

Discipleship, the Catechetical Edge of Holistic Christian Formation

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► ABSTRACT

The article discusses the concept of Christian discipleship within the catechetical framework of holistic Christian formation. It explores the historical evolution and differing perspectives on discipleship, distinguishing between the Catholic (the noun form) and Protestant (the verb form) understandings of the term. Presenting the various models of discipleship, beginning with those of the Learner, the Follower, and the Heir perspectives, the work furnishes a panoramic view of Christian discipleship, before it proceeds to analyse the different models in stages of Christian discipleship from both Protestant and Catholic viewpoints, using dynamics such as growth and participation, to illustrate the journey from novice to mature believer. Emphasizing that discipleship should be understood as a lifelong process of growth, maturity, and mission, moving beyond a “non-discipleship Christianity”, the article concludes by proposing a “Four-Dimensional model of Christian Discipleship” that Catechesis needs to promote, a model that progresses in a cyclical manner through stages of Recognition, Remembrance, and Reconstruction, ultimately orienting towards the building up of the Reign of God.

► KEYWORDS

Catechesis; Christian Discipleship; Faith Maturity; Models of discipleship; Stages of discipleship.

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Introduction: *Disciple* – is it a noun or a verb?

If you look at the term ‘disciple’ as a noun you are a Catholic, and if you say it is primarily a verb, you are a Protestant.¹ If you say it is both, you are closer to being a Christian and how closer still depends on what you believe: whether it is more noun or more verb! As a noun it is, being a disciple, growing into a disciple and maturing as a disciple. As a verb it is making a disciple, assisting those who make disciples and multiplying disciples! Those who hold on to the Latin root would remain with the term ‘*discipulus*’ coming from ‘*discere*’ which would mean to learn.² Instead, those who subscribe to the Greek term ‘*mathetes*’ from the term ‘*manthano*’ which means also to learn but (as in the root of mathematics) is more a ‘thought accompanied by endeavour’. It would mean those who ‘think and learn’, those who move beyond learning to doing, to endeavour, to put into practice the thought apprehended.³ It is in this background that the Protestant Churches and other Evangelicals extend the usage to terms such as ‘discipling’, ‘discipler’ etc., utilised within their scholarship with such familiarity and ease. The Catholic Church does not have that yet in its workaday lexicon.

The present work doesn’t not in any way intend to venture into the various and spread-out nuances of the term ‘disciple’ or ‘discipleship’, but merely takes all these nuances into consideration and attempts to suggest where and how the process of Catechesis needs to locate this paradigm of discipleship within its purview. At the outset and in brief, it clarifies some of the meaning-sets related to discipleship in general and in the Christian parlance as square one for an exploration ahead. Outlining thus the Christian and the Catholic perspective, the work shall embark upon framing “discipleship” as a paradigm for catechesis. It would be fitting to begin with understanding some of the common interpretations of the very concept of discipleship.

1. “Discipleship” – Some Relevant Ramifications

There are various traces of meanings and shades of definitions that the term discipleship could assume. Without going into the long list of it, we can group them all into some wide perspectives, within a broad continuum based on the approaches they reflect.

The first is the *Learner* perspective of discipleship, which is born out of an epistemological approach which centres on “knowing”, “ways of knowing” and

¹ The term is used here with the consciousness of the exceptions one can have in its usage. However, it refers to a particular school of thought differentiated from that of “Catholic”.

² *Disciples*, in «New Catholic Encyclopaedia», *Encyclopedia.com*, <<https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/disciples>> (last consulted 01.12.2025).

³ The nuances of the term ‘*mathetes*’ is from: C. SHIRLEY, *It takes a Church to Make a Disciple: An Integrative Model of Discipleship for the Local Church*, «Southwestern Journal of Theology» 50 (2008) 2, 207-224: 208-209.

“knowing about knowing” or consciousness. This is one of the oldest of perspectives in vogue. We can trace it back to ancient legends like the Plato, Socrates and Aristotle who had their own disciples.⁴

Another perspective that can be considered prominent is the *Follower* perspective which arises out of an ideological (philosophical, theological, social or scientific) approach which begins from an outlook that stresses on experience, agreement and allegiance to the thought or principles of a person that one considers a leader or a guide. Underlying this, is an element of learning, but a learning that tends more towards doing, living and practising. There is an added sense of imitation and modelling. Great personalities in history have always inspired followers, who concentrate not so much on academic exercise as on a desire to identify with and imitate.⁵ Personalities like Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King or Mao Tse Tung, have had a great following and they still draw disciples.

A third perspective, we could identify is an *Heir* perspective of discipleship which emerges from an existential or experiential approach which takes integral values, fundamental choices and existential responses given by a person as a heredity and ascertains a continuity to it as such. The leader or the inspirer becomes a forerunner, a pioneer, a trendsetter and his or her life becomes a path, a guidebook, a roadmap, a recipe for life of the so-called disciples. The one who considers oneself a disciple, strives to emulate and become one with, in mind and spirit, the person whom he or she considers not merely a teacher or master, but the very meaning of his or her life and the way to fulfilment of one’s existence.⁶ The disciple is sometimes looked at, as someone who would be able to replace the master or offer continuity to the legacy.

2. Discipleship in the Realm of Religious Experience

In understanding the discipleship perspectives as above, there is a danger that one can unwittingly give into – namely, that of considering that Christian discipleship automatically, being in the religious realm, would fall under the third category that we have enlisted. Not necessarily! It is possible, within the same Christian experience or tradition, to identify persons or ideas falling in line with all the three categories listed afore. For instance, there are those who subscribe to the learner perspective speaking of discipleship in terms of knowing the person of Christ, know his teachings and knowing the way to practice them,⁷

⁴ *Learner perspective*, concentrates on a specific knowledge or specific mode of knowing which differentiates the particular school or group of individuals and their allegiance to a ‘truth’ that they value above all. This has much to do with the sense of the latin root, *discipulus*.

⁵ *Follower perspective*, tends to take on the Greek root for disciple, *mathetes* where learning happens but accompanied by endeavour and practices. Life practices are altered here and some even go to the extent of letting go of a previous life style in the case of their new-found inspiration.

⁶ *Heir perspective*, as we see is very spiritual and likely to be religious. It deals with not merely spiritual categories, but with categories that are trans-material and beyond spacio-temporal, however within the concrete experiences of daily living. There is always a tension between the present, the past, the future and the timelessness here!

⁷ Just to provide an example, we can think of what C.S. Lewis says: God «had taught me how a thing can be revered not for what it can do to us but for what it is in itself. That is why, though it was a terror, it was no surprise to learn that God is to be obeyed because of what He is

while there are others who speak of faith more as a response and discipleship as following Christ⁸ and still others who would look at discipleship as becoming one with Christ and participating in the very image of Christ.⁹ However, one affirmation that can be made without any doubt is that every religious tradition speaks of some form of discipleship or the other.

While there are certainly specific interpretations that characterise every religion and its faith tradition, most of the aspects of discipleship in a religion, find a point of convergence with their counterparts in other religions. Of these we can point out at least three aspects which seem to be universal to most religions. The first of these is the fact that disciples are considered to be *special or select people*. Even in religious traditions which claim that every person who accepts that particular faith is a disciple, there is an understanding that not all live by this conviction and there are those special “some” who are conscientious who conform to it. The second common aspect that can be underlined is about discipleship being considered a kind of *mediation*, between the ideal and the commoners. The ideal in certain traditions is the divine, in others the master or the leader. The disciples are considered to be those mediators who are able to play a special role between the divine and the ordinary people, or those who have chosen to follow the master or the leader from close. The third shared aspect is the possibility of *inheritance*. The disciple is deemed worthy or considered potential to grow up to the level of inheriting special graces from the divine or the special place of the master, at a phase in the progress.

3. Christian Formation as Growth in Discipleship

Speaking of Christian Education, Leland Harder points out that the erstwhile dominant conceptions of Christian Education such as – Christian nurture, Christian instruction and Christian experience, whether taken one by one or altogether, are all lacking while it comes to thinking of a holistic process of formation. Already in those years, he observed that the conception of Christian Discipleship as a motif, has to define Christian education and that it contains within it all the three aforementioned conceptions.¹⁰ Though some thinkers in the field

in Himself . . . To know God is to know that our obedience is due to Him». See, C. S. LEWIS, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, Harcourt Brace, New York 1984, 172.

⁸ This can be seen reflected in thinkers like Paul Tillich who speaks of faith as ultimate concern and defines faith as the subjective response of the whole person, «the centred act of the personality», which transcends distinctions like conscious and unconscious, cognitive and affective or conative etc. See, P. TILICH, *Dynamics of Faith*, Harper and Row, New York 1957, 1-16.

⁹ Michael Peppard states, «the dual proclamation of Jesus Christ as God’s son and of his disciples as sons or children of God was undoubtedly part of the early Christian *kerygma*, broadly attested by different authors and genres». See, M. PEPPARD, *Adopted and Begotten Sons of God: Paul and John on Divine Sonship*, in «The Catholic Biblical Quarterly» 73 (2011) 1, 92-110: 92.

¹⁰ Cf. L. HARDER, *The Concept of Discipleship in Christian Education*, in «Religious Education» 58 (1963) 4, 347-358: 348-349.

of Religious Education today tend to be suspicious of the usage of the term 'formation' and pose it as if it is in contrast to "critical" Christian education,¹¹ one need not be timid in using the term, as it includes a great portion of internal process that involves a wide range of exercises such as understanding, critical appraisal, assimilation and so forth, which are not recognised by those who look at it as merely an external adaptation and not a 'shaping' that happens from within. The critique of this term comes mostly from non-Catholic circles and it needs to be understood and listened to for what it is worth.

There is a strong connection between discipleship and Christian Maturity. The Scripture reminds, that the disciples of Christ were first called Christians at Antioch (*Acts* 11:26f) and until then they were called just believers. While in the Gospels we come across categories of persons like "the crowd", "the disciples" and "the apostles", from *Acts of the Apostles* we begin to see, "the believers", who later become "the disciples", "the disciples" who come to be referred to as "the apostles" and so on. The indication here is to the levels or stages of maturity in living the Christian faith.

It could be a kind of mythical reasoning prevailing in our thinking, not just today but for centuries now, that «a Christian is someone who by faith accepts Jesus as Savior [sic], receives eternal life, and is safe and secure in the family of God; a disciple is more serious Christian active in the practice of the spiritual disciplines and engaged in evangelizing and training others».¹² Can this separation between being a Christian and being a disciple be justified today? At times, the popular exhortations made not to remain "nominal" Christians but to be "active disciples", isn't that an implicit approval of the separation? Rightly, we are warned that «the longer we perpetuate the myth that disciple is a secondary identity reserved for the elite, the more we will continue to produce "bar-code Christians"».¹³ This would be a "non-discipleship Christianity"¹⁴ making no difference, be it in the lives of the persons concerned or to the society they live in.

There is a curious note offered by a study that points that the word "disciple" occurs 230 times in the Gospels and 28 times in the Acts of the Apostles,¹⁵ while the term "discipleship" is found not even once in the entire New Testament. In relation to the three possible meanings of the suffix "ship", derived from the Old English root "scipe", discipleship can be thought of as a condition, a competence or a configuration. Hence it is a state of being a disciple, the art or the skill of manifesting one's relationship with Christ and the spiritual formation that leads to the followers being formed into the image of Christ more and more.¹⁶

¹¹ Cf. J. ASTLEY, *Discipleship Learning*, in «Rural Theology» 13 (2015) 1, 1-3: 2; where the author says, «the language of formation, with its powerful metaphorical connotations, [needs to be ...] balanced by this second, critical dimension».

¹² B. HULL, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ*, NavPress, Colorado Springs 2006, 33, as cited in SHIRLEY, *It takes a Church to make a Disciple*, 210.

¹³ SHIRLEY, *It takes a Church to make a Disciple*, 210.

¹⁴ Cf. HULL, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 44.

¹⁵ Cf. SHIRLEY, *It takes a Church to make a Disciple*, 208.

¹⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 211.

We see here the levels or the growth in maturity as a Christian that signifies discipleship in its true sense. Another aspect to be noted here is the fact that it is not enough to be disciples but it requires to be manifested.

4. Discipleship and the Mission Perspective

The challenge to manifest one's discipleship translates itself as the mission that is entrusted to the disciples. There are two important and interrelated dimensions of discipleship that are involved in this facet – the dimension of being and the dimension of doing; the dimension of the identity and that of the mission; the dimension of the call and that of the commission. We would not be over generalising it, if we were to say that here there is a definitive difference between the Protestant theology and the Catholic Tradition. While the Protestant theology of discipleship immediately and inseparably connects “missional role”¹⁷ of the disciple to the very identity of the disciple, the Catholic Magisterium still finds the necessity of inviting the faithful to integrate the two crucial identities of “missionaries” and “disciples”. Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium* remarks, «we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries”, but rather that we are always “missionary disciples”». ¹⁸

The call to discipleship entrusts a person with a mission unto oneself, a mission towards the community and a mission towards the world at large. This mission and one's responsiveness to it would determine the level of maturity that the person has arrived at, at a given point of one's life. The mission that a disciple assumes unto oneself is to conform more and more to the image of the One who calls him or her, making present the person and the message of Christ wherever one is. It is here that being a disciple matters along with being a missionary. The person is called to be «a true missionary who never ceases to be a disciple, knows that Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him» (EG, n. 266). The mission that the disciple assumes towards the community is to make of it, «a community of missionary disciples» (EG, n. 24), a community where missionary disciples accompany other missionary disciples (cf. EG, n. 173), and not where some are missionary disciples and others are passive recipients, says the Apostolic Exhortation (cf. EG, n. 24). Finally, the mission that the disciple assumes towards the world is to go out to the world and manifest the love and mercy of God: «An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1Jn 4,19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father's infinite mercy» (EG, n. 24).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 212.

¹⁸ FRANCISCUS, Adhortatio Apostolica *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.11.2013, n. 40, in «Acta Apostolicae Sedis» 105 (2013) 12, 1019-1137: 1036; English version: FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2013, n. 40 (Henceforth referred to in the text as EG); See also, PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION, *Directory for Catechesis* (DC), USCCB, Washington DC 2020, nn. 40, 50, 68, 89, 132, 135, 288, 303, 334, 335, 419, which refer to the very same terminology “missionary disciples”.

The Church herself is a missionary disciple (EG, n. 40), declares Pope Francis in the Exhortation reminding the faith community of its responsibility in the world today. Making disciples can be one of the focusses but the central focus remains the witness and leaves the multiplication of disciples as fruit of the mission. A more Catholic theological term for “making disciples” would be evangelisation: «Evangelized itself, the Church finds its foundational way of evangelizing others to be by means of witness: the sign of an ecclesia embracing the humanizing vision of the gospel and living out not only in communion with its own members but in solidarity with all seeking what is “noble and good”».¹⁹

5. Stages of Christian Discipleship

As reflected thus far, the conception and concrete living of discipleship and the preparation towards it, involve stages of growth and deepening. It is interesting to note how these stages could be conceived, depending on specific perspectives of theology and praxis.

5.1. Stages of Discipleship – Some Protestant Perspectives

The Protestant theology, in general, considers discipleship as the relationship every person who comes to know Christ and hears His Word, is called to have with Him, to grow in constantly, and to bring others into. One could say the Protestant perspective of discipleship has a militant sense of mission, and that mission being disciple-making, in obedience to the commission given by Jesus to his first disciples and through them to every disciple in time.

Of the many that exist, we could consider here one model of discipleship-stages, as a specimen: this model²⁰ consists of five stages, namely *Spiritually Dead* or *Unborn*, a stage where the person has not really gotten in touch with the person of Christ and the Word; *Infant*, where the person gets to know the new truth and develop spiritual habits; *Child*, where the personal becomes conscious of the journey he or she is making and connects to a small group of believers as a means to connect to God; *Young Adult*, where the person gets ready to plunge into ministry of disciple making; and finally *Parent*, where the person begins to disciple others and becomes a *discipler*. The stages are not chronological but spiritual and it begins when the person decides to enter into a serious relationship of discipleship with God.

Chris Shirley proposes what she calls an *Integrative Model*, integrative due to the fact that the model brings together «three essential elements in the formation process: a *paradigm* for the authentic disciple, the *practices* of the local church, and the *production* systems used to make disciples in the local church context».²¹ The model insists on the Spiritual formation as the most important

¹⁹ M. WARREN, *The Local Church and Its Practice of the Gospel: The Materiality of Discipleship in a Catechesis of Liberation*, in «Worship» 67 (1993) 5, 433-460: 437.

²⁰ For the model and further elaboration, see J. PUTMAN et alii, *Real-Life Discipleship Training Manual: How to Build Churches that Make Disciples*, NavPress, Colorado Springs 2010.

²¹ SHIRLEY, *It takes a Church to make a Disciple*, 213.

and the only compelling task of any church, the very purpose a church exists.²² Another proposal from Allen Joe Moore and Mary Elizabeth Moore, speaks of an Education for a Life style of Discipleship, a life style of following God's lead in our everyday lives toward a vision of the Reign of God, where lifestyle is understood as «an individual's unique and personal meaning that comes to expression in all the activities and attitudes of his or her life».²³ The Follower perspective that was referred to at beginning of this work is what is being explicated here with such clarity. The authors point out three obstacles that could block the lifestyle discipleship being lived out: the unpopularity of servanthood, that is the need to fix our gaze on the Suffering Servant of YHWH; the communion with God and the communion with human persons seen as two different phenomena, imagining God to be out of this world; and finally the equating of the experience of God to some emotional experience rather than concrete actions in the world on behalf of the suffering and the less fortunate.²⁴

5.2. Stages of Discipleship – Some Catholic Perspectives

Catholic theology looks at discipleship as a call received by every Christian at one's baptism, to be lived to the full, manifesting it in the classical two-fold relationship, a loving rapport with God and a friendly life with the others. Karl Rahner, would say, «dying with Christ is the act of Christian discipleship as well as the highest consummation of human existence».²⁵ Discipleship here could be understood in terms of stages of faith maturity and a process of being evangelised. Hence the famous process prescribed by *Evangelii Nuntiandi*,²⁶ - that of Primary Proclamation, Proclamation in an explicit and direct sense, Baptism that marks the entry into the community, Catechesis that makes the partaking more profound, Witness that gives rise to further proclamation and Lifelong growth in discipleship. Obviously, these are stages of deepening one's own faith life and experience, and they correspond to a systematic progress in discipleship too: Contact, Knowledge, Initiation, Deepening, Sharing and Growing.

Jerome Vallabaraj puts together another set of stages basing on the call that our faith community has to grow into Community-of-Disciples, which he adopts as a paradigm that «can be understood as a variant of the earlier communion model that draws one's attention to the ongoing relationship of the Christian

²² Cf. J.C. WILHOIT, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2008), 15-16, as cited in SHIRLEY, *It takes a Church to make a Disciple*, 212.

²³ A.J. MOORE – M.E. MOORE, *The Transforming Church: Education for a Life Style of Discipleship*, in «Impact» 9 (1982), 51-69: 52.

²⁴ Cf. *Ibidem*, 55-56.

²⁵ B.F. LINNANE, *Dying with Christ: Rahner's Ethics of Discipleship*, in «Journal of Religion» 81 (2005) 2, 228-248: 229.

²⁶ Cf. PAULUS VI, *Adhortatio Apostolica Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 08.12.1975, n. 45, in «Acta Apostolicae Sedis» 68 (1976) 1, 5-76: 35; English Version: PAUL VI, *APOSTOLIC Exhortation on Evangelisation in the Modern World Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 1976, n. 45.

community with Christ the Lord, who continues to lead and direct the community through his Spirit».²⁷ This Community-of-Disciples is an initiative of Jesus Christ who convokes a contrast community that witnesses to him and his Reign, a listening community, a community of worship and liturgy, a community that becomes a “sacrament” and a visible extension of the Son of God in the world, the Body of Christ.²⁸ It can easily be paralleled to the corporate calling of Israel as the people of God in the Old Testament. However, the author observes that in the process of becoming authentically such a Community, there is a «continuum that oscillates through five movements»,²⁹ which we can without much ado understand as another set of stages in Christian discipleship: i) *Membership* which involves the need on the part of the individual and recognition on the part of the community; ii) *Involvement* which involves participation and contribution on the part of the individual; iii) *Commitment* which is a matter of mutual trust and a covenant feeling; iv) *Engagement* which is going beyond the legal requirements to zeal and disponibility; and v) *Empowerment* which involves self-determination and self-efficacy at the service of the community and the holistic growth of the individual.³⁰

A third set of stages of discipleship can be formulated basing ourselves on the level of education to faith that a person is capable of, at a given point in his or her life-journey towards Christian perfection as a disciple: i) the stage where the person is still in the excitement of the life changing encounter as a *Seeker*; ii) the stage of critical knowing where the person is eager and ready as a *Learner*; iii) the stage of ardent modelling where the person is getting deeper into his or her relationship with a commitment that attaches him or her to the person of Christ as a *Follower*; iv) the stage of humble witnessing to Christ and his message in and through one’s life inspiring others as a *Mentor*; v) the stage where the person takes greater responsibility towards a collaborative building up of the community and newer communities as a *Minister*; and vi) the stage where the person is empowered by experience gained and wisdom learnt and ready to suggest, plan, evaluate and set in place processes of growth in the faith community as an *Accompanier*.

6. The Catechetical Tasks within the Discipleship Paradigm

Catechesis, certainly, is not a task. However, it is made of a series of tasks organically coordinated by a well-defined process, with a grounded point of departure and an inspiring point of arrival. When discipleship becomes its paradigm, these tasks have particular dynamics that they assume and these tasks would reflect the stages of discipleship that the concerned person finds himself or herself in, at any given moment.

²⁷ J. VALLABARAJ, *Delving into the World of the Catechetical Education of Adults: A Multi-Perspective Elaboration*, Kristu Jyoti Publications, Bangalore 2008, 143.

²⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*, 144-147.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 153.

³⁰ Cf. *Ibidem*, 153-154.

6.1. *The Dynamics of Growth: From Child to Elder*

One of the most prominent catechetical dynamics that we can think of within the paradigm of discipleship is that of Growth. Catechesis is by nature age sensitive, more so when it comes to a demanding criterion as “discipleship”. Catechesis as Christian Education or Faith education can assist in the growth of a person in stages of his or her discipleship, as the person matures from a state akin to a child to a maturity of an elder.

The first stage is the stage of the Child when the person is introduced to faith and the life of discipleship – the catechetical task here is, «Christian nurture [... which is] largely unconscious and informal assimilation of Christian beliefs and attitudes through the constant association with those Christians to whose fosterage one is committed».³¹ The role of the family, the immediate society and those who surround a person in the catechetical dynamics of growth is crucial as it is well known.

The second is the stage of Youth, when the person is conscious of the journey that he or she has embarked upon. The catechetical task that takes place here is Christian instruction.³² It is the formal study of the literary resources that are available which can clarify the nature of growth that a person has to acquire at this stage. The scripture, the formal schooling, the offer of a content of knowledge, are some of the tasks to be carried out, always mindful of not reducing it all to mere transmission of some prefabricated content instead of inspiring the person to encounter the Risen Lord, the heart of Christian faith and the protagonist of discipleship.

The third stage is that of Adult, when the person begins to have a first-hand encounter of problems of life and the catechetical task here is Christian experience,³³ that is making sense of the realities around and the implications of the choices to be freely and knowingly made. There can be some trial-and-error experiences but that would be considered much as part of the whole. A particular mode of tutelage is offered here which does not take away the freedom of the person, but at the same time keeps the person on the right track towards the desired growth.

The fourth stage is the stage of Elder. While the stage of adults refers to a level of autonomy, the present stage adds to itself experience and wisdom. At this stage the catechetical task is that of Christian discipleship. The person grows in his or her identity as a disciple and becomes aware of the ongoing relationship that is shared with the person of Christ and the responsibilities that come along with that, happily bearing testimony and drawing others through inspiration.

6.2. *The Dynamics of Participation: From Receiving to Responsibility*

Participation in the community can determine the stages of discipleship and the pertaining catechetical tasks, in a context. The *Directory for Catechesis*³⁴

³¹ HARDER, *Concept of Discipleship*, 349.

³² The part on “Christian instruction” – Cf. HARDER, *Concept of Discipleship*, 351-352.

³³ The part on “Christian experience” – Cf. HARDER, *Concept of Discipleship*, 353.

³⁴ Cf. DC, nn. 88-89.

outlines Education to community life as one of the fundamental tasks of Catechesis. Christian Discipleship,³⁵ as we have stated earlier, is not merely matter of personal righteousness but a community witness. Hence the dynamics of participation augurs well as a catechetical criterion to formulate another set of stages of discipleship.

The *Enchantment* stage is when a person gets curious or attracted to the person of Christ and the Christian way of life and the catechetical dynamics here is the that of *Receiving*. The Community offers information and experiences that would help the person get in touch with Christ and get to know the community of believers. As a child a person who grows in the family undergoes this experience of being enchanted and receiving an experience from witnessing parents and elders.

The *Encounter* stage is when the person gets to know in a manner more deep, about the person of Christ as he or she encounters persons, programmes and practices of the Community. Christ is presented to the person in a more vivid and experiential manner as the catechetical dynamics involved here is *Knowing*. The various processes of catechesis, for instance the school catechesis, the parish catechesis and sacramental catechesis helps the growing child to integrate oneself into the community.

The *Empowerment* stage is when the person begins to feel confident about his or her identity as a disciple and the catechetical dynamics here is *Growing*. The person grows into a responsible partaker in the community. The community too begins to entrust the growing persons with duties and empowers them with a sense of belonging.

The *Endowment* stage is when the person begins to give back what he or she has received and grown out of within the community of faith. The person grows in responsibility and becomes a leader-disciple as the catechetical dynamics of *Building* comes into play here. Here, the process of catechesis makes the person realise and believe that he or she has to take responsibility of building the community up and enrich it with responsible participation.

7. Towards an Authentic Christian Discipleship – a Proposal

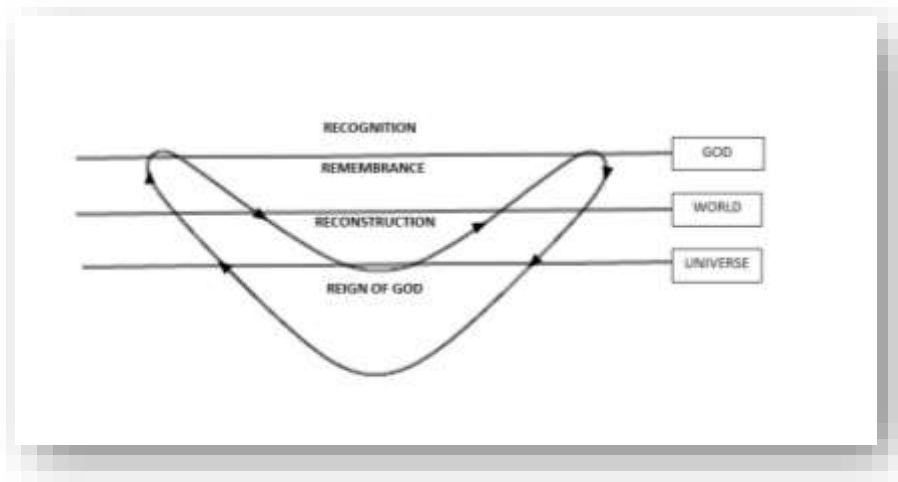
Thinking of an authentic life of Christian Discipleship, we have two facts that we have to state before we enter into the discourse proper. The first regards the present secularized situation of humanity: where being a Christian is becoming ever more a matter of importance and particular significance, an experience of being a minority among the majority who do not care much about anything to do with faith; and discipleship here, presents itself as an intense subject of consideration. The second fact is a word about the classical icon of catechesis presented to us: The Road to Emmaus!³⁶ There is a crucial message that it offers, for catechesis with the discipleship paradigm. They were disciples already before they walked that road to Emmaus, they were disciples when they returned on

³⁵ Cf. DC, nn. 33, 42, 112, 121, 319, 344, 370, 386 and others refer to integrity of faith as disciples.

³⁶ Cf. DC, nn. 160, 244.

that road – the difference was the enlightenment that dawned on them... what was till then the road to Emmaus, now had become the road to Enlightenment when they walked it on return! That is the kind of accompaniment called for within a catechesis to discipleship.

That said, we shall end this reflection with a final presentation on the stages of an authentic Christian discipleship. We could think of a Four-Dimensional model of Christian Discipleship, that can be represented by the shape of a boomerang.



The purpose of catechesis is *Shalom*, fullness of life for all,³⁷ Christ had declared himself, «I have come that they may have life, life in all its fullness» (*Jn* 10:10b). The Reign of God is this *shalom*, the fullness of life and it cannot be something that we expect in the life to come; it is here and now (cf. *Lk* 17:21). Discipleship is a journey towards this Reign and it is not a destination to be reached at the end of a journey, but an experience to be realised all through, albeit in a gradual and maturing sense. Catechesis intensifies this discipleship, so that the individual along with his or her brothers and sisters, as part of a community-of-disciples may live this journey with sense and solidarity.

Right at the beginning of this journey is God, who calls the person to embark on this journey. The Christian faith enables us to celebrate a twin birth – one the day we were born, the other the day when we were identified to the world that we are children of that God who has given us the gift of life, baptism. There is God at both of these starting points - God who is going to walk along all the way; And so begins Stage 1.

Stage 1: Recognition. The first stage consists of recognising the gift and the call that the person has received. Hence, the entire life and the discipleship is a response to a call that the person has received. Needless to say, in this scheme, Birth or the starting point of the journey is not necessarily the biological birth (though for many it is). However, the biological self is highlighted at this stage - the child grows to recognise and appreciate its body; the person understands his

³⁷ Cf. T.H. GROOME, *Will there be Faith? A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York 2011, 23.

or her background, the call and the change that is happening in one's gross daily life. The key movement of recognising the presence, the gift and the call of God is carried out and the infant in faith, grows towards the next stage. The family makes the presence of the catechist felt at this stage.

Stage 2: Remembrance. This is the stage where the child or the beginner in faith is instructed. There are facts to know, practices to learn, experiences to go through and register in one's mind. Much of our learning is remembrance for that matter. Remembrance is the impact of a thing, an information, an event, a person or an experience that remains in a person's mind influencing his or her outlook, approach and choices in general. Sometimes we call it *learning* too. Here it is Memory that comes to play – while we are highly critical about the over emphasis of memory in faith education (or even education in general), we cannot deny the fact that memory has a great role even in retaining the facts understood and using it when needed. The Disciple here allows his/her mind to be open, receptive and analytical, gathering, sorting and registering all the information and data that comes one's way. The body which was central in the previous stage, does not get replaced but gives space to the mind to be recognised more. The person goes beyond his or her biological reality and senses the world around, the community around, the reality around from which and from whom, he or she receives all the data, information and experience. The disciple who had begun the journey with God, now realises that there are others walking with him or her, and that he or she is not alone. The community is the co-pilgrim and the catechist here.

Stage 3: Reconstruction. The child grows into a youth and many a thing gets a new look, gets reconstructed, gets critically analysed and made sense of. The disciple at this stage grows to understand things that were recognised and remembered. There is a critical sense of the mind that comes into play, complementing the memory that had been active hitherto. There are questions to raise, responses to be given, choices to be made, changes to be initiated, relations to be built, mistakes to be corrected: Repent and believe the Reign of God is close indeed (cf. *Mk 1:15*); bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, give sight to the blind and set the downtrodden free (cf. *Lk 4:18*). Reconstruction has to take place within the individual, in the society, in the world at large and in the universe. The universe comes alive to the disciple, without which he or she cannot understand the real import of the Reign of God. It is not about material wealth, political freedom, social justice, or international peace – it is not about any of these, yet it is about all of these at the same time. It is about the Universal Wellbeing, the Cosmic Order as it were... the *Shalom*, the Reign of God towards which the person is straining forward. The community continues to be the accompanier and the co-pilgrim, along with that also the object to be worked upon.

Stage 4: Reign of God. The Reign is not the destination of the journey, it is the yearning of the Spirit all the time. Reign of God is not merely a spiritual reality, but it cannot be understood except through the Spirit. The soul of a human person has the great gift of communing with the Spirit of God who reveals to the person the real purpose of one's existence and whispers into the ears of the whole

existence the purpose and meaning of every being. The disciple makes present the Reign of God, here and now, because he or she is capable of it, with the help of the One who is present and working in and through the individual. Therefore, the Reign of God is not something that someone comes to do for the rest of the existence, but something that each of us has to live at every moment of our lives, here and now. The journey does not end here, the life has to move on.

Stage 5: Reconstruction. The one who has tasted the Reign of God cannot remain there, the person will strive to spread it across. As the disciples of Emmaus had to return on the same road but as renewed persons, so does the disciple here return on the same road that he or she journeyed so far, but now as a person of the Reign, conscious of the goodness, love, joy, peace, in short, the *shalom*, the fullness that the Reign offers. The person feels the necessity to reach out to more and more, because the fullness of life is *for all*. Because the Lord while instructing his disciples of their mission, had said, «freely have you received, freely shall you give» (cf. *Mtt* 10:8). The Reconstruction here is now illumined by the Reign, and everything needs to be renewed in that spirit. The new earth and new heaven that the Lord promised is the vision of this Reign-spirit that is carried all over by the disciple.

Stage 6: Remembrance. The disciple grows old and the time comes to share the wisdom and experience gained. Here again, Memory comes into play – a memory to be shared, a memory to be consolidated, a memory which should be passed on. The disciple with the experience gained and wisdom developed becomes a point of reference, a memory which shall make more sense to others who are yet in other stages of discipleship. He or she is all for the world at this stage and the world looks up to the person for direction and counsel.

Stage 7: Recognition. The disciple recognises now the real meaning of his or her entire life. All this while, it was not clear, though the disciple had been so actively involved in it. Now the disciple is able to look back and say, “Now my Divine Master, my eyes have seen your salvation” (cf. *Lk* 2: 29,30). The One who has been with the disciple right from the beginning and all through the journey is right beside the disciple to say, «welcome my faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master» (cf. *Mtt* 25: 34). The life is not ending where it began, but we would have come at this point, a full circle... and would have understood the core of our life and call. It is one full journey as a disciple, responding to the call of the Divine Master who has not only been walking along, but has been the journey itself.

Conclusion

Fostering our commitment to live as disciples of Jesus is the greatest task that is entrusted to us as Christians and in fact this is exactly what defines a Catholic identity.³⁸ Reflecting on this, Tomáš Halík writes:

³⁸ Cf. R.J. REICHERT, *Renewing Catechetical Ministry: A Future Agenda*, Paulist Press, New York 2002, 21.

If the faith of the Church does indeed *subsist* in the spiritual life of believers, but the religious knowledge they have received does not fill the whole space of their spiritual life, then there remains legitimate room in their minds and hearts for searching, critical questioning, and honest doubt. It is healthy for them to humbly question whether their faith journey is authentic, faithful to tradition, but also faithful to how God guides them in their conscience. Therefore, the final addressee of their questions cannot be the ecclesiastical authority alone, but God, present in the sanctuary of their conscience, God who speaks to them not only in the teachings of the Church but also in the signs of the times and in the events of their own lives.³⁹

Discipleship in the Catechetical parlance therefore, cannot be a mere individual commitment although commitment cannot but be the decision of an individual; however, it is a commitment that has to be lived and expressed as a community of disciples today, a community that grows in interpersonal and universal commitment, as a sign of its commitment to the Divine who has commissioned it into existence, and unceasingly continues to do so.

Discepolato, lato catechetico della formazione cristiana olistica

► SOMMARIO

L'articolo discute il concetto di discepolato cristiano all'interno del quadro catechetico della formazione cristiana olistica. Esplora l'evoluzione storica e le diverse prospettive sul discepolato, distinguendo tra la concezione cattolica e quella protestante. Presentando i vari modelli di discepolato, a partire da quelli di Apprendista, Seguace ed Erede, lo studio fornisce un panorama del discepolato cristiano, prima di procedere ad analizzare i diversi modelli di fasi del discepolato cristiano dal punto di vista sia protestante che cattolico, utilizzando dinamiche come la crescita e la partecipazione, per illustrare il percorso dai neofiti ai credenti maturi. Sottolineando che il discepolato dovrebbe essere inteso come un processo di crescita, maturità e missione che dura tutta la vita, andando oltre un "cristianesimo senza discepolato", la riflessione si conclude proponendo un "modello quadridimensionale del discepolato cristiano" che la catechesi dovrebbe promuovere, un modello che progredisce in modo ciclico attraverso le fasi del Riconoscimento, Ricordo e Ricostruzione, orientandosi infine verso l'edificazione del Regno di Dio.

► PAROLE CHIAVE

Catechesi; Discepolato cristiano; Fasi di discepolato; Maturità di fede; Modelli di discepolato.

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³⁹ T. HALÍK, *The Afternoon of Christianity. The Courage to Change*, G. Turner (trans.), University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 2024, 147-148.