

LIFE IN CHRIST



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LIFE IN CHRIST

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Chapter I

The Call of a Disciple

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?

Come, Follow Me

Everything changed in Simon's life. When the day began, he was a Galilean fisherman. By the end of the day, he had left his fishing business behind and was following a wandering Rabbi around Israel. This simple fisherman had a "quit your job" moment, a "leave everything" moment, a moment that required profound trust, courage, and commitment. This was the moment Simon became a disciple.

Even if you've read the Gospels before, you may have missed the dramatic unfolding of Simon's call to discipleship. It is described in a few short verses (Luke 5:1-11). But don't let the length fool you—these verses are packed with deep truths about Christian discipleship. Answering Jesus' call to discipleship is absolutely life-altering. As we will see, that's how it was for Simon, and that's how it should be for us also.

Too often, however, we can think about following Christ in ways that are much too simplistic, in ways that don't reflect the depths of Jesus' call. We might think of Christian discipleship as accepting certain beliefs or loving our neighbor. Or we might think of discipleship as giving a little bit of our time to God, attending Church, spending some time in prayer, being a part of a Bible study, or doing some service

for the poor. These are all aspects of discipleship but being a disciple of Jesus consists of so much more. Discipleship is not a minor course correction, a sort of Christian adjustment to our behavior, but rather a total reorientation of our lives.

In Simon's story today, we are going to explore the true meaning of Christian discipleship. As we will see, Jesus makes a radical call, and Christian discipleship is a radical response.

Chosen (Luke 5:1-3)

While the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret. And he saw two boats by the lake; but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

There is a small detail we need to consider as we unpack Simon's call to discipleship. Did you catch it? How many boats were in this passage? Two. Of all the details that are included in the Gospel, and of the many things that are left out, why did the number of boats make it into the story?

This small detail reveals a simple, but important truth about Christian discipleship: Jesus chooses His disciples. There were two boats, and Jesus, theoretically, could have chosen one or the other. It wasn't an accident, a matter of happenstance that He entered Simon's boat. It wasn't simply that Simon's boat was the only one available. Christ's actions were deliberate and intentional. You can imagine Him walking to the shoreline, examining the boats, and then getting into Simon's.

In the back of His mind, He is aware of everything that is about to unfold. He is choosing Simon.

At the beginning of this discussion of Christian discipleship, it is important to recognize the simple but profound reality that Jesus chooses His disciples. Jesus will say later in the Gospels, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn 15:16). Similarly, St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus, “he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph 1:4). None of us could ever deserve to be a disciple of Jesus. We don’t become disciples because we are really good people or because of some great quality or ability. Discipleship can only begin with the free and gratuitous gift of God. The Catechism states, “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....He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him” (CCC 1). Everything else we will discuss about discipleship is built upon this foundation of God’s free and generous love for us.

Furthermore, every Christian is called to discipleship. Discipleship is not the privilege of a select few, a sort of advanced version of Christianity to which some are called but others are not. Each Christian is personally chosen to follow the Lord. Indeed, every Christian is called to a life of total, committed discipleship with Jesus.

Called into the Deep (Luke 5:4-7)

And when he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, they beckoned

to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.

Jesus calls Simon to discipleship in a very personal way. After going “out a little from the land” and teaching the crowd, (v. 3) Jesus says something surprising to Simon. He tells him, “Put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a catch” (v. 4). To understand this invitation, we need to consider the context. Simon is a fisherman. He has probably been fishing for his entire life. In other words, He knows how to catch fish. He knows that the best time to catch fish is often at night or in the early morning. In fact, as verse 2 tells us, he is just getting back from a night of fishing. He tells Jesus he “toiled all night and took nothing” (v. 5). What does this mean? Scripture is showing us that when Jesus makes his invitation to “put out into the deep,” he is asking Simon to go fishing at *exactly the wrong time*. You can imagine Simon thinking, “You want me to go fishing now?” What is Jesus doing?

Jesus’ request to “put out into the deep” isn’t primarily about helping Simon’s fishing business. He’s not proposing a new fishing strategy. Repeatedly in the Scriptures, God asks difficult, even seemingly impossible things of those He calls, in order to lead them to give their entire lives to Him. Abraham wasn’t simply called by God to have a child at age ninety-nine—as impressive as that would have been—but also to become a father of many nations, the father of all who have faith (Gen 12:1, Gen 21:5, CCC 145-147). Similarly, David, a young shepherd boy, wasn’t only invited to fight the giant Goliath but also to become king of God’s holy people, and ancestor of the great Messiah (1 Sam 17). Mary, the simple virgin from Nazareth, was asked to carry the Son of God in her womb and offer her life as a model of Christian discipleship, becoming the mother of all Christians and the Queen of Heaven (Luke 1:31, Rev 12, CCC 967-970). In all these instances, God didn’t only ask for something to be done; He sought a lifetime of

fidelity. Therefore, when Jesus tells Simon to “put out into the deep,” we observe a similar call. This is an invitation to trust, to surrender, to give his entire life—and it is filled with drama.¹

As we think about our call as Christian disciples, we shouldn't be surprised when we see this same kind of drama. In fact, we should expect Jesus' call to be surprising and challenging—it might even seem impossible at first. While Jesus might ask us to “put out a little from the land” initially, being a disciple means answering Jesus' call to “put out into the deep,” trusting His plan for our entire lives, even beyond what we think comfortable, easy, or familiar. Like Simon, we might not fully understand what Jesus is doing, but instead of protesting, arguing, or being stubborn, as disciples, we are invited to say, “but at your word, I will let down the nets” (v. 5). Indeed, to be a disciple is to respond generously to Christ's call, to give all our life to Him, no matter how radical it might seem.

Simon's Response (Luke 5:8-10)

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men.”

How would you respond to this miraculous catch of fish?

¹ The large catch of fish also prophetically anticipates Peter's mission as an Apostle. He will be called to lead the Church and be a “fisher of men,” bringing an abundant catch of souls into his ship (the Church).

We wouldn't fault Simon if he offered Jesus some sort of fishing partnership. Isn't that what every fisherman would want? This was the catch of a lifetime. Why not celebrate and capitalize on the opportunity? Yet, we know from Simon's response that he sees something deeper in this miracle; it's about more than fishing. Jesus isn't revealing His fishing prowess to Simon. He's revealing His identity.

While we don't know exactly what Simon believes about Jesus at this point, we can see that he recognizes something more in this miracle. Instead of celebrating the catch of fish, Simon does something unexpected. He literally falls down at Jesus' knees and says, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (v. 9). What would prompt such a strong response?

To help us understand, consider some background on Biblical discipleship. Theologian Edward Sri explains, “If there's one key word that sums up the essence of discipleship, it's *imitation*—imitating the life of the teacher.”²

In biblical times, being called to follow a Rabbi as a disciple meant much more than joining a club or accepting a few particular teachings:

To follow a rabbi ... meant living with the rabbi, sharing life with him and taking part in the rabbi's whole way of life. A disciple might accompany a rabbi on all his daily routines: prayer, study, debating other rabbis, giving alms to the poor, burying the dead, going to court, etc. ... Disciples, therefore, studied not just the text of Scripture but also the “text” of the rabbi's life.³

² Edward Sri, *Into His Likeness: Be Transformed as a Disciple* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 23.

³ Edward Sri, *Into His Likeness: Be Transformed as a Disciple* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 25.

With this background in mind, we can begin to make sense of Simon's response. If he understands the reality of Biblical discipleship, then he grasps the immensity of what is happening. He is being called to become a disciple of a great teacher (v. 3), a worker of miracles, a person whom he calls "Lord" (v. 9)—and Simon is being called to follow Him, to *imitate* him. This is truly an incredible invitation. No wonder Simon responds so dramatically. You can just imagine Him recalling his many shortcomings and inadequacies. Being face-to-face with Christ, he knows how incapable he is of imitation. He thinks there's no way he could possibly follow this man. Yet, Christ still calls him.

Two thousand years later, Christ's call to discipleship is no less compelling. Today, we know that Jesus is not simply another prophet or religious teacher; He is God-made-man. And amazingly, as disciples of Jesus, we too are invited to imitate Him. Pause, and think about that for a moment—Christian discipleship is an incredible, even radical, call to become like God!

Our Response: Three Temptations

Once we come to know the significance of Christian discipleship, it is important for us to personally consider how we are responding to Christ's call. In particular, we need to be aware of three temptations that can prevent us from faithfully responding to Jesus.

The Temptation of Despair: First, we might be tempted to despair. Can I really live like Christ? Can I really imitate Him? How could I, as sinful as I am, possibly be like God? Like Simon, we might be fully aware of our many weaknesses, failures, and sins and might not believe that

discipleship is possible for us. We might even think, "I'm just not the kind of person that can live like Jesus."

In this situation, we need to be reminded that we don't "qualify" for discipleship. Jesus doesn't call us because he believes we are superior to others. He doesn't call us because of our character. In fact, he doesn't call us because of any of our qualities. He calls us because he knows what He can do in our lives. Jesus doesn't call the equipped, he equips the called.

The Temptation of Pride: A second temptation in discipleship is equally problematic: trusting in ourselves. Upon hearing Jesus' call, we might desire to respond generously. However, instead of listening to Christ and allowing Him to transform our hearts, we might try to live as faithful disciples by our own strength. Maybe we try to change a certain bad habit of sin. Or maybe we begin some apostolic work or service to the poor. But instead of entrusting these things to Christ, we try and accomplish them by our own strength and ingenuity.

Unfortunately, even with the best of intentions, these efforts will never be successful. We can't live as faithful disciples on our own. Instead, we must embrace an essential spiritual principle, what St. John Paul II called the "primacy of grace":

There is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan. God of course asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that "without Christ we can do nothing" (cf. Jn 15:5).⁴

⁴John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, par. 38.

The Temptation of Half-heartedness: Finally, we might be tempted to accept Jesus' invitation to discipleship, but only to a certain degree. We might see some attractive aspects of the Christian life and accept those, but then turn away when harder, more difficult teachings are presented. We might desire the blessings of following Jesus while avoiding the difficulties. This is a half-hearted response, and it isn't true discipleship. Being a disciple requires a whole-hearted commitment, not simply a half-hearted one. In the next section, we are going to discover what this whole-hearted commitment really looks like.

“They left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:11)

And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

At the end of this passage, we read one simple closing line that is packed with meaning for Christian discipleship: “They left everything and followed him” (v. 11). These few short words capture the heart of discipleship. Let's consider them carefully.

Think back to the beginning of this passage. Recall what Simon was doing. When the day began, he was a Galilean fisherman. By the end of the day, he had left his nets and his boat behind and was following Jesus wherever He went. Therefore, when we read the words, “left everything,” let's not overlook their meaning. Simon had much to consider. He had many things that you or I might be tempted *not* to leave behind. What were these things, and what does Simon's response tell us about discipleship?

The first thing that we can observe Simon leaving behind is his career. Fishing was his life's occupation. He probably started off as an

apprentice. Then as he got older, he went into the fishing business on his own. Fishing wasn't just a hobby; it was Simon's whole livelihood. When we think of Simon leaving everything and following Jesus, we must recognize that he was giving up the one thing he had been working on for his entire adult career. And it wasn't as if Jesus showed Simon how discipleship was a better career path. He didn't promise Simon financial security or a retirement plan. He asked Simon to leave everything. This was, literally, a “quit your job” moment for Simon.

Simon also leaves behind his home and his community. We know from another passage later in the Gospel that Simon reminds Jesus that “we have left our homes and followed you” (Lk 18:29). Sometimes, we can be tempted to de-humanize the characters in the Bible, to view them as people that were somehow different than us. Simon was a real man, with a real job, with a real home. This isn't figurative speech. He left everything to become a disciple of Jesus.

As disciples, we too are called to leave everything. This might include sacrificing our career or a prestigious job, the safety and security of a comfortable modern lifestyle, our time and energy, the location that is most familiar to us, or simply our own plans and preferences. Whatever it might be that God is calling us to surrender, Simon's example teaches us that, as faithful disciples, we must be willing to leave it all behind for the sake of following Christ.

Finally, this passage ends with the words “followed him.” Again, these are a few simple words, but what did following Jesus really mean for Simon? Where did he go? How did he follow?

We know from the Scriptures that Simon followed Jesus throughout His public ministry. He followed Christ up the mount of Transfiguration and saw His glory. He followed Christ as He healed the sick and the

dying. He even followed Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane, ready to go to battle for His cause. Simon's discipleship, however, ultimately led him to the one place Christ had to go: the cross. That is where Christ's life led, and that is where Simon had to follow. While Simon failed initially when he denied Jesus during his passion, tradition tells us that Simon (his name now changed to Peter) was eventually crucified in Rome, insisting that he be nailed to the cross upside-down, because he was unworthy to die in the same way as his Lord. In the end, this is what it meant for Simon to "follow Him."

This is the key to Christian discipleship: discipleship means following Jesus everywhere He goes, even to the cross—in fact, most especially to the cross. In the Gospels, Jesus told His followers, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 10:27). The cross is at the heart of Christian discipleship.

Far too often, however, we fail to embrace the cross. When Jesus starts heading toward the cross, we start moving in the other direction. While Jesus certainly wants to heal us, forgive us, and allow us to experience joy and fulfillment, true happiness and joy come only through the cross. What is not crucified will not be resurrected. We can't simply follow Christ when it feels good, when it suits our style, or when we encounter a problem and want Him to help. We must also follow Him when it is difficult, when we must make hard decisions, when others don't understand—that is whole-hearted discipleship.

Life in Christ

In this Bible study, we are going to discuss the many habits of the Christian life, those aspects of "Life in Christ" that we are called to

embrace as disciples. As we begin, we need to answer the most important question of all: am I willing to be a disciple of Jesus? As we saw above, discipleship is a profound reality. It requires answering Jesus' call to put out "into the deep," giving our entire lives to Him, leaving everything else behind, and following Him wherever he might lead—even to the cross. None of the other habits of discipleship in this study will make much difference if we are not first and foremost willing to embrace the call to discipleship. That is what the Christian life is all about, and that is where we must begin.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passage: Luke 5:1-11

Introduction

1. Launching Question: What comes to mind when you hear the word “disciple”?

Allow the group to discuss.

Come, Follow Me

An essential aspect of the mission of Jesus Christ – God-made-man – was the fact he called followers to himself, to live and learn alongside him. In other words, he made disciples. This bible study will consider what it truly means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. How did he call disciples to himself? What did he teach them? And how should this inform how we live today, as Christians (or “little Christs”)? Today, we’ll look at the radicality of the Lord’s call to discipleship and the radicality of a whole-hearted response to him, as seen in the calling of St. Peter in Gospel of Luke.

Chosen

Read Luke 5:1-3

2. There’s a small detail here we should pay attention to. How many boats were in the water? And whose did he get into? Of all the details that are included in the Gospel, and of the many things that are left out, why do you think the number of boats make it into the story?

Answer: There were two boats, and Jesus, theoretically, could have chosen one or the other. It wasn’t an accident or a matter of happenstance that He entered Simon’s boat. It wasn’t simply that Simon’s boat was the only one available. Christ’s actions were deliberate and intentional.

Please read aloud: Christ deliberately chose Simon’s boat. What exactly is he doing in there? Isn’t this strange? He just got into a stranger’s boat, asked him to put off a little from the land, and then taught the crowds from inside the boat? And yet, it gets even a little stranger... let’s keep reading.

Called into the Deep

Read Luke 5:4-7

3. Imagine this. You’re Simon. Fishing is your livelihood; this is how you keep food on your table and a roof over your head. You’ve been doing this for years – maybe even your whole life – and you know the ins-and-outs of fishing. You know the best time to catch fish is often at night and in the early morning. And you’ve labored *all* night and caught nothing. And now, as the day begins, you’re cleaning your nets, you’re signing off for the day, ready to take it

easy. How would you feel if Jesus came, got into your boat, and asked you to put your nets back in the water at this moment? What does he know about fishing? Who is this guy? What would your reaction be?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Isn't this request rather inconvenient? Why might Simon comply? What is going on? Scripture is showing us that when Jesus makes his invitation to "put out into the deep," he is asking Simon to go fishing at exactly the wrong time. He's not proposing a new fishing strategy or concerned about helping Simon's business. He's proposing to him a seemingly impossible task, after Simon has toiled all night with nothing to show for it. We can see something similar in many other parts of Scripture: God often asks difficult, seemingly impossible things of those He calls.

4. Jesus is doing much more than helping Simon catch two boatloads of fish; why is Jesus asking Simon to do something seemingly impossible? Why would God do this for those he calls?

Answer: He is asking Simon to trust him. This is an invitation to trust, to surrender. Simon must have taken a step of trust and surrender in cooperating with this request from Jesus – like Abraham, David, and Mary did – even without a clear idea of what would be on the other side. While the Lord initially may ask us to take the risk of trust him in little things – "put out a little from the land" – eventually, and inevitably, he will ask us to trust him with everything, with our whole lives – "put out into the deep." He does not only ask us to cooperate with specific tasks – i.e., let down your nets – he is seeking for us to offer him our entire lives.

5. What do you think it would take for you to cooperate with a seemingly impossible thing asked of you by God?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Jesus's call is radical. How does Simon respond? Let's keep reading.

Simon's Response

Read Luke 5:8-10

6. What is Simon's response to the catch of fish? Why do you think he'd react this way?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: Instead of celebrating the catch of fish, Simon does something unexpected. He literally falls down at Jesus' knees and says, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (v. 9). What would prompt such a strong response? While we don't know exactly what Simon believes about Jesus at this point, we can see that he recognizes something more in this miracle.

Please read aloud: To help gain more understanding about Simon's response, let's consider some historical background on Biblical discipleship. Theologian Edward Sri explains, "If there's one key word that sums up the essence of discipleship, it's *imitation*—imitating the life of the teacher."¹

In biblical times, being called to follow a Rabbi as a disciple meant much more than joining a club or accepting some teachings: "To

¹ Edward Sri, *Into His Likeness: Be Transformed as a Disciple* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 23.

follow a rabbi ... meant living with the rabbi, sharing life with him and taking part in the rabbi's whole way of life. A disciple might accompany a rabbi on all his daily routines: prayer, study, debating other rabbis, giving alms to the poor, burying the dead, going to court, etc. ... Disciples, therefore, studied not just the text of Scripture but also the 'text' of the rabbi's life."²

7. A disciple of a rabbi is called to imitate him: his behaviors, his habits, his preaching, his whole life. At this point in time, what could Simon observe about this "Master," this rabbi? How does this help us understand his response?

Answer: He is being called to become a disciple of a great teacher (v. 3), a worker of miracles, a person whom he calls "Lord" (v. 9)—and Simon is being called to follow Him, to imitate him. This is truly an incredible invitation. No wonder Simon responds so dramatically. You can just imagine Him recalling his many shortcomings and inadequacies. Being face-to-face with Christ, he knows how incapable he is of imitation. He thinks there's no way he could possibly follow this man. Yet, Christ still calls him. With this background in mind, we can begin to make sense of Simon's response. If he understands the reality of Biblical discipleship, then he grasps the immensity of what is happening. The call to imitate is intimidating!

8. This is pretty amazing to think about. Simon is being called to be like – to imitate – not simply a great rabbi, but the Messiah who is God himself! But, God is a personal God who knows us intimately – not a distant, far off taskmaster. Let's look closely at his call for Simon; what images and language does the Lord use in his call to Simon? What does this reveal to us about our call to discipleship?

²Edward Sri, *Into His Likeness: Be Transformed as a Disciple* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 25.

Answer: Jesus calls Simon to discipleship in a very personal way. He not only approaches Simon on his "turf," but he also uses language to make his call compelling and meaningful to Simon based on Simon's life. "Let down your nets," "Put out into the deep," "You will be a fisher of men." Jesus calls us personally, too. While his call to imitate him will be challenging and life-altering, he comes to us as we are and invites us to follow him in a way that is suited specifically for each one of us. As intimidating as that is, we can rest assured knowing that the Lord calls us with an attentive care, knowing where we've been and where he desires us to go. His call is always particular, specifically tailored for each one of us.

9. How has Jesus called you personally? In what ways has he come to you in a personally compelling way, as he did with Simon?

Allow the group to discuss.

Our Response: Three Temptations

Please read aloud: When Christ comes to us and calls us personally to follow him, like Simon, we can face a couple of roadblocks that might prevent us from faithfully responding to him. We'll zoom in on a couple temptations we might experience, but first...

10. Can you identify some obstacles that could have stood in the way of Simon fully and faithfully answering Christ's call?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the Leader: As part of this discussion, be sure to mention three specific temptations listed below:

*We've mentioned that we're called to imitate God himself! In response to this, we can be tempted to **despair**: Like Simon, we might be fully aware of our many weaknesses, failures, and sins and might not believe that discipleship is possible for us.*

*We've also mentioned that Jesus's call is radical, often coming to us as a challenge or terribly inconvenient compared with our plans. Another temptation is to be **half-hearted** in our response: We might see some attractive aspects of the Christian life and accept those, but then turn away when harder, more difficult teachings are presented. We might desire the blessings of following Jesus while avoiding the difficulties.*

*We've also pointed out that Jesus makes an intentional choice; it is not by accident that he calls his disciples. In light of this, we could be tempted to **pride**, trusting in our own strength, virtue, skill, rather than Him and his grace. But nothing will be fruitful if it is not rooted in the Lord (see John 15).*

11. Does one (or more) of these temptations most closely align with your experience of following the Lord? How so?

Allow the group to discuss.

"They left everything and followed him"

Read Luke 5:11

12. Luke isn't exaggerating here. We know from the rest of the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and the letters of Saints Peter and Paul that Simon lived the rest of his life as a disciple of Jesus. So, what kinds of things did he leave behind in order to follow Christ from this point onward?

Answer: His career – his livelihood, his expertise, his security financially, socially, "professionally" – this was literally a "quit your job" moment. His home and community. We know from another passage later in the Gospel that Simon reminds Jesus that "we have left our homes and followed you" (Lk 18:29). Simon was a real man, with a real job, with a real home. This isn't figurative speech. He left everything to become a disciple of Jesus.

13. Does anyone happen to know what tradition tells us about Simon's death?

Answer: Simon (his name now changed to Peter) was eventually crucified in Rome, insisting that he be nailed to the cross upside-down, because he was unworthy to die in the same way as his Lord. Simon's discipleship ultimately led him to the one place Christ had to go: the cross. That is where Christ's life led, and that is where Simon had to follow.

Please read aloud: This last point is the key to Christian discipleship: discipleship means following Jesus everywhere He goes, even to the cross—in fact, most especially to the cross. In the Gospels, Jesus told His followers, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 10:27). The cross is at the heart of Christian discipleship.

Far too often, however, we fail to embrace the cross. When Jesus starts heading toward the cross, we start moving in the other direction. While Jesus certainly wants to heal us, forgive us, and bring us joy and fulfillment, true happiness and joy come only through the cross. What is not crucified will not be resurrected. We can't simply follow Christ when it feels good, when it suits our style, or when we encounter a problem and want Him to help. We must also follow Him when it is difficult and when others don't understand — this is whole-hearted discipleship.

14. To be a disciple is to respond generously to Christ's call. You, like Simon, are called to imitate the life of the Lord – which inevitably includes embracing your cross. How would you characterize your discipleship right now? Are you whole-heartedly saying “yes”? Are there things that are keeping you from “putting out into the deep” and “letting your nets down”? What “nets” do you think the Lord is asking you to leave behind so you can follow him freely? Are you willing to embrace the cross?

Allow the group to discuss.

Conclusion: Life in Christ

Please read aloud: Christ's call to you is radical. He is asking to you to come, follow him, imitate him, and take up your cross. But he always comes to you personally, intentionally, and supplies every grace necessary to be faithful to his call. The only true response to him is a whole-hearted response.

In this Bible study, we are going to discuss the many habits of the Christian life, those aspects of “Life in Christ” that we are called to

embrace as disciples. As we begin, we need to answer the most important question of all: am I willing to be a disciple of Jesus? As we can see, discipleship is a profound reality. It requires giving our entire lives to Him, leaving everything else behind, and following Him wherever he might lead—even to the cross. None of the other habits of discipleship in this study will make much difference if we are not first and foremost willing to embrace the call to discipleship. That is what the Christian life is all about, and that is where we must begin.

NOTES



Chapter II Sacred Scripture

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
Pages 28 - 39

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
Pages 40 - 52



UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Ignorance of Scripture is Ignorance of Christ (Luke 24:13-27)

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus... While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Clopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him....And he said to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself (Lk 24:13-27).

Put yourself in the shoes of these early disciples. You have just witnessed the crucifixion of the man you thought was going to lead your people as the long-awaited messiah king. Now, he has been put to death, and you are walking home, discouraged. Suddenly, someone you don't recognize comes along beside you and begins asking questions about what has happened. You explain your sad tale, your shattered hope, and a few perplexing reports. And what does he do? Comfort and support you? No! He rebukes you and, surprisingly, launches into a Bible study! It's not a short one either: "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk 24:27).

Of course, the person these disciples encountered isn't just anyone—we know it is Jesus, risen from the dead. This forces us to ask an important question: Of all the things that Jesus could have done, why did He spend so much time interpreting all of the Scriptures to these disciples? He could have revealed His glory or performed some miracle. Instead, he slowly and painstakingly reveals the truth about Himself in the Scriptures.

This isn't the only time Jesus does this either. He does it again just a few short verses later. In the very next scene in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus appears to His disciples again, mysteriously entering the locked room in which they are staying. He "open[s] their minds to understand the Scriptures, and [says] to them, 'Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead'" (v. 44-46). Again, we must ask ourselves, why are the Scriptures so important to Jesus? St. Jerome, the great 4th century Biblical scholar, points us toward an answer when he writes, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." We might think of many ways of coming to know Jesus—listening to a good Christian podcast, watching a YouTube video, receiving the sacraments, or spending time in prayer. However, if we want to know

Jesus deeply and personally, then Sacred Scripture is essential. It is in the Scriptures that we learn the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is in the Scriptures that we come to understand how Christ's coming was foretold in the Old Testament. And it is in the Scriptures that people today, two-thousand years later, can hear God speaking to them now. This is the point Jesus seems to be driving home in these passages: if we want to know Him, we must listen to His Word.

Divine Inspiration: Did Not Our Hearts Burn Within Us (Luke 24:28-32)

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Lk 24:28-32).

"Did not our hearts burn within us?" (Lk 24:32). As these disciples reflect on their encounter with the risen Christ, they are amazed at how Scripture moved their hearts. Have you ever experienced this? Have you ever heard something that was so powerful, so beautiful, that your heart was moved with tremendous emotion? That's what these disciples must have experienced—and to a tremendous degree! The message was simply overwhelming.

These early disciples experienced the power of God's Word. The book of Hebrews tells us, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). We can see this transforming power at work in many examples throughout the history of the Church:

St. Anthony of the Desert heard the words of the Gospel, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me," and he proceeded to sell everything he had to pursue holiness and live a life of prayer in the desert (Mt 19:21).

Wrestling with his sinfulness and the prospect of becoming a Christian, St. Augustine read, "Let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh" (Rom 13:13-14). These verses propelled him to finally leave his sin behind and follow Christ.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, prodded St. Francis Xavier to conversion with Jesus's words, "For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Mk 8:36).

Truly, the Scriptures are powerful in turning hearts toward Christ. Why are the Scriptures so powerful? Why are they so unique in their ability to move hearts? One word: inspiration. The Bible is different than any other book. Other books might claim to teach something about God or how to live a holy life. However, only the Bible is written by God Himself. Paul's Second Letter to Timothy states, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof,

for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). The word inspired in Greek is *theópneustos*, which literally means "God-breathed" (see CCC 105). Just as our breath moves over our vocal cords to make the sounds needed for speech, God's "breath" brings forth the words of Sacred Scripture. Indeed, the Scriptures contain God's own divine Word, communicated to us through the human words of the inspired authors. That is why the disciples on the Road to Emmaus and many saints throughout the centuries were so deeply impacted by the Scriptures: they were listening to God's own Word.

Hearing God's voice in the Scriptures isn't only for saints from a bygone generation, either. It is something we can do every day. When we prayerfully read the Scriptures, we converse with God Himself. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, "in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them" (DV 21).

Furthermore, reading the Scriptures leads to a vibrant practice of the Faith. For the disciples on the road, the Scriptures led them to the Eucharist, and in the Eucharist they "recognized" Christ (v. 31, 35). How frequently do we hear people today say, "I didn't get anything out of Mass."? Often, people struggle to recognize Jesus' Eucharistic Presence because they haven't deeply listened to God's Word in Scripture. Indeed, the written Word, Sacred Scripture, prepares us to receive the Word Made Flesh, the Eucharist. The two belong together.

Biblical Inerrancy

There's another reality we must consider as we ponder God's inspired Word. Because Scripture is inspired, it is also inerrant. This means that "the books of Scripture [teach] solidly, faithfully and without

error" (DV 11). God is Truth; He cannot and does not lie. He is a loving Father, who wishes to guide His sons and daughters into the truth. In fact, the Father sent His Son into the world to "bear witness to the truth" (Jn 18:37). Therefore, we can be confident that God's Word is totally without error. In the words of the Catechism, "God is Truth itself, whose words cannot deceive. This is why one can abandon oneself in full trust to the truth and faithfulness of his word in all things" (CCC 215).

In our study of Sacred Scripture, however, it is not uncommon to encounter difficulties—language we don't understand, stories we find difficult to grasp, and even statements that we struggle to reconcile with what we know to be true. What should we do when we encounter these difficulties? Where can we turn when we have trouble perceiving the truth in a particular passage? The Church has wrestled with these kinds of questions for centuries. That's why She gives us several principles to guide us in our study of God's Word. Let's consider a few of these principles, so that we know how to proceed when we encounter difficult passages in Sacred Scripture.

One essential principle for interpreting not only Scripture, but any text, is understanding the intention of the author. If we aren't paying attention to an author's intended meaning, then we are likely to misinterpret his or her writing. This is certainly true of Sacred Scripture. The Bible is truly God's Word, but it didn't just fall out of the sky. It was written by inspired human authors—authors who wanted to say something specific to their intended audiences. Therefore, we must pay careful attention to the Sacred authors' intentions when interpreting God's Word. The Catechism states, "to interpret Scripture correctly, the reader must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm and to what God wanted to reveal by their words" (CCC 109). In other words, while the Holy Spirit certainly

inspired the authors of Sacred Scripture, these human authors were real authors with a real message that they intended to share with the people to whom they were writing.

By discovering the author's intention, we can better understand the intended meaning of a passage. Consider a modern example: When a weatherman today says, "The sun will rise at 6:30am," he isn't making a scientific claim about the sun rising and falling. Even less is he attempting to refute the Copernican system of astronomy. Instead, he is simply using colloquial language to describe an everyday occurrence. To understand the weatherman's meaning, we must be aware of what he is intending to say.

The same is true of Sacred Scripture. Scripture is full of historical, cultural, and literary elements that the inspired human authors employed to communicate their message. Therefore, to interpret a passage correctly, we must pay careful attention to these elements to determine the author's intended meaning. Think, for example, about the various literary forms employed in Sacred Scripture: poetry, historical narrative, biography, apocalyptic, sayings of wisdom, songs, and more. If an author is using the literary form of poetry, then that tells us something about the author's intended meaning. It isn't likely that he or she would employ a poetic style to communicate a precise historical narrative.

Similarly, sometimes we need to pay attention to historical or cultural idioms in the text. For example, today we might say something like, "That car is a lemon." By saying this, we don't mean that the car is literally full of juice and pulp. Similarly, words or phrases that appeared in Hebrew or Greek texts thousands of years ago often had unique meanings during that time and in that culture. Therefore, to interpret Biblical passages correctly, we need to understand the

expressions the human authors are using. In these instances, the Biblical text is not in error; we simply need to learn what the author intended to say. While most of us are not Greek or Hebrew scholars, we can use tools like study Bibles, concordances, and commentaries to help us understand key words or phrases.

We can summarize these Biblical principles in the words of Pope Pius XII who wrote, "For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, 'except sin,' so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error."¹ In other words, just as Jesus Christ really and truly took on human flesh without relinquishing His divinity, so too the words of God in Sacred Scripture take up human language without losing their divine authority and inerrancy. The words of Scripture are truly fully human and fully divine.

Finally, we must approach God's Word with humility. St. Augustine says of Scripture, "Some of the expressions are so obscure as to shroud the meaning in the thickest darkness. And I do not doubt that all this was divinely arranged for the purpose of subduing pride."² There isn't a problem with Sacred Scripture simply because we are having difficulties. When a passage is challenging, God is humbling us and inviting us to ponder more deeply. It's okay, even good, to ask difficult questions about the Scriptures. But we must also be willing to put effort into discovering the answers to those questions. Often, those passages we find most perplexing can become spiritually enlightening if we are willing to do the hard work of patiently seeking its meaning with the help of the Holy Spirit.

¹ Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, par. 20. Accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_30091943_divino-afflante-spiritu.html

² St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book II. Accessed at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/12022.htm>, January 25, 2022.

Renewing Our Minds: A Catholic Imaginative Vision

We live in a world full of many (and often contradictory) ideas about the most important aspects of our lives: what it means to be human, how we should live, the nature of love, and the reality of God. This presents a challenge for us as Christ's disciples. As disciples, we are called to have a Catholic imaginative vision, that is to see all things as Christ sees them. The book of Ephesians states that God desires to "make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God" (Eph 3:9). Similarly, St. Paul says that Christians should "have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). These passages reveal that thinking rightly, having the right vision of the world is necessary for faithful discipleship.

As Christian disciples, we are blessed with the gift of Faith. Faith not only gives us knowledge of Divine Revelation (the Trinity, the Incarnation, Eternal Life, etc.) but also our day-to-day experiences—our work, our leisure, our suffering, our family, our past and our future—are made clearer in its light (CCC 153). Consider these words from the Catholic apologist Frank Sheed:

[[I]t is not...enough that we should see the same thing as other people plus the things the Church teaches. Even the things that we and they both see will not look the same or be the same; because what the Church teaches affects even the things already in the landscape, the things of ordinary experience. It is like a physical landscape at sunrise: it is not that you see the same things that you saw before and now find yourself seeing the sun as well. You see everything sun-bathed. Similarly it is not a case of seeing the same universe as other people and then seeing God over and above. For God is at the centre

*of the being of everything whatsoever. If we would see the universe aright, we must see it GOD-bathed.*³

Yet how often do we allow our minds to be truly enlightened by Faith? Instead, don't we frequently turn to the world to shape our minds, imbibing a vision of reality produced by movies, TikTok, Netflix, Instagram, and popular news programs? These forms of media often tell us a different story—that what will really make us happy is money, fame, sex, and power; that what matters is getting something for ourselves, not sacrificing for others; that life ought to be easy, not difficult; that we must live for this world, not the next. By constantly subjecting our minds to these false narratives, we slowly and subtly begin to embrace them. We start to tell ourselves a different story about reality, "exchang[ing] the truth of God for a lie" (Rom 1:25).

How can we resist these false narratives and see the world in the light of Faith? How can we acquire a Catholic imaginative vision? In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom 12:2). Daily renewal of the mind is the habit we need in order to gain a Catholic imaginative vision and avoid worldly ways of thinking.

As disciples seeking to cultivate this vision, there is no better place for us to turn than to God's Word. In the Scriptures, we read the real story, the true Gospel, the one narrative that enables us to think with the mind of Christ. Just imagine what would happen if instead of filling our minds with the world's falsehoods we dedicated ourselves to reading God's Word? Let's not waste our time being steeped in worldly thinking. Let's renew our minds and embrace a Catholic imaginative vision by turning to Sacred Scripture.

³ Sheed, Frank. *Theology and Sanity*, Catholic Way Publishing: London, England (2019). p. 15.

Scripture in the Christian Life

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night (Psalm 1:1-2).

These are the first words of the wisdom literature in the Bible (i.e., Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach, Ecclesiastes). They point us to the very heart of forming our minds and growing in divine wisdom: the habit of reading the Scriptures “day and night.” If we seek to take on the mind of Christ, then the daily reading of Sacred Scripture is essential. Indeed, “The Church ‘forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful...to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ,’ by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures’” (CCC 133).

There is a line from the Second Vatican Council that should inspire us to embrace this daily devotion to Sacred Scripture. It reads, “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord” (DV 21). This is a powerful statement; one we should strive to make our own. Can we say with the Church, “I reverence the Scriptures just as I venerate the body of the Lord.?” Does that statement ring true for you? Or do you find yourself squeamish about being so devoted to the Scriptures? If someone looked at your life, would they see that you reverence both the Eucharist and the Scriptures? Could they observe that you are someone who regularly reads Sacred Scripture by the way you live, by the way you speak?

One figure in Sacred Scripture models this great devotion to Scripture: Mary. When she heard God’s Word, the Scriptures tell us she “kept all

these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). Not only this, but in her song of praise, the Magnificat, we observe that Mary’s devotion to Scripture is so detailed, so intense, that the words of Scripture have become her own (Lk 1:46-55). Scholars note, literally, dozens of Biblical quotes and allusions in these few verses. Pope Benedict XVI writes of Mary and her Magnificat,

Here we see how completely at home Mary is with the word of God, with ease she moves in and out of it. She speaks and thinks with the Word of God; the Word becomes her word, and her word issues from the word of God. Here we see how her thoughts are attuned to the thoughts of God, how her will is one with the will of God (Verbum Domini 28).

Let us be like Mary. Let us ponder God’s Word in our hearts. Let’s immerse ourselves so deeply in God’s Word that it starts to become our word, so that our thoughts become imbued with the thoughts of God. Indeed, let’s be so devoted to Sacred Scripture, reading it “day and night,” that our minds, our hearts, and our lives are transformed.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: Luke 24:13-32, 2 Timothy 3:16, Romans 12:2, Psalm 1:1-2

Introduction

1. Launching Question: Can you think of a time when you came to a place of understanding because someone taught you something you didn't know? How did that change your life?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Last time we looked at the call of Simon and the cost of saying “yes” to the invitation of the Lord. Today, we'll be looking at one the of the essential elements of building a life of discipleship with the Lord: Sacred Scripture.

Ignorance of Scripture is Ignorance of Christ

Read Luke 24:13-27

2. Put yourself in the shoes of these early disciples. You have just witnessed the crucifixion of the man you thought was going to lead your people as the long-awaited messiah king. Now, he

has been put to death, and you are walking home, discouraged. Suddenly, someone you don't recognize comes along beside you and begins asking questions about what has happened. You share your sadness and how does he respond?

Answer: Comfort and support you? No! He rebukes you and, surprisingly, launches into a Bible study! It's not a short one either: “And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (v. 27).

3. Of course, the person these disciples encountered isn't just anyone—we know it is Jesus, risen from the dead. This forces us to ask an important question: Of all the things that Jesus could have done on Easter Sunday, why did He spend so much time interpreting all of the Scriptures to these disciples?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: This isn't the only time Jesus does this either. He does it again just a few short verses later. In the very next scene, Jesus appears to His disciples and he “open[s] their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Lk 24:45). Again, we must ask ourselves, why are the Scriptures so important to Jesus? St. Jerome, the great 4th century Biblical scholar, points us toward an answer when he writes, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.”

4. As Christians we have prayer and the sacraments, as well as fellowship as integral parts of our life. Why is it so important to also engage deeply with Scripture? What do you think we miss about Jesus if we do not read and come to deeply know the Scriptures?

*Answer: We might think of many ways of coming to know Jesus—listening to a good Christian podcast, watching a YouTube video, receiving the sacraments, or spending time in prayer. However, if we want to know Jesus deeply and personally, then Sacred Scripture is essential. It is in the Scriptures that **we learn the story** of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is in the Scriptures that we come to understand how Christ's coming was foretold in the Old Testament. And it is in the Scriptures that people today, two-thousand years later, can hear God speaking to them now. This is the point Jesus seems to be driving home in these passages: **if we want to know Him, we must listen to His Word.***

Divine Inspiration

Please read aloud: Let's keep reading so we can unpack the power of Scripture in our lives.

Read Luke 24:28-32

5. "Did not our hearts burn within us?" (v. 32). Have you ever experienced this before? Have you ever heard something that was so powerful, so beautiful, that your heart was moved with tremendous emotion? What was it?

Allow the group to discuss.

6. These early disciples experienced the power of God's Word. The book of Hebrews tells us, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). We can see

this transforming power at work in many hearts throughout the history of the Church. How has Scripture impacted your life? Or can you think of examples of lives that were drastically changed because of the Word of God?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Note to leader – feel free to share a personal story. Please also share at least one example from the following: St. Anthony of the Desert, St. Augustine. St. Ignatius of Loyola. See Leader's Guide for their stories.

Please read aloud: Why are the Scriptures so powerful? Why are they so unique in their ability to move hearts? One word: inspiration. The Bible is different than any other book. Other books might claim to teach something about God or how to live a holy life. However, only the Bible is written by God Himself.

Let's read what St. Paul says about this:

Read 2 Timothy 3:16

7. What stands out to you from this verse? What does it mean that Scripture is inspired by God?

Allow the group to discuss.

*Answer: The word inspired in Greek is *theópneustos*, which literally means "**God-breathed**" (see CCC 105). Just as our breath moves over our vocal cords to make the sounds needed for speech, God's "breath" brings forth the words of Sacred Scripture. Indeed, the Scriptures contain God's own divine Word, communicated to us through the*

*human words of the inspired authors. That is why the disciples on the Road to Emmaus and many saints throughout the centuries were so deeply impacted by the Scriptures: they were **listening to God's own Word**.*

8. How might the inspiration of Scripture impact our relationship with God? What does it mean for our practice of the Faith, especially in the Mass?

Allow group to discuss.

*Answer: Hearing God's voice in the Scriptures isn't only for saints of old. It is something we can do every day. When we prayerfully read the Scriptures, **we converse with God Himself**. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, "in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them" (DV 21).*

*Reading the Scriptures leads to a vibrant practice of the Faith. When we are familiar with the Scriptures, we will **perceive the works of God** in our life, confident that we know the sound of his voice and the character of his acts. Additionally, for the disciples on the road, the Scriptures led them to the Eucharist, and in the Eucharist they "recognized" Christ (v. 31, 35). Often, people struggle to recognize Jesus' Eucharistic Presence because they haven't deeply listened to God's Word in Scripture. Indeed, the written Word, Sacred Scripture, prepares us to receive the Word Made Flesh, the **Eucharist**. The two belong together.*

Biblical Inerrancy

Please read aloud: We just made some bold claims about Scripture: it's inspired, it's transformative, God actually speaks to us through it. Let's add another claim: because it is written by God, everything contained in Scripture is true. It is "*inerrant*" meaning "the books of Scripture [teach]...without error" (*Dei Verbum* 11). In the words of the Catechism, "God is Truth itself, whose words cannot deceive. This is why one can abandon oneself in full trust to the truth and faithfulness of his word in all things" (CCC 215).

But this may be a hard claim because you may have encountered some confusing or difficult passages in Scripture. We might even find language we don't understand or statements we struggle to reconcile with what we know to be true. What do we do when we encounter these difficulties? Let's unpack this a little more.

9. Scripture is written by *human* authors who are inspired by God. When we read any text that's from a different historical or cultural context, what kinds of things do we need to take into account? For example, how might a poetic writing style or the historical situation in the ancient world thousands of years ago impact the way you read a text today?

Answer: We ought to take into account the historical, cultural, and literary context as well as idioms, use of words, and the human author's intended meaning of words.

10. Some say the Bible is more of a library than a book. There are at least 35 human authors of the 73 biblical books and many genres (poetry, narrative, historical, apocalyptic, songs, prophetic, letter, etc.). If you take these things into consideration when you read

any other text, how should we engage with them in Scripture? What kinds of things should we be mindful of, especially when we encounter difficulties in the text?

*Answer: The Catechism states, “to interpret Scripture correctly, the reader must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm and to what God wanted to reveal by their words” (CCC 109). While the Holy Spirit certainly inspired the authors of Sacred Scripture, these human authors were real authors with a real message. By discovering the author’s **intention**, we can better understand the intended meaning of a passage.*

*The elements of the author’s intention can be considered in its historical, cultural, and literary **context**. To interpret a passage correctly, we must pay careful attention to these elements to determine the author’s **intended meaning**. Sacred Scripture employs a variety of literary forms that should be approached differently. We should be especially mindful of words or phrases that were used in ancient Hebrew and Greek often had unique meanings in that time and culture. Therefore, to interpret Biblical passages correctly, we need to understand the expressions the human authors are using in their right context.*

Please read aloud: Sacred Scripture, like the Church and like Jesus himself, is fully divine and fully human. In the words of Pope Pius XII, “As the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, ‘except sin,’ so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error.”¹ In other words, just as Jesus Christ really and truly took on human

¹ Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, par. 20. Accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_30091943_divino-afflante-spiritu.html

flesh without relinquishing His divinity, so too the words of God in Sacred Scripture take up human language without losing their divine authority and inerrancy. The words of Scripture are truly fully human and fully divine! Our faith is incarnational!

11. Understanding that Scripture is both fully human and fully divine should impact the way we read it. That said, we also need to have the right disposition of heart. With what disposition should we approach the Biblical text, even passages that are difficult?

*Answer: We must approach God’s Word with **humility**. St. Augustine says of Scripture, “Some of the expressions are so obscure as to shroud the meaning in the thickest darkness. And I do not doubt that all this was divinely arranged for the purpose of subduing pride.”² There isn’t a problem with Sacred Scripture simply because we are having difficulties. When a passage is challenging, God is humbling us and inviting us to **ponder** more deeply. It’s okay, even good, to ask difficult questions about the Scriptures. But we must also be willing to **put effort** into discovering the answers to those questions. Often, those passages we find most perplexing can become spiritually enlightening if we are willing to do the hard work of patiently seeking its meaning with the help of the Holy Spirit.*

Renewing Our Minds: A Catholic Imaginative Vision

Please read aloud: We live in a world full of many (and often contradictory) ideas about the most important aspects of our lives: what it means to be human, how we should live, the nature of love,

² St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book II. Accessed at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/12022.htm>, January 25, 2022.

and the reality of God. This presents a challenge for us as Christ's disciples. We are called to have a Catholic imaginative vision, that is to see all things as Christ sees them. A Catholic mind, when renewed by grace, will look and think differently than a mind formed by our culture or this world.

Faith is a gift, and it is a "light" that shines and reveals the reality of things to us (CCC 153). Consider these words from the Catholic apologist Frank Sheed:

[[I]t is not...enough that we should see the same thing as other people plus the things the Church teaches. Even the things that we and they both see will not look the same or be the same; because what the Church teaches affects even the things already in the landscape, the things of ordinary experience. It is like a physical landscape at sunrise: it is not that you see the same things that you saw before and now find yourself seeing the sun as well. You see everything sun-bathed. Similarly it is not a case of seeing the same universe as other people and then seeing God over and above. For God is at the centre of the being of everything whatsoever. If we would see the universe aright, we must see it GOD-bathed.³

12. How do things like movies, social media, Netflix, news, etc. affect how we think about the world and ourselves? How might Scripture, in contrast, better equip us to have a Catholic imaginative vision?

Allow the group to discuss.

*Answer: Media is one of the greatest forces working to **shape our minds** and the way we think. Movies, TikTok, Netflix, Instagram,*

³ Sheed, Frank. *Theology and Sanity*, Catholic Way Publishing: London, England (2019). p. 15.

*and popular news programs – these types of media often tell us a **different story** than what is true—that what will really make us happy is money, fame, sex, and power; that what matters is getting something for ourselves, not sacrificing for others; that life ought to be easy, not difficult; that we must live for this world, not the next.*

When taking on the mind of Christ, there is no better place for us to turn than to God's Word. In the Scriptures, we read the real story, the true Gospel, the one narrative that enables us to think with the mind of Christ. Just imagine what would happen if instead of filling our minds with the world's falsehoods we dedicated ourselves to reading God's Word? Let's not waste our time being steeped in worldly thinking. Let's renew our minds and embrace a Catholic imaginative vision by turning to Sacred Scripture.

13. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." How have you experienced a transformation of your mind because of your faith in Jesus? What steps do you need to take to continue to allow Scripture to shape your thinking instead of the world?

Allow the group to discuss.

Scripture in the Christian Life

Read Psalm 1:1-2

Please read aloud: These are the first words of the wisdom literature in the Bible (i.e., Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach, Ecclesiastes). They point us to the very heart of forming our minds and growing in divine wisdom: the habit of reading the Scriptures

“day and night.” If we seek to take on the mind of Christ, then the daily reading of Sacred Scripture is essential (CCC 133).

There is a line from the Second Vatican Council that should inspire us to embrace this daily devotion to Sacred Scripture. It reads, “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord” (DV 21). This is a powerful statement; one we should strive to make our own.

14. Does that statement surprise you? Do you venerate the Scriptures in this way? How would you describe your current devotion to Scripture? If someone looked at your life, would they see that you reverence both the Eucharist and the Scriptures? Could they observe that you are someone who regularly reads Sacred Scripture by the way live, by the way you speak?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: One figure in Sacred Scripture models this great devotion to Scripture: Mary. Pope Benedict XVI wrote of Mary at the Annunciation when she proclaims her Magnificat the following words,

Here we see how completely at home Mary is with the word of God, with ease she moves in and out of it. She speaks and thinks with the Word of God; the Word becomes her word, and her word issues from the word of God. Here we see how her thoughts are attuned to the thoughts of God, how her will is one with the will of God (Verbum Domini 28).

15. What could you do to be more like Mary and have a greater devotion to Scripture? How would your life be different if you truly meditated on God’s word like she did?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Let us be like Mary. Let us ponder God’s Word in our hearts. Let’s immerse ourselves so deeply in God’s Word that it starts to become our word, so that our thoughts become imbued with the thoughts of God. Indeed, let’s be so devoted to Sacred Scripture, reading it “day and night,” that our minds, our hearts, and our lives are transformed.

NOTES



Chapter III

Christian Fellowship

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
Pages 54 - 65

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
Pages 66 - 78



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).¹ 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).

¹ 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.²

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

² 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.

financial offerings. 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.

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, obedience³, 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).

³ 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.

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.

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

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 analogy¹). 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.*

¹ 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”² (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.³ 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*

² 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.

³ 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.

arisen since the Protestant Reformation). Without the unity of Faith, 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).

NOTES



Chapter IV

The Eucharist and the Mass

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
Pages 80 - 93

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
Pages 94 - 106

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The Last Supper (Luke 22:14-20)

And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after supper, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk 22:14-20).

The Last Supper is one of the most important events in all of Scripture. It appears explicitly in three of the four Gospels and Paul's letters. Not only this, but if you've been to Mass before, you know that the Last Supper is central to Catholic worship. Given its prominence in Scripture and the Church, we must ask ourselves, "What is happening at the Last Supper?" To understand its significance, we need to dig beyond the surface. This passage is full of rich, meaningful words like "Passover," "remembrance," and "covenant," and discovering their

meaning is essential for understanding the beauty and significance of the Last Supper.

A New Passover

[T]hey shall take every man a lamb without blemish, a male a year old...[T]he whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs in the evening. Then they shall take some of the blood, and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat them. They shall eat the flesh that night.... It is the Lord's passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will smite all the first-born in the land.... The blood shall be a sign for you...when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall fall upon you (Exodus 12:3-13).

God's people were once enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. Therefore, God sent ten plagues to persuade Pharaoh to let Israel go free. These plagues wreaked havoc on the Egyptians and demonstrated God's judgement on the gods of Egypt. The final plague was the most devastating: The firstborn sons of both man and beast were destined to die unless they celebrated a ritual called the Passover. This ritual involved sacrificing an unblemished lamb, marking one's doorpost with the lamb's blood, and eating the sacrificed lamb. When God's angel saw the blood on the doorposts, he would "pass-over" those houses, permitting the firstborn sons to live. The Passover ultimately led Israel to escape Egypt and be freed by God's mighty hand. From that time on, God commanded the people to celebrate the feast of Passover each year as a memorial of His saving action.

Do This in Memory of Me

What does the Passover have to do with the Last Supper? We know from the Gospels that the Last Supper was a Passover meal (Lk 22:7-13). Yet, this Passover meal was different than any that preceded it. To perceive this difference, we need to understand an important word: “remembrance” (Lk 22:19). In modern English, the word remembrance means recalling what happened in the past. But that is not the full meaning of the word in this context. The Greek word in the Gospel is *anamnesis*. More than simply recalling the past, *anamnesis* means to make present again, literally to *re-present*. The Jews didn’t merely “remember” the Passover; by their observance of this memorial, they mysteriously participated in it. Even today, the *Haggadah*, the Jewish guide to the Passover evening meal (*Seder*), speaks in the present tense:

*This year we are here; next year in the land of Israel. This year we are slaves; next year we will be a free people. What makes this night different from all other nights?*¹

It is as though every Jew personally experiences anew the mighty deeds God accomplished centuries before, as if they are preparing to leave Egypt alongside Moses that very night.

What’s incredible in this passage, however, is that Jesus isn’t inviting His apostles to remember (*anamnesis*) the events of the first Passover. Instead, He reorients the celebration around Himself, saying, “Do this in remembrance of *me*” (Lk 22:19, emphasis added). We shouldn’t miss this dramatic change. To a first century Jewish audience, these words would have been astounding. They had centered their

¹ <https://w2.chabad.org/media/pdf/1125/rCjo11252600.pdf>

celebration of Passover on the events in Egypt for centuries. Now, Jesus is saying, “This is no longer simply a memorial of Passover, this is a memorial of me.” Not only this, but God had commanded Israel to observe Passover “for ever” (Ex 12:14). Was Jesus violating God’s law? Was He circumventing the prescriptions for right worship? Of course not. Then what *was* He doing?

The Lamb of God

To uncover an answer, consider a title for Christ that initially appears in Scripture on the lips of John the Baptist: “Lamb of God” (John 1:29). While such a title might seem ordinary for many Catholics, referring to Christ as “Lamb of God” has incredible significance, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the Jewish Passover. Consider, for example, the parallels between Christ and the Passover lamb:

- God commands the people to select a lamb “without blemish, a male a year old” (Ex 12:5). We know that Christ was truly unblemished, for he was without sin (Heb 4:15).
- An unblemished lamb could have no broken bones (Ex 12:46). Amazingly, though the criminals hung on the cross next to Jesus had their bones broken to speed along their deaths, Christ died before his legs could be broken.
- The people were to “kill their lambs in the evening” (Ex 12:6). At the time of Jesus, the lambs for Passover were sacrificed in the temple beginning around 3pm—the exact time at which Christ died on the cross (Lk 23:44-46).²
- One scholar even notes that it was likely the lambs in Jesus’ day were sacrificed in a manner that resembled crucifixion, being hung on wooden rods.³

² Josephus, War 6:423-27.

³ Pitre, Brant, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper*, p. 63.

- Just as the blood of the lambs was spread on the doorposts and lintel, Christ’s blood was spread on the wooden beams of the cross.
- Finally, even the plant used to apply the blood to the lintel, hyssop, appears in the Gospel, when it is used to give Jesus a sponge full of vinegar (Ex 12:22, Jn 19:29).

Passover Lamb	Jesus, the Lamb of God
Unblemished, no broken bones	Without sin, his bones are not broken
Male, a year-old	Male, in the prime of life (age 33)
Sacrificed (or crucified) in the evening twilight	Crucified at the time when lambs were being sacrificed in the temple
Blood on the doorposts and lintel	Blood on the wood of the cross
Blood splattered with hyssop	Given vinegar on a branch of hyssop

Now we can begin to see the significance of the word “Passover” in the Last Supper. Jesus isn’t abolishing the Passover. He is fulfilling it. He is giving us a New Passover, one in which He is the New Passover Lamb.

Sacrifice, Meal, Covenant

Sacrifice

To further unpack the meaning of the Last Supper, we must also understand the significance of sacrifice in the Bible. For Christians, the idea that Christ offers himself as a sacrifice is somewhat familiar. Indeed, His death on the cross is a sacrifice offered for our sins (Heb 10:12). But how is Christ’s sacrificial death connected to the Last Supper?

Sacrificial language is deeply embedded in the Last Supper narrative. First, simply the words “body and blood” would recall the separation of the blood from the body in ritual animal sacrifices. Jesus also speaks of his body being “given for you,” a phrase connected with sacrifice other places in the New Testament (Lk 2:24, 22:19, Mk10:45, Jn 6:51, Gal 1:4). Further, Jesus says his blood will be “poured out,” which is reminiscent of the temple sacrifices, when the blood of animals was “poured out” on the altar (Lv 4:7, 18, 25, 34). By using these phrases, Jesus is directly linking the Last Supper to His sacrifice on calvary.

By connecting the themes of Passover and sacrifice, we begin to see a more complete picture of the Last Supper. Jesus is showing His apostles that He is the true servant of God, Who offers the perfect sacrifice, fulfilling the sacrificial rituals of the Old Testament. The Book of Hebrews tells us, it was “impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins” (Heb 10:4). These sacrifices merely symbolized the transformation of heart that God desired. Jesus’ sacrifice, however, is the perfect offering, capable of accomplishing salvation “once for all” (Heb 10:10). While the original Passover led the people of Israel out of slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt, Christ’s Passover leads to true freedom, not from physical bondage but from the greatest enemies of all: sin

and death (see Jn 8:34). Indeed, Christ's sacrifice "completes and surpasses all other sacrifices" (CCC 614, see Heb 10:1-18).

Meal

Now that we've seen how the Last Supper is connected to Passover and the idea of sacrifice, we must go a step further. One obvious element of the Last Supper is that it is a meal. Why did Jesus choose to make a sacred meal the centerpiece of Christian worship?

While it might seem less obvious to us, the connection between sacrifice and meal would have been entirely natural for Jesus' Jewish audience. Throughout the Old Testament, sacrifices and meals were deeply intertwined. Consider Passover itself. The Israelites didn't simply sacrifice the lamb. They were also instructed to eat of it. In fact, the sacrifice was incomplete until it was eaten (Ex 12:8). If the Israelites failed to eat the Passover Lamb, they would have suffered the disastrous consequences of the tenth plague, the death of their firstborn sons.

Jesus' sacrifice follows the same logic. He didn't simply give His life in sacrifice on the cross; He also invites His apostles to complete His sacrifice by eating of it in a sacred meal. That is why Jesus takes the bread and wine and tells his apostles "This is my body...this is my blood." He is inviting them to complete the New Passover by eating His flesh, the flesh of the sacrificed New Passover Lamb (see Jn 6:41-58).

Covenant

There is one additional point we must make about these sacrificial meals. In the Bible, ritual meals aimed at much more than satisfying the needs of the body; they expressed covenant union. At the Last Supper, Jesus directly connected his actions with an Old Testament covenant. In the Book of Exodus, God made a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex 24). The people first accepted God's word. Then, they offered sacrifices. Next, Moses took the blood of the sacrifices, sprinkled it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you." Finally, Moses, Aaron, Aarons' sons, and seventy elders ate and drank in God's presence. This was a moment of intimacy with God. Later Rabbis compared this covenant ceremony to marriage vows. This was the moment when Israel became God's beloved spouse (see Ez 16:8, Jer 2:2, Is 54:5, Hos 2:16). This scene is surely in the background of the Last Supper. Not only does Jesus speak of a "new covenant," but also in Matthew and Mark's accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus explicitly refers to His blood as the "blood of the covenant"—the same phrase used in the covenant ceremony in the Book of Exodus (Mt 26:28, Mk 14:24, Ex 24:8).

We can now see how these themes of sacrifice, meal, and covenant tie together. Jesus offers Himself as the perfect sacrifice to God. This sacrifice is completed in a ritual meal, which ratifies a new covenant. At the Last Supper, the apostles are brought into covenant union with Christ through a *communion* meal.

The Thank Offering

One final phrase from the Last Supper merits our attention. Scripture tells us that it was only after Jesus had "given thanks" that He gave His

body and blood to His apostles (Lk 22:19). While Jesus was certainly expressing His gratitude to the Father, much more is contained in these words.

Many people have heard of some Old Testament sacrifices, but fewer are familiar with the *todah*, that is, the thank offering. The *todah* was incredibly significant to the Jews. There is an old rabbinic saying that “in the coming Messianic age all sacrifices will cease, but the thank offering will never cease.”⁴ Indeed, the *todah* was one of the greatest of all Old Testament sacrifices. Therefore, when we read that Jesus had “given thanks,” it’s expressing much more than mere gratitude. He was offering a *todah*.

What was a *todah* sacrifice and why was it so important? Biblical scholar Tim Gray explains:

*A todah sacrifice would be offered by someone whose life had been delivered from great peril... The redeemed person would show his gratitude to God by gathering his closest friends and family for a todah sacrificial meal. The lamb would be sacrificed in the Temple and the bread for the meal would be consecrated the moment the lamb was sacrificed. The bread and meat, along with wine, would constitute the elements of the sacred todah meal, which would be accompanied by prayers and songs of thanksgiving.*⁵

The key elements of the *todah* so closely align with the Last Supper, that it is almost undeniable that, while the Last Supper is certainly

⁴ Taken from the Pesiqta as quoted in Hartmut Gese, *Essays On Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 133.

⁵ Gray, Tim. “From Jewish Passover to Christian Eucharist: The Story of the Todah,” *Lay Witness*, (Nov/Dec 2002). Accessed at <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/reli-gion-and-philosophy/apologetics/from-jewish-passover-to-christian-eucharist-the-story-of-the-todah.html>, January 26, 2023.

a Passover meal, it is also a *todah* sacrifice. Jesus was making a thank offering to the Father in anticipation of His deliverance (the Resurrection) from a great trial (the Passion). Therefore, He gathered His closest friends (the apostles) to share in a sacrificial meal of bread, wine and the lamb of sacrifice (His body and blood). The meal even ended with a hymn (Mt 26:30).

The Mass and Discipleship

With this background in mind, we are now ready to connect the Last Supper to our lives as disciples. Perhaps you’ve noticed some connections already. Nonetheless, let’s walk through the details carefully, so that we can see how the key elements of the Last Supper are present in the Mass today.

First, the Mass is the “memorial of Christ’s Passover” (CCC 1409). As we discussed, memorial (*anamnesis*) doesn’t simply mean “remember.” In a memorial, the events of the past are re-presented. Christ commanded His apostles to “do this in remembrance (*anamnesis*) of me” and His apostles were faithful to His command (Lk 22:19, CCC 1342). Ever since then, Christians have celebrated this memorial—it is exactly what we celebrate as disciples today. When we go to Mass, we not only recall Jesus’ sacrifice, but it actually becomes present to us. “The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ’s Passover...*made present* by the liturgical action” (CCC 1409, emphasis added). This is one of the reasons why we believe in the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist. Indeed, “Christ is truly, really, and substantially” present at Mass (CCC 1374).

Next, the Mass is a *sacrifice*. “Because it is the memorial of Christ’s Passover, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice” (CCC 1365). Indeed, the Church affirms, “the Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross” (CCC 1366). This does not mean that at every Mass Christ is sacrificed again. Rather, Christ’s one, perfect sacrifice is made present anew. When we go to Mass, it is as though we are brought to the very foot of the Cross. While we could never offer a perfect sacrifice to God, the Mass allows us to unite our imperfect sacrifice with Christ’s perfect one. The Catechism explains, “In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value” (CCC 1368). Therefore, when we attend Mass, we must bring our whole selves to the Father, offering our joys, sorrows, dreams, and desires to God through Christ. This is the very heart of the “active participation” which the Church invites us to observe in the liturgy.⁶ We are called to offer all that we are and all that we have to Father in union with Christ’s perfect sacrifice.

Further, the sacrifice of Christ is connected to a *meal*. St. Paul writes, “Our paschal (Passover) lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the *feast*” (1 Cor 5:7-8, NAB, emphasis added). Notice what Paul doesn’t say. He doesn’t just say, “Christ has been sacrificed, therefore, believe in Him.” As a learned Jew who knows the connection between sacrifice and meal, St. Paul realizes that the sacrifice of Christ is only complete once the ritual meal has been eaten. That is why Jesus invites us to eat His flesh and drink His blood. It’s not a symbolic gesture; we must truly eat of His sacrifice.

⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14. Accessed at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

This reality sheds new light on Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John, “[U]nless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you” (Jn 6:52). Just as the Israelites would have suffered disastrous consequences if they didn’t eat the Passover lamb, so too, if we don’t receive Christ’s body and blood in the Eucharist, we won’t experience the salvific effects of His sacrifice. Jesus in the Eucharist is truly the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” By participating in this meal, we are set free.

Next, this sacred Eucharistic meal leads to *covenantal* union. How do we enter into covenant union with God? How do we live as members of His new covenant family, the Church? Certainly, one primary way is by participating in the Mass and receiving Holy Communion. Just as the Israelites read the words of the law, assented to them, and ate a meal in God’s holy presence, so too do we offer our “Amen” (“so be it” or “let it be done”) to God’s Word and share in an intimate covenant meal with Him when we go to Mass (Ex 24:4-11). We call it “Holy Communion” because this meal “augments our union with Christ” and unites us as His body, the Church (CCC 1391, 1331). Indeed, the “principal fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an intimate union with Christ Jesus” (CCC 1391). There is no deeper intimacy with Christ than receiving Him in Holy Communion.

The Eucharist is also our *todah*, our thank offering. The word *eucharistia* literally means thanksgiving. This is the same Greek word Scripture uses when it states that Jesus had “given thanks” at the Last Supper (Lk 22:19). We celebrate this offering with our spiritual family, the Church, thanking God for delivering us from sin and eternal death.

Final Thoughts

Given this amazing gift of the Eucharist, how should we respond? What practical steps should we as disciples take to fully embrace this great mystery? Much could be said, but here are a few simple places to start:

- First, faithfully attend Sunday Mass. Christ has humbled Himself, taking the forms of bread and wine, so that you can approach Him. Don't reject this great gift.
- Prepare yourself to receive the Lord worthily. St. Paul writes, "Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself" (1 Cor 11:28-29). If you have committed mortal sin, go to Confession before receiving Holy Communion.
- Lastly, as you come to a deeper knowledge and love of the Eucharist, seek out more opportunities to approach Him, including daily Mass or Eucharistic adoration.

The celebration of the Eucharist in the Mass is at the heart of discipleship; it is the "source and summit of the Christian life" (CCC 1324). Christ has given Himself fully to us; let us give ourselves fully to Him in return.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: Luke 22:14-20, Exodus 12:3-13

Introduction

1. Launching Question: Has something ever become so familiar to you that you sometimes forget what you are doing when you do it? Or have you ever done something that was so routine that you couldn't remember if you did it or not?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Last time we considered the story of Zacchaeus and the vital need for fellowship in the Christian life, especially because it is a means by which we are transformed! We also mentioned how the Mass is the truest form of communion between believers that is possible. Unfortunately, sometimes the Mass has become so familiar that we forget how amazing it is. Today, we will continue considering the Mass and the Eucharist and dig a little deeper into what they should mean for us as disciples of Jesus. There's no better place to look than the Last Supper to begin unpacking the source and summit of our faith. Let's turn to Luke's Gospel to read about it.

The Last Supper

Read Luke 22:14-20

2. If you've ever been to Mass, you've heard these words before. They seem so routine to us; how might they be richer than we realize? But what is really going on? Does any phrase or word seem especially strange when you really sit and think about it?

Allow the group to discuss.

Possible answers: Not eating the Passover until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God, offering his body, asking them to do this in remembrance of him, the cup of wine is a new covenant in his blood.

Please read aloud: The Last Supper is one of the most important events in all of Scripture. Given its prominence in Scripture and the Church, we must ask ourselves, "What is happening at the Last Supper?" To understand its significance, we need to dig beyond the surface. This passage is full of rich, meaningful words like "Passover," "remembrance," and "covenant," and discovering their meaning is essential for understanding the beauty and significance of the Last Supper.

Let's start with "Do this in Memory of Me." To unpack this, let's take a look at some key background and context for this phrase.

A New Passover

3. First, does anyone know what Passover is?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Let's take a look at the text together.

Read Exodus 12:3-13

4. What is happening here? Could someone summarize this story?

*Answer: At the time of the Hebrews' enslavement in Egypt, God sent ten plagues upon the Egyptians in order to convince the Pharaoh to let his people go free. The final plague was the most devastating: the firstborn sons of man and beast would die unless they celebrated a ritual which was named the Passover. The ritual involved sacrificing an unblemished lamb, marking one's doorpost with its blood, and eating its meat. When God saw the blood on the doorposts, he would "pass-over" those houses, leaving the firstborn sons untouched. This led ultimately to their escape from Pharaoh and their freedom from slavery by God's mighty hand. From that time on, God commanded the people **celebrate** the feast of **Passover each year** as a **memorial of his saving action**.*

Please read aloud: So, we know the Last Supper was a Passover meal. And we've just learned that God commanded this feast be celebrated every year as a memorial of his saving work. Yet this Passover meal was different from all others.

To perceive the difference between every other Passover meal and the Last Supper, we need to understand an important word: "remembrance" (Lk 22:19). In modern English, the word remembrance means recalling what happened in the past. But the Greek word in the Gospel is "anamnesis." More than recalling the past, anamnesis means to make present again, literally to *re-present*. The Jews didn't merely "remember" the Passover; by their observance of this memorial, they mysteriously participated in it. It is as though Jews

personally experience the mighty deeds God accomplished centuries ago in every Passover feast.

5. Can you perceive any differences in what Jesus is saying and doing in the passage from Luke that we read? (*If needed ask* – He is commanding his disciples to partake of this meal in remembrance of *what?* Or rather, *who?*) What does this tell us about what Jesus is doing at the Last Supper?

*Answer: What is incredible about Jesus's words, however, is that he is **reorienting the celebration of Passover around Himself**. He is instituting a meal to commemorate the saving power of God, as he is about undertake a great saving action with many mighty deeds to set his people free from slavery of a different kind, that of sin. He is also commanding his disciples to re-present this sacrifice in the blessing, breaking and sharing of the bread and wine.*

Please read aloud: Jesus's words would have been astounding to first century Jews. Was he violating God's law? Was he undermining the expectations for right worship of God at the Passover? Of course not. Then, what was he doing? Let's dig in more by considering another key element of the Passover: "The Lamb of God."

6. Jesus is called the Lamb of God, first by John the Baptist (Jn 1:29). Why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: While such a title might seem ordinary for many Catholics, referring to Christ as "Lamb of God" has incredible significance, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the Jewish Passover. Consider, for example, the parallels between Christ and the Passover lamb:

- An unblemished lamb could have no broken bones (Ex 12:46). Amazingly, though the criminals on Golgotha next to Jesus had their bones broken to speed along their deaths, Christ died before his legs could be broken.
- The people were to “kill their lambs in the evening” (Ex 12:6). At the time of Jesus, the lambs for Passover were sacrificed in the temple beginning around 3pm—the exact time at which Christ died on the cross (Lk 23:44-46)¹.
- Just as the blood of the lambs was spread on the doorposts and lintel, Christ’s blood was spread on the wooden beams of the cross.
- Finally, even the plant used to apply the blood to the lintel, hyssop, appears in the Gospel, when it is used to give Jesus a sponge full of vinegar (Ex 12:22, Jn 19:29).

Now we can begin to see the significance of the word “Passover” in the Last Supper. Jesus isn’t abolishing the Passover. He is fulfilling it. He is giving us a New Passover, one in which He is the New Passover Lamb

7. What specifically happens to the Passover Lamb throughout the feast?

Answer: It is sacrificed and eaten.

Please read aloud: The lamb is key part in the **sacrifice** offered to God, the food eaten and shared in a communal **meal**, and it’s also a key element of making a **covenant** with God. Let’s look at these three elements (Sacrifice, Meal, Covenant) one by one, to continue drawing the connection between Passover and the Last Supper.

¹ Josephus, War 6:423-27.

Sacrifice, Meal, Covenant

Please read aloud: Sacrificial language is deeply embedded in the Last Supper narrative. The words “body and blood” would recall the separation of the blood from the body in ritual animal sacrifices. Jesus also speaks of his body being “given for you”. Jesus says his blood will be “poured out,” which is reminiscent of the temple sacrifices, when the blood of animals was “poured out” on the altar.

8. What is the purpose of Jesus offering a sacrifice, which is his very self?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Jesus is showing His apostles that He is the true servant of God, Who offers the perfect sacrifice, fulfilling the sacrificial rituals of the Old Testament. Jesus’ sacrifice is the perfect offering, capable of accomplishing salvation “once for all” (Heb 10:10). While the original Passover led the people of Israel out of slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt, Christ’s Passover leads to true freedom, not from physical bondage but from the greatest enemies of all: sin and death. Indeed, Christ’s sacrifice “completes and surpasses all other sacrifices” (CCC 614).

Please read aloud: We’ve seen how the Last Supper is connected to Passover and the idea of sacrifice. Now, we must go a step further. One obvious element of the Last Supper is that it is a meal. While it might not be obvious for us, the connection between sacrifice and meal would have been entirely natural for Jesus’ Jewish audience.

9. At the Passover, the sacrifice of the lamb was incomplete until the Israelites consumed it. How might this shed light on the meaning of Jesus’ words at the Last Supper for us today?

Answer: Jesus' sacrifice follows the same logic. He didn't simply give His life in sacrifice on the cross; He also invites His apostles to complete His sacrifice by eating of it in a sacred meal. That is why Jesus takes the bread and wine and tells his apostles "This is my body...this is my blood." He is inviting them to complete the New Passover by eating His flesh, the flesh of the sacrificed New Passover Lamb (see Jn 6:41-58). We are called to participate in the sacrificial offering of Christ's body and blood by consuming it as well.

Please read aloud: There is one additional point we must make about these sacrificial meals. In the Bible, ritual meals aimed at much more than satisfying the needs of the body; they expressed covenant union. To see this exact reality in the Old Testament, let's turn to Exodus 24. *Read Exodus 24:3-11*

10. We read that the people offered sacrificed to God, then God made a covenant with his people after they had accepted his word, and, finally, Moses, Aaron, Aarons' sons, and seventy elders ate and drank in God's presence. This was a moment of intimacy with God! Later Rabbis compared this covenant ceremony to marriage vows. Why might meals be an expression of intimacy? If covenants are connected to meals, and meals to intimacy, what does this tell us about the Last Supper?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: We can now see how these themes of sacrifice, meal, and covenant tie together. Jesus offers Himself as the perfect sacrifice to God. This sacrifice is completed in a ritual meal, which ratifies a new covenant. At the Last Supper, the apostles are brought into covenant union with Christ through a communion meal. This communion meal is a place of great union and intimacy.

The Thank Offering

One final phrase from the Last Supper merits our attention. Scripture tells us that it was only after Jesus had "given thanks" that He gave His body and blood to His apostles (Lk 22:19). While Jesus was certainly expressing His gratitude to the Father, much more is contained in these words.

Many people have heard of some Old Testament sacrifices, but fewer are familiar with the *todah*, that is, the thank offering. The *todah* was incredibly significant to the Jews. There is an old rabbinic saying that "in the coming Messianic age all sacrifices will cease, but the thank offering will never cease."⁴ Indeed, the *todah* was one of the greatest of all Old Testament sacrifices. Therefore, when we read that Jesus had "given thanks," it's expressing much more than mere gratitude. He was offering a *todah*.

What was a *todah* sacrifice and why was it so important? Biblical scholar Tim Gray explains:

*A todah sacrifice would be offered by someone whose life had been **delivered from great peril**... The redeemed person would show his **gratitude to God** by gathering his **closest friends and family** for a todah **sacrificial meal**. The lamb would be sacrificed in the Temple and the **bread** for the meal would be consecrated the moment the **lamb** was sacrificed. The bread and meat, along with **wine**, would constitute the elements of the sacred todah meal, which would be **accompanied by prayers and songs of thanksgiving**⁵*

11. The key elements of the *todah* so closely align with the Last Supper, that it is almost undeniable that, while the Last Supper is certainly a Passover meal, it is also a *todah* sacrifice. What elements of a

todah offering do you see present in the Last Supper? Why do you think Jesus would have been offering a *todah*?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Jesus was making a thank offering to the Father in anticipation of His deliverance (the Resurrection) from a great trial (the Passion). Therefore, He gathered His closest friends (the apostles) to share in a sacrificial meal of bread, wine and the lamb of sacrifice (His body and blood). The meal even ended with a hymn (Mt 26:30).

The Mass and Discipleship

With this background in mind, we are now ready to connect the Last Supper to our lives as disciples. Perhaps you've noticed some connections already. Nonetheless, let's walk through the details carefully, so that we can see how the key elements of the Last Supper are present in the Mass today.

12. We've touched on many aspects of the Last Supper. How can you see all these things relating to the Mass?
- Passover?
 - Anamnesis?
 - Sacrifice?
 - Meal?
 - Covenant?
 - Thank offering?

Answer:

- The Passover was the ritual commemorating the saving act of God when He freed His people from slavery to Pharaoh, so that they*

could worship Him freely. They sacrificed a lamb and its blood saved them from death. The Mass is the ritual re-presentation of the meal Jesus shared, where He became the lamb offered to free his people, and all people, from the slavery of sin so that they might enter into communion with Him. His body and His blood save us from the wages of sin, which is death.

- The Mass is the "memorial of Christ's Passover" (CCC 1409). As we discussed, memorial (anamnesis) doesn't simply mean "remember." In a memorial, the events of the past are re-presented. When we go to Mass, we not only recall Jesus' sacrifice, but it actually becomes present to us. "The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's Passover...made present by the liturgical action" (CCC 1409, emphasis added). This is one of the reasons why we believe in the "**Real Presence**" of Christ in the Eucharist*
- The Mass is a sacrifice. "Because it is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice" (CCC 1365). This does not mean that at every Mass Christ is sacrificed again. Rather, Christ's one, perfect sacrifice is made present anew. When we go to Mass, it is as though we are brought to the very foot of the Cross. While we could never offer a perfect sacrifice to God, the Mass allows us to **unite our imperfect sacrifice with Christ's perfect one**. when we attend Mass, we must bring our whole selves to the Father, offering our joys, sorrows, dreams, and desires to God through Christ. This is the very heart of the "active participation" which the Church invites us to observe.*
- The sacrifice of Christ is connected to a meal. St. Paul writes, "Our paschal (Passover) lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the feast" (1 Cor 5:7-8, NAB). As a learned Jew who knows the connection between sacrifice and meal, St. Paul realizes that the sacrifice of Christ is only complete once the ritual meal has been eaten. That is why Jesus invites us to eat His*

*flesh and drink His blood. It's not a symbolic gesture; **we must truly eat of His sacrifice.***

- e. *This sacred Eucharistic meal leads to covenantal union. How do we enter and live as members of His new covenant family, the Church? Certainly, one primary way is by participating in the Mass and receiving Holy Communion. The "principal fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an **intimate union with Christ Jesus**" (CCC 1391). There is no deeper intimacy with Christ than receiving Him in Holy Communion.*
- f. *The Eucharist is also our today, our thank offering. The word eucharistia literally means thanksgiving. This is the same Greek word Scripture uses when it states that Jesus had "given thanks" at the Last Supper (Lk 22:19). We celebrate this offering with our spiritual family, the Church, thanking God for delivering us from sin and eternal death.*

13. What from everything we've discussed is most striking to you?

Allow the group to discuss.

14. How should we respond, given this amazing gift of the Eucharist?

Allow the group to discuss.

*Answer: Much could be said, but here are a few simple places to start: First, **faithfully attend Sunday Mass.** Christ has humbled Himself, taking the forms of bread and wine, so that you can approach Him. Don't reject this great gift.*

Prepare yourself to receive the Lord worthily. St. Paul writes, "Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body

eats and drinks judgment upon himself" (1 Cor 11:28-29). If you have committed mortal sin, go to Confession before receiving Holy Communion.

*Lastly, as you come to a deeper knowledge and love of the Eucharist, **seek out more opportunities to approach Him**, including daily Mass or Eucharistic adoration.*

The celebration of the Eucharist in the Mass is at the heart of discipleship; it is the "source and summit of the Christian life" (CCC 1324). Christ has given Himself fully to us; let us give ourselves fully to Him in return.

NOTES



Chapter V

Confession, Forgiveness, and Healing

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
Pages 108 - 119

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
Pages 120 - 130



UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

God Loves Us Where We Are (But He Doesn't Leave Us There)

Jesus Receives the Sinful Woman

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was sitting at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner" (Lk 7:36-39).

Consider this woman's difficult situation. All we know about her is that she is "a sinner." While her specific sin isn't mentioned, we can be sure her faults are serious. Jesus says later that her sins are "many" (v. 47).¹ Not only this, but her sins are also publicly known. As if it weren't challenging enough for her to bear the guilt in her own heart, she

¹ The phrases "sinner" and "of the city" may indicate the sin of prostitution or some other public sexual sin, but this is somewhat uncertain.

must also endure public shame. Just imagine her hopelessness and despair. This is a woman struggling with serious personal sin, while at the same time suffering rejection from her society.

Jesus, however, responds very differently than the crowds. Not only does Jesus *not* reject her. Amazingly, He allows her to lavishly pour out her tears upon Him. More than merely offering Jesus basic hospitality, she anoints his feet with ointment, and even dries them with her hair. Her gesture is so profoundly generous that it causes the Pharisee in the story to murmur to himself, "How can this man allow such a woman to do this!" Yet Jesus receives her without reservation.

Jesus' receptivity to this sinful woman teaches us something essential about the process of forgiveness and healing: God welcomes us first. He is willing to come to us, even in our sinfulness. In the words of St. Paul, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). St. Peter Chrysologus summarized this passage in this way: "Christ came to the Pharisee's table not to be filled with food for the body but to carry on the business of heaven."² The Catechism describes this reality beautifully,

God calls man first. *Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person.... [T]he faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response (CCC 2567).*

Repentance

This woman's response, her lavish outpouring of love toward Christ, shows us how to answer an important question we often face: "How

² Just Jr., Arthur A. (Editor), and Oden, Thomas C. (General Editor). *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, Vol III: Luke*. Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois. 2003, p. 126. Copyright Institute of Classical Christian Studies.

should I respond to my sin?" Unfortunately, ever since the Fall, we face a perennial temptation: hiding from God. As soon as Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, they immediately hid themselves from God (Gen 3:8). We often do the same. We are tempted into believing that we can only approach God when we are "being good" or "living a holy life." We think that maybe once we amend our lives or solve our own problems, then we'll be able to approach God and come back to the Church. In the meantime, however, while we are still struggling with our sin, we feel we must keep our distance. We often commit a "second sin," hiding from God in our shame, rather than opening ourselves up to His mercy.

This woman shows us a better path. Despite her sinfulness, she reaches out to Jesus. Instead of hiding, she courageously approaches Christ and pours out her love upon him. You can just imagine her bursting into tears of sorrow at her sinfulness, aware of how desperately she needs Christ's mercy. Face to face with perfect love, she turned back to God in repentance. We would do well to follow her example.

The truth is we don't need to "put our lives in order" to approach God; we need to approach God so that He can put our lives in order. We could never be so good or so holy that we could deserve God's forgiveness. Rather God freely pours out his mercy upon us. This woman didn't anoint Jesus' feet and dry them with her hair to earn Jesus' favor. She was turning to Christ in repentance—the same repentance we are called to today. When we find ourselves in sin, rather than hiding in shame, we should come to Christ with contrite hearts. The Catechism defines repentance this way, "Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance

toward the evil actions we have committed" (CCC 1431). This is our sure path back to God.

Further, interior repentance is something we all need. St. John tells us, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8). Repentance isn't only for grave offenses; it is also for everyday faults. We have all done things that have damaged our relationship with God and others. Therefore, we are all in need of mercy and forgiveness. Moreover, repentance isn't a "one-and-done" activity either, something we do once and then move on. Rather, we are called to a "constant...path of penance and renewal" (CCC 1428). Indeed, regular repentance is a key habit of the Christian life.

Healing: A New Heart

And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "What is it, Teacher?" "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Lk 7:40-50).

There is an essential spiritual principle at work in this passage. While Jesus certainly comes to meet us in our sinfulness, He never leaves us there. Notice what Jesus doesn't say to this woman. He doesn't say, "no big deal," "that's okay," or "don't worry about it." He doesn't minimize the gravity of her offenses. He acknowledges that her sins are indeed serious. In fact, that's what makes her story so powerful. She really is mired in sin. And Jesus really does forgive her. And because of Jesus' forgiveness, her heart really is transformed. She is capable of loving much *because* she has been forgiven much.

The same is true for us. Sin is the greatest tragedy of our lives. The Catechism states, "To the eyes of faith no evil is graver than sin and nothing has worse consequences for sinners themselves, for the Church, and for the whole world" (CCC 1488). Similarly, St. John Henry Cardinal Newman once wrote, "better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail...than that one soul...commit one single venial sin."³ And yet, amazingly, Christ generously pours out His forgiveness.

He also goes a step further. He not only forgives us, but He also makes us a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:7). Like this sinful woman, He desires to not only take away our sins, but to give us a new heart, a heart capable of loving "much" (CCC 1432, Ez 36:26, Lk 7:47). He wants to make "all things new" in our lives (Rev 21:5). "We love, because he first

³ Newman, John Henry. *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Chapter 5, accessed at <https://newman-reader.org/works/apologia65/chapter5.html>

loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). This is the healing and forgiveness Christ wants to graciously bestow upon us.

Finally, consider Jesus' parting words to this sinful woman: He says both, "Your sins are forgiven," and "Go in peace." Can you imagine how moving those words must have been? How long had it been since this woman experienced the freedom of forgiveness or true peace? Surely, a long, long time. This peace wasn't simply emotional relief, either (though it likely included that too). It was the deep peace that only comes from God—the peace of being known, loved, and restored to right relationship with God and others.⁴

We too desire to hear these same words from Christ: "Your sins are forgiven" and "go in peace." Are you burdened by your sins? Are you lacking peace? Are you hiding in shame, afraid to approach God? Or are you struggling with a heart that is "heavy and hardened" (CCC 1432)? Turn to Christ in repentance and He will forgive you, give you a new heart, and fill you with a peace that only He can give (see Jn 14:27).

The Sacrament of Confession

The woman in this passage experienced a profound transformation of heart. How can we experience the same? How can we repent, receive Christ's forgiveness, and allow our hearts to be changed? While many things could be said, there is one thing that is essential: Confession. Jesus gave us this sacrament to free us from our sins and make us new.

⁴ See Hahn, Scott. *Peace*, Catholic Bible Dictionary, p. 688.

That said, it is not uncommon to encounter some challenging questions when considering this sacrament: Isn't it God alone Who forgives sins? Then why do we need to go to a priest? Doesn't God already know my sins? Then why do I need to confess them aloud? These are reasonable questions. Let's unpack what Scripture has to say about the Sacrament of Confession so that we can both respond to these objections and open ourselves to the many graces Christ wants to give us through this sacrament.

First, Scripture and the Church affirm that God alone forgives sins (CCC 1441). Every sin is an offense against God (CCC 1850). Therefore, it only makes sense that, ultimately, forgiveness must come from the person offended, that is, God Himself. We see this in the Old Testament. King David confesses, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned" (Ps 51:4). And we read of multiple instances of God forgiving His people (Ps 85:2, Is 6:7, Deut 21:8).

Forgiveness is central to the ministry of Jesus also. To the sinful woman, Jesus says explicitly, "your sins are forgiven" (Lk 7:48). Perhaps understandably, this causes the people to marvel, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" (Lk 7:49). In another passage, the crowds are amazed that God has "given such authority to men" (Mt 9:8). Indeed, forgiving sins was a hallmark of Jesus earthly ministry (see CCC 1443). If Jesus forgives our sins, then why is it that we confess our sins to a priest? The answer is that Jesus entrusts His Church with His "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). All throughout the Bible, God is constantly inviting His people to participate in His work. From the very beginning God asked our first parents to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). Was God capable of creating each human being without human cooperation? Of course. But as a loving Father, He wanted humanity to share in His creative action. He even asked that some people participate in His work in a unique way through

their leadership. We see this repeatedly in Old Testament figures like Moses and David, who acted as God's mediators.

The same thing is true in the Church today. Is God sufficient in and of Himself to forgive sins and accomplish all the work of salvation? Of course. In fact, as Catholics, we recognize God is never bound by His sacraments. He is sovereign and free to act as He pleases. As a good Father, however, He continues to invite His people to participate in His work—evangelizing in His name, serving the poor, loving others, and, for those ordained to the sacramental priesthood, forgiving sins in His name. The Catechism states it this way,

Christ has willed that...his whole Church should be the sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation that he acquired for us at the price of his blood. But he entrusted...the power of absolution to the apostolic ministry which he charged with the "ministry of reconciliation." The apostle is sent out "on behalf of Christ" with "God making his appeal" through him and pleading: "Be reconciled to God" (CCC 1442).

Jesus makes this apostolic ministry explicit in the Gospel of John: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'" (Jn 20:21-23). Truly, Christ intended for His apostles to be His instruments of forgiveness.

This is why St. James encouraged the Christians of his day to "confess your sins to one another" and why St. John reminds us that "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (Jas 5:16, 1 Jn 1:9). When we confess our sins, we allow ourselves to honestly face the failures

in our lives. Instead of carrying these burdens, we can bring them to Christ, through His priest. St. Faustina, a mystic who frequently conversed with Christ in prayer, heard Him speak these words to her, “When you approach the confessional, know this, that I Myself am waiting there for you. I am only hidden by the priest, but I Myself act in your soul.”⁵ What an incredible gift to be able to approach Christ through His priest in the Sacrament of Confession.

Finally, how many of us need to hear the words that the sinful woman heard: “Your sins are forgiven,” and “Go in peace.” The Church, in Her wisdom, asks the priest to say these same words at the end of Confession: “The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.”⁶ We are physical creatures, made of both body and soul. Therefore, the experience of confessing our sins with our lips and hearing these words with our ears can be incredibly powerful. In Confession, we can be certain that our sins are forgiven. That is why those who receive this sacrament usually experience “peace and serenity of conscience along with strong spiritual consolation” (CCC 1468).

Making a Great Confession

Even once we accept Christ’s teaching on Confession, sometimes we still find ourselves hesitant to approach this incredible sacrament. Whether it is fear, a bad past experience, uncertainty about what to do, or even just nervousness about how it might go, such trepidation is not uncommon. What should we do in these situations? What steps can we take to make a great confession? Here are a few important points to consider:

⁵ Diary of St. Faustina, paragraph 1602, p. 568.

⁶ <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/rite-of-reconciliation-for-individual-penitents-2173>

First, interior repentance is of primary importance. While we certainly don’t want to neglect the specific steps necessary to make a good confession, we must remember that God “looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). Before we get too caught up in the practical aspects of Confession, we ought to come to God with a “contrite heart” (Ps 51:17). We should strive to “return to the Lord [our] God...with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul” (Deut 30:2). Confession anticipates the “merciful judgment of God, [and] anticipates in a certain way the judgment to which [we] will be subjected at the end of [our] earthly life” (CCC 1470). In these moments, what is most important is what is in our hearts.

Next, we should consider the specific sins we have committed by making an examination of conscience. We can use the Ten Commandments or another guide to reflect on the concrete ways we have failed to love God, ourselves, or others. As disciples of Christ, we are called to continually develop our consciences, to come to a deeper and fuller understanding of how we are called to act (CCC 1784). Quite simply, we need to learn what is and isn’t a sin and understand how serious those sins are. Developing our conscience enables us to avoid both *scruples* (seeing sin where there is no sin or exaggerating its seriousness) and *permissiveness* (not recognizing our sin or minimizing its gravity).

As you examine your conscience, first take note of those sins that are serious in nature. These are the sins that St. James refers to as “full-grown” that “bring forth death” (Jas 1:15). These are spiritually deadly, or mortal, sins (see 1 John 5:16). These sins break our relationship with God and deprive us of divine life. If left unrepentant, these sins can separate us from God forever. When we confess these sins,

however, our relationship with God is restored and we can experience a “spiritual resurrection” to new life (CCC 1468).

After recalling our serious faults, it can also be helpful to consider other, more minor, or venial, sins. These are the sins which are “not deadly” (1 Jn 5:16). While these sins do not deprive us of divine life, they do injure our relationship with God. These sins can also make it more likely that we will commit serious sins in the future. Therefore, it is important to bring these sins to Confession also, so that we can receive the grace we need to overcome them and renew our hearts to love God and neighbor more perfectly.

It can also be helpful to consider why we fall into particular sins. Am I falling into sins of chastity because I am lonely? Or because I am bored? Or because I am feeling hurt or am jealous of someone else? Uncovering the roots of our sins can help us realize why we fall into them and learn, with the help of God’s grace, to overcome these faults.

Next, if you have concerns about how to practically go to Confession, there are many guides available. Find one from a trusted source to guide you in making a great confession. Don’t let a practical difficulty prevent you from receiving this amazing sacrament.

Finally, don’t allow your excuses or hesitations to prevent you from approaching Confession. Know that the false reasonings that often pop into our heads—it’s not a good time, I’m not ready, it doesn’t matter, I can go later—don’t come from God. The same can be said about feelings of fear and anxiety. Confession breaks the hold that sin has on our lives. That’s why the enemy uses these subtle tactics—he wants to keep us enslaved. Don’t give in to these temptations. Come to Christ and be set free.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: Luke 7:36-39, John 20:21-23

Introduction

1. Launching Question: Have you ever had to apologize for something that was really serious? What was that experience like? Did you face the person you had hurt and did they receive you?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Last time we took a look at the deeper meaning of the words Jesus says and the acts he performs at the Last Supper and grew in our knowledge of the richness of the Eucharist and the Mass. Today, we are considering the path to forgiveness and healing Jesus lays out for us by zooming in on his encounter with a sinful woman in Luke's Gospel.

God Loves Us Where We Are (But He Doesn't Leave Us There)

Jesus Receives the Sinful Woman

Read Luke 7:36-39

2. Consider this woman's difficult situation. All we know about her is that she is "a sinner." While her specific sin isn't mentioned, we can be sure her faults are serious. Jesus says later that her sins are "many" (v. 47).¹ Not only this, but her sins are also publicly known. What do you imagine she must have been experiencing, given her state and the Pharisee's reaction? Is Jesus' reaction surprising given what we know about her situation?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: As if it weren't challenging enough for her to bear the guilt in her own heart, she must also endure public shame. Just imagine her hopelessness and despair. This is a woman struggling with serious personal sin, while at the same time suffering rejection from her society.

Jesus, however, responds very differently than the crowds. Not only does Jesus not reject her. Amazingly, He allows her to lavishly pour out her tears upon Him. Jesus receives her without reservation.

3. What does Jesus' reception of this woman reveal to us about the heart of God receiving us in our sinfulness?

¹ The phrases "sinner" and "of the city" may indicate the sin of prostitution or some other public sexual sin, but this is somewhat uncertain.

Answer: Jesus' receptivity to this sinful woman teaches us something essential about the process of forgiveness and healing: God welcomes us first. He is willing to come to us, even in our sinfulness. In the words of St. Paul, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

Please read aloud: The Catechism describes this reality beautifully, God calls man first. Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person.... [T]he faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response (CCC 2567).

So, what does our "first step" in response look like? Let's consider this woman's response to Jesus and discover how it can inform our own experience.

Repentance

4. This woman's response, her lavish outpouring of love toward Christ, shows us how to answer an important question we often face: "How should I respond to my sin?" How does she respond to Christ? Is this the way we respond to our sinfulness? What has kept you from responding as this woman does?

Allow the group to discuss.

*Answer: Unfortunately, ever since the Fall, we face a perennial temptation: **hiding from God**. As soon as Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, they immediately hid themselves from God (Gen 3:8). We often do the same. We are tempted into believing that we can only approach God when we are "being good" or "living a holy life." We*

often commit a "second sin," hiding from God in our shame, rather than opening ourselves up to His mercy.

Please read aloud: This woman shows us a better path for responding to our own sin. Despite her sinfulness, she reaches out to Jesus. Instead of hiding, she courageously approaches Christ and pours out her love upon him. You can just imagine her bursting into tears of sorrow at her sinfulness, aware of how desperately she needs Christ's mercy.

We don't need to "put our lives in order" to approach God; we need to approach God so that *He* can put *our* lives in order. We could never be so good or so holy that we could deserve God's forgiveness. God pours his mercy out freely. So how ought we to approach him? With a heart of repentance.

5. What is repentance? What does it look like in our lives? Why is it a necessary disposition of heart to approach God and to receive his mercy?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: In Scripture, repentance is associated with the image of "turning back" or "turning around" towards the proper destination. As the Catechism puts it, "Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed" (CCC 1431).

Further, interior repentance is something we all need. St. John tells us, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8). Repentance isn't only for grave offenses; it is also

for everyday faults. Repentance isn't a "one-and-done" activity, rather regular repentance is a key habit of the Christian life.

Please read aloud: Repentance can't be manufactured. It is a movement of the heart born out of sadness and sorrow for our offenses towards God and others. But it's not the end of the story. God isn't looking for us to be sad over our shortcomings and failings. He's offering so much in return for our "turning back" to Him. Let's keep reading to unpack what God offers us in return for our repentance.

Healing: A New Heart

Read Luke 7:40-50

Please read aloud: There is an essential spiritual principle at work in this passage. While Jesus certainly comes to meet us in our sinfulness, He never leaves us there. Notice what Jesus doesn't say to this woman. He doesn't say, "no big deal," "that's okay," or "don't worry about it." He doesn't minimize the gravity of her offenses. He acknowledges that her sins are indeed serious. In fact, that's what makes her story so powerful.

6. We shouldn't underestimate the seriousness of sin. The Catechism states, "To the eyes of faith no evil is graver than sin and nothing has worse consequences for sinners themselves, for the Church, and for the whole world" (CCC 1488). How have you seen this grave evil or damaging effect of sin in your life, in the Church, in the world? Where can you see it most clearly?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. But we also shouldn't underestimate the efficacy and power of God's mercy! What does Jesus say to Peter about this woman's capacity to love (see v. 47)? How is this the case? Why does forgiveness lead to a greater capacity for love?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: And because of Jesus' forgiveness, her heart really is transformed. She is capable of loving much because she has been forgiven much. Christ generously pours out His forgiveness, but he also goes a step further. He not only forgives us, but He also makes us a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:7). Like this sinful woman, He desires to not only take away our sins, but to give us a new heart, a heart capable of loving "much" (CCC 1432, Ez 36:26, Lk 7:47). He wants to make "all things new" in our lives (Rev 21:5). "We love, because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). This is the healing and forgiveness Christ wants to graciously bestow upon us.

Please read aloud: God's forgiveness and mercy are truly transformative in the lives of those willing to receive it with a repentant heart. And what is the lasting fruit of our repentance? Consider Jesus' parting words. He says both, "Your sins are forgiven," and "Go in peace." In our repentance we receive both forgiveness and peace. This peace isn't simply emotional relief or the release of guilt; it was the deep peace that only comes from God—the peace of being known, loved, and restored to right relationship with God and others.³

8. Do you desire to hear these same words from Christ? Have you experienced the freedom and peace that comes with repentance? What has kept you from hearing these words spoken over you?
Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The woman in this passage experienced a profound transformation of heart. How can we experience the same? How can we repent, receive Christ's forgiveness, and allow our hearts to be changed? When we desire to know God's forgiveness and peace, there is one sure place of receiving them: the Sacrament of Confession.

The Sacrament of Confession

9. Before we dig into what Scripture tells us about Confession, what has your experience been with this sacrament? Are there any difficulties you've encountered?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Let's unpack what Scripture has to say about the Sacrament of Confession so that we can both respond to these objections and open ourselves to the many graces Christ wants to give us through this sacrament.

First, Scripture and the Church affirm that God alone forgives sins (CCC 1441). Every sin is an offense against God (CCC 1850). Therefore, it only makes sense that, ultimately, forgiveness must come from the person offended, that is, God Himself. We can see this in Jesus' ministry, even in this passage we just read, when the people marvel and say, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" (v. 49).

10. If we truly sin against God, and God alone forgives our sins, why should we confess our sins to a priest?

Answer: The answer is that Jesus entrusts His Church with His "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). All throughout the Bible,

God is constantly inviting His people to participate in His work. The same thing is true in the Church today. Is God sufficient in and of Himself to forgive sins and accomplish all the work of salvation? Of course. In fact, as Catholics, we recognize God is never bound by His sacraments. He is sovereign and free to act as He pleases. As a good Father, however, He continues to invite His people to participate in His work—evangelizing in His name, serving the poor, loving others, and, for those ordained to the sacramental priesthood, forgiving sins in His name.

Please read aloud: The Catechism states it this way: *Christ has willed that...his whole Church should be the sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation that he acquired for us at the price of his blood. But he entrusted...the power of absolution to the apostolic ministry which he charged with the "ministry of reconciliation." The apostle is sent out "on behalf of Christ" with "God making his appeal" through him and pleading: "Be reconciled to God" (CCC 1442).*

Jesus makes this reality explicit in John, Chapter 20.

Read John 20:21-23

11. How do you see the ministry of the apostles being related to the ministry of our priests today? What does this passage teach us about approaching a priest for confession?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Jesus makes this apostolic ministry explicit in the Gospel of John: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the

Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:22-23). Truly, Christ intended for His apostles to be His instruments of forgiveness.

When we confess our sins, we allow ourselves to honestly face the failures in our lives. Instead of carrying these burdens, we can bring them to Christ, through His priest. St. Faustina, a mystic who frequently conversed with Christ in prayer, heard Him speak these words to her, “When you approach the confessional, know this, that I Myself am waiting there for you. I am only hidden by the priest, but I Myself act in your soul.”⁴

12. We hear the same words spoken to us in Confession that the woman receives from Jesus: “Your sins are forgiven” and “Go in peace”. Why is it important that we hear these words actually spoken to us by another person? Why do you think God has chosen for us to confess our sins out loud to another person, rather than just telling them to Him in our hearts?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: We are physical creatures, made of both body and soul. Therefore, the experience of confessing our sins with our lips and hearing these words with our ears can be incredibly powerful. In Confession, we can be certain that our sins are forgiven. That is why those who receive this sacrament usually experience “peace and serenity of conscience along with strong spiritual consolation” (CCC 1468). This is why St. James encouraged the Christians of his day to “confess your sins to one another” and why St. John reminds us that “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (Jas 5:16, 1 Jn 1:9).

Making A Great Confession

Please read aloud:

Even once we accept Christ’s teaching on Confession, sometimes we still find ourselves hesitant to approach this incredible sacrament. What should we do in these situations? What steps can we take to make a great confession?

13. What are some ways that can help us approach God in this sacrament so that we can receive the grace he so generously offers through it? Any practical steps or things you’ve learned from experience you’d like to share with the group?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to leader: Do your best to ensure your group knows how to make a great confession. Here are some practical steps and formative topics you can cover to help do that. You don’t have to cover all of them, but make sure, given the needs of your group, you offer the most relevant and helpful information from below.

Answer:

First, interior repentance is of primary importance. While we certainly don’t want to neglect the specific steps necessary to make a good confession, we must remember that God “looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). Before we get too caught up in the practical aspects of Confession, we ought to come to God with a “contrite heart” (Ps 51:17).

*Next, we should consider the specific sins we have committed by making an **examination of conscience**. As disciples of Christ, we are called to continually develop our consciences, to come to a deeper and fuller understanding of how we are called to act (CCC 1784).*

Quite simply, we need to learn what is and isn't a sin and understand how serious those sins are. Developing our conscience enables us to avoid both scruples (seeing sin where there is no sin or exaggerating its seriousness) and permissiveness (not recognizing our sin or minimizing its gravity).

*It's important to first take note of those sins that are **serious in nature (mortal)**; these sins break our relationship with God and deprive us of divine life. It can be also helpful to consider other, **more minor (venial) sins**. It is important to bring these sins to Confession also, so that we can receive the grace we need to overcome them and renew our hearts to love God and neighbor more perfectly.*

*It can also be helpful to **consider why we fall into particular sins**. Am I falling into sins of chastity because I am lonely? Or because I am bored? Or because I am feeling hurt or am jealous of someone else? Uncovering the roots of our sins can help us realize why we fall into them and learn, with the help of God's grace, to overcome these faults.*

Next, if you have concerns about how to practically go to Confession, there are many guides available. Find one from a trusted source to guide you in making a great confession.

*Finally, **don't allow your excuses or hesitations to prevent you from approaching Confession**. Know that the false reasonings that often pop into our heads—it's not a good time, I'm not ready, it doesn't matter, I can go later—don't come from God. The same can be said about feelings of fear and anxiety. Confession breaks the hold that sin has on our lives. That's why the enemy uses these subtle tactics—he wants to keep us enslaved. Don't give in to these temptations. Come to Christ and be set free.*



Chapter VI

Prayer

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
Pages 132 - 143

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
Pages 144 - 154

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

“Lord, teach us to pray.” - Luke 11:1-5

Can you imagine being face to face with Jesus, looking him in the eye and listening to Him teach you how to pray? As He spoke, you would hang on every word. You would listen with great care and attention. These would be the most important words about prayer that you would ever hear. After listening to Jesus, no other prayer technique, no other devotional, would mean nearly as much as those few, perfect words from Jesus.

That experience isn't just a hypothetical exercise. It is exactly what happens to the Apostles in the passage we are going to study today (Luke 11:1-5). They approach Jesus, saying, “Teach us how to pray,” and, that is precisely what Jesus does. Don't miss the significance of these few short verses—Jesus, God Himself, teaches the Apostles how to pray.

Jesus' teaching isn't just for the Apostles either. It's also for us. And the prayer that He teaches us is known as the “Our Father.” The “Our Father” is not only a prayer that we recite, but it is also a guide for Christian prayer. In a way, it is Jesus' “instruction manual” for

prayer. The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls the “Our Father” a “summary of the whole Gospel” (CCC 2761) and St. Thomas Aquinas calls it “the most perfect of prayers.”¹ Of all the things that Jesus could have said, this is what He wanted to teach us about prayer.

Yet, how often do we think deeply about the “Our Father?” For many of us, it can simply spill out of our mouth. We may have memorized it before we could even understand the words. Because it is so familiar, we can lose sight of its meaning and just say it without thinking. We need to be reminded that this is not just any old prayer. This prayer contains Jesus' instructions for communicating with God.

As Christian disciples, we are called to take in the “deep breath of prayer” every day—it is absolutely vital to our discipleship.² Therefore, let us be attentive to the words of the “Our Father,” so that our prayer can truly become what Jesus wants it to be:

Our Father, Who art in heaven

The “Our Father” is a *daring* prayer.

At Mass, prior to the recitation of the “Our Father,” the priest says, “At the Savior's command and formed by divine teaching, we dare to say.” But what is so daring about a prayer that even young children have memorized?

In our modern society, we don't always appreciate what it means to approach the all-holy God. The Bible is full of examples of people

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 83, 9.

² Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, accessed May 16, 2022, Vatican.va, 262.

approaching God in reverence and awe. At the burning bush, God's first instructions to Moses were "do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Ex 3:5). Upon receiving a vision of the Lord, the prophet Isaiah exclaims, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Is 6:5). These examples reveal how amazing, staggering, and incredible it is to converse with the living God.

The "Our Father," however, takes us further. In it, the all-powerful, all-holy, omniscient, omnipresent, creator of the universe invites us to speak with Him as a child speaks to their Father. How can this be? Something incredible happens at baptism: we become sharers in God's inner life. We participate in the love of the Father and the Son. We become, "sons in the Son" (see Gal 3:26). The Father says the same words to us that he said of Jesus at His baptism, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). This is the reason we can be so daring as to call God "Father": in Christ, He really is our Father. He is not simply *like* a Father; He *is* our Father, and we *are* His children. This changes *everything* about our prayer. We don't need to try and earn something from a God who is distant and calculating. He is not a taskmaster that demands our servitude. In the words of the Catechism, we can approach God with "straightforward simplicity, filial trust, joyous assurance, humble boldness, the certainty of being loved" (CCC 2778).

Is this how you approach God? Do you approach prayer as a relationship with your loving Father, confident in His care for you? Do you recognize that you are His beloved son or daughter? Or are you trying to impress Him? Trying to earn His love? Or do you hide yourself from Him, afraid or ashamed of what He might see? Do not be afraid.

Our God is a Father who dearly loves us, and we can approach Him confidently as beloved children.

Hallowed be thy name

God's name is holy. For the Jewish people, God's name was considered so holy that it was only uttered by the High Priest once each year, on the highest Jewish feast day, the Day of Atonement. His name was full of meaning and power—and it wasn't to be uttered lightly.

In the New Testament, a similar reverence is paid to Jesus' name. The Scriptures say, "at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow" (Phil 2:10). To simply speak the name of "Jesus" is to invite him into our lives and our hearts (Mt 18:20), and according to the Church, in his name is contained "God and man and the whole economy of creation and salvation" (CCC 2666).

Today, we don't have to wait for a feast day to speak the name of Jesus, nor is it reserved for priests or religious. We can pray with this most powerful Name every minute of every day. But why does Jesus invite us to "hallow" God's name and what does that mean?

The word "hallow" means to make holy. But Jesus isn't inviting us to *make* God's name holy—it is already holy. Instead, in this petition, we take a moment to pause and recognize God's holiness. This is an important step for our prayer. Our God is worthy of our praise. In fact, He *deserves* our praise. Therefore, "hallowing His name" should be a priority in our prayer. Too often, however, we get it backwards. Instead of hallowing God's name, we come to God concerned more about ourselves—our problems, our needs, what we want Him to do in our lives—rather than giving Him what He deserves. Jesus wants us to re-order our priorities. Make no mistake, petitions are good,

and our Father wants to hear our needs, but these can't come first. The first movement of our prayer should always be to praise, honor, and thank God for Who He is. That's what hallowing God's name is all about.

A good way for us to examine how well we are hallowing God's name is to ask ourselves, "Is my prayer about God or is my prayer simply about me?" If we are honest, we might realize that our prayer is much more selfish than we think—that we are simply asking God to make our lives easier, to bless the things we care about, and to bring our own plans, wants, and desires to fruition. But that's why Jesus gives us this teaching. It is a remedy for our temptation to self-centeredness. He knows how important it is to honor God first and foremost, and He challenges us to prioritize hallowing God's name in our prayer.

Thy kingdom come

Do you want Christ's Kingdom to come?

At first, we might be inclined to think "Of course I desire the Kingdom." But this petition is more than a vague wish for things to be better. At its deepest level, praying "Thy Kingdom come" is an expression of our desire for Christ to reign in everything. Too often, we pray these words half-heartedly. Instead of Christ's total reign, we simply want to get through another day without difficulty and suffering. We want the kingdom, but only insofar as it doesn't upset our own plans and preferences. But what would it mean to pray this petition with total sincerity?

First, this petition invites us to change our hearts. The Catechism states, "only a pure soul can boldly say, 'Thy kingdom come'" (CCC

2819). We can't fully desire the Kingdom when we are attached to other things. We must surrender our lives to Christ and allow him to reign in our hearts. Our plans, our preferences, and the sins to which we secretly cling, these cloud our desire for the kingdom. This petition forces us to examine ourselves: What are we holding onto? What is getting in the way of our relationships with God? What is preventing us from seeking first His Kingdom (see Mt. 6:33)? How might we be tempted to build our own kingdom instead of building God's?

Second, praying "Thy Kingdom come" compels us to work to build Christ's kingdom. Instead of sitting on the sidelines and merely hoping for things to get better, praying "Thy Kingdom come" moves us toward action. It convicts us to embrace the method of evangelization that Jesus modeled for us as the best path for reaching souls and extending the Kingdom. The world has so many needs, and God invites us to respond—whether that be serving the poor, sharing the Gospel, or anything else that makes Christ's Kingdom present on this earth. If we want to know how sincerely we are praying this petition, then we need look no further than our commitment to building the Kingdom. Are we laboring diligently for Christ? Are we making radical sacrifices to serve others and bring them into the kingdom? Are we prioritizing God's work over our own plans each and every day? That is what it means to pray "Thy Kingdom come."

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

Have you ever heard someone say, "God's will be done?" When you heard it said, did the person seem to be expressing something profound? Or was it tossed around casually, as a sort of simplistic Christian way of saying, "It is what it is."?

Seeking God's Will is anything but casual and simplistic. To say, "Thy will be done" has a deep and profound meaning. To uncover the deeper meaning of phrases in the Bible, it can be helpful to look at other contexts in which that phrase is used. And the phrase "thy will be done" appears in a place that gives us great insight:

Imagine the scene. Jesus is with His disciples on the night before He suffered. He is in agony, fully aware of the suffering that awaits. He turns to God in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane and pours out His heart. He prays to the Father saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this chalice from me; nevertheless *not my will, but yours, be done*" (Lk 22:42). His human nature is repulsed by the suffering and death that await Him. Yet, His prayer is clear, "Thy will be done."

This context shows us the true meaning of "Thy will be done." Accepting God's will means accepting whatever God might ask, including what Jesus accepted in the Garden—suffering, hardship, the things we would least prefer, even death.

You have probably said "Thy Will be done" many times, but do you mean it in this way? Are you willing to totally surrender your will to God's Will, no matter the situation, no matter the cost? The next time you pray this petition, imagine Jesus in the Garden. Will you accept God's Will like Jesus did?

Give us this day our daily bread

As we consider this petition, there is an important word that needs to be highlighted. The word "daily" is *epiousios* in the Greek—and it is a loaded word. It appears only here in the entire New Testament and all extant Greek writings. It is literally "one of a kind." In fact, it's

entirely plausible that this word was invented to capture this unique mystery. If we were to translate *epiousios* in its most literal sense, we might translate it as "super-essential" (CCC 2837).³ But what is "super-essential" bread? What is Jesus trying to tell us by using this unique word?

Taken in a natural sense, this bread refers to a bread that satisfies all our material needs (CCC 2837). It is "super-essential" in that it provides everything. Such a bread would recall the "daily" manna Israel received in the desert to satisfy the people's hunger (Ex 16:31). It is a miraculous bread that God provides. We have so many needs—food, clothing, shelter, etc. And in this one petition, we ask God to provide for everything.

But even more is contained in this single word. Taken more directly, this "super-essential" bread refers to that bread which satisfies the deepest desires of our hearts. It is a *supernatural* bread that satisfies not only our physical hunger but also our spiritual hunger. This is the bread, that when we eat of it, we will never hunger again (Jn 6:35). Quite simply, the Church and so many of the saints have recognized that this is a petition for the Eucharist.

There is an important question we need to consider here: Do we really believe that the Eucharist is the answer to our spiritual hungers? We might be tempted to think that we need more to be satisfied, that the Eucharist isn't enough to meet our spiritual needs, that we need some spiritual novelty—a new book, a retreat, a unique spiritual experience—to be truly satisfied. But this would be a great mistake. St. John of the Cross once wrote, "In giving us his Son, his only Word, he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word—and he has

³ The general meaning of the word *epiousios* can be derived from its Greek roots. *Epi-* can mean "upon," "over," "above," "on the basis of," etc. While *-ousia* can mean "being," "essence," or "substance."

no more to say" (CCC 65). Jesus is the answer to every desire of our hearts. He is the One Who truly satisfies. When we pray this petition, we recognize that God has already given us His most perfect solution to our spiritual hungers, the Holy Eucharist.

And, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us

Did you notice how this petition is different from all the others?

This is the only petition in the entire prayer that uses conditional language. When we pray this prayer, we actually ask God *not to forgive us* if we don't forgive others. This reveals a key teaching of Scripture: The mercy God grants us depends upon our own forgiveness toward others (1 Jn 4:20, Mt 18:35). We are called to be "merciful even as [our] Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36).

It's important to note that God isn't simply withholding forgiveness to demand that we forgive others. It isn't a divine tactic for obedience. There is a deep, spiritual principle at work here—a principle of the heart. Only when we have forgiven others are we truly open to receive God's forgiveness. It isn't that God *won't* forgive us; it is that He *can't* forgive us, because by our unforgiveness, we prevent Him from working in our hearts.

This has important implications for our prayer life. The Catechism states, "Forgiveness is a high-point of Christian prayer; only hearts attuned to God's compassion can receive the gift of prayer" (CCC 2844). In other words, when we fail to forgive others, our prayer life dries up. Indeed, only hearts open to forgiveness are also open to the gift of prayer.

Are you struggling in prayer? Consider your attitude toward others: Have you forgiven those who have hurt you? Are you harboring grudges? Is there a wound in your heart that you refuse to bring to the Lord? It may be that you aren't noticing God's mercy in your life because you haven't extended mercy to anyone else. Only when we are willing to extend mercy to others can our prayer life truly blossom.

And, lead us not into temptation

We need to avoid a possible mistake when understanding this petition: God does not tempt us. The book of James clearly teaches that God "tempts no one" (Jas 1:13). Instead, in this petition, we ask God to help us not *give in* to temptation. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, in this petition, we "ask God not to mete out more than we can bear, not to let us slip from his hands."⁴

And let's be very clear: we can't overcome temptation on our own. Yet, how often do we trust in ourselves, instead of turning to the Lord, believing that somehow by our own strength, intelligence, or ability we will be able to overcome temptation? This petition presents a better path:

First, in these words, we recognize our weakness. We humbly acknowledge our powerlessness against temptation. We admit that left to our own devices, we are sure to fail.

Second, we also recognize that temptations will come. Implicit in this petition is a request for strength from God. Scripture tells us, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth; From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, Vol 1. Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2007, p. 164.

may be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13). Yes, temptation will come, but sin is not inevitable. Amidst temptation, we ask God for strength, knowing that He can provide a means of escape.

The next time you find yourself struggling with sin, this petition can be your guide. First, acknowledge your weakness and don't try to handle things on your own. Seek out the help you need. Then, spend time in prayer, begging God for His divine assistance. This is our path for overcoming temptation.

But deliver us from evil

Evil has no power over Jesus Christ. God can and has delivered many, many people. Think of Mary Magdalene from whom seven demons were driven out (Mk 16:9), or the hemorrhaging woman who was healed after eighteen years of suffering (Lk 8:44), or the many other suffering people delivered from their maladies by Christ in the Gospels.

Jesus can conquer the evil in our lives as well. This is so important for us to remember. Do you find yourself discouraged? Do you fear that evil is too prevalent in the world? Too powerful? That things are much too bad, and that you can do nothing in response? Don't give in to this deception. By praying, “deliver us from evil,” we recognize that Christ has all the power. He has already won the victory. By His death and resurrection, Christ has conquered the devil. He can conquer any difficulty we might face.

Do you believe this? As you finish reciting the “Our Father,” even amidst the many struggles in this world, don't give in to discouragement. Remember: Jesus is Lord!

Conclusion

Now that you have walked through the entire “Our Father,” take a minute and reflect on the key places in your prayer life where you feel challenged or inspired. The “Our Father” is a demanding prayer. It covers both the basics of Christian prayer and the heights of contemplation. While you may not be able to reflect on every aspect of this prayer each time you say it, this prayer can be a constant source of inspiration for deepening your prayer life. If you were to dedicate yourself to allowing the “Our Father” to shape your prayer life, you would experience profound transformation. As this chapter concludes, consider what could happen if you truly put this prayer into practice.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passage: Luke 11:1-5

Introduction

1. Launching Question: Who first taught you to pray? What did they teach you?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Last time we explored the significance and beauty of the sacrament of Confession. Today, we will be considering the “oxygen of the soul”, as Padre Pio called it: that is, prayer. Specifically, we will turn to the moment in Scripture when Jesus teaches his disciples word for word how they ought to pray. Line by line, we’ll discover why this prayer is called “summary of the whole Gospel” (CCC 2761) and even “the most perfect of prayers.”¹

“Lord, teach us to pray”

Read Luke 11:1-5

Our Father, Who art in heaven

2. At Mass, prior to the recitation of the “Our Father,” the priest says, “At the Savior’s command and formed by divine teaching, we dare to say.” But what is so daring about a prayer that even young children can memorize? What do you think?

Answer: In the “Our Father”, the all-powerful, all-holy, omniscient, omnipresent, creator of the universe invites us to speak with Him as a child speaks to their Father.

Please read aloud: In our modern society, we don’t always appreciate what it means to approach the all-holy God. The Bible is full of examples of people approaching God in reverence and awe. Think of Moses approaching the burning bush (God says, “Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5)).

But as Christians, through our baptism, we become sharers in God’s inner life. We participate in the love of the Father and the Son. We become, “sons in the Son” (see Gal 3:26). This is the reason we can be so daring as to call God “Father”: in Christ, He really is our Father. He is not simply *like* a Father; He *is* our Father, and we *are* His children.

3. How does the reality that we are God’s children and he is our Father God alter the way we can approach Him in prayer?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: This changes everything about our prayer. We don’t need to try and earn something from a God who is distant and calculating. He is not a taskmaster that demands our servitude. In the words of the

Catechism, we can approach God with “straightforward simplicity, filial trust, joyous assurance, humble boldness, the certainty of being loved” (CCC 2778).

4. Is this how you approach God? Do you approach prayer as a relationship with your loving Father, confident in His care for you? Or are you trying to impress Him? Trying to earn His love? Or do you hide yourself from Him, afraid or ashamed of what He might see?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Do not be afraid. Our God is a Father who dearly loves us, and we can approach Him confidently as beloved children.

Hallowed be thy name

5. Does anyone know what “hallowed” means? Why do we call God’s name hallowed at the beginning of this prayer?

Answer: God’s name is holy. For the Jewish people, God’s name was considered so holy that it was only uttered by the High Priest once each year, on the highest Jewish feast day, the Day of Atonement. In the New Testament, a similar reverence is paid to Jesus’ name. The word “hallow” means to make holy. But Jesus isn’t inviting us to make God’s name holy—it is already holy. Instead, in this petition, we take a moment to pause and recognize God’s holiness. Sometimes we can come to God concerned more about ourselves and our lives and fail to give him what he deserves: honor, praise, thanksgiving, adoration. Offering God our petitions is good and he wants to receive them! But the first movement of our prayer should always be to praise, honor,

and thank God for Who He is. That’s what hallowing God’s name is all about.

6. A good way for us to examine how well we are hallowing God’s name is to ask ourselves, “Is my prayer about God or is my prayer simply about me?” What would you say in response to that question? What would change if we approached God consistently with a desire to honor and praise him above all else?

Allow the group to discuss.

Thy kingdom come

7. What does it mean for Christ’s Kingdom to come? What would the experience of that in your life look like?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: This petition is more than a vague wish for things to be better. At its deepest level, praying “Thy Kingdom come” is an expression of our desire for Christ to reign in everything. Too often, we pray these words half-heartedly. Instead of Christ’s total reign, we simply want to get through another day without difficulty and suffering. We want the kingdom, but only insofar as it doesn’t upset our own plans and preferences.

8. What would it mean to pray this petition with sincerity?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: First, this petition invites us to change our hearts. We can't fully desire the Kingdom when we are attached to other things. We must surrender our lives to Christ and allow him to reign in our hearts. Second, praying "Thy Kingdom come" compels us to work to build Christ's kingdom. Instead of sitting on the sidelines and merely hoping for things to get better, praying "Thy Kingdom come" moves us toward action. The world has so many needs, and God invites us to respond—whether that be serving the poor, sharing the Gospel, or anything else that makes Christ's Kingdom present on this earth.

Optional questions for further discussion

- a. What are we holding onto? What is getting in the way of our relationships with God? What is preventing us from seeking first His Kingdom (see Mt. 6:33)? How might we be tempted to build our own kingdom instead of building God's?
- b. If we want to know how sincerely we are praying this petition, then we need look no further than our commitment to building the Kingdom. Are we laboring diligently for Christ? Are we making radical sacrifices to serve others and bring them into the kingdom? Are we prioritizing God's work over our own plans each and every day?

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

9. What do you think of when you hear "Thy will be done"?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Sometimes we can toss this phrase around casually, and even say to some degree, "It is what it is." Seeking God's Will is anything

but casual and simplistic. To say, "Thy will be done" has a deep and profound meaning.

Please read aloud: To uncover the deeper meaning of this phrase, it is helpful to look at other places it is used. And the phrase "thy will be done" appears in a place that gives us great insight: the Agony in the Garden.

Imagine the scene. Jesus is with His disciples on the night before He suffered. He is in agony, fully aware of the suffering that awaits. He turns to God in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane and pours out His heart. He prays to the Father saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this chalice from me; nevertheless, *not my will, but yours, be done*" (Lk 22:42). His human nature is repulsed by the suffering and death that await Him. Yet, His prayer is clear, "Thy will be done."

This context shows us the true meaning of "Thy will be done." Accepting God's will means accepting whatever God might ask, including what Jesus accepted in the Garden—suffering, hardship, the things we would least prefer, even death.

10. You have probably said "Thy Will be done" many times, but do you mean it in this way? Are you willing to totally surrender your will to God's Will, no matter the situation, no matter the cost?

Allow the group to discuss.

Give us this day our daily bread

Please read aloud: As we consider this petition, there is an important word that needs to be highlighted. The word "daily" is *epiousios* in the

Greek—and it is a loaded word. It appears only here in the entire New Testament and all extant Greek writings. It is literally “one of a kind.” In fact, it’s entirely plausible that this word was invented to capture this unique mystery. If we were to translate *epiousios* in its most literal sense, we might translate it as “super-essential” (CCC 2837).

11. What is “super-essential” bread? What might that mean in a natural sense? In a supernatural sense?

Answer: Taken in a natural sense, this bread refers to a bread that satisfies all our material needs (CCC 2837). It is “super-essential” in that it provides everything. We have so many needs and in this one petition, we ask God to provide for everything.

Taken more directly, this “super-essential” bread refers to that bread which satisfies the deepest desires of our hearts. It is a supernatural bread that satisfies not only our physical hunger but also our spiritual hunger. This is the bread, that when we eat of it, we will never hunger again (Jn 6:35). This is a petition for the Eucharist.

12. Do we really believe that the Eucharist is the answer to our spiritual hungers? Do we believe Jesus is the One Who truly satisfies?

Allow the group to discuss.

And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us

Please read aloud: This is the only petition in the entire prayer that uses conditional language. When we pray this prayer, we actually ask God not to forgive us if we don’t forgive others.

13. Is God withholding forgiveness so that we might behave obediently to his commandment to forgive? If not, what is going on here?

Answer: This reveals a key teaching of Scripture: The mercy God grants us depends upon our own forgiveness toward others (1 Jn 4:20, Mt 18:35). God isn’t simply withholding forgiveness to demand that we forgive others. It isn’t that God won’t forgive us; it is that He can’t forgive us, because by our unforgiveness, we prevent Him from working in our hearts.

Please read aloud: This has important implications for our prayer life. The Catechism states, “Forgiveness is a high-point of Christian prayer; only hearts attuned to God’s compassion can receive the gift of prayer” (CCC 2844). In other words, when we fail to forgive others, our prayer life dries up. Indeed, only hearts open to forgiveness are also open to the gift of prayer.

Optional question for further discussion:

- a. Are you struggling in prayer? Consider your attitude toward others: Have you forgiven those who have hurt you? Are you harboring grudges? Is there a wound in your heart that you refuse to bring to the Lord?

And, lead us not into temptation

14. It is important to note that God does not tempt us (see James 1:13). In this petition we ask God to help us not *give in* to temptation. What do we need from God in order to not fall into temptation?

Answer: First, the gift of humble self-awareness, knowledge that we are weak and cannot by our own power overcome temptation. Also, we must ask for strength from God, recognizing that temptations will come. Sin is not inevitable so we must ask God to preserve us and strengthen us in the face of temptations.

But deliver us from evil

Please read aloud: Evil has no power over Jesus Christ. Think of the woman delivered from seven demons (Mk 16:9) or the hemorrhaging woman who bled for eighteen years (Lk 8:44).

15. Jesus can conquer evil in our lives as well. Do you believe this? Or do you fear that evil is too prevalent in the world? Or that it is all up to you to deal with evil?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Don't give in to this deception. By praying, "deliver us from evil," we recognize that Christ has all the power. He has already won the victory. By His death and resurrection, Christ has conquered the devil. He can conquer any difficulty we might face.

Conclusion

16. We've just walked through Jesus' own teaching on prayer. What stands out to you most? Where do you feel challenged or inspired? How will this change how you pray the "Our Father?"

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The "Our Father" is a demanding prayer. It covers both the basics of Christian prayer and the heights of contemplation. While you may not be able to reflect on every aspect of this prayer each time you say it, this prayer can be a constant source of inspiration for deepening your prayer life.

If you were to dedicate yourself to allowing the "Our Father" to shape your prayer life, you would experience profound transformation. As this chapter concludes, consider what could happen if you truly put this prayer into practice.

NOTES



Chapter VII

Works of Mercy

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
Pages 156 - 167

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
Pages 168 - 177



UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The Works of Mercy

Ever since the beginning of Christianity, Christians were known for their care for those in need. In the Roman Empire, it was Christians who often cared for infants who had been left to die of exposure. In the 20th Century, saints, like Mother Teresa, cared for the poor and abandoned that no one else would touch. What is it that drives Christians to care for the poor? And how are we called to care for them as disciples today? Let's look at three parables that reveal Christianity's radical, counter-cultural approach toward those in need.

A Matter of Salvation

There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon

me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.' (Lk 16:19-31)

Pope Benedict XVI stated, "This parable teaches us two lessons: the first is that God loves the poor and comforts their humiliation; the second is that our eternal destiny is conditioned by our attitude [toward them]"¹ Let's consider each of these two main points.

First, God loves the poor. Think for a moment about what we *don't* read about in this parable. We don't hear of Lazarus' good deeds. We don't hear about his deep faith or how he suffered patiently and offered his sufferings up to God. All we really know about him is that he was poor and that he suffered. And yet, we read very clearly that because Lazarus suffered "evil things" he is now "comforted." The point here is clear: God cares for the poor.

We read about God's concern for the poor repeatedly in the Old Testament (Is 29:19, Prov 14:31, Ps 34:6). Not only this, but He also

¹ Benedict XVI, Angelus, Courtyard of the Papal Residence, Castel Gandolfo, Sunday, 26, September 2010. Accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20100926.html August 8, 2023.

consistently exhorts His people to care for those in need (Deut 15:7, Prov 19:17). This same loving care was exemplified in Jesus' public ministry (Mk 10:21, Lk 4:18). And the Church continues this same mercy as Christ's body in the world (Gal 2:10, Acts 4:34). The word "mercy" in Latin, *miser cordia*, literally means a heart (*cor*) that gives (*dia*) itself to one in misery (*miseri*). Just as a parent has compassion on a suffering child, so too is God's heart moved by the misery of His suffering children.

Here we find a key source for Christian charity: we are called to love what God loves. God is the Father of all and loves His children dearly. He also, in a special way, loves his children who are poor and suffering. Therefore, as Christians we are invited to share in God's unique love for the poor. We are called to love as He loves (see 1 Jn 3:16-17). In the words of the Catechism, "those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a *preferential love* on the part of the Church" (CCC 2448). This leads to the second main point of the parable: our eternal destiny. Think of the Rich Man in the parable. Does the parable say he blasphemed God? Does it say he was a jerk to those around him? Does it say he failed to say his prayers or make his offerings at the temple? We don't know any of that. All we know is that he didn't take the time to consider the suffering of poor Lazarus at his door. And because of that, he is eternally lost.

Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Lk 18:25). As Christians disciples today, especially those of us in developed countries, we ought to take Jesus' words very seriously. We have material wealth that previous generations could only dream of (i.e., central air conditioning, heated and sanitized water, electricity, cars, and the internet and everything that comes with it!). But alongside these riches, have we also developed a "love of money" that St. Paul

says is the "root of all evils" (1 Tim 6:10)? Because the poor have little, their hearts are often disposed to recognize their total dependence upon God and others. As Our Lord said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3). Riches, however, can foster the opposite, to hearts that are proud, to an interior disposition that trusts only in oneself—I can provide for myself, I need not ask for anything from anyone. Such an attitude is spiritually perilous because it fails to recognize our utter dependence on God—Why turn to Him? I have everything I need. This parable challenges this attitude and exhorts us not to overlook the eternal ramifications of our use of wealth.

Finally, consider the rich man's last plea. While in torment, He realizes the seriousness of his situation and desires to spare his brothers the same fate. But when he asks that someone be sent to them, he hears the reply, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." In other words, God has already told them, and they still haven't listened. Even someone rising from the dead is unlikely to change their behavior.

As Christians, these words ought to move our hearts. We believe that Jesus Christ has indeed risen from the dead, but have we heeded His message? Has His resurrection transformed us so deeply that we love the poor and care for those who are suffering? This parable ought to challenge us today, perhaps even more than it did those who heard it 2,000 years ago. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Have we taken to heart His words?

You Did It to Me

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:41-46)

The call to serve the poor takes on a new significance in the light of Christ. As we read in Jesus' parable above, Christ has taken the incredible step of identifying himself with the poor. This is an astounding development. Not only does Jesus call us to serve the poor for their own sake, He goes even further, teaching us that how we treat the poor is also how we treat Him.

This reality adds a deeper dimension to the Christian understanding of serving the poor. Beyond the mere alleviation of suffering, serving the poor is also an act of devotion. In the words of St. Mother Teresa, "I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him. I serve because I love Jesus."² Because our Lord himself suffered in his earthly life, especially in his Passion and Death, He remains specially united to all those who suffer. In them,

² Miller, Justina. "Mother Teresa: each one of them is Jesus in disguise," Pureflix, accessed March 27, 2019 <https://insider.pureflix.com/news/mother-teresa-each-one-of-them-is-jesus-in-disguise>.

we find God. In the words Pope Francis, "our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation."³ Indeed, when we encounter the poor, we encounter Christ.

Knowing that it is Christ whom we serve in the poor has enormous consequences for us as disciples. On the one hand, it isn't enough to simply acknowledge that the poor need our assistance (though they do), as Christians, we actually *need* the poor. As Pope Francis tells us, "We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them."⁴ Because our encounter with the poor is an encounter with Christ, serving them is transformative. We are changed when we serve the poor.

Not only this, seeing Christ in the poor also moves us to encounter the poor *personally*, to move beyond our own comfort and preferences to meet those in need. While it is certainly good to give money to charities and support just social structures in the economic and political realms, the Christian call to serve the poor requires that we become personally involved in their lives. It isn't enough to simply wish them well from a distance. If we never meet the poor, if we never see them face to face, then we will never truly encounter Christ in them. Again, Pope Francis says, "We must learn how to be with the poor, to share with those who lack basic necessities, to touch the flesh of Christ! The Christian is not one who speaks about the poor, no! He is one who encounters them, who looks them in the eye, who touches them."⁵ The poor are not

³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 179, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, June 9, 2023.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 198, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, June 9, 2023.

⁵ Pope Francis, Meeting with the Poor Assisted by Caritas, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/october/documents/papa-francesco_20131004_poveri-assisi.html, June 9, 2023.

problems to be solved or tasks to be checked off our to-do lists, but brothers and sisters to be loved.

Furthermore, the Church also cautions us against reducing service to the poor to mere political and economic activism. Pope Benedict XVI stated it this way,

There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness.... The State which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person—every person—needs: namely, loving personal concern.⁶

This is not to say that we are not also called to influence the social structures that impact poverty today—we certainly are. The Church has a rich social doctrine, which continually calls us to work for justice for those in need.⁷ As Christians, we are called to both: to encountering the poor among us directly and to working to build a society that enables human flourishing.

An additional point is worth making clear: Christian discipleship *requires* serving the poor. Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.”⁸ We might be tempted to think that

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, par. 28b, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html, June 9, 2023.

⁷ For more on the social doctrine of the Church, please see the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, par. 22, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html, June 9, 2023.

serving the poor is for *some* people, but not *everyone*. We might think that we are living a faithful Christian life so long as we are praying and going to Mass on Sundays. But serving the poor is not an optional add-on to the Christian life. If we neglect this essential task then our faith is, as St. James tells us, “dead” (Jas 2:17). The love of God is inseparable from the love of neighbor (1 Jn 4:20).

Who is My Neighbor?

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Lk 10:25-37)

A question that might come to our minds is “How am I supposed to serve the poor?” The parable of the Good Samaritan can help guide us in answering this question. Let’s consider a few elements of this incredible parable to discover how we are called to care for the poor. One of the first things that stands out about this parable is its context. Jesus tells a scholar of the law that to inherit eternal life, he must fulfill the two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. However, the Scriptures tell us that the lawyer desired to “justify himself” (v. 29). In other words, perhaps this man wanted “off-the-hook” so to speak, hoping that Jesus would narrowly define “neighbor” to exclude some people.

Jesus, however, does exactly the opposite. He tells a parable wherein a Samaritan, one of the enemies of the Jewish people, is the hero. This is not lost on the lawyer. After the parable, Jesus asks him who proved to be neighbor and he is unable even to say the words, “the Samaritan.” He opts instead for a description—“the one who showed mercy.” We ought not miss how scandalous Jesus’ message must have seemed to His Jewish audience: Who is my neighbor? Who am I called to love? Everyone, even the Samaritans. This is Jesus’ point: everyone is our neighbor, even our enemies (see Mt 5:43-48).

In fact, Jesus’ answer flips the lawyer’s original question on its head. Instead of telling the lawyer *who* his neighbor is, Jesus actually asks him which of the three “*proved neighbor*” (v. 36, emphasis added). He makes “being neighbor” something active. While everyone is our neighbor, more importantly we are called “to be neighbor,” to be people who have mercy on others, who give their hearts away to those in misery. While we should ask “Who is my neighbor?” We should also contemplate, “Who am I called to be neighbor to?”—who in my life, in my community, in my sphere of influence is poor, lonely, in need of

mercy? Even more important than identifying *who* is a neighbor is a heart that is ready to *be* a neighbor.

A second aspect of the parable that stands out is that the Good Samaritan notices the other man’s suffering. Too often today, we can get absorbed in our own pursuits. Like the priest and the Levite, we can be inattentive to the needs of those around us. Pope Francis speaks firmly about this problem,

We need to acknowledge that we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak...We have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly.... What is more, caught up as we are with our own needs, the sight of a person who is suffering disturbs us. It makes us uneasy, since we have no time to waste on other people’s problems.⁹

As Jesus’ disciples today, we must be attentive to the needs of the poor around us. We don’t have to go all over the world, searching for the poor, either. Mother Teresa said,

Find your own Calcutta. Find the sick, the suffering, and the lonely, right where you are — in your own homes and in your own families, in homes and in your workplaces and in your schools. You can find Calcutta all over the world, if you have eyes to see. Everywhere, wherever you go, you find people who are unwanted, unloved, uncared for, just rejected by society — completely forgotten, completely left alone.¹⁰

⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, pars. 64-65, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html June 9, 2023.

¹⁰ Murdock, William. *Find Your Own Calcutta: Living a Life of Service and Meaning in a Selfish World*. Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press, 2017. 2.

Furthermore, as we can see, Mother Teresa certainly invites us to attend to people experiencing material poverty, but she also invites us to address spiritual poverty. Pope Francis even goes so far as to say that the “worst discrimination the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care.”¹¹ Thus, the Church has always invited Christians to be attentive to both the *corporal* and the *spiritual* works of mercy, to care for peoples’ bodies as well as their souls.¹² The people around us have so many needs, we simply need to open our eyes and our hearts to see their poverty. Again, Mother Teresa observed this clearly,

*The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty — it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There’s a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.*¹³

Cardinal Ratzinger observed something similar: “The deepest poverty is the inability of joy, the tediousness of a life considered absurd and contradictory. This poverty is widespread today, in very different forms in the materially rich as well as the poor countries”.¹⁴

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 200, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, June 9, 2023.

¹² “The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead” (CCC 2447).

¹³ Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path*, Compiled by Lucinda Vardey, Ballantine Books: New York, 1995.

¹⁴ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “The New Evangelization: Building the Civilization of Love,” Address to Catechists and Religion Teachers, Jubilee of Catechists (December 12, 2000).

Turning back to the parable of the Good Samaritan, we observe one final aspect of loving our neighbor: a willingness to make sacrifices. Consider the many sacrifices the Good Samaritan makes to care for this man in need: his time, his money, and his personal attention. Caring for the poor isn’t necessarily easy. It often has a cost. The Good Samaritan was willing to make those sacrifices. The question is: Are we willing to do the same? Will we use our money, our time, our energy and effort to care for the poor around us? Or will we simply pass by on the other side of the road?

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: Luke 16:19-31, Matthew 25:41-46, Luke 10:25-37

Introduction

1. Launching Question: If there was one need of the world that you could meet, which would it be and why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Last time we unpacked how the “Our Father” is the perfect prayer. Today, we’re going to continue our conversation about the essential habits of Christian disciples. Specifically, we’ll explore the works of mercy. Ever since the beginning of Christianity, Christians were known for their care for those in need. What is it that drives Christians to care for the poor? And how are we called to care for them as disciples today? Let’s look at three parables that reveal Christianity’s radical, counter-cultural approach toward serving those in need.

A Matter of Salvation

Read Luke 16:19-31

Please read aloud: Pope Benedict XVI stated, “This parable teaches us two lessons: the first is that God loves the poor and comforts their humiliation; the second is that our eternal destiny is conditioned by our attitude [toward them]”¹ Let’s consider each of these two main points.

2. What do we learn about why Lazarus is saved? What, if anything, seems to be missing? Do we hear of his virtues or religious practices?

Answer: We don’t hear of Lazarus’ good deeds. We don’t hear about his faith in God or how he suffered patiently and offered his sufferings up to God. All we really know about him is that he was poor and that he suffered. And yet, we read very clearly that because Lazarus suffered “evil things” he is now “comforted.”

3. God cares for those in need, he comforts the afflicted. How do we see God’s care for the poor shown in Scripture? And what does this mean for us as His followers?

Answer: We read about God’s concern for the poor repeatedly in the Old Testament, for example in his provident care of the Hebrews while they suffered enslavement under Pharaoh (see leader’s guide for additional Scriptural passages). This same love was exemplified in Jesus’ public ministry, for example his care for the sick and dying such as the Widow at Nain or the hemorrhaging woman (see leader’s guide for additional passages).

¹ Benedict XVI, Angelus, Courtyard of the Papal Residence, Castel Gandolfo, Sunday, 26, September 2010. Accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20100926.html August 8, 2023.

Here we find a key source for Christian charity: we are called to love what God loves. God is the Father of all and loves His children dearly. He also, in a special way, loves his children who are poor and suffering. Therefore, as Christians we are invited to share in God's unique love for the poor. We are called to love as He loves (see 1 Jn 3:16-17). In the words of the Catechism, "those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the Church" (CCC 2448).

Please read aloud: God's care for those in need can be given another name: mercy. The word "mercy" in Latin, *miser cordia*, literally means a heart (*cor*) that gives (*dia*) itself to one in misery (*miseri*). Just as a parent has compassion on a suffering child and happily serves to alleviate the suffering, so too does our heavenly Father look with great mercy upon the poor and needy.

4. What do you think of when you hear this definition of mercy, a heart which gives itself to one in misery? Have you ever experienced this kind of love? What was that like?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. Have you ever witnessed immense faith in someone who has had a very hard life or has suffered much? Why might the experience of poverty lead to faith in God? How does your experience of poverty influence the way you approach God?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: The experience of poverty can awaken a need for God and a reliance upon him. Those who take on that disposition and live from

a place of reliance on providence often have the richest, strongest faiths, even in the face of immense loss, suffering, or hardship.

Please read aloud: God cares for those in need and has mercy on them: he gives his heart to those in misery. This is the first point Pope Benedict was making: "God loves the poor and comforts them in their humiliation." Let's turn to his second point: "Our eternal destiny is conditioned by our attitude toward them." In other words, our eternal life with God hinges on the disposition we have towards the poor. Let's unpack this together.

6. Jesus warns elsewhere in Luke's Gospel that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Lk 18:25). We see this to be true for the rich man in this parable. Why might riches be an obstacle to salvation? What disposition of heart might threaten the eternal destiny of those who possess riches?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: With riches comes the danger of cultivating of an interior belief that we can get by in life by being self-reliant – we have enough, we can provide for ourselves, we need not ask for help or seek to receive anything from anyone. St. Paul says, "The love of money is the root of all evils" (1 Tim 6:10). If we love money, we are easily tempted into believing that it alone will protect us, secure our future, and in a real way, save us from all harm. If we believe ourselves and our resources capable of providing for our own needs, we risk elevating ourselves (and our means) to a role that only God can truly claim: He alone is our protector, provider, and savior.

7. Now, looking back at the story, does the parable reveal any wicked deeds of the rich man? Why does it appear he was damned?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Does the parable say he blasphemed God? Does it say he was a jerk to those around him? Does it say he didn't say his prayers or make his offerings at the temple? We don't know any of that. All we know is that he didn't take the time to consider the suffering of poor Lazarus at his door. And because of that, he is eternally lost.

Please read aloud: As Christians disciples, we ought to take Jesus' words very seriously. In fact, this seems to be the key point of the parable. We are saved or lost based on our willingness to minister to the suffering of the poor around us.

8. How would you describe your current attitude toward those in need? How does this parable challenge your attitude?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Now, we've considered, one, that God loves the poor, including how poverty and riches can impact our attitude toward God, and, two, that serving the poor is a matter of salvation. But why, exactly, does service to the poor matter so much for our eternal destiny? Let's see what Jesus tells us about this in another parable.

You Did It to Me

Read Matthew 25:41-46

9. Jesus identifies himself with the poor. How does this shed light on the connection between serving the poor and our salvation?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Not only does Jesus call us to serve the poor for their own sake, He goes even further, teaching us that how we treat the poor is also how we treat Him. This reality adds a deeper dimension to the Christian understanding of serving the poor. Beyond the mere alleviation suffering, serving the poor also becomes an act of devotion to God.

In the words Pope Francis, "our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation." When we encounter the poor, we encounter Christ. Because our Lord himself suffered in his earthly life, especially in his Passion and Death, his heart remains specially united to all those who suffer as well. In those who suffer, we find the heart of God. In serving the suffering and poor, we bring consolation to the heart of Jesus.

10. Do you serve the poor? Why must Christian disciples be interacting with, serving, and encountering the poor in a personal way?

Allow the group to discuss.

*Answer: While it is certainly good to give money to charities and support just social structures in the economic and political realms, the Christian call to serve the poor requires that we become **personally involved in their lives**. It isn't enough to simply wish them well from a distance. If we never meet the poor, if we never see them face to face, then we will never truly encounter Christ in them. The poor are*

not problems to be solved or tasks to be checked off our to-do lists, but brothers and sisters to be loved.

*An additional point is worth making clear: **Christian discipleship requires serving the poor.** We might be tempted to think that serving the poor is for some people, but not everyone. We might think that we are living a faithful Christian life so long as we are praying and going to Mass on Sundays. But serving the poor is not an optional add-on to the Christian life. If we neglect this essential task then our faith is, as St. James tells us, “dead” (Jas 2:17). The love of God is inseparable from the love of neighbor (1 Jn 4:20).*

Please read aloud: We have many good reasons to serve the poor. God loves the poor, it is a matter of our eternal destiny, Christ himself is in the poor! So how do we identify who it is we ought to serve and how are we supposed to serve them? Let’s dive into one last parable to answer these questions.

Who is My Neighbor?

Read Luke 10:25-37

11. This parable is well-known and puts on display a man of great generosity who cares abundantly for those around him, even at his own cost and inconvenience. Let’s begin our discussion with Jesus’ question at the end of the parable. Because He actually flips the original question on its head and asks who *proved to be neighbor* to the man in need. In this parable, Jesus is inviting us to “be neighbors” to others. What does it mean to “be neighbor”?

Answer: In his question, Jesus makes “being neighbor” something active. It is important to recognize that what it means “to be neighbor”

is to be one who has mercy on others, who gives their heart away to those in misery. While we should ask “Who is my neighbor?” we should also contemplate, “Who am I called to be neighbor to?” -- who in my life, in my community, in my sphere of influence is poor, in need of generosity, in need of mercy? What shall I do to serve them? How am I neighbor?

Please read aloud: We are called to take on the role of neighbor in an active way. But the context of this parable also unlocks another important fact. Jesus tells this scholar of the law that to inherit eternal life, he must fulfill the two great commandments: the love of God and the love of neighbor. However, the Scriptures tell us that the lawyer desired to “justify himself” when he asks “Who is my neighbor?” (v. 29). In other words, perhaps this man wanted “off-the-hook”, so to speak, hoping that Jesus would narrowly define “neighbor” and exclude some groups of people he wouldn’t have to serve.

12. We often hear in Scripture of the mutual animosity between Jews and Samaritans. The scholar questioning Jesus is a Jew and the hero of this story is a Samaritan. How does the scholar answer Jesus’ question about who proved to be neighbor? What might his wording reveal about his disposition of his heart towards Samaritans?

Answer: After the parable, Jesus asks him who proved to be neighbor and he is unable even to say the words, “the Samaritan.” He opts instead for a simple description — “the one who showed mercy.” His hardness of heart towards the people he perceives as enemies becomes clear.

13. How does Jesus' answer, the parable of the Good Samaritan, challenge the hardness of heart of his listeners, especially the scholar questioning him?

Answer: We ought not miss how scandalous Jesus' message must have seemed to His Jewish audience: Who is my neighbor? Who am I called to love? Even our enemies, the Samaritans. This is Jesus' point: everyone is our neighbor—even those we most detest, even our enemies (see Mt 5:43-48).

14. Now let's turn to the Good Samaritan himself. What do you notice about his actions? In what ways does he serve the man in need? And what might his actions teach us?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: The Good Samaritan notices the other man's suffering. He was attentive to his needs. He also had compassion on him (see above on the meaning of compassion). Additionally, He went to great lengths to care for his needs, giving of his time, his money, and his personal attention. This teaches us that we need to be attentive to the needs of the poor, have hearts of compassion toward them, and make real sacrifices to meet their needs.

15. What can keep you today from noticing the needs of others and serving them? Who are neighbors you can begin serving in your immediate community? What kinds of needs can you begin attending to?

Allow the group to discuss.

16. Our communities have a variety of needs, but we could say that their spiritual needs are the most dire. Mother Teresa said,

The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty — it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.²

Similarly, Pope Francis writes that the “worst discrimination the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care.”³ Have you taken time to consider the spiritual poverty of your community? What would it take to begin serving the spiritually poor around you? What would that look like?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Thus, the Church has always invited Christians to be attentive to both the corporal and the spiritual works of mercy, to care for peoples' bodies as well as their souls.⁴ The people around us have so many needs, we simply need to open our eyes and our hearts to be attentive to their poverty.

² Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path*, Compiled by Lucinda Vardey, Ballantine Books: New York, 1995.

³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 200, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazi-one-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, June 9, 2023.

⁴ “The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead” (CCC 2447).

NOTES



Chapter VIII

Missionary Discipleship

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
Pages 180 - 193

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
Pages 194 - 205

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Missionary Discipleship

This Bible study began with Jesus' calling of Peter. Jesus chose him as a disciple, called him to a deeper trust, and invited him to leave everything and follow Him (Lk 5). Yet, there is one additional element of Peter's story that cannot be forgotten: a call to mission. "And Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men'" (Lk 5:10).

From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, He didn't only call His disciples to follow Him; He also invited them to share in His mission to reach the world with the Gospel of the Kingdom. After calling Peter, He chose the twelve and sent them out (Lk 6:12-16). And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal (Lk 9:1-2). His mission didn't end with the twelve, either. In His desire to reach more lost souls, He appointed seventy others, saying, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Lk 10:1-2).

Then, at the end of His earthly ministry, He made clear His full plan for mission,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age (Mt 28:18-20).

This is the most authoritative statement in the history of the world. Jesus Christ, God-in-the-flesh, through whom the entire universe was created, cites His own credentials, saying "all authority" has been given to Him. Presidents, CEOs, and all other leaders on the planet do not have any authority comparable to Christ's. And with this authority, He commands His body, the Church, to "make disciples of all nations" (v. 19). This is our mission. Pope St. Paul VI said it beautifully when he wrote, "Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize."¹ What began with the calling of the first disciples, extending to the twelve and the seventy, also extends to the entire Church. Even today, two-thousand years later, His followers receive His call to reach the world with His message of salvation. This is the mission Christ entrusted to His Church, and each one of us is called to participate in that mission.

Several facets of Christ's mission merit particular attention. Let's consider a few:

¹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, par. 14, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html August 17, 2023.

An Indispensable Mission

Christ's mission is indispensable. Speaking of the missionary mandate for all Christians, the Second Vatican Council stated: "On all Christians therefore is laid the preeminent responsibility of working to make the divine message of salvation known and accepted by all men throughout the world."² Even the Church's law states Catholics have the right and the duty to evangelize.³ Truly, mission is an indispensable aspect of Christian discipleship.

Unfortunately, for some it can be tempting to think that mission is an optional part of discipleship, something we should do, but not a necessity. If we maintain our personal devotion to God, the thinking goes, what more is necessary? But Jesus never envisions mission as an "extra." As we learned, to be a disciple is to imitate the master. And if Christ's mission is to save the world, then our mission is to imitate Him, to join Him in His saving work. It is a contradiction to say that we desire to follow Jesus but don't care about His mission. Like St. Paul, we must say, "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16).

In fact, Pope St. Paul VI tells us evangelization is the surest sign that we are disciples,

Finally, the person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize others. Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelization: it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself

² Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html August 31, 2023.

³ *The Code of Canon Law*, Can. 225 §1, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann208-329_en.html#TITLE_II. August 31, 2023.

*to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn.*⁴

Pope Francis articulates a similar idea, calling all Christians to missionary discipleship,

*All the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization.... [W]e no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries", but rather that we are always "missionary disciples".*⁵

Do you think of yourself this way? Are you a "missionary disciple?" You might be thinking, "Evangelization isn't for me." But that is simply not true. Not only is Christ commanding you to go on mission, He is also giving you His grace and His Spirit to empower you. It is His mission, and as a member of the Church, you are called to participate in it.

A Mission to Make Disciples

Jesus calls us to "make disciples" (Mt 28:19). At the very heart of the Church's evangelization is the proclamation of the Gospel, which St. John Paul II described the Gospel as "the initial ardent proclamation by which a person is one day overwhelmed and brought to decision to entrust himself to Jesus Christ by faith."⁶ Indeed, just as Peter "left

⁴ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, par. 24, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html August 17, 2023.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 120, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#We_are_all_missionary_disciples August 17, 2023.

⁶ John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, par. 25, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae.html August 17, 2023.

everything and followed him” so too are we called to invite others to “leave their nets behind” and begin a life of discipleship, following Jesus unreservedly. Said simply, our mission is to make disciples.

This reality is essential for us to remember as we set out on mission. There are many good ways of contributing to the work of evangelization—giving to the poor, teaching someone about the Faith, modeling the Christian life by our conduct, etc. And we all have different gifts that can contribute to building up the kingdom—teaching, healing, hospitality, etc. What we must keep in mind, however, is that our primary goal in all these activities is making disciples of Jesus Christ. Whether we are serving in a Diocese, a Parish, in campus ministry, or just witnessing to the people in our daily lives, we cannot lose track of this goal. If our missionary efforts are not contributing to disciple-making, then we ought to reevaluate them carefully. We are not simply called to do what we enjoy or what makes us feel good about ourselves; we are called to “make disciples” (Mt 28:19). That is the mission Christ is entrusting to our care. We cannot be content to let lesser goods get in the way of our primary goal of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

A Mission to Reach the Entire World

Christ’s mission is to all people. God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). And with such great desire, Christ calls His Church to reach the entire world with His saving truth (CCC 849). It is truly for “all nations” (Mt 28:19).

The Church is keenly aware of this responsibility. As Christ’s body on earth, She is entrusted with the mission of bringing the Gospel to every person. Pope St. John Paul II, in his 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, recognized this responsibility when he wrote,

The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion. As the second millennium after Christ’s coming draws to an end, an overall view of the human race shows that this mission is still only beginning and that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service.⁷

Pope St. Paul VI wrote similarly in his day,

The Church is deeply aware of her duty to preach salvation to all. Knowing that the Gospel message is not reserved to a small group of the initiated, the privileged or the elect, but is destined for everyone, she shares Christ’s anguish at the sight of the wandering and exhausted crowds, “like sheep without a shepherd.”⁸

Today, the Church, and we as members of it, must recognize our responsibility as well. Pew research estimates that in 2020, the world population was around 7.66 billion people, only about 2.38 billion of which were Christians. This means that today there are likely *at least* 5.28 billion people in this world who are *not* disciples of Jesus Christ.⁹ And that number doesn’t even consider those Christians who are not actively practicing the Faith.

These staggering numbers should get our attention. We might not be able to personally reach every individual on the planet, but our hearts should break that so many people are likely to die not knowing

⁷ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, par. 1, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html

⁸ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, par. 57, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html August 31, 2023.

⁹ Pew Research, *Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050*, accessed at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/interactives/religious-composition-by-country-2010-2050/> August 31, 2023.

Jesus Christ. And while the Church certainly teaches that salvation is *possible* for those who do not know Christ explicitly—who, to the best of their ability, are trying to do what is right by the light of reason—She also recognizes that only an intimate knowledge of Jesus Christ, through faith and baptism, *ensures* salvation (see CCC 847-56). The Church has always rejected universalism, the idea that everyone will necessarily be saved. Yet, even if we don't subscribe to universalism explicitly, too often today, many people subscribe to what might be called practical universalism. They believe that hell exists, but they are none too concerned that any decent, hard-working person might end up there. But Jesus Himself cautions us against such a view. He tells us, "[T]he gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction" (Mt 7:13). It isn't enough to simply *hope* that the people who haven't heard the name of Jesus will receive a heavenly reward. If any of those 5.28+ billion non-Christians can be saved from eternal damnation and brought to eternal life with God in heaven, why wouldn't we bring them His saving message? And even if certain people were already following their consciences and seeking to live well according to the light of reason, why wouldn't we bolster their eternal hope (not to mention their earthly joy) by telling them explicitly about the saving truth for which they long. Woe to us if we merely affirm their good intentions! Instead, our love for God and for others ought to convict us that every person needs and deserves to hear Christ's saving message.

An Urgent Mission

This leads us to a final point: Christ's mission is urgent. Curtis Martin and Edward Sri write, "As Christians, we don't believe in reincarnation; no one gets a "do-over," a second chance to help people in some

second, third or fourth life. No, the time is now. This generation of Christians is responsible for helping this generation of souls."¹⁰

Jesus uses the word "go" in the Great Commission (Mt 28:19). It is a word we should take to heart. We can't sit back on the sidelines, waiting to go on mission until some future date. The people of this world are desperate for a relationship with Christ, even if they don't know it. They are spiritually starving, and we need to bring them food before they expire of hunger. Therefore, we must go out to them—now!

Many saints of the Church knew how important it was for them to go out and preach the Gospel. The first apostles travelled across the known world. St. Peter traveled to Rome. St. James is purported to have made it all the way to the Atlantic coast of Spain. St. Paul travelled much of the Mediterranean world. Additionally, St. Francis Xavier, one of the greatest missionaries in the history of the Church, travelled from Europe to India. While there he lamented how many of the "good Christians" of his day failed to take seriously the urgency of Christ's mission. He wrote, in a letter to his dear friend, St. Ignatius,

Many, many people fail to become Christians, simply for the lack of a teacher of the Christian faith! Often I think of running throughout the universities of Europe, and principally Paris and the Sorbonne, there to shout at the top of my voice, like one who had lost his senses—to tell those men whose learning is greater than their wish to put their knowledge to good use, how many souls, through their negligence, must lose Heaven and end up in hell.¹¹

¹⁰ Martin, Curtis and Sri, Edward (Editors), *Foundations for Discipleship*, p. 142. Published by FOCUS and OSV, 2021.

¹¹ Walsh, Milton. (2012). *Witness of the Saints: Patristic Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2012), 638.

You may or may not be called to travel the world to evangelize, but either way, you should have the same urgency as these saints to reach all peoples with Christ's Gospel. Do you have this urgency? Do you desire to make disciples of all nations? If not, you might spend a little time reflecting: How is my relationship with Christ? Do I care about the salvation of souls? Do I only want to receive from Christ or am I also willing to give? Do I love learning the teachings of the Church but fail to share those teachings with others? There's no need to be ashamed if your conviction isn't yet what it could be—we can all grow. What is essential, however, is to recognize our call to mission and grow in our commitment to it.

Getting Started – Three Habits of Missionary Disciples

If we are going to live Christ's mission, we need to be people totally transformed by Christ, people committed to loving Him with all our hearts, loving others and living His mission in the world. Over the years in FOCUS, we have found three key habits of a missionary disciple that seem most important to helping us become the kind of people who can fulfil Christ's mission: Divine Intimacy, Authentic Friendship and Clarity and Conviction about the Little Way of Evangelization. Let's discuss each of these three habits:

Divine Intimacy

Prayer was at the heart of Jesus' mission. He prayed before and after He preached, healed, and cast out demons (Mk 1:35, Lk 5:16, Jn 6:1, 6:15). He prayed before traveling to a new city (Lk 4:42). He prayed all night before He chose the twelve (Lk 6:12). Constantly, He turned back to His Father in prayer.

Christ teaches us to do the same as we go on mission. We cannot give what we do not have. If we want others to know Jesus Christ, then we must first be deeply committed to Him ourselves. Therefore, as missionary disciples, we should have as our primary goal cultivating a deep, personal friendship with Jesus Christ. Evangelization is first and foremost the work of God, and we will be fruitful in mission only to the extent that we ourselves are abiding in deep union with Him. Jesus tells us, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

To grow in our intimacy with Christ we must commit ourselves to the four key practices to which the earliest disciples of Jesus dedicated themselves: prayer, fellowship, the sacraments and forming our minds with the teachings of Christ (see Acts 2:42). These are the four main ways we continually renew our encounter with Christ and grow in divine intimacy, without which we will not bear fruit in mission.

Authentic Friendship

Jesus called His disciples "friends" (Jn 15:15). This is a profound statement. If the God of the universe, Who came down from heaven to save humanity, Who is infinitely beyond human comprehension, can call His apostles friends, what does that mean for us and our missionary efforts? How does this impact the way we view the people we are evangelizing?

In forming missionary disciples, it is not enough to pass on the Gospel message and the teachings of the Church. That is essential, but we must do more. We must genuinely love the people we are serving, accompanying them in life and personally investing ourselves in them through authentic friendship. Pope St. Paul VI wrote, "The work of evangelization presupposes in the evangelizer an ever increasing

love for those whom he is evangelizing.”¹² Similarly, St. Paul writes, “So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (1 Thess 2:8). As true missionary disciples, we must love the people we serve. We must give them not simply a message, but our very selves. This involves actively going out to them, taking interest in them, visiting them on their turf and being a true friend, not simply a formal leader. This kind of deep, personal investment in the people we’re serving matters. Consider Pope Francis’ words, “An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives... Evangelizers thus take on the ‘smell of the sheep,’ and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.”¹³ Indeed, our efforts at fulfilling Christ’s mission of evangelization will prove fruitless if we do not love those we serve through genuine, authentic friendship.

Clarity and Conviction about the Little Way of Evangelization

Jesus’ way of evangelization was not a big way, but a little way. He did not travel the world to preach the Gospel to everyone on earth himself. Rather, He invested deeply in a few whom He formed in the Gospel of the kingdom and trained them to go out and do the same for others. Though He preached to the masses sometimes, He spent most of His time investing in His small group of disciples. He spent three years living with them, teaching them and showing them how to preach, heal and lead as He did (Mt 10:5ff, Lk 10:1ff). Then, He sent them out to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Jesus’ approach

¹² Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, par. 79, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html August 31, 2023.

¹³ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 24, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html August 31, 2023.

to evangelization is what we call the “Little Way of Evangelization.” It is the approach to evangelization that Jesus modeled for us, the “Method Modeled by the Master.”

As we aim to fulfil Christ’s mission, we must have both clarity and conviction about Jesus’ “Little Way of Evangelization.” First, do we have *clarity* about the way Jesus evangelized? Do we think that we need to have a big social media platform or teach theology classes to go on mission? Or do we have clarity that by imitating Christ and investing deeply in a few, we can transform the world?

Second, do we also have *conviction* that Jesus’ example models for us the best way to evangelize? Do we have the conviction that if we imitate Jesus’ way of evangelization we can be most effective in our mission and help transform our world today with the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Do we have the conviction to prioritize this mission in our lives, making time for this urgent task and pouring our lives out into it? Do we have the conviction that this mission is not a job or something extra but is truly at the heart of our identity as disciples?

By having both clarity and conviction for Jesus’ “Little Way of Evangelization,” we will not only bring others to Christ, but we will also begin to see a kind of “spiritual multiplication,” in which more and more souls are brought into Christ’s kingdom. Consider this example,

Imagine one person pursuing a deep, personal relationship with Jesus and desiring for others to know him. She starts intentionally investing in three others who also have a desire to know Jesus. As they grow together, each of these missionary disciples begin investing in friends of their own—three, six or more—who eventually go on to do the same, forming more and more missionary disciples with each new cycle of growth.

The effects begin slowly: For example, one missionary disciple who reaches three others makes four. If each of those three new disciples reaches three others, the total becomes thirteen. For illustration purposes, imagine if all continued to go ideally well—after seven cycles, the total number could reach nearly 1,000, and after 13 cycles, more than 500,000. At this rate, the entire world could be reached in just 22 cycles—that’s within one lifetime of the original disciple! While human weakness and failure will always be present along the way, this model, while purely mathematical, still beautifully illustrates the potential effect one person can have.¹⁴

Conclusion

If we put these three habits into practice, we will begin to see incredible fruit. By continuously deepening our intimacy with Jesus Christ, loving others through authentic friendship, and investing deeply in a few with clarity and conviction for the “Little Way of Evangelization,” not only will we have the potential to reach the entire world for Jesus Christ but also each person will be known, loved, and cared for along the way by another missionary disciple. Just imagine what could happen if we began to live this mission today. The time is now. Let’s get started.

¹⁴ Martin, Curtis and Sri, Edward (Editors), *Foundations for Discipleship*, p. 146-147. Published by FOCUS and OSV, 2021.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 1:35-39, Luke 5:12-16, John 15:12-17

Introduction

1. Launching Question: Have you ever been given a challenging task to complete? What was it and how were you successful or unsuccessful in fulfilling that task?

Allow the group to discuss.

Last time we discussed the works of mercy and the importance of serving poor. Today, we are going to look more deeply at Christ's mission and our role in that mission.

Missionary Discipleship

Read Matthew 28:18-20

2. This passage, referred to as the Great Commission, begins with "all authority on heaven and earth has been given to me" (v. 18). Why do you think Jesus mentions His authority here, and what does this tell us about the words that follow?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Christ makes the most authoritative statement in the history of the world. Jesus Christ, God-in-the-flesh, through whom the entire universe was created, cites His own credentials, saying "all authority" has been given to Him. Presidents, CEOs, and all other leaders on the planet do not have any authority comparable to Christ's. With this authority, Christ commands His body, the Church, to "make disciples of all nations" (v. 19). This is the mission Christ entrusted to His Church, and each one of us is called to participate in that mission. By citing His authority Jesus is emphasizing the importance of this command and His full authority to see this mission fulfilled.

An Indispensable Mission

Please read aloud: Let's look at a few aspects of Christ's mission that appear in the Great Commission. The first aspect we will look at is indispensability. In other words, why mission is an essential part of the Christian life.

3. If you think back to the very first chapter of this Bible study, what did it mean to be a disciple in Biblical times?

Allow the group to discuss.

*Answer: The key answer is that disciples **imitated** their rabbis.*

Note to the Leader: Keep this question short; it is simply meant to set up the following question.

4. If disciples are called to imitate their rabbis, and Jesus (our rabbi) has a mission to save the world, what does that mean for us as His disciples?

Answer: If Christ's mission is to save the world, then our mission is to imitate Him, to join Him in His saving work. It is a contradiction to say that we desire to follow Jesus but don't care about His mission to save souls. The Second Vatican Council stated: "On all Christians therefore is laid the preeminent responsibility of working to make the divine message of salvation known and accepted by all men throughout the world."¹ Even the Church's law states Catholics have the right and the duty to evangelize.² Truly, mission is an indispensable aspect of Christian discipleship.

5. Pope Francis has said, "All the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization.... [W]e no longer say that we are 'disciples' and 'missionaries', but rather that we are always 'missionary disciples.'³ Do you think of yourself as a "missionary disciple?" Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

A Mission to Make Disciples

6. Going back to the Great Commission, Jesus commands us to "make disciples." What does it mean to "make disciples?" Why

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html August 31, 2023.

² *The Code of Canon Law*, Can. 225 §1, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann208-329_en.html#TITLE_II. August 31, 2023.

³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 120, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazi-one-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#We_are_all_missionary_disciples August 17, 2023.

didn't Jesus simply say, "Share the good news" or "Show mercy to others?" And what impact does this have on the way that we live out mission?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: At the very heart of the Church's evangelization is the proclamation of the Gospel, which St. John Paul II described the Gospel as "the initial ardent proclamation by which a person is one day overwhelmed and brought to decision to entrust himself to Jesus Christ by faith."⁴ Indeed, just as Peter "left everything and followed him" so too are we called to invite others to "leave their nets behind" and begin a life of discipleship, following Jesus unreservedly. We preach the Gospel and have mercy on others so that we can make disciples. Whether we are serving in a Diocese, a Parish, in campus ministry, or just witnessing to the people in our daily lives, we cannot lose track of this goal. If our missionary efforts are not contributing to disciple-making, then we ought to reevaluate them carefully. We are not simply called to do what we enjoy or what makes us feel good about ourselves; we are called to "make disciples" (Mt 28:19).

A Mission to Reach the Entire World

Please read aloud: Jesus says that we are to make disciples of "all nations" (v. 19). In the Book of First Timothy, we read that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). Truly, Christ's mission is meant to reach everyone.

⁴ John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, par. 25, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae.html August 17, 2023.

However, Pew research estimates that in 2020, the world population was around 7.66 billion people, only about 2.38 billion of which were Christians. This means that today there are likely *at least* 5.28 billion people in this world who are *not* disciples of Jesus Christ.⁵ And that number doesn't even consider those Christians who are not actively practicing the Faith.

7. What comes to mind when you hear these numbers? Do you get angry? Discouraged? Motivated to go on mission? Something else entirely?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: When we hear these numbers, it's important for us to understand what the Church teaches about salvation. While the Church certainly teaches that salvation is *possible* for those who do not know Christ explicitly—who, to the best of their ability, are trying to do what is right by the light of reason—She also recognizes that only an intimate knowledge of Jesus Christ, through faith and baptism, *ensures* salvation (see CCC 847-56). The Church has always rejected universalism, the idea that everyone will necessarily be saved. Yet, even if we don't subscribe to universalism explicitly, too often today, many people subscribe to what might be called practical universalism. They believe that hell exists, but they are none too concerned that any decent, hard-working person might end up there. But Jesus Himself cautions us against such a view. He tells us, “[T]he gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction” (Mt 7:13). It isn't enough to simply *hope* that the people who haven't heard the name of Jesus will receive a heavenly reward.

⁵ Pew Research, *Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050*, accessed at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/interactives/religious-composition-by-country-2010-2050/> August 31, 2023.

8. Given the Church's teaching, how ought we to respond to the reality that so many people are not Christians? Why must we do more than simply hope that things will work out?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: If any of those 5.28+ billion non-Christians can be saved from eternal damnation and brought to eternal life with God in heaven, why wouldn't we bring them His saving message? And even if certain people were already following their consciences and seeking to live well according to the light of reason, why wouldn't we bolster their eternal hope (not to mention their earthly joy) by telling them explicitly about the saving truth for which they long. Woe to us if we merely affirm their good intentions! Instead, our love for God and for others ought to convict us that every person needs and deserves to hear Christ's saving message.

An Urgent Mission

Please read aloud: This leads us to a final point: Christ's mission is urgent. Many saints of the Church knew how important it was for them to go out and preach the Gospel. The first apostles travelled across the known world. St. Peter traveled to Rome. St. James is purported to have made it all the way to the Atlantic coast of Spain. St. Paul travelled much of the Mediterranean world. Additionally, St. Francis Xavier, one of the greatest missionaries in the history of the Church, travelled from Europe to India. While there he lamented how many of the “good Christians” of his day failed to take seriously the urgency of Christ's mission. He wrote, in a letter to his dear friend, St. Ignatius,

Many, many people fail to become Christians, simply for the lack of a teacher of the Christian faith! Often I think of running throughout the universities of Europe, and principally Paris and the Sorbonne, there to shout at the top of my voice, like one who had lost his senses—to tell those men whose learning is greater than their wish to put their knowledge to good use, how many souls, through their negligence, must lose Heaven and end up in hell.⁶

9. You may or may not be called to travel the world to evangelize, but either way, you should strive to have the same urgency as these saints to reach all peoples with Christ's Gospel. Do you have this urgency? Do you desire to make disciples of all nations? In what ways do you struggle to make evangelization a reality in your life?

Allow the group to discuss.

Getting Started – Three Habits of Missionary Disciples

Please read aloud: If we are going to live Christ's mission, we need to be people totally transformed by Christ, people committed to loving Him with all our hearts, loving others and living His mission in the world. Over the years in FOCUS, we have found three key habits of a missionary disciple that seem most important to helping us become the kind of people who can fulfil Christ's mission: Divine Intimacy, Authentic Friendship and Clarity and Conviction about the Little Way of Evangelization. Let's look at how Jesus lived each of these habits, so that we can learn how to begin living out Christ's mission.

⁶ Walsh, Milton. (2012). Witness of the Saints: Patristic Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2012), 638.

Divine Intimacy

Read Mark 1:35-39

Read Luke 5:12-16

10. What do we see Jesus doing before and after His work of building the kingdom? What does this teach us about going on mission?

Answer: Prayer was at the heart of Jesus' mission. He prayed before and after He preached, healed, and cast out demons (Mk 1:35, Lk 5:16, Jn 6:1, 6:15). Constantly, He turned back to His Father in prayer. Christ teaches us to do the same as we go on mission. We cannot give what we do not have. If we want others to know Jesus Christ, then we must first be deeply committed to Him ourselves.

11. Jesus also tells us in John 15:5, "Apart from me you can do nothing," Why is union with Christ so essential for us as we seek to live out Christ's mission?

Answer: As missionary disciples, we should have as our primary goal cultivating a deep, personal friendship with Jesus Christ. Evangelization is first and foremost the work of God, and we will be fruitful in mission only to the extent that we ourselves are abiding in deep union with Him.

Authentic Friendship

Read John 15:12-17

12. Jesus called His disciples "friends" (Jn 15:15). This is a profound statement. If the God of the universe, Who came down from heaven to save humanity, Who is infinitely beyond human

comprehension, can call His apostles friends, what does that mean for us and our missionary efforts? How does this impact the way we view the people we are evangelizing?

Answer: In forming missionary disciples, it is not enough to pass on the Gospel message and the teachings of the Church. That is essential, but we must do more. We must genuinely love the people we are serving, accompanying them in life and personally investing ourselves in them through authentic friendship. Pope St. Paul VI wrote, “The work of evangelization presupposes in the evangelizer an ever increasing love for those whom he is evangelizing.”⁷ Similarly, St. Paul writes, “So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (1 Thess 2:8). As true missionary disciples, we must love the people we serve. We must give them not simply a message, but our very selves. This involves actively going out to them, taking interest in them, visiting them on their turf and being a true friend, not simply a formal leader.

Clarity and Conviction about the Little Way of Evangelization

Please read aloud: Jesus’ way of evangelization was not a big way, but a little way. He did not travel the world to preach the Gospel to everyone on earth himself. Rather, He invested deeply in a few whom He formed in the Gospel of the kingdom and trained them to go out and do the same for others. Though He preached to the masses sometimes, He spent most of His time investing in His small group of disciples. He spent three years living with them, teaching them and

showing them how to preach, heal and lead as He did (Mt 10:5ff, Lk 10:1ff). Then, He sent them out to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Jesus’ approach to evangelization is what we call the “Little Way of Evangelization.” It is the approach to evangelization that Jesus modeled for us, the “Method Modeled by the Master.”

13. Do you have *clarity* about how you are called to evangelize? How can your missionary efforts be more like Jesus’ efforts?

Allow the group to discuss.

14. Second, do you also have *conviction* that Jesus’ example models for us the best way to evangelize? Do you have the conviction to prioritize this mission in your life, making time for this urgent task and pouring your life out into it?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: By having both clarity and conviction for Jesus’ “Little Way of Evangelization,” we will not only bring others to Christ, but we will also begin to see a kind of “spiritual multiplication,” in which more and more souls are brought into Christ’s kingdom. Consider this example,

Imagine one person pursuing a deep, personal relationship with Jesus and desiring for others to know him. She starts intentionally investing in three others who also have a desire to know Jesus. As they grow together, each of these missionary disciples begin investing in friends of their own—three, six or more—who eventually go on to do the same, forming more and more missionary disciples with each new cycle of growth.

⁷ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, par. 79, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html August 31, 2023.

The effects begin slowly: For example, one missionary disciple who reaches three others makes four. If each of those three new disciples reaches three others, the total becomes thirteen. For illustration purposes, imagine if all continued to go ideally well—after seven cycles, the total number could reach nearly 1,000, and after 13 cycles, more than 500,000. At this rate, the entire world could be reached in just 22 cycles—that’s within one lifetime of the original disciple! While human weakness and failure will always be present along the way, this model, while purely mathematical, still beautifully illustrates the potential effect one person can have.⁸

If we put these three habits into practice, we will begin to see incredible fruit. By continuously deepening our intimacy with Jesus Christ, loving others through authentic friendship, and investing deeply in a few with clarity and conviction for the “Little Way of Evangelization,” not only will we have the potential to reach the entire world for Jesus Christ but also each person will be known, loved, and cared for along the way by another missionary disciple. Just imagine what could happen if we began to live this mission today. The time is now. Let’s get started.

15. (Optional) We have now completed this Bible study, Life in Christ. What parts stood out to you most? Where do you think you still need to grow? What are you looking forward to next?

Allow the group to discuss.

⁸ Martin, Curtis and Sri, Edward (Editors), *Foundations for Discipleship*, p. 146-147. Published by FOCUS and OSV, 2021.

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FOCUS Equip

'FOCUS Equip' is based on Ephesians 4:12 "for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

These materials seek to equip you for lifelong Catholic mission.

We would love to hear your feedback at: focusequip@focus.org

LIFE IN CHRIST

