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## Chapter III

# Christian Fellowship

### UNDERSTANDING

*(for your preparation as a leader)*

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### DISCUSSION

*(to use with your group)*

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UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

## Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-2)

*[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector, and rich.*

Scripture introduces Zacchaeus as anything other than a fun, likeable character—at least initially. The Gospel refers to him as “a chief tax collector, and rich” (Lk 19:2). These are loaded words, which we need to understand if we are going to grasp Zacchaeus’ story. Collecting taxes wasn’t simply another profession in the time of Jesus. Tax collectors were responsible for extracting money from people, and they often did so without mercy. They often stole from the people, increasing tax rates and pocketing the extra money for themselves. When we read that Zacchaeus was a “rich man,” this is probably an indication that he had unjustly used his office for personal gain (see also Lk 19:8).

Moreover, Zacchaeus was a *Jewish* tax collector, which made things far worse (see v. 9). Roman rule was a serious problem for the Jews. They were supposed to be God’s people, with a Jewish king as their ruler. Being under Roman occupation was a calamity. Partnering with

Rome as a tax collector was akin to treason. Moreover, as a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus had some sort of leadership role. From the perspective of his fellow Jews, Zacchaeus was among the lowest of the low—a man who steals from his kinsman, profits off their plight, treats them mercilessly, and joins forces with the enemy. That’s Zacchaeus.

### **The Need (Luke 19:3-4)**

*And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way.*

What does Zacchaeus’ story have to do with Christian fellowship, the topic of this chapter?

To understand Christian fellowship, we must first recognize our profound need for love and community. Consider Zacchaeus at this moment. He has given in to the allure of wealth and power. He is living a life of dishonesty and treachery. Not only this, but because of his choices, he is despised by the people of his community. In verse 7, the people simply refer to him as a “sinner,” in the same category as prostitutes and drunkards. Being known publicly as a sinner meant Zacchaeus was probably shunned by the local Jewish community. He was someone people didn’t associate with—no meals, no friendly visits, no social interaction, nothing. He was a man to be avoided. Just imagine how isolated and lonely such a life must have been for Zacchaeus.

Something dramatic occurs when Christ arrives on the scene. We know from earlier in the Gospel that Jesus was called a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Lk 7:34). Consider how significant such a description would have been for Zacchaeus. Suddenly, we can begin to understand why he is so eager to see Jesus. We can imagine him thinking, “A friend of tax collectors? Can it really be? Will this be the man who will finally welcome me, receive me, be a friend toward me?” That is why Zacchaeus breaks social convention and climbs the Sycamore tree—he is enamored at the possibility of meeting the one person who might possibly welcome him. His need for fellowship is overpowering. He *must* see Jesus.

Zacchaeus’s need for fellowship is something we all understand. Ever since the Fall, we have experienced the breakdown of the communal life of love for which we are made. We only need to turn on the news to realize that our human family experiences a tremendous lack of real community—depression, loneliness, political strife, tension in families, and on and on. Zacchaeus’ story reminds us of our great need for fellowship.

### **Jesus Comes to Zacchaeus (Luke 19:5-10).**

*And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it they all murmured, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he*

*also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost."*

Initially, it might not seem like Jesus did anything unusual in this passage. But Jesus' actions communicated much more than a desire for rest and a good meal. Zacchaeus, like all of us, was made for community and friendship, and when Jesus visited Zacchaeus' house, He was not only leading Zacchaeus to repentance and conversion, He was also restoring him to fellowship, bringing an alienated man back into the community. Just imagine what Zacchaeus must have felt like—finally, he had someone who wanted to befriend him! No wonder he "made haste" and "received him joyfully" (v. 6). This was his opportunity to be welcomed back into community!

Restoring sinners to the community is a theme of Jesus' ministry (see CCC 1443). Repeatedly in the Gospels, He not only heals and forgives, but He also brings people back into relationships with Himself and others. Prostitutes, drunkards, Gentiles, the blind and the lame, and even tax collectors are all welcomed into Jesus' friendship. And, in the case of Zacchaeus, he does this despite the objections of the crowd, who mumble about him being the "guest of a man who is a sinner" (v. 7). What the crowd fails to see is that Jesus isn't condoning Zacchaeus's sin; He is restoring a man who is lost.

Zacchaeus's encounter with Christ is absolutely life changing. Consider Zacchaeus at the beginning of this passage: he was a greedy and cheating tax collector, alone and despised by his own people. Now, because of Jesus' friendship, he is ready to give half his fortune to the poor. He is ready to renounce his riches because he gains so much more in Christ. We shouldn't miss the transformation that has occurred. Zacchaeus has turned completely around. He was lost and has been found (see Lk 19:10).

## The Power of Fellowship

In Zacchaeus, we observe the profound impact that fellowship can have on someone's life. There are two important points we can learn from his story:

The first point might seem simple, but it is absolutely essential for getting fellowship right: Christian fellowship is centered on Jesus Christ. Christian fellowship is of a totally different order than other relationships. We don't simply need other Christians like an athlete needs a good coach or a co-worker needs a good business partner. We need other Christians in our lives, because in them we encounter Jesus Christ. We actually meet *Him* in *them*. In his letter, St. John writes, "that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 1:3). Christian fellowship is about so much more than simply having fun with other Christians or spending time with people we like. In its truest form, it is a mystical sharing in the love of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The second point flows from the first. Because Christian fellowship is centered on Jesus Christ, it is also transformative. When we encounter Christ in others, we are changed. Proverbs teaches us, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Prov 27:17). Christian fellowship forms us, it strengthens our character, encourages us, and inspires us to grow. When we spend time with other Christians, we allow Christ to work in our hearts because Christ actually dwells in them (by Baptism). They are a near occasion of encounter with the Living God.

Christian fellowship is also vital for Christian discipleship. If we don't have Christian friends to support and encourage us, then we are

missing out on many opportunities to encounter Jesus and are far more likely to struggle in our journey as Christ's disciples. Like the hot coals of a charcoal fire, we need to remain close to others to remain "on fire" for Christ. Without other "hot coals" in our lives, we are bound to become lukewarm or snuffed out by the pressures of the world (see Rev 3:16). Indeed, we need fellowship to live faithfully.

Take a moment and reflect on your own life. Do you have Christian friends who can build you up in the Faith? Do you have "hot coals" in your life who can help you grow? Or are you trying to live the Christian life by yourself? Or are you surrounding yourself with people who lead you away from Christ and toward sin? Imagine the impact that a deep habit of living Christian fellowship could have on your life.

## **Living Christian Fellowship**

Having other Christians in our lives is so important. But bumping into another Christian every now and then or occasionally showing up at a few Church events isn't nearly enough—as good as those things are. Christian fellowship must be intentional. It requires our time, energy, and attention. We can't just fall into it; we must choose it.

To better understand the meaning of true Christian fellowship, let's turn to two passages about the fellowship of the first Christians from the Acts of the Apostles. In these passages, we get a beautiful picture of the dynamic fellowship of the early Church:

*And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad*

*and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47).*

*Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35).*

There is much to consider in these verses—more than we could possibly cover in a single chapter. However, let's look at a few key elements of Christian fellowship that appear in these passages, including some that might surprise us:

### *Unity*

One of the first things that stands out about the early Christian community is their unity. Scripture tells us they shared “all things in common” (Acts 2:44) and were of “one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32).<sup>1</sup> In them, we observe a deep, intimate sharing of life that surely had a profound impact on their lives. They brought to life the words of the Psalmist, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps 133:1).

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<sup>1</sup> See CCC 2425. The Church outrightly condemns communism and socialism ideologies. While this passage indicates a spirit of intense generosity, this is most clearly lived today in the call of the faithful to supply for the needs of the Church. The priests, religious men and women of our Church do live in common, and their needs are supplied for due to the generosity of the greater Church.



If we are going to experience this kind of unity in our Christian fellowship, then we must take a few important steps. First, we must share life together. It might go without saying, but if we want to have Christian fellowship, we must spend time with other Christians. This can sometimes be difficult amidst our often-busy lives. With so much to do, fellowship can get lost in the shuffle. But fellowship is something we need to prioritize. If we don't make time for it, it is never going to be a part of our lives, and our journey as Christian disciples will be significantly stunted.<sup>2</sup>

The second aspect of unity we must embrace is the “one faith” of Christ (Eph 4:5). Such an idea might be unpopular in today's culture, which often puts an emphasis on diverse ideas and opinions. It is important to realize, however, that the unity of Faith in Christ's “one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church” is a real source of communion. When we accept teachings that differ from Christ's Church, disunity inevitably follows. That is why we see so many different Protestant denominations today. Accepting foreign beliefs leads to disunity—this is true for both communities and individuals. When we turn away from the teachings of Christ and the Church, we break the unity to which we are called and separate ourselves from Christ and our brothers and sisters. That's why we need to be like these early Christians, who were of “one heart and soul” (Acts 2:44). Without the unity of Faith, we cannot fully experience Christian fellowship.

A third aspect of unity is also particularly important for our fellowship today: unity with Church leaders, the Pope, Bishops and Priests whom God has called to lead us. In the passages from Acts, we observe the prominent role of the Apostles—the community listened to their teaching, gathered around them, and presented them with their financial offerings. Indeed, Christ built His Church on these Apostles

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<sup>2</sup> The Church has always acknowledged the goodness of the eremitic life for those called to live as hermits. They too live Christian fellowship, albeit in a unique way by their prayer and participation in the Communion of Saints.

and their successors. Thus, living Christian fellowship today requires that we remain united with those same leaders whom Christ has given us.

Throughout history, and even today, none of our Church leaders have ever been perfect. From the beginning, they often failed—eleven of the twelve apostles abandoned Christ as He went to the cross. Despite these failings, we are still called to unity with Church leaders. Even when they fail or we disagree with their decisions, we are still called to humility, charity, obedience<sup>3</sup>, and unity.

### *Worship*

It is clear from these passages in Acts and the testimony of other early Christians that the Mass was central to the early Christian community. The Scriptures tell us that they were “breaking bread in their homes,” which was an early way of expressing their celebration of the Eucharist (Acts 2:46). Already in the New Testament, Christians were being exhorted to hold fast to this common worship: “[do not neglect] to meet together, as is the habit of some, but [encourage] one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb 10:25). This is not only strong encouragement to share in Christian fellowship, but also an exhortation to gather for Mass. The Catechism teaches, “those who receive the Eucharist are united more closely to Christ. Through it Christ unites them to all the faithful in one body - the Church” (CCC 1396). St. Paul teaches about this same power of the Eucharist to draw us together when he writes, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17).

While we might not always *feel* a close fellowship with others when we attend Mass and receive communion, it’s important for us to know

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<sup>3</sup> Obedience is a matter of justice. Christians are called to be obedient to legitimate authorities. This, of course, does not include commands that are contrary to the moral law; we can never be obedient to an immoral request.

that, despite our feelings, the Mass is truly the highest expression of Christian fellowship. In the Mass, we are truly united with those with whom we worship. This includes not only the people in the Church building with us, but also all those who share in the Sacrifice of the Mass around the world—and even beyond our world, those angels and saints who are united with us in heaven. In the Mass, we are mystically united with all who are “in Christ.” It is the high point of Christian fellowship. All other fellowship pales in comparison.

If you sense that you are not experiencing the fullness of Christian fellowship in your life, you might consider your participation in the Mass. Are you attending Mass every Sunday? When you attend Mass, are you approaching Communion in a state of grace, free from all serious sin, so that you can truly be united with Christ and the Church? Examine your heart so that you don't miss this profound opportunity for Christian fellowship.

### *Mission and Witness*

A final aspect of Christian fellowship for us to consider is the shared mission and witness of these early believers. They “gave their testimony to the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus” and “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47, 4:33). They could not “but speak of what [they had] seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). These Christians knew their mission and lived it powerfully—both in their witness and in their words.

Further, the love that the early Christians had for one another was one of the key sources of evangelization in the early Church. The early Christian writer Tertullian wrote that the pagans would exclaim of the early Christians, “See how they love on another!” Indeed, the Church's fellowship and mission were inseparable. As Jesus taught, “By this

all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).

We will have a deeper discussion of the Church’s mission of evangelization later in this Bible study. For now, however, let’s ask ourselves some challenging questions: Do we witness to Christ like these early Christians? Do we share our Faith like they did? Do we go out to meet the poor, the lonely, or those in need? Do we adhere to Christ’s command to love one another? Does our example inspire others to inquire about what makes us different? Imagine the impact we would have if we truly lived out Christian fellowship.

### **Summary of Fellowship**

Certainly, more could be said about Christian fellowship. But the above sections give us a glimpse of the challenge of this essential Christian practice. Fellowship is not something simplistic, and it is certainly more than just hanging out with people. As Christians today, let us take seriously this high ideal of Christian fellowship. When we do, not only will we see transformation in our lives, but the love we show for one another will also be a compelling witness to the world.



DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*Passages: Luke 19:1-10, 1 John 1:3, Acts 2:44-47 and Acts 4:32-35*

## Introduction

1. Launching Question: Do you have any accomplishments in your life that you wouldn't have been able to complete without the help of someone else? Who helped you, and how did their support make your accomplishment possible?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Please read aloud:* Last time we gathered we examined the essential part Scripture should play in our lives. Today, we are going to examine what exactly Christian fellowship is and what it means for our journey as Christ's disciples.

## The Need

*Read Luke 19:1-2*

2. What do you notice about this description of Zacchaeus? What kind of man was he? What do you know about the historical or political situation in ancient Israel that would help us understand the significance of this description?

*Answer: The Gospel refers to him as “a chief tax collector, and rich.” These are loaded words: tax collectors were responsible for extracting money from people, and they **often** did so **without mercy**. They often **stole** from the people, increasing tax rates and pocketing the extra money for themselves. The fact he is “rich” may indicate he had used his office for personal financial gain.*

*Moreover, Zacchaeus was a Jewish tax collector; for a Jew, partnering with Rome (the occupying force) as a tax collector (the occupied people) was akin to **treason**. Moreover, as a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus held some sort of leadership in the community. From the perspective of his fellow Jews, Zacchaeus was among the lowest of the low—a man who steals from his kinsman, profits off their plight, treats them mercilessly, and joins forces with the enemy.*

### **Jesus Comes to Zacchaeus**

*Please read aloud:* Let’s keep reading to see how Jesus approaches this disgraced man.

*Read Luke 19:3-4*

3. Now, something to note: consider Zacchaeus at this moment. He has given in to the allure of wealth and power. He is living a life of dishonesty and treachery. Not only this, but because of his choices, he is despised by his community. He is probably shunned and wasn’t welcome in community life. What do you imagine his daily life was like?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Answer: Zacchaeus's life must've been very lonely, he must've been very isolated.*

4. Combine this context with this funny detail we read: he climbs a tree to see Jesus. This would've broken social conventions and been unexpected, unlike anything he would normally do. What would compel him to do something so abnormal to see Jesus?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Answer: We know from earlier in the Gospel that Jesus was called a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Lk 7:34). Consider how significant such a description would have been for Zacchaeus. We can begin to understand why he is so eager to see Jesus. We can imagine him thinking, "A friend of tax collectors? Can it really be? Will this be the man who will finally welcome me, receive me, be a friend toward me?" This is why Zacchaeus breaks social convention—he is enamored at the possibility of meeting the one person who might possibly welcome him. **His need for fellowship is overpowering.** He must see Jesus.*

5. What have been obstacles in your life to being a part of good, virtuous community? Have you been disappointed by the communities you've sought out? Do you relate to Zacchaeus's desperation to meet a good friend?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Please read aloud: Zacchaeus's need for fellowship is something we should take seriously. Ever since the fall, we have experienced disharmony in community and isolation from the love for which we were made. We only need to turn on the news to realize our*



human family experiences a tremendous lack of real community – depression, loneliness, political strife, tension in families, and so much more. Zacchaeus's story should remind us of our great need for fellowship and how hard it can be to find it. Let's continue to see how Jesus approaches the isolated, lonely, those desperately in need of fellowship.

### **Jesus Comes to Zacchaeus**

*Read Luke 19:5-10*

6. What does Zacchaeus do here? What does Jesus do?

*Answer: Zacchaeus receives him joyfully and promises to give half his fortune to the poor and restore anyone who he has stolen from. Jesus calls him to come to him and says he must commune with him at his house.*

*Please read aloud:* Initially, it might not seem like Jesus did anything unusual in this passage. When Jesus visited Zacchaeus' house, he was only interested in rest and a good meal. He was not even *only* leading Zacchaeus to repentance and conversion, but He also was restoring Zacchaeus to *fellowship*, bringing an alienated man back into the community.

The Catechism says that “in his public life, Jesus not only forgave sins, but also made plain the effect of this forgiveness: he reintegrated forgiven sinners into the People of God from which sin had alienated or even excluded them. A remarkable sign of this is the fact Jesus receives sinners at his table, a gesture that expresses in an astonishing way both God's forgiveness and the return to the bosom of the People of God” (CCC 1443).

7. Why do you think this second aspect of Jesus's mission is so important? Why do you think He goes beyond just forgiving us? What did a restoration to fellowship mean for Zacchaeus and what does it mean for you?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Answer: Zacchaeus's encounter with Christ is absolutely **life changing**. Consider Zacchaeus at the beginning of this passage: he was a greedy and cheating tax collector, alone and despised by his own people. Now, because of Jesus' friendship, he is ready to give half his fortune to the poor. He is ready to renounce his riches because he gains so much more in Christ. We shouldn't miss the transformation that has occurred. Zacchaeus has turned completely around. He was lost and has been found (see Lk 19:10).*

## **The Power of Fellowship**

*Please read aloud:* Jesus didn't just forgive Zacchaeus, he restored this isolated, lonely man to fellowship. But let's dive into what exactly fellowship is. Jesus isn't just inviting us to relationship or friendship with him; he invites us to the fellowship he enjoys with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

*Read 1 John 1:3*

8. Saint John writes that this is the fellowship that he enjoys and is enjoyed by all who believe in Jesus Christ! Fellowship isn't just horizontal – it's not just the friendships between Christians. It is actually *Trinitarian*. What does this mean for our relationships with other believers?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Answer: Christian fellowship is of a **totally different** order than other relationships. We don't simply need other Christians like an athlete needs a good coach or a co-worker needs a good business partner. We need other Christians in our lives, because in them we encounter Jesus Christ. We actually meet Him in them. Christian fellowship is about so much more than simply having fun with other Christians or spending time with people we like. In its truest form, it is a **mystical sharing in the love of the Trinity**, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

*Please read aloud:* The impact of his encounter with Jesus transformed Zacchaeus. In this short encounter, Zacchaeus became a man willing to part with his riches; he completely turned around. This is the same power that is available in every encounter with Jesus and takes effect in Christian fellowship even now.

9. We often use the image of hot coals to describe the necessity of community in the Christian life (if your group is unfamiliar, please explain the hot coals analogy<sup>1</sup>). You may have also heard the Proverb, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (27:17). Why does fellowship sharpen us? Why does it keep us on fire?

*Answer: Because Christian fellowship is centered on Jesus Christ, it is **transformative**. Christian fellowship forms us, it strengthens our character, encourages us, and inspires us to grow. When we spend time with other Christians, we allow Christ to work in our hearts because **Christ actually dwells in other Christians** (by Baptism). They are a near occasion of encounter with the Living God.*

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<sup>1</sup> Think about a charcoal fire. When the coals are piled together, each coal remains hotter for a longer period. The coals help each other remain on fire. Conversely, when a coal becomes separated from the others, it cools more quickly. Like hot coals, we need other Christians around us to remain "on fire" for Christ.

10. Do you have Christian friends who can build you up in the Faith? Do you have “hot coals” in your life who can help you grow? Or are you trying to live the Christian life by yourself? Or are you surrounding yourself with people who lead you away from Christ and toward sin?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

### **Living Christian Fellowship**

*Please read aloud:* When Jesus invites Zacchaeus to fellowship, he doesn't just offer him friendship. He offers him the opportunity to be reconciled and transformed. Christian fellowship is not only made up of community events and service or even participating in Bible study – as good as these things are! Christian fellowship must be intentional. It requires our time, energy, and attention. We can't just fall into it; we must choose it.

To better understand the meaning of true Christian fellowship, let's turn to two passages from the Acts of the Apostles that depict the fellowship of the first Christians. In these passages, we get a beautiful picture of the dynamic fellowship of the early Church.

*Read Acts 2:44-47 and Acts 4:32-35*

11. What stands out to you in these passages? What habits or qualities characterize their community? What do these passages reveal to us about the key qualities that should distinguish a Christian community, and the fellowship shared between those in it, from other communities?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Answer: Unity, generosity, joy, selflessness, missionary activity, common worship, charity, sacrificial giving to those in need and to the Church, temperance.*

*Note to leader – you might not get to all these follow ups. You are encouraged to **cover at least 3 main points** from the following content.*

**Optional questions on Unity:** *How do you see unity manifested between these early Christians? What are the key elements of their unity? What do you think fellowship of this kind must be like?*

Unity: *the early Church shared “all things in common” and “were of one heart and soul”<sup>2</sup> (v. 32, 44). They brought to life the words of the Psalmist, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps 133:1). They brought to life the words of the Psalmist, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps 133:1). If we are going to experience this kind of unity in our Christian fellowship, then we must take a few important steps. First, we must **share life together**. Fellowship is something we need to prioritize. If we don’t make time for it, it is never going to be a part of our lives, and our journey as Christian disciples will be significantly stunted.<sup>3</sup> The second aspect of unity we must embrace is the “**one faith**” of Christ (Eph 4:5). Unlike our culture which puts an emphasis diverse ideas and opinions, the Church proclaims one Faith in Christ’s “one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church” – this is the real source of communion. When we accept teachings that differ from Christ’s Church, disunity inevitably follows (e.g., the thousands of denominations that have arisen since the Protestant Reformation). Without the unity of Faith,*

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<sup>2</sup> See CCC 2425. The Church outrightly condemns communism and socialism ideologies. While this passage indicates a spirit of intense generosity, this is most clearly lived today in the call of the faithful to supply for the needs of the Church. The priests, religious men and women of our Church do live in common, and their needs are supplied for due to the generosity of the greater Church.

<sup>3</sup> The Church has always acknowledged the goodness of the eremitic life for those called to live as hermits. They too live Christian fellowship, albeit in a unique way by their prayer and participation in the Communion of Saints.

*we cannot fully experience Christian fellowship. That's why we need to be like these early Christians, who were of "one heart and soul." A third aspect of unity is also particularly important for our fellowship today: **unity with Church leaders**, the Pope, Bishops and Priests whom God has called to lead us. In the passages from Acts, we observe the prominent role of the Apostles. Indeed, Christ built His Church on these Apostles and their successors. Thus, living Christian fellowship today requires that we remain united with those same leaders whom Christ has given us. Despite the failings of human leaders in the Church, we are still called to unity with Church leaders. Even when they fail or we disagree with their decisions, we are still called to humility, charity, obedience, and unity.*

**Optional questions on Worship:** *How do these early Christians worship? How does worship relate to fellowship?*

*Worship: It is clear from these passages in Acts and the testimony of other early Christians that the **Mass was central** to the early Christian community. The Scriptures tell us that they were "breaking bread in their homes," which was an early way of expressing their celebration of the Eucharist (v. 46). Already in the New Testament, Christians were being exhorted to hold fast to this common worship: "[do not neglect] to meet together, as is the habit of some, but [encourage] one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb 10:25). This is not only strong encouragement to share in Christian fellowship, but also an exhortation to gather for Mass. The Catechism teaches, "Those who receive the Eucharist are united more closely to Christ. Through it Christ unites them to all the faithful in one body - the Church" (CCC 1396). St. Paul teaches about this same power of the Eucharist to draw us together when he writes, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). While we might not always feel a close fellowship with others when we attend Mass and receive communion,*

*it's important for us to know that, despite our feelings, the **Mass is truly the highest expression of Christian fellowship**. In the Mass, we are truly united with those with whom we worship. This includes not only the people in the Church building with us, but also all those who share in the Sacrifice of the Mass around the world—and even beyond our world, those angels and saints who are united with us in heaven. In the Mass, we are mystically united with all who are “in Christ.” It is the high point of Christian fellowship. All other fellowship pales in comparison.*

**Optional questions for Mission and Witness:** *How do you see this early Church on mission? What were their motivations for mission? How is this related to fellowship?*

*Mission and Witness: A final aspect of Christian fellowship for us to consider is the shared mission and witness of these early believers. They “gave their testimony to the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus” and “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47, 4:33). They could not “but speak of what [they had] seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). These Christians knew their mission and lived it powerfully—both in their witness and in their words. Further, the **love** that the early Christians had for one another was one of the **key sources of evangelization** in the early Church. The early Christian writer Tertullian wrote that the pagans would exclaim of the early Christians, “See how they love one another!” Indeed, **the Church’s fellowship and mission were inseparable**. As Jesus taught, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).*

12. How does examining these key qualities of the early Church help teach us about how we ought to be investing and participating in Christian fellowship?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Possible follow-ups, given your discussion above:*

- a. *Unity:* Do you sacrifice for intentional investment in fellowship Christians? Are you of one mind with the Church and her beliefs? Do you respect and honor Church leaders, even when they disappoint or fail us?
- b. *Worship:* Are you attending Mass every Sunday? When you attend Mass, are you approaching Communion in a state of grace, free from all serious sin, so that you can truly be united with Christ and the Church? How can you examine your heart so that you don't miss this profound opportunity for Christian fellowship?
- c. *Mission and Witness:* Do we witness to Christ like these early Christians? Do you share our Faith like they did? Do you go out to meet the poor, the lonely, or those in need? Do we adhere to Christ's command to love one another? Do you think our example inspires others to inquire about what makes us different?

### **Summary of Fellowship**

Certainly, more could be said about Christian fellowship. But the above sections give us a glimpse of the challenge of this essential Christian practice. Fellowship is not something simplistic, and it is certainly more than just hanging out with people. As Christians today, let us take seriously this high ideal of Christian fellowship. When we do, not only will we see transformation in our lives, but the love we show for one another will also be a compelling witness to the world.



