

Mission Made Possible  
(Second Edition)

Fr. Jon Bielawski, Michele Thompson, and Michael Dopp



**MISSION** OF THE **REDEEMER**  
MINISTRIES



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## Chapter 3

### Part A

*Your life is not about you.*

What does that mean? It means that your life is not about self-fulfillment or self-realization. It is not about feeding the desires of the flesh, being recognized by the world, experiencing every and all forms of pleasure, exercising power, pandering to the ego, or satisfying your own will.

Jesus told us this when He asked rhetorically, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life” (Mark 8:36)? Or when He said, “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). And He reinforced it with a memorable analogy, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

Your life is to be about seeking communion with God through the full gift of yourself to Him and others.

This is not the way of the world. The world tells you to take care of yourself, while Christ tells you to set aside the world and give your life away. This is the great inversion of Christianity where we find our life by giving it away.

Does this mean Jesus wants you to be unhappy? Ought life to be one sacrifice after another? Are you to disregard your own needs? Are you not allowed to have desires or have them fulfilled?

These are critical questions. Many Christians are unsure how to answer them. They want to give their life away, but they wonder if that means sacrificing all that is good including the dreams they carry and the happiness they desire. The answers are found not only in Scripture and the Church’s great tradition, but also in the lives of countless Catholics who discovered the beauty and genius of living these paradoxes.

The world tells you that you will find true happiness if you take care of yourselves. This is a lie. Those who have all that the world has to offer (honour, wealth, power, pleasure)

are not the happiest people alive. Why? Because while these are goods in themselves, they are not the true cause or source of happiness. When you think you will find genuine happiness in being honoured, wealthy, powerful, or in experiencing unbounded pleasure, you ask more of these goods than they can deliver. In expecting ultimate happiness from them, you have turned them into idols. And idols always turn out to be lies. These idols make a promise to you (your ultimate happiness) that they than cannot keep. They may bring fleeting comfort and enjoyment (who doesn't like being recognized, or getting a raise, or being in charge of an important decision, or eating an ice cream cone?), *but they cannot and will not satisfy the deepest desires of your heart.*

Jesus knows perfectly the human heart, and so He knows *your* heart perfectly. In your heart, like every heart, is a desire for the Infinite. In his *Confessions*, Augustine famously wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” You will only find rest, that is, joy, peace, happiness, and fulfillment, when God dwells fully in your heart. God made you in such a way that only He can be your fulfillment. The highest honours, global power, unlimited wealth, and intense pleasure are simply finite realities. *They are not enough for you. You have been made for God alone.*

How do you find this “rest” (that is, perfect joy, peace, happiness, and fulfillment) that alone can satiate the human heart? By deep communion with God which begins by making room for Him in your heart. And how do you make room for Him? By clearing out everything in your life that is not of Him. This is the seed “dying” of which Jesus spoke. He does not wish anything good within you to die. It is your fleshly desires, your disordered passions and attachments, and your sins that must die so that there is “room” for God to dwell within your heart. A garden that is full of thistles, weeds, and rocks does not have the “room” for the flowers to grow. Once these are removed, there is “room” for the plants to thrive and bear fruit.

The quickest and surest way to empty your hearts of everything that is less than God is to make of yourselves a gift to others.

*This is the great mystery of love.* The more you give it away, the more you have and the more you give yourself away, the more you genuinely possess yourself. A father who expresses love for his newborn daughter has more love, not less love, than he did before she arrived. The world, the flesh, and the devil tell you to be selfish, to hold on to self, to appropriate things to yourselves in order to be happy. But the opposite is true. It is in giving away that you receive. It is in dying that you gain life. To love is to give yourselves away and to die to yourselves. And to die is to enter into new life.

We see this manifested beautifully in the lives of the saints. In their youth, both St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Francis Xavier had great dreams for their lives. They came from prominent families, were naturally gifted, and had a plan for where they would find fulfillment and happiness. As young men, they were confident that they knew what was good for them and what would make them happy. But through difficulties and trials, they both came to see that God's ways were not their ways. Their plans were great in the eyes of the world—being a distinguished soldier or having a noble career—but God had something *indescribably more significant* for them. For these two men to realize this and open themselves to God, took a type of death. Death to their own ideas, plans, hopes, and dreams. It wasn't that these had been terrible ideas, plans, hopes, and dreams. They were (mostly) good, but they were not good enough.

The problem isn't that the things of this world are all bad. They have value and utility, and there is a vestige of God's goodness in them. There can be some level of satisfaction in the goods of this world: a tasty meal, time with friends, a promotion, recognition from a colleague, or a good book. But if we hope that these things alone are sufficient for the restlessness of the human heart, we are wrong.

God has something great for you. Something so unspeakable it may be difficult to imagine and believe. But Ignatius, Francis, and countless other saints testify to this simple truth: a life lived in deep friendship with God is *the good life*. No saint has ever died thinking, "I wish I gave less to God and more to the world." A life where God is kept on the margins may seem good, but it is nothing compared to one of intimacy with Him. Deep friendship with Christ will make the gold in your life reveal itself as coal. It will make the joys in your life comparable sorrows. It will unveil your biggest dreams as trifles. The Scriptures remind us that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor: 2:9). God has a plan for every person, and it is good. The saints saw this, responded, and experienced it. And because of this, *the saints were the happiest people who ever lived*.

What holds us back from saying "yes" to God? Often we are not sure He wants the best for us. We think His plans will make us unhappy. We ask, "Won't God ask me to give up something I love? Are the lives of saints not filled with suffering and difficulty?"

Of course that is what we see. But what we often miss is the hundredfold that God gives in return. On the outside, we see the crucifixion, but interiorly, friends of God are living the resurrection. In those who are fully open to God, suffering is not merely endured, but transformed and redeemed.

Think of this. Raising a child can be difficult. They wake you in the middle of the night. There are diapers to be changed, bills to be paid, and messes to be cleaned up. Watching new parents, you can wonder, “Why would anyone ever do that to themselves?” Yet there are few greater joys than having a child. Yes, a child brings about suffering, but it is also tremendously life-giving. And the suffering is not just to be stoically endured, but is something that can be transformative. Getting up at night, changing diapers, dealing with a crying child—all of these experiences can be instrumental in overcoming our own selfishness and laziness. Having children presents countless occasions to grow in virtue.

It doesn't mean it will always happen. Parenting can instead make us resentful, impatient, and angry. We have to choose what to do with this suffering. A parent who allows this suffering to purify them, and who uses the trials as an occasion to die to themselves, can come out on the other side more virtuous, happy, and even holy. In them, suffering has been redemptive.

Look again at God's plan for your life. What does He want for you? What is His dream for you? The words of Pope Benedict from the very first homily he gave after his papal election speak profoundly to these questions:

Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom? ... No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life (Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 April 2005).

Jesus wishes to heal attachments to things that are not good for you. In doing this, the deepest “you,” the most authentic “you,” the “you” He made you to be, will be fully realized. Jesus invites you to find this fullness of life (now and eternally) through a sincere gift of yourselves to Him and others (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 24).

What does any of this have to do with mission?

Evangelization is a privileged occasion to give ourselves away. It allows us to set aside our plans, inhibitions, and insecurities, and instead to focus on God and His Kingdom. It leads us to be less concerned with ourselves and focus instead on glorifying Him and working for the salvation of souls. Evangelization moves our focus from our plans/happiness/fulfillment to the happiness and fulfillment of others. When we do this, God gives back to us the very things that we desire most. Thus the great inversion: It is only in giving ourselves away that we “find” ourselves. It is only in emptying ourselves that we are filled. It is only in setting aside our plans that we find real joy and fulfillment (see Luke 6:38 and Mark 10:30).

When we are “in” the world, we think about our own interests and the building of the proverbial bigger barns (cf. Luke 12: 15-21). But as we draw closer to Jesus, our foundation and priority shifts. No longer is the self at the center, but God.

When this happens in us, we begin to show deep concern for the salvation of souls. This is the fruit of living with eternity as our horizon. And in light of eternity, almost everything that seemed to matter now is revealed as mundane, transient, and unimportant. And what was once relegated to the fringe now comes into clear view. Where we (and others) spend eternity—in hell separated from God or in heaven delighting in His embrace—matters absolutely and supremely. The lives of the saints testify to this reprioritization.

Why did St. Ignatius give up his grand military plans? He was filled with a profound love that prioritized the salvation of souls over all earthly goods.

Why did St. Francis Xavier give up his plans for an honourable career? He was filled with a profound love that prioritized the salvation of souls over all earthly goods.

Why did Sts. Jean de Brebeuf and Noel Chabanel give up a comfortable life in France? They were filled with a profound love that prioritized the salvation of souls over all earthly goods.

And how could Jesus, God Himself, ever choose to come down to Earth, endure the rejection of men, the abandonment of friends, the betrayal of Judas, the humiliation of arrest, the torture of flogging, the mocking of crowning, the agony of carrying the cross,

the horror of crucifixion, and the utter abandonment of all human and Divine consolation? He was united to the will of the Father and loved each and every soul even unto death.

In 1990, John Paul II wrote, “The number of those who do not know Christ and do not belong to the Church is constantly on the increase. Indeed, since the end of the Council it has almost doubled. When we consider this immense portion of humanity which is loved by the Father and for whom he sent his Son, the urgency of the Church’s mission is obvious” (*Redemptoris missio* 3). This is just one concerning trend among several. There is the rapidly-growing percentage of “Nones” (those who claim no religious affiliation). In some countries, Nones comprise almost half of the population. Then there are many people who once identified as Christian but have turned away. In the USA, less than one in four Catholics come to Mass on Sunday. In Canada and Europe, the rates are lower, with some places having less than one in ten Catholics attending Mass. Also concerning are those who identify as Catholic and still attend Mass, but who manifest merely a lukewarm faith. Many of these attend Mass merely out of duty or habit, rather than out of conviction. There may be some faith, but it is immature, shallow, incomplete. It is not the faith of the Nicene Creed. They are not disciples growing in the faith, but rather are sacramentalized yet unconverted. They live more according to the norms and dictates of the world than the Gospel; their lives are almost indistinguishable from those of unbelievers.

Thus our current situation: A significant portion of the population self-identify as having no religious affiliation. Among those who identify as Catholics, a shrinking number attend Mass. Then even among those who attend Mass, there is the phenomenon of Catholics with feeble faith. This is a crisis. The response of the Church to this crisis is to reiterate the call to mission. Since the need for the Gospel to be proclaimed is immense, a whole army of missionary disciples is necessary. The Lord is inviting His people to respond. Such a response must be rooted in one thing: A profound love that desires the salvation of souls.

Do you want the fullness of what God has for you? Do you desire a life of true greatness? Do you hope to be His instrument? Do you long to see people saved?

## **Part B**

Don Everts and Doug Schaupp were evangelical campus missionaries in California. After ten years, they looked back at the stories of all those students who had come to

faith as part of their ministry. Was there a pattern? Was there a “pathway” for leading a non-believer to a place of both encountering and responding to Christ?

What struck them in their research was that many people faced the same types of obstacles which needed to be addressed. They identified five common ones and labeled these *thresholds*.

A *threshold* is literally a piece of wood at the bottom of a barn door that *holds* in the *thresh* (straw). To go into or out of the barn, you have to go over the *thresh-hold*. The threshold does not prevent you from entering or leaving, but you do have to go over it if you want to get to the next room. Analogously, they identified five “thresholds” that a person on the road to conversion had to step over.

Sherry Weddell reflected further on their work. To this she added her own insights, born from decades of working in the Catholic Church. This strengthened the case for these thresholds as well as suggesting ways they can be overcome.

To understand the importance of identifying thresholds, think about this: when a doctor sees a patient, she does not *first* write a prescription. Why? Because she doesn’t know if the person has an infection, a broken bone, cancer, or something else. The first thing she does is speak with them in order to figure out what is going on. Only once she diagnoses the issue can she consider and begin treatment.

This is how we are to evangelize. Not everyone is in the same spiritual place. Some people have no faith, some have weak faith, some have distorted faith. Some people seem to hate Christ and the Church. Others are merely uninterested. Some people have lots of questions, while others have none. Some feel an emotional attachment to the Church and Christ but have intellectual hang-ups. For others, it is the opposite. Some people are so immersed in worldly lives that they don’t give God a second thought. Others are consumed by a desire to know Him but feel like they have not yet found Him. Some have never heard the Gospel, others have rejected it, and still others have simply drifted away.

If we are to be instruments in drawing someone closer to Christ, there are questions that we could first explore: What is important to them? What do they currently believe and why? What are the great dreams in their heart? Do they have faith? Knowing the answer to these questions and listening to the Holy Spirit can help us to understand the threshold that is before them. This time of listening, observing, questioning, and



befriending allows us to peek behind the curtains and have a better idea of where they are on this threshold spectrum.

Let's start to look at the thresholds ...

### *Threshold 1: Trust*

A person who is at the threshold of *Trust* does not yet trust you. If they do not trust you, they will not listen to you. It is really that simple.

Think of someone that you do not trust. Would you seek their counsel about a big decision? Would you solicit their advice? Would you be interested in what they have to say? Would you be open to their ideas? Likely not.

People will not listen to you until they trust you.

Trust can be built surprisingly quickly. When we meet a stranger, we begin to assess them immediately. We are making an initial evaluation as to whether we will offer initial trust to them. We listen to what they say and we watch how they act. If our first impressions and initial interactions are positive, then we tentatively offer trust. This initial trust is at the start of all relationships and conversations. It is tentative, fragile, and must grow, but it is where trust starts.

How do we build trust, and how do we help it to grow?

Whether a person comes to trust us or not depends in large part on how we act. If we are authentic, genuine, and friendly, most often a fundamental level of initial trust and acceptance will be established almost immediately. This is sufficient for a fruitful encounter.

Long-term this budding trust can be fostered in numerous ways. We can take an active interest in their life by expressing curiosity about them. We speak words that are true and life-giving. In continued interactions with them, we act in a trustworthy manner. We keep our word, speak honestly, and are faithful to promises. By expressing and living authentic love for the other person, their heart begins to open. And when people feel that we love and cherish them, trust deepens. As this happens, they move beyond the first threshold.

## Threshold 2: Curiosity

At the second threshold, the person tentatively trusts you. Trust will continue to grow, but they are willing to engage with you because of the trust you have built. The next threshold is *curiosity*. A person may have some degree of trust, but *they are simply not curious about spiritual things*.

Often family and friends are stuck here. They know us well; they may even love us. Their trust is authentic trust. But when it comes to “religion” or “God” or “the Church,” they are not curious/interested. Many are lukewarm or fallen-away Catholics. They have a “been there, done that” attitude. “What more is there to the Catholic faith?” they wonder. They have tried it and found it wanting (or so they think they have). They are like a person who heard half a game of football on the radio, thinks they know everything about the sport, and so decides definitely that football is simply of no interest and not worth their time. Unlike the first threshold, the issue is not in your relationship with them, but rather their lack of interest in or curiosity about Christianity/Catholicism.

How can we help them overcome this threshold?

We start interceding seriously and specifically for them. Ask God to awaken within them a curiosity or desire to know and believe. Next, we can work to evoke curiosity in several ways. The first is by taking a genuine interest in them— being curious about their life— and in particular, the things that matter most to them. Second, we should live a radical Christian witness. If we have the joy of Christ reigning in our hearts, then it should shine out in our attitude and manner for the world to see. St. Paul VI said that if we live a life rooted profoundly in the Gospel, our witness will “stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst?” (*Evangelii nuntiandi* 21). A full-on and integrated Christian life will arouse curiosity in others. Too often the lives of Christians are mediocre, banal, predictable, even boring. As such, they do not evoke curiosity in others. But when we live the Gospel fully with a transforming love of God and when He is *the* priority in our life, God's light shines out from within us. This is not about drawing attention to ourselves, but rather letting the joy of the Gospel radiate from us. Such a life awakens curiosity in others.

A third and vital part of this threshold is to begin to speak to the person about Jesus; not just about “God” or “the Lord” but about the person of Jesus. There is inherent power

in the Holy Name of Jesus and just speaking of “God” can seem to be abstract to some people. Jesus, in contrast, is a person who walked this Earth, ate meals with friends and sinners, and died of love on the cross. Many people have never heard of Jesus spoken of in personal and familiar terms. This can arouse curiosity in *who He is* (cf. Weddell, 141-145).

A fourth (and simultaneous) approach is to introduce or “dangle” the treasures of the Church before people. This could include our great artistic heritage, the lives of the saints, Eucharist miracles, beautiful liturgy, and modern miracles and healings. These not only catch a person's attention but break through the enslavement to the immanent and open someone up to the transcendent.

As people become curious, they open up to hearing more of the Good News. This is not conversion but is a step toward it. Catholicism and faith are now something in which they have a degree of interest. Without this, we are talking to a closed door.

If we recognize the importance of curiosity, we can, with God's grace, find ways to enkindle it and allow our friend to move to the next threshold, which is the most exciting and challenging of them all.

### *Threshold 3: Openness to change*

As they hear more of the faith and the call to a life of communion with God, they face a crucial dilemma: the life they are living and the life called for in the Gospel are two different realities. Thus, there must be real change of life if they are to become a Christian. Initially this change is one of repentance and faith, but it also includes the ongoing alignment of all dimensions of their life with the Gospel. Thus what is believed (faith) is transformed by grace, but so too are actions/choices (works).

The Gospel reveals areas of our life where we need to turn from evil and choose the good. It is here that people often get stuck. This threshold can seem daunting and insurmountable. Some people may find the message of the Gospel to be attractive, but they are not sure they want to change how they live, or they doubt their capacity to do so. It's analogous to how many people want to be healthier but they are not sure they want to start exercising and eating less ice cream. Let's face it: change in life is always difficult. It can be doubly difficult for someone who does not yet fully grasp the reasons behind the call for change.

There is a saying that everyone likes change, but no one wants to change. In other words, we all want things to get better (in our families, workplaces, relationships), but we are not sure that *we* want to change. We want the fruit of change but not the work of change. But the Gospel calls *us* to change. And this change is not passive, but active. *We* have to reject the areas of sin in our life and, with God's grace, choose virtue. This hurts. It is difficult for our weakened will, and it contradicts our disordered desires.

Why would someone be afraid of change? Perhaps because they are not sure that the change God invites them to is good. Sometimes people of faith still have vestiges of this doubt. Ask yourself...

Do I ever question whether the change God wants for me is good?

Does it ever seem like the little areas of sin in my life don't matter that much?

Am I tempted to think that I know right and wrong better than Christ's Catholic Church?

Am I at times afraid or reluctant to allow God to transform some areas of my life?

Now imagine you were still very new in the faith, or that you have been away from the Church for a long time or were still just exploring the whole thing. Isn't it reasonable to expect that these questions and challenges would be amplified?

While we may not say it, *we like our sin*. It's true. We like our sin; that is why we do it. Yes, we often fight temptation, but often our resistance is tepid. Or, we rationalize that we must know better than Christ and His Church, or that it is not a big deal, or that we are justified in doing it, or that it actually isn't sin, or some other excuse.

Some people have the erroneous view that the moral teachings of the Church are there to test us. In this view, God forbids certain actions to see if we will obey. Or maybe He does it because He does not want us to have too much fun. Looked at another way, some people believe the Church's moral teachings are there to make life more difficult and impede our freedom.

Remember our earlier citation from Pope Benedict? He reminds us that the change God calls us to *is good for us*. God does not want to take away anything that makes life "free, beautiful, and great." He calls us from the shadows into the light. His plan for our life *is a good plan*. The laws of morality direct us toward both the right worship of God and the good of our neighbour, but they also create a certain path for human flourishing. We thrive when we live by them. It is not good for us to be bound by greed, jealousy, lust,

avarice, laziness, or any other sins. Often God's plan for our flourishing conflicts both with the wisdom of the world and our own disordered desires. But we have to remember that our nature, while good, is fallen. Consequently, our intellects are dimmed, our wills weakened, and we are attracted to things that are not good for us. If, tragically, we repeatedly choose that which is not good for us, we develop habits. These bad moral habits—vices—enslave us.

Temptation slyly promises us happiness and freedom. But temptation is a lie. To be an honest person is to be happy and free. To speak well of others will lead us to happiness and freedom, while slander and gossip will do the opposite. To experience sexuality as an opportunity for a free and fruitful self-gift to a spouse will make us happy and free, while pornography, masturbation, or fornication set us on a path toward bondage and misery. Our souls cannot thrive when we live in discord with the natural or divine law.

It is no wonder that people pause at this threshold. They ask if the Christian life will truly bring them joy, freedom, and fulfillment. They may be steeped in the lies of the world, a world that sees freedom in sin and bondage in virtue. Perhaps they don't yet have the vision to see what true happiness is and how it can be obtained. Maybe they simply are not willing to make the sacrifices necessary to change.

What can we do for someone who is here?

First, we have to reveal to them, in words and witness, that the change God calls us to is *good*. It is not easy, it may not make sense right now, it will involve self-sacrifice and the denial of fallen desires, but ultimately it will bring us closer to Him and therefore bring us great joy, both now and for eternity. We can communicate this directly but also by sharing how we have struggled in overcoming vice and sin with God's grace, and seen the fruits in our lives on the other side.

Second, we have to be willing to be near people with messy lives. If someone is in the thresholds, then they are pre-conversion. As such, *we must expect* that they will have little or imperfect faith, *we must expect* that they will have patterns of (serious) sin in their life, *we must expect* that they don't look like a clean and polished Christian. If they had everything properly ordered, then they would be post-conversion, not pre-conversion.

This does not mean that we encourage sinful behaviour nor do we communicate that simplistic or incomplete faith is adequate. Instead, we respect them in light of their inherent personal dignity, but we demonstrate love in calling them to a life of virtue.

For what type of car does a carwash exist? Brand new ones? Those that sparkle? Cars without a spot of dirt? Of course not! A carwash exists for cars that are covered in dirt. If a filthy car is in line for the carwash, then it is where it ought to be. You'd never find the attendant yelling, "Your car is too dirty, you can't go through here" nor would the attendant dissuade a customer by saying, "Your grubby car is great the way it is. Don't wash it. Just go on your way and ignore the dirt."

The point of the carwash is to take those cars that are covered in dirt and to make them clean. The process of evangelization is something like that: we are leading people to conversion *because they don't have faith and because their lives are not aligned with the Gospel*. We must not be afraid of a messy life anymore than the attendant is afraid of a dirty car. But we should never leave them where they are either. It doesn't help the owner of a car if the attendant tells them that their car is better off dirty.

A carwash requires many steps to get things clean. Water is sprayed, soap is dispensed, brushes are twirled, more water is sprayed, more brushes are twirled, then there is a final rinse and drying. The first spray of water doesn't clean the car, nor does one spin of the brush. But if you trust the full process – spray, soap, brush, water, brush, rinse, dry – something sparkling is going to come out.

What this means fundamentally is that we should not expect a person to become perfect immediately. What we believe and how we act matters, but we must be willing to be with the person as grace transforms them. We will love and accompany them as they slowly prepare for the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation or as they return to Confession and allow grace to undo the many knots of sin in their lives. We will journey with them as they move forward in small steps and stick by them even if they step backward. God has a grand plan for them which gives us the confidence to never give up on them.

Third, we always need to present Church teaching in its beautiful fullness. As mentioned, many people see the moral teaching of the Church as a test of obedience or dated and arbitrary rules. Instead, the moral teachings of the Church, given to her by Christ, are a roadmap for human flourishing. Are they easy to fulfill? No. Do we all fail? Yes. Do we all have somethings that we may not fully understand? Possibly. But are they oriented toward our good? Absolutely.

Think of this. The Church calls us to generosity. This can be hard. But don't you want to be a generous person? The Church calls us to mercy. This can be hard. But don't you want to be a merciful person? Same with honesty. The Church calls us to be masters of our passions. This is tough! But don't you want to be a master of your passions?

This is true for all Catholic moral teachings. Initially, some of it may seem difficult or confusing. The Church's sexual morality is perhaps the best example of this (simply because it is so different than the propaganda of the world). Often caricatured as holding that sex is bad, the whole Catholic sexual ethic is rather based on the conviction that sex is *very good* and so must be taken seriously. That which is most valuable must not be treated carelessly; thus her sexual ethic is one of honoring the gift of human sexuality. The Church invites us to express self-control and to use our sexuality to offer a fruitful and exclusive gift to another within a lifelong covenant. This is a call to make a complete gift of ourselves to another and to receive their gift in return. Do we all not desire to be a gift to another and to have our beloved give themselves to us? Isn't it better for us to be masters than slaves of our sexual passions? Isn't our sexuality an opportunity to image God's generous self-gift rather than a means for self-gratification? This is the vision of the Church for human sexuality and what it means for our lives.

The point is simply this: All that God has for us is good. If we have taken Christianity seriously, we have seen this. The more we conform ourselves to the Gospel, the better and richer our life becomes. The more we follow our own way, the worse and poorer our life becomes. We face here the choice of an easy path that leads to temporary pleasure but also slavery, bondage, and death. And a rugged road that is challenging but leads to freedom, self-possession, and life.

Which will we choose?

Which will we help others chose?

Change is difficult. Yes, those at this threshold may not see exactly where it will lead. Yes, God calls them to a radical path. Yes, many questions may be unanswered. It seems like a considerable risk.

But it is good.

And we will be (we must be) with them through thick and thin. To rejoice in the victories and to encourage in the trials. We will not give up on them, and we will not stop believing in them. We know that grace can do miraculous things.

Let's circle back briefly to something we said at the start. *Openness to change* is one of the most difficult thresholds. It is hard for the person going through it and it is hard for the evangelist (because we get our hopes up). We see a small degree of progress in their life

and we think *that is the breakthrough*. But it is not. What we are really seeing is not a person on the definite road to conversion but instead someone who is curious and moving closer to God, but who is also coming face-to-face with sin and woundedness. They wonder if they can go any further. It is here that we are called to radical love, which offers them a taste of the unconditional love of God. A love that loves them as they are, but a love that desires to carry them further.

#### Threshold 4: Seeking

The fourth *threshold* is more straightforward. Here the person is open to the possibility of change and they want to learn more. This is often an intense period with many questions because the person is trying to figure out what Catholicism is all about.

We need to be prepared to offer useful answers to their questions.

Many of us feel ill-equipped for this. Perhaps we have not been well-formed ourselves, or our knowledge of the faith is shallow, or maybe we just lack the confidence to be able to explain in a persuasive way what it is we believe and why we believe it. But these must not become excuses that stop us. With conviction and authenticity, and a few good and widely available resources, we have all we need.

There have never been more helpful materials available than there are now. Thousands of books, websites, digital platforms, podcasts, etc., explain every dimension of the Catholic faith and can be easily obtained. Additionally, there is the invaluable *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Thus we have ample opportunities to educate and form ourselves. It also means that we can point people directly to where the answers can be found. There is not a question that someone could ask you which has not been asked many times before and answered in a dozen places; you just have to look for the answer or point them in the right direction.

The key at this threshold is to keep fuelling the fire and introducing the person to more of the faith's treasures. We need to know what inspires the person (theology, art, liturgy, saints, etc.). The point is not that they have a complete catechetical formation, but rather that they have their basic questions answered and taste the unsurpassed richness of all things Catholic. They begin to see that *all good questions have good answers*. In the saints, they see that a deep Catholic life leads to human flourishing. The liturgy moves their heart toward the right worship of God. Our artistic patrimony reveals something of the



aspirations of the soul and the beauty of God.

While they want to learn a lot, which is good, the key is to keep inviting them to the surrender of repentance and faith which characterizes conversion. It is excellent to form the intellect, but they also have to engage their will. In the next threshold, we will discuss this choice, but for now, remember that learning itself leads to knowledge, not faith. Knowledge is important and is related to faith, but its not the final goal. More than just learning, what matters is our will, our heart, our soul.

Our fifth and final threshold goes by different names. The evangelicals called it *Entering the Kingdom*. For Sherry Weddell, it is *Intentional Discipleship*. We believe it is described best as ...

### *Threshold 5: Conversion*

*Conversion* is not (as many commonly think) about forcing, manipulating, or coercing someone. St. John Paul II wrote that conversion “means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple” (RM 46). It is our “yes” to the invitation of the Gospel, which includes repentance and faith. It is experienced and manifested in choosing to enter the fullness of Catholic life through the sacraments. *Conversion is a personal act*. It does not happen by accident, and it does not occur gradually although it may appear so. Yes, we experience something of on-going conversion in our life, but this is realized in discreet and concrete moments of grace and choice. But these *ongoing conversions* are a deepening of an initial and necessary *first conversion*. As someone journeys closer to Christ, at some point they have to answer His question, *Are you with me?*

Conversion, faith and the sacraments have an unbreakable link. For the unbaptized, conversion will lead to the request for the Sacrament of Baptism. For someone who is away from the Catholic faith, conversion will be a return to Confession and Mass. A person who was baptized and remained in the sacramental practice of the faith may make an interior decision to surrender their life to the Lordship of Jesus.

We must never forget that the goal of evangelization is conversion. If we understand conversion correctly, then it makes sense when St. Paul VI writes, “the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert” (EN 18). Thus conversion is the goal of all evangelical activity. It is good for people to learn more about Catholicism, it is good for them to be curious about Christianity, and it is good for them to have a more positive view of Christians or the Church. It is good as well if they come to respect the faith or

appreciate the contributions of Christianity in culture and society. It is also good if they recognize what Christ has done in the lives of others. But at the end of the day, none of these is of first importance. What matters is that they ultimately hear the call to love God with their whole heart, mind, and soul (cf Matt 22:37), *and do it*.

Having looked over the thresholds individually, we can now make a few comments about the process as a whole:

- Movement through the thresholds is also a transformation from passivity to activity. We can see this at the extremes. Overcoming a lack of trust happens passively, while a decision to respond to Christ's call to surrender our lives is clearly active. On the side of the missionary disciple, there is also a movement from witness to proclamation. The early thresholds call for the evangelist to primarily (but never exclusively) witness to the faith, while a person who is seeking or on the edge of conversion is expecting (and needs) us to speak the truth of the Gospel to them. Thus an effective missionary disciple is prepared to balance both witness and proclamation according to the threshold of the individual.
- Not everyone moves through the thresholds in the same way. Some people move through them more quickly than others. Some may skip one or go back and forth. At times, people face multiple thresholds simultaneously. This is fine. What matters is that we are asking ourselves where people are so we can help them move forward. If they ask questions about the Christian life but keep saying, “I don’t know if I believe that” or “I’m not sure I could live that way” or “I’m afraid of what God might ask of me,” it’s likely they are on the threshold of *openness to change*. It doesn’t matter how they got there or how long they have been there. What matters is that we be God’s instrument (that means, we cooperate with His grace) in helping them to see the big picture of His dream for their life.
- Major life events often open people to change. This could be the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the fracturing of a relationship, or an illness. It might also be positive things: retirement, moving, or having a significant birthday. Each of these can lead us to ask the big questions in life. And at these moments, we may see more clearly than usual. The death of a loved one reminds us of the importance of taking eternity seriously. The loss of a job invites us to trust in a providential God. Trouble in a marriage may lead us to look at our own woundedness and need for a Savior. Illness shows us how uncertain our life is. Retirement can lead us to think about how we want to live the last portion of our

life. Moving is a time for new rhythms of life. Turning 50 (or 90!) can lead us to reflect on the shortness of this life. All of these are salutary reminders. They are genuinely sobering and open before us questions of life and death, faith, and God. These are privileged occasions to draw near to people and to speak consoling and hope-filled words of truth.

- This model is helpful when looking at individual relationships, but it can also be beneficial for a parish. Tragically, many practicing Catholics are still in the thresholds. Remember, these are not stages of spiritual growth or discipleship; *these are pre-conversion*. We have to move away from assuming a person is converted simply because they bear the name Catholic; coming to Mass regularly does not mean someone loves Christ and is living with Him as Lord. Many Catholics who are in the pews are still in the early thresholds. Consequently, not only are many not converted, but they are passive and so not seeking to grow in friendship with Christ and His Church. The opportunity then is that there is mission work to be done right within the parish.

But as you will learn in the next session, there is something even more critical than any framework: actively listening to the Holy Spirit. It is helpful to know the thresholds (or the “how-to’s” you will learn in Chapter 6), but a model/tool/method must never replace actively listening to the Spirit. The Holy Spirit surely knows what is stirring in the person’s heart (for He is the one doing the stirring!). He knows what words they need to hear. And He knows the struggles that are raging within them. He knows what holds them back and what will move them forward. The Spirit knows them *perfectly*. Thus we should turn to Him before and during all encounters. He will be our infallible guide.