

# DISCIPLESHIP

# Quadr

## *The* **7** **CHARACTERISTICS** *of a* **DISCIPLE**

**Bob Rice,**  
Author and Designer

**Kristina Scheerbaum,**  
Chief Researcher and Editor



# The **7** CHARACTERISTICS of a DISCIPLE

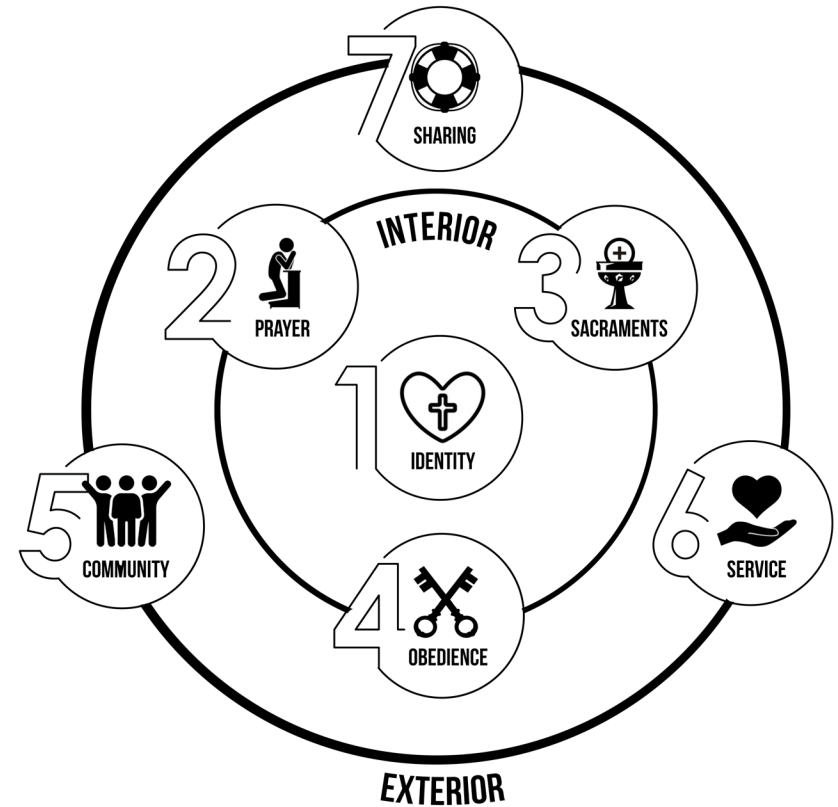
St. James wrote, “if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his own face in a mirror. He sees himself, then goes off and promptly forgets what he looked like” (James 1:23-24). I must confess that I often do that. I read an inspirational book, I have a great time of prayer, and then I go off and act like my old, sinful self. The path of discipleship is difficult. We need the grace of God and the support of others to truly live out our faith.

We know in the words of St. Paul that we “have been saved by faith... not by works” (Ephesians 2:8-9) and we know from James that “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). There is no contradiction here. Faith is a gift of God’s grace. We cannot earn it by doing good deeds. But good deeds naturally spring from this gift of faith and act as a way to measure how alive our faith truly is.

Too often we leave religion in the realm of our imagination. Our minds can easily trick us into thinking we are holier, or more sinful, than we actually are. Though measuring our spiritual growth is not an exact science, there are indicators that we can use to know if we are heading in the right direction. We call them, *The Seven Characteristics of a Disciple*.

Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines a characteristic as “a distinguishing trait.” It is what makes us different. A characteristic of an NBA player would likely be how tall he is. A characteristic of a math professor would be her ability to work with numbers. In a similar way, disciples of Jesus Christ have characteristics that set them apart from those who do not follow him, those of whom Jesus bluntly told us, “Do not be like them” (Matthew 6:8).

Each session of the Discipleship Quad Process is focused on one of these seven characteristics, all of which are rooted in Scripture and Tradition. Though they are numbered one through seven,



this isn’t meant to be a “to-do” list where you have to cross one off before moving to the next. There is an organic unity within them. Growth in one area brings about growth in others. Some characteristics are more present in our interior lives than what we do exteriorly, but God comes to us through all of them. For example, some people have a powerful experience with service (#6) that nourishes their prayer life (#2). Others find becoming more obedient to the Church (#4) inspires and equips them to be more bold in sharing the faith with others (#7). As it is said, “A rising tide lifts all boats.”

For a body to be healthy, it needs all of its parts to work properly. For a disciple to be alive in faith, he or she needs all of these characteristics present. Most people look at this and recognize areas of strength and areas that could use growth. Throughout this process, we will give practical challenges in each of these characteristics and provide opportunities of self-assessment so you can see how God is helping you grow stronger in your faith.

More importantly, you won't be doing this alone! The others in your Quad will be an incredible source of encouragement and accountability. This is often the missing element for many who love the Lord but are stagnant in their spiritual lives. "Iron sharpens iron; one person sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). This isn't optional. We *need* each other. In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis shared this simple truth: "Missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples" (173). God uses others to help us grow to greater depths of holiness than we could ever get to on our own.

The Holy Spirit will help you grow in these seven characteristics through what is offered in this resource: prayerful reflections of Scripture, practical explanations of Church teaching, and the encouragement and accountability of three fellow disciples. Here is a brief overview of each one.



*Our identity is rooted in being a child of the Father, redeemed by the Son, and alive in the Holy Spirit. We are loved because of who we are, not what we do.*

"See what love the Father has lavished upon us, letting us be called children of God. For that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1). This characteristic is at the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It is an entirely different way of understanding who we are and why we are valuable. The world would have us base our identity on how successful we are, the numbers in our bank account, or the numbers on a scale (just to name a few). Scripture tells us that our "value" is not based on any material thing, but on the love that God the Father has for us. The depths of that love can be seen on the cross, for "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son" (John 3:16).

Having our identity rooted in the love of God changes everything. Our decisions, our relationships, our values, our actions... *everything*. It opens our eyes to a spiritual reality about the meaning of life and the dignity of others. Though the numbers assigned to the characteristics aren't meant to imply that one is better than the others, this one can rightly be called *first*. The first ten sessions are focused on this characteristic.



*We have an active, daily life of prayer, both individually and communally, where we glorify God and seek His will. It becomes the air we breathe.*

The *Catechism* describes prayer as our "vital and personal relationship with the living and true God" (2558). Our life of prayer manifests itself in different ways. The silent time we take each day to be present to Jesus, the sufferings we offer up, the opportunities to pray with others in need, and the celebration of the Mass are all examples of how we live out St. Paul's exhortation to, "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).



*We prayerfully encounter Jesus on a regular basis through the sacraments of the Church and live in the power of the grace we have received through them.*

A Catholic disciple of Jesus Christ understands that sacraments aren't just "a" way of receiving God's grace, they are "the" way! We are made children of God through Baptism. We are forgiven of our sins through Reconciliation. We receive the Body and Blood of Jesus through the Eucharist. Jesus instituted seven sacraments for the sake of our salvation, so that the power he displayed in his public ministry would continue through the sacraments he gave to the Church. A disciple of Jesus frequently receives and calls upon the graces he or she has received through the sacraments.



*We seek to understand and obey the teachings of Christ as passed on to us through the Apostles and now living in the Magisterium of the Catholic Church.*

The Church is our mother and she shares with us the revelation of Jesus. The disciple understands there is not a difference between what Jesus taught and what the Church teaches, just as a head cannot be separated from the body. He or she humbly seeks to learn more about what God has revealed through the Church and live in obedience to it.



*We participate in our parish community and foster deeper relationships with individuals with whom we can share and grow in our faith.*

A disciple knows that one's faith is not meant to be lived in isolation. We are a part of a family.

"We must consider how to rouse one another to love and good works" (Hebrews 10:24). Disciples of Jesus actively seek each other out and look for opportunities to celebrate the love of God together, whether that be at Mass, on retreat, at a restaurant, at work or school, or even at a football game.



*We devote our time, talent, and treasure to our parish, our community, and to those in need, encountering Jesus in "the least of these."*

Jesus could not be clearer: he is present in the poor and needy, and we will be judged by how much we loved him through them. St. James wrote, "If a brother or sister has nothing

to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,' but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?" (James 2:15-16). A disciple actively serves those in need.



*In both words and action, we share the Good News of Jesus Christ, and we commit ourselves to helping others be His disciples.*

Pope St. Paul VI wrote, "it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims

it in his turn" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 24). A disciple takes the command of Jesus to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) seriously, knowing Christianity is not just a philosophy, but a matter of eternal salvation. Jesus said, "A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). The Good News is not just life changing but life *saving* (hence the icon of a life saver) and a disciple is eager to share that message with others.

## An Organic Perspective

Now that you've had an overview of each of the characteristics, I'd like to propose a more organic analogy for the Seven Characteristics of a Disciple. Think of it like a tree.

A tree is a popular analogy within Scripture. The book of Psalms begins by comparing those who are holy as someone who, "is like a tree planted near streams of water, that yields its fruit in season; Its leaves never wither; whatever he does prospers" (Psalm 1:3). John the Baptist warned that, "every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:10), and Jesus compared his relationship to his disciples using a similar image, saying, "I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:5).

**Identity** is the roots of the tree. The stronger the roots, the healthier the tree. Have you ever seen a *bonsai* tree? They are tiny trees that are popular in Eastern culture. What many people don't know is that *bonsai* is not a type of tree, but an art of growing and pruning it. Any tree can be a *bonsai* tree. So how do they get so small? They prune the roots. By keeping the roots short, the tree stays small.

I hate to say it, but I think there a lot of *bonsai* Christians out there, not living up to their full potential because their roots are constantly "pruned" by the desires and anxieties of the world. That is why this Discipleship Quad Process spends so much time on the characteristic of Identity. We were not created to be a potted plant on a shelf, but a mighty tree in the forest!

**Prayer** is the soil in which the tree grows. Soil provides the nutrients to the roots. A disciple needs to surround himself or herself in prayer just as a tree needs to be surrounded by healthy soil.

**Sacraments** are the water that give life to the tree. The soil (Prayer) becomes the conduit by which the roots (our Identity) receive that life. Just as water falls from the sky, the Sacraments are given to us from heaven so that we may be strengthened and nourished by God's grace.

**Obedience** is the trunk of the tree. It becomes the visible expression of the roots, a unity of wood that comes up from the ground. When trees are grown in difficult climates, such as those with strong winds, those who cultivate them will often put strong sticks by the

trunk so that it grows upright. I think that is a beautiful analogy of the doctrines of the faith as expressed in the *Catechism*. In a culture with many “winds” that would try to knock us over, the teachings of the Church guide and protect us so that we can grow in the right way.

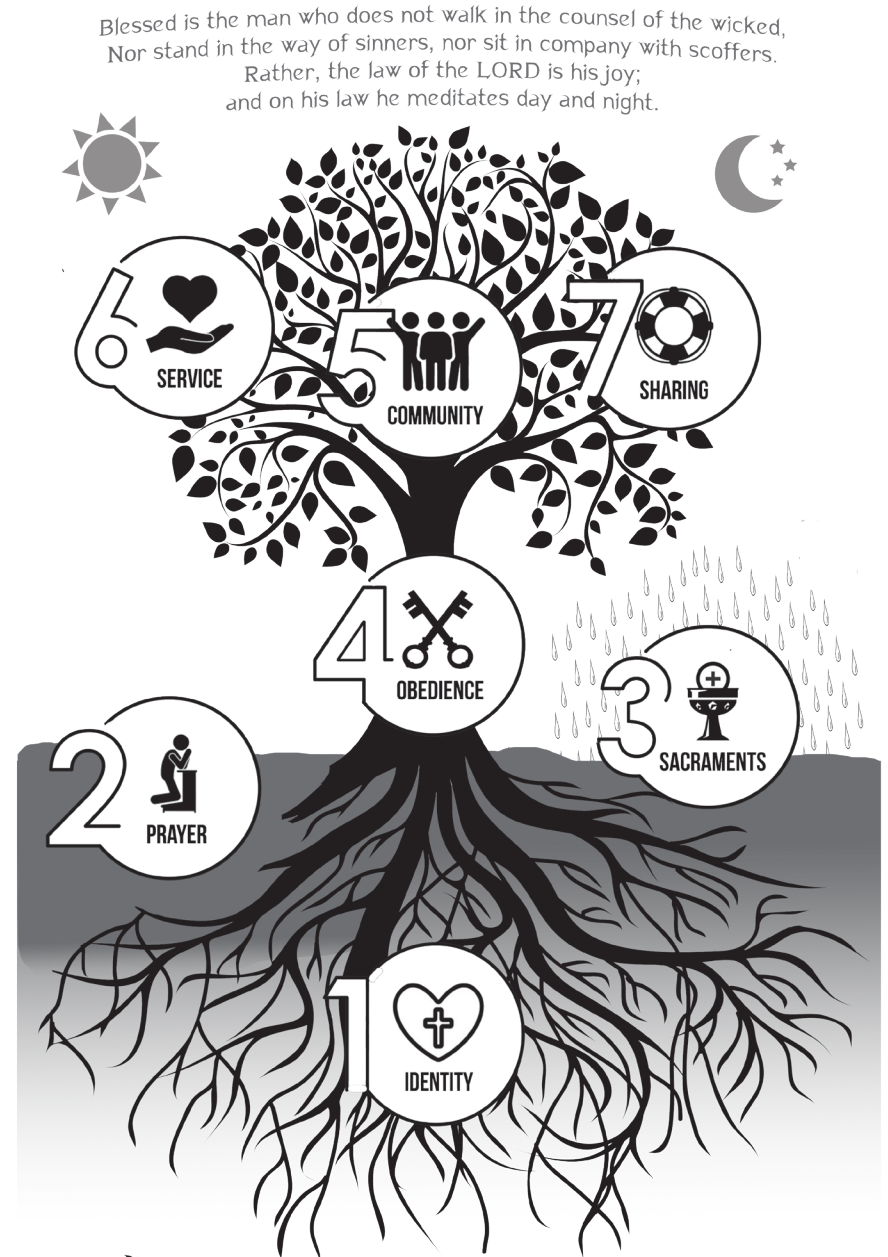
**Community** forms the branches of the tree. When a tree is in full bloom, the individual branches connect with each other in such a way that you often can't tell them apart. They seem to be one with each other. In a similar way, disciples of Jesus Christ are united in love for God and each other.

Then we get to the fruits of the tree: **Service** and **Sharing**. A healthy tree naturally produces good fruit. In a similar way, a disciple of Jesus wouldn't hesitate to help someone in need or share the faith with someone who doesn't know about it. When it comes to recognizing whether someone is truly a disciple or not, Jesus said, “by their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:20).

### A Healthy Tree

If someone who wishes to be a disciple isn't bearing the fruits of Service or Sharing, that usually means there is a problem somewhere else in the tree. That is why, as important as those two characteristics are, the Discipleship Quad Process spends the least amount of time on them as compared to the other Characteristics. Focusing on the fruits without cultivating the rest of the tree would be like putting fake fruit on a dead branch. This happens when we are motivated to help others, not by the love of God, but by guilt.

However, when we are rooted in our Identity as a son or daughter of God, surrounded by Prayer that is nourished by the Sacraments, guided and protected by Obedience to the Church and her teaching so that we don't “branch off” in the wrong direction, and are weaved within a Community of other disciples through the love of God and love of others, we cannot help but bear the fruits we were made for, Service and Sharing.



He is like a tree planted near streams of water,  
that yields its fruit in season;  
Its leaves never wither; whatever he does prospers.