

What Discipleship Relationships Look Like

One of the young men I had been working with told me once, “Until I met you, I never knew what it meant to have a father love a son. Now I can see, through you, how much God loves me.” Wow. I was not only humbled, but overjoyed at what God had done in our discipleship relationship.

But, we didn't get there overnight. We spent a lot of time together. We hung out, we drank coffee (and beer) together. We ate together. We communicated electronically all the time. We prayed together. We challenged one another to grow in holiness. We laughed. We had fun. We worked side-by-side. He became my spiritual son.

These are the marks of what a discipleship relationship looks like. Apprenticeship is an essential element in witnessing to the Gospel message. It is a school for discipleship that promotes an authentic following of Christ based on the acceptance of one's baptismal responsibilities, the internalization of the word of God, and the transformation of the whole person to 'life in Christ.'

Think of the trades that have apprentices - such jobs as electricians, plumbers, etc. You might be able to learn how to do some of the same things an electrician (or plumber) does by reading a book, attending a class, or being trained at a conference. But, to really learn how to be a good electrician, you need to learn from someone who has been there (and can teach you how to be safe from all the hazards, tricks of the trade, strategies to employ, etc.).

In discipleship, there should be a similar dynamic. You might be able to learn a lot about what it is like to follow Jesus from a book, a class, a program, or a conference. But, you will never really know until you are apprenticed by someone who is further along, on the journey of discipleship, than you are.

How did Jesus love his disciples? By living life with them for three years. For knowing them deeply, by teaching them, by being an example to them on how to live out their vocation. By holding them accountable. By challenging them. By training them. By forgiving them. By apprenticing them. By being a leader for them and then commissioning them to do the same thing with others.

We need to be doing the same, but we first ought to have someone else do it for us. The best and most natural way to grow as a disciple is to sit at the feet of a more mature disciple and let them be our example and lead. The Catechism speaks to this, when it says (in very strong language): “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....Service of and witness to the faith are necessary for salvation.” -CCC 1816

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