



Jesus and Discipleship 8

Sharing in the Mission of Jesus

Reflecting on Jesus's proclamation of the Reign of God, the participants explore how Christians are called to live out Jesus's mission today.

Preparation

Materials to Gather

Gather the following items:

- bibles, one for each participant (optional, see step 2)
- one copy of the resource entitled "Called to Share the Mission of Jesus," cut apart as scored

Process

1. Point out to the participants the two dimensions of Jesus's proclamation of the Reign of God: his radically new understanding of the nature of God and the implications of that vision in terms of our relationships with one another. Jesus's call to love was not restricted to loving only those in our own families or social groups. On the contrary, he said that we are also called to reach out to those who are poor, oppressed, and lonely.

2. Before reading the following adaptation of Luke 4:18–19, introduce it by telling the participants that Jesus was using a selection from the Hebrew Scriptures to explain what his mission was. Remind them that Jesus was a Jew and knew the Hebrew Scriptures well.

- ▶ The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for God has appointed me. I have been sent to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to those in prison, and comfort to those who mourn.

Tell the participants that this passage is a powerful indicator of how Jesus viewed his own role in establishing this Reign grounded in love of

God and neighbor. If you do not feel pressed for time, distribute bibles and have the participants turn to Isaiah 61:1–2 and compare it with Luke 4:16–22.

3. Divide the large group into five small groups. Give each group a section from the resource entitled "Called to Share the Mission of Jesus." Tell each group to discuss the questions posed and appoint a secretary to take notes and share the results of the discussion.

4. Gather the participants back into the large group and ask the small-group secretaries to share their responses to the questions. Invite further discussion.

Next Time

Use this space for notes on how you might improve your facilitation of this strategy in the future.

Called to Share the Mission of Jesus



Jesus and his followers are called to bring good news to the poor. What are the various kinds of poverty that could be experienced by people today? What might be the good news that those people are waiting for?



Jesus and his followers have been called to proclaim comfort to those whose hearts are broken. Think of ways people might speak of having a broken heart. What would be required to comfort or heal those broken hearts?



Jesus and his followers are called to proclaim liberty to captives, to free those who are oppressed. Who are the most oppressed people in our society today, those who feel overwhelmed by their life situations? How would the message of Jesus liberate them from those feelings of oppression?



Jesus and his followers are called to give freedom to those in prison. Does that mean that we are to release all the thieves and murderers who are now held in our jails? How would you rephrase this statement to clarify what it might mean to us today?



Jesus and his followers are called to comfort those who mourn. Think of situations in which people mourn. What are some ways those people could be comforted?

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

This learning activity helps the participants understand the role of the Holy Spirit as a teacher, empowerer, and guide in the life of a Christian disciple.

Preparation

Materials to Gather

Gather the following items:

- sheets of newsprint, one for each pair of participants
- markers, one for each pair of participants
- a Bible

Things to Do

- Recruit a volunteer to read John 14:25–27.
- Prepare to make a presentation on the Holy Spirit, based on the material outlined in step 3. You may want to make an outline on a sheet of newsprint to make it easier for you and the participants to follow.
- To set the stage for the discussion of the Holy Spirit, prepare to introduce a fragrant aroma into the room about 15 minutes before the participants arrive. The source of the fragrance should be as unobtrusive as possible. Some options to consider are listed here, but feel free to be creative and come up with one on your own:
 - If you are in a home setting or in a place with an oven nearby, prepare a batch of bread dough and begin baking it before the participants arrive.
 - Purchase some incense or a strong-smelling candle. Light it and put it in a place where the participants will not see it but where its aroma will be apparent.
 - Purchase or borrow a potpourri pot and some fragrant potpourri intended for

simmering. Begin simmering it, and put the pot in a place where the participants will not see it.

Process

1. Have the participants form pairs. Then comment that Jesus called us all to live the life of a Christian disciple, but he also assured us that we would have help. Ask the volunteer to read John 14:25–27. Then ask the participants the following question:

- What kind of help did Jesus promise?

Note that some translations of the Bible refer to the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete (which means “consoler”) or the Advocate.

2. Distribute a sheet of newsprint and marker to each pair. Announce that the pairs will have just a few minutes to define or describe the Holy Spirit in concrete terms, using whatever means possible. The only thing they cannot do is portray the Holy Spirit in the traditional image of a dove. Suggest that they look for something in the room that represents the Spirit, draw an image or a diagram on newsprint, or simply come up with words to describe who the Holy Spirit is and what the Spirit does.

When the pairs are finished, ask them to share their ideas with the rest of the group. What should become apparent is that it is difficult to describe the Holy Spirit in words or concrete images.

3. Make the following brief comments about the Holy Spirit in your own words and add your own thoughts:

- It is difficult to define the nature and work of the Holy Spirit using concrete

images. The Church has used various images in history to symbolize the spirit of God, such as a dove, a cloud and light, oil, and the finger of God.

- ▶ *[Read Acts 2:1–4.]* This passage describes what took place at a celebration of Pentecost, a Jewish harvest or thanksgiving feast. The event described in the passage was a fulfillment of the promise Jesus had earlier made to the disciples. Recall the reading from John you heard at the beginning of this activity. As in the passage I just read from the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit has often been described in images of wind or tongues of fire.
 - ▶ Notice the aroma that has been filling the room since you arrived. How is the Holy Spirit like the fragrance? *[The participants should come up with answers such as the aroma is invisible, but we know it is there; the aroma is not restricted to one location—it is pervasive, even penetrating clothing and sticking to hair and skin; when an aroma is pleasant, it carries a sense of well-being, even peace; some aromas trigger powerful memories and feelings.]*
 - ▶ The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Blessed Trinity. Recall the words of the Nicene Creed: “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son” (*Sacramentary*, p. 368). The word *spirit* is a translation of the Hebrew word *ruah*, which means “breath,” “air,” or “wind.”
 - ▶ The root word of *spirituality* is *spirit*. A Christian spirituality is one that is rooted in Jesus Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit. It is in the Holy Spirit that God communicates to us through grace. Though the Holy Spirit may be difficult to describe in concrete terms, the work of the Spirit in the life of a Christian is ongoing and its effects are pervasive.
4. Invite the participants to share ways they have experienced the Holy Spirit at work in their lives.

Alternative Approach

- You may wish to close the activity with a prayer or litany to the Holy Spirit.

Next Time

Use this space for notes on how you might improve your facilitation of this strategy in the future.

Death: Questions and Feelings

In the first part of this learning activity, the participants explore their reactions to and feelings toward death through an icebreaker presenting death-related terms. Then they pose their own questions, reflect on the questions Jesus may have had when faced with his own death, and bring all those questions—with hope and trust—to prayer.

Preparation

Materials to Gather

Gather the following items:

- small slips of paper (about 2 x 2 inches), one for each participant
- pens or pencils, one for each participant
- a CD of reflective music
- a CD player
- a large candle
- a chalice

Things to Do

- Make copies of the resource entitled “Game Cards,” one for each small group of four or five, and cut them apart as scored. For each group, arrange the cards from columns 1 and 2 in separate piles. Be sure to include the blank cards from the resource, adding one to each pile. These will be used as wild cards.
- Recruit a volunteer to read Mark 14:32–42 when you cue him or her.

Process

1. Have the participants assemble in small groups of four to five. Give a set of two piles of cards to each group. Tell the groups to begin by spreading out the cards, facedown, being careful to keep the cards from each pile separate. Point out that each pile contains a wild card—that is, a blank. Explain that the first person to play is to draw two cards, one from each pile. That person turns over the two cards for all to see and then formulates a single statement with those two words

in it. If a person draws a blank card, he or she may insert any word into the statement. The only stipulation is that the statement be true. Have the groups follow this process until everyone has had a turn or until you call time. You might want to share a couple examples with the participants before they start:

- *Death* sometimes comes to people we *cherish*.
- A *palldearer* may *ponder* the meaning of death as he or she helps to carry the coffin.

2. Gather the participants back into the large group. Use the following questions to help the participants identify some of the thoughts, feelings, and concerns touched on by the card game:

- Did you discover anything new about yourself? about the subject of death?
 - Were there certain words you found difficult to deal with?
 - Did you find yourself formulating statements you preferred not to speak aloud?
 - Were you reminded of any of your own experiences of death or loss?
 - Did you notice the stirring of any particular emotions? To what did they seem related?
- 3.** Offer these thoughts, in your own words:
- We deny death because death is difficult to face. Underlying death denial, we may find a sense of powerlessness, a fear of suffering, a fear of the unknown, a fear

of loss, a sense of abandonment, a sense of meaninglessness, doubts about God, or rage toward God.

- ▶ Since the beginning of time, people of all ages, cultures, and races have asked tough questions about death. Jesus himself struggled with such questions. Questions themselves are of great value, even the questions for which we have no answers. Just posing the questions and being willing to struggle with them is already part of the answer.
 - ▶ Many of our most important questions require not so much answers of the mind but answers from the heart. Willingness to raise our questions can help to open—and free—our hearts.
4. Distribute a small slip of paper and a pen or pencil to each participant. Instruct the participants to spread out to allow one another maximum personal space. Then tell them to write on their slips one question they have about grief, death, and dying. Encourage them to write the question they find least answerable. Point out that they need not put their names on their slips but that you would like to record their anonymous questions afterward for all to read.
 5. While the participants are composing their questions, play some reflective music in the background. Compose a question of your own. Then add the large candle (unlit) and the chalice to the gathering space.
 6. When it looks like the participants are finished writing their questions, gently fade out the background music and provide a bridge into the following prayer by reminding the participants of Jesus's struggle with his own questions and by telling them that Jesus found a way to deal with the most difficult, least answerable questions of all. Invite the participants to reflect on and share what specific questions Jesus might have been asking as he prayed in Gethsemane and traveled the Way of the Cross. Then direct the participants to silently form a circle around the candle and the chalice, bringing their question slips with them.
 7. When the participants have formed a circle and are sitting still, dim the lights. Pray aloud, using these or similar words:
 - ▶ Jesus, you know all our sorrows and all our doubts. You willingly entered the darkness because this is what God asked of you. Be with us now.
 8. Direct the volunteer reader to read Mark 14:32–42, the Gethsemane passage, in a solemn voice.
 9. Allow a moment of silence after the reading. Then read aloud your own unanswerable question, fold your question slip, and place it in the chalice. Then lead the participants in making an act of faith by reciting together, "Take this cup." Explain that this is a statement of entrusting ourselves into God's loving hands. Now explain that each person will be given an opportunity to read aloud his or her question. Tell everyone that when their turn comes, they may read their question aloud to the group or silently to themselves. After each person's reading or brief silence, he or she will fold the question slip and place it in the chalice, and everyone will repeat aloud together, "Take this cup." Continue this process until all the questions have been placed in the chalice.
 10. To conclude the activity, hold up the chalice and pray aloud in these or similar words:
 - ▶ God of compassion, you who know us better than we know ourselves, you who care deeply about our every anxiety and hurt, you who know our most secret dreams, receive these precious questions born of our own struggles. As Jesus's struggle intensified, he entrusted his life into your hands. God of mystery, we are on holy ground; sweep over us as you swept over the waters of the deep so long ago. May your Spirit strengthen each of us that we might pray with Jesus, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." [*Luke 23:46*].
- Lower the cup and place it near the unlit candle.

Alternative Approaches

- For step 5, play the song, “Gethsemane” from the soundtrack *Jesus Christ, Superstar* (Decca U.S., 1996). Provide copies of the lyrics. Afterwards, invite the participants to share their reactions to the song, and allow those reactions to help them reflect on the questions they think Jesus might have had at this moment in his journey.
- To create an effective environment for the session, display sympathy cards, obituaries, and death-related news clippings on a side table. Post a graffiti board, set out a box full of quotations on the subject of death, and display a poster of quotations related to death. These items can provide immediate interest for the participants and stimulate discussion as they gather.

Next Time

Use this space for notes on how you might improve your facilitation of this strategy in the future.

• **Game Cards** •

▼	funeral	▼
◆		◆
	hearse	
◆		◆
	graveyard	
◆		◆
	pallbearer	
◆		◆
	obituary	
◆		◆
	death	
◆		◆
	hospital	
◆		◆
	terminal illness	
◆		◆
	tragedy	
◆		◆
	last will and testament	
◆		◆
	coffin	
◆		◆
	funeral home	
◆		◆
▲		▲
	treasure	
◆		◆
	ponder	
◆		◆
	wonder	
◆		◆
	dream	
◆		◆
	love	
◆		◆
	imagine	
◆		◆
	trust	
◆		◆
	cherish	
◆		◆
	hope	
◆		◆
	promise	
◆		◆
	console	
◆		◆
	heal	
◆		◆
▲		▲



Sacraments and Liturgy 8

Prayer in a Box

This learning activity challenges the participants to attach prayerful, symbolic meaning to common, everyday items, thereby gaining insight into what it means to think symbolically.

Preparation

Things to Do

- Gather a variety of common household and office items and put them in a box. You might include, for example, a roll of tape, a tissue, a scissors, a cup, an eraser, a picture frame, a bottle of aspirin, a stamp. Try to have at least three objects for each small group of two or three.
- You may want to create a prayer or two to use as examples instead of the one included in step 1.

Process

1. Divide the large group into small groups of three or four. Display the items in the box. Invite each group to come forward and randomly choose three items. After all the groups have chosen their items, announce that they are to create a short prayer that includes references to each of the three items. Give the following example, or one of your own:

- ▶ If a group chooses an eraser, a bottle of aspirin, and a roll of tape, its prayer might be something like “God, help me to erase my mistakes [*eraser*], heal the hurts I may have caused [*aspirin*], and patch up a broken friendship [*tape*].”

Let the small groups know they will be sharing their prayers with the large group.

2. When the small groups appear to be finished, ask each one to identify a representative to share its group prayer with the others. Then have each representative share his or her group’s prayer.

Be prepared for some creative responses and even laughter!

3. After all the group representatives have shared, explain that the items in the box were used to get everyone thinking symbolically; that is, they were used to illustrate that objects can take on special meanings apart from what they are as objects. As human beings, we often use things in a symbolic way to communicate with one another. Ask the participants to think of items that are regularly used in a symbolic manner. Some examples might be flowers for someone who is ill, a Christmas present, a family memento, a ring, and a birthday cake. On a very basic level, sacraments serve a related purpose in the life of the Church—they use the basic stuff of life to connect us to realities of profound significance.

Next Time

Use this space for notes on how you might improve your facilitation of this strategy in the future.



“I Am . . .” Litany



Leader. Take a moment to quiet yourself before we begin. [Pause.] Let us begin our prayer in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All. Amen.

Reader 1. Jesus said: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35)

All. Jesus, bread of life, feed us.

Reader 2. Jesus said: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

All. Jesus, light of the world, take away our darkness.

Reader 1. Jesus said: “I am the gate for the sheep. . . . Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” (John 10:7–9)

All. Jesus, gate for the sheep, open the door for our salvation.

Reader 2. Jesus said: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11)

All. Jesus, good shepherd, thank you for your sacrifice of love.

Reader 1. Jesus said: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” (John 11:25)

All. Jesus, the resurrection and the life, bring us to everlasting life.

Reader 2. Jesus said: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

All. Jesus, the way and the truth and the life, bring us to your Father.

Reader 1. Jesus said: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers.” (John 15:5–6)

All. Jesus, the true vine, help us to bear much good fruit for your Reign.

Leader. Jesus, like Peter, we confess that you are the Messiah, the Promised One, who brings the power of salvation to all people, in every place and in every time. Praise be to you for your humble obedience to your Father. Help us to be your faithful followers in this world and bring us to everlasting life in the next. In your name we pray.

All. Amen.

Sign of the Cross: Simply Profound

In this prayer service, the participants experience in a fresh way the traditional and sometimes too familiar gesture of the sign of the cross. They then combine the gesture with blessed water, either baptismal water or holy water. This brief experience can be used in a wide variety of settings and with many topics.

Preparation

Materials to Gather

Gather the following items:

- three taper candles in a bowl of sand
- matches
- a Bible
- the bowl of water used in the earlier prayer experience (optional, use if you led strategy 13, the prayer experience “Christian Baptism and Initiation”) or a small bowl of holy water from the parish

Things to Do

- You may want to set up a CD player to play reflective music during the prayer service. Use quiet instrumental music or an appropriate liturgical song, perhaps the same music used during the prayers in strategy 13.
- Prepare to give a presentation on the sign of the cross and the use of holy water, based on the material outlined in step 2. You may want to make an outline on a sheet of newsprint to make it easier for you and the participants to follow.
- Recruit a volunteer to read 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 when you cue him or her.

Procedure

1. Invite the group to gather in a circle. In the middle of the circle, place the three taper candles in the bowl of sand, the matches, and the Bible. Ask the participants what the three candles might have to do with God. If necessary, give them hints

until someone comes up with the Trinity. Then light the candles slowly and deliberately. As you light each wick, proclaim aloud its corresponding scriptural quote:

- *First wick.* “The LORD appeared . . . in a flame of fire out of a bush” (Exod. 3:2).
- *Second wick.* “Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world’” (John 8:12).
- *Third wick.* “Tongues, as of fire . . . rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:3–4)

2. Introduce the prayer experience by pointing out that among the many identifying features of Catholicism—that is, the beliefs, actions, rituals, and so on, by which many people outside the Catholic Tradition might identify a person as Catholic—are the sign of the cross and the use of holy water. In your own words, briefly explain the primary meaning of those two realities:

- ▮ The sign of the cross, a symbolic gesture that can easily become quite routine for us, has existed since the very early centuries in the Church and has multiple layers of meaning. It is used in both personal and communal prayer. In personal prayer, the believer forms the sign of the cross by reverently touching the forehead, chest, and shoulders. In communal prayer, the priest often blesses the gathered believers by making the sign of the cross in the air. The gesture is used in other ways as well. For example, in the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, the priest makes the sign of the cross on the sick person’s forehead and hands.

- D The sign of the cross expresses two very fundamental beliefs of Catholic Christians:
 - Catholics believe in the Holy Trinity, the central Christian dogma or teaching that holds that in the one God exist three divine persons—God the Father, Jesus the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Each is distinct, yet the three are so totally united as to be the one God. Catholics see reflected in the Trinity itself the significance in Christianity of communal love: They are called not only to live together in a community of faith but also to see in the dogma of the Trinity that God is a community of love par excellence. Clearly this is a mystery of such depth and complexity that believers have pondered and prayed over its meaning since the death and Resurrection of Jesus.
 - Catholics believe that Jesus’s death on the cross, along with his Resurrection from the dead, redeemed humanity from the power of sin and marked the turning point of history.
- D By combining these two meanings of the sign of the cross—that is, the Trinitarian blessing (“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”) and the physical tracing of the cross itself—Catholics sum up the very core of their faith. And it is with these words and this sign that Catholics are baptized into the Church.
- D Catholics use holy water to remind themselves of their Baptism. It is normally available at the entry of churches, where believers can dip their fingers in it and then make the sign of the cross with their dampened fingers. The use of the water in this setting, as in Baptism itself, suggests a cleansing and a desire to purify oneself in preparation for prayer. It is difficult to imagine a more meaningful

gesture as one prepares to join in worship with the community.

- D The water used for Baptism is blessed in a special ritual during the Easter Vigil. It is contained in baptismal fonts or pools at the entry of churches. Common holy water—the kind found in smaller receptacles at the entry of churches—is blessed in a separate ritual.

Note: If you used strategy 13, the prayer experience “Christian Baptism and Initiation,” at this point add to the bowl of water used in that service some of the parish’s baptismal water if it is available, or some of the parish’s holy water. If you did not use the earlier service, simply have available a small bowl of the parish’s baptismal or holy water. Explain that the use of that water is a sign of the group’s unity with the broader parish community. Continue with the following comments in your own words:

- D The sign of the cross and holy water are among the most familiar of a whole host of special actions and objects within Catholicism called sacramentals. They are called this in part because they are often associated with, or imitate parts of, the Church’s official seven sacraments. Sacramentals include religious signs, gestures, public and private devotions, music, images, natural or manufactured objects like special candles, and so on. The use of sacramentals is one of the identifying characteristics of being Catholic.

3. Tell the participants that in a moment you will invite them to express their faith in Jesus and the Gospel by consciously and reverently making the gesture that has come to have such powerful significance for Catholics. How you choose to do this depends on the size of your group and the size of the bowl you have been using. Consider these three options; for each they will dip their fingers in the bowl, then make the sign of the cross:

- The participants come forward to the bowl of water one at a time, as they feel moved.
- The participants process to the bowl in a line and make the sign of the cross as they reach the bowl.

- You carry the bowl to the participants, slowly and prayerfully moving from one to the next, inviting each to make the sign of the cross.

In any case, as each participant approaches the bowl, you might want to repeat a short prayer or blessing. For example, you might say, “[Name of participant], in this gesture remember and embrace your Baptism.” If the participants leave their places in the prayer space to make this gesture, ask them to return to their places quietly when they are done.

4. Allow the room to grow quiet. Then say a brief spontaneous prayer of your own, perhaps while extending your hands over the bowl of water. You could pray that this ritual might symbolize the unity in Christ between the participants and the broader community of faith. After this opening prayer, begin the signing ritual. If you are using reflective music, play it at this time.

5. When all the participants have completed the signing gesture, invite the person who has prepared to read the passage from First Corinthians to come forward. Before he or she reads the passage, introduce it with the following comments, in your own words:

- ▮ In this reading, Paul tells the community of believers in the city of Corinth that what Christians recognize as the wisdom of God is often viewed by nonbelievers as a ridiculous fantasy, if not insanity. How can one possibly accept as God a man who died the horrible death of a common criminal on the cross? Yet believers today sign themselves with the image of that very cross. They agree with Paul’s assessment that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” [*1 Cor. 1:25*].

Direct the volunteer to read the passage.

6. Close the prayer experience with a brief prayer of your own, asking God to guide the group in its pursuit of God’s own wisdom. Then encourage the group to join you once again in prayerfully making the gesture and saying the words of the sign of the cross.

Next Time

Use this space for notes on how you might improve your facilitation of this strategy in the future.



Spirituality 24

God Brings Peace to Our Stress

This prayer experience emphasizes that there is always room for God in our lives, that God helps make all the other pieces of our lives fit together and brings peace.

Preparation

Materials to Gather

Gather the following items:

- a large candle
- matches
- a Bible
- a large, clear glass
- sponges
- a scissors
- a jug of water (enough water to fill the glass)

Things to Do

- Cut up sponges into ten to twelve pieces. The sponges should be dry. Make sure they will completely fill the glass. Place the empty glass and the dry sponges on a table or place them where all the participants will be able to see them. Set the jug of water off to the side.

Procedure

1. Invite the group to gather in a circle. In the middle of the circle, place the large candle, the matches, and the Bible. Then light the candle or invite a participant to come forward and light it. Introduce this activity by saying something like the following:

- ▶ We get so busy in our everyday lives that sometimes it seems as though there is little or no room for God. Let me show you what I mean.

2. Ask the following question:

- ▶ What are some of the things that fill up your life?

Then ask each person who volunteers an answer to come up and place one of the sponge pieces in the glass. Do this until the glass is completely filled with the sponges. Some possible answers the participants might offer include working, driving kids to activities, exercising, talking on the phone, doing cleaning the house, shopping, attending club meetings, studying, watching television, keeping up with e-mail, paying bills, socializing, spending time with spouse, and so on.

3. Then make the following statement:

- ▶ The glass appears full, but there is actually still plenty of room. *[Pour water into the glass until it is full.]*

4. Ask the participants what we can learn from this reflection. Some possible answers include these:

- Even though our lives may seem full, there is always room for God.
- God fills up the empty places in our lives.
- Just as the sponges grew and became softer when water was added, God changes our lives and makes them fuller and better.
- God fills our lives with many good things and good people.

5. Invite the participants to enter into a few moments of silence to thank God for all the gifts of activity in their lives. Then ask the participants if anyone has any needs the group could pray for. Pray for any needs mentioned, and then close with this blessing:

- ▶ God ever-present, you are right here in all our busy activity and stress. Help us remember you are with us through it all, helping and encouraging us. We pray to be more mindful of pausing in the quiet moments and empty spaces of our days to rest in your peaceful presence and let you fill us up with whatever we need to keep going. We ask this through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Next Time

Use this space for notes on how you might improve your facilitation of this strategy in the future.



Morality 19

The Nature of Love

When asked to name the core component of Gospel morality, many would immediately respond “love.” But if asked to define love, most would stumble for an answer. This brief presentation offers insights into what Jesus meant when he used that powerful yet elusive word.

Preparation

Things to Do

- If you think that some participants might not know the Ten Commandments, you may want to list them on a sheet of newsprint. You can find them in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, on the pages preceding paragraph 2052. You might also want to copy the great commandment from the Gospel of Mark as it is noted in the presentation.
- Prepare to share the following ideas about the meaning of love in your own words. You may wish to create an outline on a sheet of newsprint, both as a reference for you and as a visual aid for the participants.

Presentation Notes

Present the following information in your own words:

- ▶ Because of its various and abstract meanings, *love* is difficult to define. Many popular notions of love can be found in greeting card stores, on TV commercials, in novels, and in movies. There love is equated with everything from sex to our attitudes toward ice cream or an article of clothing. However, these definitions tell only part of the story, for love is also a Gospel mandate. Jesus demanded that we love one another as he loved us. That is the foundation of Christian morality. And we can be sure that by the word *love* Jesus meant something far different than our culture does today.
- ▶ Sometimes people confuse Christian morality with being nice, not upsetting anyone, and being agreeable and pleasant at all times. However, love, not niceness, is the bottom line.
- ▶ The writer of the First Letter of John tells us that “God is love” (4:8). In God, love is perfect. Jesus is the perfect manifestation of God’s love for us. The letter goes on to say that though no one has ever seen God, “if we love one another, God lives in us” (4:12).
- ▶ Jesus called human beings to an ideal love when he said, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9). He made his instructions a little clearer when he said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (15:12). The central goal of the Christian moral life is to determine what it really means to love one another as Jesus loved us. In other words, we must find an answer to the question, What does real love look like?
- ▶ The Scriptures are filled with answers to that question. Jesus came from devoutly Jewish roots. He preached the authentic message of Judaism, which was a message about God’s love for humanity. Love is the highest law, love directed to God, to neighbor, to self, and to the created order. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the law of love is presented in the Ten Commandments. When a Pharisee asked Jesus to tell him which commandment of the Jewish

law was the greatest, Jesus summed up the Ten Commandments in two statements: “The first is “. . . you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29–31). Jesus took the Golden Rule and went a step further. He articulated the laws of the Jewish tradition in one great commandment of love.

- ▶ To Jesus, the answer to the question, What does love look like? is Love looks like the Reign of God. We can define *the Reign of God* as “the rule, or reign, of God’s love over the hearts of people, and a new social order based on unconditional love of God and others.”
- ▶ The opposite of love is not hate; it is apathy. *Apathy* means “without feeling.” The opposite of love is indifference or a lack of concern. Loving is not the same as liking. We are not called to like everyone, but we are called and empowered by God to love. To love means to be deeply concerned about the dignity and welfare of other people. It means respecting all life because we are in relationship with all life. In this context, sin is understood as a violation of this relationship with God, with other human beings, with creation, or with life itself.
- ▶ The Christian Church is a community whose members have struggled and searched together for two thousand years to figure out and live out the vision of Jesus. This gives the Church a wide-angle perspective on the human experience and what it means to be holy, healthy, and happy. The Catholic Church arrived at its moral teachings after years and even centuries of living with, and reflecting on, its experiences in light of the Gospel. When the Church asks the fundamental

question of the moral life, What does love look like? it can proclaim only one answer: Love looks like the life and message of Jesus, who calls us to bring about God’s Reign by loving one another as he loved us.

Next Time

Use this space for notes on how you might improve your facilitation of this strategy in the future.



Peace and Social Justice 23

Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

This strategy includes two helpful components: (1) notes on a presentation and discussion summarizing the principles that undergird Catholic social teaching, and (2) information about a Web site that offers a wealth of effective resources related to the theory and practice of action on behalf of justice and peace.

Preparation

Materials to Gather

Gather the following items:

- ten copies of the daily newspaper (optional)

Things to Do

- Make one copy of the resource entitled “Key Principles of Catholic Social Teaching” and cut it apart so that each principle is on a separate slip of paper. Then roll up or fold the slips of paper and place them in a bowl.
- Peruse the Web site for the Office for Social Justice of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, www.osjspm.org, and decide what if any resources from it you might use to support or expand your presentation and discussion.
- Prepare to share the following ideas about justice and service in your own words. You may wish to create an outline on a sheet of newsprint, both as a reference for you and as a visual aid for the participants.

Presentation Notes

Present the following information in your own words:

- ▶ One of the earliest and strongest moral charges of the Judeo-Christian tradition is the responsibility of all human beings to care for the earth, all the wonders in it, and, in a particular way, their fellow humans. Made in the image of God, human beings have both the privilege

and responsibility of reflecting God’s love and compassion to others.

- ▶ In the Hebrew Scriptures, God repeatedly raises up prophets to remind the people that the truest measure of their covenant relationship with God is how well they treat one another, especially the weak and powerless. And Yahweh is constantly seen as One who listens in a special way to the cry of the poor.
- ▶ Jesus, a faithful Jew, demonstrated a particularly powerful commitment to living out the moral vision of his people and his Father. The Last Judgment scene in Matthew’s Gospel (25:31–46) demonstrates how totally Jesus identifies with the poor and the abandoned.
- ▶ Throughout its two-thousand-year history, the Church has continued Jesus’s work of justice and service. In his name, believers reach out to their brothers and sisters in need, providing food and shelter, guidance and education. The Church tries not simply to do things for the poor but to also equip and empower them to use their own gifts and talents to change their situation.
- ▶ Beginning in the late 1800s, the Church began to consolidate its teachings on justice and service into a body of knowledge called Catholic social teaching. This teaching offers clear principles to guide

us in the task of making Jesus's compassion known to all.

(Adapted from Thomas J. Bright, et al.,
Ministry Resources for Justice and Service,
p. 38)

Divide the group into ten teams of close to equal numbers. Separate the teams by moving them into different parts of the room to make conversation easier. Then ask one member from each group to pick a slip of paper from the bowl. The principles chosen are to become the focus of the groups' conversations.

Now ask the groups to do three things:

- Summarize your assigned principle in one clear, simple sentence, capturing its essence or core truth.
- Think of one clear application of your principle to a major event in the news or to a local situation. [*Consider making copies of the daily newspaper available for this step.*]
- Prepare to share the results of your discussion with the rest of the group by identifying a spokesperson for the group and helping him or her prepare a brief report.

The method of reporting and large-group conversation can be adjusted to suit your situation. Because of the number and complexity of the key principles, as well as the limited attention people can devote to such conversation, one approach would be to collect the slips of paper you began with, put them back in the bowl, and then randomly select slips one at a time. The group whose slip you choose is then given just a few minutes to present its report. Keep going until time is up or energy wanes.

Consider closing the session with a prayer service selected from those in this manual. Start by looking for options within this category, but know that many of the other services in *Adult Faith Formation Strategies* will work well with this theme.

Web-based Resources on Peace and Social Justice

The resource “Key Principles of Catholic Social Teaching” is one of the fruits of the good work of the Office for Social Justice of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. The office has developed a wonderfully rich and helpful Web site, www.osjspm.org. Visit the site and explore the wealth of information, training resources, and educational strategies available there. Here are some suggestions for specific resources that can be found on this Web site:

- Under “Issues” (along the left-hand side of the home page) click on “Fact Sheets” for a series of resources on many social justice issues. All the fact sheets can be downloaded and distributed. Though some have references specifically to Minnesota, most are applicable anywhere in the country.
- Under “Social Teaching,” click on “Documents” for links to all the major Church documents on peace and social justice, with selected quotes and reading plans.
- Under “Social Teaching” choose “25 Questions” for concise, clear responses to many questions that arise in discussion of the Church’s teachings on peace and justice.
- The “Parish Social Justice” section offers loads of ideas and training aids for parishes wishing to expand or enhance their commitment to, and opportunities for, involvement in the work of social justice.

The editors of this manual are indebted to the staff of the Office for Social Justice for its marvelous work, generosity, and spirit of genuine service.

Next Time

Use this space for notes on how you might improve your facilitation of this resource in the future.

Key Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

Human Dignity

In a world warped by materialism and declining respect for human life, the Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Our belief in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching.

Community and the Common Good

In a global culture driven by excessive individualism, our tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society — in economics and politics, in law and policy — directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. Our Church teaches that the role of the government and other institutions is to protect human life and human dignity and promote the common good.

Rights and Responsibilities

Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities — to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

Catholic teaching proclaims that a basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt. 25) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

Participation

All people have a right to participate in the economic, political, and cultural life of society. It is a fundamental demand of justice and a requirement for human dignity that all people be assured a minimum level of participation in the community. Conversely, it is wrong for a person or a group to be excluded unfairly or to be unable to participate in society. In the words of the U.S. bishops, “The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were non-members of the human race. To treat people this way is effectively to say they simply do not count as human beings.”

Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

In a marketplace where too often the quarterly bottom line takes precedence over the rights of workers, we believe that the economy must serve people, not the other way around. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected — the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property and to economic initiative.

Stewardship of Creation

Catholic tradition insists that we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions which cannot be ignored.

Solidarity

Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Solidarity means that “loving our neighbor” has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

Role of Government

Because we are social beings, the state is natural to the person. Therefore, the state has a positive moral function. It is an instrument to promote human dignity, protect human rights, and build the common good. Its purpose is to assist citizens in fulfilling their responsibility to others in society. Since, in a large and complex society these responsibilities cannot adequately be carried out on a one-to-one basis, citizens need the help of government in fulfilling these responsibilities and promoting the common good. According to the principle of subsidiarity, the functions of government should be performed at the lowest level possible, as long as they can be performed adequately. If they cannot, then a higher level of government should intervene to provide help.

Promotion of Peace

Catholic teaching promotes peace as a positive, action-oriented concept. In the words of Pope John Paul II, “Peace is not just the absence of war. It involves mutual respect and confidence between peoples and nations. It involves collaboration and binding agreements.” There is a close relationship in Catholic teaching between peace and justice. Peace is the fruit of justice and is dependent upon right order among human beings.

Office for Social Justice, Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis
328 West Kellogg Blvd., St. Paul, MN 55102 (651) 291-4477 www.osjspm.org



Paul and His Writings

In this presentation, the participants learn about Paul and his communications to the early Christian communities he established. Included are a reading and discussion of 1 Thessalonians.

Preparation

Materials to Gather

Gather the following items:

- bibles, one for each participant

Things to Do

- Prepare to share the following ideas about Paul's Epistles in your own words. You may wish to create an outline on a sheet of newsprint, both as a reference for you and as a visual aid for the participants.
- Write the following questions on a sheet of newsprint, post it on wall in the gathering space, and then cover the list with another sheet of newsprint so that the participants won't see the questions until the appropriate time.
 - What struck you as you listened to this letter? What did you like best about what Paul had to say?
 - What kind of relationship did Paul appear to have with the Thessalonians? How can you tell? (See 2:11–12.)
 - Remember that you were listening to one side of a conversation. Reading between the lines, what issues in the Thessalonian community did Paul seem to be addressing?

Presentation Notes

Read Acts of the Apostles 1:6–11 to the group. Then present the following information in your own words.

- The last verse, ““This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven,”” is important. This passage and others like it indicate that the first Christians believed Jesus Christ would return within their lifetimes to establish a new world order. This Second Coming of Christ is called the Parousia by Christians.
- Imagine being among those first Christians. What would it have been like in the first few weeks after Jesus's Ascension? after a year? after ten years? after other Christians your age began to die? In some of his communities, Paul had to deal with confusion over Jesus's return. We are going to take a closer look at this as we explore Paul's messages.

Distribute a Bible to each participant. Ask the participants to find the beginning of the Book of Romans and mark it while they find the end of the Book of Philemon. When everyone has found the end of Philemon, make the following points:

- This section of the Bible, from Romans through Philemon, contains thirteen books that are traditionally attributed to Paul. Each of these books is really a public letter with a religious intention. The word used to describe this type of writing is *epistle*, which comes from a Greek word meaning “written communication of any kind.”
- The Epistles written by Paul were addressed to specific Christian communities

and individuals that Paul had formed relationships with during his journeys. Each Epistle is named for the community or individual it was written to. So Romans was written to Christians in Rome, First and Second Corinthians to Christians in Corinth, and so on.

- ▶ Paul took part in at least three missionary journeys to establish new Christian communities. He suffered many trials and hardships on those journeys, but he was successful in establishing several thriving Christian communities. Christ, community, and Resurrection were themes that Paul emphasized in his preaching and writing.
- ▶ In each Epistle, Paul generally addressed problems or concerns that had arisen in the Christian community he was writing to. Reading them is like listening to one side of a conversation. We have to deduce what is going on in the other side of the conversation.
- ▶ Thirteen Epistles name Paul as their writer. However, that does not necessarily mean Paul actually wrote them. It was common for the followers of an important person to preach or write in the name of the master in the master's absence or after the master's death. This was done out of respect for the master and to imply that the content of the preaching or writing reflected the teaching of the master.
- ▶ Most scholars believe that Philemon, First Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, and Romans were authored by Paul. Scholars also think that Colossians, Ephesians, Second Thessalonians, First Timothy, Second Timothy, and Titus were probably not written by Paul but by disciples of Paul. Those six Epistles are sometimes referred to as the deutero-Pauline Epistles. The uncertainty about their authorship does not affect our belief

that they are inspired biblical writings that convey the truth God wishes to reveal to us.

- ▶ We do not have time to study all of Paul's Epistles today, so to understand what a complete epistle is like, we will read and study just one Epistle, First Thessalonians. Scholars believe that this is the first Epistle Paul wrote and that it is the earliest book in the entire Christian Testament. It was written in the early 50s BC—twenty to twenty-five years after Jesus's death and Resurrection.
- ▶ Please turn to First Thessalonians in your bibles. Follow along with me as I read the Epistle out loud, the way it would have been proclaimed when the Thessalonians first received it from Paul. I will skip chapter 3 to keep the reading a little shorter.

Divide the large group into small groups of four or five. Uncover the list of questions you posted on the wall before the participants gathered, and have them discuss those questions in their small groups.

When the small groups appear to be done discussing the questions, call for the participants' attention. Give a brief presentation, covering the following points in your own words:

- ▶ In the body of this letter, Paul addresses two main concerns. One concern is that the Thessalonians' religious faith could be influenced by other preachers or missionaries in his absence. According to Acts of the Apostles 17:1–9, while Paul and Silvanus were in Thessalonica, they were attacked and had to leave quickly. That left Paul open to the accusation that he was just a fly-by-night preacher. In his defense, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his conduct while he was in Thessalonica. He did not attempt to take advantage of the Thessalonians for personal gain or change his preaching to please them. As a result, they received his message not as a human word but as

the word of God, for which Paul is very thankful.

- The second concern Paul addresses is at the end of chapter 4. It seems that the Thessalonians had a strong expectation that Christ would return very soon. That was causing some problems. Some of the Thessalonians were worried about their friends and family who had already died. How would they join Christ at his coming? Others seemed to be getting disillusioned and were starting to tire of the demands of living a full and faithful Christian life. To address those concerns, Paul first promises that the Christian dead have not been lost or forgotten—they will be among the first to join Christ. Then he reminds the Thessalonians not to grow sloppy or lazy in living as Christians—for the day of the Lord will come when they least expect it.

Even today, some Christians expect the Parousia to happen within their lifetime. Catholic Christians also believe in Christ's Second Coming, but they are careful to emphasize that no one knows the day or the hour when it will occur. The Catholic Church avoids predicting the Second Coming by using historical events or scientific predictions. It teaches that the images Paul and other biblical authors used are symbolic and should not be interpreted as actual historical occurrences.

- In this letter, we see Paul's tender concern for the community, his passion for moral living, and his desire for good order in the Church. These themes can be found in many of his Epistles. They go beyond the specific community issues he addresses in each letter.
- Paul's Epistles follow a pattern. They were more formal and structured than letters today. All the Epistles follow the same outline, containing these four sections:

- *Opening salutation.* This is usually in three parts—naming of the sender (in this case, Paul), naming of the persons or community the Epistle is addressed to, and a formal greeting. Chapter 1, verse 1 is the opening salutation in First Thessalonians.
- *Thanksgiving.* In this section, Paul usually offers a thanksgiving to God for the blessings bestowed on the receivers of the Epistle and on Paul. In First Thessalonians, the thanksgiving is in 1:2–10.
- *Message.* In the body of the letter, Paul addresses the issues or concerns in the community that caused him to write the letter, and general instructions for Christian conduct. In First Thessalonians, the message is in 2:1–5:22.
- *Conclusion and final blessing.* In the final section, Paul sends greetings to specific people, gives instructions for travel, and bestows a final blessing. His typical blessing is a variation of, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (1 Thess. 5:28). The final blessing in First Thessalonians is in 5:26–28.

Discuss the following questions as a large group:

- The faith of the Thessalonians was initially connected to the actions and attitudes of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. Yet the believers kept their faith even when their leaders were forced to suddenly leave. What persons have been major influences in your faith life? How would your faith be affected if those people suddenly were not around?
- Are you encouraged by Paul's words about the dead joining Christ? When facing the death of a loved one, what advantage do Christians have over people without any religious belief?

Alternative Approach

- If you find that you tend to run short of time, the group could read and study the Epistle to Philemon instead of 1 Thessalonians. Philemon is only twenty-five verses long, yet it still clearly follows the four-section outline. In this Epistle, the issue Paul addresses is the return of a slave to his master. The slave, Onesimus, has converted to Christianity, and Paul is asking the master to welcome him back as an equal in Christ. If you choose to use Philemon, prepare your own reflection questions. Also prepare to answer questions the participants may raise about why Paul does not directly condemn slavery. A good Bible commentary can provide you with background.

Next Time

Use this space for notes on how you might improve your facilitation of this strategy in the future.