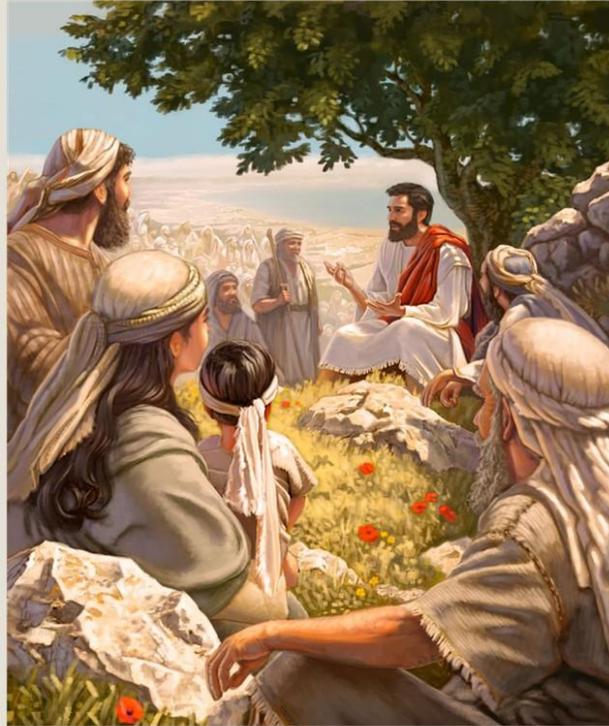


GENE VANDERZANDEN



# *Discipleship*

ACCEPTING THE CALL OF JESUS  
TODAY



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Accepting the Call of Jesus Today

GENE VANDERZANDEN

2025

**Discipleship: Accepting the Call of Jesus Today.**

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ISBN: 9798313111995

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## Viewing Instructions

This booklet should display well on your computer or on a standard tablet with an 11" screen.

Each chapter takes about ten minutes to read.

You can print the document on 8.5" x 11" paper.

It won't be pretty, but you'll only use 20 sheets.

Just hit: Print, print on both sides, flip on the long edge.

[Or you can get a professionally printed booklet on Amazon.com for \\$5.82.](#)

You are encouraged to forward this digital copy to your friends to support them in their discipleship.

*As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. Jesus said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." Then they left their nets and followed him.* —Mark 1: 14-15

# 1

## Introduction

The first disciples were not born great, nor were they great when Jesus called them to follow him. They were ordinary people, who weren't even fully observant Jews. But through the gift of grace and their accepting response, they grew to be dedicated heroes of the faith.

We also are beckoned into a life with Christ. He entices us gently, even before we can understand. He doesn't expect us to already be saints, just people who may develop and grow.

Peter and Andrew were poor. New Testament scholars today believe they came from the little town of Bethsaida at the north end of the Sea of Galilee. As boys, they learned to fend for themselves, casting small, weighted nets into shallow waters and dragging up bottom fish to eke out a living.

At some point the brothers moved to Capernaum, where they met James and John and were hired by their father Zebedee, who had boats. They saw Jesus preach and were attracted by his inspiring words. And when Jesus called them, they left their nets and walked with him into an unknown future.

Mary Magdelene had a reputation, but she found hope in Jesus. This most often mentioned woman disciple probably was among the "seventy-two" that Jesus sent out to the towns and villages. Her devotion brought her to the foot of the cross. She witnessed his suffering and death. She helped place his body in the tomb and was among the women who found it empty on the third day.

When Mary Magdelene began to follow Jesus, she had no idea where it would lead. But after his resurrection, Christ appeared to her and asked her to be his first witness.

Think back to your experience, before you made Jesus important in your life. Odds are it was a process. You heard a few things about him when you were a child, and you learned more as you grew. You began to see Jesus as someone special. But he wasn't yet a part of your life, just a historical figure that people talked about.

Then you noticed that your parents or some other person took a special interest in Jesus. They considered him important, someone they cared about. They may even have talked about Jesus from time to time like they knew him, personally. And this made you wonder: *Who is this man?*

The gospels don't tell us much about the early followers—we know more about Peter than the others. Jesus healed his mother-in-law, which sparked Peter's interest in Jesus.

Peter probably heard Jesus teach in Capernaum several times. So, when Jesus asked Peter if he could get into his boat to preach to the crowds, it was easy for him to agree. This gave him the chance to observe Jesus, up close.

But then, when Jesus finished speaking to the people, he turned to Peter directly and said, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch." Their relationship suddenly became personal.

Jesus stepped into Peter's work life, which must have been quite a shock. They had fished all night and caught nothing. Peter and Andrew and James and John had come to shore in empty boats discouraged because they hadn't earned anything all night to support their families.

But Peter did something that should be a lesson for us all. He did what Jesus asked him to do. He got in his boat, rowed out to where Jesus said to go, lowered his nets, and caught a boatload of fish! Peter said, "Yes!" to Jesus, and his whole life changed.

When did you first say Yes to Christ? It may have been when you saw older kids serving at the altar and said, "I want to do that too." It may have been when you joined the Youth Group or received the Sacrament of Confirmation. Or as an adult, when you first volunteered at your parish, or you began to make donations. Those times were more significant than you think—they were the first small steps of your saying Yes to what Jesus asked you to do.

My story was like that. I was born into a loving family who practiced the Catholic faith. My grandpa left the Church when my dad was 13, but dad met a girl picking hops who asked if he was Catholic before she agreed to a date.

Growing up, I had a variety of interests like my brother and sister who were older. I enjoyed being an altar boy, which inflated my ego. I liked how Fr. O'Connell called me by my name, and I loved getting tips for serving at weddings.

My mom was always doing things at the parish, which I thought was crazy. I was quite a self-centered boy, and I hadn't yet developed the slightest concept of service.

While in college, I went to mass most Sundays out of obligation. And fortunately, I fell head over heels for a Catholic girl who took her faith seriously. Liz became my lifeline to God. She made sure we made it to Sunday mass and our kids received the Sacraments.

My focus initially was mostly on my career. I wanted to become a "success" with money and interesting options. But in my early 30s, my attitude deteriorated. I got moody and restless, and greedy and selfish. I

often pushed people away so I wouldn't have to get close.

But Christ had other ideas for me.

Out of the blue and with no warning, on Christmas Eve 1977, during the mass after the children had enacted the Christmas story, Christ opened my heart and showed me that it was all true! And not just true, but important! I was granted the realization that God's coming to earth in Jesus was the most important event in human history.

This was a spiritual experience of being "born anew." I felt the presence of Jesus, close and personal. And I came to see how God loves us unconditionally—like Liz had loved me through my time of selfishness, only more. What had been just theological doctrine became a living reality.

I purposely had kept out of parish life, not wanting to waste my time there. But that negative attitude melted away. Church activities seemed more interesting. I wanted to get involved. And I realized it was time to make living my faith central in my life.

This booklet is about experience—the experience of being called to discipleship with Christ. Adult spirituality flows out of experience, and the New Testament was written from the first followers' experience of Jesus. Our experience has a lot in common with what St. Peter and St. Mary Magdelene felt as they began to serve in his name. But we each find our own role—how we personally can help with his Mission.

Each brief chapter offers several tips to help you respond to your call to assist with Christ's Mission in our time. Each takes about ten minutes to read plus the hours you may invest following up with the points you learned. Compare what you read with your own experience. Recall the times Christ helped you when you needed it and opened your heart to live out his teaching.

Above all, let Jesus walk with you. Allow him to lead you to the next steps in your life of discipleship and love. Christ is not yet finished inviting all humanity into the kingdom of God. So, we go forth in trust and hope, knowing he is with us all the way.

## Reflection Questions:

When did you first say "yes" to Jesus?

How often do you ponder your spiritual experiences?

Can you tell the story of your faith journey?

## Sensing the Call to Discipleship

**W**hat is a call to discipleship? It's a feeling in your heart that doesn't go away.

Christ gives us little "nudges" all the time to help us grow in faith, hope and love. And the nudge to become his disciple is like that. Some feel it at a young age. But for most of us, it happens as we mature. It's a desire to help in some way with the Mission of Christ in our time.

As we listen to the gospels, we may think, *It sure was nice that so many people carried on his work after he ascended into heaven.* It was "nice," and much more. Without the dedication of those first disciples, the Good News of Jesus may have been forgotten. The pagan culture of the Roman Empire wouldn't have converted, and we would not have the Church we love today.

The Holy Spirit certainly was present, guiding and sustaining those who carried on the faith. And the phenomenal growth of the Church in the first centuries couldn't have happened on human-effort alone. But without the human-effort and sacrifice and dedication in the face of obstacles, the whole movement may have lost its steam.

Jesus's plan was quite practical. During the three years that he preached to the crowds, he gave special attention to his disciples, preparing them to follow in his footsteps. He chose these men and women carefully and taught them things the crowds couldn't understand. Then, before he ascended into heaven, he took them up on a high mountain and commissioned them saying, "Go forth to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey all that I have commanded you, and know that I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

When I first felt the call, I said, "Who? Me?"

I didn't have ministerial skills, and I didn't consider myself especially holy. Others I knew were much better at helping people than me. And I couldn't visualize where I would fit in.

I knew that I cared about certain things more than other people. I wondered, *If we are following the Prince of Peace, why are we still at war?* And when I saw the poor get tromped on by the powerful all over the globe, my heart ached for them. I realized that no political party was going to fix these problems, and our world would only get better if people followed the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

It boggled my mind to see professed Christians lead scandalous lives and go on TV saying things so unlike Jesus. I asked, "Why are these guys representing Christianity?" I was far from perfect, but I wanted to

demonstrate in some small way what the Jesus who had come into my life, was like.

Reading Thomas Merton and some Latin-American theologians fired me up, but they didn't help me figure out what I was supposed to do. And when I talked with the men I knew, they seemed strained to understand. My wife was supportive, but she wasn't feeling the stirrings I was sensing in my heart.

Then three years after my Christmas Eve experience, Christ reached out and touched my life again. Through the winter months, I began to picture myself serving in parish ministry, and I seemed to be quite happy there. The images weren't fully clear, but I could see myself working in a sense of partnership with a Catholic priest.

This became a bright light during the gloomy northwest winter and amid the uncertainties in my soul. I felt glimmers of hope that this may be "it." And the more I pondered the intuition and lifted it in prayer, the more vivid it became. I began to visualize myself as a professional, ministering in some way in a Catholic parish.

It took several years for my dream to become a reality, and I had to deal with many obstacles along the way. (I'll tell you more about these later.) But the image of serving in a parish never left me, nor did the grace of Christ ever fail me, while I stepped forward in faith.

So, what are you feeling in your heart? What issues fire you up? What aspects of the Mission of Christ do you feel need some of your personal attention?

Those feelings didn't get where they are by accident. They were placed there carefully and intentionally by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit knows all the obstacles that get in the way of the Mission of Christ and all the people who can help deal with them. So, it's no wonder that the Spirit has a special interest in what you are willing to do.

If you don't feel prepared, that's no problem. The Spirit will see that you receive the grace you need to accomplish what is needed.

Your first question should be, "Is the outcome I desire solely for the good of others, or is it for my own advantage?" Discipleship can be satisfying but should never be for our own interests. This is an important distinction. Doing good for God can be a lofty ideal, but many become enamored with the "idea" of serving while advancing their own status and prestige. Stay humble. Your personal role among Christ's disciples must be selfless, offered only for the advancement of his Mission.

My best tip for you when you feel the Holy Spirit's nudge is first to act on it in a small way. Don't try to analyze it in your mind. Just experiment a bit; put your toe in the water and wade in. Keep your eyes on the need and let your heart be your guide. If your first attempts don't feel right, then adjust your course and keep at it.

The path of discipleship that is right for you probably will make use of

your gifts and stretch a few of your weaknesses. But it may not use all your greatest strengths. Christ wants his disciples to broaden their abilities and to be willing to venture into the unfamiliar. The Spirit is crafty and leads “head persons” into things that require an open heart. And for those who are “people persons,” you are sure to be called upon to handle some details. Don’t expect to fashion your discipleship ministry only with the tools of your daily job.

A later chapter will delve more fully into the practices of spiritual discernment. For now, keep things simple. Just pray, “Lord Jesus, help me to follow you as your disciple,” and let the Holy Spirit be your guide.

Above all, follow the feelings in your heart. That’s the direction Christ wants you to go.

### Reflection Questions:

What was it like when you felt called to help with the Mission of Christ?

What issues fired you up?

What did you think needed your personal attention?

How do you feel about it now?

### 3

## Overcoming your Fears

After the joy of sensing the call to discipleship, reality sets in and unanticipated fears arise. Peter and his friends were overjoyed when they lowered their nets where Jesus told them and brought in two boatloads of fish. But when they thought about how the extraordinary catch happened, they realized he was no ordinary man. Peter exclaimed, “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

Negative thoughts lodge in our minds: *Who am I kidding? I'm not worthy enough to be his disciple. I don't have the time. I have too many other responsibilities. I don't know enough. People will laugh at me. They'll reject me. I'll get in trouble. I'll give a donation, but that's all I can do.*

The twelve apostles were chosen by Jesus and given three years of training, but until the Holy Spirit descended upon them, they huddled in fear in the upper room.

I've heard people say, “I could never serve Holy Communion because I'd have to touch it with my hands.” Christ came into this world to live among us, and he expects his followers to put their hands where he put his. Discipleship can get messy, but our hands are his hands today.

I had an experience about 44 years ago, when I first felt called to serve in the ministry of the Church. I wanted to say Yes, but I was scared.

I took some classes at Seattle University to help me get prepared, but this also gave me time to think about the risks. I could have pulled back at any moment.

I was having lunch between classes with a nice wise nun. Her name was Sister Rosie. I had read about saints who became poor and suffered terrible illnesses, and across the lunch table I asked Rosie, “Will those things happen to me?”

Sister listened so attentively, and I'll never forget what she told me. She said, “Gene, Christ will never ask more of you than you can handle with the grace he gives you.”

And I can witness to you today after 44 years of experience, Christ will never ask more of you than you can handle with the grace he gives you.

This doesn't mean you are called to take extraordinary risks. We can't do everything for everybody. And some people are called to take more heroic stances than the rest of us.

When a few brave men were walking the streets of Seattle at night for Operation Nightwatch, it seemed too dangerous, and I could not bring myself to join them. Their enduring ministry to the homeless was

remarkable. But only some people are given grace for that ministry.

When the angel appeared to the shepherds of Bethlehem, his first words to them were, “Do not be afraid.” Think about all the times Jesus repeated this in the gospels. It’s important advice.

The ministry of a disciple often includes guiding others when they become frozen with fear. You can’t make their fears go away, but you can show them how you walk on despite your fear.

Don’t you love the song: “Be not afraid, I go before you always. Come, follow me. And I will give you rest.”

Sing those words boldly.

Proclaim them from your heart.

Memorize the verses. This is a perfect prayer for the times you feel afraid. Jesus will grant rest in your heart when you make peace with the difficulties in your path.

## Reflection Questions:

What fears have stood in your way of serving Christ?

What fears still stand in your way now?

How do you plan to deal with your fears?

## Identifying as Christ's Disciple

Let's talk now about your self-identity.

When Jesus asked his followers, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Since you are reading this booklet, I assume your answer would be similar.

But for disciples, another important question is, "Who do you say that you are?" In the past, your answer may have described your heritage. It may have included your family relationships. You might have named your job or an organization you are a part of. And as you made your faith central in your life, you may have said, "I am a child of God," or "I am a Catholic Christian."

But now that you are stepping into discipleship, begin to state as often as you can, "I am a disciple of Jesus Christ."

The first few women and men who followed Jesus were drawn by his amazing miracles and his unusual holiness. They walked along with him because he was more compassionate and truthful than anyone they'd ever met. And their understanding of Jesus grew over time.

People like us today do the same. We first hear something about Jesus that catches our attention like turning water into wine or calming the winds of the sea. Then later, the Holy Spirit puts a flame of faith in our hearts, and we see how Christ was unique—how he reached out to lepers, lifted up the poor, and valued lost sheep. Then still later, after we've pondered how Jesus is the Son of God, we listen more closely to what he says. His teachings reveal God's will for us, which we make priorities in our lives.

That's when we become not just followers and not just practicing Catholics, but disciples—disciples of Jesus in our world.

When I was taking classes at Seattle University, I got to know women and men, who were way past where I was. And knowing them and listening to their stories boosted my faith too.

They taught me that it's a great privilege to join in the Mission of Christ. It's an honor to serve in his work.

I was humbled to realize that my path was like theirs. And not only theirs, but similar to the paths of Peter and Mary Magdeline and others who went from being ordinary people to becoming disciples of Jesus. I started applying that term to myself. I began saying, "I am his disciple."

Christ offered his teachings in a way that helped his followers grow in their faith. He wanted to form them into more mature disciples by watching how he handled situations.

When we encounter times of distress or tragedy, we usually focus on

what's wrong, what help we need. But Jesus wants us to approach these situations asking, *How can I be an instrument who manifests the goodness of God? How can I be a light that demonstrates that God really is a God of Love?* That's a dramatic re-orientation of our attention and motivation.

Disciples show, to all who are watching, that we have unwavering faith. We fully believe that God's love is enormous, and we want God's care and mercy to be noticed, not ignored.

Scripture scholars say we can see this difference in how his early followers reacted to his teaching. Remember Martha and Mary from the town of Bethany, whose brother had died? Jesus waited three days and then went to see them.

Martha met him first and immediately showed her distress, almost scolding Christ for getting there late. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died!" And to everything Jesus told her, she said something contrary. She was locked in a naive understanding of who Christ is. She hadn't yet come to see Jesus as God here on earth for us, someone she could fully trust and depend on.

Mary, on the other hand, understood that Jesus is the Son of God. She knew in her heart that he is the Resurrection and the Life. She fully trusted that Jesus would do what is best. I don't think she dwelt on the pain of her loss as much as her sister. And when she went out to meet Jesus, she fell at his feet in devotion.

Do you see the difference? Both sisters are in heaven. Both are saints. But Mary was a more mature disciple in this life. Mary chose to follow Jesus all the way, here and now!

So, there's an important question for us. Isn't there?

Am I going to live as a disciple of Jesus?

We may not yet think of ourselves as disciples, but we are. We've been called by Christ personally, just like Peter, James and John, and Mary Magdeleine and Mary of Bethany. And let me tell you, life gets easier when we embrace the term and say, "I am his Disciple."

The words, "I am," are very powerful. Way back, God told Moses, "I am who am." And when Jesus came to earth, he said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Their names are their identities. They are who they are.

So, take some time pondering how you can be an even more mature disciple. And as often as you can, say those powerful words:

"I am his disciple."

"I am his disciple."

Those words can work wonders. They can get you through tragic situations, even loss and death.

Pray those words. Pray them during the Eucharist. Pray them when you go to bed and when you wake up in the morning.

Jesus gave up his body for us. He gave up his blood. Give him your

most full devotion and you'll be a true disciple just like those men and women in the gospels.

“I am Christ’s Disciple.” It’s a rich identity, perhaps the greatest identity any human can have.

### Reflection Questions:

Does your self-identity include being a Disciple of Jesus?

When did you first think of yourself as his disciple? How did it feel?

How can you share with others that you are his disciple?

## What Jesus Wants you to Do

**Y**ou've taken the first steps of discipleship by serving as you do. Now you're ready to step into a special role in the Mission of Christ. This chapter is about discernment—figuring out what Jesus wants you to personally do.

Disciples of Jesus have been dealing with this issue for centuries. You will be fleshing out where the Holy Spirit is leading you, which requires different skills than searching for a job. Disciples need to ask, “Where can I best contribute?”

Praying for your discernment. Chapter 8 will focus on praying as a disciple but first ask Jesus what he wants you to do.

When you pray, tell Jesus that you want to help with his Mission. Express the feelings you've been pondering and let him know the areas you are attracted to. Ask him to clarify his will for you. Your discernment may take a while, so keep lifting these initial prayers until you complete the steps below.

Learn what you need to know. Do you already know all you need to do well in the ministry you're considering? Most of us still have a lot to learn. When you just wanted to be a good Christian, you may not have needed much additional study. But now that you are becoming a disciple, skipping this step could be a mistake.

Taking a class on scripture or the Catholic faith, will broaden your understanding and prepare you to answer questions. There has been a lot of development in recent years as the Church entered the age of science and technology and has begun to adapt to its findings. Disciples need to know more than we hear at Sunday mass.

There are many good opportunities available online or through workshops in your area. And Seattle University offers excellent degree programs. When you take a class, you meet interesting people. Hearing the perspective of your teacher and fellow classmates will challenge your assumptions and widen the horizon of your faith. All this is good for your discernment and essential for your life as a disciple.

Know your spiritual gifts. Do you remember the gifts of the Holy Spirit? St. Paul wrote about them in his letters, and St. Thomas Aquinas summed them up in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. The traditional seven gifts are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. They are different from our talents and abilities.

Through our baptism, the Holy Spirit adds special “charisms” to the

innate capabilities we were born with. They may remain latent until we need them in living out our faith. You probably have a fairly good idea of your strengths and weaknesses, but I highly recommend that you get to know your special gifts. They will help you discern and then fulfill your discipleship call.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with the advances in our understanding of the human psyche, we learned that spiritual gifts have multiple dimensions and serve a variety of purposes in Christ's Mission.

I heard about the new definitions through the Catherine of Sienna Institute, which gave workshops and developed one of the first paper and pencil tests for charisms. I was not surprised that I scored high in Evangelization. But it shocked me to see how low I scored in the practice of Generosity. But seeing that I needed to grow in generosity was helpful. I've worked at it ever since.

Today, both Catholics and Protestants have ready access to online tools to help us investigate our personal charisms. Among the many websites available, I recommend the one from Theology on Tap, which offers a simple "check list" that gets analyzed for you. [Click here.](#)

And for a test developed by women, go to [Catholicfamilyfaith.org](http://Catholicfamilyfaith.org).

So, invest some time doing this. Take a test and reflect upon your results. You'll learn more about yourself, which is essential to your project of discernment.

Seek advice. Who can tell you about the ministry you are considering? You may not yet know them, but they are out there and usually are pleased to talk with interested people.

Consider meeting with someone on your parish staff. Or find a department in your diocese or an agency that serves in the field you are considering and check out the staff page of their website. Say a little prayer and choose someone, then call during office hours. Meeting with someone not only will help your discernment; it also may provide a steppingstone to what you feel called to do.

What affirmations have you received? When you do a good job, some people will pay you a compliment. And the more often you say thank you, the more information they will give you.

Ask questions about how well you did but be clear about your purpose. You are in this to gather honest impressions, not to swell your pride. The Holy Spirit wants to strengthen your confidence and often will speak to you through the remarks of others.

Where did your efforts bear fruit? Jesus said, "By their fruits, you shall know them."

Here is a simple exercise that will really open your eyes. Get a big piece of paper and down the left side write all the times that you served the

Mission of Christ in some way—big and small. Then in the second and third columns write for each entry, how you felt while you were doing it and what resulted from your efforts. Then sit back and let the big picture sink in.

Next look for patterns. What kinds of ministries energized you and which left you weary. Which bore fruit for the kingdom of God, and which seemed like failures.

This exercise doesn't take long, and the results can really help your discernment. In Chapter 2, I shared how I received affirming images about serving in parish ministry, but it took a few years for the doors to open. In one of the classes at Seattle U, the professor assigned us to make our personal chart and report back what it told us.

Wow! Was that an eye-opener. Nothing I had tried in downtown Seattle accomplished much, but almost everything I had attempted in the parish went well. And the professor said, "Doesn't this tell you something? It's good that you tried different things. You gained experience and learned a lot about yourself. This reinforces your plan to prepare for parish ministry. Doesn't it?" Of course, I already knew that it did.

The discernment method of St. Ignatius. The founder of the Jesuit order developed a method of helping with discernment that still is the best out there today. When young men arrived, many wanted to serve in foreign missions and usually had a specific part of the world in mind. Ignatius told them, "Here's what you should do: Take a few weeks living as though you are serving there and then spend some time living as though you remained here at home. Then come tell me how you feel." The young men didn't like the exercise, but for many it prevented their making a huge mistake.

I didn't learn about this method until after I already had done it. During the years after I felt the call to parish ministry, I had to put first things first. Our children were preparing for their own chosen pathways, and supporting their needs and pursuing deacon formation left me with little time to do anything more than some volunteer work in our parish. So, I actually was living the first Ignatian alternative without realizing it.

A full-time job with the Archdiocese caught my attention, and when I applied, I came in second. This was discouraging, but while I licked my wounds, I realized that the position would not have been good for me. It paid less than my current employment in industry and it would have required a lot of travel around western Washington at a time when I was needed at home as a father and provider. And shortly after I didn't get the job, it became clear that preparing to become a Catholic deacon was the route I should follow.

Does the Ignatian method sound like something that might help you with your discernment? You can learn more by contacting the [Seattle Ignatian Spirituality Center](#).

You have many years of discipleship ahead of you, so follow the steps

now that seem to best fill your discernment needs.

### Reflection Questions:

In the past, how have you approached discerning what you should do?

Which spiritual gifts do you think you have?

What do you need to learn to effectively do what you feel called to do?

## 6

### Obstacles to Grace

**A**t this point, you've made up your mind that you want to live a life in grace. You want to accept the call of Jesus and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Don't get too overconfident, though. You will face obstacles, and you need to know what to do about them.

Focusing on obstacles can be useful. Sin obviously is an obstacle, but it's not the only one.

We know that God's grace is always shining on us like the sun. But clouds can come between us and the sun, and we can put up an awning to keep the sun's rays away. The clouds between us and God's grace are outside of our control—societal, cultural, political. But we often put up barriers ourselves—selfishness, resentment, compulsion.

We might ask, "Why would anyone put up a barrier to God's grace? It doesn't make sense."

But the fact is, we do.

We do.

The following examples and illustrations won't all apply to you. But as you read through them ask, *Which are the biggest obstacles to grace in my life?* This will tell you what you need to work on.

Venial Sins. Why do I mention venial sins? Most of us don't go around committing mortal sins every day, and venial sins can be significant obstacles.

Most books on spirituality today don't bother to mention sin. This may help sell books, but it doesn't advance discipleship.

St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross were mystics who wrote a lot about the challenges of the spiritual life. Their advice is timeless. Teresa insisted that the seven stages into the heart of the Interior Castle were open to everyone, not just monks and nuns. And today the stages, which she called "mansions" on the journey, are more applicable to people like us than ever.

St. Teresa stressed that most people don't progress beyond the first three stages. And what holds them back the most are their venial sins.

We often don't bother to look at our little faults, they are so commonplace. They don't even seem "sinful." But while our Lord looks upon these with mercy, they do get in the way of our spiritual progress. St. Teresa says that anyone who wants to get to the fourth mansions and beyond must look clearly at their venial sins and do something about them.

Why did Eve believe the serpent when it told her she could eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil? She decided to judge the matter for

herself, which was a fatal mistake.

Unfortunately, it's a mistake that's been repeated by human beings over and over again. The restrictions God has placed upon us are for our own good. And God is not arbitrary. God sets boundaries for us because he loves us and wants to protect us from negative consequences. Often, it's only after we've transgressed that we realize what a blunder we've made.

Like the serpent, many voices in our world today try to convince us that we can determine for ourselves what is good or evil. They tempt us to focus on our own selfish desires. We shouldn't listen to them, though, because they have not listened to Jesus. And we don't want to be one of those who make little sins seem OK. We should watch what we do and don't do so we don't add legitimacy to sins people see us commit.

Let's instead use our God-given powers of judgement to hear the voice of Jesus, who showed by his words and example what the "good life" really is.

Mimetic Desire. Have you noticed how little children copy what they see their parents do? It's the main way kids learn. And we see it throughout the animal kingdom. For most species, it's the key to survival.

Researchers now realize that adults copy too, only in more subtle ways. Adult humans tend to want things that people they look up to desire. We copy them by desiring what they want or have. There's a name for this. It's called Mimetic Desire.

Advertisers understand this fully. It's why they pay big bucks to sports stars and celebrities to tell you they like their product.

Mimetic desire causes all kinds of problems from envy to armed robbery. Two of the Ten Commandments say, "thou shall not covet."

If we copy anyone, it should be Jesus who openly shared his desire for love, peace, justice, truth and compassion.

To get a handle on desire, make a list of things you wish you had. Then for each ask, "What would having this actually do for me?" If something doesn't fulfill a real need, your desire for it is likely mimetic, a preference you appropriated without thinking.

To learn more about this intriguing topic, consult the works of French theologian Rene Girard, whose books are available in English on [Amazon](#).

Control. Do you have a high need to control? How much of your time and energy goes into making sure that others do things right?

The Mission of Christ needs people who are good at leading and organizing, but not those who just like to boss people around. So, spend some time thinking about your motivations. Disciples serve best when we allow the Holy Spirit to be our guide.

And we are a part of a world-wide Church that is responsible for the Mission of Christ today. Even the pope doesn't have the latitude to make everything go his way. Popes, like us, have areas they'd like to emphasize,

but they must deal with limited resources and conflicting opinions like we do. The most successful disciples usually have adopted the attitudes of Jesus, who came “not to be served, but to serve.”

Compulsions. For most people, compulsions are the biggest obstacles to grace. They are the problems we have that we say are not problems.

Do you use substances to make you feel good? These could be alcohol, prescription drugs, pot, coke, or food. Do you have private experiences that you try to hide, such as gambling or porn? Do you engage in self-serving activities, like risky adventures or expensive purchases? Do you spend most of your time working in some way, or on its counterpart: codependent attending to the needs of another?

These suck up our energy, time and money. They are substitutes for the love and intimacy we crave but don't have. They become idols we cling to instead of letting Christ be our Savior.

When we give too much of our time and attention to these substitutes, our hearts and minds are not open to the invitations of the Holy Spirit or to the helpful grace we need to fulfill our discipleship call.

There are two antidotes for compulsive behavior: prayer and counseling.

Pray for clarity. Ask Jesus to help you see how your drug of choice is affecting you. Pray for him to help you see the damage it is causing. And request that he guide you to resources that can help.

Finding the right counselor or help group usually is the answer in these situations. We already know that our willpower alone won't handle it.

There's truth in the saying, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over, and expecting different results.” And anyone who has been through counselling can tell you, it's the easiest way forward to a new life.

We all have wounds that hold us back, and healing earthly wounds advances quicker when we make use of a professional healer. So, look for a good counsellor and go to the first session. Don't let embarrassment hold you back. And most of the cost may be paid by your insurance.

This advice comes from my experience. For several months I met with an excellent therapist, Greg, who helped me see where my troubles came from and led me on the road to overcoming them.

During my first five years as a child, I was sick with asthma. And after it went away, I was still a weak kid, which left scars on my self-esteem that I never fully grew out of. I had vivid memories of being picked on by other kids and feeling helpless to do anything about it. I turned to cookies for comfort and avoidance to feel secure.

Greg helped me to understand the origins of my issues and suggested things I could do to move past them. I began to see that I had built a “wall” around myself to protect me from the intrusions of people. Then he asked me to visualize how God sees me rather than worry about what others might

be thinking. Greg said, “When you can love yourself like God loves you, the wall around you will crumble and you won’t want to repair it.”

This was one of the best pieces of advice I ever received. I’m very grateful for the counseling experience. It was a great grace in my life. From that point on I became a happier person and a more capable disciple of Jesus than I had ever imagined.

Taking down our obstacles to grace is simpler than we may think. It’s just like rolling up an awning, so the sun can shine on us.

It takes work and determination, and there is a cost. But the world we enter into is so beautiful that we never want to go back.

When we take down our obstacles, our relationship with Jesus bursts with new meaning! We want all that Christ wills for us and we feel a sure confidence that whatever path we follow with him, his grace will see us through.

## Reflection Questions:

How often do you think about your venial sins?

What do you tell the priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

What are the biggest obstacles to grace in your life?

How do you plan to deal with them?

## Christian Friendship

People sometimes ask, “Which is more important Christian friendship or service in the Mission of Christ?”

Both are vitally important.

Friendship builds disciples who want to serve, and serving shoulder to shoulder in Christ’s Mission creates lasting friendships. Without our friendships, we wouldn’t accomplish as much for the Mission.

People today have fewer good friends than their ancestors had. And studies show that young men and women are plagued with feelings of loneliness. On the streets and in our workplaces, we are crowded among faces we hardly know. Many of us interact for hours through our phones and screens, but at the end of the day we may feel empty from lack of depth.

Websites tell us how many “friends” we have, but are they real friends? Do they share their lives with us? Do they reveal their inner selves? Do they want to hear our stories? Do they challenge us to grow?

Jesus understood our human need for friendship. That’s one reason he taught his followers in groups. The women who ministered with Jesus didn’t get much space in the New Testament, but every time we see them, they are together. And initially, none of the twelve apostles knew more than three of the others. But by the time Jesus commissioned them to go forth to all nations, they had formed bonds of intimacy and trust.

Christian friends fill a need that no other relationships can satisfy. They link us to Christ, and they anchor us to his Church. But deep friendships don’t happen by accident. They develop as we share our inner selves.

I encourage you to talk about your religious experiences with friends you trust and who take their faith seriously. The more we share our personal stories of faith, the deeper our friendships become and the more our friendship with Jesus grows.

When we say things out loud, we hear our own voices state how we feel. This benefits you and it benefits those who listen; they grow in their faith by what they hear from you. And all this works best when you participate in a small faith-sharing group.

During my preparation for deacon ordination, I got to know two outstanding, faith-filled Catholics who became my mentors in Christian friendship. Both were leading small faith-sharing groups, and both graciously gave me the benefit of their knowledge. (Both have passed away now but before they joined Jesus in heaven, they gave me permission to share their stories.)

Tom Mahoney was a regional leader in the Cursillo movement. (That’s a

Spanish word meaning little course.) It's a discipleship movement that begins with a four-day retreat and continues in weekly faith-sharing sessions with friends.

Tom told me that he met Jesus when he was 30 at his first retreat. He said, "I always believed in God and the Trinity. But at that retreat, Jesus became someone close—a brother and a friend—a best friend—the kind of friend you could count on in any situation."

Tom and I grouped together weekly for more than three decades.

Mary Mauren was a natural leader of women who loved to help people grow. She had a remarkable teaching and ministry career, touching the lives of thousands. Mary earned two graduate degrees and authored a five-year bible study, *Scripture Share and Prayer*, which she taught in parishes throughout the Archdiocese.

In addition to teaching Scripture, Mary led growth groups for women and established the *Naming Myself* program that helped women look back over their lives, heal their wounds, and move on with a truer sense of who they are.

Mary helped me develop an adaption of *Naming Myself* for men. Women and men process things differently inside. Women typically are better at self-disclosure, but men enjoy sharing their experience, which satisfies a hunger for intimacy men long for today.

I'm not saying that you have to be in a faith-sharing group to be an effective disciple. But it's important for our growth in faith and service that we get into the habit of talking about our religious experience out loud. Unless we spend time regularly engaging with our friends in Christ, we won't get much opportunity. And those who join a group that gathers regularly win both ways. Their friendships get deeper, and their ability to express their faith to others grows stronger.

As the Partners in the Gospel process began to unfold in 2023, it became apparent that as parishes get larger, we no longer will know everybody. We will need groups to stay connected. So, I began to develop Discipleship Groups, making use of the best practices I learned from Mary Mauren and Tom Mahoney and other movements I had been involved with. In 2025, we now have about 165 men and women meeting in 16 groups in Snohomish and Monroe.

For disciples, success is not measured in numbers, but by how good of a friend you can be. When you can make a friend and be a friend, you can bring a friend to Christ.

Can you be a friend to those who are poor?

Can you lead back someone who has fallen away?

Can you reach out to someone who feels marginalized?

Can you attract people to Jesus by the type of friend that you are?

When the Mahoney family's fifth child came along, she was born with Down's Syndrome. Then they learned that Erin also had a weak heart with a hole between the ventricles. She had open heart surgery when she was one year old, another at five, and more after that.

Erin lived longer than the doctors expected, but at age 23, she needed another critical heart operation. I was with them at Children's Hospital while they awaited the outcome. Tom and I walked outside and sat on a bench in the sun. He poured out his heart that day. I've never met another man who could be so open.

It helped Tom to talk about how hard it would be for him when Erin died. And as he let the tears flow, he reaffirmed his faith in Christ. I tried to be as good of a friend as I could. It was all I could do.

Friendship is an important aspect of discipleship. When people see how you and your friends love and support one another, they can begin to visualize what the phrase "God loves you" actually means.

They may love their spouses and children deeply, but until people experience love freely given without expectation, the notion of a loving God remains intangible and hypothetical. Only a believer can talk about Jesus in a way that is believable. And only a friend can make friendship with Jesus attractive.

For more than a dozen years, my Snohomish group met in the open dining area at Hagen's grocery. The staff got to know us as "the guys who meet here every Monday to talk about their faith." Some of them learned our first names, and we spoke with them personally. A few times an observing customer would walk up to us and ask, "Who are you guys?" And we'd tell them with big smiles, "We're Catholic friends who just love to get together!"

One of our Monroe groups meets in a coffee shop and another at the Senior Center. Private places have less noise, but public spaces have their advantages too.

People say, "I love my group." Once they've enjoyed the close experience, they want it to endure.

We all need a friendship group, even if it's not official. If you live in an area where no formal faith-sharing groups are available, try asking some friends to join with you. If you'd like a copy of the format we use in Discipleship Groups, [Click here](#).

Disciples in some manner share their faith in a public way. That's how the gospel has been spread to all nations and throughout the generations. If no one had spoken, no one would have heard.

Parents do this when they bring their children for baptism and when they tell their kids why they believe. Adults spread the gospel when they back out of the driveway on Sunday mornings and when they wave at their neighbors as they drive by. We demonstrate the values of the kingdom by what we do

and don't do. And we support the faith of our friends when we sing from our hearts at mass.

St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary, use words." That's good advice for all Christians, but disciples must develop comfort with speaking out. We start in simple ways like teaching religion classes to children or welcoming newcomers to Church. And we progress bit by bit out of our comfort zones, month by month and year by year. The more we engage in conversations about our faith, the more we grow as ministers of the gospel.

This can be a stretch at times. But we follow the Savior who stretched out his arms on a cross to show the world how much we are loved. Disciples advance the Mission of Christ by demonstrating he was right.

So, speak with your friends about what you feel in your heart and widen your circle of influence. Christ will smile on your efforts and shower you with grace.

## Reflection Questions:

Who do you share your stories of faith with?

If you seldom do this, when do you plan to begin?

How good of a friend can you be?

Who do feel you can bring to Christ?

## Praying as a Disciple

**A**fter the flood, when Noah climbed out of the ark onto dry land, the first thing he did was build an altar and offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God. This was a most natural thing for Noah to do. And today, disciples of Jesus pray in the way that feels most natural.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained that prayer should flow out of where we are in that moment. We should not put on a big show—just be ourselves.

Prayer brings us into the presence of God. We are in prayer whenever our minds and hearts become centered on God, whether we are alone or with others, whether our prayer is silent or out loud.

Jesus taught his followers how to pray by his word and example. He often loudly praised God in the presence of his disciples, but at times he went off by himself.

The words we speak in prayer should flow from our heart, but they can be familiar, like the rosary, where the meaning is in our attention to the mysteries more than on the repetition. (I find it helpful to meditate a bit on each mystery before I proceed with the prayers.)

When his disciples asked Jesus, “Teach us to pray,” he responded, “This is how you are to pray:

Our Father in heaven, holy be your name.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread,  
and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.  
And do not subject us to the final test,  
but deliver us from the evil one.” Matthew 6: 9-13

The Lord’s Prayer has become a great treasure of the Church that provides a sense of unity as we recite it with friends and strangers alike. When we pray spontaneously, we should make sure our prayer embraces what is expressed in the Our Father.

We pray to “our” Father, which acknowledges that we are one family born of one God. We recall that we are brothers and sisters in one great heritage. We pray with the confidence of children approaching their father with love. It’s the way Mary and Joseph taught Jesus to pray.

In our New Testament faith, we picture the intimate relationship of Jesus with his Father and realize that we share in the same bond of love. And we proclaim the unfathomable holiness of God that permeates our lives.

We pray that the kingdom of God will come to fullness in our world.

There is no mention of our Christian hope for eternal life, just a passionate plea that the principles of the kingdom will be lived out—that God’s will becomes accepted in the hearts of humanity and prevails throughout the earth.

We pray for the sustenance that we need daily for our physical needs and for our lives as Christians. The Greek word translated as “daily,” *epiousios*, literally means “superior substance.” This refers to the Eucharist and the grace we need to fulfill our discipleship call. If we picture the *mana* that appeared each morning for the Israelites in the desert, we can imagine the “bread from heaven” that sustains us on our earthly journey.

“Debt” in the Lord’s Prayer is another word for sin. In Israel, sin came to be understood as something more than just a violation of a moral code; it created a debt owed to God. In our prayer, we say we are grateful for being forgiven and therefore forgive in the way God forgives. When Peter asked Jesus, “how many times must we forgive, seven times?” Jesus didn’t just up the ante, he multiplied it.

We conclude the Lord’s Prayer by asking that we not be led into temptation nor subjected to the final test. This brings to mind the temptations of Christ by the devil in the desert and the test in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed to his Father, “not my will, but thine be done.” We probably won’t be hung on a cross, but all disciples face trials that test our commitment.

There is no one best way to pray. The best method for you depends upon your personality. But all prayer should lift our hearts and minds to God. I’ll mention a few approaches.

If you have not yet prayed for help in praying, by all means start now. The Holy Spirit will help you become a better prayer. Just ask, “Holy Spirit, help me to pray.” Repeating this simple phrase like a mantra as you breath in and breath out works wonders.

St. Teresa of Avila, a great mystic and doctor of the Church, wrote about her experiences in prayer as “spiritual union,” where her heart at times became united with the heart of God. This is the union that Jesus experienced when he went off by himself to pray. And while we may not expect that level of communion with God in this life, we can visualize it and make it our goal.

St. Teresa described seven stages into the “Interior Castle” and wrote that special moments with our Lord occur when he chooses to grant them. The best resource I’ve found on Teresian contemplative prayer is *Fire Within* by Thomas Dubay, SM. It’s packed through with experienced advice and practical tips.

To learn a more tangible and incarnational method of prayer, I recommend *Franciscan Prayer* by Ilia Delio, OSF. Sister Delio walks you through the steps practiced by St. Clare of Assisi, a close colleague of St.

Francis, that begins with gazing at a crucifix and considering the ways Jesus has blessed your life.

I love this form of prayer. It's easy to learn and quickly brings you closer to Christ.

If you are bothered by distractions when you pray, find a quiet space free of interruptions. And if the distractions persist, try to determine if they may be Jesus telling you something. Pray, *Jesus, if this is from you, please disclose it to me. If it is not, then help me release it.* Remain calm and stay with your prayer. Jesus may be speaking to you in the distractions. But if not, give them time to drift away.

And finally, make it your practice to ask for guidance and assistance in your discipleship ministry. Whenever you don't know what to do, silently say, *Jesus, help me with this*, and proceed. No one will even know you prayed.

You are helping advance the Mission of Christ. So, pray for those you serve. Pray that you may serve them well. And pray that your efforts when combined with the work of other disciples will bring the world to Jesus.

## Reflection Questions:

How do you rate your prayer life?

What is your favorite way to pray?

Can you make it your habit to pray before you serve and pray for those who you serve?

What other methods of prayer do you think you should try?

## Accepting Responsibility

Step back for a moment and picture all the men and women who never met Jesus in person, yet who accepted responsibility for his mission.

That's a lot of people.

They are countless—millions, perhaps billions of dedicated followers.

And each one was remarkable in their own way. Each one saw a need and accepted responsibility for filling it.

If they hadn't accepted responsibility, where would Christianity be today? The Holy Spirit would have had a difficult time keeping faith in Christ moving.

Accepting responsibility is a choice we make freely. People can be pushed or pounded into doing things, but that is not the way Jesus would have it. Christ expected those who enjoy the benefits of the Church to observe what is needed and then freely take responsibility for doing it.

Consider St. Paul.

Paul, like us, never met Jesus in person. He was a zealous Jew, highly patriotic for the traditions of his homeland. When the new Jesus movement emerged within Judaism, it appalled him. He stated later in his letters that he volunteered to round up those who professed faith in Jesus to bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

Yet the risen Christ chose Paul to become his missionary to the Gentiles. Jesus saw qualities in Paul that made him an ideal choice. Paul was educated. He could speak and write eloquently in both Aramaic and Greek. And whenever he got enthusiastic about something, Paul put all his energy into it. Accepting responsibility came naturally to him.

St. Paul shared the story of his first encounter with Christ: how on the way to Damascus, he was knocked to the ground and struck blind by a voice that said, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" And he relates how he was led into the city, where a Christian named Ananias prayed over him and he regained his sight! Paul was so impressed by the man's dedication to Jesus that, when he recovered his strength, he accepted baptism!

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, one of his earliest, he told how he then went to Arabia (probably Nabataea) and spent three years attempting to convert the Arab people there, but with little success. So, he went back to Jerusalem to learn more from Peter and others.

In Jerusalem, Paul met Barnabus—who became his mentor as a missionary—and the rest is history. Paul spent the next twenty years, through all kinds of dangers and hardships, advancing the mission of Christ, until his martyrdom in Rome in about the year 60.

There was no authority who told Paul where to go or what to do. The gospels had not yet been written. He simply saw the need and with the guidance he felt in his heart, he preached and formed little communities of faith in cities all around the eastern Mediterranean. Today we recognize St. Paul as the most accomplished missionary in the initial years of Christianity, all because he accepted responsibility for Christ's continuing mission.

As disciples, we shouldn't judge ourselves in comparison to St. Paul or other heroes of the faith, but we should look for similarities in our traits. Do we place an emphasis on learning new things in our faith? Do we make sacrifices and accept risks when needed? Do we pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us. And do we accept responsibility for our part of carrying on Christ's mission?

There is no leeway for disciples today to become complacent. Yes, the Church has its problems. We may be bothered by the scandals, and we may feel discouraged that many young people drop out. But do we let those issues prevent us from carrying out our responsibilities? No, we don't! No one else can carry on the mission of Jesus except us. Our dedication is needed now more than ever.

Our call today is to cooperatively carry on his mission as stewards of all we have received. Our sins have been forgiven, and we've been given countless blessings. So, we accept responsibility out of gratitude.

In our time and place, stewardship means offering a portion of our time, talent and treasure for the advancement of the mission of Christ. The current guideline for treasure is 10%. That's 5% to our parish community and 5% to other needs such as Catholic school tuition, the Annual Catholic appeal, and other charities and agencies.

For time and talent, it's not as simple. We may have children or elderly parents to care for, so there is no numerical formula. But our offering should be significant. It should be enough that we feel it and enough to make a meaningful contribution.

Until I began to identify as a disciple, I didn't take contributing to the mission of Christ seriously. I was stingy with my time and money. But after I took on the mantle of discipleship, I saw how I had been selfish with Jesus, and I was sorry for the wasted years.

So, don't feel bad about past shortcomings. Just begin when you can at the level you are able. Jesus will be pleased with your contribution.

Invest your time, talent and treasure where your heart leads you and your gifts are needed. Accept responsibility for the continuing Mission of Christ. Like the great men and women of the past, you'll make a difference in the evolving power of faith, hope and love of the world, and you'll know what it's like to fully be his disciple.

**Reflection Questions:**

How do you feel when you ponder the image of billions of people accepting responsibility for the mission of Christ?

Have you thought about your discipleship in terms of accepting responsibility for Christ's mission?

In what ways is the concept of stewardship helpful for your accepting responsibility?

How do you feel about the guideline for time, talent and treasure of giving 5% to your parish community and 5% to other needs and charities?

## Disciples in a Selfish World

People sometimes ask me, “What keeps you going when the world rejects what Jesus stood for?” My answer is, “There’s work to be done, and I just do what I can.”

The kingdom of God has not yet fully evolved on our planet. Jesus said it would grow like a tiny mustard seed into a giant sheltering tree, but he didn’t say how fast that would happen. He may not have known how long it would take because he only had the few early disciples to nurture the seed and keep it growing.

The known world was totally soaked through with pagan values and controlled by violence and oppression. The task may have looked impossible to the first disciples. And Jesus didn’t say it would be easy. He only said, “Know that I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.”

In fact, Jesus never said that people would not suffer, nor that poverty would be eliminated. And he predicted that wars and rumors of wars would continue right up to the end. But Jesus used his time on earth to help the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, cleanse lepers, raise the dead, and preach the good news to the poor.

He told everyone who would listen that a new kingdom was emerging—the kingdom of God—that was in the midst of all the mess. Jesus invited all to enter this kingdom, enjoy its benefits, and minister to those not yet in it. And he instructed his disciples to follow his lead.

Christ relied on one enduring resource—the power of love—a force that could resist and outlast any earthly power. At the Last Supper, he gave his followers a New Commandment that they “love one another,” so that everyone would know he was sent by his Father. And throughout the First Century and beyond, love has overwhelmed even the hardest hearts. People noticed and exclaimed, “See how they love one another!” which attracted them into the new faith.

It's easy to become discouraged by the troubles in our times. We watch the evening news and feel angry and overwhelmed.

In our area, 30% of women and 15% of the men aged 18-35 are using prescription drugs to ease their frustration and depression. The homeless population is growing, even in small towns. Our stores are packed with unhealthy food, disease still haunts us, racism persists, kid’s test scores remain low, online scams never end, politics seems hopelessly divided, and money controls most of the power.

So, disciples of Jesus still have a lot of work to do. We should pray for God’s help, but we must not sit on our hands and wait for a miracle.

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus preached:

“Do to others what you would have them do to you.

And if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?

Even sinners love those who love them.

And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?

Even sinners to the same.

If you lend money to those from whom you expect repayment,  
what credit is that to you?

Even sinners lend to sinners and get back the same amount.

But rather, love your enemies and do good to them,

and lend expecting nothing back;

then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High,

for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

This is how we can witness today. This is how we can show the world that Jesus is who he said he is. It’s how we can demonstrate that he’s alive and well, still encouraging us on. And it’s how we can use the power of love to get the results we can get, even if we don’t change the world.

Almost all disciples face roadblocks in our ministries, which can be very discouraging at times. And there is a fine line between those who drop out and those who keep going with increasing determination or move on to new endeavors that they can put their hearts into.

I have friends who are helping an immigrant family making a new life in this country. The family is working hard and doing their best to become good Americans, but they constantly run up against issues caused by the shifting policies affecting immigrants. Now, they must develop a “Plan B,” which they wish they didn’t have to do.

One of my friends revealed, “These are good people. They’ve worked hard and done all the right things. We never imagined that we’d be helping them plan another move. This is difficult for all of us who love them!” When I asked him, “What do you plan to do?” he answered, “We’ll help them in any way we can. We are not going to give up on them.”

My wife and I have other friends who, back when their only child was in high school, provided a home for some exchange students from various parts of the world. I thought it was amazing. They hosted about five students over several years and said it was “a wonderful experience for us, as well.” When I asked if there were any problems they said, “Of course. They were teenagers. But we treated them with love and things worked out.”

As the years went by, I saw the “evidence” of the fruit of their love. The former students stayed in contact with them. They visited often, and one even invited them to her wedding.

Not all of us are called to host exchange students or help immigrants, but we are called to do what we can and not yield to the temptation to give up.

Mother Teresa taught that “not all of us can do great things. But we all can do small things with great love.”

She told her sisters, “Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time and always start with the person nearest you.” And she told reporters, “I do not pray for success; I ask for faithfulness.”

Her tender words ring true today:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere, people may deceive you.

Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.

Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today will often be forgotten.

Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.

Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God.

It was never between you and them anyway.

## Reflection Questions:

How often do you get discouraged by the ways our world works?

Do you think that someone other than Jesus will fix it?

Have you faced discouragement in your discipleship ministry? What did you do about it?

How do you feel about Mother Teresa’s advice to simply do what you can do, starting with those nearest to you?

## How Disciples “Image” Jesus

Disciples of Jesus are the living image of Christ in our time.

This was understood as early as 1441 when the Dutch-Catholic Thomas a Kempis published *The Imitation of Christ* in Latin. It became one of the most widely read books on Christian spirituality and translations are still popular today.

Don't let the term “imitate” fool you. People shouldn't pretend they are Christ nor attempt to copy him. And it's not about asking, “what would Jesus do?” in each situation. It's more a matter of welcoming Christ to reside within you and understanding the implications.

St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “It is now no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me.” Paul realized that through his dedication to Jesus, he had become a new person, someone who was in many ways like Christ and who often did the things Jesus had done.

You may ask, “How does Jesus live within me?” He comes into us when we listen to his Word and when we receive his Body and Blood. He enters our hearts when we pray and when we love those whom he loves. And Jesus remains within us even when we don't notice him. The self-giving love that is incarnate in the person of Christ becomes incarnate in us.

To imitate is to image. When the Word of God became flesh, the image became flesh and was expressed in time. And we were created in the image and likeness of God so as to image God. Everything we can know about God is revealed in Christ, and what is revealed about Christ is revealed in us. By our imitating Christ, Divinity truly becomes present in our lives and in the world.

Our imitation of Christ is the fruit of our prayer and actions, which shape who we become. So, imitation is not a “mimicking” of Jesus but our becoming his image through transformation.

For Clare of Assisi, a close colleague of St. Francis, the transforming power of love leads to a spiritual birth of Christ in our lives. We become, “like Mary, who gave birth to a Son whom the heavens could not contain.” She is the model of spiritual motherhood and the perfect imitator of Christ. To become a spiritual mother is what discipleship is all about, for men and women alike.

Like St. Francis and St. Clare, we give birth to Christ by letting the love in our hearts shine through in our lives—we conceive and give birth to Christ in our world. When love transforms our actions in such a way that Christ is “imaged” in us, then we become mothers and sisters and brothers of Christ.

Ponder that idea. Isn't that what Mary did when she protected and nurtured

her Son? Isn't that what Jesus did when he stretched out his arms on the cross? Isn't that what the great saints of history did when they followed the call they felt in their hearts? And isn't that what the saints of our time did—Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis and countless others—as they served God's people with love?

Disciples of Jesus do that. And you can do that! You can do that. Just let the presence of Christ within you burst out and enter into all those you pray for and all those you serve.

Think about who gave “spiritual birth” to you. Identify those who imaged Jesus for you. Make a long, written list of their names and take out their photos. Don't hide them in your computer—place them where you will see them often. And meditate on all that they did for you. Because of them, you are who you are today. Isn't that true?

I didn't appreciate who my mother was for me, and my wife and the many others who have been influential in my life, until I had grown in faith. My mom was my protector and my teacher. I always felt safe in her love. She was my haven of refuge in a world I didn't fully understand.

Like many Italian mothers, she felt it was her duty to mold me into the person she wanted me to be. And she often held on to me—tighter than I wanted—but I was not an easy kid to handle. I knew I was loved and I usually obeyed. She taught me my prayers and answered my never-ending questions. And she kept her eyes on me. I could never hide from her. One stern glance would keep me from going astray.

Mom was a Catholic as you could get. She dragged our family to mass, and to every novena and devotion that came along. I still can smell the incense and see the peering eyes of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and hear the repetitive recitations of those who gathered in our small dark Church.

My mother didn't drive, but that didn't keep her from accepting responsibility for the many bazaars and dinners our parish held. And when someone had a baby or was sick in bed, mom would pack a little suitcase and go stay with her and take care of her and her family for several days. Our house seemed empty during those times. And what a joy it was to go with dad to pick her up and bring her back. Our house felt like home again with her warm and loving presence.

Now, as I look back, mom clearly imaged Christ to me, when I wanted to see it and when I didn't. And when I finally let Jesus come into my heart and accepted the call to discipleship, I understood. I knew that the purpose of life—all life and my life—is to allow the life of Christ to shine.

So, don't be afraid to be the image of Jesus in your world. Accept the blessings and grace he showers upon you. Ponder the vital element you are in the double-helix of humanity and open your heart to his love, so you can pass it on.

This is the calling of the disciples of Jesus today. It is your calling and my calling and ours in the kingdom of God. Our world needs all the help it can get. So, the Body of Christ is not just a nice spiritual idea. Like St. Teresa of Avila said, “Christ has no body but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Your eyes are the eyes that must beam out Christ’s compassion to the world.”

Our participation in the Mission of Christ is necessary to make Christ present in the flesh. Without people visibly imaging Jesus, Christian faith makes no sense in our sinful world. Living the mystery of Christ today means accepting the call to complete what he has begun—for the healing of humanity, for the sanctity of the earth, and for the sake of all creation.

Your response benefits you. It benefits your family and friends. It benefits God and all humanity.

### Reflection Questions:

Who imaged Christ to you?

How do you see yourself imaging Christ in your world?

How do you show that you believe God is a God of Love?

### Note:

**You are encouraged to forward this digital copy to your friends to support them in their discipleship.**

# Discipleship Groups meeting format



## **Pray**

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth.

O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever rejoice in his consolations, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## **Check In**

Briefly share what has been happening in your personal life since your last group gathering.

## **Scripture**

Read aloud next Sunday's gospel passage. Then share the phrase or sentence that was most significant for you. How does it challenge your life today?

*Then each person shares on these three areas*

## **Spiritual Life**

Share meaningful moments in your spiritual life since your last gathering.

These might include a time in private prayer, liturgy, adoration, the beauty of nature, or a joy or struggle in your personal life that affected you spiritually.

Be sure to share times when you felt especially close to Jesus. What happened? How did you feel? What came from it?

## **Formation**

What have you done to further develop your knowledge and commitment as a disciple of Jesus? Include reading, classes, videos, etc.

## **Service**

How have you reached out to others to demonstrate the reality of God's glory and spread the truth of Christ's love?

Include charitable works, sharing your faith, accepting responsibility in your parish, etc.

*Always maintain confidentiality. What is said in the group stays in the group.*



## **Prayer Intentions**

Tell your friends who you are praying for, so they can join in your intentions.



## **Pray**

Our Father...

Hail Mary...

Glory Be...

We pray that the fire of Jesus enkindled in us by God's Spirit may lead more and more people to become disciples, formed in the image of Christ our Savior. Amen.

## **Business**

Before parting, discuss any other matters that your group needs to address.

## About the Author

**D**edicated adult educator and deacon Gene Vanderzanden writes for those who like to search for and discover gems of insight that deepen their understanding of scripture and connect their faith with their life experience. He holds Master of Pastoral Ministry and Master of Divinity degrees from Seattle University and has served in parish ministry for more than four decades.

Gene's other books include *Mark's Passion: The Story of a Spiritual Calling*  
*Passion & Purpose: St. Peter, Clement of Rome, and Struggles in the Early Church*  
*Women of Passion: Joanna and Mary Magdalene, witnesses to Jesus*  
*A Passion for Truth: St. Luke and the Gospel for the Gentile World*  
*Christ Speaks about Peace: His Message for Today*  
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but pressing crowds blocked her way  
until a mysterious woman from Magdala offered to help.

GENE VANDERZANDEN



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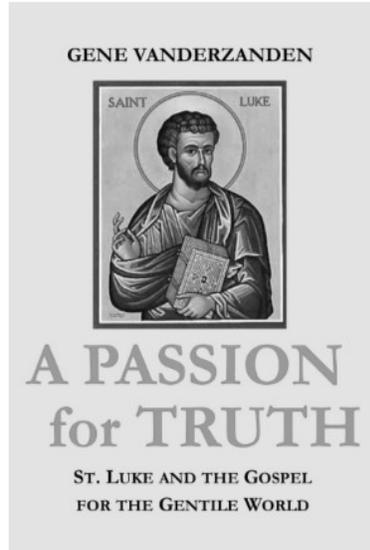
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