



Diocese of
Green Bay

THRESHOLDS OF CONVERSION



“BEING A DISCIPLE MEANS BEING CONSTANTLY READY TO BRING THE LOVE OF JESUS TO OTHERS, AND THIS CAN HAPPEN UNEXPECTEDLY AND IN ANY PLACE: ON THE STREET, IN A CITY SQUARE, DURING WORK, ON A JOURNEY.” - POPE FRANCIS, EVANGELII GAUDIUM, #127

Introduction:

The five thresholds of postmodern conversion were developed by Don Everts and Doug Schaupp and outlined in their book, *I Once Was Lost*. The authors derived these thresholds from the stories of postmodern skeptics who shared their stories of coming to faith. All of those interviewed seemed to pass through the same five distinct stages: from mistrust to initial trust, from complacency to curiosity, from being closed off to change to being open and from meandering to seeking, and finally, to discipleship. Sherry Weddell, author of the book “Forming Intentional Disciples” expands upon these thresholds and situates them within a Catholic discipleship context.

While these stages are distinct it is important to remember that they are stages and not labels. The thresholds help us to listen carefully to where people are at in their life and to meet them there. The thresholds rely heavily on prayer, calling upon the power of the Holy Spirit, practicing active listening and the Socratic method of asking questions.

Understanding this process will help you to learn how to encourage your friends along their journeys, even though not all of them will become Christians. The thresholds are as follows:

INITIAL TRUST

CURIOSITY

OPENNESS

SEEKING

INTENTIONAL
DISCIPLE

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The Thresholds Through the Scriptures:

The “Woman at the Well” and “Nicodemus” are at an early stage of conversion, the “Man Born Blind” a further stage and Lazarus, Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalene, and St. Peter are further along again.

But consider re-reading the Woman at the Well and noticing how all of the thresholds are interwoven within the story.

The Samaritan Woman’s develops an initial trust in the man who dares to speak to her, a Samaritan and a woman, clearly a marginalized person in society. However, she does not shrink run away or ignore him but instead is intrigued. Curious about what he is telling her but most importantly listening to her (verbally and non-verbally) she becomes more open to what he is saying.

The Samaritan Woman becomes gradually open to the possibility of change when Jesus seems to know all about her situation, but does not seek to judge or condemn. There is something about Jesus which draws her to him. She wants to know more, she wants to tell others what she has experienced and who she has been with- Jesus. In doing so, she runs to share the Good News that she is loved, that we are all loved by Jesus. Her compelling testimony is now offered to those who have not met Jesus and yet can still encounter Him in and through her story!

Prayer for Conversion

Loving and Merciful Father,

We entrust to your heart and our friends and family,

Inspire us with ever deeper trust in You, in Your Son Jesus and in His body, Church.

Guide us and those who we love from trust to curiosity and spiritual openness. Stir in us a continual desire to seek You leading to conversion and intentional discipleship.

Bless our parishes as places of strong faith, abundant mercy and healing love.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Our Lady of Good Help, pray for us.
St. Francis Xavier, pray for us.

Amen.

Discipleship is about:

- Entering into a personal relationship with Jesus and His body, the Church.
- Jesus calls you, the question is how you will respond to Him?
- Disciple means “pupil”. We must follow and learn from He who is Master.
- Discipleship involves moments of conversion over our lifetime- metanoia – turning away from sin and toward God each day. Jesus cannot show us what he wants us to see until we follow him. This is a heartfelt decision.
- Discipleship involves some type of letting go (what we are doing, where we are doing it, how we see ourselves, our desire for total control, etc.)
- Jesus takes all that we have and gives it back to us in abundance

Discipleship is not about:

- Having all the answers
- Being perfect
- Keeping the Gospel news to myself
- A private faith

Feelings you may experience throughout the thresholds include:

- I’m not ready
- I’m not worthy
- I’m afraid of what Jesus might ask
- I want to keep my options open
- I’m a disciple of someone or something else
- I don’t know how to respond
- I’m too busy

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THRESHOLD 1: Initial Trust

In a secular world, suspicion and mistrust of Christianity and especially Catholicism has become more common. The postmodern journey of conversion usually begins when there is a bridge of trust with a fellow Christian.

TRUST IS THE FOUNDATION
OF ALL RELATIONSHIPS.
IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT
"DISCIPLESHIP ONLY HAPPENS
AT THE SPEED OF TRUST."

The beginning point is often when a person is able to trust or has a positive association with Jesus Christ, the Church, another Christian, or something identifiably Christian. This often takes place outside of "Church" for example, in a group setting or engaging in commonplace activities such as at the gym or the coffee shop.

Often we may encounter those in "pre-trust" who may be passively participating in activities or engaging marginally with Christians but has not built bonds of trust yet with Christians or the Church. Keeping a warm and inviting presence with those in pre-trust and trust is critical. Trust is not the same thing as active personal faith. But without some kind of bridge of trust in place, people will not move closer to God. Trust is the foundation of all relationships. It has been said that "discipleship only happens at the speed of trust".

Three reactions to be aware of in this stage:

1. Defensiveness

Being defensive is often a sign that you are in flight or fight mode. Our faith is so personal that it can hurt when someone criticizes what and who we love. Our defense mechanism is a sign of stress and tension. When we are defensive, little constructive conversations takes place and often we find ourselves arguing when we didn't set out to do so.

Debating someone who is in this delicate stage can be very harmful. While we may win an argument, we may well find that we will lose the person. Apologetics are often not helpful here. When we close our hearts to non-Christians and treat them with contempt, neglect or indifference, it reinforces their mindset that we are mistrustful. We may fall into patterns where we begin to point fingers and separate them. This "we versus us" mentality kills trust.

Positive response: Suppress feelings of defensiveness and recognize your internal signs when you feel defensive. Instead, cultivate an attitude of curiosity as to why the person thinks as they do. Listen for cues but most importantly, pray for the person. Continue to speak the name of Jesus in your heart as you visualize this person.

In conversation with this person, keep the name of Jesus on your lips (silently) and pray for their heart to open and soften. Take heart and reflect upon the words of St. John of the Cross "Where there is no love, put love -- and you will find love." Put love into this situation through prayer, listening and relationship building.

2. Indifference

When we encounter someone who thinks differently and challenges us, we have a tendency to marginalize their opinion. We distance ourselves from them and those who think like them creating an "echo chamber" effect in our ministries where we only interact with those who think like us and behave like us. This mentality keeps us further and further away from the very people that we are called to be walking with.

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THRESHOLD 1: Initial Trust (continued)

Positive Response: Consider the following words from Pope Francis and meditate upon them: “In the poorest countries, and also in the peripheral areas of the richest, there are many people who are weary and exhausted under the unbearable weight of abandonment and indifference. Indifference: how much damage human indifference causes to those in need! And the indifference of Christians is worse. At the margins of society there are many men and women who are sorely tested by poverty, but also by dissatisfaction and frustration. Many are compelled to emigrate at risk of their own lives. Many more every day bear the weight of an economic system that exploits man and imposes an unbearable ‘yoke’ upon them that the privileged few do not want to carry. To each of these sons of the Father who is in heaven, Jesus says, ‘Come to me, all of you.’ -- Angelus, St. Peter’s Square, July 6, 2014

4. Judgement

Words can hurt. Like a splinter lodged in our hand, a small utterance of scorn or condemnation can wound considerably and throb with pain. While we are called to exercise good judgment and hold ourselves and others to a higher standard, God alone is the ultimate judge of other’s lives, not us. Words are like splinters of the heart- once spoken they can wound deeply and painfully so we should be especially careful when tempted to be judgmental.

We are often tempted to write off people who are not living life up to our high standards and treat them rudely. St. Ambrose reminds us that “No one heals himself by wounding another.”

Positive Response: Pray! (notice a pattern here?!). Pray and ask the Lord to give you the right words, merciful and loving words with people. Affirm the good and ask probing questions about that which troubles you. Before you rush headlong into a difficult conversation, consider the Gospel of Matthew 7:3-5 in which Jesus says to us “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye”.

Reflect upon these words and ask yourself what planks do you need to remove from your own eyes before you are tempted “to remove the splinter” from your brother’s eye? Remember, building relationships takes time and you may need to prudently hold off certain conversations until the person is ready.

Personal Application:

- In whom/what do I need to put trust more in?
- How do I build trust in others? What methods, behaviors or practices do I employ?
- Have I ever trusted someone in ministry that let me down? What happened? What did I learn from this?

Parish Application:

- Who in your parish circles are mistrustful? How can you reach them to build trust?
- What activities/practices can you undertake to build trust?
- What activities/practices can you streamline or discontinue to build trust?

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THRESHOLD 2: Curiosity

Curiosity grows as trust is built with a believer. Curiosity may take a couple of different forms in terms of the Church's teachings and the person of Jesus Christ. One person may be intrigued by the person of Jesus, another by the Holy Spirit, another person by the Church's intellectual tradition and so forth. One of the most important ways to arouse curiosity about the person of Jesus Christ is to speak about Jesus and your relationship with him.

The stage of curiosity tends to blossom increasingly over time and usually has three levels of intensity. The pedagogy of curiosity is as follows:



1. Awareness

This is when the person becomes aware of possibilities and options beyond what they have considered or experienced. They become aware of greater realities and mysteries which they had not thought about.

2. Engagement

This is when the person actually begins to seek answers and affirmations independently. They may start researching online, looking at spiritual reading materials etc.

3. Exchange

This is a more vocal stage and becomes more intense as the person begins to invite others into their curiosity and reasoning. There is a move from being passive to active.

Three Pastoral Practices to Encourage Curiosity:

1. Ask Questions

"In the New Testament, Jesus asked 183 questions, gave 3 answers, and answered 307 questions with a question in return like a true rabbi." (Forming Intentional Disciples, Sherry Weddell, p. 147)

Questions encourage natural curiosity and draw people ever deeper into the encounter with Christ. We find in the Scriptures that Jesus cultivates curiosity and leaves people wanting more- more wisdom, more questions to ponder, more to consider, more to behold. In short, more of Him. Questions have a way of getting to the heart of the matter and helping people to focus on why they believe what they believe. Pose interesting questions and listen attentively to people as they voice their hopes, fears and dreams.

Examples of questions Jesus used:

- What do you want me to do for you?
- Who do you say that I am?
- Where is everyone? Has no one condemned you?
- What are you looking for?
- How do you read the law?
- How much do you love me?

What questions might you use?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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THRESHOLD 2: Curiosity (continued)

2. Use Parables

Jesus' preferred method of engaging others and teaching about the Kingdom of God was through storytelling and specifically parables. It is a common misconception that story telling is "intellectual fluff" but instead, story can illustrate abstract concepts very clearly and in concrete ways.

We don't make disciples of Jesus Christ by engaging others in debate or by lecturing to them about principles of dogma and doctrine. Disciples make disciples (not books or programs) and their preferred methodology is story telling. Pay attention to the world around you and use everyday reality and circumstances to communicate deeper truths.

Share concrete stories of how you see the Lord working in your life and in the lives of those around you. Speak plainly and honestly- "Some people know nothing about God... because no one has talked to them about him in terms they can understand"- St. Josemaria Escriva

3. Live a Curiously Catholic Life

Authenticity is critical. People are weary of salesmanship and commercialization. Live a life that causes people around you to ask questions. The Catholic life is one that is meant to be a sign of contradiction in the world. Christian values are counter cultural.

A Catholic way of life is often at odds with the dominant values of the culture and so it should be! Speaking the truth in love, sharing what we have freely with others and being charitable to those our society has discarded are all countercultural witnesses.



Personal Application:

- Would I describe myself as living a curiously Catholic life? Why?
- What methods, behaviors or practices do I employ to evoke curiosity in others?

Parish Application:

- Who in your parish circles seems curious about the faith?
- What activities/practices can you undertake to provoke curiosity?
- How might you employ the three pastoral practices listed above in your ministry?

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THRESHOLD 3: Opening to Change

Commitment. Surrender. Change. All behaviors that are difficult for post-modern people.

Openness is the most difficult threshold to cross and one that people may consider and then turn away from. Jesus becomes a real person to those in this threshold. For those teetering at this stage of discipleship, it can feel like they are on the edge of an abyss. Defenses are lowered, people are often very vulnerable and feel as if they are laid bare and it can feel dangerous, out of control and frightening.

This stage is often coupled with intense personal suffering due to life circumstances that trigger a desire to change. When a person acknowledges that they are open to the possibility of a personal and spiritual change in their lives, they start to see life differently. Openness is not a commitment to change, but people who are open are simply admitting that they are ok with the possibility of change.

This is the stage where calling upon the power of the Holy Spirit is the most critical as you walk with someone in faith.



Considerations for Openness

Be Patient

- St Faustina reminds us that “patience, prayer and silence....these are what gives strength to the soul”.
- Choosing to center your life on Christ can for some people, living in this threshold for many years.
- Walk with them through this process without regard for the constraints of time.

Challenge but also Affirm Like Jesus with Gentle Honesty

- "You are right in saying...you have had five husbands." - John 4:18

Give an Encouraging Help

- "Take up your mat and walk." - John 5:8

Connect the Dots

- "Truly, truly I say to you..." - John 12:24
- Remind them of how God has been working in their life and that these incidences are not random but the hand of God at work.

Encouragement to Trust

- “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” - Proverbs 3:5-6

Speak of Spiritual Renewal

- “Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.” - 2 Corinthians 4:16

Focus on Connecting Truth and Freedom

- “So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” - John 8:31-32

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THRESHOLD 4: Seeking

This threshold is marked by a deeper longing and searching for God, Jesus and the Church. Not all may be sought with equal intensity but there is a distinct movement from the passive to the active in this threshold. The decision to seek Jesus imparts a new urgency and purpose to life.

The person in this stage may be coming to terms with previous behaviors, experiences and patterns that have hindered growth in the Christian life. With this process comes grief but also a sense of hope.

Seekers can be compared to those “dating with a purpose” but who still have not decided to make the commitment of marriage yet. While those who are in the stage of openness might remain there indefinitely, those in the seeking phase are seeking resolution. They want to make a decision.

During this phase, ministers want to be appropriately urgent as no one stays in seeking mode forever. Mentoring, accessibility and walking closely with those in this threshold is important.



Beware The “Phantom Seeker”

The Phantom Seeker is one who asks many of the same questions as the seeker, is engaged in many of the same practices as the seeker but lacks any sense of urgency. They might use questions or their circumstances to avoid looking at the deeper issues and to engage without truly committing.



Signs that someone may be in the seeking phase include:

Seeking the person of Jesus specifically

There is a movement from a vague sense of God to the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus becomes the focus of their intrigue during this threshold.

Coming to grips with what it means to live a life of discipleship

Those in this threshold come to grips with the weight of what it means to live a life of discipleship. Old patterns of behavior are discarded as the seeker seeks to integrate faith into their lives as best they can. Often people can be very zealous in this stage of faith and make quite a few mistakes as they wrestle with new life.

Seeking a Community

Seekers in this stage often deliberately search out mentors and other Christians to spend time with. They may consider permanently joining a particular parish rather than just going from one to the other. They may not understand much of what they experience in Church for example, at Mass, but have a desire to understand more. Community becomes more and more important as they wrestle with the Christian life. Modeling, witnessing and the value of testimony tend to be helpful here in addition to communicating the Gospel clearly and compellingly.

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THRESHOLD 5: Intentional Discipleship

Flirting and dating with a purpose becomes marriage as the person seeks to look upon the face of Jesus and say "I do".

Sherry Weddell describes this threshold as the decision to "drop one's nets". This threshold is where seekers decide to make a conscious commitment to follow Jesus in the midst of the Church community. Obedience and repentance are central here.

KEY SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

- Prayer
- Lectio Divina
- Attendance at Mass
- Sacramental Engagement
- Service/Acts of Charity
- Adoration

The person in this threshold moves between a beginning stage of intentional discipleship to a growing stage and a more mature sense of discipleship over time.

10 ways to help people drop their nets:

1. Invite someone to become a disciple. Never underestimate the power of asking a person if they would like to hand their life over to Jesus. If they say no- address the obstacles that might be preventing them from doing so. Try again later. Intense prayer and intercessory prayer is tremendously important here.
2. Focus on the central issues and don't get into too many issues of perfecting catechesis until a solid foundation has been set.
3. Encourage them to spend time in Adoration and ponder the question of whether they would like to be a disciple and hand their life over to Christ.
4. Encourage them to renew their baptismal promises and reflect upon them.
5. Pray the Act of Faith with them.
6. Surround them with a team of intercessors who are praying for them.
7. Reach out- through email, phone calls or sending hand written notes to encourage them.
8. Invite them to events, activities where other disciples are gathered.
9. Encourage them to make a retreat or visit a spiritual director.
10. Drill down into the kerygma once again. Allow the power of the kerygma to wash over them. Speak with them and help them to process the kerygma once again.

Personal Application:

- What does intentional discipleship look like in my life?
- How might I become more intentional in my discipleship journey?
- What are some key spiritual practices that would help me to grow in my discipleship?
- In what ways do I bear fruit as a disciple?

Parish Application:

- Are there intentional disciples in your parish? Who are they? What do they do to nourish themselves?
- What discipleship efforts have borne fruit at your parish? Why?
- What do you need to START doing to form disciples? STOP doing? KEEP doing to form disciples?

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THE DISCIPLE'S PRAYER | Bishop David L. Ricken

Jesus,
Help me to imitate you and reflect your image to others, especially those whom I guide and serve.
Help me to think with your mind, to see and gaze with your eyes,
to hear with your ears, to speak with your words.
Lord Jesus, use me to carry on your mission as your servant and disciple.
Help me to love with your heart,
to carry out my work with your hands,
to be a voice for Christ in all that I say and do.
Merciful Shepherd, Jesus, help me to live in your person,
to share generously in the carrying of your cross,
so that many others may be saved by coming to know and love You
through my simple, faithful witness.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit!
As it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever.
Amen.

NOTES

Acknowledgements:

This article gave the basic framework and outline for this document with heavy adaptations. <http://evangelism.intervarsity.org/how/conversation/why-you-should-ask-more-questions-spiritual-conversations>

Don Everts and Doug Schaupp outline the thresholds in their book "I Once Was Lost: What Postmodern skeptics taught us about the path to Jesus", IVP Books, 2009.

Key insights adapted from Sherry Weddell's Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus, Our Sunday Visitor: 2012.

(This text should be considered indispensable reading for those who wish to understand the thresholds and how to recognize them in others).