



Introduction: Discipleship: Our Fundamental Catholic Identity
by Bishop Donald J. Hying

In the Gospels, Jesus confronts us with a fundamental question: Who do you say that I am? As Christians and members of the Church, we answer with Simon, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." In faith, we can add Savior, Light of the world, the Word made flesh, the Resurrection, the Prince of Peace. Through the saving activity of Jesus' Incarnation, life, death and resurrection, we become adopted children of the Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, temples of the Holy Spirit, all in the mystery, communion and sacrament of the Church. The relationship that Jesus enjoys with the Father by nature of who he is, we receive as a pure offer of grace.

Baptized into the identity and mission of Jesus Christ, we proclaim Christ's saving Gospel through a faith lived out in the words, actions, work, relationships and values of our lives. Our fundamental identity as disciples of Jesus Christ gives focus and method to the important activity of the new evangelization. As we painfully know, too many Catholics have not really been evangelized to know and experience the personal love of Jesus Christ, have been poorly catechized in the fundamentals of the Catholic faith, and do not participate in the sacramental life of the Church in any meaningful way. If we seek to change this disturbing trend, parishes must continue to grow in their fundamental identity as dynamic communities of faith which form intentional disciples. If we are not focused on formation for discipleship, we are failing the mission of Christ.

What do intentional Catholic disciples look like? How do they act? What is qualitatively different about their lives and personalities? The answer is clear yet challenging. Disciples are ordinary people who have experienced the love, forgiveness, presence, consolation and challenge of God poured out through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. They have fallen in love with the Lord and find their deepest identity in their relationship with him. They find God and the mission of his Kingdom to be the fundamental purpose of their lives and, having a strong **Catholic identity**, find the whole Catholic experience of the Scriptures, sacraments, moral life and prayer to be the transformative means of their ongoing conversion. As Paul discovered on the road to Damascus, they are people loved and forgiven by Jesus Christ.

Disciples instinctively **evangelize**, that is they naturally share their experience of God and their faith in him with others. The power of moral example itself evangelizes, as others intuitively sense that such a person lives from a very different center of meaning and purpose than secular society. In addition to witnessing by example, disciples are both courageous and articulate in their proclamation of Jesus and the difference he has made in their lives. They will freely pray with others, do volunteer work, witness to how the Lord has worked in their daily experience, offer moral advice when asked, share spiritual books, CDs and DVDs with family, friends and co-workers, all the while actively cultivating a discipleship response in those around them. The power of one Catholic who knows, practices and proclaims the faith is truly remarkable.

An intentional disciple is a good **steward**, knowing that everything in life is a superabundant gift freely bestowed upon us by the Lord, both to enrich us but also to bless and benefit others. This deep conviction of existence as a gift leads to a profound gratitude that pours itself out in deeds of mercy, love and healing. Like Mary who anoints the feet of Jesus with an extravagant costly perfume that cost 300 days' wages, we are compelled to break open and pour out the gifts of our lives in loving service of others and so fill the world with the sacred fragrance of Christ.

An intentional disciple is a Catholic maximalist, not asking what the minimum is that **must** be done in order to be saved, but rather asking what **can** be done for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Like St. Paul, a disciple has moved from the obligation of the law into the astonishing freedom of Christ, who liberates us to do every good work. In this context, the Blessed Virgin Mary is clearly the first and premier disciple who responds in total faith to the seemingly impossible proposal of the angel, places her entire being at the service of God and gives flesh to the Incarnate Word.

St. Augustine insists that when a Christian disciple places the whole mystery and gift of life at the service of God, the Lord Jesus takes flesh within that person and is offered to the world once again. For us as Catholics, in this critical moment in history, we cannot afford to proceed with business as usual. All over the world, millions of Catholics are asking the same questions:

- How can I have a deeper and more authentic relationship with Jesus Christ?
- How can I more effectively live out my faith in such a way that it actually makes a difference in the lives of others, especially my family and friends?
- How can we continue to insert Gospel values into the public square of politics, economy, health care and education?
- How can we bring back all of those Catholics who have fallen away from the practice of the faith?

In millions of different ways, intentional disciples are living out the exciting answers to these important questions. If the Gospel is the script of our lives, the new evangelization is the urgent challenge to act out with fresh enthusiasm and generosity the great drama of Christ's salvation.

Synod 2014 invites us to consider anew how to be intentional disciples, especially in the areas of Catholic Social Teaching, Cultural Diversity, Evangelization, Formation, Leadership, Liturgy, Marriage and Family, and Stewardship.