then the Creator and Lord of the universe, stunningly, chooses to "cooperate" with our choice. Of course, our personal response at the moment of receiving baptism or another sacrament is only the beginning of a lifetime of responding in faith to God's grace. If we don't intentionally seek to continue to grow in faith, the initial grace we receive can be thwarted. As part of our lifelong freedom, we retain - mysteriously and tragically - the power to "baffle" God's grace. Thus how we help teens and adults prepare their hearts, minds, and souls to receive the grace of God fruitfully and then cooperate with that grace throughout life is every bit as critical to the life and mission of the Church as making the sacrament available in the first place.

Source and Summit: The Church teaches that the "Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life." The Eucharist is described this way because the Eucharist contains "the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself." We have to make an intentional journey to the summit, an intentional journey, properly prepared, to fully receive the inexhaustible grace to be found in the Eucharistic Christ. But in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions; that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace, lest they receive it in vain. The general principle at work is always that those who want more of the Lord will receive more of the Lord. This is why the Mass requires the "conscious, active, and fruitful participation" of all present.

With Fear and Trembling Stand: The consequence of receiving the sacraments without faith, of receiving in vain, are not merely that nothing happens and that therefore we just "don't get the good stuff." On the contrary, we actually hurt ourselves by receiving in vain. Receiving the sacraments in the state of unconfessed mortal sin is a sacrilege. Receiving faithfully not only means being in the state of grace, but also having the right or supernatural intention. Mere carelessness, lack of preparation, or lack of thanksgiving can be harmful and cause spiritual loss.

Given that the majority of baptized Catholics do not even attend Mass on a regular basis, we may safely question whether many Catholics possess the inner disposition of discipleship necessary for the sacraments, as well as liturgical and personal prayer, to have their intended effect and bear their intended fruit. The vast majority of Catholics have received the sacraments validly and have received the character - but we must ask whether they have also received, or received fully, the inward reality.

Seeking Revival: Sacraments that bestow a character (Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders) can be "revived" when the recipient comes to personal faith, repents, and chooses to follow Jesus Christ as a disciple in the midst of the Church. One makes a choice of faith, prepared in repentance, that allows the work of God to set itself free and to emanate all its strength. The gift of God is finally "untied" and the Spirit is allowed to flow like fragrance in the Christian life.

In calling Catholics to a deliberate discipleship and intentional faith, our goal is not to create a community of spiritual elites. Rather it is to **create a spiritual culture that recognizes, openly talks about, and honors both the inward and outward dimension of the sacraments and the liturgy.** Our goal must be to help anyone who is open to developing a positive inward disposition that runs to do God's will and results in abundant and amazing fruit for the sake of the Church and the world.

How can we intentionally call postmodern people to follow Jesus?

How can we deliberately and effectively help ordinary Catholics in the pew make the journey to intentional discipleship?

How would you go about effectively designing preparation for those receiving the sacraments?

Chapter 5: Thresholds of Conversion: Can I Trust You?

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018

Where do we start when seeking to make disciples of un-evangelized Catholics? Let us get a common assumption out of the way first. With most twenty-first-century people (there are always exceptions), we can't start with catechesis. They aren't ready for it yet, and if they aren't ready, it will just roll off like water off a duck's back. In any case, **catechesis is designed to foster the maturation of disciples**, not the initial conversion of those who aren't yet disciples.

The *National Directory for Catechesis* outlines two critical steps that should precede catechesis: pre-evangelization and initial proclamation of the basic kerygma, or the Great Story of Jesus Christ. Both are necessary to awaken initial Christian faith, and as we have seen, **Christian faith is necessary for catechesis to be fruitful**.

Catholic pastoral practice has few structures for these two preliminary stages. We typically presume that pre-evangelization and initial proclamation just happen automatically during basic catechesis. All the evidence suggests that even if true evangelization once worked that way, it is not working that way anymore. **Catechized Catholics are clearly not necessarily evangelized Catholics**.

There is a **series of thresholds or stages of conversion** - five in all - that culminates in a commitment to follow Jesus Christ as a disciple. Each transition to a new threshold is a genuine work of grace, empowered by the Holy Spirit, but each threshold also requires real spiritual energy and real choices on the part of the person making the journey. Let's look at these five thresholds briefly and then zero in on the first threshold in more detail.

1. **Initial trust:** A person is able to trust or has a positive association with Jesus Christ, the Church, a Christian believer, or something identifiably Christian. Trust is not the same as active personal faith. Without some kind of bridge of trust in place, people will not move closer to God.
2. **Spiritual curiosity:** A person finds himself intrigued by or desiring to know more about Jesus, his life, and his teachings or some aspect of the Christian faith. This curiosity can range from mere awareness of a new possibility to something quite intense. Nevertheless, a person at the threshold of curiosity is not yet open to personal change. Curiosity is still essentially passive, but it is more than mere trust.
3. **Spiritual openness:** A person acknowledges to himself or herself and to God that he or she is open to the possibility of personal and spiritual change. This is one of the most difficult transitions for a postmodern nonbeliever. Openness is not a commitment to change. People who are open are simply admitting they are open to the possibility of change.
4. **Spiritual seeking:** The person moves from being essentially passive to actively seeking to know the God who is calling him or her. It is, if you will, "dating with a purpose" but not yet marriage. Seekers are asking, "Are you the one to whom I will give myself?" At this stage, the seeker is engaged in an urgent spiritual quest, seeking to know whether he or she can commit to Christ and his Church.
5. **Intentional discipleship:** This is the decision to "drop one's nets," to make a conscious commitment to follow Christ in the midst of his Church as an obedient disciple and to reorder one's life accordingly.

It's a Mystery: There is no one-size-fits-all way of negotiating the journey to discipleship. People will move through at different paces. There may be great leaps forward as well as relapses to earlier thresholds. The thing to remember is that we are not in control of this process. We are dealing with the mystery of a relationship that God himself is initiating in the human heart.

Let it be stressed that we cannot bring anyone to faith through pressure, guilt, argument, or cleverness. Conversion and true faith are works of the Holy Spirit. But it is also true that we can, by our responses, help or hinder another's journey.

The First Threshold - Trust: The threshold of trust is not the same as active personal faith. Trust, in this case, refers just to a basic, felt trust of something or someone associated with Christ or the Church. The task of evangelization is to find out if a bridge of trust already exists. Does our friend or colleague or roommate or family member trust or have some kind of positive association with Jesus Christ, the Church, a believer, or something identifiably Christian? If this trust does not already exist, then our first job as an evangelizer is to help build that bridge. We earn such trust primarily through relationships: through the integrity, compassion, warmth, and joy of our own life and faith. As we work to rebuild trust or to build it for the first time, we must pray and work to avoid the natural reactions to the distrust directed at us. We need to avoid such things as defensiveness, seeing ourselves as a "victim," and avoiding or judging those who don't trust us.

Many don't trust God or the Church, but they do trust a Christian in their life. Maybe they trust you. You may be the bridge that one day will lead them to a life-changing encounter with Christ. For someone at this very early threshold, it is more important that trust exists than that it make theological sense. Our joy at this point is to affirm, strengthen, and if possible, broaden whatever trust exists.

We Will Never Evangelize What We Do Not Love: Each generation is largely responsible for the evangelization of its own. But trust cannot be built if the evangelizers regard the un-evangelized with fear and disdain. Francis Cardinal George, the late Archbishop of Chicago, summed up our dilemma brilliantly years ago: "We will never evangelize what we do not love." We should never cease to pray for, long for, labor for, and call every man and woman to encounter Christ in the midst of his Church. We can never accept, cooperate with, or most appallingly, rejoice in the events and changes that endanger the eternal happiness of millions of those redeemed by Christ's sacrifice and baptized in Christ's name. Evangelization isn't about us. It is Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, seeking the lost sheep through us. When we forget that, we can alienate and even lose those who God has called us to bring to Jesus.

An RCIA candidate describes the transforming power of love that builds trust and that changed his life: "I am not a Christian because it 'makes sense' or because someone sat down and diagrammed it for me. **I am a Christian because I have been loved deeply and unconditionally by Christians.** Some of them...troubled me with hard questions. But all of them loved me when I did not love them...Reason is a wonderful tool, but it is a weak force for deep change in human beings. Faith, hope, and love are not tools; they are virtues, powerful and exceedingly difficult to employ, and much more efficacious than reason for changing lives."

What do you think of the five thresholds of conversion that are outlined? Do they make sense?

Do they line up with your own story or the story of someone you know well?

What opportunities do we have for people to be pre-evangelized and introduced to the story of Christ?

Chapter 6: The Second Threshold: Curiosity

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018

Once someone has a bridge of trust in place, our role as evangelizers is to help our friend move toward the spiritual threshold of curiosity. The first and most obvious question is “Curiosity about what?” The answer is that if our ultimate mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, our task at this stage in the journey is to first arouse curiosity about Jesus Christ. To do that, **we have to talk about Jesus**.

About Jesus Hardly at All: I have been part of many conversations about the Catholic discomfort at using the naked name of Jesus. We talk endlessly about the Church but so seldom about Christ as a person with whom we are in a relationship. How easy it is to talk about everything, but about Jesus hardly at all. Whenever we treat Jesus as a “topic” within the faith instead of as the “whole spiritual good of the Church,” or as a “belief” among other beliefs instead of as Lord, Bridegroom, Savior, and Elder Brother, we profoundly distort the faith and communicate an impersonal or institutional understanding of what it means to be Catholic. Pope Paul VI wrote, “There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed.”

We must talk about Jesus because we can no longer presume solid knowledge of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection on the part of Catholics. For instance, a 2010 Barna Group study of American perceptions of Easter found that while the majority of Catholics understood Easter as a religious holiday (65%), only 37% listed the Resurrection as the meaning of the day.

The threshold of curiosity is a perfect time to explore the possibility that **a personal God exists and that you can have a personal relationship with that God**. It is essential that we help people wrestle with this first, most crucial issue of a personal God.

You can easily quench inquiries by drowning a teaspoonful of curiosity with a gallon of answers. Match your response to your friend’s level of curiosity, and then wait for the friend to become curious again.

The Pedagogy of Curiosity: There are three basic stages of curiosity.

1. **Awareness:** This is the moment when people become aware that there are more possibilities in life than they had imagined or experienced. One such possibility can be “I can have a personal relationship with a God who loves me.”
2. **Engagement:** This is when the curious person takes steps on his own to pursue his curiosity by, say, making friends with a Christian, reading about Jesus, and so on.
3. **Exchange:** The convert begins to experience intense curiosity. He moves from merely listening and semi-covert examination of Christians and their faith to actively asking questions and exchanging ideas.

One of **the best ways to rouse curiosity is to ask questions, not answer them**. There is a point at which basic catechesis becomes very important, but for most people that comes later in the journey. We are not, at this threshold, about the business of telling people all that the Church teaches. Rather, our goal is to arouse spiritual curiosity by our lives and by raising questions that pose the ultimate question: “Who do you think Jesus is?”

Allow the natural curiosity of the human person to draw him or her to encounter with the person of Jesus. One powerful way to rouse curiosity is to tell stories. Again, Jesus was masterful in his use of parables and stories. Telling stories of Jesus from the New Testament and stories of your own or someone else’s experience of healing and forgiveness can be very thought-provoking.

Curiosity Is Not Seeking: Curiosity is important but still essentially causal and passive. Curiosity involves truth but not openness to change - not yet. And it is certainly not the intense spiritual quest of true seeking. Curiosity is natural.

We have come to accept passivity as “normative” Catholicism because the **majority of Catholics are, in fact, spiritually passive**. All the statistical indicators suggest that the majority of our “active” members are in early and essentially passive stages of spiritual development, such as trust and curiosity.

It has been our experience that the communal spiritual norm of an average American parish - one that is not influenced by an evangelizing or other special movement - is usually somewhere between trust and curiosity.

Living Curiously means more than being “nice.” It requires that we think and act in Kingdom-oriented and countercultural ways in our daily lives. We have the freedom in Christ to say unexpected and even borderline

outrageous things, not to shock, but to genuinely “subvert the dominant paradigm” with the prospect that the Kingdom of heaven is here, that the risen and supernatural Lord Jesus Christ is in our midst with power.

A prayerful life that springs from the supernatural power of the Eucharist and the sacraments, and the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, are all powerful signs of contradiction that creates the curiosity that calls a soul to Christ.

Helping Catholics Come Home: Most initiatives aimed at lapsed Catholics do not address the question of discipleship. Their impact could be multiplied many times if we understood these outreaches in light of the overall journey that twenty-first century people typically make. Most programs aimed at lapsed Catholics won't have the impact we desire as long as we presume that luring Catholics to cross the threshold again and restoring trust is all that needs to happen. We won't have the impact we desire until intentional discipleship has become our common norm.

“There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promise, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed.” When St. Paul VI wrote these words in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, he provided a challenge to the church.

Do we prepare people in our parish with the gospel story so that they can take that story into their own hearts and out to the marketplace?

When was the first time or the most recent time that you proclaimed “the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus”? Discuss that time.

How comfortable are you in speaking about discipleship?

How can we make our parish a more welcoming place so that our evangelization efforts can be more effective in reaching others?

Chapter 7: The Third Threshold: Openness

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018

A witness story from Brad Bursa:

A little over ten years ago, some long-time friends I had basically dismissed during my high school years due to their active faith came calling again. They wondered if I would be interested in coming to a “youth” holy hour at the other parish in town. After making excuses each Sunday for several months, I finally relented to both their persistence and their undeniably joyful way of living life. I’ll never forget the experience, during that first holy hour, of a presence. It was undeniable, and certainly not conjured up by the 90s praise and worship CD spinning in the boom box.

I liked the feeling of presence, and you could say I was curious about exactly what “it” was. Maybe there was something to this “Eucharist thing,” but initially I was not open to considering how this possible truth would impact my life. This curiosity congealed as my friends and I split for our various universities in the fall of 2004.

Days into that first semester, I happened upon a group of guys who invited me to an evening of adoration at a little-used chapel on my secularized Catholic campus. So I went. And kept going.

A couple months later, due to a number of personal decisions, I broached the chasm of despair and darkness, and for the first time actually recognized personal sin for what it was. In that moment of realization, of light tinged with despair, I moved from curiosity to openness. If this presence I’d been encountering really was Jesus, and Jesus is legit, then I’d be open to his being a part of my life. So I tossed up a prayer to that effect alone in my dorm room.

In so doing, I officially stepped into the ring, and the wrestling match of conversion had begun.

In Chapter 7 of *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Sherry Weddell tackles this very phenomenon - the precipice of openness, stepping into the possibility of change in one’s life. Pope Benedict XVI summed up this experience during his inaugural homily, saying: “If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom?”

Weddell notes that **openness to change is often sparked by a major life event and the vulnerability that these varying circumstances can inspire**. Occasionally, one negotiates the journey to openness without struggle, however many go back and forth between wanting to change and being opposed to it (i.e. interior wrestling). With regard to people we may know who are teetering on the edge of openness, it is important not to pressure them beyond what they are prepared to do right then. Ministering to someone who is open requires patience as they “try on” and perhaps “take off” the faith, or experience frustration with what they sense is being asked of them (think of the difficulty in surrendering control, for example). Weddell notes that ministering in this case also calls for “serious, enduring intercession” and care for the person that must be genuine - “no matter what our friend decides, he or she needs to know that we are truly friends.”

However, one need not twiddle his thumbs while waiting for a friend to totter over the edge of openness. It can be helpful to **propose appropriate challenges to take the next step**, much like Jesus did. Obviously, this assumes that a deep trust has already been established. A few suggestions might be:

- **Practicing nonjudgmental truthfulness** while talking through your own faith struggles and the experience of God helping you through.
- **Asking thought-provoking questions** like “What do you do when life gets hard?” or “Where is God in all of this?”
- **Helping him/her connect the dots** (i.e. using your own gifts of discernment to help point out ways God is present and even using them) by using their own words as much as possible. Remind the person how God has been at work in their lives.
- **Encourage him/her to ask God for a sign** (and help the person to put on their spiritual lenses and see...previous point).
- **Ask if you can pray for him/her to be open to God** - and pray on the spot!
- **Ask if he/she would be willing to offer a prayer** and acknowledge openness to God.

Next, Weddell moves into a section aptly titled “God with Us.” Here, she stresses the power of Eucharistic adoration (which is not a devotion for the already devout or an escape from helping a neighbor in need) as a form of evangelization well-suited for the postmodern mindset. “Adoration is experiential, mysterious, and accessible to everyone: the non-baptized, the non-Catholic, the unchurched, the lapsed, the badly catechized, the wounded” and so on. **Adoration is like “spiritual radiation therapy”** because the soul is placed directly in the presence of Christ “in the trust that he will act if we leave the door open the merest crack. All it requires is the ability to sit down.” I’m very certain this is exactly what happened to me during my senior year of high school and into college.

Finally, initial openness to change cannot be mistaken for intentional discipleship. This is often the case in the Church at a time where acknowledging openness to personal change moves one beyond the communal spiritual norm. Hence it is the case that, according to Weddell, “Catholics who move into a stage of spiritual development that is beyond their particular community’s experience may quickly discover that their family, friends, and fellow parishioners are uncomfortable with this new development.” Openness creates a challenge and, “We need to recognize the presence of a hidden hemorrhage fueled by spiritual growth in our parishes. Numerous Catholics are experiencing spiritual longings but may have little or no language for what they seek...Their spiritual antennae are up, and they are quietly looking for people who might know, for clues, for guidance.”

Often these **seekers find that their needs are not being met in the Church, and many leave** - motivated to do so by “a loss of spiritual hope that eventually turns into a loss of trust.” Many of them enter the Protestant world. However, we are beginning to see that in **parishes where discipleship is spoken about openly, seekers hidden in the shadows are emerging**. A culture of intentional discipleship is attracting the low-hanging fruit already in our midst - people already baptized and Catholic. According to Weddell, “All we need to do is recognize, honor, nourish, and support the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, and we will gain radiant new disciples.” Personal openness must be met and fostered by communal openness. **Our community must be open to the radical transformation offered by the Holy Spirit.**

What times in your life can you identify as times of openness to God?

What spiritual practices have helped you remain open to God?

Look at Sherry’s suggestions for fostering openness. Which of these would you be comfortable practicing?

How can our parishes become places where openness is encouraged and supported? What can you do to support someone at this threshold?

Chapter 8: Thresholds of Conversion: Seeking and Intentional Discipleship

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018

The purpose of RCIA is to help people become conscious, intentional followers of Jesus. There needs to be a total openness to seeking how **Jesus is the center of all we do as Catholics**. With a greater focus on Christ and the call to conversion, the catechumens and candidates can noticeably become hungry for solid catechesis.

We need to do what Peter did on the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 people were present: to speak about Jesus whom we have crucified and whom God has raised and to bring that person to the point that he or she, cut to the heart, asks, "Brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). We will respond as Peter did, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you" (Acts 2:38) if you have not been baptized, or if you have already been baptized, go to confession.

Those who respond to the proclamation will join themselves - today as in that day - to the community of believers. They will listen to the teaching of the apostles and will partake in the breaking of the bread. Depending on each person's calling and response, little by little they will be able to make the immense heritage arising from the kerygma (the basic proclamation of faith) their own. Jesus is not accepted on the word of the Church, but the Church is accepted on the word of Jesus.

Our primary task when someone has reached the threshold of seeking is to help him or her focus on the person of Jesus and the central challenges of the kerygma, leaving other doctrinal issues for later.

It is ultimately the Church who is proposing Jesus Christ, her Lord and the living heart of all that she believes and holds dear, to seekers. If we did this consistently, we would not have millions of Catholics in Protestant congregations telling people that they left because they hadn't encountered Christ in a living way as a Catholic. "Me and Jesus" would cease to be an issue if Catholics routinely encountered Jesus Christ in a life-changing way in the context of their own parishes.

Heading into "The Zone": We have found it useful to think of the two thresholds of seeking and intentional discipleship as a whole, as well as considering them as two separate stages. What both thresholds have in common is that they are active rather than essentially passive like the earlier thresholds of trust, curiosity, and openness. That's why we sometimes talk of seeking and intentional discipleship together as "The Zone." The Zone is the place of active wrestling with and serious contemplation of the following of Christ. When an individual crosses the line into active seeking, things really start to change. When large numbers of parishioners are actively seeking or are disciples, the spiritual atmosphere in the parish heats up dramatically.

Seeking - "Dating with a Purpose": To enter into the threshold of **seeking requires a certainty that a personal relationship with God is possible**, because that is, after all, what one is exploring. Seeking is like "dating with a purpose" but not yet marriage. People in the grip of spiritual seeking are no longer speculating about interesting questions with no stake in the outcome. On the contrary, they are now wrestling with a life decision that really matters.

Seekers Seek Jesus: The seeker seeks Jesus Christ and not just God in a general sense or as the "divine" or "impersonal force," or a "Higher Power." Seeking is centered on the possibility of committing oneself to follow Jesus of Nazareth as his disciple. At the same time, seeking is not yet intentional discipleship. You are only seriously thinking about dropping your nets and following Jesus into the unknown.

Seekers realize that **following Christ** has personal implications: it **will make real demands on their priorities, time, money, relationships, and all other areas of life**. By the time a spiritual traveler has crossed into seeking, he or she feels comfortable spending a lot of time with Christians. It is as a seeker that many **begin to pray seriously, become aware of personal sin, and feel the need for personal repentance**.

As we move through the thresholds, our knowledge of Jesus and our openness to him should be steadily increasing. Catholics on the way to discipleship can and should be exposed to parts of the Great Story of Jesus (the kerygma) from the threshold of curiosity on. They will need to understand the whole by the time they make a decision whether or not to "drop their nets."

Moving from Openness to Seeking: We can often help those on the frontier of seeking by inviting them to **experiment with the corporal and spiritual works of mercy**. The threshold of seeking is also an excellent time to help them **explore the vast diversity of prayer** within the Catholic tradition. Introduce them to other disciples so that they can experience the beginnings of Christian community. It can be very **powerful for seekers to hear the journeys of new disciples**. Seekers need to see what life is like for an authentic disciple of Jesus whose struggles

are real - and whose victories are therefore believable. Offer to pray with your seeking friends. Share how the sacraments, the Mass, and the life of the Church have nourished your relationship with Jesus.

Sin Matters: We need to help seekers confront the issues of relativism, personal sin, and “Lordship” – all three of which are rooted in some of the most profound difficulties postmodern people have with the Catholic tradition, since all of them evoke a fear of the loss of personal autonomy. We can help our friend see that the Catholic tradition honors freedom but teaches that freedom is ordered toward virtue and that its misuse will guarantee the loss of freedom.

Intentional Discipleship: Once our friend has passed through the threshold of pre-discipleship, she will come to the point where a final decision whether or not to follow Jesus is required of her. You cannot seek forever. The point is that a human being reaches the moment where - with complete freedom - she chooses to sell all she has to purchase the Pearl of Great Price and become a follower of Christ. This is as far from a passive act as a person can get. It requires a searching and deliberate act of the will. That is why the prior journey through the thresholds is so vital. Everything has prepared us for and led us to this moment of decision.

Dropping your nets and taking the first steps into the world of intentional discipleship is, then, a supremely active choice. Catholic friends, family, and the parish community play a critical role in helping individuals, whether already baptized, or not, make this life changing decision. Of course, it is possible that those on the brink of intentional discipleship may say no. That is not the end of the world. If someone says no, the first and most obvious thing to do is ask, “Why not?” In other words, find out what the blocks are. Then try to address those blocks or help your friend set them aside for now. Spiritual warfare often becomes very intense on the verge of discipleship. Tremendous obstacles can suddenly appear. Because of this, **sustained intercessory prayer for those making their decisions is crucial.**

Becoming a Disciple from a Christian Background: Obviously, merely being baptized in a Christian community of any type does not necessarily result in a commitment to discipleship. The liturgical life of the Church is ideally suited to making the decision to “drop the net” and follow Jesus, for both individuals and the larger Catholic community. Nothing fosters a widespread culture of discipleship like seeing new disciples from all backgrounds emerge in the parish.

When a Leader Isn't Yet a Disciple: One practical issue that has come up often of late is that of how to help existing leaders - sometimes highly visible diocesan and parish staff - negotiate their own personal journeys to discipleship. As leaders, we need to think through, in advance, how to help all in our parish who are not yet disciples to negotiate that journey. The issue at stake is extraordinarily high for individuals, for the Christian community, for the Church, and for the world.

Would you feel comfortable inviting a seeker to experience the demands and challenges of true discipleship?

Have you made an intentional decision to drop your nets and follow Jesus Christ? If so, when did you make that decision? If not, what is keeping you from making that decision?

What sacrifices or challenges have you experienced in your spiritual journey? How have you overcome them? How could you help someone else encountering similar experiences?

Chapter 9: Break the Silence

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018

Five Percent: Diocesan and parish leaders around the country were asked, “What percentage of parishioners, would you estimate, are intentional disciples?” The consistent answer was five percent. What do we do about this?

Weddell comments that obviously, we can’t force people into intentional discipleship, but we can “prepare the soil” - we can “intentionally and intelligently work to create an environment that is conducive to the growth of personal faith and discipleship. We can intentionally shape the atmosphere, experiences, structures, and spiritual culture of our parish life so that it fosters the journey that Jesus Christ asks all of us to make: following him.”

In other words, the **parish needs evangelization goals**. If the parish is serious about making disciples, some serious steps must be taken. Weddell breaks these into four beginning steps: Chapter 9: Break the Silence; Chapter 10: Do Tell the Great Story of Jesus; Chapter 11: Personally Encountering Jesus in His Church; and Chapter 12: Expect Conversion.

Chapter 9: Break the Silence: Weddell gives us four directives on how to Break the Silence.

1. Talk openly about the possibility of a relationship with a personal God who loves you. Talk about your relationship with God. Talk explicitly about following Jesus. Drop the Name! Do Ask: Ask others about their lived relationship with God. Do Tell: Tell the “Great Story of Jesus” (kerygma).
2. Offer multiple, overlapping opportunities for baptized and non-baptized people to personally encounter Jesus in the midst of his Church.
3. Expect conversion. Plan for conversion.
4. Lay the spiritual foundation through organized, sustained intercessory prayer.

Brad comments from his own experience: “I remember my first meeting with Paul - my sophomore year of college, and his junior year. Paul was a highly respected leader on campus and I wanted to get to know him, and I wasn’t expecting him to care so much about getting to know me. Not long into our conversation, he asked the most blunt question that I, a cradle, cultural Catholic had ever been asked – ‘How is your prayer life?’ Who asks that of someone? Who cares to know so deeply about a person that he is willing to talk about spiritual matters? I found myself surprised, and excited to share a bit about what Jesus was doing in my life. It was unlike any conversation I’d ever really had before.”

In breaking the silence, Weddell notes that **discipleship and conversion must become a normative part of parish life and conversation**, or else the spiritually curious and open will continue to walk away having never been asked about their journey, and disciples will continue to hide or minimize their newly awakened personal faith. The code of silence must be broken if it is in place within a community, and Weddell points out “one of the most powerful ways to challenge the silence is by making a **safe place for others to talk about their own lived relationship with God.**”

Threshold Conversations: A “safe place” wherein someone feels comfortable enough to share about his/her relationship with God (or lack thereof) must be built by establishing a bridge of trust. Once this trust is in place, people are surprisingly open to what Weddell has termed the “threshold conversation.”

This conversation is the initial step of listening evangelism, whereby **one invites another to share, simply and directly, about his/her lived relationship with God**. One must listen prayerfully, seeking to learn what the faith journey has been like and, if possible, what threshold the person is currently at, in order to start encouraging and facilitating the next step in the journey to intentional discipleship. The **thresholds are not an attempt to fit people into airtight compartments**, but are a helpful tool for ministry. The threshold conversation breaks the code of silence and raises the issue that underlies all we say and do as Catholic Christians – having a personal relationship with God. Once trust is established, a threshold conversation can take place anywhere (in a coffee shop, the back of the church, a ministry at the parish, etc.) and within the span of mere minutes (or hours, of course).

Weddell continues by stating that before touching on the basics of a threshold conversation (below), a few important things should be noted.

1. A threshold conversation is a supportive, inviting, open-ended, prayerful act of listening evangelization.
2. We need to listen to more than facts, but hear emotion and meaning behind the story.
3. Understand that the goal here is not catechizing and correcting ideas.
4. It is not faith sharing - the focus is on listening to the other and most especially, the Holy Spirit as he prompts us with questions.

5. It is not time for counseling, apologetics, and it is never judgmental.

The ABC's of a Threshold Conversation: Every threshold conversation begins with some variation of a basic question: *Can you describe your relationship with God to this point in your life?* or *Can you tell me the story of your relationship with God so far?*

Based upon Weddell's experience, the answers typically tend in one of five directions:

- "I don't believe in God" (atheist) conversation.
- "I don't know if there is a God" (agnostic) conversation.
- "I believe in a Higher-Power or Impersonal Force" conversation.
- "I believe in a personal God but have no relationship with God" conversation.
- "I believe in a personal God and have a relationship with God" conversation.

On the rise, as well, is the category of "nones" - those who consider themselves spiritual (having a relationship with God) but not religious (not identifying with a particular tradition or community).

This brings us to the cardinal rule of threshold conversations: Never accept a "label" in place of a story. Always ask people what they mean if they identify as a religious "label." One can move beyond the "label" by asking questions like: *What do you mean by atheist? Tell me about the God you don't believe in. Do you believe in any other kind of God or universal spirit? Have you ever believed in God? Why did you stop? Do you ever pray? If so, how? What gives meaning to your life?*

In short, the threshold conversation breaks the code of silence and allows one to listen for what the Church calls "seeds of the Word" which often lie hidden in our neighbor. Remember that this may be the first time anyone has asked a question about their relationship with God and **sometimes simply asking the question raises the issue for one who may have never thought a relationship was possible.**

Weddell recommends ending the conversation with a question like: If you could ask God one question that you knew he would answer right away, what would it be? The answer to this question usually reflects current questions, struggles, or felt needs that might be addressed in the future by some person or resource in the parish.

During threshold conversations, our minds must work at two levels simultaneously: taking in what the person is sharing (on the personal level), while identifying where the story touches on pivotal moments in the spiritual journey (i.e. thresholds). Threshold conversations are often spontaneous, happening within the midst of a longer conversation. They are the fruit of the prompting of the Holy Spirit. **Listening to someone's personal story opens the door for sharing the story - the good news of Jesus Christ.**

Have you ever asked someone about their relationship with God? How did that conversation go? If not, why?

Who in your life would you be comfortable having a threshold conversation with?

If someone asked you about your relationship with God, how would you respond?

Chapter 10: Do Tell: The Great Story of Jesus

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018

We must be clear: The purpose of evangelization is not waking up a generic “faith.” **Evangelizers seek to bring people to an encounter with the person of Jesus of Nazareth**, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, and risen from the dead. Our own personal witness can help illuminate and make living, compelling, and believable aspects of Jesus’ story, but it cannot take the place of Jesus’ story.

How is our generation to believe without someone who proclaims the kerygma? We can no longer presume that people around us already know the story. On the contrary, we have to presume that (a) many don’t know the basic facts of the Story; (b) a good deal of what they “know” may be wrong; (c) they don’t know how the parts of the story fit together to make a whole; and (d) they don’t know what the story means for them personally. Nor do they know what it means for their family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, or the world. We have a duty to provide opportunities for them to make a real spiritual choice to follow Christ. We must respect their right to hear the story.

The Story and Spiritual Development: In every individual’s life, there are two fundamental dynamics at work: (1) the individual’s personal spiritual journey through the thresholds and (2) his or her knowledge of the Great Story of Jesus. An individual can be spiritually far ahead or far behind his or her knowledge of the kerygma, depending on circumstances, openness to the Spirit, and opportunities.

Ultimately, it is the two together - an open heart and a response to the Great Story of Jesus - that enables an individual to declare with faith, “Jesus is Lord.” Indeed, the two feed each other; learning about Jesus through his story can motivate people to finish the personal journey, while moving through the thresholds enables us to understand the story of Jesus as a whole and respond to it.

Tailoring The Great Story to Our Audience: The essential basics do not vary, but we have to ask the question: What parts of the Story does this individual or this family or this group need to hear when and in what order? This can vary, depending upon the beginning place, the holes in their knowledge, and their questions and concerns.

We have come to terms with the reality that, in the United States, **if we don’t evangelize our own, someone else will:** evangelicals, Mormons, or independent Christians. If we don’t preach the kerygma in our parishes, people will hear it in a modified form outside the Church and may come to the mistaken conclusion that it isn’t to be found within the Church. Our practice of not telling the Great Story clearly and compellingly within our parishes has contributed much to the “me and Jesus” mindset.

What follows is a very brief outline of the essential Story of Jesus organized with postmodern sensitivities in mind. Where we begin telling the Story can vary widely, depending upon our audience.

The Great Story of Jesus in Nine Acts:

Act 1: The Kingdom: In this proclamation of the Kingdom we declare that God is love. He created us for a life with him full of love, peace, truth, beauty, goodness, and meaning that begins now, lasts forever, and can’t be taken away. It is this life that Jesus preached and called the Kingdom or reign of God.

Act 2: Jesus, Face of the Kingdom: Jesus is not only the great prophet or announcer of the Kingdom - he is the presence of the Kingdom. If we help them encounter the actions and teachings of the Kingdom in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, people who are intrigued by the Kingdom can very easily become intrigued by Jesus, the man. As evangelizers, we must always remember that as Pope St. John Paul II taught, “The kingdom of God is not a concept, a doctrine, or a program subject to free interpretation, but it is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God.”

Act 3: Jesus, the Kingdom in Word and Deed: Jesus is the face of the Kingdom, not only because he announces the Kingdom, but also because he does the works of the Kingdom. Jesus reveals the love of the Father and the nature of God’s Kingdom through his every word and action: healing and forgiving. Jesus’ mission is to transform people, free them from sin, and make them whole in body and spirit. Jesus’ healing miracles and authority to forgive sins raises the question of his divinity - “Who is this?” - which is naturally followed by another question, “If Jesus is God, what does that mean?”

Act 4: Jesus Embraces the Cross: At the threshold of openness, the inquirer is usually ready to face the fact that Jesus’ ministry results not in “success” as the world understands it, but rather in the mystery of his rejection, betrayal,

crucifixion, and death. Yet it is for us that Jesus embraces the cross in obedience to the Father, as the means of our salvation and access to God's life.

Act 5: Resurrection, Ascension, New Life, Adoption, and the Kingdom: The entire Christian message stands or falls with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Inquirers can study the historical evidence for the Resurrection and discover how powerful it is. Satisfied with that, they can then move on to the personal challenges of what the Resurrection means for each human person. Jesus' life of perfect love and obedience, his death and resurrection on our behalf, breaks the bondage of sin and death. Now in his resurrection he opens the way to our own resurrection and to a new life for all.

Act 6: Jesus Asks Me to Follow Him: The command to "follow" is one heard again and again in the Gospels. Discipleship is not something that just "happens" but is a real decision and turning point requiring all the resources of heart, mind, and strength we can muster-particularly since following Jesus involves that we obey.

Act 7: Personal Sin and Forgiveness: It can be difficult to grasp the reality of personal sin because it feels like an attack upon the self. The seeker must ultimately come to trust and seek Jesus enough to acknowledge what St. John the Apostle says: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John: 1:8). The forgiveness of sin - and therefore our need to acknowledge our sin - is at the heart of the Gospel. And so we must face and repent of sin - our personal sin, which lies at the root of the great structures of systemic sin -since it was for the forgiveness of our personal sin that Christ suffered, died, and was raised from the dead.

Act 8: Dropping the Net: The disciple cooperates with the Holy Spirit, making a conscious choice that requires faith in Jesus as God, with the intention to follow him in what the Church calls the "obedience of faith." Discipleship is expressed by repentance of personal sin and baptism into Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and body on earth - the Church - or by the renewal of baptismal grace through confession and return to the regular practice of the faith.

Act 9: The Life of Discipleship: The new disciple is now ready to begin a lifetime of following Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit in the midst of his Church for the sake of the world.

If you were asked to recount the story of salvation in three minutes or less, what would you say?

What aspects of the Great Story does your personal witness illuminate?

How would you evangelize someone who knows the Great Story but lacks personal faith?

Review the nine acts of the Great Story. Is there any act you have questions about or don't fully understand? How could you learn more about it?

Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus, by Sherry A. Weddell

Chapter 11: Personally Encountering Jesus in His Church

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018

Evangelizing parishes need to look at **how they can turn already existing ministries into evangelization opportunities**. Creating a culture of discipleship is to **create multiple, overlapping opportunities for people to personally encounter Jesus in the midst of his Church**.

We need to have a variety of different paths or doors to discipleship available and visible so that most people will find at least one way to connect with or draw closer to Christ. Instead of thinking of these ministries as separate, siloed endeavors run by different parish interest groups, we need to see all of our ministries in light of our primary call to make disciples. Run every program with one focus: bringing people into an encounter with Jesus Christ.

Charisms (Gifts of the Holy Spirit) as Aids on the Journey to Intentional Discipleship: Charisms play a critical role in the mission of evangelization. Charisms are ways that you and I are empowered by God to be channels of his love, mercy, beauty, truth, wisdom, healing, and provision for others. The power of God flowing through a charism can help reveal Christ, remove impediments to belief, and encourage others to open their lives to God and receive sanctifying grace through the sacraments.

It is critical that we understand that **charisms are given to all the baptized, not just to a few extraordinary Christians**, and to individuals as well as to religious communities and movements. We are not interchangeable cogs in an ecclesial machine. Being open to these gifts of the Holy Spirit, discerning them, and then exercising them for the sake of others are critical acts of obedience. God gives each of us particular charisms.

If a charism is genuine, then God has given it to people in our parish community for a reason. At this moment in our history, we particularly need the charisms ordered toward evangelization and making disciples.

Part of fostering a culture of discipleship is to **expect conversion**. If we expect God to transform lives, we need to have a plan so that our parishes **encourage and support that transformation**, rather than unwittingly suppress it.

Think of the people you would describe as intentional disciples in your parish. What seems to have encouraged their development as disciples? Do they share any common experiences such as a retreat or community service?

What missed opportunities exist in our parish? What thresholds aren't being addressed? How could you make existing programs and events more evangelizing?

Are there any charisms that our parish is not currently tapping into? How could you invite people with their charisms to use their gifts for the work of the Church?

Chapter 12: Expect Conversions

Summarized by Brad Bursa, edited and revised November 2018

We should understand that the manifestations of **major conversion in a person's life are a common part of a new disciple's experience**. How open are we to support this dramatic change in someone's life?

One consequence of the lack of culture of discipleship is that Catholics often don't expect to witness God at work. We plan and work as though the mission of the Church depends entirely upon our hard work, cleverness, and institutions.

For many centuries, the Church has taught that God gives us our intellect, will, and strength to use in his service. Catholicism famously honors the intellect in its relationship to faith. But we are seriously mistaken if we think and plan as though all we can expect to see happen in our parishes is what we could expect to see happen in any secular nonprofit filled with clever people. If we are going to seriously evangelize our own, we had better **be prepared for the Holy Spirit to do things in people's lives** and in our parishes. We have to expect and plan for conversion and the fruit of conversion. How does one "plan" to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit? Certainly one important piece is to become clear about your basic Kingdom priorities.

Kingdom Priorities: Seven key elements that are universal and need to be addressed by any parish community that desires to make disciples:

1. Prayer
2. Identifying the Unbelieving and the Unchurched
3. Sharing the Good News
4. Evangelizing: How and Where?
5. Forming and Equipping Disciples
6. Transforming Society: Compassion and Mercy
7. The Financials/Parish Resources

In the absence of discipleship-centered Christian community, even the most independent and committed Catholic cannot flourish, and they begin to wither - and even leave the Church.

The Power of Christian Community: Many priests and lay leaders who are disciples and who long to evangelize experience a devastating isolation. The reason for their despair is always the same: the lack of a community of spiritual friends with whom they could walk the path of discipleship. Many Catholic leaders say that they are exhausted because they feel completely on their own, that they have no meaningful support in their parishes or dioceses except for their spiritual directors.

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote over seven hundred years ago that the fruitfulness of the sacramental life is dependent upon the intentional support of the community as well as that of the spiritual life of the individual. Apologist Ralph Martin commenting on this wrote, "The ongoing **fruitfulness of a sacrament is tied to the quality of the follow-up or the environment of faith in which one lives**, and the ongoing receptivity to the work of the Holy Spirit in the particular grace of the sacrament. Thomas acknowledges - even in his time - that the clergy are too busy to undertake this responsibility solely by themselves, but must involve the lay faithful in the task of follow-up."

We know that the first year after one finishes RCIA or goes through a major conversion is critical and can be surprisingly difficult as the new disciple faces many unexpected obstacles and decisions. We also know that **many converts ultimately "drown" in the vast, lonely Catholic ocean**. If we are serious about making disciples, we must

intentionally support them once they are made. As we make disciples in our congregations, some kinds of community will form naturally, but we will need to **support spontaneous networks of friends with intentional discipleship-centered community building**.

Lay the Spiritual Foundation of Prayer: Resistance to spiritual culture change is to be expected and happens on many levels. This is why organized, sustained, corporate **intercessory prayer for the spiritual renewal of our communities is essential**. Sustained intercessory prayer for the spiritual renewal of one's parish can change the spiritual atmosphere of a place and increase the frequency of external and internal actual graces. Parish leaders who are serious about making disciples are discovering how critical it is to deal with spiritual opposition through prayer.

The infinitely good news is that God has made provisions for all our weaknesses and needs, and for our mission of evangelization. But like discipleship, obtaining this provision requires that we embark on a spiritual quest. Much of God's provisions come to us in response to the sustained prayer of his Church as she prepares to run the race of discipleship in a given time and place.

In the end, the Catholic understanding of salvation is incorrigibly communal. We are all in this together, because none of us are saved by ourselves alone: we are saved as members of the Church, the body of Christ. The hand cannot say to the foot, "I do not need you."

The Weight of Glory: It should not surprise us that a **parish-wide culture of intentional discipleship is built and reinforced by the love, charisms, prayer, sacrifices, energy, and discipleship of many people**, not just pastors and staff and "officially" recognized leaders. In order to evangelize our own within the Church and those who lives we touch outside, we need to deliberately form a wide range of Catholic disciples to:

- ask where people are in their relationship with God;
- listen well, respectfully, and prayerfully;
- recognize spiritual thresholds in one another;
- respond helpfully to one another's current spiritual needs;
- articulate the basics of the Great Story in a way that invites intentional discipleship;
- challenge one another to make the decision to follow Jesus as a disciple;
- celebrate and support intentional discipleship.

There is great cause for hope. The Holy Spirit has our back; he is creating a vast community of love in which, slowly but surely, we are learning the steps of the Great Dance of the Blessed Trinity. Jesus promises to be with us always, even to the end of the world. And because of this we can trust that he will give his Church what is necessary in this hour, as in all hours past, to meet the challenge of this time. We can, in a word, pray for and expect conversion.

How is our parish prepared for the Holy Spirit to work in the community? Does our parish handle change well? Or is change a struggle?

What is one step you are willing to take to become an advocate for intentional discipleship in our parish?

Studies show that one of the most effective ways to keep young people involved in their faith communities is through Christian service. What sustained, ongoing service opportunities are available to young people in our parish? How are they encouraged to reflect on these experiences and connect them to their relationship with Jesus Christ?