

A Closer Relationship with God
- Becoming a Disciple

Introduction

1. Someone once commented that in any regular Catholic parish, there are usually hundreds or even thousands of Christians but only a handful of true **disciples**. I think none of us here can deny that there is some truth in this statement. For 1, any church activity seems to be organized and attended by the same people.

2. But, what does it mean to be a disciple? Does it mean that we have to throw ourselves in all the church activities, join every organization etc? Well, that may be a sign that one is a disciple but all the activities in themselves do not make us a disciple. So, what is it? A Christian disciple is simply one who is determined to **follow** Jesus, with the desire to **learn** from him and to **live** according to his example. To put it simply, discipleship is Imitation of Life – it is a way of life.

3. If we look at the person we are now, much as we sometimes deny it, we inherit or absorb a lot of traits from our parents, our family members or others we are close to. Sometimes, even the way we talk or express ourselves are like them. Couples have even been known to grow more and more alike in appearance. Why? It all stems from a strong relationship with them, the fact that we spend most of our time with them, the fact that we look to them as an example – all these soon result in us being like them.

4. The same with God. If we want to be like him, to act like him, to think like him, we have to start building a strong relationship with him. We have to start spending time with him and absorbing all his traits. Until that happens, we can never be the disciples that God calls us to be.

5. The other day, I came across some instructions that St Francis of Assisi wrote for the men who joined him in the early days of his ministry. [Read the handout] When I first read this – I had 2 contradictory feelings – first a strong desire to serve God with the same abandonment and second, a fear that such total commitment was impractical. And yet, this is the challenge that God presents to us, a challenge to grow our relationship with

him to such an extent that he becomes the focus of all we do. It becomes something that is second nature to us. The question is: Are we ready to take that challenge?

6. I hope you are cos' today I want to start us all on the journey of challenge, a journey of building a relationship with God. A journey that will hopefully one day result in God being the focus of all we do so that when we eventually meet him God face to face, it will be a meeting of best friends.

Making a Decision

1. Just with almost everything else we do, our journey to discipleship starts with us making a decision – a conscious decision to give ourselves entirely to him. All that is required of you is that you desire to let God be the Lord of your life. It's not important to know how this will happen or how you will overcome obstacles/temptation because once we think of the obstacles etc, we will not do it. So, all you need to do is to say, "Yes, this is what I want to do".
2. Our path to making a decision starts with a realization that we are called and chosen by God. God is the initiator – he calls us to be his disciples. And what a privilege it is! Every one of us here is chosen by God to have a special kind of relationship with Him. It is not a matter of chance that you are here, you are here because of a special choice and calling by God himself. And this choice is not based on any merit or on whether a person deserves it or not. It is solely a choice of God in his infinite wisdom. God chooses people that sometimes the world may not deem suitable for the job (think Moses).
3. If you think of Jesus during his public ministry, you will notice that there are 5 concentric circles of people around him. (1) In the outermost circle are those vast crowds of people who are, for the most part, curious bystanders. They hear his teachings, saw his miracles, watched from a distance but were never touched in their hearts and minds by Him (2) the next circle are the Scribes and Pharisees who also saw and heard him, watched his moves, criticized/despised him, discussed and debated with him, plotted to trap him. These people never believed in Him (3) then, there were the 72 disciples who were called to be with him for a while and then sent to proclaim in towns and villages the

coming of the kingdom of God (see Luke 10). They were privileged because they were given special authority and power over unclean spirits and diseases (4) among the 72 were the 12 (the apostles) who were always with him and were given more personal attention by Jesus for their future ministry of making disciples of nations (5) finally, there's the inner-circle, Peter, James and John who were participants and witnessed very special events in the life of Jesus. We are all called to be part of the inner-circle but it is OUR choice and decision that finally decides which concentric circle we are in.

4. So, recognizing that we are called by God, we are then encouraged to make that decision to follow him as disciple. But this decision should not be wishful thinking or made hurriedly in the spur of the moment. It is something freely personal, made in the conviction that it is one's best response to the love of God. It is also done in faith ie in full trust that our lives are in God's hands.

5. Once we have made that decision, that's not the end of it. We make so many decisions in our lives and on many occasions, we don't follow them through. It is therefore important to take a positive step is to make an honest plea to God asking him to be the Lord of your life and asking for the help of the Holy Spirit. You know how saying something allowed has the effect of making a promise/commitment seem all the more stronger? I will distribute a prayer that you can use when you get home or at a time when you feel you are ready to make that decision. Remaining faithful is not easy and cannot be done through our own willpower and efforts – we have to rely on the power from the Holy Trinity to keep us on the discipleship path.

6. And is that it? NO! This decision we make requires daily renewals in order to retain its freshness, vigor and vitality. If we fail to do this daily, it may result in stagnation, less enthusiasm and mediocrity. This is the trap that a lot of people fall into. So, each day, we should re-examine why we are determined to be God's disciples to renew the commitment in our lives.

7. So, we have decided, now what? We have to start building that relationship with God. This relationship with God, as I said earlier, is like a journey. Like most journeys and trips that we make, we are often very enthusiastic in learning and doing new things. But

enthusiasm in itself is not enough. In fact, it might even get in the way [e.g. road trip or children helping parents]. The same with our relationship with God, enthusiasm is great but we need to learn how to use various tools that will help us on our journey.

8. Today, I am going to share with you 4 basic tools that form an essential part of God's plan for his people. I'm sure these tools are very familiar to you but I think they are important enough in our disciple journey to reiterate. These tools are prayer, study, service and fellowship. When we did the very 1st Spiritual Session, you remember that I used the image of a wheel to represent the choir and our connection to Christ. Remember the blue ribbons? Using the same image now, each blue ribbon represents one of these basic tools that hold us, the rim to Christ, the hub. It is also through these "spokes" that Jesus transmits his power to us.

Learning to Pray

1. It comes as no surprise when I say that daily prayer is the single, most fundamental means of growth available to us. Indeed, if we are trying to develop a personal relationship with God, like any other personal relationships, its growth rate depends on how much time we invest in it. That's why some people say long distance love affairs never work – has some truth in it – just like couples need to spend time together, we need to spend time together with God.
2. If our goal is to become like God, we must spend sufficient time with him daily, telling him our thoughts and learning from him. The best part about it is God **wants** to develop a personal relationship with us. Try spending time with someone you admire when it is not reciprocated – afraid it doesn't get very far. With God, it too wants to spend time with us. In fact, we can say that Christianity is different from other faiths because in the other faiths, it is always man trying to reach God whereas in Christianity, it is God trying to reach man. How marvelous when you think of this all powerful, majestic being trying to reach out and touch little potatoes (small fries) like us!
3. Setting priorities – we need to make a practical decision to pray at a specific time each day. Some people say that this will become too rigid, no meaning etc but I think it is the contrary. Unless we make a specific plan to pray and it fits into our schedule, we do not

allow ourselves to develop the relationship because a lot of other things will come in the way. We are often tempted to do other things besides praying [give eg of marcom specific times].

4. Practical details – the hows?

- a. One tradition that exists is to start each day by dedicating the whole day to the Lord. Throughout Christian history, from apostles to Mother Theresa, have been known to this daily. Make it a habit of praying as you awake or prepare for school/work. Can be very simple, short but it helps focus your mind for the day. Or you might even sing a song and you'll be amazed how you tend to carry that song throughout the day.
- b. While praying, it is important to avoid have a one-sided conversation with God. Try and be sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit and to listen out for God's voice.
How do we listen to God?
 - i. Wait silently in his presence – of course, being entirely silent or meditative should not consume our entire prayer life (for the prac reason that most of us may fall asleep!) but we should allow ourselves to remain silent with the Lord, not daydreaming, not making lists in our minds or carrying on a monologue with God but recognizing his presence and surrendering to him. This is not an easy form of prayer but if we work at it, we will be amazed at our ability to actually “hear” God.
 - ii. Meditate on the scriptures – this just means that we take a scripture passage, think about it prayerfully and allow the Spirit to teach or inspire us by the topic. If you don't understand or accept anything, write it down to ask God for help and find a suitable time/person to speak to.
- c. Sometimes to be perfectly alert during prayer. Whenever your mind wanders, don't worry just return it to prayer. God knows that it is like to be human and I am sure that he allows for such natural things. Of course, it would be wise to avoid praying in a place that is filled with distraction or at a time when you are likely to be interrupted. If you find that some particular concern is distracting you from praying, it is better to prayer about that concern than treat it as a distraction to be avoided.
- d. Start small – if we give God just a little room to deal with us, he will take full advantage of it to direct our lives according to his plan.

- e. There are many prayer books available to help us prayer – [introduce some]. No one method works all the time. Variety and flexibility are essential principles.
5. How much time to spend in prayer? Simple rule of thumb – pray the length of time your daily schedule allows. What does that mean? Well, prayer is not something that we can look at precise number of minutes. In fact, if you look through the Bible, you will see that God challenges us to pray “constantly” and “unceasingly”. How do we implement this call to pray “constantly”? It’s not impossible...
- a. Raise our awareness of the Holy Spirit’s presence within us. If we truly understand that the Holy Spirit is in us, even if we do not experience him in the course of our day, he is still there. So, this approach doesn’t separate prayer from our other activities. Rather, it places our whole day within the framework of prayer. Human beings are just not made to focus constantly on prayer throughout the day but if we make it our intention to serve God, all our labour throughout the day should be pleasing to God and these are then lifted up to God as acceptable worship.
 - b. Dedicating the day to the Lord by stopping at brief regular intervals to pray. This can help us be aware of God’s presence throughout the day. [Muslims have adopted this method] While this should not replace the longer time you have set aside for prayer, this will go a long way in helping you in your effort to “pray constantly”.

Studying the ways of God

- 1. Our relationship with God should not only involve prayer but we have to also study God’s ways and his character. Just like any human relationship, learning about a person just by talking tells us ½ the picture. Observing and learning about the person gives us the whole picture (e.g. how that person treats his parents and interacts with other people).
- 2. So, how do we go about studying the character of God? The most important is regular study of scripture for it is through scripture that we learn who God is, what he has done and what he wants us to do. Another form of study we might want to do is to study the actions and teachings of God’s faithful people throughout history. From their interactions with God, we can learn a lot about him. They face many similar situations we do and their lives can inspire us to remain faithful despite obstacles.

3. So, let's talk about scripture study. In studying scripture, we must always remember that the Bible consists of direct personal words from God as inspired by the Holy Spirit. So, we can't study it in the same way that we might be read or study another book. Even our attitude is different - we need to come with an attitude of submission and cooperation so that we are able to be transformed and renewed by what we study. The same Spirit that inspired the bible will help us understand and appreciate the bible.

4. There are many different ways of studying scripture. Perhaps, the simplest is to ask 3 questions as you are reading Bible passages: (1) what does it say (2) what does it mean (3) what should I do about it. I would not recommend reading the Bible from Genesis to Revelation – use Bible guides.

5. Another technique I read about involved 7 steps – each step named after the 1st 7 letters of the alphabet. [Read from cards] This is a very flexible method and will help organize your thinking.

A Servant's Life

1. All Christians are called to have the hearts of servants – doing all things for the love of God and his people. When we thinking about growing closer to God, we might think primarily of improving our prayer life. But, as we try to put God 1st in our life, he invariably calls us to reach out to others. Serving others is a powerful way to grow in our own relationship with God because such service touches our most basic attitudes about our independence and ourselves. Many times, it is service that is that is the furnace, which “purifies us”. Teaches us humility.

2. What does service mean? Means 2 things – the 1st is actual “service” i.e. we take some positive action to reach out to others. The other way to look at service is in the “passive” – it means that when others see us, they see Christ in his character and behaviour; to hear us means to hear Christ so that they too will be attracted to want to develop a relationship with God. People should be able to see the fruits of the Spirit pouring out from us – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

3. Why serve? Many of us may be motivated to serve out of our sense of duty and need i.e. someone has to do it. While duty is important and it is right to help when there is a need, these are not the most important. Jesus summarized the whole law on service in two commands: Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and love your neighbour as you love yourself. These commands show that our service needs to be motivated by love of God and neighbour. Love has always been a strong motivation of human beings. It is the one thing that causes people to make sacrifices for the betterment of another. So, all our efforts are made easier and pleasant when they flow out of love for the person being served. If we do it out of duty, it becomes a chore and we tend to do it grudgingly. But, if done out of love, we find that it becomes almost easy to do.

4. Who should we serve? Service shouldn't be just an occasional formal activity. It needs to be integrated into our daily lives, in formal and informal ways. We need to have an attitude of being a servant in every aspect of our lives. We all have countless opportunities to serve (eg. holding lift for someone rushing to get in or allowing another driver to "cut" into our lane). These are opportunities that come up in the course of our normal daily living – we can choose to avoid them or to embrace them as a means of growing closer to God. When we think about it this way, wouldn't there be so many more "nice" people in the world? And if service draws us closer to God, we must try to serve with a willing spirit, out of love of God, eagerly grasping opportunities to serve others and perform the task around us.

5. Does this mean we have to say yes to everything? Of course not. We need to ensure that we have a good balance of service & spending time with God. Doing all things will simply wear us out and we become burnt out. Pray and ask God where he wants you to serve and once you have accepted, do the service with your whole heart and with a smile.

Fellowship – an indispensable part of Christian Life

1. Jesus came to establish a kingdom, not a set of individual, private relationships. Ultimately, therefore, our lives as Christians must be lived in concert with other servants of Christ. From the beginning, God intended to gather to himself a people with a corporate identity, a people who experience fellowship together. It is part of his intention

that we, too, share our Christian lives together as a way of fulfilling his plan. God himself is a “community” – a community consisting of Father, Son and Spirit.

2. Christian life is designed to be lived out most powerfully when lived in union with others. Jesus himself promised that where 2 or 3 are gathered in his name, he will be in their midst. It is God’s plan, therefore that his people serve him together and he promised to be present in a special way to his people when they gather together. It is both a natural and spiritual principle that growth occurs more easily if a person is in contact with others rather than spending time along.
3. The 2 main benefits that can come from living our Christian lives with others: Guidance and Protection. Often, our doing of service for God has struggles and if we face these struggles alone in isolation, we are cut off from the kind of sound advice and guidance we need to make wise decision. Sometimes, we might even need protection from things that can destroy us if we don’t make clear decision (give eg of man who spends more time in church than at home).
4. As part of fellowship, it is also important for us to pray with others. That’s why these Spiritual Sessions are important – it gives us an opportunity to pray with others.
5. Fellowship is not an optional exercise. Close relationships with other Christians provide a forum in which we can hear and apply God’s word along with others who are committed to that same word. Fellowship can provide an environment in which to receive both the encouragement and the redirection that we need in our Christian life. It is obvious that it helps to have other Christians to support and encourage us when trials and difficulties arise in our lives. In such cases, it is clear that God uses the people around us to strengthen and support us. But, it is also true that God wants to make use of our fellow Christians when all seems to be going well in our lives. We need to merge our lives with others who have placed themselves under the same Lord. These relationships become a source of protection for us and a witness to others.

Conclusion

So, as we take the bold step of deciding to be a disciple of Christ, we are assured that God is always there with us. He wants to have a closer relationship with us, he will not abandon us and we know that there are tools out there that we can use to help us in our growth towards God.

[Hand out obstacles to growth]