

LESSON 62: BEING LIFELONG DISCIPLES

Revision from previous lesson:

In the previous lessons, we have considered our obligation to live a moral life, and also the different ways in which we should witness the Christian faith to people in different contexts. This task of living our Catholic life faithfully is an ongoing one, and we will have to persist in it for the entire duration of our life on earth. The call is for us to be lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ, not just temporary disciples for several years. In this lesson, we will discuss some important aspects that need to be considered in the way we cultivate our lives as disciples of Christ.

Current lesson:

1. As followers of Christ, we are called to be fully committed to Him and to imitate Him in all our ways. We are called “disciples”. The process of being formed so that we become more and more like Christ is called “discipleship”.

Being a Disciple Means Being an Apprentice

2. *The General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) clarifies the nature of discipleship using what is considered a synonym: *apprenticeship*. The term “apprenticeship” indicates that the process of discipleship is much more than a formal classroom lecture.
3. The disciple who is an apprentice follows his master. He lives by the teachings and lifestyle of his master. He attempts to share in and embrace the standards and ideals set by his master. He resolves to imitate his master so that he can become a person who is developed upon the virtues and goodness imparted by his master.
4. The concept of apprenticeship is not alien to Scripture. Let us take an Old Testament example of such apprenticeship taking place. We shall consider the relationship between Moses and his apprentice, the young Joshua, who was one day going to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land.

Moses had an apprentice, or a young aide, called Joshua Son of Nun. He was a very young man, probably in his teens. Every time Moses went into the tent to meet with God, this young apprentice (Joshua) would follow him in and sit with him as Moses had his lengthy conversations with God in the tent (Exodus 33:11). He would sit and watch how Moses communicated and fellowshiped with God. He would listen to God and Moses discussing the big issues regarding the Israelite community, all 4 million people. When God was done with Moses, and Moses had left the tent, Joshua stayed behind in the tent instead of exiting with Moses. It could have been God who had asked him to stay behind so He could have quality time with this young teenager. This whole exercise was necessary, since Joshua had been earmarked for a very vital task of leading Israel into the Promised Land years later. Much of what he was going to do in the future depended on his relationship with Moses. Their destinies were intertwined.

5. In the Gospels, we see how Jesus Himself apprenticed His disciples: He did not check them into a seminary to study for a theological degree. In John 1, when they came to Him and

asked, “Master, what are you about?” His answer was, “Come and see”. And they followed Him, lived with Him, ate with Him, slept with Him, watched Him live, and heard every word He spoke. Their given task was to watch and imitate, and to do all that Jesus did in the course of His earthly ministry. And in the midst of their life together, He imparted many “secrets” of the Kingdom of God to them, things that were not understood to people on the outside at that point in time, for the fullness of God’s plan had not yet been revealed to all mankind.

6. Discipleship, as we see from Scripture, is all about the sharing of life and a common space: living together, watching and imitating the master. It is about lingering with the master even when you may seem to have no formal business with Him. There is nothing new about this art of discipleship. It’s a very, very ancient art.
7. It is true that Jesus had love and compassion for the crowds, and He preached the Kingdom of God to them. But you see, unfortunately, discipleship is not something that all people aspire to. All are called to come to Christ, but few are “chosen” to be disciples (Matthew 22:14), because a vast majority would not be willing to bear the cost of discipleship.

A disciple must love Jesus even more than his immediate family (*Luke 14:26*: “If any one comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple”).

A disciple must deny himself, live in complete dedication to Christ in willing obedience and total commitment even unto death (*Luke 14:27*: “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple”).

A disciple must be willing to surrender everything for Jesus (*Luke 14:33*: “[E]veryone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple”).

A disciple must remain utterly true to Jesus’ words and teachings (*John 8:31, 32*: “...If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free...”).

A disciple loves others as Jesus has loved him (*John 13:34-35*: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”).

Being a Disciple Means Living in Communion

8. CCC 1816 states that “The disciple of Christ must not only keep the faith and live on it, but also profess it, confidently bear witness to it, and spread it”. This prescription comes with two obvious parts to the process of discipleship, that is, firstly, learning to keep the faith and live it, and secondly, learning to apprentice others into the faith. These are precisely the aspects of our faith that are embodied by our way of life. We live our lives in such a way that it expresses the faith and draws others into it; this is called evangelisation.
9. For far too long, Western Christians have defined evangelisation as a very verbal activity, as if evangelisation exclusively involves the propagation of the faith through a string of

impressive and compelling words that would convince our listeners about how true and how good our faith is. Whilst using words for the propagation of our faith has its rightful place, discipleship calls us to a more wholesome way of witnessing our faith. It is our way of embodying our faith with a rhythm and in a manner that is beautiful, that is good, and that is true, that people we encounter find themselves being drawn into the dance of life that they witness in the way our faith is being enfolded. Evangelisation is an invitation to others to “come and see”, to come and live with us, and to join in our “dance”.

10. It takes years for a disciple to develop a concrete and stable rhythm and expression of faith. This is why in the Early Church, the rites of initiation of a catechumen, that is, a person who was intending to get baptised and confirmed, and subsequently to receive the other Christian Sacraments, would not be administered unless and until the catechumen's Christian way of life had become concrete and stable. The journey of discipleship finally leading up to the rites of initiation could take at least three or more years.
11. The call to discipleship definitely requires of us a commitment to make it a priority in life without compromise. A disciple pursues excellence in his spiritual life; he moves beyond trying to avoid sin and allows the Spirit of God to propel him far above that. His concern is not how to avoid being bad, but rather, how to be truly good.

Matthew 19:16-24: “And now a man came to him and asked, ‘Master, what good deed must I do to possess eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one alone who is good. But if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.’ He said, ‘Which ones?’ Jesus replied, ‘These: You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false witness. Honour your father and your mother. You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ The young man said to him, ‘I have kept all these. What more do I need to do?’ Jesus said, ‘If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ But when the young man heard these words he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth. Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘In truth I tell you, it is hard for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Yes, I tell you again, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven.’”

The cliché that has become fashion among Christians these days, “You don't need to be perfect, God loves you as you are” contains a very misguided notion that contradicts the spirit of the Gospel. God does in fact desire for us to be perfect. He does not wish for us to lapse into a state of being merely sufficient, for eternal life is about the entering into union with the surpassing goodness, the unfathomable love, and the inexhaustible perfection of God.

This rich young lad was fundamentally a good man who had devoted much effort in avoiding sin by keeping the Ten Commandments with which he was raised in the faith as a good God-believing Jew. But Jesus was trying to inspire him to desire to be better than merely avoiding offense. Unfortunately, the price of the excellent life was dearer than he was willing to bear, for he had strong attachments to his earthly possessions.

12. Evidently, discipleship is not a process that one can undergo alone without being an active participant of a community of disciples. One succeeds in embodying the life of a disciple only when one enters into a fellowship, a communion, with others who share the same concerns and commitments. It is a community of faith that forms the way we live our Christian life and gives shape to our expressions of faith.
13. The “communion” that is being referred to here comes from the fact that in our Baptism and Confirmation, we have been “configured to Christ... Baptism seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark (*character*) of his belonging to Christ” (CCC 1272). We, each one of us, are bound to Jesus Christ and are a part of His Body.

But what of the consecrated Bread and Wine that we receive in communion? Saint Augustine of Hippo, in preaching his sermon (*Sermon 227*) to the newly baptised on the Feast of Christ’s Resurrection, explained that those devoutly receiving the Body that was broken and the Blood that was shed for them would themselves become that Body. This means that as a Eucharistic people, we are now joined in the close union of the Mystical Body of Christ and are inseparably enjoined to Him who is the Head. Further to that, it also means that we are inseparably enjoined to one another.

14. This is precisely why the ancient form of the Christian faith, if preserved in fidelity today, does not focus on the individual but on the Church and Her union with Christ. A Christian who focuses on his faith in an individualistic sense and elevates his personal preferences in the faith over everything else has missed the intrinsic meaning of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The case against an individualistic faith does not mean that the faith should not be personal. If we are following Christ, then there must be a level at which our relationship with Him is “person-al”. At the same time, this personal faith is to be construed as a part of a larger communion of other “personal” relationships with Him, all of which are also related to us inseparably.

For this reason also, the communion that we share with Christ and His Church does not permit for us to be “left-leaning” Christians who define ourselves apart from that which the Church is. In fact, our relationship with the Body of Christ is so intricate that Saint Augustine of Hippo defines all the members of the Church together with Christ as being, together, the “Whole Christ” (Latin, *Christus totus*). If we are to live out who and what we are as members of this Whole Christ, Christ and His Church must necessarily be the context in which our discipleship takes place and finds its embodiment. There is no other way.

15. In the light of all that has been shared on the nature of our communion with Christ and His Church, individualism is probably one of the most threatening but the most all-pervasive problems present among Christians today. Our lives as so-called disciples can be so expressive, impressive even, but are not subject to the examination of a wider audience, for it is largely “none of their business” how we have chosen to conduct our Christian life. We need to return to a spirituality of communion.
16. If we believe that God, the Holy Trinity, is Himself a perfect communion of three Persons properly described by Saint Gregory of Nazianzus as a *perichoresis* (“mutual indwelling”), then it is into this *perichoresis* that we as Christian individuals are called to enter. To that end, discipleship is nothing less than a visible embodiment of a concrete expression taken



on by the individual to make visible this union into which he has entered and is constantly still entering.

In this communion of the Holy Trinity, even the Eternal Word who was incarnate as Jesus Christ, defined Himself apart from His personal preferences and delights in being subservient to the collective will of the three Persons that is one God. He says, “My Father...if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless, let it be as you, not I, would have it” (Matthew 26:39). Furthermore, he says, “I have come from heaven, not to do my own will, but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38).

Likewise, as aspiring disciples of this same Jesus Christ, our spiritual direction in life must be very much intertwined with the direction of others who share in our faith and hopes and aspirations. A spirituality that does not embody communion holds no power of attraction, for it does not point to Divine Life. This is how God has always designed the spirituality of the Christian life to be, which is why Jesus gave this commandment to His disciples: “I give you a new commandment: love one another; you must love one another just as I have loved you. It is by your love for one another, that everyone will recognise you as my disciples” (John 13:34, 35). For this reason, “We must consider how to rouse one another to love and good works. We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another, and this all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24-25). A disciple therefore develops organically as he constantly seeks to make visible the fellowship that is present with other brothers and sisters by virtue of their common union with Christ and with one another.

Being a Disciple Means Becoming Like Jesus

17. Because Christian spirituality involves the imitation of Christ to whom we are configured by the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, you will notice that a form of commitment is shared in common among all the people who profess to Religious Life even if their spiritualities may be different. It is, if you like, the most concrete overlap that they have as a collective of disciples even if the way it is embodied and lived may be rather different. This commitment is referred to as the Evangelical Counsels, which are the threefold commitments of simplicity (or in its more drastic form, voluntary poverty), chastity (or in an even more intense form, celibacy), and obedience.

These Evangelical Counsels are sometimes misunderstood by Christians to be an ideal meant for a select group of Christians who are specially called and are endowed with special divine grace to live them. While it is true that there are people who are called to Religious Life, making exceptional public vows to poverty, celibacy, and obedience, the Evangelical Counsels are meant for all who desire to follow Christ. The role of those who have committed themselves to make these public professions is to inspire us with their dedication and self-effacing sacrifice as they too strive to keep an ideal of holiness held by the communities to which they belong. But even for those who have been called to live secular lives, the Evangelical Counsels continue to apply to us as a vehicle towards the perfection of the Gospel life.

18. The modern world and the complexity of life today poses all kinds of unprecedented challenges to the contemporary man.

Gaudium et Spes, 4: “Today, the human race is involved in a new stage of history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man, these changes recoil upon him, upon his decisions and desires, both individual and collective, and upon his manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and to people...

...Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the worlds citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. Never before has man had so keen an understanding of freedom, yet at the same time new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance.”

The antidote to this malady is the age-old wisdom of the Church, which continues to prescribe the Evangelical Counsels as being relevant for the disciple living amidst the challenges of the modern world. The invitation to lives of simplicity, chastity, and obedience is offered to all who seek to be disciples of Christ, for these are counsels seen to be at work in Jesus’ own life while He was on the face of earth working out His divinely instituted mission.

19. Saint Francis de Sales in the 17th century wrote a meaningful piece of literature entitled *Introduction to the Devout Life* to provide guidance towards holiness for a young woman named Philothea who was about to enter into a life of marriage. Saint Francis expressed his conviction that even in the married life, persons are to seek and to practice all types of virtues, including simplicity, chastity, and obedience.

Considering the maladies present in the modern world, one could say that the three main evils that plague our world today in an even more pronounced way than they used to are money, sex, and power. The Evangelical Counsels continue to apply as effective antidotes to these evils: simplicity as an antithesis to love of money, chastity as an antithesis to the perversions of sex, and obedience as an antithesis to the craving for power.

20. The Evangelical Counsel of **simplicity**, or poverty, speaks of dependence on God alone as a matter of our life priority, in a world of greed and self-reliance.

The malady of wealth is not so much found in the possession of material itself, for it is essentially the inner attitude of a person using material goods which determines the goodness or the badness of the act. In other words, poverty is a state of the heart, not just an exterior situation. Simplicity therefore does not mean having nothing, but rather, being possessive over nothing.

Saint Augustine of Hippo in the 4th century and Saint Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century held that material things are not intrinsically evil. Created things by themselves do not separate us from God; rather, they actually have potentials to lead us to Him. If ever material things cause us to be separated from God, it is the unreasonable use of them that has caused it.

God does choose to bless some people with much more wealth than they could ever need in the course of their lifetimes. But the Evangelical Counsel of simplicity stipulates that those who have wealth should practise being servants to others who suffer material lack in their lives. Examples of heroic figures like this are rather abundant in the history of the Church, such as Saint Louis the King who waited on the poor at his own dinner table, or like Saint Elizabeth the Queen of Hungary, who visited the poor and often dressed like them when she was socialising with other royal ladies.

21. We live in a consumerist culture that promotes hoarding material goods as a way to attain pleasure and social status. Many people are addicted to buying things without due consideration for the poverty in which the rest of the world exists. The fact is, people who own a car are among the world's upper class. Homeowners are among the upper five percent of the wealthiest in the whole world.
22. To earn and spend only as needed is a practice of poverty in this context. To lovingly care for the true physical and emotional needs of others such as the poor, and your children, without encouraging them to become hoarders, is a virtue.

Disciples who practice a spirituality of true stewardship will stand as a witness to the gospel in the modern world. They recognise that, in reality, all they “own” actually belongs to God, the Creator of all that exists.

Intentionally reforming our way of thinking and our attitudes, in a very practical way, is the first step in developing the spirit of “poverty”. When our way of thinking about wealth and possessions changes, it will eventually influence the outward choices that we make about how we use money.

23. CCC 2337: “**Chastity** refers to the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.”

This does not merely mean staying away from sinful sexual acts. It also means using the gift of sexuality in an ordered way that acknowledges God as the one who gave this gift. Even through our sexuality, God can be honoured, and sexuality was actually placed in the human person for this very purpose.

The term “chastity” has often been used to indicate “celibate” or “abstaining from sex”, but this need not be so. There is a more general or universal sense of this term. Certainly, celibacy cannot apply as a universal virtue for married people, except in certain cases of illness, natural family planning, physical separation, surgery, or other legitimate reasons that build virtue in the marriage. However, although experiences of married celibacy can help us develop the virtue of chastity, such abstinence element is not the essential component of chastity. In fact, the depth of the meaning of chastity even goes beyond the renouncing of sinful sexual behaviour that is a part of chastity to which all disciples are called. While chastity does indicate the self-control necessary for the separation from and renunciation of sin, it involves far more than efforts at avoidance.

Chastity begins with the acknowledgement, a realisation, that we are sexual beings. Even in non-sexual relationships with other people, we cannot help but relate through our

embodiment as men and women. In this context, the manner in which we use our bodies in our relations with others, and the intention with which we do so, is what makes for holy or evil use of our sexuality. It is therefore the intention of the person's mind and heart, along with the action taken, that is of central concern. To be clear, not actually engaging in sinful physical sexual acts does not necessarily render a person chaste, for the mind may have intentions that the body does not act out for fear of shame. Chastity therefore speaks of the stewardship that we exercise over the right ordering and use of our minds in relation to our bodies.

24. Contrary to the way in which many people today fight for the right of self-expression by dressing in any manner they fancy, the counsel of chastity tells us that chastity has an outward expression. The outward expression is the way in which we dress our bodies. Chastity calls for modesty and decency in physical self-expression.

CCC 2521: "Purity requires modesty, an integral part of temperance. Modesty protects the intimate center of the person. It means refusing to unveil what should remain hidden. It is ordered to chastity to whose sensitivity it bears witness. It guides how one looks at others and behaves toward them in conformity with the dignity of persons and their solidarity."

CCC 2522: "Modesty protects the mystery of persons and their love... Modesty is decency. It inspires one's choice of clothing. It keeps silence or reserve where there is evident risk of unhealthy curiosity. It is discreet."

25. It needs to be kept in mind that mass media is increasingly losing this virtue of reservation in self-expression. It feeds on the social reality that lust sells profitably.

CCC 2523: "There is a modesty of the feelings as well as of the body. It protests, for example, against the voyeuristic explorations of the human body in certain advertisements, or against the solicitations of certain media that go too far in the exhibition of intimate things. Modesty inspires a way of life which makes it possible to resist the allurements of fashion and the pressures of prevailing ideologies."

26. The constant struggle with lust is a fact of life. And the necessity of feeling shame about such lust is a safeguard that prevents us from going further than baseline morality would permit of us. A society that forgets how to feel shame is one that eventually condones public expressions of the sinful use of sexuality in the name of freedom of expression, and eventually this phenomenon is raised to a level of normalcy.

27. The Evangelical Counsel of **obedience** requires one to dispossess power over others and embrace a position of humility in relation to God and neighbour. In choosing the path of obedience, one intentionally chooses to become like Christ, who is divine and therefore equal to the Father, but yet radically other-centred, always seeking the Father's will and not His own.

28. Whilst obedience towards God is obviously the most important form of obedience, our union with humanity necessitates that obedience to God is most expressed towards a concrete human face. Therefore, obedience towards God, in the context of our spirituality of communion, cannot be something individualistic and is to be rendered within the

communal dimension as well. In other words, the vertical aspect of obedience cannot exist in exclusion of the horizontal aspect of the same, for God elects to invest His spiritual authority over us in the form of human agents who are custodians over His Holy Church and over our spiritual communities. There is much to be said about this, but it has to be left as a separate matter for discussion at another available opportunity.

29. St Francis de Sales speaks of two types of obedience, that is, *necessary* obedience and *voluntary* obedience.

Necessary obedience is that compliance with the obvious authorities in our lives. He names ecclesiastical authorities as those to be obeyed in spiritual matters; princes and magistrates are those to be obeyed in civil matters. In our time, authority often resides in laws or Church teachings. To obey all just laws is practicing *necessary* obedience. A heart that is seeking to discover the will of God will look to Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and Magisterial Church teachings in an effort to formulate a sound conscience.

Voluntary obedience is exercised when we freely choose to obey another whom we are not obligated to obey. This is, needless to say, a higher form of obedience which requires a deep sense of humility in a man, which propels him to obey not out of obligation but out of profound love and trust. We obey not because we must or because we have something to gain from that obedience; we obey because we love, and love always trusts (1 Corinthians 13:7).

30. Let us now sum up all that has been shared. Being a disciple does not take place as an immediate instance of transformation. It is a metamorphosis, a process, that is not accidental. It is the result of years of discipleship through being apprenticed, in communion with other fellow believers who are mature in the faith, by way of imitating Jesus. The ultimate goal of discipleship, and its most visible embodiment, is found in the embrace of the Evangelical Counsels of simplicity, chastity, and obedience.



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