



The **kerygma** enigma: creating an effective discipleship pathway in your parish

... we need different types of faith formation
experiences at different stages of our faith journey!

To most parishes, the 'kerygma' is an enigma—an essential but missing piece in our parish's efforts to grow and form our people. This is unfortunate, because a lot of the answers to our problems lie in a deeper understanding of what the kerygma is and how we ought to be using it.

The purpose of evangelisation is not to awaken some sort of generic 'faith'; to evangelise is to bring people into an encounter with the person of Jesus and an ongoing relationship with him—a conversion. The reality is that many Catholics have been catechised without ever being evangelised. They have never heard the kerygma. Pope Francis says that in recent times 'we have rediscovered the fundamental role of the first announcement of the kerygma, which needs to be the centre of all evangelising activity and all efforts at Christian renewal' (*Evangelii Gaudium* §164). Parishes who begin to intentionally proclaim the kerygma are seeing tangible success in renewing the faith of cradle Catholics as well as in evangelising people who have never had any faith.

So, what is the kerygma? Again, in the words of Pope Francis, 'The first proclamation (kerygma) must ring out over and over. Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you' (*Evangelii Gaudium* §164). The kerygma is the core message of the love, death and resurrection of Jesus, and an invitation into an ongoing, personal relationship with him as a member of his mystical body, the Church.

But what role does the kerygma play in our parish faith-formation efforts? And how is it different from what we are doing now? Outlined below is a five-stage journey that people travel through as they come to know Jesus. Once you understand the conversion journey, your parish can then develop a three-phase 'discipleship pathway' along which people can travel into missionary discipleship.

Five thresholds on the conversion journey

In her book *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Sherry Weddell writes about 'thresholds of faith'—stages that people journey through as they meet Jesus, come to faith and become disciples.

1. Building trust

Most practising Catholics possess initial trust—but in whom or what? For example, they may trust the church but not God. Many non-practising Catholics or unchurched people do not have a trusting relationship with either a Christian person or the church. They may trust God (as they understand God) but not the church or Christians.

In post-Royal Commission Australia, a fundamental distrust of Christianity and Catholicism is now the norm. People no longer see us as 'good'. If we are to take people on a journey into a relationship with Jesus, therefore, we must first set out to earn their trust. This begins with getting to know them and listening, really listening, to their story.

2. Curiosity

At the 'curiosity' threshold, our friend knows and trusts us and begins to ask questions about what we believe and why. Our primary task here is not catechetical; it is not answering theological questions. It is to invite them to 'come and see'. Many parables Jesus told are responses to questions people asked. People who are curious need a safe, non-threatening way to ask their questions without pressure, over-reaction or strident teaching from us.

Don't answer questions with theology; instead, tell stories—stories of how Jesus has worked in your life; about how you pray. And invite them to 'come and see' your parish community.

3. Openness

Openness is not yet discipleship but a tentative openness to God and the possibility of spiritual change. For a twenty-first-century millennial, moving from curiosity to openness is one of the hardest transitions to make. The person must lower their defences (cynicism, antagonism) and acknowledge to themselves and to God (if God is really there and listening!) that they are open to change. They need to grasp that Jesus transforms lives. It can feel dangerous, crazy, out of control.

4. Spiritual seeking

Spiritual seeking is active. It is a purposeful exploration of a relationship with Jesus and the possibility of responding with a life-changing 'yes'. Spiritual seeking is not yet missionary discipleship, though it can look like it. (It's 'dating with a purpose', not 'marriage'). There is an urgency. It feels like a quest. They want to connect the dots, and they feel the need to make a decision. Seekers seek Jesus, not just God in a general sense or some 'divine impersonal force'. Spiritual seekers are moved to initial faith by:

- hearing the kerygma
- having an encounter with Jesus
- making an intentional decision to follow Jesus in the midst of his church.

5. Missionary discipleship

Missionary disciples:

- Have decided to say 'yes' to a personal relationship with Christ
- Are 'on fire' with their love of Jesus
- Are hungry for catechesis
- Pray, seek fellowship, serve and give with enthusiasm.

Missionary disciples are 'contagious' Christians who spontaneously share their love of Jesus through both their words and their lives.

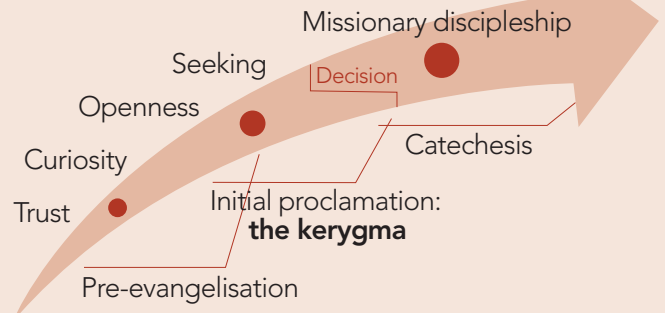
Does this sound like very many of your fellow Catholics? Does this sound like you?

A three-phase discipleship pathway: growing missionary disciples in a parish setting

Most parishes tend to assume that everyone who is attending Mass is a missionary disciple. Not so! Many Catholics have been sacramentalised but have never been evangelised. They have never said a life-changing 'yes' to a loving and personal relationship with Jesus. Many have never had an opportunity to.

What we need to remember is that *we need different types of faith formation experiences at different stages of our faith journey!*

Kerygma and the threshold of faith



Sources: based on Sherry Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples*, and Don Everts and Doug Schaupp, *I Once Was Lost*.

Vibrant parishes offer a clear pathway of opportunities for people to meet Jesus, to make a decision to follow him and then to be nurtured, initiated and taught.

1. Pre-evangelisation is focused on building trust and relationships. It demands, in the words of Pope Francis, 'attitudes which foster openness to the message: approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental' (*Evangelii Gaudium* §165).

2. The kerygma is the very heart of the gospel, a simple and clear proclamation of our faith in Jesus as the Christ. It always includes an invitation into ongoing relationship. It is about conversion. It is about encountering Jesus, surrendering into his love and deciding to follow him in our day-to-day lives.

The kerygma can be shared in one-on-one pastoral relationships. It can also be proclaimed at retreat events. In addition, many Catholic parishes use Alpha as a proven and effective tool. Alpha presents the kerygma in a way that is welcoming and non-threatening, and that leads people through the thresholds from trust to discipleship.

3. Catechesis forms and nurtures the new disciple. Once people know and love Jesus, they are hungry for the sacraments, for scriptural teaching, for growth in prayer and for a deeper spirituality. They want to learn, grow and deepen their knowledge of Jesus, the friend they have met and have learnt to love.

Our parishes are usually geared to providing catechesis in order to nurture disciples. We are feeding 'grass' to our 'sheep'. What we have failed to recognise is that many of our people are fish, not sheep. They haven't been 'caught' by Jesus, and therefore are not yet disciples. And fish don't eat grass.

A parish that begins to create a 'discipleship pathway'—with clear opportunities for people to be welcomed, to hear the kerygma and to encounter and follow Jesus—will be a parish that begins to see a renewed and expanding core of passionate, generous, contagious and growing missionary disciples.

For your parish leadership team

At the next meeting of your leadership team, you might like to try this exercise. On a piece of paper or a whiteboard (or in a Word document shared via Zoom), draw up three columns. Head one 'Pre-evangelisation', one 'Kerygma' and one 'Catechesis'. Fill in the columns with everything your parish does in each of those areas.

- Parishes may have a few activities in the first 'pre- evangelisation' column.
- Most parishes will have a range of catechetical programs in the third 'catechesis' column, including Scripture studies and perhaps an RCIA.
- The 'kerygma' column is frequently empty.