Forming Intentional Disciples by Sherry Weddell....... Rob’s Edited Notes

Sherry helped me focus on the most critical issue: we Catholics have been willing to assume that children who are baptized ("sacramentalized" by Baptism, 1st Communion, Confirmation) will eventually mature (take on adult responsibilities, such as marriage) and become "practicing Catholics".

If that worked in the past, PEW research ("U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, “ 2008) proves it no longer works:

- Only 30% of Americans raised Catholic are “practicing” (i.e. mass once a month).
- 38% say they are “Catholic” but seldom/never attend Mass.
- The final 32% no longer consider themselves Catholic.

Today young people leave the Catholic Church early...nearly 50% are gone by age 18.

Past assumption of Catholic Church was that they will come back....for marriage and baptism of their children. Jesuit motto: “Give me a child until he is seven, and I will give you the man (as Catholic).” But this no longer works.

The Pew research offers this ........

- Of older Catholics, 62% attend Mass while only 57% of them are certain they have a relationship with God.
- Of Millennials, only 34% attend Mass BUT Mass attendance tends to be linked with “personal relationship with God.” [NOTE this is hopeful information!]
- So....majority of Catholics in US are “sacramentalized” but not evangelized.

Most people don’t know what NORMAL adult Catholicism should look like. (The point here is that merely “sacramentalized” Catholics don’t qualify as “disciples of Jesus.”......and thus cannot be considered mature Catholics.)

Sherry Waddell writes: “Healthy Catholicism” (Normative Catholicism) involves 3 spiritual journeys that, in practice, are often treated as separate:

1. The personal interior journey of a lived relationship with Christ (Jesus/God)...resulting in intentional discipleship.
2. The ecclesial journey into the Church through reception of the sacraments of initiation.
3. The journey of active participation in the life and mission of the Church (i.e. receiving the sacraments, attending Mass, participating in the life and mission of the Christian Community).

Ideally, every Catholic would make all 3 journeys and understand them as 3 elements of one whole. But ~ perhaps because of our tradition of infant baptism ~ we tend to “overlook” the personal journey of intentional discipleship (because infants and children are too young to make the kind of “adult choices/commitments necessary) when children are baptized. And then ~ when they are expected to
prepare for Confirmation ~ we have never developed an adequate approach to this personal interior journey of **intentional discipleship**.

If you have ever been involved with religious education/formation for teens and/or young adults you know the challenges of trying to “evangelize” folks who are baptized but not adequately evangelized. Trying to do this for groups of young people never works very well because the group will always be made up of folks with very different levels of maturity. Yet, trying to provide adequate formation for each young person individually (not in a group setting) seems impossible. So there is a tendency for leaders to focus on Step 2 and Step 3 because there is no history of how to address Step 1 for young people. The result is that Catholics tend to “assume” that Step 1 has been accomplished when they are Confirmed…..but in fact personal interviews with adult (Confirmed) Catholics demonstrate that they have never become “intentional disciples.”

The truth is that we have a **MESS**. But now we know “the cure”…..we need to help Catholics address the first spiritual journey (that 95% have not accomplished), i.e., **an intentional relationship with Christ (Jesus/God)**.

The **GOOD NEWS** is that we can learn the skills for doing this “new” evangelization ~ **with this caution** ~ we will need to learn what for most of us will be new skills and to use them effectively we will have to quit using “skills” we used to use……such as:

- If we want to help others to become “intentional disciples,” we will have to start with ourselves. We will have to come to terms with the truth that our personal lives are the only Gospel we can preach. We will have to invest ~ as perhaps never before ~ in our own spiritual development.

- We will need to accept that “We can’t evangelize those we do not love.” The starting point is love and befriend (not teaching/preaching)….the first goal is **RELATIONSHIP** OF TRUST (one person at time!) within which I witness being a disciple of Jesus (none of us will do this perfectly….but I can’t “teach” which I don’t live).

- Engaged in **DIALOGUE** that is more about the appropriate QUESTIONS (rather than providing answers to questions not yet asked).

- Dialogue is **NOT** a tool for telling other how to think/believe. Rather it is a tool for making connection (relationship/intimacy) and is mostly about LISTENING (not TELLING) and ACCEPTANCE (not agreement).

- Within a **relationship of TRUST**, I can begin to inquire more about who the other is and his/her relationship with Jesus (and share my own **relationship with Jesus** when I am asked about it). This is **NOT** time for catechism (theology)….**NOT YET**. Any effort to teach/preach before the other wants to learn will likely have the opposite result….the other is likely to shut down and turn me off.

- “Don’t jump the gun” and make assumptions about where another is (words that he/she uses may not adequately express his/her spiritual reality). A self-described “agnostic” may be closer to discipleship than a self-described Catholic who has “never had a question about the faith.”

- In addition, we have never developed processes of follow-up so that very serious retreat experiences [E.E.] continue on to “intentional discipleship.”
Fostering Openness

On the verge of openness, it can be helpful to challenge your friend appropriately to take the next step. Jesus did this constantly, sometimes resulting in someone’s renouncing his life to follow him (as with the apostles) and sometimes resulting in a potential disciple going away sad (as with the rich young man). Obviously, a deep trust between the two of you must already be in place. Here are a few suggestions:

• Practice nonjudgmental truthfulness. Talk about your own struggles of faith, how you look to God to enable you to change, and your experience of his helping you change.

• Ask thought-provoking questions. Often people on the edge of openness can be helped with well-timed questions that raise the issue of personal change: "What do you do when life gets hard?" or "Where is God in all this for you?"

• Help them connect the dots. In our discernment work, we spend a great deal of time helping Catholics recognize ways that they are already being used by God that have escaped their notice. The same dynamic is helpful when accompanying someone on the verge of openness. Using their own words as much as possible, remind them how God has been at work in their lives to this point. It can help them see that God is pursuing them in love and doing all he can to get their attention.

• Encourage them to ask God for a sign. Yes, this is daring, but do we believe that God is initiating a relationship with them or not?

• Ask them if you can pray for them to be open to God. If they give you permission, consider praying for this in front of them in your own words. Keep it as simple as possible. I know this can be anxiety producing for many Catholics, but there is tremendous power for some in hearing someone else putting such a prayer into words.

• Ask them if they would be willing to pray themselves and acknowledge their openness to God. Of course, this is the ultimate goal. But when it happens, it can seem simple and nondramatic.

The Catholic tradition holds that grace perfects nature (since God is the author of both). So it is important to take advantage of whatever aspects of human culture will help the potential disciple. One advantage we can capitalize on is the fact that, in our culture, openness is a good thing.

p.185. Break the Silence.

While we cannot make anyone become an intentional disciple, we can intentionally and intelligently work to create an environment conducive to the growth of personal faith and discipleship. Mostly this will focus on being willing to initiate conversations with questions that are the opposite of “are you saved??”...that is they are non-judgmental, open-ended, and demonstrate a willingness to listen to whatever the other person is willing to say....... See Chapter 9 for more detail.