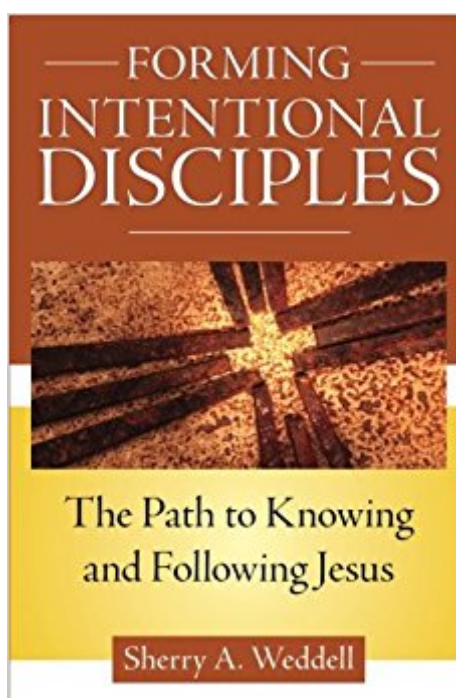


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# Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path To Knowing And Following Jesus



## Synopsis

How can we transmit a living, personal Catholic faith to future generations? By coming to know Jesus Christ, and following him as his disciples. These are times of immense challenge and immense opportunity for the Catholic Church. Consider these statistics for the United States. Only 30 percent of Americans who were raised Catholic are still practicing. Fully 10 percent of all adults in America are ex-Catholics. The number of marriages celebrated in the Church decreased dramatically, by nearly 60 percent, between 1972 and 2010. Only 60 percent of Catholics believe in a personal God. If the Church is to reverse these trends, the evangelizers must first be evangelized—in other words, Catholics-in-the-pew must make a conscious choice to know and follow Jesus before they can draw others to him. This work of discipleship lies at the heart of *Forming Intentional Disciples*, a book designed to help Church leaders, parish staff and all Catholics transform parish life from within. Drawing upon her fifteen years of experience with the Catherine of Siena Institute, Sherry Weddell leads readers through steps that will help Catholics enter more deeply into a relationship with God and the river of apostolic creativity, charisms, and vocation that flow from that relationship for the sake of the Church and the world. Learn about the five thresholds of postmodern conversion, how to open a conversation about faith and belief, how to ask thought-provoking questions and establish an atmosphere of trust, when to tell the Great Story of Jesus, how to help someone respond to God's call to intentional discipleship, and much more. And be prepared for conversion because when life at the parish level changes, the life of the whole Church will change.

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## Customer Reviews

Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus by Sherry Weddell is the most important book I've read this year. That is not exaggeration or hyperbole, but a testament to the research, experience, and insight Weddell brings to the question of evangelization and catechesis in the Church today. Weddell's book is a synthesis of every deep conversation about catechesis and evangelization I've had with my local and national colleagues for the past four years. Weddell begins with a review of the data that should be familiar to all of us: decreasing Mass attendance, Catholics leaving the Church for Protestant communities, and a general "disengagement" from the life of the parish by many of the faithful. But she doesn't just leave us with cold, hard facts. Thanks to her work with parishes across the country Weddell is also able to weave compelling anecdotes that put a human face on the crisis. Most surprising to me were the number of people who have left the Catholic Church not because they were failing to moving closer to Christ but because, as they more fully embraced their call to discipleship, they had no one in their parishes to support them or who understood the sudden fire that had been lit in them. That the Church is losing both unengaged and highly motivated members -- leaking from both ends, as it were -- should alarm all of us. Weddell's overarching question in reviewing the data and stories is this: How many of our parishioners are truly disciples of Jesus Christ? How many are committed to living a life of faith in an intentional way? Her answer, based on conversations with pastors and parish staff across the country, is that about 5% of Catholics can be described as "intentional disciples." This is shockingly low. And unfortunately many of the leaders in our parishes are not included in that figure. Some of the most heartbreaking stories in the book are the anonymous parish leaders -- presumably DREs, youth ministers, and pastoral council members -- who describe themselves as having no active relationship with God. Thankfully Weddell doesn't tread old arguments by trying to place the blame for this crisis on any particular group within the Church. Rather, she identifies as a major contributing factor the lack of a "normal" understanding of what it means to be a disciple: "As we listened to the spiritual experiences of tens of thousands of Catholics, we began to grasp that many, if not a majority of, Catholics don't know what 'normal' Christianity looks like. I believe that one reason for this is the selective silence about the call to discipleship that pervades many parishes. Catholics have come to regard it as normal and deeply Catholic to not talk about the first journey - their relationship with God - except in confession or spiritual direction. This attitude is so pervasive in Catholic communities that we have started to call it the culture of 'Don't Ask, Don't

Tell."Weddell also decries the poor sacramental preparation received by both children and candidates in the RCIA. Weddell delves into the Church's theology of grace to demonstrate that we are not preparing people to fruitfully receive the sacraments. A tendency to focus on the validity of the sacraments has blinded us to the need for the recipients to receive the grace and allow it to flourish in their lives. Quoting St. Thomas Aquinas and the Catechism of the Catholic Church Weddell skillfully indicates catechists who operate with a "the sacrament will take care of it" attitude towards the spiritual lives of those in their care. Weddell goes on to offer a framework for understanding the process by which a person becomes an authentic disciple of Jesus Christ. This was, for me, the most important part of the book, since it is the pivot on which evangelization and catechesis turn. Through her work with the Catherine of Siena Institute Weddell has identified these "thresholds" on the path to discipleship: 1. Trust 2. Curiosity 3. Openness 4. Seeking 5. Intentional Discipleship Each describes the foundational attitude the individual must have before they are able to progress through the stage. Of course, this framework would be of little use without suggestions for how to guide individuals through this journey of faith. Fortunately, Weddell gives us some very concrete ways that we can walk with people at these different stages. Weddell challenges Church leaders to break the silence in our parishes concerning discipleship: "Until discipleship and conversion become a normative part of parish life, many [people] will walk in and out of our parishes untouched, and many Catholics who are disciples will continue to feel that they need to hide or minimize their newly awakened personal faith in front of other Catholics. The first thing that must be done is to deliberately and persistently break the code of silence if it is in place. The Catholic norm of silence about a relationship with God, about Jesus Christ and his story, about our own stories of following Christ, and about the need for everyone to decide whether or not he or she will follow as a disciple is stifling the emergence of a culture of discipleship and all that flows from it. One of the most powerful ways to challenge the silence is by making a safe place for others to talk about their own lived relationship with God." Weddell offers similar advice for each of the thresholds of discipleship; parish staffs would do well to read these chapters carefully and discuss how the suggestions might be implemented in their local communities. *Forming Intentional Disciples* is a book that has appeared at precisely the moment it is needed in the life of the Church. I am indebted to Sherry Weddell for her work in writing it, and I believe every bishop, pastor, evangelist, and catechetical leader should have a copy and study it carefully. I know I will be.

Sherry Weddell has written an important book, which should be read by everyone in pastoral ministry. She truly understands that Christianity is about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ,

and that too many people in the "official" Church do not seem to understand this. Please read the numerous 5-star reviews to see the many positive aspects of this book. My review will take those other reviews as a given. Bearing that in mind, here are my problems.1) Weddell uses a series of "thresholds" which tend to make judgements on a person's spiritual life. Although having such a list is good on a practical level as a shorthand when in professional ministry, these thresholds seem to be given too much concrete value. It can also lead to the awkward situation of a serious Christian sub-consciously (or consciously) of putting all of their friends and acquaintances into lists (e.g. Timmy and Suzy are Seekers, Bob is Open, and Jim is Curious). All the while, the person is comfortably listing themselves as "disciples". Yet maybe Timmy the Seeker just seems like a Seeker, and is actually a Disciple, etc.2) The book seems to de-emphasize the Sacraments. Yes, it talks about how wonderful they are, but the author openly disparages the argument of "letting the Sacraments work". Although we must avoid a magical view of Sacraments, and must not deny the need for a personal relationship with Christ, including a strong prayer life, sometimes we need to remember to let the Sacraments work.3) Her system does not seem to account for those disciples are seriously affected by sin. Those who truly love Jesus, but seem to love drink or women or money just a little bit more; those who struggle with themselves, but also struggle with Our Lord. I think those using her system might refuse to recognize these folks as "disciples" and drop them into some other category. When I read Brideshead Revisited, I just don't see those neat categories at work in the Flyte family (although one does in Charles Ryder, just to be fair!) Again, these points are made as constructive criticism, and I highly recommend the book.

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