

Cultivating a Culture of Commencement/Conversion: Maturing Discipleship

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When I hear the word cultivating, I automatically think of my father's garden; and the tireless joy that he finds in cultivating the earth. He subscribes to dozens of gardening periodicals and owns one of those "gizmos" that turns the earth upside-down-and-inside-out tilling the land until it is ready for seedlings.

Daily he waters, fertilizes, and pulls weeds from his seeds-springing-to-life. More often than not however, his prize winning tomato or squash is served up at a banquet hosted by the groundhogs, raccoons and rabbits that roam the wooded area surrounding my family's home.

Not to be defeated, my Father, also a bit of a techno-geek (and in Wiley Coyote style), rigs-up countless motion-sensitive-contraptions with bells, whistles and horns that blare in the middle of the night frightening half of the neighborhood but do little to deter the nightly dinner guests.

And yet yearly he continues the ritual of cultivating the earth – with an enthusiasm of a new beginning each time – tilling, planting, and nurturing – always confident that the miracle-of-sprouting-plants-from-seeds will yield a bountiful harvest (even if only for the groundhogs!).

It is with this same enthusiasm and tireless joy that we cultivate a culture of commencement for maturing disciples.

When the sacrament of Confirmation is received in the teen years quite often it is compared to the Jewish "coming of age" Bar or Bat mitzvah; or perceived by our young people as graduation or my favorite, "the rite of exit."

Yet, Confirmation is none of the above. Rather, it is as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (# 1282 quoting the *Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation, 1971, by Pope Paul VI*) states that: "By the sacrament of Confirmation, the baptized are **more perfectly bound** [emphasis added] to the Church and are enriched with special strength of the Holy Spirit...they are as true witnesses of Christ and **more strictly obliged** [emphasis added] to spread and defend the faith by word and deed."

"**More perfectly bound**" and "**more strictly obliged**" indicate an increase or a deepening of the believers witness to Christ, and sharing of the good news in word and deed.

This "more" that we are cultivating is a spirit of new beginnings – a spirit of **commencement**; it is an outward sign of an inner change of heart. We know this inner change of heart by another name: **ongoing conversion. Every new conversion moment begins in us a new way of being disciples.** Our work of cultivation is an "apprenticeship" in Christian discipleship.

Each sacrament offers us God's grace and is a moment of conversion that configures us more fully into the image of Christ and His mission carried out in oneness with the Holy Spirit.

How does this apprenticeship happen? "The Church herself is a living catechesis" (NDC, p. 57).

The Landscape of Parish Life: Remote Catechesis and Ongoing Catechesis

Our parishes, like my fathers' garden, are meant to be the "living and permanent environment for growth in the faith." (GDC, 158) Our parishes are meant to be places of apprenticeship in the ways of sharing the good news in word and deed.

Sometimes the field in which the seeds of faith are sown is a bit rocky with domestic crisis, or weedy with substance abuse or mental illness, or worn down by unemployment, death and despair. With care, tenderness and nurturing by the community of faithful disciples even the rockiest of land can bear great fruit.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* affirms this understanding of the parish as the field of maturing discipleship by echoing the words of the Gospel: "Some seed falls on good soil: that is among men and women who are open to a personal relationship with God and who are in solidarity with their neighbor. This seed brings forth fruit in great abundance."

Growth in faith flourishes when it is rooted deeply in the religious traditions, beliefs and customs of the community of faith. A culture of commencement – ongoing conversion – is found in the very life and fabric of the parish – it's the parish's culture.

This internal life of the Church community is at once an agent that "makes disciples," and is itself in a constant state of conversion of heart and growth in holiness. A seasoned gardener knows that the seeds of faith fall on specific soil, that is the unique soil and landscape of your parish; and they absorb all of the elements that make for a community of disciples.

What is the soil of your parish? Is it rocky? Is it weedy? Is it full of clay? Is it ready for seedlings? Let's look at the characteristics common to all parishes.

A Parish's Culture of Commencement for Maturing Discipleship exists in the following three "apprenticing" elements:

Tilling – the daily work of the faith community: this can be discerned by participating in the rituals, liturgy, social justice activities and events that happen daily within the community; these are identifiable by simply looking at the parish's bulletin, newsletters and website. They are the most visible elements by which a parish's daily work is structured and celebrated.

Planting – the values of the faith community: this can be discerned by listening to statements of parishioners about what they consider to be important and unimportant – where the parishioners and staff invest their time and resources.

Nurturing – the world view of the community: not as easily discerned as tilling and planting; nurturing comprises the "soul" or interior presuppositions and attitude of the faith community that are so deeply planted within the field of the parish's identity that they unconsciously dictate the community thoughts and actions. These can be discerned amid the most revered symbols and stories within the parish, and are owned by all members. These are heard in the faith stories of the parishioners and are reflect the awareness.

Together these three aspects comprise the landscape of remote and ongoing catechesis for sacramental formation. It is within the "field of parish life" that we apprentice every disciple, (but most especially our young believers) in the attitudes, values, work and identity of Jesus Christ. All the while giving newness of life through the Miracle of Deeply Rooted Plants Sprouting from Seeds; the maturing disciple is every member of the community of faith.

Just as seedlings tended with care can flourish into mature plants; so too, through the power of the Holy Spirit, a healthy community of faith that lives the "many moments of commencement" will protect, nurture and model the blossoming and maturing of faith that is the aim of discipleship. Confirmation celebrates the way that one's life becomes increasingly centered on Jesus Christ and the reign of God that he proclaims.

The **laborers** in work of cultivating a spirit of ongoing commencement are:

The Family – forms faith through its daily, lived experience... Families continually teach about the sacraments by their attitudes and practices, especially in the ways that the family members participate in the life of the parish community and live the Gospel values. It may not always be expressed in a way we would like or as we express our own faith – but it is real.

As ecclesial ministers we are very good at making it clear to parents are the primary religious educators of their children; however, we have often done so without offering them the tools to facilitate their life in Christ to its fullest. One of the most important things that we can do for our parents and families is to give them tool to make this work easier. And the first rule of helping parents is to know the landscape of their daily life, and recognize that while faith is important to them they are pulled into 1001 directions and that as parish formers of faith this may require us as a parish community to “re-imagine” the way that we can partner with them in the sacramental formation experience. The expression of faith varies from family to family and we need to be sensitive to that reality as we partner with them.

We invite them.... We are patient.... And trust that the Spirit will bring about the miracle of seeds spouting to plants....

The Whole of the Parish Community and its Life – by its patterns of celebration and participation the community of faith fosters a mature discipleship by living fully and valuing the sacraments as an essential part of being “Church.”

The Catholic School and Parish Religious Education and Youth Ministry Programs – provide a systematic catechesis, which includes the basic and gradual developing understanding of sacraments and of discipleship.

The **laborers** are a sign of maturing discipleship as well as continuing to grow in maturity of faith with each new “commencement experience.” The goal of the entire community is a “living, explicit and fruitful confession of faith.” So tht we may “go and make disciples...”

Conclusion

Is cultivating a culture of commencement – a culture of ongoing conversion for maturing discipleship possible? It is bigger than any one person individually. This is a long-term plan and an entire parish endeavor. It begins with us working together and modeling discipleship.

Jesus’ own model of forming disciples was one of apprenticeship. The Master’s instructions to an apprentice are simple: Follow Me. That invitation is repeated twenty times in the gospels.

He invited people to walk with him. He invited people into an adventure. He invited people into a way of life. He invited men, women and children simply to “Follow Me.” This is the spirit of remote and ongoing catechesis, it is a journey of faith that we walk together with Christ, with His Church, with each other and with our young people.