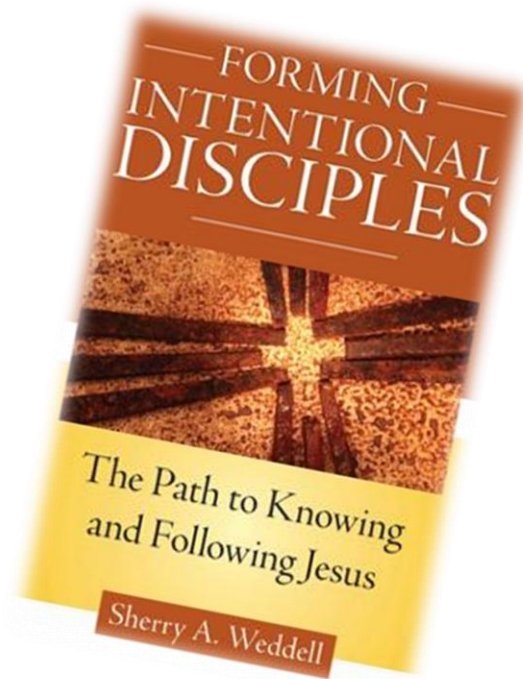




The Door of Faith
is Always Open

Forming
Intentional Disciples

Discussion Guide



Sherry A. Weddell
and Following Jesus
The Path to Knowing
and Following Jesus

Discussion Guide

Chapter 1

God Has No Grandchildren

In this chapter, Sherry Weddell discusses the alarming statistics that describe the reality faced by the Catholic Church today. What reality is Sherry addressing? The current situation in our parishes and dioceses is that many Catholics no longer practice the faith. In page 39, she states,

If this trend does not change, in ten years it will cease to matter that we have a priest shortage. The Builders will be largely gone, the Boomers retiring, and our institutions –parishes and schools- will be emptying at an incredible rate... So let's be clear: *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.*

1. What is your initial reaction to the statistics presented?
2. What do you think the author means by 'cultural Catholicism'?
3. Did you grow up Catholic? If so, was having a personal relationship with God a central element of the formation you received?
4. Reflect on the following passage,

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The two disciples [of John's] heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see." John 1:35-39

What is the invitation offered by Jesus? Is this the beginning of a relationship?

5. Is there someone close to you –family, friend, co-worker-, who is no longer practicing the Catholic faith? Have you asked this person to share his/her story?
6. What are some of the reasons used to explain why so many people describe themselves as "NONE"?

Chapter 2

We Don't Know What Normal Is

In this chapter, Sherry presents excerpts from the document which guided the topics of conversation during the recent gathering of Bishops in 2012 to discuss the New Evangelization (the Synod on the New Evangelization). Highlighted multiple times during the Synod, was the importance of having a relationship with Christ, and thus with the Father, and the Holy Spirit. She states that this relationship involves “three spiritual journeys.” Furthermore, the manner in which these journeys are nurtured and lived has an impact on our discipleship.

The concept of what is considered “normal” is also presented. Sherry describes that what is perceived as “normal” is skewed. For instance, we have lost the sense that desiring and having a personal relation with Jesus is “normal.”

1. On page 54, three spiritual journeys are described. What are they? Do you see them as separate or inter-related journeys?
2. In your journey of faith, have you been formed from the perspective of separate or inter-related journeys?
3. Reflect on the “normal” values listed on pp. 60-61. Which of these values are you most comfortable with and which one do you think is most challenging to you?
4. What is your own experience of small intentional gatherings of disciples?
5. Are you familiar with the word *kerygma* (p.66)? What is it?
6. What are your memories of hearing the *kerygma* and your understanding of the *kerygma*? Why do you think the *kerygma* is essential to the journey of faith of a disciple?

Chapter 3

The Fruit of Discipleship

Discipleship is NORMAL. Sherry presents on page 89, the importance of discipleship in the life of the parish,

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.

This also applies to each of our lives. No matter how many parish activities we are involved in, if we are not intentional disciples, we will not bear much fruit.

1. Reflect on your faith journey. Do you think you are an intentional disciple? What is helping you or preventing you from true discipleship?
2. Ecclesial vocations are mentioned on page 72. Considering the term “ecclesial vocation” in the most basic form, it indicates a calling lived in the Church, through the Church, and for the Church. Which vocations would you think constitute “ecclesial vocations”?
3. Do you think that marriage or the single life are considered to be “ecclesial vocations”, why or why not?
4. Why is discipleship important when discerning any vocation?

5. Reflect on the following passage,

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others, with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Romans 12: 6-8

What is your understanding of charisms? Have you been guided on a path of charism discernment?

6. How are the charisms of your parish community nurtured and brought forward?

Chapter 4

Grace and the Great Quest

Sherry brings the reader's attention to two concepts that have been prevalent in our Catholic culture: *"The Sacrament will take care of it"* and *"The Church will provide."* The reader is invited to ponder the sacramental life in a new way.

This chapter invites us to reflect on the disposition of the person receiving the sacrament. On page 101, Sherry states,

Passively receiving a sacrament is not enough. The grace we receive is directly related to the personal faith, spiritual expectancy, and hunger with which we approach the sacrament. St Thomas [Aquinas] describes how adults who have been validly baptized can receive different effects of grace –or even none at all.

1. How do you understand the concept of "grace" in the sacraments?
2. Reflect on the following passage,
Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house." So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith. Mark 6:4-6
Why do you think "he [Jesus] was not able to perform any might deed" in Nazareth?
3. What do understand by the expression, "the Sacrament will take care of it"? What do think is missing from that expression?
4. How do you understand the difference between "validity" and "fruitfulness" of a sacrament?
5. Reflect on the last time that you received formation about the sacraments. What do you remember most about this experience? Has your understanding changed after reading this chapter?
6. Do you think you **all** the formation about sacraments happens exclusively before the Sacraments are received? Why or why not?

Chapter 5

Thresholds of Conversion: Can I Trust You?

In 1979 Pope John Paul II wrote the Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesis in Our Time* [*Catechesi Tradendae*], which summarized the recommendations made by the Synod of Bishops following their meeting in 1977, when they gathered to discuss the topic of catechesis. The Pope then states,

Nevertheless, the specific aim of catechesis is to develop, with God's help, an as yet initial faith, and to advance in fullness and to nourish day by day the Christian life of the faithful, young and old... To put it more precisely: within the whole process of evangelization, the aim of catechesis is to be the teaching and maturation stage...

It is important to remember that although the aim of catechesis is to bring one's faith to maturity, this is not a single step process. Sherry describes five thresholds or stages that occur in the process of conversion toward intentional discipleship and mature faith. In this chapter, the initial threshold –which is TRUST- is discussed.

1. What are the five thresholds of conversion presented in this chapter?
2. Are these thresholds focused on knowledge of the faith? Is it possible to have a “high” knowledge of the faith and not have experienced conversion?
3. What is the role of trust in the process of conversion and evangelization? What exactly is understood by “trust”?
4. Reflect on a close relationship. How did you become close friends? How was trust established? What happened if trust was betrayed?
5. Reflect on your faith journey- Has there been someone who was a “bridge of trust” for you? Have you been a “bridge of trust” for someone?
6. What connection do you see between trust and the countless numbers of Catholics who no longer practice the faith? Discuss your answer.

Chapter 6

The Second Threshold: Curiosity

Once the bridge of trust has been established, Sherry explains, the role of the evangelizer is to help transition to the next threshold, that of curiosity about Jesus Christ. During this threshold people are open to exploring the possibility of a personal relationship with God.

“Those who don’t believe in a personal God and the possibility of a relationship with that God will never be able to move beyond the threshold of curiosity.” (p. 144). During this time, it is important to allow people to express their curiosity. This is not the threshold at which we teach all the dogmas of the Church; rather, this is the time when we would invite people to reflect on the question, “Who do you think that Jesus is?”

1. After reading this chapter, do you understand curiosity as active or passive? In other words, is it active seeking or casual curiosity?
2. What is the relation between trust and curiosity?
3. Reflect on the following passage,

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, “Behold, the Lamb of God.” The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come, and you will see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. John 1:35-39.

Jesus invited his would-be disciples to “come and see.” In your own faith journey, have you been invited to “come and see” or have you received information about the faith?

4. Are you likely to invite others to “come and see” or are you more comfortable teaching about all the dogmas of the faith?
5. Reflect on the difference between Jesus as a “topic” of faith formation and Jesus as the personal God who is capable of forming a personal relationship with each individual.
6. Do you think the three basic stages of curiosity (p. 145) offer a helpful tool for those involved in faith formation in a parish community?

Chapter 7

The Third Threshold: Openness

Just as trust is needed in order to move to curiosity, curiosity is needed in order to move to openness. Sherry tells us on pg. 157,

But moving into that threshold is one of the most difficult journeys for twenty-first-century people to make because it demands that we declare ourselves open to the possibility of personal and spiritual change.

Moving into this threshold is not the same for everyone. For some, it might only take a weekend experience of attending a truly evangelizing retreat; but for others it might be months, even years of “testing the waters.” This transition occurs without much struggle for only a few people, the majority of people struggle with truly being open to change. Those accompanying someone through this stage need to be very patient. Unfortunately, when we are eager to share the Good News, we fail to exercise as much patience as we should. Many times initial openness to change is confused by the evangelizer with intentional discipleship; this can create a greater struggle in the transition toward openness.

1. Why is the transition between curiosity and openness a difficult process?
2. What are likely triggers that pave the door for openness? Why do you think the “trigger” opens the way to move to the threshold of openness?
3. How does your parish foster openness with those who inquire about the Faith?
4. What are some ways in which you (or your parish) could encourage openness in those who have left the Catholic Church or who are considering leaving because their spiritual hunger is not met?
5. Reflect on times in your own faith journey when you have experienced openness. What was the “trigger”? What was the most valuable experience that helped foster openness for you?
6. What are some ways in which you have fostered openness? What was most challenging?

Chapter 8

Thresholds of Conversion: Seeking and Discipleship

The last two thresholds are a bit different from the other three. They are sometimes called “The Zone.” Sherry explains,

We have found it useful to think of the two thresholds of seeking and intentional discipleship as a whole... What both thresholds have in common is that they are *active* rather than essentially passive like the earlier thresholds of trust, curiosity, and openness.

In order to enter into the threshold of “seeking,” there has to be a certainty that a personal relation with God IS possible. Those who seek are looking for the person of Jesus Christ, but are not intentional disciples yet. They are seriously thinking about following Jesus. During this threshold the evangelizer continues to model what it means to be a disciple and continues to proclaim the *kerygma*. This is also the threshold best suited for catechesis.

1. What is the main difference that sets apart the threshold of seeking from the previous three thresholds?
2. What is the primary task of the evangelizer (and the catechist) when someone has reached the threshold of seeking?
3. What connection do you see between seeking and becoming an intentional disciple?
4. How would you companion someone in the seeking stage?
5. Why do you think it is important to address personal sin with seekers? How would you address this topic? Reflect on your faith journey, how do you understand personal sin?
6. Often the journey towards intentional discipleship is not clearly presented. In fact there are many pastoral leaders who are not yet disciples. Does this affect your faith journey? How would you treat a leader who is not yet a disciple?

Chapter 9

Break the Silence

We cannot begin to find solutions to a problem unless we realize there is a problem. Once that happens, we need to name the problem. It is important that we face our current realities. It has been estimated that only five percent of parishioners at any given parish are intentional disciples. Prayerfully, we can set goals and a plan of action to help form more intentional disciples.

Sherry offers us much encouragement, (p. 185)

While we cannot make anyone “drop their nets” any more than a gardener can make a seed germinate, we can intentionally and intelligently work to create an environment that is conducive to the growth of personal faith and discipleship.

1. What specific problem facing our parishes, dioceses, and our Church in general is Sherry discussing in this chapter? Why would this be problematic?
2. Most of our formation programs are “silent” about an essential component of the journey of faith? What is that component?
3. What is your understanding of the goals of a “Threshold Conversation”?
4. Reflect on your faith journey. Did someone ever have a “Threshold Conversation” with you?
5. How does your understanding of Threshold Conversation change the way in which you would “break the silence?”
6. What aspects of Threshold Conversations seem most challenging to you? What aspects seem most natural?

Chapter 10

Do Tell: The Great Story of Jesus

It is important that we accept the sad reality that most people have NOT heard the great story of Jesus. Therefore, as evangelizers we must make a commitment to tell this story. In our zeal to share our own journey, we need to remain mindful to keep things in perspective, and to remember that the story of Jesus is most important. Sherry reminds us,

Our own personal witness can help illuminate and make living, compelling, and believable aspects of Jesus's story, but it cannot take the place of Jesus' story (p. 202).

The story needs to be tailored to our audiences. The story is unchangeable, but what does change is what parts are shared, when, and in what order. What truly awakens Christian faith is not primarily about the Church herself...but primarily about Christ. Sherry offers us a plan of telling the story in a series of acts; she suggests nine acts.

1. What is the real purpose of evangelization?
2. What do you understand by the statement, "What truly awakens Christian faith is not primarily about the Church herself"?
3. Reflect on your faith journey, what story did you hear first?
4. If we could honestly reflect on our faith formation programs, what do you think is most central to them, the teachings of the Church, or the story of Jesus?
5. What does telling the "Great Story" mean for you? What does it mean for our pastoral practices?
6. What elements of the "Story in Nine Acts" are helpful to your faith journey? Does the story need to be told in this order?

Chapter 11

Personally Encountering Jesus in His Church

Once the silence is broken, and the story is told, the next evangelization step in forming intentional disciples is,

To create multiple, overlapping opportunities for people to personally encounter Jesus in the midst of his Church. (p. 219)

We need to begin with what we already have in place. Our parishes and our dioceses already have many ‘structures’ in place. There are many faith formation opportunities for children and for sacramental preparation already available. There is, of course, the golden opportunity of the homily at every Mass. These two opportunities should be revisited and in Christian charity change what needs to be changed so that the story can be heard. Then, we need to consider what could be added to the offerings that we already have available. This is not the work of one or two people alone. This is the apostolate of the entire parish, according to the *charisms* given to all.

1. What is your understanding of *charism*? When did you first hear about *charisms*?
2. Which *charisms* do you think you have received?
3. How can you help others discover their gifts?
4. Do you think there are any *charisms* that are not welcomed in many parishes? Why do you think that might be the case?
5. What are some of the structures already in place in your parish which could be evangelizing opportunities? What would need to be changed in order for these structures to be truly evangelizing?
6. Reflect on your faith journey. Which opportunities have you found (at your current parish or a parish from the past) which have helped you encounter Jesus in his Church?

Chapter 12

Expect Conversion

One of the many unfortunate consequences of the lack of a culture of discipleship is that we do not expect to witness God's mighty deeds. We should not be surprised to see God at work. We should not be surprised to witness miracles. We should expect conversion to be intimately related to discipleship. Conversion and discipleship should be the NORM –not the exception- in our parishes and dioceses.

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 that are not part of our five-year plans, things that we could have never accomplished even if they were part of our five-year plans. We have to *expect and plan for conversion and the fruit of conversion.* (p. 238)

As we continue to participate in God's mission, it is important to be mindful that as we change our efforts and plan to form intentional disciples, we might feel isolated at times. Change is not easy, and we need to nourish our own relationship with the Lord as we commit to a new chapter in our lives and in the lives of our faith communities.

1. Can you list three new insights that you have gained about forming intentional disciples after reading this book?
2. What new insight have you gained about your own discipleship?
3. Have you ever felt alone or isolated in your quest to follow Christ? Has someone in your community reached out to you to journey with you?
4. What would you do to reach out to someone who is not an intentional disciple yet?
5. What do you think would be possible ways to encourage a community of spiritual companions to journey with one another?
6. How can you minister within the community to bring about a new vision of discipleship?

Notes