

Forming Intentional Disciples – Session 1

How Friendship with Jesus (or the lack thereof) Shapes the Church

The evidence is clear: an alarming number of people are leaving or have already left the Catholic Church. According to some studies, 53% of American adults have left the faith of their childhood at some point. For those who do remain in the Church, only 15% attend Mass on a weekly basis. As Sherry Weddell so aptly states:

Our spiritual climate provides us with real opportunities and very definite threats if we do not adjust our evangelizing, catechetical, and pastoral practice to the unique challenges of the times in which we live.

The very first step to addressing this problem is to look at why so many have chosen to leave the Church. When asked why they left the Church, the vast majority of people answered by stating “my spiritual needs weren’t being met”. Delving further into this issue, 1/3rd of self-identified Catholics stated that they did not believe a personal relationship with Jesus Christ was even possible. The main reason people are leaving the faith is that they have not grasped the most fundamental concept at the heart of Catholicism: relationship. Catholicism is about a real, dynamic friendship with the Heart of God Himself. Without a direct experience of this friendship with Jesus, people feel spiritually unsatisfied and search outside the Church for spiritual fulfillment. For those who remain in the Church, the life of a parish can feel stifled, routine, and empty.

Widespread neglect of the interior journey of discipleship has unintentionally fostered an immense chasm 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.

Intentional discipleship happens when a life and heart is changed by an interior friendship with Jesus. We have examples of this in the Gospel, where disciples were formed through an experience with the Good News. A relationship with Jesus sets a heart on fire, leading us to be like St. Peter and drop our nets to follow Him when He calls us. In developing a friendship with Jesus, it is normal to become zealous and excited about the faith, and to take steps to share the Good News with others. Even when a small group of individuals become intentional disciples, living out of a friendship with Jesus and inviting others into that friendship, the dynamic of a parish community can change dramatically for the better. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

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.

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Consider a close friendship and what makes that relationship thrive. Do you consider Jesus to be a close friend of yours? What steps could you take to improve your friendship with Jesus?
- 2) Do you feel comfortable speaking about your relationship with God? With whom? Why or why not?
- 3) Have you ever heard the Good News shared with you in a way that made you want to “drop your nets” and follow Jesus at all costs? How is He calling you now?

Reading Assignments:

Forming Intentional Disciples: Chapters 1 and 2

Scripture	Catechism
Ephesians 5:10-11	CCC
1718-1719 1 Peter 2:25	CCC 1704
Romans 10:14-15	CCC 28-29
Isaiah 49:5	CCC 1439
Hebrews 5:10-12	CCC 820
Romans 1:16-17	CCC 1072
Romans 2:21	CCC 2609-2610
1 Peter 3:15-16	CCC 2784-2785