

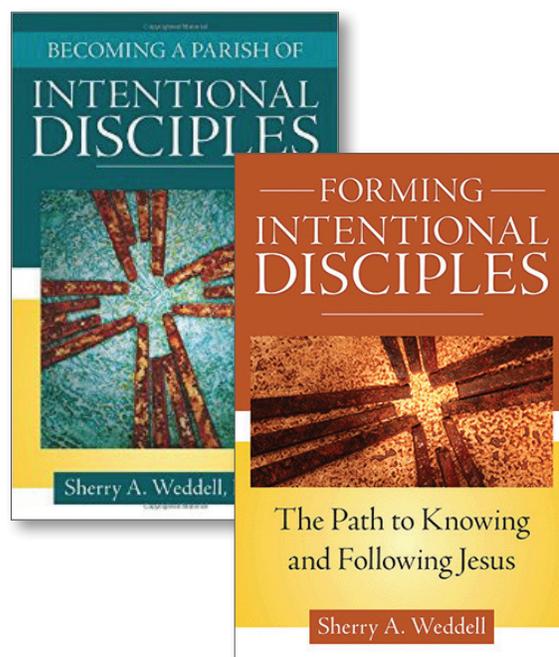
# Forming Intentional Disciples

*When I teach about charisms, I often reassure people that God won't suddenly remove a long-term charism and replace it with something totally different. No one goes to bed a happily married administrator and wakes up the next morning as a celibate exorcist! But over the past four years, I've been reminded that God can throw you some astonishing curves. God will not radically alter your charisms while you sleep, but he's quite capable of altering your life with dizzying speed.*

The only thing to which I can compare the impact of *Forming Intentional Disciples* on my life is being struck by lightning. In July 2011, I had just outlined the basic thesis and twelve chapters of a book on evangelization. At 6:30 am, an OSV editor heard about it and asked me to send her everything I had on the book. At 2:30 pm that afternoon, I got a phone call from OSV saying, "We want it," and my life turned on a dime.

The response to *Forming Intentional Disciples* (FID) is still a bit of a mystery. To my great surprise and that of everyone else concerned, FID went viral almost immediately. I kept hearing from people who read it and then bought twenty-five... fifty... one hundred copies for everyone they knew, including their pastor and their bishop. FID has sold over 100,000 copies in three years and is routinely referred to discussions about evangelization around the English-speaking world. The Spanish-language edition of *Forming Intentional Disciples* will be available in October.

What made FID possible was the eighteen years we had already spent helping tens of thousands of American Catholics in hundreds of parishes discern charisms and evangelize. That breadth and depth of experience gave us a rare bird's-eye view of the American Catholic Church and of the chasm between our rich theology of evangelization and discipleship and the lived spiritual experience of the majority of our people.



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One of our discoveries—one that readers tell me that they find most helpful—was that twenty-first-century people process issues of faith differently than earlier generations did. They usually don't become disciples in a single step. Instead, they typically pass through a series of "thresholds" or stages of conversion before they are ready to consciously follow Jesus Christ as a disciple in the midst of his Church. Each transition to a new threshold is a genuine work of grace that is empowered by the Holy Spirit but moving into each threshold is also a deliberate choice. "Conversion" for post-moderns is typically an ever-increasing commitment to a deeper and deeper "yes." The thresholds of conversation that I describe in *FID* are trust, curiosity, openness, seeking, and intentional discipleship. If we understand where an individual has been and is now in his or her spiritual journey, we can respond in a way that is truly helpful.

I wrote *Forming Intentional Disciples* for the "Core," the roughly three million American Catholics who are active in their parishes and dioceses in addition to attending Mass and who determine almost everything that happens at every level of the Church's life. What has surprised me is that reading and discussing *Forming Intentional Disciples* *together* has turned out to be the fastest, least expensive, and most effective way for a group of leaders to quickly and fruitfully absorb paradigm shifts essential to moving a parish from maintenance to mission. The first question that naturally arises for many readers is, "Am I a disciple myself?" A number of highly

engaged Catholics, including those in full-time ministry, have told me that they did not know that they could have a personal relationship with God before reading *FID*. Some have told me that they have experienced significant personal conversion through reading the book.

What has been incredibly exciting is to see the dramatic change in the national conversation over the past three years. There has been a dramatic growth in the use of the magisterial and scriptural language of relationship, personal faith, conversion, and discipleship. Creative initiatives to foster intentional discipleship are popping up in parishes and dioceses all over the country. Pastors and leaders are beginning to view their parishes as missionary communities of disciples rather than maintenance institutions for those who are already Catholic. Whole dioceses are well on their way to their goal of making conscious discipleship and disciple-making the center of ministry. All this is music to our ears because the Catherine of Siena Institute (CSI) was founded in 1997 to equip parishes to form lay disciples and apostles for the sake of their evangelizing mission to the world.

The Institute grew out of my collaboration with Father Michael Sweeney, OP, whom I met in Seattle when he became pastor of my parish. We come from very different backgrounds. I grew up in a fundamentalist family in the Deep South, became a serious disciple as an undergraduate, and entered

the Church in Seattle as a young adult. I had already created the Called & Gifted discernment process and had been teaching it for three years by the time Father Michael and I got to know each other. Father Michael was raised in Vancouver, BC, and is a Dominican priest, and a cradle Catholic. He has long been fascinated by the Church's teaching on the mission and formation of the laity while I come from a world where lay mission and apostolic initiative was considered absolutely normative. Mutual friends kept telling me, "You and Father Michael are always talking about the same things."

One moment stands out from the day before the Catherine of Siena Institute was even a dream. A group of young Catholic friends were spending the evening with Father Michael. Some of us were recent converts, some lifelong Catholics. We were all eager to live as disciples and apostles. I can't remember what triggered it, but suddenly Father Michael turned to us and said something I have never forgotten: "You are the evidence that my priesthood is bearing fruit." I didn't understand what Father Michael meant at that moment. It was years before I realized that he was talking about a reality that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts this way: "...the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians" (1547).

In the early days, I used to bombard poor Father Michael with emails about astonishing initiatives that lay men and women from other Christian traditions were undertaking and asking, "Why aren't Catholics doing things like this?" I loaned him books that he found so irritating that he threw one against the wall! It wasn't rapport at first sight but we began a remarkably fruitful collaboration that was fueled in part by our differences.

***In the eighteen years since, Institute teachers and trainers have worked directly with 120,000 priests, religious, and lay leaders in over 500 parishes on 5 continents. From San Francisco to Boston, Rome, and Singapore, CSI has labored to ensure that every lay Catholic has access to a formation that:***

- Is deeply rooted in the tradition and magisterial teaching of the Church;
- Calls each baptized man and women to intentional discipleship;
- Takes seriously the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to every Christian;
- Enables each one to discern more deeply God's unique call in his or her own life;
- Prepares him or her to be an effective, creative apostle in the midst of the world;
- Encourages collaboration between the clergy and laity in mission to the world.

Word of mouth about the Called & Gifted discernment process spread rapidly and we were invited into hundreds of different parishes all over North America and beyond. Gifts interviews—private one-hour sessions with individual discerners—has always been an integral part of the Called & Gifted process. Many people, including pastors and leaders, tell us stories about their experience of and relationship with God and how God had used them in the lives of others that they have never shared with another person before. I always tell trainees that doing gifts interviews is the most fun you can have legally! Gifts interviews give pastoral leaders moving glimpses of the Holy Spirit at work in their communities as well as a window on the lived spiritual experience of their parishioners and a priceless source of pastoral information. Our work in evangelization grew out of our work in discernment.

My own turning point was eleven years ago while doing an interview with a woman who was a leader in Canadian diocese. The interview wasn't going very well so I finally asked her a question that I had never asked anyone before: Could you briefly describe to me your lived relationship with God to this point in your life? After thinking carefully for a few moments, she responded briskly, "I don't have a relationship with God." I came away certain that I had just sat through the most amazing interview I had ever done and that we should ask this question more often! As we did so, we began to realize that many Catholics were struggling with discernment because they had little or no lived relationship with God and that "being active" at the parish level was not necessarily an indicator of discipleship.

We learned that the Holy Spirit is planting charisms and vocations of amazing diversity in the hearts of all his people. Like the graces of the sacraments, they are real but they are not magic. Just as the gifts of children must be fostered deliberately and with great energy by parents if their children are to reach their full potential, so charisms and vocations must be fostered by the Church. In this area, we are not asking for too much... we are settling for too little. God is not asking us to call forth the gifts and vocations of a few people; he is asking us to call forth the gifts and vocations of

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millions. Our problem is not that there is a shortage of vocations but that we do not have the support systems and leadership in place to foster the vast majority of the vocations that God has given us. Most fundamentally, *when we fail to call our own to discipleship, we are unwittingly pushing away the vast majority of the charisms, vocations, and leaders God is sending us.*

As Father Michael wrote at the time of the Institute's founding:

"My Order was founded to preach, most especially to the unchurched. One thing has become utterly clear to me: if we are to evangelize our world, we must mobilize our laity. I cannot afford to think of the laity as a chaotic agglomeration of personal and pastoral 'needs'; they must be my collaborators in a common work. Having met Sherry—and so many others in our parish and beyond with whom I have begun the adventure of a real collaboration—I am happy to report that 'needs' are no longer our agenda. Our laity have been endowed with supernatural gifts which, from a pastor's point of view, are ripe for the harvest. We are to work together, not simply to administer and maintain our parishes, but to bring Christ to the world."

In 2015, most of us realize that traditional immigrant cultural Catholicism is no match for the power of post-modernity. It is clear that we stand on the edge of a massive demographic and institutional decline unless we change our practice radically and make intentional disciples and form apostles of the already baptized. We have worked

with dozens of US parishes who are already seeing the tremendous fruit that emerges when the parish leaders set out to double the number of intentional disciples in their communities in five years. We call it the “double in five” challenge. What if a thousand US parishes set out to double the number of disciples in their communities in the next five years?

There is nothing magical about the numbers but there is something profoundly transforming about pursuing the goal. Having the conscious goal of making disciples and systematically going after it changes parish leadership, culture, and practice. Most critically, the lives of many thousands of Catholics change in amazing ways. What God will do through the fruit of their personal “yes” will change Catholicism’s future.

To change the course of history, we must vigorously take advantage of the enormous evangelization and disciple-forming potential of the only truly universal Catholic institution: the local parish. As Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelium Gaudium* (28):

“The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. [27] In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. [28] It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach.”



Sherry Anne Weddell created the first charism discernment process specifically designed for Catholics in 1993. In 1997, she co-founded the Catherine of Siena Institute, an affiliated international ministry of the Western Dominican Province, and currently serves as Co-Director. Sherry has developed numerous unique formation resources that are used around the world and trained and helps lead an international team who have worked directly with over 100,000 lay, religious, and ordained Catholics in hundreds of parishes in 137 (arch)dioceses on 5 continents. When not hanging around airports, Sherry enjoys tending her high altitude Tuscan garden in the Colorado Rockies.

[27] Cf. *Propositio* 26.

[28] Cf. *Propositio* 44.

