



# PLANS OF HOPE

HOUMA-THIBODAUX PARISH PLANNING

## DIOCESAN PLANNING PRIORITY NO. 2: ADULT FORMATION

# CHAPTER 11

## SECTION 3



## WHAT?

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#### “MAKE” IS A VERB

**Make** disciples. The word “make” is a *verb*. To “make” is to **do** something. There is action. There is movement. To “**make**” is to **change**. Discipleship formation is essentially about **change**. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is meant to confront our lives. When the Truth of God meets the reality of our life there is only one authentic response: surrender.

There is an African American hymn that sings, “Something on the inside, working on the outside, o’ what a change in my life.” If we wanted to find a simple and rememberable summation of the Christian life it could be found there, “Something on the inside, working on the outside, o’ what a **change** in my life.” Notice the intentionality of the verse. Notice the **change** in one’s life. The something on the outside started with something on the inside.

The catchy hymn references the centrality of Christian experience. It is one’s experience of transformation that serves as the energy fueling conversion. One has to be aware that there is an experience. The experience reveals not only what is happening within me but more importantly it reveals *He* who is initiating the experience. In order for us to theologically understand the dynamics of conversion and discipleship formation, we would do well to begin with a few theological presuppositions.

## THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

The first theological presupposition is that God is **alive** and **active** now. The popular colloquialism, “What would Jesus do?” subtly implies that Jesus is dead. Of course, our faith tells us that Jesus *is not dead*. Jesus is **alive** now, on this earth, in our lives. God is **alive** and **active** today.

This first theological presupposition changes everything. If this is true, if God is **alive** and **active** today, there are life-changing implications.

The second theological presupposition is that Jesus is always taking the **initiative**. This is a fundamental Catholic theological statement. God is the initiator of the gift and man is the receiver of the gift. God is taking the initiative as He is **alive** and **active** today. *He is always taking the initiative*. Man is always **responding** to his initiative. In fact, the church teaches us this truth as the *Catechism* defines prayer. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2567 teaches, “God calls man first. Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer. In prayer, **the faithful God’s initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response.**”

These two theological presuppositions have a dramatic influence when it comes to the formation of disciples. One cannot understand the dynamic of discipleship formation without understanding these two theological truths. Forming disciples is *not* participating in parish programs. It is not checking the boxes. This mindset of “doing things on my own” has plagued the Catholic Church for decades. It is fostered a “transactional culture” within the Church whereas “I give you my envelope and you give me the Bread.” This “transactional mindset” leads one to participate in programs hoping that the programs do what only God can do.

**Discipleship formation is about what God is doing in the life of a human being.** Discipleship formation **is initiated by God**. His initiation is discovered in human experience. To the degree that I am aware of human experience I am then disposed to respond not merely to the experience, but to the God who has engendered the experience within me.

These two theological presuppositions are essential for your understanding of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux’s vision for discipleship formation. We are convinced that God is **alive** and **active** today. We are convinced that whatever transformation happens in the Church is merely a human receiving of what God desires through His initiation.

## SAINT IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA



The 2,000-year-old history of the church is filled with masters of the spiritual life. We relish in the writings of the desert fathers. Saint Augustine, Saint Benedict and Saint Thomas Aquinas. We revere Bonaventure, Thomas à Kempis, and Catherine of Sienna. There is one spiritual master, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who has a particular expertise in the spiritual life and a remarkable influence in the blueprint of our diocesan strategic plan. We would benefit from understanding the heart of Ignatius so that we can understand the mind of Ignatius.

We do not need an extensive biography of Ignatius to understand his mind. However, let us understand of few simple things from his life. He was born in the Basque country of Spain in 1491. His father and mother were of lower nobility in the Spanish courts, yet his stature within nobility did not guarantee him the type of fame or fortune he craved.

He was driven to make a name for himself. His ego and pride lead him to the Battle of Pamplona in 1521, as the Spanish were fighting a French offensive. During the battle Ignatius was wounded severely. The French were so impressed with his courage that they themselves dressed his wounds and brought him back to his family castle in Azpeitia. While recovering from two significant surgeries Ignatius had a life-changing encounter with the Lord and therein experienced conversion. His conversion was painted on the canvas of experience. Ignatius paid attention to his experience. He noticed interiorly those things that which led to sustained consolation. He also noticed those things that left him sad or flat, in a desolation that lingered for hours. It was there, in his experience, that Ignatius discovered God in the experience.

Soon after his conversion, Ignatius, desiring to do what the great saints did, set out for pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He stopped just north of Barcelona in a little town called Manresa. He planned to be in Manresa for just a few days in route to the land of Christ's birth. What happened in Manresa forever changed the life of Ignatius. It would also set in motion that which has had an historic impact on the Church and civilization across the globe.

Ignatius would eventually found the Society of Jesus, also known as the Jesuits. They remain the largest Religious Order in the world today. They are responsible for the evangelization of more people than any other Religious Order in history. The Jesuits are known for many things; however, their contribution to the spiritual life is most noteworthy.

#### THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

The *Spiritual Exercises*, given to Ignatius while he was in Manresa, are a series of meditation and prayer experiences meant to unfold sequentially over a 30-day period. During the last 500 years there have been several adaptations to the *Spiritual Exercises*. They remain one of the most effective and fruitful treasures in the vast spiritual tradition of the Church.

The *Spiritual Exercises* are built on two theological presuppositions, the same two theological presuppositions mentioned earlier. Ignatius believed that God was active and alive in his life. He was also convicted that the most authentic response of man to God is to receive God's initiative. Ignatius crafted his "spiritual" exercises using language that we can all relate to. The body can participate in "physical" exercise. The body can *do* certain things. It can engage in exercise to order to grow. So too can the soul. The soul can engage with God. The soul can "do" certain things to foster growth and intimacy with God. Ignatius refers to this as "spiritual" exercise.

The *Spiritual Exercises* presume that God is always taking the initiative. The *Spiritual Exercises* intentionally reverence and pay attention to spiritual experience and, therein, anticipate what God may do next. **The *Spiritual Exercises* encourage the participant to be ready to receive what God is doing. This is critical to understanding the *Spiritual Exercises*.** Let me repeat this. **The *Spiritual Exercises* encourage the participant to be ready to receive what God is doing.** The *Spiritual Exercises* acknowledge that God is leading. They anticipate what might be the expected next step in spiritual experience because of what we know to be true of God. Thus, you might say the *Spiritual Exercises* are a map of how God traditionally moves in a person's life and provides a structure for them to maximally receive that which God wants to give.

Let me give you an example. In the Gospel of Luke chapter five Jesus takes the initiative in Peter's life. In Luke 5:8 we witness the miracle of the great catch of fish. Peter is in awe of God, how powerful God is, and how near God is. Peter responds as most of us would as he says, "Depart from me Lord for I am a sinful man."

Is it possible for us to anticipate what God may do in someone's life? And, if so, is it possible to anticipate how they might respond? **Yes.** It is to be expected that when the human person encounters the presence, power, and awe of God that the most natural response is to feel unworthy in God's presence. We cannot anticipate what will facilitate the encounter with God, but you can presume with some certainty that most human beings will respond in a certain way, ways that are revealed to us in the Bible. Learning how God operates in our lives and understanding how we traditionally respond to God's love then helps us maximally receive the gift and remain present to what God will do next.

**The *Spiritual Exercises* remain the most popular form of spiritual experience or retreat experience in the world today.** Whether on 30-day retreats, weekend retreats, or daily prayer and meditation more people use the *Spiritual Exercises* than any other form of prayer. The *Spiritual Exercises* have been scrutinized by the Magisterium. The *Spiritual Exercises* contain content, theological content, which can be trusted. The *Spiritual Exercises* in their purest form, the way Ignatius himself intended, have received both the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* from the Holy See itself. This is important. The theology of the *Spiritual Exercises* can be trusted.

A further distinction regarding Saint Ignatius and the Jesuits will be helpful. There is a difference between *Jesuit spirituality* and *Ignatian spirituality*. Jesuit spirituality is proper for the Jesuits themselves. Ignatius spent fifteen years writing and editing the *Constitutions*, which govern the Society of Jesus. They illuminate the Ignatian way *for the men in the Society of Jesus*. Jesuit spirituality makes sense for the man in the Society of Jesus. Jesuit spirituality can be summarized in one single sentence: *ad maiorem dei gloriam*, for the greater glory of God. Jesuit spirituality because it is grounded in the *Constitutions* would not be applicable to the average person in the pew or to any of the laity.

*Jesuit spirituality* is different from *Ignatian spirituality*. *Ignatian spirituality* can be summarized in one single sentence: **find God in all things.** Ignatius, through several profound encounters with the Lord, discovered that God was always taking the initiative in his life. He discovered that God wanted him to always receive, no matter what he was doing. Ignatian spirituality teaches to receive God in the mist of everything that we do. While we need to appreciate the many schools of spirituality within the Church, it would be difficult for us to find a spirituality more suited for the laity than Ignatian spirituality. Who more than the laity need to find God in the mist of all things? The laity must find God at work, in traffic, and the up and down of married life. We need to find God in raising kids, in paying bills, and in all that is ordinary about life. Is this not what we all want? Don't we all want to find God with us in the mist of everything? Perhaps this is why the Ignatian spirituality and the *Spiritual Exercises* are so popular.

#### THE WEEKS WITHIN THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

The *Spiritual Exercises* are organized into four "weeks". When Saint Ignatius uses the word "week" he is not referring to a sequential set of seven days. He is using a word to simply contextualize spiritual experience that is received in time. Some of the dynamics of the *Spiritual Exercises* unfold over a period of eight to 12 days. Others unfold over a period of four or five days. The use of the word "week" refers to what happens in one's experience rather than what happens literally on the calendar.

The *Spiritual Exercises* allow the participant to walk with Jesus. The *Spiritual Exercises* use the Gospels, disposing the participant to follow Jesus from womb to tomb, from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, and everything in between. *Spiritual Exercises* can be loosely summarized in the following way:

- First Week: God's love, and all that this means in a person's life
- Second Week: walking with Jesus in his public ministry
- Third Week: walking with Jesus into Jerusalem and through his passion and death
- Fourth Week: experiencing Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost

Each of the four "weeks" has their own personality. Each "week" has specific notations for the spiritual director so he or she may best help the retreatant. Throughout the *Spiritual Exercises*, depending on which week you are in, Ignatius asks the participant to ask God for certain graces for blessings. Each week is important; each week is particular. However, there is a pride of place of the "First Week", which is why it is the *first* week.

During the First Week, Ignatius anticipates that several things will happen. He anticipates that God wants to be known. He anticipates that God wants to lead. He anticipates that God is laboring to love the participants. The dynamics of the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* exercise are as follows:

- God reveals his love to retreatant. God's love is lavish and personal. The retreatant is encouraged to receive that love.
- In response to receiving God's love the retreatant is most often filled with gratitude. That doesn't surprise you, does it? Because of the way that God ordinarily works in our life the spiritual director can anticipate that God would eventually want to reveal to the retreatant how they have taken His love for granted. In doing so what we ordinarily see in the retreatant is gradual rise of ingratitude: they recognize how they have taken God for granted.
- The recognition of ingratitude leads to the admittance of sin. Ignatius has the retreatant honestly and soberly look at their life of sin. This, as is God's love, is deeply personal. It is all seen *through* God's love. It is not a pursuit of self perfection. It is an awareness of **God's love** revealing what prevents further receptivity to more of God's love.
- After the retreatant has come face to face with the reality of sin, God then reveals His **love** for them in the sin. This leads to further contrition and begins to fuel conversion. The retreatant is now able to see that sin prevents the relationship. Sin prevents receptivity. Sin prevents the very thing that we long for: happiness.
- The retreatant experiences is what redemption really is: the initiative of God saving me from sin. This fuels a new depth of personal gratitude which is life-changing. Being saved from hell, being saved when one was absolutely stuck in sin, is *the* fuel that ignites conversion.
- The First Week concludes with the retreatant acknowledging his or her need for God and their desire to never leave God. This, of course, sets them up for the Second Week as they now are ready to follow Jesus. The rest of the *Spiritual Exercises* unfold from here, fueled by this transformative love they have experienced during the First Week.



During the Second Week the retreatant learns how to *stay* with Jesus, to *stay* in the truth of who they are in lieu of God's love. The Third and Fourth Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* take one deeper into the mission of Jesus' saving mission of His passion. The retreatant is moved by loved and propelled into mission.

If we look at human experience, if we study what happens in the human heart through the lens of what we *know* God wants to do, we see the following dynamics:

- God wants to be encountered. He wants people to have a life changing **encounter** with them.
- When a person encounters the person of Jesus Christ we can expect that he or she will want to repent. It's not that repentance is a nice thing to do. It's human. It's expected. It's what happens. God's love will always lead me to **conversion**. It's anthropological. When I encounter God's love I am moved to want more of God's love. This is the healthiest way to understand **conversion**: I am moved to want more of God's love.
- There is usually only one response to conversion, "Jesus, teach me how to stay here, with you." God wants us to **grow**. God wants us to abide in Him (cf. John 15). Human experience, and the *Spiritual Exercises*, both teach us that we all need to learn how to stay in God. It's one thing to *encounter* God, it's another thing altogether *to learn how to live there*. Human nature as it is wants us to go back to the familiar. We need to learn how to live in the new "land" of conversion. This requires growth.
- Eventually Jesus is going to call me out of myself. Love is a verb, not a noun. Jesus desires to do all things with me. Again, we see this in John 15:5, "apart from me you can do nothing." One begins to follow Jesus daily. One begins to participate in the **mission** of Jesus here on this earth.

Four words: **encounter, conversion, grow, mission**. They simply are. They describe how God operates and how the human person responds. They are the dynamics of the *Spiritual Exercises* and as such are the blueprint for the most popular spiritual "exercise" on the planet. The dynamic of being moved from **encounter** to **conversion** to **grow** to **mission** as in the *Spiritual Exercises* has been given the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* from the Holy See itself. Again, this is important. The theology and the aforementioned interior dynamics of the *Spiritual Exercises* can be trusted.

#### THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND THE FORMATION LIFE CYCLE

There are many ways to describe formation in the Church. There are many ways to describe the formation of disciples. The Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux is certainly not the only voice trying to speak to the formation of disciples. Many of those who have described discipleship formation have used a valuable methodology which attempts to describe how one grows in commitment. Most of us reading this would be familiar with the models of discipleship revealing the dynamics of how one grows in deeper commitment to Christ. There is value in this methodology. The difficulty with this approach is not in its methodology but in its application in the "real life" of parishes.

How does a parish help a parishioner when they want to take "the next step"? Most parishioners are in touch with their *experience*, not their *trajectory*. Most parishioners know what has happened to them, they know *experience*. What we learn from the *Spiritual Exercises* is that if one pays attention to their present experience it is not hard to anticipate what a natural next step might be. This is why the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux has used the *Spiritual Exercises* as the blueprint for its approach to discipleship formation. Parishes needed help to know what to do next. The methodology of *Spiritual Exercises* is "friendly" for parishes in programming and alignment.

Again, there are words that summarize the interior dynamics of the *Spiritual Exercises*: **encounter**, **conversion**, **grow**, **mission**. These four words are at the heart of what we in Houma-Thibodaux describe as our Formation Life Cycle.

From May through December of 2016 the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux went through a comprehensive planning process. There was an emphasis on forming disciples which served as the golden thread woven throughout all of the planning. During the process of planning for adult formation we interviewed dozens of people who participated in RCIA. We listened to their experience through the lens of a spiritual director trying to further appreciate what happened in their life, what God was doing, and how they responded to God's initiative. What we knew to be theologically correct we suspected to see illustrated in their story. We were not disappointed.

What we heard over and over, in all of those stories, were the very four words which serve as the blueprint of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The people interviewed had an **encounter** with God which led them to a change of lifestyle (**conversion**). Over time, they needed help learning how to live this new lifestyle (**grow**). As time passed they felt called to do something, to respond to this new relationship with God (**mission**).

What we did not expect to hear, but what we heard loud and clear, was how influential it was when they had other people walking with them. In fact for many of them, what started the process was another person, a disciple that they trusted. What we learned is that authentic relationships, to **connect** with other people we trust, not only starts the process for many people, but it is *the* thing that most likely sustains movement through the process of formation. Simply put, people are more likely to persevere with the process of formation once they are connected to others on the journey with them.

Thus, the Formation Life Cycle: **connect, encounter, conversion, grow, mission**.

These five words that merely shine light on human experience. Rather than looking at these five words as linear steps, consider these as descriptions of inner experience that describe aspects of spiritual maturation. There is no one way, there is no perfect way, to describe or anticipate what God will do in a person's life. However, we find that the only way, the healthiest way, to describe discipleship formation is through the lens of what *God* is doing and how we are responding to what God is doing. Forming disciples is a two-fold dynamic: God takes the initiative and parishioners respond. It is our hope that in using the Formation Life Cycle as a way of appreciating the *Spiritual Exercises*, our parishes are better equipped to partner with God in the great commission: to make disciples.





# Formation LIFE CYCLE

THE 5







## WHERE ARE YOU WITH “THE FIVE”?

- CONNECT** The most natural “first step” for most people is to **CONNECT** with people. Research clearly indicates that people are more prone to persevere through the process to refinement if they are connected to other people who are walking with them.
- When have you enjoyed the greatest momentum in your spiritual life? Were you alone or did you have people walking with you?
  - Who knows you? Who *really* knows you?
  - Who holds you accountable?
  - Who wants your holiness more than you do?
- ENCOUNTER** **ENCOUNTER** is perhaps the most influential part of the process. It is the energy that animates an on-going personal relationship with Jesus Christ.
- When was the last time you had a personal encounter with God? What was it like?
  - Is God real to you? Is He *really* real?
  - How would describe your relationship with God?
- CONVERSION** Once people have an authentic encounter with God, the most natural response is contrition. **CONVERSION** is important. Without receiving the grace of saying “no” most people are not able to sustain the “yes” experienced in their encounter.
- What helped you “stay” and respond to the encounter?
  - What has pulled you away from God?
  - What would your life look like if you had help “staying” with God?
- GROW** The fire of emotion must be grounded in the truths of the Bible, the Tradition, and wisdom. People are need to learn how to **GROW** in virtue, healthy spiritual exercise, and knowledge of God.
- Did anyone ever mentor you to learn how to live in the “new land” of conversion?
  - If so, what did you learn? If not, what impact did that have on the conversion?
  - What has helped you move from emotion to virtue?
  - How would you describe your experience of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance?
- MISSION** God always calls us out of ourselves. We are all called to participate in His mission. While service at the parish is a way of participating in the **MISSION**, the true aim is to equip the laity to walk others through the five-step process of forming disciples.
- Do you know your “testimony”? Can you share it? Do you share it?
  - Do you have a confidence of God being with you, leading you, in the midst of your everyday life? Back home? In your vocation?
  - Are you aware of your gifts?
  - If God asked you to serve His Church, would you know how to best use your gifts?