



nextstep
VOLUME 1

**Discipleship is a series of
next steps.**

The Evangelical Catholic

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Introduction

I knew the destination so well, but I still got lost the first time I drove myself to my family’s annual vacation spot. On that first attempt at making the trip on my own, I noticed rock outcrops I’d never seen before and knew it was time to stop and get out the map.

Maps are available for most destinations, but where’s the map that shows us how to grow closer to God?

Welcome to Nextstep!

Nextstep seeks to guide Catholics into a closer relationship with Jesus and to help them know Jesus better, to hear his voice more clearly, and to radiate his love more effectively. With an accompanying online resource from The Evangelical Catholic (ecnextstep.com), Nextstep uses a multimedia combination of

story, witness, and teaching to guide users through practical and lively formation in the mission and habits of Jesus Christ and his followers.

Currently, Nextstep has four parts:

- **Find Your True North** seeks to solidify belief and clarify the mutual “yes” between God and each one of us, made possible through Jesus Christ, that constitutes the foundation of faith.
- **Explore the Terrain** and **Hit Your Stride** proceed through basic formation in the central habits and attitudes Jesus modeled, and these levels invite all of Jesus’ followers to take up these habits, that we may continually grow into the freedom he came to give us.
- **Become a Guide** moves into the territory of mission, as the Lord sends each of his followers to partner with him in the ongoing transformation of the world.

This book contains parts 1 and 2 (Find Your True North and Explore the Terrain).

Each of the four parts contains six topics (chapters). Each page is brief, digestible in one to five minutes. You may progress through the pages at your own pace, but we encourage you to allow your reading and viewing to aid you in further prayer and reflection. Pause to reflect on what you just read, jot a few notes in a journal, and take your thoughts and questions to prayer.

While a program like this one can’t adequately represent the full life of discipleship to which Christ calls each of us, we hope and pray it gives users an enjoyable, balanced, practical,

and inspiring resource to launch ongoing personal and communal growth. We also hope it will fuel increased passion and zeal for the Lord!

Use Nextstep on your own, or invite a friend or small group to journey with you. If you embark on this journey with others, safeguard some personal reading and prayer times at home. Then get together regularly with others to discuss your thoughts, prayers, and reflections prompted by Nextstep content.

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD!”

Isaiah 2:3

Authorship and Style

Unless otherwise noted, written portions of this Nextstep experience were authored by Andre Lesperance and Andrea Jackson from The Evangelical Catholic. The writing also features occasional stories and contributions from current and former EC staff members Clare Freeman, Emily Mansfield, Kendra McClelland, and James Carrano.

All of the stories are true, though some names and minor details of select stories have been changed in order to ensure the privacy of others. While the contents within a given part or chapter will fluctuate between authors, the overall project is one collaborative work.

Bible Citations

Unless otherwise noted, all Bible citations are from the Catholic Edition of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

▣ PART 1 ▣

**FIND YOUR TRUE NORTH:
WHO GUIDES YOUR LIFE?**

1

The Gap

The gap between what we desire
and what we experience is real.

A Gap Exists.

We all experience it.

A profound gap exists in our lives and in our world.

No matter our religious background, ethnic heritage, socio-economic status, or location on the planet, we all know this tension from experience: there's a gap between what the world is and what we wish, hope, or believe it could be.

If we're honest, we likely feel the same tension deep within *ourselves*. On the one hand, I believe I am good and I have some things to offer this world. And yet, I wish, hope, or believe I could somehow become . . . better, happier, healthier, more peaceful, more loving, or more effective.

More.

Or less: less selfish, angry, anxious, busy, fearful, or doubtful.

The gap may be big or small, and it may change over time. We may interpret its significance differently and offer conflicting accounts of its causes and effects. But one thing remains undeniable: the gap between what we desire and what we experience is real.

At some level, everyone knows the gap.

- **Where do you most see or experience the gap in the world?**
- **Where do you experience the gap in yourself?**

We Cannot Conquer the Gap.

We humans have a singular (even impressive) ability to manipulate the gaps *in* and *around* us. We really can make *the* world or *our own* world or *someone's* world better or worse. It's an amazing power and responsibility.

Yet despite this power, we cannot eradicate the gap, though we do try!

In our efforts to confront the gap, we likely turn to one of two approaches.

We may try to squelch our desire for a “better world” or a “better life.” We lower our expectations, numb our pain, distract ourselves, or simply look the other way.

This method of dealing with the gap doesn't work. Sooner or later, we remember that we're deeply dissatisfied with some aspects of ourselves, others, or our world.

Or, if we can't ignore or numb the gap, we strive frantically to make ourselves and/or others conform to our ideas about the way things “should be.”

This approach doesn't work either, and it usually leaves behind a trail of new hurts and disappointments.

* * *

Try as we might to remove the gap—by deadening our painful awareness of it or by defeating it through perfectionism and coercion—the gap remains. The ultimate story of the gap lies far beyond human control and understanding.

- **Which of the two strategies do you use when confronted with the painful gaps in your life?**
- **Do you tend to soften your desire for something better? Or ramp up your efforts to make something happen?**

Perhaps you're an expert at both. Many of us are.

The Gap: A Source of Bigger Questions

Eventually (perhaps after we've faced enough failed attempts at “gap removal” in our lives), we may start asking some pretty big questions about the gap. Whether directly or indirectly, consciously or subconsciously, our confusing and painful experiences of the gap lead us to wonder about the deepest questions that have always rolled around in human minds.

These ageless questions fall into some general categories.

- **The question of origins:**
 - Where did we come from?
 - How did we get here?
- **The question of destiny:**
 - Where are we headed?
 - Is there anything after death?
- **The question of pain and suffering:**
 - Why is there so much pain in this life?
 - Is there any purpose or good to be found in it, or in spite of it?
 - If God exists and is good, how can he allow such suffering?
- **The question of happiness:**
 - What is true happiness and how can I attain it?
- **The question of conscience:**
 - What is right, and how do I know?
 - Is there even a real right and wrong?
- **The question of purpose:**
 - What is the meaning or purpose of our existence?
 - Of my existence?
 - Does my life make some kind of impact or contribution?

The essential human questions might be summed up in one word: **why?**

- **What experiences in your life have drawn (or plunged) you into the deeper questions?**
- **What questions about your life do you have right now?**
- **If you could ask God anything and receive an answer, what would you ask?**

Religions and Philosophies Make Attempts to Explain the Gap.

As we've discussed, the gap between what *is* and what we believe *could or should be* lies behind the deepest questions of the human mind and heart.

These ultimate human questions find expression, as well as answers, in various religions, philosophies, and ways of life. Systems of belief and practice offer possible “diagnoses” and “cures” to “fix” the universal experience of the gap.

Let's paint with some broad, oversimplified brushstrokes:

Early peoples believed the gods' anger caused the gap. They appeased the gods through sacrifices and rituals in an attempt to bring peace and abundance to their communities and, even, as they saw it, the world.

Marxists suggest the gap stems from private property and greed, and have argued in favor of achieving some sort of universal equality through common ownership of resources.

Buddhists believe the gap arises from deception, from a desire for unreal notions of the self and the physical world. Their solution involves eliminating desire and transcending the self through meditation and mortification.

The rock-and-roll, sexual-revolution adherent (and this group represents a sort of philosophical school) explains the gap as arising from the oppressive rules of authority figures and institutions, which inhibit the ideal of limitless freedom. The solution, for these individuals, lies in rejecting authority and doing “what comes naturally.”

These accounts represent extremely limited pictures of the intricacies of actual religions, philosophies, and lifestyles, but they help lead us to the real questions:

- **What does Catholicism have to say about the gap?**
- **What does Catholic Christianity claim as the origin, fundamental diagnosis, and ultimate solution for the gap?**

How would *you* attempt to answer these questions?

The Good News?

The rest of this “apprenticeship” will present the basic Christian understanding of the gap: its origin, fundamental diagnosis, and ultimate solution.

But first, a question to ponder.

In the face of the gap, Jesus preached and embodied the “gospel,” which means “good news.” Since then, the word

“gospel” has become a code word to summarize the entire message of the Christian faith.

What is this good news?

What is this good news that . . .

- . . . emboldened early Christians to endure torture and death while offering forgiveness to persecutors and giving praise to God?
 - . . . motivated Mother Teresa (and many others) to start organizations dedicated to the poorest of the poor?
 - . . . has propelled missionaries all over the world, throughout the centuries and today, to leave the comforts of a homeland in order to share its message with strangers?
 - . . . fuels the institution that gave rise to the concepts of education for all, the university, and hospitals and social services for the poor?
 - . . . leads some to trade the prospect of a family for heroic service to the Church?
 - . . . empowers others to commit unconditionally to spouses and children with the equally heroic love demanded by family life?
 - . . . compels the generous and sacrificial sharing of time, talent, and treasure for the sake of every just cause?
- **How would you summarize the good news?**

In a Nutshell

Many, many ways exist to capture the core truths proclaimed as good news at the heart of the Catholic faith.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides a concise summary in its opening paragraph. As you read it here, allow it to prompt deeper reflection. The questions below can help.

God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son as Redeemer and Savior. In his Son and through him, he invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life.¹

- **How does this summary of the good news account for the gap between what is and what could or should be?**
- **What fundamental diagnosis and ultimate cure does the Church propose here?**
- **How does this paragraph give seeds of an answer to some of the questions of human searching: questions of origin, destiny, suffering, happiness, and purpose?**

- **Are there any phrases that illuminate your own experience or prompt deeper questions for you?**

Five Truths about Ourselves

Have you ever gotten one of those toy animals or washcloths that come packed in a tiny capsule the size of a pill? When you soak it in water, it gradually unfolds to reveal a surprisingly large item. Only after soaking it do we see what the thing is. Before we soak it, the thing's design, beauty, and function sit hidden away.

The first paragraph of the *Catechism* is a bit like that animal to be soaked, as is the creed. The central truths of our faith sit tightly bound up in one small place. Their true beauty, truth, and goodness are there, though mostly hidden.

For the rest of part 1, we will soak this condensed pill of the good news to reveal its truth.

We will examine the good news through the lens of what it teaches us about God and ourselves. We will highlight five central claims about our identity that flow from this good news.

We are:

1. God's beloved,
2. broken by sin,
3. rescued by grace,
4. being transformed, and
5. free to respond.