Intentional Discipleship

“This conversion is the acceptance of a personal relationship with Christ, a sincere adherence to him, and a willingness to conform one’s life to his. Conversion to Christ involves making a genuine commitment to him and a personal decision to follow him as his disciple.”

*National Directory for Catechesis, p. 47,48*

Thresholds of Conversion

Pre-Discipleship
Focus: *Lived relationship with God*, whether baptized or unbaptized, churched or unchurched.

1. Initial Trust
2. Spiritual curiosity
3. Spiritual openness
4. Spiritual seeking
5. Intentional discipleship (5% of “active”?)

(Adapted from *Five Thresholds of Post-Modern Conversion*, Doug Schaupp, 1998)

We Must Not Confuse:

Passive  
*Initial Trust*  with  *Active Personal Faith*
*Curiosity*  with  *Serious Seeking*
*Openness*  with  *Intentional Discipleship*

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The majority of Catholics, practicing or non-practicing, are in one of the earlier, essentially passive, stages of spiritual development.

Building Trust

- Most practicing Catholics possess initial trust - but in whom or what? Example: They may trust the Church but not God.
- Not the same as the theological virtue of faith.
  “Faith is first of all a personal adherence...to God. At the same time, it is a free assent to the whole truth God has revealed.” (US Catholic Catechism for Adults, p. 37)
- Many non-practicing Catholics or unchurched people do not have a trusting relationship with either a disciple or the Church. They may trust God (as they understand God) but not the Church or Christians.

Pope Francis: Building Trust Since 2013

26% of lapsed/non-practicing American Catholics polled were considering or open to re-visiting or strengthening their relationship with the Church because of Francis. (Angus Reid Global, The People’s Pope, March 2014) 14 million Catholics! 800 per US parish!
Fostering Curiosity: Curiosity About ???

- Most RCIA programs focus upon Catholicism primarily and deal with Jesus Christ as a “belief” or “topic” within Catholicism. This can reinforce an “impersonal” or Institutional understanding of becoming a Catholic.
- If our goal is intentional discipleship, we must foster curiosity about the person of Jesus as the center of the Catholic faith.
- Those who are disdainful of Christianity often know very little about Jesus.

Vine and Branches

Learn to Ask Questions
Jesus ran “Q & Q” sessions:
- What do you want me to do for you?
- How do you read the law?
- Where is everyone? Has no one condemned you?
- Who do people say that I am?
- What are you looking for?

Our primary task at this threshold is not catechetical – to answer factual questions. We must first **arouse spiritual curiosity**.

Stages of Curiosity
- Awareness. There are more possibilities than they had imagined or experienced. One such possibility might be: you can have a personal relationship with a God who loves you.
- Engagement: Taking steps on their own: making friends with a Christian, reading about Jesus, etc.
- Exchange: Intense curiosity. Not just listening but actively asking questions and exchanging ideas.
Curiosity to Openness

- Openness is not discipleship. It is a tentative openness to God and the possibility of spiritual change. You may not be certain that you can have a personal relationship with God, but must be open to the possibility.
- Openness is still essentially passive.
- Moving from curiosity to openness is one of the hardest transitions to make.
- Must lower defenses (cynicism, antagonism), and acknowledge to God (if he is really there and listening!) and yourself that you are open to change. It can feel dangerous, crazy, horrific, out of control.

On the Verge of Openness

- Serious, enduring intercession is especially important at this threshold. Many influences: our nature, family and friends, the culture, the enemy, the world all conspire to block a move into openness.
- The not-yet-open often need anonymity at this point in their journey. They need to explore spiritual things at arm’s length.

Appropriate Challenge

- Help them connect the dots. Remind them of how God has been at work in their life to this point.
- “I don’t think there are random events in your life. I think God is pursuing you. I think God is doing all he can to get your attention.”
- “I think God is trying to get your attention through that dream you told me about (or that movie you saw). Your soul is yearning for God and you should listen to your soul.”
We Are Learning

That the first big journey that most Catholics have to make is from trust to openness to the possibility of change.

First Big Issues:
1. Possibility of a personal relationship with God?
2. They need to make a choice. This choice is not just saying a prayer but giving your life away to God.

The majority who go through a single evangelization retreat/process will probably come out in the thresholds of openness/seeking – not full discipleship.

Only a small minority emerge from a single evangelization experience as intentional disciples.

There needs to be vision, leadership, and structures for continuing follow-up to help those who have had a powerful experience – but are not yet disciples – continue the journey.

If we “drop” them, many backtrack to fit in or may even leave for the Protestant world to find answers.

Spiritual Seeking

- Being open but not yet seeking can feel like seeking. They are passively “open to the universe” and think that is the goal.
- Seeking is active: intentionally exploring relationship with Christ and his Church and the possibility of discipleship.
- It is not yet intentional discipleship. But it does require certainty that personal relationship with God is possible because that is what you are exploring. (It’s dating with a purpose, not marriage).
- The decision to seek is a real commitment and can be confused with intentional discipleship.
- Those who are “open” don’t always want to come to a conclusion.
- Seekers intentionally seek resolution. They want to connect the dots. “I need to make a decision.”
Becoming a seeker may not look like that different on the outside but can feel dramatically different to the one on the journey. There is an urgency. It feels like a quest.

“Phantom seekers” can look the same, ask the same questions but lack urgency. They may be using questions to deflect attention from deeper issues.

Fostering Seeking

- Model seeking after Christ in your own life for them. Share how the sacraments and the Church have nourished your relationship with Jesus.
- Help them confront issues of relativism, personal sin, and “Lordship.”

For many, talking about “personal sin” sounds like an attack upon the self – and you never attack the self!

“Dropping the Net”

- People can’t seek forever. They often feel they need to make a decision or drop the whole thing.
- Following Jesus as a disciple takes a different “set of muscles” than seeking. You can get used to seeking and never finding and feel that commitment is impossible.
- At this threshold, we need to encourage them to make a decision.

“Dropping the Net”

- Ask them explicitly to make a commitment.
  If they say “no”, ask why not. Find out what their blocks are. Address those blocks or help them set them aside.
- Help them focus on Jesus and central issues and leave less important doctrinal issues for later.
• Should we encourage someone to follow Christ before they have decided about entering the Church?
  This fits the Church’s understanding of pre-baptismal disposition. Perfectly appropriate in RCIA.

• Encourage new disciples to tell their story.
• Spiritual warfare becomes very intense on the verge of discipleship (as on the verge of openness). Intercessory prayer is very important.

Helping Another “Drop Their Nets”
• Ask “Would you like to make the choice to turn your life over to God today?”
• Lead someone through the renewal of Baptismal promises – one on one – before the Blessed Sacrament.
• Have confirmation sponsor and candidate pair up, pray through renewal of baptismal promises in a chapel setting.
• Family setting: Celebrating the anniversary of each child’s baptism by relighting baptismal candle and reciting baptismal promises as a family (remind older children that they are old enough to pray it for themselves.)

We Repeat This Journey at Critical Moments of Conversion
• Entering the Church from another Christian tradition and already a disciple. The journey is centered around the Church and the Catholic faith.

• Important points of deepening faith or challenge, discernment, decision-making, or difficult obediences.
• The journey can be fast or slow.
Building a Culture of Discipleship

Help a wide range of Catholics become comfortable with and skilled at:

▪ Asking where people are in their relationship with God
▪ Listening well, respectfully, and prayerfully
▪ Recognizing spiritual thresholds in another
▪ Responding appropriately to their current spiritual needs
▪ Articulating the basics of the gospel in a way that invites intentional discipleship
▪ Challenging others to make the decision to follow Jesus as a disciple
▪ Celebrating & supporting intentional discipleship

A culture of intentional discipleship is built and reinforced by many inputs by many people. This skill set will reinforce the impact of other evangelization efforts underway.

Discussion:
How could you apply this understanding of the pre-discipleship spiritual journey into your own ministry or relationships?