—FORMING—
INTENTIONAL DISCIPLES

The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus

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CHAPTER 5

Thresholds of Conversion: Can I Trust You?

Peter Parker: "You don't trust anyone, that's your problem."

J. Jonah Jameson: "I trust my barber."

SPIDER-MAN (FILM)

Where do we start when seeking to make disciples of unevangelized 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 aim of catechesis is to be the teaching and maturation stage ... the period in which the Christian, having accepted by faith the person of Jesus Christ as the one Lord and having given Him complete adherence by sincere conversion of heart, endeavors to know better this Jesus to whom he has entrusted himself.[1]

[1] Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 20, emphasis added.

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.[2] 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.

I've listened to hundreds of Catholic leaders lament the failure of catechesis since Vatican II. So often we talk as if our problems would be over if we could just convey the concepts and facts of the faith to people accurately enough. A failure of catechesis may have been a major factor in the 1960s, but we are now two generations past the council. The situation in the West today is far beyond a failure of catechesis.

Today we can presume hardly anything about an individual's true beliefs and lived spiritual experience even when we are dealing with a baptized Catholic who attended CCD classes or received a Catholic education. Catechesis remains hugely important, especially for those on the verge of discipleship and afterward, but *not as a starting place* when evangelizing in the twenty-first-century West.

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[2] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Department of Communications, *National Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2005) p. 49.

In the mid-1990s, a campus minister named Doug Schaupp was struggling with similar problems. He and his ministry team at UCLA realized that "students weren't responding in the same ways they had before. Sharing the truth of Jesus' gospel no longer moved people. Our evangelistic labors resonated less, and had less fruit."[3]

During the 1997–1998 school year, thirty-seven students went through conversion experiences. Schaupp's team responded by doing something unusual. They asked these students to describe their spiritual journeys:

> At the end of the year, we interviewed most of the 37 students to find out what kind of internal and external dynamics helped them into the Kingdom of God. What we found was that they actually all went through the same phases of growth and transformation, though each student obviously took different amounts of time to grow from one place to the next.[4]

What they discovered was remarkable. First, Schaupp and his collaborators found that all thirty-seven students passed through a series of thresholds or stages of conversion — five in all — that culminated in a commitment to follow Jesus Christ as a disciple. Each transition to a new threshold was a genuine work of grace, empowered by the Holy Spirit, but each threshold also required real spiritual

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[3] Don Everts and Doug Schaupp, *I Once Was Lost: What Postmodern Skeptics Taught Us About Their Path to Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), pp. 12-13.

[4] Doug Schaupp, "Five Thresholds of Postmodern Conversion" (online at www.intervarsity.org/evangelism/article_item.php?article_id=1505, as of May 8, 2012).

energy and real choices on the part of the person making the journey. Conversion didn't "just happen" for these young adults. It required their ever-increasing commitment to more and more profound choices. After spending ten years walking with another 2,000 students on the journey to discipleship, Schaupp and co-author, Don Everts, wrote a book about their discoveries.[5]

What they "discovered" was as ancient and perennial as the journey taken by the blind man in John 9:1–38, who went through a series of steps on his way to full commitment to Jesus. When first questioned, he spoke of "the man called Jesus" (v. 11). Then he described Jesus as a prophet (v. 17). Then he acknowledged him as "from God" (v. 33). Finally, he called him "Lord" and "he worshiped him" (v. 38).

The Five Thresholds of Conversion

When I first stumbled across a draft of Schaupp's initial paper on the thresholds eight years ago, I instantly sensed that here was a language for something that nearly everyone in pastoral ministry has encountered. We all know lots of Catholics who have some genuine spiritual yearnings — Catholics in whom the Holy Spirit is obviously at work — and yet who are clearly not yet disciples or even close to discipleship. Listening to people's journeys in light of these thresholds or stages of conversion enables us to honor the first reality while dealing effectively with the second.

Keep in mind that the thresholds are strictly focused upon one's lived relationship with God rather than one's

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[5] Everts and Schaupp, *I Once Was Lost*.

baptismal status or knowledge of the faith. One of the fascinating things you learn as you listen is that some baptized and catechized Catholics have not even progressed as far as simple trust (the first threshold), while some of the unbaptized are much further along the road. A few may even be intentional disciples without having yet been baptized.

Our maxim has become "Never accept a label in place of a story." For postmoderns, common spiritual labels like "Catholic" and "agnostic" are as likely to hide reality as to reveal it. There is no way of knowing what a particular person's journey has truly been and where the person is now until we earn the right to hear his or her story and then listen carefully and prayerfully.

Let's look at these five thresholds briefly and then zero in on the first threshold in more detail. (We have adapted the language slightly to better fit a Catholic context.):

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 in his Church.
5. **Intentional discipleship:** This is the decision to "drop one's nets," to make a conscious commitment to follow Jesus in the midst of his Church as an obedient disciple and to reorder one's life accordingly.

Inside and Outside

It is important for those who are committed Catholics — especially those who have never known anything else — to remember that a threshold usually looks and feels very different to "insiders" than it does to someone approaching from the outside. As evangelizers, we need to make a real effort to imagine; to see Christ, the faith, and the Church through the eyes of outsiders. The same threshold can seem overwhelming and insurmountable to them while looking very simple and obvious to us.

One important side note: We have found that people who are already disciples within another Christian tradition

usually go through these same stages as they contemplate the possibility of entering the Catholic Church. This was certainly true for me when I first considered entering the Church. I had been raised as a strongly anti-Catholic fundamentalist in southern Mississippi, and contemplating becoming Catholic was like considering becoming a Martian.

I brought a big book about Catholicism to my first RCIA session. In those days, I was completely clueless about intra-Catholic squabbles and presumed that all books on Catholicism came from the same basic perspective. I put my big book underneath my battered metal chair and waited for the session to begin. A member of the RCIA team sat down next to me, glanced at the title of my book, and fixed me with a knowing look. "I see where you're coming from," he said.

"What?" I was completely mystified. "*I* don't even know where I'm coming from. How do *you* know where I'm coming from?"

That was my first clue that there were mysteries involved in being Catholic that weren't covered in the *Catechism*.

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. In intense retreat settings, some may bound through a couple thresholds in a few days. Others may stay stuck in one place for years or ping-pong back and forth between different thresholds. 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. Some people will not respond to our best ef-

forts to be helpful. Jesus warned us that some people will not receive the "seed" (Mark 4:14–19). Others may dazzle us by choosing to cooperate with grace and become the good soil that brings forth thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. We are dealing with the mystery of a relationship that God himself is initiating in the human heart.

Let me stress 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. Responding to seekers in a way that does not accept and honor their lived experience may cause them to "freeze" or even move away from God. Understanding the thresholds can help us help them or, at least, help us to not get in the way of what God is doing.

The First Threshold: Trust

What do we mean by *trust* in this context?

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. What this means can vary widely.

A dear friend of mine, raised in a completely nonreligious household, somehow came to the conclusion that Christmas wasn't Christmas if he hadn't heard Linus recite the Nativity story from the Gospel of Luke in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. He trusted in the goodness of that story, though he didn't learn anything else about Christianity for many years. A cartoon was his initial bridge of trust.

Another close friend lives in the Persian Gulf, speaks Arabic fluently, and often goes places few Western women ever