

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO

SHAPING A
GOSPEL
SPIRITUALITY

DISCIPLESHIP, CONVERSION & EVANGELIZATION

BY
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Our Discipleship Challenge

*“The Christian faith is, above all,
conversion to Jesus Christ,
full and sincere adherence to his person
and the decision to walk in his footsteps.
Faith is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ,
making of oneself his disciple.
This demands a permanent commitment
to think like him, judge like him and live as he lived.
In this way the believer unites himself or herself
to the community of disciples
and appropriates the faith of the Church.”*

—U. S. Bishops
General Directory for Catechesis, (1997) #53

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Shaping a Gospel Spirituality

DISCIPLESHIP, CONVERSION & EVANGELIZATION

“**C**ome, follow me!” With this inviting command and commanding invitation, Jesus calls followers to a Christ-like life, to be as he is and to do as he does. The Jesus who invited his first disciples so long ago still extends that same invitation to us today when we encounter him and his world in and through the Gospels. They provide a way to live in a personal relationship with him and “see” the world anew from the viewpoint of God and Jesus. Accepting and living this new vision and vocation will open up a way that will lead us through death to new life with God forever.

[Our goal is] “to bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others. Clearly, unless we continue to be evangelized ourselves, with renewed enthusiasm for our faith and our Church, we cannot evangelize others. Priority must be given to continued and renewed formation in the faith as the basis of our deepening personal relationship with Jesus. When the story of Jesus is truly our story, when we have caught his fire, when his good news shapes our lives individually, as families and as a Church, his influence will be felt far beyond our Church.”

—U.S. CATHOLIC BISHOPS
“Go and Make Disciples” (1992), #46-47, 57

Christian Discipleship

Christian discipleship is the way we live out our relationship with God and with others in the Christian community and in our world. Our spiritual lives as *Christ-ians* are patterned after the example of Jesus, the *Christ*. We strive to become like Jesus. As Paul described it, we put on the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5) and then are able to speak and act as he did. Our discipleship—our following Jesus—is a relationship that is based on seeing the world as he did (vision) and being the kind of person he was (vocation).

When Jesus invites us to follow him, he is inviting us into a relationship, which, like all relationships, has five basic stages. It begins with our response to Jesus’ **call** or invitation to a relationship with him, which is expressed in our **commitment** both to him and to this relationship. Then we assume with

him the **co-mission** of building the relationship together, which he identifies as the kingdom community. This will demand the lifelong process of **conversion**, that is, making the necessary changes in our self and our behavior to adopt his vision of reality, his values, his goals, his roles and dedicate ourselves to realizing God's dream of transforming our world into a community of justice, love and peace. Because of the total investment of ourselves in this relationship, there will always be a **cost** for our involvement because of the resistance of our world to God's grace.

“What does it mean to become a Christian? It means at least this: to trust that, empowered, enabled, gifted and commanded by the Christ event of God, I can (because I must) attempt to risk a life like that disclosed in these gospel narratives. The gospel narratives of the message, actions and fate of Jesus of Nazareth are the primary story that the Christian learns to trust: to focus, confirm, correct, challenge, confront and transform my present questions, expectation, reflections on life and all my attempts to live a life worthy of the name ‘human.’”

—DAVID TRACY

The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism (1981)

Living as a Christian disciple in relation to God is always a challenge. The discipleship relationship we commit ourselves to and the decision to live our life more responsibly in the light of that decision demand that we grow or transform ourselves into Christ. But growth as a disciple does not happen automatically but rather slowly, almost imperceptibly, through the power of God's Holy Spirit working in and through us.

Although we enter whole-heartedly into this relationship, nevertheless it is a challenge because when we adopt Jesus' worldview, then many things about who we are, how we have learned to think and act from our family, from our society, and even from the church that we have grown up in, might have to be changed if we are going to live the Jesus way. As Jesus so aptly put it “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (Jn 12:24).

Physically, we begin to die from the moment we are born. Spiritually, we begin to die from the moment we make our faith commitment to be in a discipleship relationship with Christ and our conversion decision to live more responsibly. Being a disciple means being willing to die to our self, our own “ego,” our old vision of reality, our old values, our old behaviors in order to

be transformed into Christ. To see the world the way Jesus does, to value it as Jesus does and to act in it as Jesus does will lead us inevitably to the cross as it does Jesus. But like Jesus, we must trust ourselves to God and believe that through our cross comes the new life of resurrection.

Spirituality: Faith Seeking Embodiment

To consider what is necessary to shape a discipleship spirituality, let us briefly consider what we mean by the term *spirituality*. If you are like me, when growing up, spirituality was not something that you created but something that was given or handed to you. Some famous saint or writer had produced it by writing a book about prayer or about how to live a spiritual life. You were expected to read the book, adopt its suggested method and practices of prayer and behavior, and that was your spirituality.

“We are summoned to be disciples, and so to a discipline. A disciple is a learner and his discipline is the training whereby one learns. To learn the way of the cross is the hardest thing of all, and the training by which we are to advance in this learning is provided for us by the discipline of prayer and worship. Those who disparage prayer and worship and imagine that without these one can achieve some kind of instant Christianity do not know what they are talking about. They understand neither the weakness of our humanity nor the depth of the richness of the spiritual maturity into which Christ is calling us.”

—JOHN MACQUARRIE
Paths in Spirituality (1992)

But spirituality must be something more. The heart of our Christian reality is our experience of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Our personal and communal response to this central experience is faith, which has a theological dimension in which we use our minds to try to get some words (Gk: *logos*) to describe the God (Gk: *theos*) we encounter. In the long Christian tradition, theology has often been described as faith seeking understanding. What it searches for are concepts and ideas that are clear and distinct and as exhaustive and complete as we can achieve.

But we must not confuse theology with spirituality. Spirituality is always more than good ideas and can best be described as *faith seeking embodiment*. We have to practice what we believe, to live in a way that corresponds to what we believe. Thus spirituality requires not just having good ideas about Christ, but also living a Christ-like life. It is our personal attempt to adopt the Christian worldview and put it into a lifestyle.

We must recall that before the early Christians were known as Christians, they referred to themselves simply as followers of “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22). The Christian way is the way to God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. So spirituality is all about the way we get from where we first start to where we end. It is a way of seeing the world (our worldview) and a way of being in the world (our actions). We all have a way of seeing things and deciding what the reality of our world is. And from this understanding of the world, we also develop a way of being or lifestyle patterned upon how we understand the world. So spirituality is our own way of “putting on Christ” (Rom 13:14) and thus becoming and being a Christian.

Becoming a Christian Disciple

Becoming a disciple or follower of Jesus is not an inherited characteristic, like a genetic endowment or the capacity for sensation and for language that we are born with. And even though many of us are baptized as infants, becoming a Christian is a long and arduous journey that lasts a lifetime.

“We will never come to know our true vocation in life unless we are willing to grapple with the radical claim the gospel places on us—the call to follow Christ without compromise. Regardless of the particular shape we give to our lives, Jesus’ call to discipleship is primal, all-encompassing, all-inclusive, demanding a total commitment. One cannot be a little bit for Christ, give him some attention, or make him just one of many concerns.”

—HENRI J. M. NOUWEN
The Selfless Way of Christ (2007)

From the disciple’s point of view, discipleship is a learning experience with three distinct stages: information, conformation and transformation. Attending to these stages as they are revealed in the biblical texts gives us both “clues” about who God is and how God is present in power to create a covenant community of friends, and “cues” about how we are to act in response to God’s mysterious presence once we have discovered it.

Becoming a Christian disciple depends on assimilating Jesus’ genuine Good News and the worldview it embodies. For this reason, it is necessary to consider carefully what Jesus’ Good News is (information) so that we can assimilate it and make it our own (conformation) so that it can change us, our communities and our world (transformation).

1. Information

To follow Jesus by responding to his Good News message, we must learn how he sees the world, understands its workings and evaluates it in relation to God's mysterious presence working for salvation, i.e., the right relationship of all reality to God. We do this by our continual encounter with the Gospels, in which most of everything we know about Jesus is found.

This first stage requires attentiveness to both Jesus and his message. We must listen, observe, experience and understand reality the way Jesus does. Very often what Jesus says and does is puzzling and requires much effort to understand. His words seem to have too many meanings and his behavior can be strange and puzzling. But through continued effort we slowly become aware of a whole new way of understanding the meaning of our world and how our social relationships must be reconfigured.

2. Conformation

Simply knowing *about* Jesus from the Gospels is never enough. We must make our own the information we learn so we can see reality, evaluate it and act the way Jesus does. His vision and values and the behavior that follows from them must become our own.

This second stage of discipleship is characterized by the assimilation of a whole new outlook that depends upon our eagerness to imitate Jesus. When this new understanding of the world and his place in it becomes our own, when we are conformed to Jesus' worldview and adopt his values, then we will really be changed, which is the heart of the process of conversion.

3. Transformation

The phases of information and conformation are incomplete unless they are translated into action. This third stage of discipleship follows naturally upon the successful assimilation of our knowledge of Jesus' worldview. Since actions and behavior result from our attitudes and beliefs, this new worldview will lead naturally to new forms of behavior. The Gospels were written to evoke this response that leads us to a new way of life.

Changed by this new internal experience, we reenter the mainstream of everyday life. We find that our old patterns of living and relating that used to motivate our behavior are no longer relevant. Our job, our family, our neighborhood are still the same. But it is us who are now radically changed.

The ordinary is no longer ordinary because we now recognize that God is an integral and important part of our world. Our new perception generates a revised understanding, which in turn leads to new behaviors and alternative relationships and communities. The ordinary now becomes extraordinary. Reality indeed is more than meets the eye.

Responding to Jesus' call and our faith commitment to him and to our relationship, though they may occasionally offer difficulties, are usually not the hardest challenges that we have to face. The main challenges arise from our attempt first to align our minds and hearts with Jesus' vision and values through life-long conversion, and secondly to share in the co-mission to continue his work of bringing mercy and justice to our world. Thus we must now explore further what is involved in the key discipleship challenges of conversion and evangelization and then indicate how we can shape our own personal discipleship spirituality using the Gospels as our guide.

The Challenge of Conversion

We live in a time when many people are bothered by God's absence. But the fact is that God's absence is not nearly as challenging or scary as God's presence. When God breaks into our lives we cannot remain in a business-as-usual mode. When, quite literally, all hell breaks loose with God's entry into our lives, we are challenged to change in ways we never dreamed possible. Jesus' Good News is that God's presence is now unleashed in our world to do what it always does: transform us and our world.

“Conversion is the change of our lives that comes about through the power of the Holy Spirit. All who accept the Gospel undergo change as we continually put on the mind of Christ by rejecting sin and becoming more faithful disciples in his Church. Unless we undergo conversion, we have not truly accepted the Gospel.”

—U. S. BISHOPS
“Go and Make Disciples” (1992), #12

Responding to God's powerful presence will require realigning our whole being so that we will continue to experience the world but now with God as its center. Though apparently simple, this reordering is, in fact, so extraordinary that it brings about a total transformation of our lives. This constant transformation has been a part of Christianity from its very beginnings and is described as the experience of conversion, changing your mind