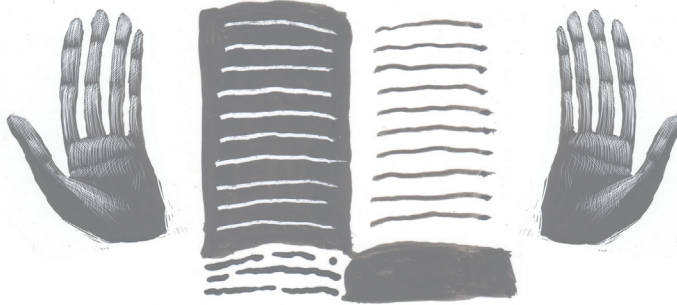


WELCOME TO OPENING THE WORD

# OPENING THE WORD



## LEADER GUIDE

**LUCAS POLLICE**

*Editor*

YEARA

*Nil obstat:*

*Censor Deputatus*

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO *OPENING THE WORD*

**W**elcome to *Opening the Word*. Over the next several months, we are going to be explaining sacred Scripture, prayer, and insights about how the Lord is working in our midst today. We invite you to participate fully in this study, allowing the Father to guide you, the Son to extend his love to you, and the Holy Spirit to enlighten your heart and mind.

The Leader Guide, Prayer Journal, and videos are the three components we'll be using throughout this program. Each builds upon the other, providing you with everything you need to fully immerse yourself in this study. Whether you're participating as part of a small faith-sharing group or an RCIA program, or just for personal faith formation, everything you need is right here. To direct you further, we've also included information on the traditional prayerful reading of Scripture known as *lectio divina* and suggestions for facilitating a small group.

We've found that when our participants utilize these components with an open heart, they don't just grow in their understanding of sacred Scripture, but their relationship with Our Lord also grows. Going to Mass on Sunday is never the same again, as they are able to hear the Sunday readings in a much more personal way.

We're excited for you as you begin your journey into the Sunday readings.



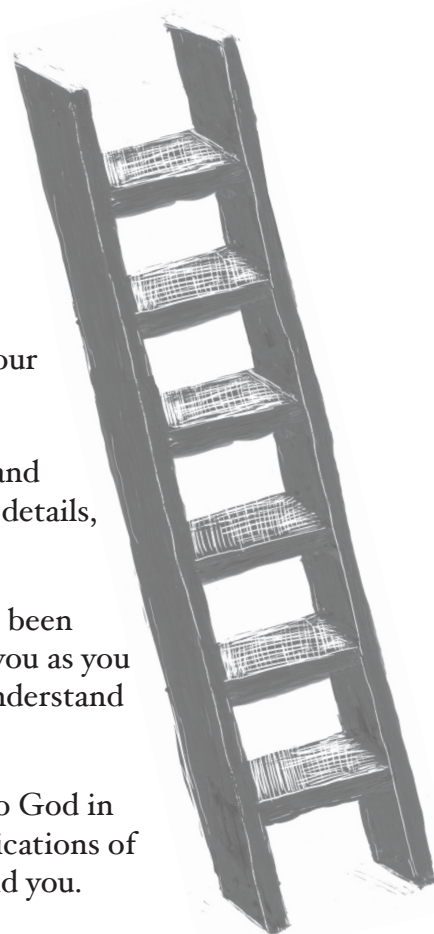
## AN OVERVIEW OF LECTIO DIVINA

**L**ectio divina is an ancient practice to enhance one's prayer life through the power of God's Word. The term itself means "divine reading" of Sacred Scripture. It is our hope that by using these simple steps each day as they study the Scriptures in *Opening the Word*, participants will develop an effective way to soak up God's Word as they learn to fruitfully pray and listen to how God wants to be part of their lives.

Here is a brief description of each step of *lectio divina* for your reference as you guide participants through the practice:

- **Sacred Reading of the Scriptures (*lectio*):** The reading and rereading of the Scripture, paying close attention to words, details, themes, and patterns that speak to the reader.
- **Meditation (*meditatio*):** Meditating or reflecting on what's been read to gain understanding. Allow the Holy Spirit to guide you as you spend time pondering what you have read and striving to understand it in meditation.
- **Prayer (*oratio*):** A time to bring our meditative thoughts to God in prayer. Talk with God about how the connections and implications of your meditation affect your life and the lives of those around you.
- **Contemplation (*contemplatio*):** A time of quiet and rest, when we become receptive listeners to God's voice. Contemplation is a gift from God, not something we achieve on our own—so be patient as you practice this step and strive to be receptive to God's voice speaking into your life.
- **Resolution (*operatio*):** A call for resolution and action, inviting us to respond to the things we have read and prayed about in Scripture and to put them into practice.

(To learn more about *lectio divina*, check out Dr. Tim Gray's book *Praying Scripture for a Change*, available at [www.AscensionPress.com](http://www.AscensionPress.com).)







## LEADING AN OPENING THE WORD SESSION

Everything you need to lead an *Opening the Word* session is found in the Leader's Guide. The resources are carefully crafted to lead participants through an opening of their hearts and minds to God's Word.

The Leader's Guide for each session begins with a one-page overview of key points that will be covered in the lesson. This is a way to get the "big picture" of the session firmly in your mind.

The rest of the Leader's Guide takes you step by step through each part of the session. Each step has a script, which you can use verbatim or as a guide for what you would like to say in your own words. If you choose to use the script, it will help if you take the time to become very familiar with it so that it will have a natural feel as you read it. If you use your own words, you'll want to study the script so that you don't leave out an important thought.

### **Here are the Key Steps recommended for an effective *Opening the Word* session:**

**Leader Preparation Overview & Scripture Reflections:** We begin with a brief overview of the session, including the key points. This gives the necessary background for the readings, shows its relevance for daily life, and inspires you to delve into a particular aspect of the Faith. The reflections give some biblical background for each of the readings. This is a way to get the "big picture" of the session firmly in your mind.

**Step 1. Opening Prayer:** Your Leader's Guide gives an opening prayer for each session which is also found in the Prayer Journal, so participants can read along in order to focus their attention more during the prayer.

**Step 2. Introduction to the Theme:** The leader gives a brief overview of the topic, including the key points for the session.

**Step 3. Lectio Divina - Video Presentation:** The video is the first step in taking the participants deeper into the meaning of a particular part of the readings.

**Step 4. Lectio Divina - Meditation:** Discussion questions are included in both the Leader's and Participant's Guides. The questions are designed to help participants retain the key points by engaging with the doctrine through discussion. The questions also help to make the teaching more personal by asking the participants to apply what they have heard to their own daily lives. If you have a large group, consider forming smaller groups for the discussion, with team members facilitating each small group.

**Step 5. Lectio Divina - Prayer and Resolution:** This step takes the participants deeper into the readings. *We want to lead the participants into a prayerful Ignatian reading of the Scriptures in which we imagine ourselves in the biblical scene or encountering Christ.* It also includes a section on life application, calling participants into a deeper understanding that these readings can be connected to their everyday life.

**Step 6. Closing Prayer:** The Closing Prayer in your Guide has been specifically chosen to reflect back to God an appropriate response to his loving action in the session.

**Leader Tips, and Digger Deeper:** We have included throughout the study interesting quotes and excerpts from saints, Catholic documents, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and Catholic authors to enhance your understanding of each session.



## HOW TO LEAD A SMALL GROUP STUDY

The success of any small group begins with a leader. Leading a small group doesn't mean lecturing or teaching—a successful small group leader facilitates, getting group participants to interact with each other as they make new discoveries. Here are some tips to help you get started as you lead and facilitate your small group:

### **Environment**

- **Discussion-Friendly**—Set up your meeting space so discussion and conversation happen naturally. Avoid sitting at tables or desks; instead arrange chairs in a circle or meet in a living room environment that encourages casual, friendly conversation. Choose a meeting space that's free of distractions and offers a fair amount of privacy.
- **Prep Ahead**—If your study includes any video segments, set up and test equipment ahead of time. Queue videos so they're ready to go to avoid losing valuable discussion time.
- **Snacks**—Depending on your meeting time, consider offering a light snack so participants won't be distracted by a growling stomach. If you don't offer any food items, always have water available for participants.

### **Logistics**

- **Name Tags**—Especially when you first begin meeting, have participants wear name tags so you can easily address them by name and other participants don't have to worry about trying to remember everyone's names.
- **Supplies**—Always have extra pens on hand for people to take notes. Also consider having highlighters, paper, and extra Bibles available for participants to use.
- **Be Prompt**—While you can encourage a time to mingle at the beginning of your meeting time, don't let it get out of control so you have to rush through materials and discussion. If people know you're dedicated to starting on time, they'll begin to arrive a bit early to socialize. Likewise, reserve your meeting space for 30 minutes after you're scheduled to end so people can mingle afterward. Be diligent to **START** and **END** on time!

### **Before You Meet**

- **Prepare**—Look over discussion materials and preview video segments before your meeting time. Go through the questions yourself to make your own discoveries about how they apply to your own life—this will help you be more credible as a leader.
- **Pray**—Take time to pray for group members individually and lift up any needs they've expressed during previous meetings. Pray specifically for the Holy Spirit to open participants' hearts to spiritual growth, renewal, and new discoveries.
- **Evaluate**—As you get to know the needs of individuals and your group's dynamics, evaluate your discussion materials and highlight information or questions that you feel would be particularly helpful and insightful for your group.

## During the Meeting

- **Set the Tone**—Let group members know from the beginning that your time together is meant to be for discussion and discovery, not lecture. Remind participants that your environment encourages safety and to practice confidentiality within your meeting time. Also remind participants that every question and answer is welcomed and worthy of discussion.
- **Encourage Involvement**—Work to invite all participants to engage in discussion. Don't be afraid of periods of silence, especially during your first few meetings. If one person begins to dominate the discussion time or gets off track from the topic, kindly acknowledge the person and invite him or her to explore that topic more after your group time. Ask questions such as "What do the rest of you think?" or "Anyone else?" to encourage several people to respond.
- **Open-Ended Questions**—Use questions that invite thought-provoking answers rather than "yes" or "no," "true" or "false," or a one-word, fill-in-the-blank answer. As leaders, your job is to get participants to think about the topic and how the Scriptures and reflections can be relevant and applicable to their daily lives.
- **Affirm Answers**—People are often reluctant to speak up for fear of saying something wrong or giving an incorrect answer. Affirm every participant by saying things such as "Great idea," "I hadn't thought of that before," or "That's a great insight." These types of phrases communicate that you value everyone's comments and opinions.
- **Avoid Advice**—Remember, you're acting as a facilitator—not as a college professor or counselor. Instead of giving advice or lecturing, when appropriate, offer how a Scripture passage spoke to you personally, or give an example of how you've been able to apply a specific concept in your own life.
- **Be Flexible and Real**—Sometimes your group time may veer off-track due to something that's going on in the culture or in your community (for example, a natural disaster strikes your area or a group member is experiencing a family tragedy). Use relevant topics as a time to model for participants how God is always with us and that we can seek the guidance from Scripture and from the Holy Spirit in every situation. If you model relevant discussion and transparency, your group participants are more likely to do the same.
- **Transitions**—As you get close to ending your time together, transition discussions toward a time to share how participants will apply what's been discussed to their lives in the upcoming week. Close your time together in prayer each time you meet. Invite participants to share requests, either verbally or in writing, so you know how you can pray for them throughout the week.

## After the Meeting

- **Stick Around**—As the leader, make yourself available after your meeting time for questions, concerns, or further discussion that a participant may have been hesitant to discuss during the scheduled time. If a question arises that has you stumped, admit that you don't have the answer but that you'll contact someone who may be able to provide an answer, such as your parish priest, church deacon, or diocese.
- **Follow-Up**—Throughout the week you may have an opportunity to follow up with group participants, especially when it's relevant to send an email or make a phone call for things such as a prayer request, question, birthday or anniversary, or significant life event. Making contact with group members during the week to see how they're doing, how they are making lessons relevant in their own lives, or giving quick encouragement to engage in daily Scripture reading and prayer will only strengthen the relational connections between you and your group participants.

Below is the suggested outline for a thirty-minute study session. Use the time allotments as a guideline; the length of time spent on each section will vary from group to group.

## SAMPLE 30-MINUTE SESSION

Time	Steps	Section Overview
5 minutes	STEP 1: Opening Prayer	Welcome to the study
	STEP 2: Introduction of the Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brief discussion on the study's theme</li> </ul>
10 minutes	STEP 3: Lectio Divina— Sacred Reading of Scripture	Read the Sunday Readings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large group discussion</li> <li>Play the DVD</li> </ul>
10 minutes	STEP 4: Lectio Divina—Meditation	Walk your group through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large/small group Discussion</li> </ul>
5 minutes	STEP 5: Lectio Divina— Prayer & Resolution	Walk your group through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prayer &amp; Resolution</li> <li>Journaling</li> </ul>
1 minute	STEP 6: Study Wrap-Up	Summarize the main points from the study, and encourage participants to set resolutions to live out what they have learned. Close in prayer.

Below is the suggested outline for a sixty-minute study session. Use the time allotments as a guideline; the length of time spent on each section will vary from group to group.

## SAMPLE 60-MINUTE SESSION

Time	Steps	Section Overview
10 minutes	STEP 1: Opening Prayer	Welcome to the study
	STEP 2: Introduction of the Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brief discussion on last week's theme and weekly journaling.</li> <li>Brief discussion on this week's theme.</li> <li>Read through each of the readings</li> </ul>
10 minutes	STEP 3: Lectio Divina— Sacred Reading of Scripture	Read the Sunday readings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large group discussion</li> <li>Play the DVD</li> </ul>
15 minutes	STEP 4: Lectio Divina—Meditation	Walk your group through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large/small group discussion</li> </ul>
20 minutes	STEP 5: Lectio Divina— Prayer & Resolution	Walk your group through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prayer &amp; Resolution</li> <li>Journaling</li> </ul>
1 minute	STEP 6: Study Wrap-Up	Summarize the main points from the study, and encourage participants to set resolutions to live out what they have learned. Close in prayer.

SUNDAY	TITLE	PRESENTER	MINUTES
1st Sunday of Advent - 12/01/19	A New Year	Edward Sri	6:49
2nd Sunday of Advent - 12/08/19	True Repentance	Johnette Benkovic	6:11
3rd Sunday of Advent - 12/15/19	An Unexpected Messiah	Mary Healy	6:18
4th Sunday of Advent - 12/22/19	Fulfillment of Prophecy	Tim Gray	6:28
Nativity of the Lord - 12/25/19	God Had This Planned	Jim Beckman	4:48
The Holy Family - 12/29/19	The Importance of Family	Jules Miles	5:37
Mary, Mother of God - 01/01/20	The Rosary, A True Treasure	Father Riley	8:57
The Epiphany of the Lord - 01/05/19	Coming Before the King	Jim Beckman	4:48
Baptism of the Lord - 01/12/20	Anointed By the Spirit	Mary Healy	4:47
2nd Sunday in OT - 01/19/20	Lamb of God	Edward Sri	6:40
3rd Sunday in OT - 01/26/20	Come, Follow Me	Patrick Coffin	6:02
Presentation of the Lord - 02/02/20	Light of Revelation	Edward Sri	5:13
5th Sunday in OT - 02/09/20	Salt and Light	Teresa Tomeo	4:47
6th Sunday in OT - 02/16/20	The New Law	Scott Powell	6:12
7th Sunday in OT - 02/23/20	Love Your Enemies	Tim Gray	5:27
1st Sunday of Lent - 03/01/20	Into the Desert	Jules Miles	6:07
2nd Sunday of Lent - 03/08/20	Living with Contrasts	Martha Fernandez	6:31
3rd Sunday of Lent - 03/15/20	A Messiah for All People	Mary Healy	5:45
4th Sunday of Lent - 03/22/20	Healing Our Blindness	Michel Therrien	5:34
5th Sunday of Lent - 03/29/20	The Raising of Lazarus	Johnette Benkovic	5:32
Palm Sunday - 04/05/20	Not My Will	Edward Sri	6:33
Easter Sunday - 04/12/20	He Is Risen	Father Riley	6:45
2nd Sunday of Easter - 04/19/20	Peace and Mercy	Jules Miles	5:38
3rd Sunday of Easter - 04/26/20	Our Emmaus Road	Mary Healy	6:21
4th Sunday of Easter - 05/03/20	The Good Shepherd	Teresa Tomeo	4:53
5th Sunday of Easter - 05/10/20	The Way, the Truth, the Life	Ben Akers	4:52
6th Sunday of Easter - 05/17/20	The Spirit of Truth	Scott Powell	6:18

SUNDAY	TITLE	PRESENTER	MINUTES
Ascension - 05/24/20	Through the Eyes of Faith	Father Riley	6:17
7th Sunday of Easter - 05/24/20	The Work of the Father	Jim Beckman	4:55
Pentecost Sunday - 05/31/20	The Holy Spirit	Father Riley	7:08
Trinity Sunday - 06/07/20	Three Persons--One God	Tim Gray	6:59
Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi) - 06/14/20	Take and Eat	Father Riley	6:07
12th Sunday in OT - 06/21/20	Do Not Be Afraid	Patrick Coffin	4:48
13th Sunday in OT - 06/28/20	Finding Our Lives	Edward Sri	5:46
14th Sunday in OT - 07/05/20	Light Burdens	Michel Therrien	5:37
15th Sunday in OT - 07/12/20	The Soil of Our Lives	Teresa Tomeo	4:37
16th Sunday in OT - 07/19/20	Faith and Patience	Jim Beckman	6:51
17th Sunday in OT - 07/26/20	Choosing the Higher Goods	Tim Gray	7:02
Transfiguration - 08/06/20	It Is Good That We are Here	Jim Beckman	6:51
19th Sunday in OT - 08/09/20	Storms of Life	Patrick Coffin	6:05
20th Sunday of OT - 08/16/20	Great Faith and Prayers	Mary Healy	5:54
21st Sunday in OT - 08/23/20	Keys of the Kingdom	Tim Gray	7:26
22nd Sunday in OT - 08/30/20	The Word Burning Within	Martha Fernandez	6:58
23rd Sunday in OT - 09/06/20	Our of Bondage	Johnette Benkovic	6:42
24th Sunday in OT - 09/13/20	Forgiven Debt	Mark Giszczak	4:16
25th Sunday in OT - 09/20/20	Envy and God's Generosity	Katie Warner	4:45
26th Sunday in OT - 09/27/20	Actions Speak Louder than Words	Jim Beckman	6:39
27th Sunday in OT - 10/04/20	The Vineyard of the Lord	Ben Akers	4:46
28th Sunday in OT - 10/11/20	The Wedding Feast of the King	Scott Powell	7:10
29th Sunday in OT - 10/18/20	Render Unto Caesar	Martha Fernandez	6:17
30th Sunday in OT - 10/25/20	Loving the Lord with Our Mind	Tim Gray	7:52
The Feast of All Saints - 11/1/20			
32nd Sunday in OT - 11/08/20	Wise and Foolish Virgins	Jim Beckman	4:49
33rd Sunday in OT - 11/15/20	Using our Talents	Ben Akers	4:00

# LEADER GUIDE

## 1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT

✧ YEAR A ✧

# A NEW YEAR



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### Leader Preparation Overview



**Happy New Year!** If this strikes you as a bit premature, it isn't really because this Sunday marks the start of the new Church year. In the Catholic Church, the first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of the cycle of readings, holy days, and holidays for roughly the next 365 days. It's also the time of year not only when we are called to prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus at Christmas, but also when we are asked to examine our lives and take stock, spiritually speaking.

The readings for today all carry a common theme: Wake up! Wake up from the slumber that keeps marriages mediocre, careers unfulfilling, moral lives stagnant. Wake up to the possibility of a new beginning, a new way of living that welcomes Jesus into the cribs of our days, the mangers of our souls. We are told to awaken from the slumber that is robbing us of a deeper and more meaningful relationship with our God, and begin to live the new and abundant life that we have been promised.



Sometimes people use today's Scripture passages, especially those in the Gospel about two men working in the field and one being taken away, in light of a relatively new and profoundly un-Catholic theology of the "Rapture," which says that the faithful will be taken to heaven and the unbelievers "left behind." We will see that the opposite is true. It is those who are left behind in covenant with God who are saved, and, like in the days of Noah, it is those who are unfaithful who will be swept into exile from God.

This Advent, we not only want to make a new beginning with the Church, but we also want to be sure that we are with those who are "left behind" in covenant with God at the end of all time.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina. See Introduction for details.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

### FIRST READING

~ Isaiah 2:1-5 ~

### REFLECTION

**T**he Jews were accustomed to the idea that the blessing of Israel would mean the blessing of all nations. Israel was strategically located between the two great seats of power in the ancient world, Egypt and Mesopotamia. That meant that the vital arteries of trade crossed through Palestine, making it more influential than its own power or wealth would otherwise suggest. Jerusalem and its God were well known throughout the region and beyond. Judaism's radical monotheism was an oddity in the ancient world and earned the admiration of many seekers of truth beyond the borders of Israel.



So that Isaiah should say “All nations shall stream toward it” and “from Zion shall go forth instruction, / and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” wouldn’t surprise Jews. Rather, it would directly connect with the understanding of their important place in the plan of God. Only if we fall into the common misconception of Israel’s historical insignificance are we surprised by the Christmas story. To those who honestly seek the truth and who are attentive to the signs of the times in any age, the surprises of God are easier to spot and embrace.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~ Psalm: 122:1-9 ~

## SECOND READING

~ Romans 13:11-14 ~

## REFLECTION

**I**n this letter, St. Paul gives us what could be a catalog of our vices of today: carousing, drunkenness, sexual excess and lust, quarreling, and jealousy. That the Christians of an increasingly debauched Rome should be warned of the same sins by which we are tempted shouldn’t really surprise us. These aren’t simply the sins of ancient Rome or modern America; they’re the sins that plague people of every time, place, nation, and race.

The time in which we’re now living is the dispensation of grace in Jesus Christ, that time between his first coming and his second. In every time and place, wakefulness is the primary posture of those who search for God; wakefulness against temptation and for his visitation. We always stand at that moment when, “The day is at hand.” In the Advent season, we practice our wakefulness with particular attention. We turn the events of God’s past saving actions, and particularly those of the Nativity, over in our minds so as to engrave the outlines of his *modus operandi*; his way of acting in our souls so that we might not be caught unaware at his next visit. As Christians, we always live at the border, between the long night of sin and the eternal dawn.

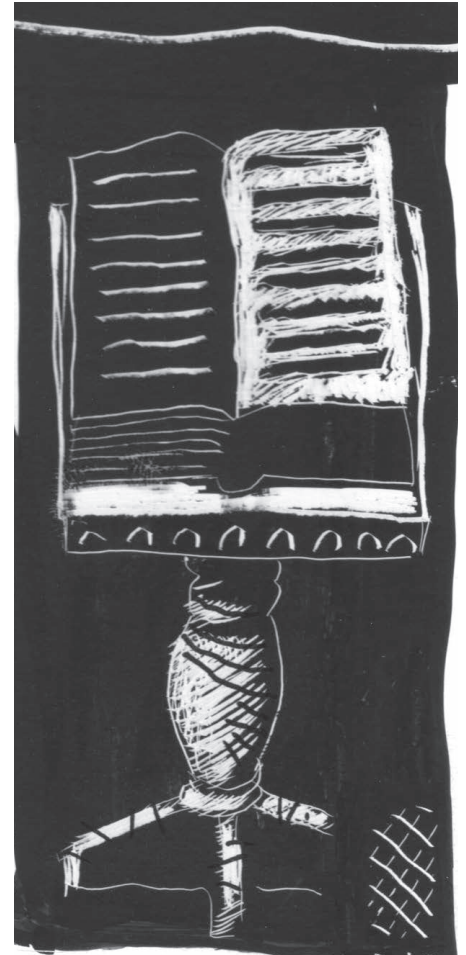
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 24:37-44~

### REFLECTION

**T**he warning that Jesus levels at his disciples isn't so much a caution against sin as it is against being "unconcerned." This is the way that he describes the attitude of those who were swept away in the flood at the time of Noah. Their mistake was in being unconscious of God in the midst of ordinary activities. Jesus heightens this warning as he describes the time of his second coming in verses 40 and 41. Certainly nothing suggests sin in either activity, yet one will gain an everlasting reward and the other not. What separates the two destinies?

In a word—wakefulness. It isn't for us to know when the Lord will come, but we need to be aware that he will come. We're called to live in a state of wakefulness, of spiritual attention. Like the homeowner who doesn't know exactly when the thief will come testifies to the fact that he must "keep a watchful eye," the Lord for whom we wait tells us, "You also must be prepared."



#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- The focus of the readings is on preparation, both preparing for the coming of Christ at Christmas and preparing our own hearts and souls for a deeper reception of the Lord.
- Help participants understand that even in the midst of all the worldly preparation for Christmas, we need to make time to prepare spiritually as well.
- You may want to point out that there will be places in their journals for participants to make "New Year's resolutions" for this Advent season.

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the First Sunday of Advent. Let's open our time together in prayer.**

But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse,  
and from his roots a bud shall blossom.  
The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him:  
a spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
A spirit of counsel and of strength,  
a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord,  
and his delight shall be the fear of the LORD.  
Not by appearance shall he judge,  
nor by hearsay shall he decide,  
But he shall judge the poor with justice,  
and decide fairly for the land's afflicted.  
He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.  
—Isaiah 11:1-4

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**As we begin our journey through *Opening the Word* for Cycle A, let's talk about new beginnings. What kind of New Year's resolutions do you make? How much success do you have with keeping New Year's resolutions?**

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Advent is a time of preparation, so let us prepare for our study by listening to what Dr. Edward Sri has to say about today's Scripture readings.**



Play the video for First Sunday of Advent. This will play for approximately seven minutes.

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**What is the major thrust of the readings for the first week of Advent, according to Dr. Sri? What are we being called to do at this time of year?**

*(Today's readings focus on preparing for the coming of Christ, and preparing ourselves to receive him.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**A common non-Catholic teaching about the end of times is the Rapture. What does the whole idea of being “left behind” mean to you?**

*(The Rapture is not grounded in the Catholic understanding of Scripture. In the Bible, the imagery of being “left behind” described those left in covenant with God, while those taken away or taken out were the ones who were cut off from the covenant with God because of their sins. (See Zechariah 14:2, Isaiah 4:3, Isaiah 11:11, 16, and Jeremiah 50:20.)*

*The story of Noah shows that the ones who remained (Noah and his family) were the ones who were saved. It was the rest of the world that was taken out. )*

**STEP #5****LECTIO DIVINA —  
PRAYER & RESOLUTION**

**In today’s Gospel, we are told, “So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.” Let’s now contemplate that passage in prayer.**

**PRAYER:**

Take a deep breath and close your eyes. Allow yourself to become still. Now imagine that you have just learned that you are going to die very soon. What is your first thought? What is your first feeling? Hold that thought and the feeling as you take another deep breath. Now see Jesus talking directly to you. Hear him say,

“There is still time. Wake up! Stop sleeping your life away!” What areas of your life come to mind as you hear Jesus? Now see him gently touching you on the shoulder and saying, “You have time. So stay alert. Go and....” What is he asking you to do? Listen carefully for his guidance.

### **RESOLUTION:**

During this first week of Advent, choose one activity that will take you out of the “slumber” of commercialism and busyness, and “awaken” a new zeal for the faith. You might attend daily Mass one morning, pray the rosary over the noon hour, or read Scripture instead of watch TV. Make a choice based on what you heard Jesus tell you to do during our prayer time.

**Use your journal pages to write down your thoughts, reflections, and your resolutions.**

#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *As we begin Opening the Word, this is a good time to emphasize that the “resolution” section is more than just a place to journal. It is where participants can bring the Scripture to life by creating tangible activities to do during the week. Urge them to use this section to become more accountable to themselves and to the Lord over the next months.*
- *Stress that just thinking about doing something isn’t the same as actually doing it, so taking a tip from time management experts and scheduling in an action is a good way to ensure a resolution doesn’t become just a mental exercise, but actually translates into real action.*

#### **DIGGING DEEPER** **THE RAPTURE?**



Although Christians have always believed that both the living and dead will encounter Jesus in the Final Judgment, the idea of a Rapture (in which Jesus comes once to take the devout and leaves the rest of humanity behind to suffer for a thousand years until he comes again, apparently for the third time) is a recent development. This teaching was developed in the 1830s by John Nelson Darby and received enormous publicity in the 1990s in the “Left Behind” novel series written by Tim LaHaye. For the Catholic teaching on the final judgment and end of time, see the CCC 668ff.

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together with these words from the first reading from Isaiah:**

**Come, let us climb the Lord's mountain  
to the house of the God of Jacob  
that he may instruct us in his ways  
and we may walk in his paths.  
Amen.**



# LEADER GUIDE

## 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT

✧ YEAR A ✧

# TRUE REPENTANCE



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### Leader Preparation Overview



**It may seem odd that,** just as the secular world begins to celebrate peace and joy during the holiday season, we are asked in this week's Gospel to consider our sinfulness. The words of John the Baptist echo across the centuries: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Isn't John's talk about sin, God's wrath, and the need for repentance a bit of a downer as we prepare for Christmas?

It might seem that way, at least until we think about what it means to "repent." To repent is not just to realize that we have done bad things, or to berate ourselves continually for our errors. Repentance does mean that we confess our failures, but that's just the beginning. True repentance also entails turning toward those attributes and actions that will allow us to unite more closely with Our Lord. It involves an honest examination of conscience and a firm commitment to change.

That's what John is telling us in this week's reading when he accuses the Pharisees and Sadducees of being a "brood of vipers." He is, in very dramatic fashion, asking them to judge their actions



against their words; to see if they are living according to the Word of God or merely mouthing words about God. He is calling them to make the dramatic change that lies at the heart of true repentance.

We are asked to do the same thing. What gives us hope is that Jesus, whose birth we will celebrate in a few short weeks, will bring with him the Holy Spirit. This is one of the reasons the Church includes this reading during Advent—for it is the Holy Spirit who breaks through the walls of our sinfulness and pride and illuminates our hearts. It is only through this illumination that we are able to set our feet on a new path, which leads to the abundant life that Jesus has promised is waiting for us.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina. See Introduction for details.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

### FIRST READING

~ **Isaiah 11:1-10** ~

### REFLECTION

**T**his reading begins, “On that day.” For Isaiah, this refers to the coming of the Davidic Messiah, made clear by the reference to the “stump of Jesse.” David was the son of Jesse. At the time of Isaiah, the Davidic line was on the throne of the kingdom of Judah, but those following the righteous king Jotham were corrupt. Isaiah’s prophecy suggests that at some future point, a king will come forth; not from the family now on the throne, but from the root of the family tree. That prophecy

is fulfilled when the Messiah is born in Bethlehem, the ancestral place of Jesse.

The Messiah's reign will result in a return to a paradisiacal state of peace. It's important to recognize that the catalyst for this return is that "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the LORD." This might remind us of that first paradise of Eden, whose inhabitants chose the knowledge of good and evil over the knowledge of God. All those who teach the faith can be confident that passing on the knowledge of the Lord that they've received contributes to this eventual return to paradise.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~ Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17 ~

## SECOND READING

~ Romans 15:4-9 ~

## REFLECTION

**I**n this reading, Paul concerns himself primarily with the Scriptures; the written portion of Revelation. Specifically here, he refers to the Old Testament when he says that we (the Romans and Christians of every age) should derive "hope" and "encouragement" from what we find in Scripture. He says to accept one another, likely in reference to some tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The conclusion he draws from what is revealed in Scripture is that Christ served the Jewish people as their Messiah, in faithfulness to the promises made by God through the prophets. He has also saved the Gentiles as their Christ, so that they might bear witness to God's mercy to those beyond the covenant with Israel.

Just two verses after this reading, St. Paul cites a line from our first reading from Isaiah, which prophesies that the root of Jesse will be sought out by the Gentiles, as proof that the revealed plan of God is to bring all nations into unity under the headship of Christ, the Messiah of the Jews. Today, we still live in this age of mercy to the Gentiles; we will celebrate this mercy Incarnate in the baby born in Bethlehem.

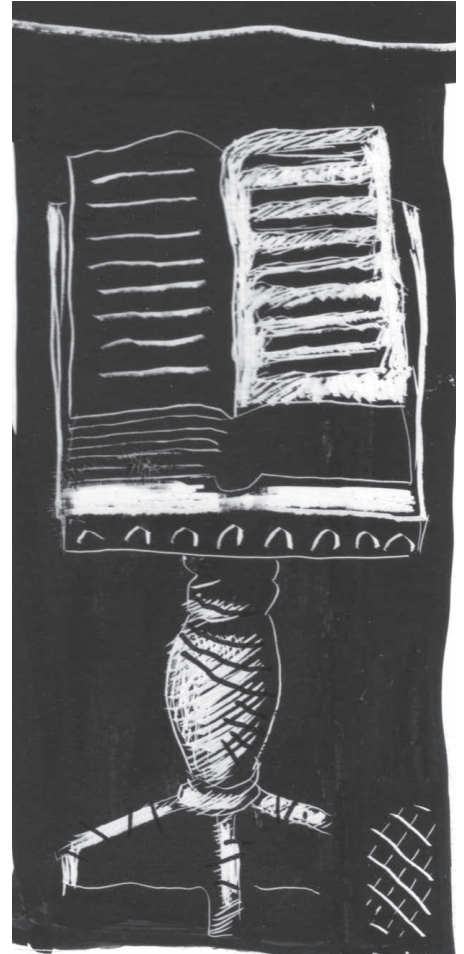
## GOSPEL

~ Matthew 3:1-12 ~

### REFLECTION

**J**ohn the Baptist is the man who stands at the seam of the Old Testament and the New. St. Augustine teaches that John's birth to elderly parents (Elizabeth and Zechariah) represents the antiquity of Israel, and that his leaping for joy while still in his mother's womb at the Visitation of Mary suggests the newness of his coming prophetic proclamation. In his appearance and actions, John sums up the whole of the Old Testament. His clothing is the same as Elijah's, the greatest prophet of the Old Testament. He calls Israel out into the desert for purification as Moses did, and prepares the people to be led into the new Promised Land by the new Joshua (Yeshua=Jesus). His diet consists of locusts, which are symbolic of pestilence, and honey, which is the food of the Promised Land.

John the Baptist's most prominent virtue is humility. "I am not worthy to carry his sandals," he says of Our Lord. Carrying one's sandals at this time would be the work of a slave—and John sees himself as unworthy of even that office! If we're to prepare ourselves and others for the coming of the great King this Advent, then we should first turn our attention to our need for a humility like that of St. John the Baptist, the first herald of Christ.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to *Opening the Word* for the Second Sunday of Advent. Let's open our time together by praying in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, spoken on December 3, 2008.**

Come Jesus;  
come, give strength to the light and to the good;  
come where dishonesty, ignorance of God,  
violence and injustice dominate;  
come, Lord Jesus,  
give strength to the good in the world  
and help us to be bearers of your light,  
workers of peace,  
witnesses of truth.  
Come Lord Jesus!

—Pope Benedict XVI, December 3, 2008

# STEP #2

## INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Today’s Gospel introduces one of the main themes of Advent: the need for repentance as we prepare for the coming of the Lord. In former times, people wore sackcloth and ashes as a sign of their repentance. What are some ways we might show our repentance today?**

*(Possible answers might include going to Confession, apologizing to those we have injured, giving a donation to the poor, contributing to a food bank, restraining our tempers, or any of the corporal or spiritual works of mercy.)*

*As participants answer, help them to understand that an outward sign is valuable only if there is first an inner conversion. However, both the inner change and the outer actions are needed for true repentance. As John says in the reading, “Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance.”)*

# STEP #3

## LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

### DIGGING DEEPER SACKCLOTH



Sackcloth is a rough, itchy cloth usually made from goat’s hair that is similar to today’s burlap. Ashes from a wood fire would also be placed on the face and hands.

These would be worn together as a sign of mourning and repentance, or during times of intense prayer.

**On this Second Sunday of Advent, let us consider how the message of John the Baptist calling for repentance is an essential part of our lives as Christians. As you watch this short video, think about how God has called you to enter into a new relationship with him.**



Play the video for Second Sunday of Advent. This will play for approximately five minutes.

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## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**Have you ever experienced an answer to prayer that led you to reevaluate your life and make positive changes? If you are comfortable, please share with the group.**

*(You may want to have an example from your own life prepared in case members of the group are initially reluctant to speak.)*

*If members of the group seem to be stuck, direct the discussion toward an Examination of Conscience, as the presenter mentioned. Explain that sometimes God uses such practical measures as a way to get our attention and help us recognize the areas where we need to make changes.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**Why is repentance an essential part of faith? What does it mean to “return to the Truth”?**

*(Faith is not a once-and-for-all profession, but a continual recommitment and reevaluation of one’s life. Help the group understand that each time a person acknowledges failure and experiences repentance, it helps faith to increase. As faith increases, so does the ability to see where repentance is needed. Thus, repentance is an essential part of faith— and faith is also an important part of repentance.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER**  
RECONCILIATION AND PENANCE



For those who would like additional insight into the Church’s teaching on repentance and penance, suggest *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, an apostolic exhortation by Pope St. John Paul II, available online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**In today's Gospel, we are exhorted to examine our lives and repent of our sins in preparation for the coming of the Lord. Let us take some time now to reflect on how we might ready ourselves this week for his coming.**

### **PRAYER:**

Imagine that you are standing on the banks of the Jordan River listening to John the Baptist. You hear him say, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." What do you think as you hear those words? What areas of your life come to mind where you might not be bearing good fruit?

### **RESOLUTION:**

What is one thing—one "good fruit"—that you could do this week that would show your sincere desire to repent? Make a commitment to act on this thought by writing down a specific action you can do and a time you can do it.

*(If participants need some ideas of "good fruit," suggest that they read about the fruit of the Spirit (listed in Galatians 5:22-23) as a starting point: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*

*Also stress that just thinking about doing something isn't the same as actually doing it; taking a tip from time management experts and scheduling an action into your day is a good way to ensure that repentance doesn't just become a mental exercise but actually translates into real action.)*



## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

#### DIGGING DEEPER FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT



St. Paul offers nine examples of the fruit of the Spirit in the Christian's soul: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). It is interesting to note that although there are nine examples given, the text refers to the "fruit" of the Spirit in the singular, not plural. This would indicate that while the Spirit gives one fruit, that fruit has various components and ways of being expressed in the Christian life.

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will prompt you if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with prayer:**

**Dear Lord, we come to you, aware of our sinfulness,  
but equally aware that you long to grant us forgiveness.  
We thank you that despite our failings,  
you always welcome us back to friendship with you.  
We ask now that you give us the strength and courage  
to live in expectant hope of your coming,  
both now and at the end of time.  
Amen.**



# LEADER GUIDE

## 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT

✧ YEAR A ✧

# AN UNEXPECTED MESSIAH



### Leader Preparation Overview



Who hasn't felt discouraged at some point in life? We all know how it feels when things don't go the way we want or expect. John the Baptist was feeling that way in today's Gospel. He is languishing in prison, wondering if all that he said and did had any meaning. Jesus didn't fit the common image of the Messiah. He wasn't a great political leader who would overthrow the Roman oppressors and restore Israel to glory. John's faith is shaken and so he tells his followers to seek out Jesus and ask him, "Are you the one?"

In response to John's question, Jesus tells him (and us) to look at what he was doing: healing the sick, raising the dead, bringing the good news to the poor. John would have immediately recognized those actions as the ones Isaiah prophesized that the Messiah would do on his arrival. By focusing on those deeds, John would have known that indeed Jesus was the one. Even though the plan wasn't going the way John thought it would, he could be comforted by knowing God was powerfully at work.

Sometimes God doesn't work in our lives the way we expect either. Like John, we can get discouraged and wonder why God is allowing certain struggles and difficulties to happen. That's when we, too,

have to realize that the mission of Jesus is not to establish an earthly kingdom, but to restore us to the fullness of life. When we find ourselves feeling dispirited, we need to consider that perhaps God has us exactly where he wants us to be for our perfect good and perfect growth in holiness.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina. See Introduction for details.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

### FIRST READING

~ Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10 ~

### REFLECTION

**T**his passage focuses on the spiritual fruits which accompany the coming of the messianic age. These spiritual fruits are apparent to those with the spiritual vision necessary to see them, those who've experienced the passage from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight, which the Messiah introduces.

“They will see the glory of the LORD, / the splendor of our God,” Isaiah promises. Of course, Jesus does heal the physically blind as part of his messianic ministry. While it's good to receive physical sight, it's infinitely better to see “the glory of the Lord.” The physical healing is a symbolic representation of the second, greater miracle. The sight of the Lord's glory had been promised to the whole of the people in Israel, but an apparent failure on the part of the people to purify themselves for that epiphany caused them to lose the chance to behold the Lord's glory.

That promise has been fulfilled in the coming of Christ, who takes on flesh so that we all may behold the face of God. Not only does he open the eyes of the blind, but he also unveils the glory and splendor of the Lord to those who have spiritual eyes to see.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~ Psalm 146: 6-7, 8-9, 9-10 ~

## SECOND READING

~ James 5:7-10 ~

## REFLECTION

**T**he Epistle of James deserves more attention than it gets. It presents a wonderful, ever-timely plan of life for the Christian. James comments upon the proper attitude toward the “coming of the Lord.” He compares our state to that of the farmer who in waiting for “the precious fruit of the earth, being patient.”

It’s worth noting that patience is called for precisely because the crop will come in. James doesn’t say that Christians shouldn’t think about the second coming; he says they should look forward to it—anticipate it joyfully, eagerly—but with patience. If we recoil at the thought of Christ’s coming with thoughts such as “I’m not ready yet,” or “I just need to arrive at my life’s goal before he comes,” then we’re not yet living in the manner that James prescribes.

Most of us would have to admit to thoughts of that kind. Often we’re more concerned with keeping up appearances than with our appearance before the face of God. The timeless Christian message is that we live patiently, looking forward to Christ’s coming; then everything else will fall into its proper place. If we seek first the kingdom, then all else will follow after.

## GOSPEL

~ Matthew 11:2-11 ~

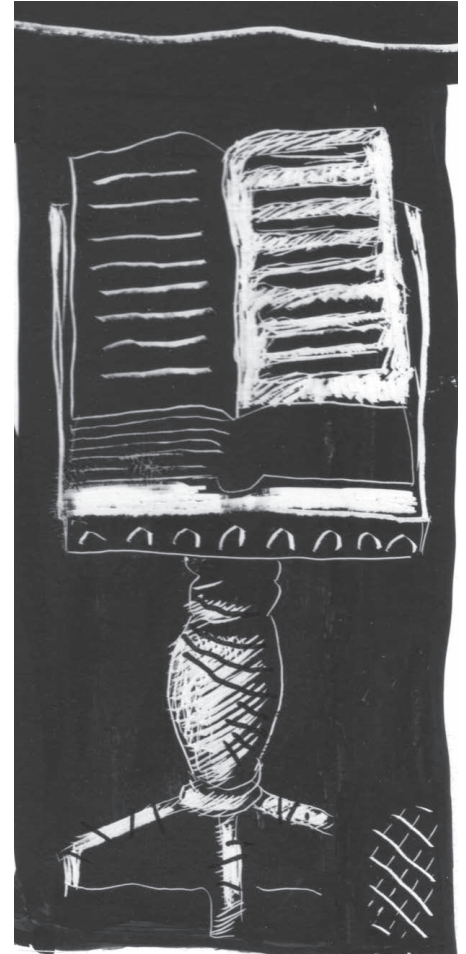
### REFLECTION

**I**n this passage, Jesus cites the signs of the coming of the messianic age from Isaiah 35 as proof that his ministry introduces the messianic age

and concludes that, “Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.” Jesus subtly makes a similar point in the next set of verses, this time addressed to the crowds after the messengers from John depart. He asks, in reference to their response to John’s prophetic message, “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?”

Interestingly, the reed was a symbol for King Herod. The reference to a “swaying reed” may have suggested that Herod had made a truce with the Romans, which would turn to Israel’s advantage. Just as God had become a stumbling block to Israel then, so would he be to Israel now in the Person of Jesus.

Rather than bending to the current political wind, as had Herod and the Jews who collaborated with Rome to maintain their power, God’s people must turn to the messianic King whose coming and reign is signaled not by the rich trappings of a royal court, but by the lone voice of a prophet crying in the wilderness and the proclamation of good news to the poor.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Third Sunday of Advent. Let's open our time together by praying to Our Lady for hope in times of discouragement.**

Holy Mary, loving mother and heavenly guide,  
be present to me now  
and let me know your compassion and kindness.  
Pray for me to your Divine Son, that I may experience  
calmness, tranquility, and peace in all my emotions.

Help me to grow in faith and love.  
Protect me from all that displeases God,  
and obtain for me serenity of mind, body, and spirit.  
I place my trust and confidence in you,  
dear Blessed Mother, and I pray that  
God's blessings of mercy, grace, and gentle goodness  
will bring happiness to my life, now and always.  
Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**All of us have experienced discouragement and disappointment some time in our lives. What are some things you do when you are feeling discouraged to help get yourself out of the slump?**

*(Be prepared to share from your own experience about a time of discouragement.)*

*Some positive things people can do when discouraged include praying, exercising, talking with a friend, reading uplifting material, making goals, cleaning something, listening to inspirational music, etc.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**On this Third Sunday of Advent, let us consider how Jesus’s answer to John’s question, “Are you the one, the Messiah?” can bring us encouragement and increase our faith.**

#### DIGGING DEEPER

##### THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST



John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded at Herod’s fortress called Machaerus, located on a rocky hilltop above the eastern side of the Dead Sea.

The area had been chosen for a sentry post because it could be seen as far north as Alexandria and as far south as Masada. In addition, smoke signals were visible in Jerusalem itself. Machaerus was more than a fort, however; it was also a lavish palace, with an extensive courtyard, baths and a beautifully detailed mosaic floor—a luxury getaway place for the king and his court. The story of John’s death in Scripture is verified by the Roman historian Josephus.



Play the video for Third Sunday of Advent. This will play for approximately six minutes.

# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**How did Jesus answer John's disciples when they asked him if he was the Messiah?**

*(Isaiah is often cited as one of the major Old Testament Scriptures that prophesy the coming Messiah. You may want to read Isaiah 35:5-6 from the first reading to the group, explaining that this would have been one of the passages that John would have understood as being fulfilled in the person of Jesus: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing.")*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**In what way does Jesus's answer give John encouragement, despite the fact he is in prison and facing death?**

*(John knew that he was to "prepare the way of the Lord." In hearing the miraculous deeds Jesus was performing, John would have been encouraged to know that the Lord was indeed present, and prophecy was being fulfilled. He would be encouraged to know that he had played his part in salvation history.)*



# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**In today's Gospel, Jesus answers John's question, not with a direct "yes," but by telling him to look at the evidence. Let us take some time to consider how we might respond to Jesus' answer.**

### **PRAYER:**

Picture yourself as one of John's disciples. John has sent you out to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" What kind of answer are you expecting? How do you feel when Jesus says to you, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them." How do you feel about going back with that answer? How do you think John is going to respond? Now ask God to show you how Jesus's answer can make a difference in the way you think about Jesus.

### **RESOLUTION:**

Ask the Lord to show you areas in which you might be blind, unclean, deaf, or dead. As you gain insights, write them in your journal and pray that these areas be healed.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We are all in need of healing at some point in our lives. If it seems appropriate, ask the group to commit to praying for each other this coming week.*
- *Suggest that participants make a note in their journals when God answers their prayers for healing so that they can look back in times of future discouragement and realize that God is indeed faithful.*



## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with this traditional prayer for the third week of Advent:**

**Incline Thine ear to our prayers, O Lord,  
we beseech Thee; and make bright the darkness  
of our minds by the grace of Thy visitation.  
Who livest and reignest, with God the Father,  
in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God,  
world without end.  
Amen.**

# LEADER GUIDE

## 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT

✧ YEAR A ✧

# FULFILLMENT OF PROPHECY



### Leader Preparation Overview



This week's Gospel tells us how the “birth of Jesus Christ came about.” More specifically, it tells us how an angel appeared to Joseph, explaining to him that Mary's son would save the people from their sins. While Joseph might not have understood it at the time, we know that Jesus is the fulfillment of the great prophecy of Isaiah 7:14ff, that the Messiah would come from the line of David and be born of a Virgin. In our readings this week, we first read that prophecy and then see its fulfillment in the Gospel.

While today's reading focuses on Joseph, Mary is also present. It is because of her, and her willingness to do God's will by accepting the responsibility of bearing his Son, that our sins can be forgiven. But we cannot overlook Joseph's role either. As the Gospel tells us, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded—taking Mary to be his wife and accepting his responsibility toward the child in her womb.

As we examine both Mary's and Joseph's responses to the Lord, we are shown two examples of the way that we, as Christians, are to be open to the Lord's movement in our own lives. Mary, the spotless virgin, readied a place in her body for the coming of

the Messiah. We, too, can prepare a place for him in our hearts. Joseph, the faithful husband, accepted what he did not understand and trusted that the Lord was at work. Inspired by his example, we who often can't understand what is happening to us can learn to trust more that the Lord is truly working in our lives.

With only a few days left before we celebrate the coming of the Lord at Christmas, let us take this time to ask both Mary and Joseph to help us truly “prepare the way of the Lord” in our hearts, our minds, and our souls.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

*We've provided "reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*

*Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 7:10-14~

### REFLECTION

**M**uch has been said about this passage from Isaiah regarding its original significance in the time and place in which it was written. Although modern scholars have noted that the Hebrew term translated as “virgin” (*almah*) isn't the technical word for virgin—the word means a young woman of marriageable age—such a woman would ordinarily be understood to be a virgin. This understanding is reflected in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament, which uses the term *parthenos*—a word that ordinarily means “virgin.”

The tradition of the Church is unanimous that Mary and her virginal conception fulfill this passage from Isaiah the prophet. In Matthew 1:22–23, the Evangelist, working under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, cites this passage from Isaiah and declares that it was fulfilled in the announcement of the birth of Jesus made to St. Joseph by an angel. It wasn't until the mid-eighteenth century that the Magisterium (Pius VI had to condemn an interpretation to the contrary.

The Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* also identifies the young woman spoken of in Isaiah 7 as the Virgin Mary and makes a further connection with “the woman” mentioned in Genesis 3:15 who would ensure the victory over the serpent (LG, 55). Without any other credible candidates for *almah* and in the face of the consistent teaching of the Scripture and the Church, we can feel utterly confident that the woman prophesied is indeed Mary, Mother of Immanuel.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 24:1–2, 3–4, 5–6~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 1:1–7~

## REFLECTION

**S**t. Paul provides a wonderful link between the first reading from the Old Testament and the Gospel reading. On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we stand at the very cusp of the event that we call the Incarnation, which is fully disclosed in a beautiful way on the Feast of the Nativity that we call Christmas.

Joseph is the “son of David,” and so through him the prophecy of Isaiah to the “house of David” can be fulfilled. Emmanuel, “God is with us,” was with Joseph, the son of David, when in obedient and trusting faith he “received [Mary] into his home.” In receiving

Mary, he also received Jesus, who was already within her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit.

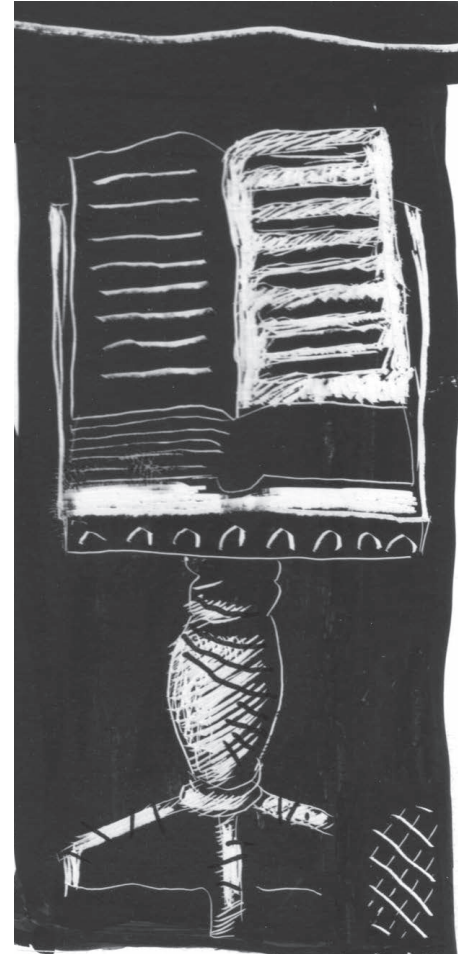
That's why Mary figures so prominently in a Catholic Advent. She's the bearer of Emmanuel. God first takes up his dwelling in her. She's the model in the flesh of the Church that receives the indwelling of the Savior in his flesh. If the core of the Catholic faith is expressed in the name Emmanuel, the "dwelling with us" is best shown in the persons of Mary, who received him into her womb, and Joseph, who received her into his home, the house of David.

## GOSPEL

~ Matthew 1:18-24 ~

### REFLECTION

**T**his Gospel passage features that mysterious name "Emmanuel," which we apply to our Savior, Jesus Christ. It literally means "with us is God." In that name is a capsule description of our Catholic faith. The single difference between Christianity and all other religions is that God has come to dwell among us as a man. While both Catholics and Protestants believe that Christ came in the flesh, we believe that he also left us his flesh, as promised in John 6 and Matthew 28:20, so that he could *remain* with us until the end of time. The whole of Catholic life centers on the belief that God has come into our midst and remains among us. The Sacraments make Christ present to us, particularly the Eucharist, which effects what we call His Real Presence among us: Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. We could say that "Emmanuel" is another word for Incarnation. It's only *in carne*, in the flesh, that God could dwell with us in that kind of intimacy—that's at the very heart of Christian faith and the life of sanctity which expresses that faith.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Let's open our time together by praying one of the traditional prayers to Mary: The Memorare.**

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary,  
that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection,  
implored thy help, or sought thine intercession was left unaided.

Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee,  
O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee do I come,  
before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful.  
O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions,  
but in thy mercy hear and answer me.  
Amen.

#### ***LEADER TIP:***

*Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to take time to read through each reading from the prayer journal with your group before beginning lectio divina. See Introduction for details.*

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Christmas is near. For many of us, it's the most stressful time of the year. So what kinds of things can we do this last week of Advent to better prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child and not get so caught up in all the "stuff" that's out there?**

*(Possible answers might include spending some time in prayer, remembering to light the Advent wreath at dinner, simply enjoying the sights and sounds of the season, going to Confession, praying the rosary, and reading the Gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus. Encourage participants by reminding them that it's not too late for spiritual preparation.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we look at how an Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Let's take a few minutes to view this video together.**



Play the video for Fourth Sunday of Advent. This will play for approximately six minutes.

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**STEP #4****LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION**

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTION #1**

**The presenter tells us that Mary provides an example for us of how we are to spend these last days before Christmas. What did Mary do that we should be emulating?**

*(The presenter said that Mary desired nothing more than to do God’s will. We, too, should strive to do God’s will for our own lives. Members of the group might say other things like: she said “yes” to God, she waited patiently for Jesus to be born, etc. Acknowledge those as legitimate answers, but be sure to point out that the main thing Mary did was desire God’s will for her life.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTION #2**

**Explain how the prophecy from Isaiah about the mother of the Messiah can be seen in relation to Mary.**

**DIGGING DEEPER**  
HANDEL’S “MESSIAH”

“The Messiah” was composed in 1741 by George Frideric Handel, with Scripture from the King James Bible and from the Psalms included with the Book of Common Prayer.

The first performance was in Dublin on April 13, 1742. A man of deep faith, Handel wrote the letters “SDG”—*Soli Deo Gloria*, “To God alone the glory”—at the end of his work, which was written in a remarkable 24 days.

*(Isaiah says that “the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.” The Gospel tells us that the Virgin Mary bore a son who came to save the people from their sins.*

*If you have time, you may want to show a video clip of part of Handel’s Messiah—a musical piece with lyrics from Isaiah’s prophecies about the coming of Christ, including this one about Emmanuel. You can find various versions online at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).)*

## STEP #5

### LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today's Gospel centers on Joseph and his response to the angel who appeared to him in a dream.**

#### **PRAYER:**

Imagine that you are with Joseph when he awakens from his dream. He tells you that even though Mary is pregnant, he is going to marry her anyway because the child she is carrying is the long-awaited Messiah, who will save his people from their sins. What do you think when you hear this? Are you shocked at his decision, or inspired by his trust in the Lord? Do you think you would have the courage to do what Joseph did? Prayerfully reflect on how you tend to respond when God invites you to do something difficult or confusing.

#### **RESOLUTION:**

Is there an area of your life right now that is bewildering or difficult for you to understand—an area in which you may be wondering, “Why is this happening? What am I to do? Where is God in all of this?” Take this situation to God in prayer. Talk to God about it. Ask him to show you what he is trying to teach you through this difficult situation, and then ask him to help you imitate Joseph’s trust and obedience.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

**LEADER TIP:**

*Remind participants that while Mary is the Virgin Mother of Jesus, both Mary and Joseph play important roles in the Nativity. Encourage them to read the Gospel again this week as they prepare for Christmas.*

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with this traditional prayer to St. Joseph:**

**Oh, St. Joseph, whose protection is so great, so strong,  
so prompt before the throne of God,  
I place in you all my interests and desires.  
Oh, St. Joseph, do assist me by your powerful intercession,  
and obtain for me from your divine Son  
all spiritual blessings, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.  
So that, having engaged here below your heavenly power,  
I may offer my thanksgiving and homage  
to the most loving of fathers.  
Amen.**

*Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.*

# LEADER GUIDE

## THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD (CHRISTMAS)

✧ YEAR A ✧

### GOD HAD THIS PLANNED



#### Leader Preparation Overview



**When we think of the story of Christmas**, we usually think of the “infancy narrative” of Luke’s Gospel: Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem, no room in the inn, Jesus laid in the manger, angels and shepherds. This is the familiar account of Christ’s birth, and we are surrounded by reminders of it during the Christmas season—songs and stories and images.

Today’s Gospel reading tells the Christmas story in a different way. Instead of the manger and the angels and shepherds, John tells us about the Word of God, present and active at creation. This Word is not only with God, but also is God; he is the Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. And it is this divine Word of God who took on flesh and came to us as a tiny baby that night in Bethlehem in order to make his dwelling among us. The beginning of the Gospel of John gives us the profound and beautiful spiritual reality of the familiar Christmas story.

It might not be what we’re expecting to hear as we celebrate Jesus’s birth, but this reading draws together the beautiful images and themes of Christmas—light, hope, salvation, God with us—and shows us that this was God’s plan from the very beginning. God always knew that he would become man in order to draw us to himself. This is the good

news that the prophet Isaiah talks about in today's First Reading. It is the powerful saving work of God that we sing about in today's Responsorial Psalm. It is the full revelation of God that the author of the letter to the Hebrews writes about in today's Second Reading. This is the hope and joy of Christmas.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

*We've provided "reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*

*Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD (CHRISTMAS)

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 52:7-10~

### REFLECTION

**C**hapter 52 of Isaiah is a remarkable one. It begins with a promise of redemption (from the exile that Israel endured in Babylon) and ends with prophecies that we often read in the Lenten season about the character of Christ's Passion, the means by which he worked our redemption. This prophecy speaks mysteriously about a "servant" (in the Greek Old Testament, *pais*, which can be translated either as "servant" or as "son") who will be both "exalted," or "raised high," and "marred...beyond that of human beings" (Is 52:13-14). In this central section that we read for the celebration of Christmas, the theme is one of announcement of the coming of the one who brings these "glad tidings" of the "salvation of our God," or what we as Christians call the Gospel. It is somewhat ironic that on this Christmas Day the Church would remind us, if even only allusively, that the scene which we contemplate today, so full of the warmth and religious feeling

of this feast of the winter season, is vitally connected to that other season in the spring of the year when we recall that the babe in the manger will pay the price of our redemption on the Cross. One of the themes of this part of Isaiah is that God will redeem (literally, “buy back”) Israel without a cost to her. That is, he will pay the ransom that she owes. We know by Faith that this prophecy is intended not just for Israel but also with reference to the sins of the whole human race. It is worthwhile to pause for a moment on Christmas to recall that the incomparable gift we receive in Christ, though it cost us nothing, cost Jesus greatly, beginning in the poverty of Bethlehem.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6~

## SECOND READING

~Hebrews 1:1-6~

## REFLECTION

**I**n our Second Reading, which is from the very beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews, we find a theological reflection upon the truth that we find also in the portion of the prologue from John’s Gospel. Jesus is the very Son of God “through whom he created the universe” and the object of the worship of even the angels. This is an important element in the apologetic argument that Paul makes, because the Jews believed that the Old Testament Law was delivered through the angels. So a Jew who was arguing against the claims of Christianity might argue, “Our Law of Moses was received from the angels, but your new Christian law is only received from Jesus, a man.”

Christmas is a celebration of what we call the Incarnation, God the Son becoming man in Jesus and being born into our human experience by taking to himself our flesh and all that goes with it, both our birth and our death. This central mystery of our Faith is always a difficult thing to hold. In fact, we only hold it by virtue of the gift of faith that makes this great mystery known to us. For many Jews, too, this was the central

difficulty of accepting Christianity. They thought that God could not enter the flesh in this way, though he had clearly demonstrated his love for his people in many ways. We know, again, only by faith, that this mystery reveals just how far his love goes.

## GOSPEL

~John 1:1-18~

### REFLECTION

**A**s was noted in the commentary on Second Reading, the mystery of the Incarnation is central to Christianity and only confessed through the gift of faith. How the infinite God, without limit of any kind, could enter the limitations of space and time is naturally unknowable. While it is clear in the Gospels that Jesus does divine things and makes divine claims—and also does human things and makes human claims—how it is that these two sets of truths can be found in one Person is not seen without the gift of faith. Only faith can see that these two things, infinity and finitude, divinity and humanity, exist together in Jesus Christ. So though on Christmas we tend to stress the importance of love and the warmth of the scene in the stable where the infant Christ is surrounded by the love of Joseph and Mary, we ought to remember that it is only faith that enables us to see—and so to feel—that love in full. That is what St. John is trying to help us see in the prologue to his Gospel. He wants us to stand at the height of eternity with the divine Word so that we might gain the dizzying sense of how far down God’s love comes to enter time. We really ought to love God more when we see that he willed to come so far down to make himself knowable and lovable.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for Christmas. Let's open our time together with this Christmas prayer.**

Praise to you, Lord God!

You have become one of us.

You have become a human being,

while still retaining all your power and holiness as God!

You, O Lord, made the journey of the unborn child.

By being an embryo, a fetus, and a newborn,

you joined all unborn and newborn children to you!

From the beginning of history, O Lord,  
you were the Creator of every human life.

Now, with Christmas,

you join yourself in an unthinkable way with the life you created.

Let this Christmas, O God,

fill all of us with awe and wonder

at how close human life is to you.

Cleanse the world of all that tarnishes  
and rejects this gift.

Purify our hearts of all that fears this gift.

Let our Christmas joy be the joy of welcoming every human life!

Amen!

A Christmas Prayer taken from [www.catholic.org](http://www.catholic.org)

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Today’s readings center around God’s loving plan, which begins “in the beginning” and results in the birth of the divine Savior—the Word made flesh, God dwelling with us. It can be very comforting to be reminded that God always has a plan.**

**What are some ways that you have seen God’s plan unfolding in your own life? Is there some area of your life where you need the extra hope that comes from knowing that God is in control?**

*(Examples of ways people might see God’s plan unfolding for them might include the events or circumstances that led to major life events such as meeting their spouse or finding a new job, their road to join the Church or return to the Church, or perhaps a particular answer to prayer.*

*Participants may share about a decision they need to make or a difficult situation they are facing. If no one wants to share about a personal circumstance where they feel in need of hope and comfort, encourage them to share about general conditions people face in our world today where they might be comforted by a reminder that God is in control.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA – SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Let’s watch the video and look at how today’s Gospel reading relates to Christmas and how it can help us to experience greater joy in this season.**



Play the video for the Nativity of the Lord. This will play for approximately four minutes.

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DEVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journals to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTION #1

**In the video Jim Beckman acknowledges that we don't always enter into the Christmas season with peace and joy in our hearts. For many of us this season brings with it feelings of grief, loneliness, or stress. But no matter our circumstances, God has a plan and he is in control.**

**Today's Gospel reading reveals that the Incarnation was part of God's glorious plan from the very beginning. What significance does this plan have for you personally?**

### **How is the Incarnation a source of hope for you?**

*(Help participants understand that God's plan from the beginning included not only salvation for mankind in general, but their existence and their salvation in particular. The plan of the Incarnation means that God has always had a plan to unite himself to each one of us specifically.*

*This reading can inspire hope in many ways. It might be a reminder of God's love or his power, or a reminder that he is in control.)*

### **DIGGING DEEPER** THE WORD BECAME FLESH



This Gospel reading deals with the mystery of the Incarnation—the Son of God taking on human flesh and a human nature without losing any of his divinity. The first centuries of the Church saw many heresies that misunderstood this central truth of our faith.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us: “The unique and altogether singular event of the Incarnation of the Son of God does not mean that Jesus Christ is part God and part man, nor does it imply that he is the result of a confused mixture of the divine and the human. He became truly man while remaining truly God. Jesus Christ is true God and true man.”

“‘What he was, he remained and what he was not, he assumed,’ sings the Roman Liturgy. And the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom proclaims and sings: ‘O only-begotten Son and Word of God, immortal being, you who deigned for our salvation to become incarnate of the holy Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary, you who without change became man and were crucified, O Christ our God, you who by your death have crushed death, you who are one of the Holy Trinity, glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit, save us!’”

—CCC 464, 469

## SMALL GROUP QUESTION #2

**At Christmas we often focus on the humanity of Jesus—how humble and helpless he is as a newborn baby and how approachable he is as one of us. He is Emmanuel, “God with us,” not “God far away in heaven.” But today’s Gospel reading also focuses on God’s sovereignty.**

**How does this reading remind us of God’s power and glory?**

*(From the video we see that the Incarnation reveals God’s power. He is able to unite his divinity to a human nature in order to save us, and he is able to orchestrate all of history to prepare for that moment of fulfillment.*

*You can also direct participants to look more closely at the text of the reading to see what John says about God’s sovereignty in his prologue. Pay special attention to the repetition of words like God, light, life, power, glory, and grace.)*

## STEP #5

### LECTIO DIVINA – PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today’s Gospel reading reminds us that God is in control. There is nothing in our lives that he can’t handle. There is nothing we are facing that is too chaotic to be conquered by his peace. Let’s take some time to pray with the prologue from John’s Gospel and surrender to God’s sovereign plan.**

#### **PRAYER:**

Picture the newborn Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger. Now consider the proclamation that today’s Gospel makes about this infant: he has always been and always will be, through him everything was created, he is the light of the world, he saves us and makes us children of God, he reveals the full glory of the Father, he is God. What are you not entrusting to him completely? Where do you need to surrender more fully to his plan? Offer these things to him.

**RESOLUTION:**

We live in a busy world filled with noise and chaos. Ask God how he wants to help you find the quiet and peace to be present with him, the Word made flesh, dwelling among us. What is one concrete thing you can do each day this week to spend time with the babe in the manger?

**Use your Prayer Journal to write down your thoughts, reflections, and your resolutions.**

*Remind participants that a resolution should be small and specific to make it easier to keep. Encourage them to think of something that won't take more than 5-10 minutes and that they can do at the same time every day this week to spend time with Jesus. Help them to think of something that will go beyond what they already do without drastically altering their daily schedule—drastic changes are much more difficult to implement.*

*They might pray a decade of the Rosary or a Divine Mercy chaplet. They might read Scripture for ten minutes before bed. They might set an alarm for noon and pray the Angelus every day. If they have easy access to a chapel, they might spend ten minutes before the Blessed Sacrament each day.*

**DIGGING DEEPER****TRUE GOD AND TRUE MAN**

“So, following the saintly fathers, we all with one voice teach the confession of one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and a body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects except for sin; begotten before the ages from the Father as regards his divinity, and in the last days the same for us and for our salvation from Mary, the virgin God-bearer as regards his humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ, just as the prophets taught from the beginning about him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ himself instructed us, and as the creed of the fathers handed it down to us.”

—Council of Chalcedon, 451 AD

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP – CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right.*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Word made flesh,  
we praise you, we adore you, we glorify you.  
You are Emmanuel, God with us.  
Please help us to be ever more aware of your presence among us.  
Give us the grace to surrender to your glorious plan.  
Guard our hearts and minds in your peace.  
Fill us with the joy of this holy season  
and make us emissaries of your joy and peace,  
that we may help our family and friends  
to encounter you more closely this Christmas.  
We turn to you with all our anxieties and needs,  
trusting in your loving care.  
We ask this in your most holy name, Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

# THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH

SUNDAY WITHIN THE OCTAVE OF CHRISTMAS

✧ YEAR A ✧

# THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

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## Leader Preparation Overview



The Feast of the Holy Family occurs in the heart of the Church's Christmas season. It's somehow fitting that as the world puts away the mistletoe and holly and families return to their ordinary lives, the Church reminds us of the importance of family, not just on holidays, but every day of the year.

But we don't always know what it means to be family because so many of us come from broken, dysfunctional, messy families. That's why the Holy Family—Jesus, Mary and Joseph—is such an important role model. Together the three show us that for a family to be a safe haven in a broken world, obedience to God must first be at the center of our individual lives. Mary's "yes" to God's request to become the mother of the Savior changed history. Joseph's prompt response to God's command rescued Jesus from Herod's attempt to kill him. And Jesus' obedience to the will of the Father brought salvation to the entire world. It was through obedience that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were able to become a truly holy family.



As we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family, let us ask ourselves how our own families can more closely model the Holy Family so that we can become witnesses of God's love to families all over the world.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE SUNDAY WITHIN THE OCTAVE OF CHRISTMAS

### FIRST READING

~Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14~

### REFLECTION

**T**he principle theme of Sirach is “If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments” (1:26). In this section, after counseling “fear of the Lord” in the first two chapters – as a kind of general admonition to the observance of the first three of the Ten Commandments – the author turns to observance of the fourth Commandment that requires that we honor our parents. The Catechism tells us that this fourth of the Commandments begins the second tablet of the law on love of neighbor (CCC 2197). That means this requirement of Christian life stands a kind of bridge between love of God and neighbor.

If we “fear the Lord” rightly, then we will honor our parents, because the God we honor has honored our parents by setting them over us as signs of his own authority. Our parents are also our first neighbors, the first of those others that we are to love (as we do ourselves) in response to our love of God. This is why the promises of children, treasure, and gladness that we see here (and the in the Responsorial Psalm) are attached to honoring our parents. If we honor them, God is honored, and we will have taken the first step toward a rightly ordered relationship with all those around us as well. The culture of rebellion against authority, beginning with parental authority, that is a singular feature of our current “culture of death,” is a recipe for unhappiness, which encourages the rupture in our relationships both with God and neighbor.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5~

## SECOND READING

~Colossians 3:12-21~

[Short Form: Colossians 3:12-17]

## REFLECTION

**I**n this passage from **Colossians** we see the way in which the requirement of the law echoed in Sirach ought to be lived out in New Covenant grace. Precisely because we are God’s “chosen” in grace, “beloved” and “holy,” we are called to live out the fourth Commandment, and so also all our relationships – from the top down – in the superlative way that baptismal grace makes possible. In the first verse of this reading (3:12) some of the fruits of the Spirit are invoked (see Galatians 5:22) in the context of a picture of Christian obedience, which recalls the blessed ones of the Beatitudes—meekness, peacefulness, purity—that come from our having been clothed in mercy.

This passage makes a great examination of conscience as we approach the sacrament of Confession or Reconciliation, or as a kind of “check in” reflection to share as a family as regards our observance of the obligations of the fourth Commandment. Note the two keys to success that Paul mentions for living out this picture of family holiness are love, the principle Christian virtue; and thanksgiving, which ventilates the heart and reminds us of the gifts of God that we are to each other. If we put on love and sing gratefully from our hearts, then the difficult demands of obedience to our obligations to each other will be made the light and easy yoke that Jesus promised (Matthew 11:30).

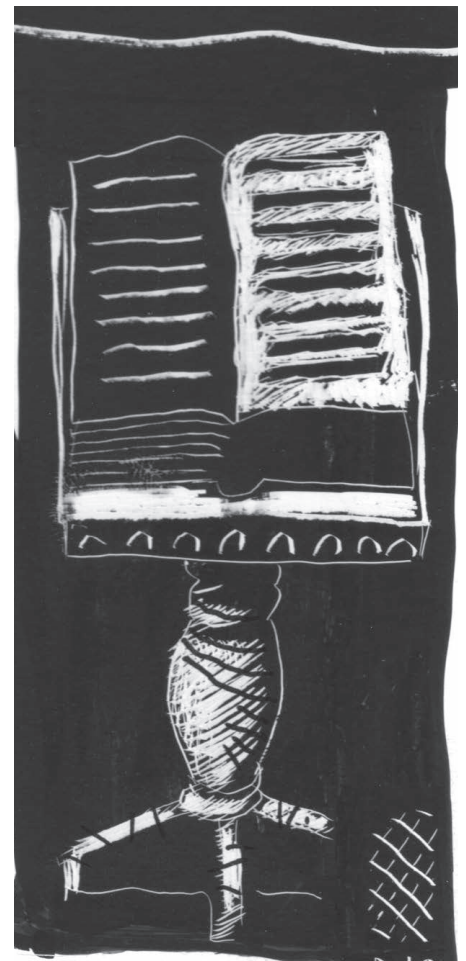
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this condensed passage relating the flight to Egypt and later return to Nazareth, which finishes the infancy narrative in Matthew's Gospel, we see St. Joseph as the very picture of the man of the fourth Commandment. Because of his obedience to the God above, he is able to serve Jesus and Mary as protector and provider, as husband and father, insuring that the plan of God for those two central figures will go forward in accordance with God's gracious designs. It is worth reading this whole section of Matthew 2 in full – including the missing verses 16-18, which tell of the murderous intent and action of Herod toward the divine – because it reminds us of just how much rides upon our conformity to the requirements of the fourth Commandment for both parents and children. While most of us don't face the designs of a murderous king, our spiritual help, as individuals, families, and as a society, depends critically upon the right order in these relationships that serve as a bridge between the two great commandments, to love God and neighbor.

There is an old Latin proverb, *corruptio optima pessima*, which means the destruction of the best of things is the worst of things. That is where we find ourselves regarding the family. If we don't recover the vital lessons of these readings and this beautiful liturgical feast and apply them to our lives, we will face the worst of futures. Grace makes the very best possible, but we must ask, seek and knock for the grace to make our families holy families in imitation of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**SAY:** Welcome to our study of **Opening the Word for the Feast of the Holy Family**. Let's open our time together by praying a traditional prayer to the Holy Family.

O most loving Jesus, who by your surpassing virtues and the example of your home life did hallow the household in which you did choose to live while on earth, mercifully look down upon our family, whose members implore your protection. Remember that we are yours, bound and consecrated to you by a special devotion. Protect us in your mercy, deliver us from danger, help us in our necessities, and impart to us strength to persevere always in the imitation of your Holy Family, so that, by serving you and loving you faithfully during this mortal life, we may at length give you eternal praise in heaven. Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**SAY:** I hope you all had a blessed Christmas day. Now, as we begin our study again, we are going to be looking at the Holy Family—Jesus, Mary and Joseph. When you think about the Holy Family, what are some of the things you might imagine that they did together?

#### **LEADER TIP:**

- While people might immediately head toward “pious” activities like praying etc., remind them that the Holy Family would have done many “ordinary” things too, like working, eating meals, visiting friends and family, attending weddings and funerals, even going “on vacation” (the pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a fun time, as well as a holy activity. Try to get participants to think of the Holy Family not as people who were living like monks and nuns, but rather as a real family.

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**SAY:** The presenter, Jules Miles, gives us some valuable insights on why the Holy Family is an important model for us. Let's see what she has to say.



(Play the video for the Sunday Within the Octave of Christmas. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

#### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1


**SAY:** How does presenter Jules Miles say that each member of the Holy Family displays the virtue of obedience?

#### **LEADER TIP:**

- Mary showed her obedience by saying “yes” to becoming the Mother of Jesus. Joseph showed his obedience by promptly obeying God’s command to flee to Egypt. One can also see Jesus’ obedience by fulfilling his Father’s will, even to going to the cross.

#### **DIGGING DEEPER**

##### THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

 The Feast of the Holy Family is relatively new, having been instituted by Pope Leo XIII in 1893. Originally it was celebrated on the Sunday within the Octave of the Epiphany (January 7 through January 13), but in 1969 it was moved to the Sunday within the Octave of Christmas. If there is no Sunday between Christmas and New Year’s Day (because both fall on a Sunday), then the Feast of the Holy Family is held on December 30.

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**SAY:** In this week’s Gospel, Joseph plays an essential role. What does Joseph do that is so important?

### LEADER TIPS:

- Joseph takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt to protect Jesus from Herod’s wrath and the Slaughter of the Innocents. Then, when the danger has passed, he brings them back to Nazareth. Both of these things were done in order to fulfill prophecy.
- You might want to point out to participants that Joseph acted as Jesus’ father on earth, guiding and instructing him as he grew. Joseph isn’t just a “placeholder” in the story of salvation, but an active, essential component.

## STEP #5 LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**SAY:** Today’s Gospel reveals that when Joseph was told to go to Egypt, he promptly obeyed. Let’s consider for a few minutes what that might have been like for Joseph.

### PRAYER:

Imagine what it must have been like to be in Joseph’s position. You know you have to get your family out of danger; you have to do it immediately, in the middle of the night. What would be going through your mind? Maybe you would worry about having enough money, or what you were going to do with your house while you were gone. Or you might be afraid that something would happen to you on the trip. Or maybe you weren’t sure how you would tell Mary that you had to leave “right now!” Think about all that might have been going through Joseph’s mind as he prepared to leave for Egypt. How does this impact your impression of Joseph as a husband and a father?

### DIGGING DEEPER

#### WHICH HEROD?



Sometimes the “Herods” in Scripture can get a bit confusing since numerous rulers bore that name. The Herod who ordered the killing of all boys under the age of two was Herod the Great. He ruled for 33 years, from 37 – 4 BC. After his death, his sons Herod Archelaus and Herod Antipas took command. Herod Archelaus was the ethnarch of Judea. Herod Antipas was in charge of Galilee and Perea. It is this Herod that Jesus called “that fox” in Luke 13:32.

## **RESOLUTION:**

What are three qualities you can see in Joseph that you would like to imitate in your own life? Write them down and look for opportunities to exhibit them this week.

**SAY:** Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.

### ***LEADER TIPS:***

- *You might want to take some time to share some of the qualities people came up with in the entire group.*
- *Some of the qualities might include: trust in God's direction, decisiveness, courage, bravery, action-oriented, etc.*
- *If time permits, share with the group an experience you might have had when you heard and obeyed God's direction in your own life.*



# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**SAY:** I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week’s Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance. Let’s close our time together today in a prayer to St. Joseph that dates back to the 16th century.

Oh, St. Joseph, whose protection is so great, so strong, so prompt before the throne of God. I place in you all my interests and desires. Oh, St. Joseph, do assist me by your powerful intercession, and obtain for me from your divine Son all spiritual blessings, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. So that, having engaged here below your heavenly power, I may offer my thanksgiving and homage to the most loving of Fathers.

Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## THE OCTAVE OF THE NATIVITY

# SOLEMNITY OF MARY, THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD

✧ YEAR A ✧

## THE ROSARY, A TRUE TREASURE

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**Today is a beautiful and important feast** in the life of the Church. Our focus today isn't on starting the new year—although that is certainly reason for celebration, and what better way is there to start out the new year than by going to Mass? Our focus today is on Mary and her motherhood. There is no Christmas without Christ, but there is no Christ without his mother.

As we will hear in the video presentation today, very early on the Church gave Mary the title *Theotokos*, “God-bearer” or “Mother of God,” in recognition of her unique role in God’s plan. Some people objected (and many still object) to the title “Mother of God” because Mary is human just like us and the title seems to elevate her too far above our humanity. But Mary is undeniably the mother of Jesus, and if we believe that Jesus is God, then Mary is clearly the Mother of God.

In declaring Mary to be the Holy Mother of God, we are recognizing the honor that God has already bestowed upon her by choosing her to be the mother of his Son. We are not elevating her any higher than God has already raised her. And in recognizing and proclaiming her privileged role as the Mother of God, we also recognize and claim her as our beloved Mother, entrusting ourselves to her loving care and allowing her to lead us ever closer to her Son.

**LEADER TIPS:**

*We've provided "reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*

*Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD

### FIRST READING

~Numbers 6:22-27~

### REFLECTION

**T**he connection to be made between this First Reading, the Epistle, and the Gospel reading for this solemnity may not be immediately evident, but one interesting theme suggests itself. Each of these readings gives us an insight into the importance of the divine name. In Numbers, Aaron is told to bless the people by putting God's name upon them. In the Second Reading from Galatians, we are told that our capacity to call God by the name of "Father" is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Lastly, the babe born to Mary, the Mother of God whom we celebrate today, is given the name "Jesus" at his circumcision.

We are told in this First Reading how Aaron and the Levitical priests are to bless the people of Israel. Previously in the Bible, the covenant blessing had been passed from fathers to sons (see Genesis 26 and 27, for example). From Exodus onward, Aaron and his sons are commissioned by God to serve as the priestly fathers of Israel, and they are instructed to pass on the blessing of the covenant with Yahweh by speaking that very name over the people. Just as the ancient patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had passed on the covenantal blessing to their sons, the priests of

the Levitical order are enjoined to pass on the blessing to their spiritual sons. The blessing form we find in this text is still used as a solemn form of blessing at the end of the Holy Eucharist. Our priest-fathers in the Church continue this practice, begun so long ago, of passing on God's blessing by invoking the holy name of God.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 67~

## SECOND READING

~Galatians 4:4-7~

### REFLECTION

**O**ur reading from Galatians highlights the specific entry of God into time at the moment of the Incarnation. "Time" can have an abstract and general meaning (*kairos* in the Greek), such as "Time waits for no man," or a more concrete and specific meaning (*chronos* in the Greek), such as, "The time is 10 p.m." The Scriptures will sometimes use the more abstract form *kairos*, as in Ephesians 1:10 when Paul speaks about the "fullness of time." Other times, the more concrete and specific form *chronos* is used, as in this text from Galatians.

This suggests that St. Paul is here stressing the actuality of the Incarnation. Some translations of this passage render the "fullness of time" as "the designated time," making that point even clearer, suggesting also the designs of God's providence in this timing. Luke in his Gospel shows the same interest in specifying the entry of God into time by anchoring it to the reign of Caesar Augustus and local rulers like Herod in Judaea and Quirinius in Syria. This temporal specificity is accompanied by the added phrase, "born of a woman, born under the law," which also indicates the actuality of the Incarnation. Jesus took flesh from a

particular woman, from Mary, a *Jewish* woman, and so he was born “under the law” of Moses. The Son of God becomes the son of Mary; and by truly entering into our humanity enables humanity to enter truly into his divine Sonship by way of an adoption worked by the Holy Spirit.

## GOSPEL

~Luke 2:16-21~

### REFLECTION

**I**n giving us this solemnity, the Church presents us with many things to consider: the beginning of a new year, the birth of God into our human experience, as well as the important place that Mary plays in the divine plan. When we approach Mary, requesting her prayers, we approach someone who has a sublime and altogether unique relationship with God. Her role as Mediatrix for the Church is something truly singular and deserves our special recognition. That is why we honor her this day. Because Jesus enters into an intimate relationship with each one of us, it is only proper that his mother, the human person to whom he is most intimately united, should have a special place in the life of each of us in the Church, as well. This is not our doing or Mary’s doing; the agency for this is Christ himself.

We approach Jesus in much the same way that the shepherds did, with Mary at his side. Approaching Jesus through Mary is not a denigration of Christ; on the contrary, it was his choice to come to us through Mary, and so we imitate him when we go to him through Mary! A mother is never far from her son, and by knowing her we come to know him better. That is why it is important for us to recognize and honor the specific role she plays in the events of our salvation. In addition to honoring her, we must also imitate her in treasuring in our hearts the events of Jesus’s life and death.

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God in the Octave of Christmas. Let's open our time together with this prayer to Mary, the Mother of God.**

O Mary, Mother of God  
As you are above all creatures  
in Heaven and earth,  
more glorious than the cherubim,  
more noble than any here below,  
Christ has given you to his people,  
firm bulwark and protectress,  
to shield and save sinners who fly unto you.  
Therefore O Lady,  
all embracing refuge,  
we solemnly recall your sweet protection,  
and beg Christ forever for his mercy.  
Amen.

A Prayer taken from [www.catholic.org](http://www.catholic.org)

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**In today’s Gospel reading we find the shepherds of Bethlehem encountering the infant Jesus with his holy mother as we close the Octave of Christmas with a solemn celebration of Mary, the Holy Mother of God. Jesus gives us Mary as our mother as well. When you consider Mary’s motherhood, what qualities stand out the most to you?**

*(Some likely answers include Mary’s gentleness, her obedience to God, and her love. You can also encourage participants to consider the various Marian apparitions approved by the Church, such as Lourdes, Fatima, and Guadalupe, and the qualities revealed in those apparitions, including her sinlessness, her affection for her children, and her desire for the salvation of souls.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA – SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Now let’s watch the video presentation and consider what we can learn from the Holy Mother of God in today’s Gospel reading.**



Play the video for Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God. This will play for approximately four minutes.

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DEVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTION #1

**After all of the momentous events leading up to and surrounding the birth of her son, Luke tells us in his Gospel that Mary continued to remember and ponder everything that had been said and done.**

**What does it mean that Mary “kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart”? How is the Rosary a “school of prayer” to follow her example in this?**

*(Mary’s “keeping and reflecting” was a remembrance of and a meditation on God’s mighty deeds in her life. She not only remembered what had happened—but she also continued to think about it and draw out meaning from it. In the Rosary the repetition of memorized prayers is supposed to provide a background for us to remember and reflect on the events of Jesus’ life described in the various mysteries. We meditate on the life of Jesus through the eyes of Mary.)*

#### DIGGING DEEPER

#### OCTAVE OF THE NATIVITY



Today is called the “Octave of the Nativity.” The feast of Christmas is so important that the Church celebrates it for more than just a single day. The Octave of the Nativity starts with Christmas Day and lasts for eight days (hence the title “octave”). On these eight days we celebrate the feast of Christmas in a special way, culminating with today’s solemnity celebrating Mary and her motherhood. After today the Christmas season will continue until the feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

In earlier periods of the Church, many solemnities and saints’ feast days were celebrated with octaves, but since 1969 octaves are only celebrated for the feasts of Christmas and Easter.

## **SMALL GROUP QUESTION #2**

**Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who Jesus said would teach us all things (see John 14:26), the Church's understanding and appreciation of Mary's role as Mother of God has grown over time.**

**According to Father John Riley, how long did it take the Church to formally proclaim the title "Mother of God" for Mary? When was this title added to the Hail Mary? How does the addition of this title enrich your praying of the Hail Mary?**

*(Father Riley said that it took more than 400 years for the Church to officially proclaim Mary's title Mother of God [and not just Mother of Christ]. You can give the participants a little more specific information and explain that the title was proclaimed at the Council of Ephesus in the year 431. Father Riley also said that the title was added to the Hail Mary more than 1,000 years after the Council of Ephesus. You can explain to the participants that according to tradition, St. Peter Canisius began adding the line "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death" to the Hail Mary during the Protestant Reformation, and it was officially accepted as part of the prayer and included in the Catechism of the Council of Trent in 1566.*

*Participants will have different answers for how the title "Mother of God" in the Hail Mary enriches their prayers. It may be so familiar that it does not make much of a difference to some. It may help some people to entrust their prayers to Mary because it is a reminder of how special her role is, and how close her relationship to Christ is. Now that they know the history of the prayer, you can encourage participants to pray it with renewed attention and zeal.)*

## STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA – PRAYER &amp; RESOLUTION



**Today's Gospel reading is about an encounter with God Incarnate and how nothing can ever be the same afterward. We see this both from the perspective of the shepherds who receive the angel's message and find the infant, and from the perspective of the Holy Mother of God who carries these things in her heart, pondering and reflecting. We are called to do the same.**

**PRAYER:**

Prayerfully place yourself in today's Gospel reading. Imagine that you are one of the shepherds, hurrying to Bethlehem after receiving the angel's message. What do you experience when you find Mary, Joseph, and Jesus in Bethlehem? What do you see? What do you feel? What do you say? What about this experience do you keep and ponder in your heart?

**RESOLUTION:**

Think of a time when you have encountered God in a powerful way. It might have been an answer to prayer, consolation in a time of trouble, physical or mental healing, an overwhelming sense of peace amidst anxiety, or something else. Set aside time each day this week to remember and reflect on that encounter with God and to praise him for it.

**Use your Prayer Journal to write down your thoughts, reflections, and your resolutions.**

*To help the participants think of an encounter with God, you can explain to them how Israel practiced this kind of remembrance of God's saving actions through their liturgical feasts and prayers. For example, the feast of Passover commemorates Israel's encounter with God as he brought them out of slavery in Egypt. And many of the psalms are prayers for God's help framed within a retelling of how God has saved his people in the past. Psalm 106 is an excellent example of this.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

### **DIGGING DEEPER** SUB TUUM PRAESIDIUM



One of the most ancient prayers to the Blessed Virgin Mary is called the Sub Tuum Praesidium, "We Fly to Thy Patronage." The oldest known version of it was found on a third-century Egyptian papyrus. There is a partial indulgence granted for reciting this prayer.

We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin. Amen.

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with prayer:**

We entrust all of our cares to Christ through Mary as we pray:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

✧ YEAR A ✧

# COMING BEFORE THE KING

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### Leader Preparation Overview



The story of the magi, the three wise men, who traveled from the East to pay homage to Jesus as the King of the Jews, is part of our Christmas tradition. (Incidentally, the Gospels never tell us that there were three; we get that number from the three gifts they brought, by assuming each brought one gift.) The magi, after a detour to see King Herod, brought their most valuable possessions to lay at the feet of the newborn King.

As we see the scene unfold, it doesn't look much like a royal court. It simply looks like a father, mother, and child, living in humble circumstances in a tiny, backwater town in a rural province of Rome. And yet, it was there that the magi encountered the King of all creation.

In some ways, it can be the same for us at church. When we attend Mass, it can seem ordinary, almost mundane, because we do it week after week. We may even find our minds drifting to the things we are going to do when we get home instead of the fact that we are in the presence of the Lord of the Universe.

The early Church Fathers encouraged Christians at Mass to meditate on the magi. It's a good lesson for us, as well. When we think about the magi approaching the Infant Jesus, we can take that same image to prayer in our lives. As we approach the Eucharist, we can see ourselves coming before the Lord, offering our most precious possession—our very lives—as we worship and adore him as the magi did those thousands of years ago.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

*We've provided "reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*

*Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 60:1-6~

#### REFLECTION

**T**his part of the book of the Prophet Isaiah is traditionally believed to be part of the prophecy of the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem after the exile in Babylon. But two verses before the start of this reading, at Isaiah 59:20, we read, “And he will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgressions, says the Lord.” So, for reasons that are obvious to Christian eyes, these verses have also been seen as prophecies of the future Redeemer, Jesus Christ, who seems to be so clearly portrayed in the earlier chapters as the servant of Yahweh, an exalted figure who is nevertheless to be despised and betrayed “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (Is 53:7). Prophecies appear as well in the chapter that follows this one, which speaks so clearly of the Anointed One of the Lord, who is “to bring good tidings to the afflicted” (Is 61:1).



In this particular portion from Isaiah 60, the clear reference to “gold and frankincense” in verse 6 has always been seen as fulfilled in the Gospel passage we have on this Sunday from Matthew, relating the gifts of the magi. The multiple layers of prophecy in Scripture remind us that God’s Word is rich in mysteries, and a limitless source of gold for the soul who, like the wise men, seeks to pay homage to the infant King of Bethlehem. Similar prophecies can be seen in Isaiah that can be applied to Israel’s return from exile and the role that the Jewish people are to play in preparing the nations for the Messiah, as well as the arrival of the Christ himself. Later, in Revelation 21:2, St. John prophesies the eventual blessing of the new heavenly Jerusalem.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13~

## SECOND READING

~Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6~

## REFLECTION

**T**he feast of Epiphany stresses the revelation of the Christ to the Gentiles, as represented by the wise men, or three kings, as they are sometimes called. In this second reading St. Paul, who wrote this letter to the Galatians before Matthew’s Gospel, tells us that God also revealed to him directly that he had a “plan” for the Gentiles. This mysterious plan had already been hinted at in prophets like Isaiah. Note that our first reading spoke of the nations and their kings being drawn to the light cast by God upon the Jewish people. But the idea that the non-Jewish nations would be offered full covenant inclusion as co-heirs with the Jews themselves was unheard of, a mystery hidden from the world until the fullness of God’s plan had been disclosed in Christ.

St. Paul is reminding the members of the largely Gentile Church in Ephesus of this spectacular surprise, that Jews and Gentiles have been mystically incorporated into the one body of Christ, made members of each other by this special grace. The Catholic Church is universal, the effect of the desire of God to unite every human heart to himself and simultaneously us all with each other in one worldwide family of God!



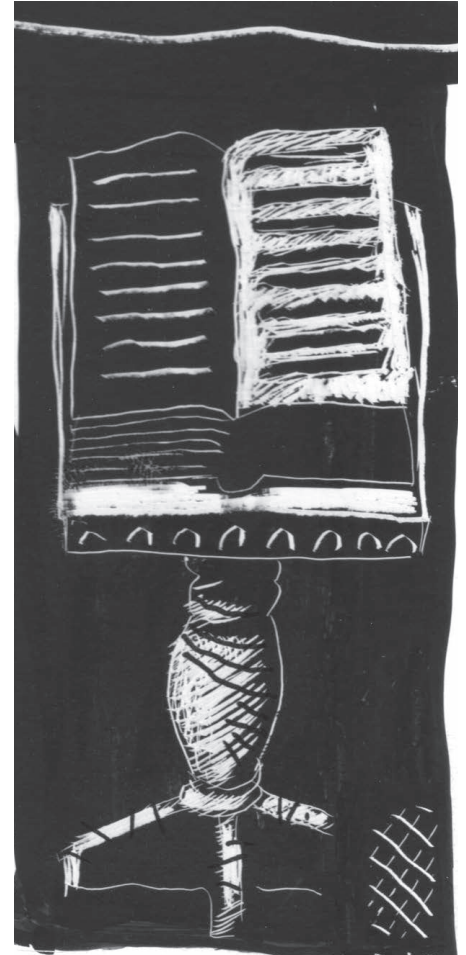
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 2:2-12~

### REFLECTION

**I**n the first chapter of Venerable Fulton Sheen's wonderful *Life of Christ*, titled "The Only Person Ever Pre-Announced," he describes the wealth of prophecies of the coming of Christ, not just in the Old Testament, but also from cultures all over the ancient world. He cites the Romans: Tacitus, Suetonius, Cicero, and Virgil. He cites evocative texts from the Greeks-- from Aeschylus and the Sibyls, and points to the longing of Socrates and Plato for the *Logos*. He notes a remarkable story from *The Annals of the Celestial Kingdom* recounting that an emperor of the Tcheou dynasty in China saw a remarkable star in the southwest and inquired of his sages what this might mean: "They showed him books in which this prodigy signified the appearance of the great Saint of the West whose religion was to be introduced into their country." And this explains how the wise men in Matthew's Gospel knew to follow the star that led them to Bethlehem. Not only had the Jewish prophecies and the texts that carried them penetrated into the Persian and Babylonian cultures from which these men likely came, but it also seems the whole world was pregnant with longing for the wisdom of God and for release from sin. Jesus satisfies both longings.

That ancient world was ripe for harvest, as we know. The whole of the Greco-Roman world was won for Christ in a remarkably short time, especially given the slowness of communication in that day. But our postmodern world we live in has grown tired of God and his truth. It believes that it has outgrown the wisdom of the ages. We live in a world that longs for novelty. Each year the liturgy reminds us, by telling this story of the newborn King, that what the world claims is outdated is, in fact, ever new.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Epiphany. Let's open our time together in prayer.**

Lord God of heaven and earth,  
you revealed your only-begotten Son to every nation  
by the guidance of a star.  
Bless this room  
and all who are in it.  
Fill us with the light of Christ,  
that our concern for others may reflect your love.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

—Adapted from USCCB

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**When the magi entered the house, they adored Jesus. If you have spent time in a Eucharistic Adoration chapel, can you share your experience with us?**

*Think about your own life and prepare an example to present to the group to help get the discussion started.*

*Some prompts might include: How did you feel when you knew you were in the Real Presence? How did you pray? What makes being in an Adoration chapel special for you?*

# STEP #3

## LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Today’s Gospel concludes what we think of as the “Christmas story” with the arrival of the magi. Let’s listen while the presenter gives us some ideas on what this can mean to us today.**



Play the video for Epiphany of the Lord. This will play for approximately five minutes.

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTION #1

**According to the presenter, why did King Herod want to kill Jesus?**

*(Herod was not an ethnic Jew, but had been made “king” of the Jews by the Roman authority. Any legitimate Jewish king would threaten his power and dynasty.)*

*See "Digging Deeper" for more information on Herod.)*

### DIGGING DEEPER KING HEROD



King Herod was born about 74 BC, the son of a high-ranking Edomite official. Although he may have practiced Judaism, he was not of Jewish descent. He was appointed the governor of Judea when he was 25 and elected “king of the Jews” by the Roman Senate a few years later. He ruled Judea for 37 years with cruelty, even killing his own wife and children.

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

### **How are the Epiphany and the Eucharist related, according to the presenter?**

*(The magi encounter Jesus in Bethlehem, while we encounter Jesus in the Eucharist at every Mass. Like the magi, who gave their most valuable possessions to the Infant Jesus, we bring our most valuable possession—our very lives—to Jesus in the Eucharist.)*

## STEP #5

### LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**As we enter into the last days of the Christmas season, let us join the magi in prayer.**

#### **PRAYER:**

Picture yourself as one of the magi standing before Mary, who is holding the Infant Jesus on her lap. You kneel before Jesus and offer him your life, to do with as he will. What might Mary say to you? What does Jesus do? How do you feel? Now take a moment to offer words of praise and thanksgiving for the opportunity to serve the King of kings.

#### **RESOLUTION:**

Today we heard how the early Church Fathers saw the visit of the magi as a symbol of the Eucharist. This week pay a visit to your church or adoration chapel, and spend a few minutes adoring Jesus as the magi did.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

#### **LEADER TIP:**

*If participants want to find a Eucharistic adoration chapel in their area, direct them to <http://www.acfp2000.com/Chapels/usa.htm>. Chapels offering both part-time and perpetual adoration are listed for every state.*

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with this prayer written by St. Jane Frances de Chantal:**

I resolve with your Divine assistance,  
Oh, my Saviour,  
to follow your desires and your ordinances,  
without regarding or examining why you do this rather than that, but  
I will blindly follow you according to your Divine will;  
without seeking my own inclinations.  
Hence I am determined to leave all to you,  
taking no part therein save by keeping myself in peace in your arms,  
desiring nothing except as you incite me to desire, to will, to wish. I  
offer you this desire, oh, my God,  
beseeching you to bless it;  
I undertake all it includes,  
relying on your goodness,  
liberality, and mercy,  
with entire confidence in you,  
distrust of myself,  
and knowledge of my infinite misery and infirmity.  
Amen!

# LEADER GUIDE

## 1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD



✧ YEAR A ✧

# ANOINTED BY THE SPIRIT

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## Leader Preparation Overview



Have you ever considered with whom Jesus spends most of his time? With whom he enjoys hanging out? Whom he considers his closest friends? They aren't the so-called "holy" people, but ordinary sinners like you and me. People who mess up, who need healing, who can't seem to get their act together.

Why does Jesus want to be with sinners? It's because his whole goal is to fulfill the Father's plan, not by being a messiah in the worldly sense, but by becoming the Messiah who bears all the consequences of sin by dying on the cross. That's what his mission, his entire reason for becoming man, was all about: to step into the place of sinners. He became a man so that he could know what it was like to be human in order to save humanity.

Jesus had a unique mission, one only he could fulfill. But have you ever stopped to consider that you have a unique mission as well? One only you can fulfill? It's true. Each of us has been created by God to carry out a mission designed for us alone. And just as Jesus



was able to complete his mission through the power of the Holy Spirit, we receive that very same Holy Spirit when we are baptized and confirmed. Through the power of the Spirit given to us in the sacraments, we are anointed to carry out our mission as beloved sons and daughters of the Father.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "Reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to take time to read the Scripture passages from each reading before beginning *Lectio Divina*.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7~

### REFLECTION

**H**ere again this Sunday, the prophetic voice announcing the coming of Christ is that of Isaiah, that wonderful book that is sometimes called “the fifth Gospel,” so clear are the prophecies in it of the coming of Christ. As was noted in the study on Isaiah from Epiphany, these servant texts from Isaiah have often been read by Christians as referring both to Israel and the Jewish people and to the coming Messiah of Israel who is to fulfill the role of his people perfectly. In the Gospel reading for this Sunday from Matthew we will see Jesus appear quietly at the Jordan, without clamor, as this text promises, to begin the work of fulfilling Israel’s role of being a “covenant of the people, / a light for the nations,” and to bring those in the dungeon of sin out into the light of salvation. Since this reading is given us in the Mass, it is worth noting that, in response to this prophetic text from Isaiah, the Christians of the first centuries would sometimes call the Holy Eucharist that we still receive in Holy Communion simply “the covenant,” to indicate that it was Jesus himself in the Eucharist that we receive, the same Messiah that Isaiah had



foretold.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10~

## SECOND READING

~Acts 10:34-38~

## REFLECTION

**T**his text from Acts 10 represents a kind of half-way point in the narrative of Luke's Acts. In this chapter Peter receives the revelation that the Gentiles are to be included in "the Way" (Acts 9:2) that Jesus had instituted. This had already appeared in Acts 9 when a figure named Saul (later Paul) had been told by God that he would "carry my name before the Gentiles" (9:15). Here we see God prepare the Jewish Church for this transition through the leadership of Peter, the first pope. He first receives a vision in Joppa that makes clear that the dietary laws of Judaism, one of the clearest signs of difference between Jews and Gentiles, have been fulfilled in the new revelation in Christ and need not be observed any more: "What God has cleansed, you must not call common" (meaning, you must not disallow the consumption of foods which God has now declared acceptable).

Peter, at first perplexed at this, realizes the deeper meaning of this revelation when a Roman centurion (a Gentile, Cornelius) from Caesarea sends for him, so that he might hear Peter's gospel announcement. When Peter hears that this Gentile had received a revelation to call Peter, just as he had, the deeper meaning of his vision is made clear: "I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him." Suddenly in the middle of Peter's announcement of this Good News, the Holy Spirit falls upon these Gentiles as a corroboration of this message!

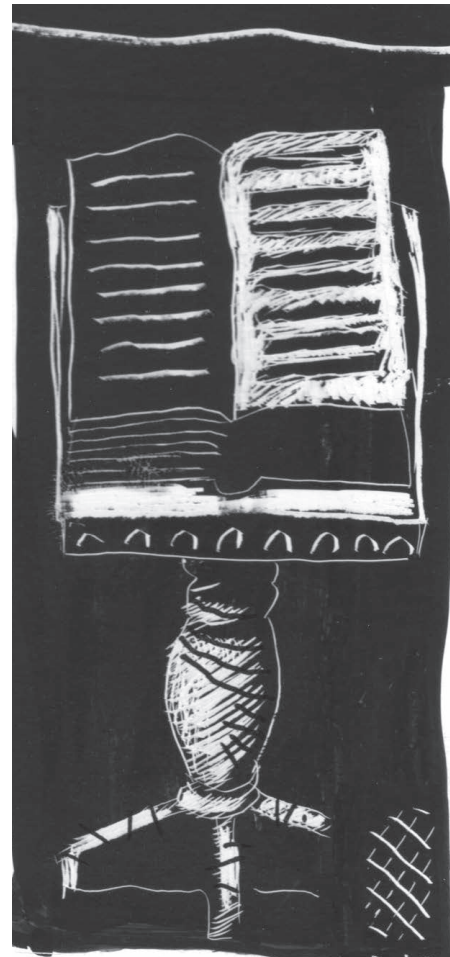
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 3:13-17~

### REFLECTION

**T**his wonderful feast of the Baptism of the Lord is part of a triptych of mysteries in the mind of the Church. In the Liturgy of the Hours for the celebration of the Epiphany, the antiphon for the Cantic of Mary (for Vespers or Evening Prayer) says, “Three mysteries mark this holy day: today the star leads the Magi to the infant Christ; today water is changed into wine for the wedding feast; today Christ wills to be baptized by John in the river Jordan to bring us salvation.”

That prayer suggests that the mystery of the magi celebrated last Sunday on the Epiphany is continued in another “epiphany” in this feast of the Baptism of the Lord. That word in the Greek means “a showing forth” and the thing shown here is the Christological mystery of our faith, that Jesus is the Incarnate Son of God and the second Person of the Most Holy Trinity. All three divine Persons are present in the tableau that we see both here and in Luke’s gospel, the voice of the Father, the dove as a sign of the Holy Spirit and, of course, the presence of the Son in the waters of the Jordan. This revelation that the one God is a loving communion of three Persons that Jesus came to disclose is what the Catechism calls the “central mystery of Christian faith and life” (CCC 234). By our Baptism we enter that mystery of the Son, overshadowed by the Spirit we become the favored sons and daughters of the Father.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**SAY:** Welcome to our study of Opening the Word for the Second Sunday of Advent. Let's open our time together by praying the words of the great hymn "Come Holy Ghost."

*(Note to leader: If you prefer, you can sing the hymn.)*

Come Holy Ghost, Creator Blest,  
And in our hearts take up thy rest;  
Come with thy grace and heav'nly aid  
To fill the hearts which thou hast made;  
To fill the hearts which thou hast made.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**SAY:** Today's Gospel is about the Baptism of Jesus, but more than that, it's about Jesus and his mission here on earth. If you had to choose one word to describe Jesus' mission, what would you choose?

#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- The idea of having people choose a single word is to get them thinking beyond the usual, rote answers and really honing in on the essence of the mission. Some possible responses might include love, salvation, peace, hope, mercy, grace.
- After participants have shared their word, ask them to write down their word because it will be used for reflection in the weekly journal.

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**SAY:** As you watch this short video on the Baptism of Jesus, reflect on what baptism meant to John, what it meant to Jesus and what it means for each of us.



(Play the video for The Baptism of the Lord. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

#### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**SAY:** What does it mean to you that Jesus healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and raised the dead both as God and as man?

#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- All too often, we minimize the fact that Jesus was both God and man by overemphasizing his divinity, which is the basis for the Gnostic Docetic heresy. Remind participants of John 14:12 (RSV): “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father.” If all of Jesus’ works were done just because he was God, then he could not make the promise that we can do the same and greater through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- People may want to object or argue that Jesus performed his miracles because he was God, not man. If that happens, remind them that Jesus is fully God and fully man and that he did those miracles as the God who became man.

## DIGGING DEEPER

### TRUE GOD AND TRUE MAN



*“The unique and altogether singular event of the Incarnation of the Son of God does not mean that Jesus Christ is part God and part man, nor does it imply that he is the result of a confused mixture of the divine and the human. He became truly man while remaining truly God. Jesus Christ is true God and true man. During the first centuries, the Church had to defend and clarify this truth of faith against the heresies that falsified it.” —CCC 464*

*“The first heresies denied not so much Christ’s divinity as his true humanity (Gnostic Docetism).”*

—CCC 465

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**SAY:** At our Baptism and Confirmation, we are anointed to carry out a unique mission that can never be fulfilled by anyone. In your journal, write down some ideas about how you are fulfilling your mission.

### LEADER TIPS:

- You may want to talk a bit about the difference between a mission and a role. A person might have the role of parent, but the mission is to bring up and educate children in the faith. If people do confuse mission and role, don’t fret. Part of the exercise is to begin the process of opening their hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit, who will enlighten and guide them.
- Be sure to remind participants that everyone has a mission. If they aren’t sure what their mission is, suggest that they ask the Holy Spirit to reveal it to them.

## DIGGING DEEPER

### BAPTISM AND THE “DOOR OF FAITH”



*“The ‘door of faith’ (Acts 14:27) is always open for us, ushering us into the life of communion with God and offering entry into his Church. It is possible to cross that threshold when the word of God is proclaimed and the heart allows itself to be shaped by transforming grace. To enter through that door is to set out on a journey that lasts a lifetime. It begins with baptism (cf. Rom 6:4), through which we can address God as Father, and it ends with the passage through death to eternal life, fruit of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, whose will it was, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, to draw those who believe in him into his own glory (cf. Jn 17:22). To profess faith in the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is to believe in one God who is Love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8): the Father, who in the fullness of time sent his Son for our salvation; Jesus Christ, who in the mystery of his death and resurrection redeemed the world; the Holy Spirit, who leads the Church across the centuries as we await the Lord’s glorious return.”*  
—Benedict XVI, *For the Indiction of the Year of Faith*

## STEP #5

LECTIO DIVINA —  
PRAYER & RESOLUTION

**SAY:** At his Baptism, Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit and empowered to begin his mission. At our Baptism, we are anointed and empowered by that same Spirit. Let us reflect for a moment on what that means in our lives.

**PRAYER:**

In the second reading from Paul, we are told that “after the baptism that John preached...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.” Now apply those words to yourself: “After my baptism, God anointed me with the Holy Spirit and power. I go about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God is with me.” What do you feel as you hear those words applied to you? Do you truly believe that you have been anointed by the Holy Spirit? Do you trust that God is with you? Let the truth of this statement take root in your heart and say to yourself, “God is truly with me.”

**RESOLUTION:**

This week, trusting that you have been anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit through your Baptism and Confirmation try your best to explain what the Church really teaches the next time you hear someone misunderstand or even misrepresent Catholic doctrine.

**SAY:** Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- Some resolutions might include: I would be more confident in talking about my faith. I would be more willing to trust God's direction in my life. I would be less fearful about the future. I would spend more time in prayer.
- If there are members of the group who have not yet been baptized and/or confirmed, you may want to talk with them about entering an RCIA program in their parishes.

### **DIGGING DEEPER** INFANT BAPTISM



*“The practice of infant Baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church. There is explicit testimony to this practice from the second century on, and it is quite possible that, from the beginning of the apostolic preaching, when whole “households” received baptism, infants may also have been baptized.”* Cf. Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16; CDF, instruction, Pastoralis action: AAS 72 (1980) 1137-1156

—CCC 1252.

*For more information on the history and institution of the sacrament of Baptism, go to: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02258b.htm>.*

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**SAY:** I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week’s Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance. Let’s close our time together today with prayer to the Holy Spirit.

Blessed Spirit of Wisdom, help me to seek you, my God. help me make you the center of my life and order my life to him, so that love and harmony may reign in my soul.

Blessed Spirit of Understanding, enlighten my mind, that I may know and love the truths of faith and make them truly my own.



Blessed Spirit of Counsel, enlighten and guide me in all my ways, that I may know and do your holy Will. Make me prudent and courageous.

Blessed Spirit of Fortitude, uphold my soul in every time of trouble or adversity. Make me loyal and confident.

Blessed Spirit of Knowledge, help me to know good from evil. Teach me to do what is right in the sight of God. Give me clear vision and firmness in decision.

Blessed Spirit of Piety, possess my heart, incline it to a true faith in you, to a holy love of you, my God, that with my whole soul I may seek you, who are my Father, and I find You, my best, my truest joy.

Blessed Spirit of Holy Fear, penetrate my inmost heart that I may be mindful of your presence. Make me fly from sin, and give me intense reverence for God and for my fellow men who are made in God's image.

—Adapted from [http://www.god-answers-prayers.com/holy\\_spirit\\_prayers/prayer\\_consecration\\_to\\_the\\_holy\\_spirit/index.html](http://www.god-answers-prayers.com/holy_spirit_prayers/prayer_consecration_to_the_holy_spirit/index.html)

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## LAMB OF GOD

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**When we say the words of the *Agnus Dei*, or Lamb of God, during Mass, we are directly quoting John the Baptist.**

The scene is set on the banks of the Jordan River. John has been gathering disciples by powerfully calling for repentance in light of the coming kingdom of God. One day, as he sees Jesus, he cries out, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!”

John was a great leader, but he recognized that he was not the center of the movement he had begun. He was the forerunner; the voice in the desert. John understood that his role was humbly to prepare others to follow Christ—to be a witness to the glory of God, the one who shows the way. It was not and never would be to draw attention to himself.

By calling Jesus the “Lamb of God,” John sums up his entire mission: he is to prepare the way for the One who will come, to actually take away our sins, not just call us to repentance. John recognizes Jesus as the Savior and exhorts us to do the same.

John's words about Jesus would have had a powerful impact on those who heard them because they would have called to mind the sacrifices of the Old Testament, particularly the Sacrifice of Passover. In the Passover, the blood of a lamb protected the faithful Israelites from the Angel of Death. Now John the Baptist calls Jesus the lamb of the New Passover, the one who will spare all of humanity from eternal separation from God. Jesus is the perfect, true sacrifice that all the old sacrifices had been pointing toward. He is truly the Lamb of God.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 49:3, 5-6~

### REFLECTION

**T**his introduction to the season of Ordinary Time from the Prophet Isaiah makes for a wonderful transition from the Advent season. The prophet who foretold the coming of Emmanuel has a word for us concerning the significance and aim of God's dwelling among us.

In this passage, God renews through Isaiah the promise of his universal salvific will. Throughout the history of God's people—whether that term is intended to refer to the kingdom of Israel or the new Israel, which is the Church—there's been a tendency to forget that God gives us what he gives us not merely

to favor us, but to make us instruments in his universal plan. God created all and he intends to save all.

It's just as easy for us to think that God's will stops at the church door as it was for the Israelites to think that his dominion was exercised solely within the boundaries of geographical Israel. But that wasn't the faith of Israel nor is it our faith. From the time of Adam, the time of Noah, and even from the time of Abraham when God began the process of forming a particular people to be "a light to the nations," he has always had his eye on "the nations."

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 40:2, 4, 7-8, 8-9, 10~

## SECOND READING

~1 Corinthians 1:1-3~

## REFLECTION

**A**gain, as was the case in the second reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we have an opening greeting, a salutation from one of St. Paul's epistles or letters. That seems somehow appropriate to the beginning of Ordinary Time. And Paul's reminder of what he is, "an apostle of Jesus Christ," is a fit reminder of what we're called to be.

The word "apostle" in Greek means "one sent forth." The Greek term is used in John 17:3, where Jesus declares his mission from the Father. And the same term is used throughout the New Testament in reference to those sent by the ancient churches to spread the Gospel. Paul describes the Corinthians to whom he writes as those "who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be a holy." As we begin that part of the liturgical cycle that we call ordinary time, we do well to remember that part of our vocation as God's holy people is to be sent to all those who, wherever they may be, fall within the ambit of God's loving, saving will. That, of course, includes the whole of the human family.

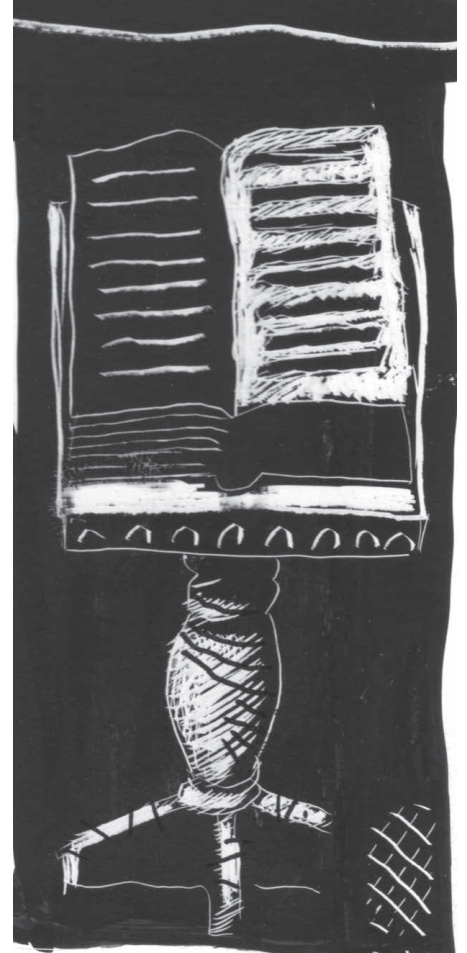
## GOSPEL

~John 1:29-34~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this passage, we're told that John identified Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Commentators suggest that this might be an allusion to the Passover lamb consumed by the Jews as a commemoration of the Exodus event, to the prophetic witness in regard to the "suffering servant of Yahweh," to the symbolic representation of a horned lamb that's made for some of the heroes of Israel, or to the twice daily sacrifice of a lamb in the temple of Jerusalem. John the Baptist unites all of these symbolically when he recognizes Jesus as the "Lamb of God." The Jews considered the offering of Isaac by Abraham to be a pivotal event in salvation history. Rather than requiring the sacrifice of Isaac, God sent an angel to Abraham to point out a ram (an adult male sheep caught by his horns in a thicket to offer instead.

This would be consistent with the Christian notion, prominent in the Liturgy of the Triduum, that Isaac is a symbolic foreshadowing of Jesus who is the beloved Son of God, just as Isaac was the beloved son of Abraham. At the end of our passage from John's Gospel, John the Baptist, after calling Jesus the Lamb of God, also identifies him as "the Son of God."



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time. We begin now with prayer.**

God the Father,  
I thank thee for creating me.

God the Son,  
I thank thee for redeeming me.

God the Holy Ghost,  
I thank thee for sanctifying me;  
infuse into my thoughts,  
words and actions thy grace,  
so that they may be supernaturally pleasing to thee  
and supernaturally rewarding to me, forever.

O Blessed Trinity,  
abundantly assist me in becoming that  
which thou intended me to become when thou created me,  
for in that perfection  
I will give thee the glory thou desirest of me,  
and in that perfection I will find my greatest joy in heaven.

Amen.

—Fr. Lucian Pulvermacher, O.F.M. Cap.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Today’s Gospel reading sheds light on the meaning of some words we hear every time we go to Mass—words we might take for granted or not fully appreciate. Sometimes we hear things so often, we no longer listen to what the words really mean. Can you think of some examples of things we say all the time that have lost much of their meaning?**

*(Possible answers might include, “Have a nice day,” “God bless you (after a sneeze), “No problem,” etc. Even, in the Mass, “And with your spirit.”)*

*The goal of this exercise is to get participants to understand that we can do the same thing in Mass or in prayer,—say words without giving them any real thought. We need to really pay attention, especially during Mass.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**We are now in Ordinary Time, those Sundays of the year when we aren’t preparing for or celebrating some major feast. In the following video, Edward Sri gives us some insight into a phrase we hear every time we attend Mass.**



(Play the video for the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTION #1**

**What would the phrase “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world” have meant to John the Baptist’s Jewish followers, according to Dr. Sri?**

*(Jews of John and Jesus’s time would have been reminded of the sacrifice of Passover, where the blood of a lamb was put on the doorposts to spare the Israelites who were captives in Egypt from the judgment of the Angel of Death. It also would have reminded them of the animal sacrifices of the entire Old Testament, where lambs (and other animals) were sacrificed in atonement for sin.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTION #2**

**What role does John the Baptist play with regard to Jesus and our salvation?**

*(John the Baptist’s role is to prepare the way for Jesus, whom he refers to as the One who will come after him, but who will rank before him. John’s purpose is to get the people ready for Jesus, who is the true Lamb of God.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER****BAPTISM AND THE “DOOR OF FAITH”**

*Agnus Dei*, which means “Lamb of God,” is said during the Mass when the Host is broken. It comes from a Syrian custom and was first used in the Roman Rite Mass by Pope Sergius I (687–701).

The Latin text is:

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.*

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.*

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.*

Translation:

Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today we see John the Baptist as Jesus first approaches him at the Jordan River. Together in prayer, let us enter into the scene.**

### **PRAYER:**

Imagine you are standing on the banks of the Jordan River, watching John baptize the crowds. All of a sudden, you see him looking at a man who is approaching. John cries out, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!” What do you think when you hear those words? Now move forward in time and imagine that John asks you to follow this man, Jesus, no matter where he goes or what he asks of you. Are you ready to make that commitment? Are you ready to follow the Lamb?

### **RESOLUTION:**

Do you truly believe that Jesus has come to take your sins away? If there is something in your past for which you are ashamed, confess it now, in the silence of your heart, and ask the Lamb to remove it from you. As soon as you are able, go to Confession. If nothing immediately comes to mind, spend time in prayer asking the Lamb to help protect you from all temptation.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### ***LEADER TIPS:***

- *You may want to have a missal available so that you can show participants where the Agnus Dei is said in the Mass*
- *Many composers have set this text to music. Some famous treatments include Bach's "Mass in B Minor," Mozart's "Requiem," and Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis." If you have time, find one of these on YouTube and play for participants.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today by praying the *Agnus Dei*—the beautiful “Lamb of God” prayer from Mass.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world,  
have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world,  
have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world,  
grant us peace.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



# COME, FOLLOW ME

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## Leader Preparation Overview



In today's Gospel, we see Jesus's reaction to the news that his cousin John has been arrested: he goes into seclusion back at home in Galilee, maybe for one last visit home with Mary, and then begins gathering the band of followers who will become his apostles.

In Israel at this time, students sought out their teachers, but Jesus reverses that. He calls first Peter and Andrew, and then James and John, saying "Come, follow me." Apparently his words strike some deep chord, because these rough, work-hardened fishermen put down their nets and immediately go with Jesus. James and John apparently even got out of the boat they were in, leaving their father behind! These men responded to Jesus's call without hesitation, and their lives, and the history of the world, were changed because of that.

Jesus also calls each one of us. Just as he did on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he meets us where we are and extends the invitation to follow him. We might think that we don't have the necessary gifts or talents to do great things for the kingdom, but who would have thought that ordinary fishermen would become the greatest fishers of men?

When we say “yes” to Jesus, when we are willing to drop our nets and turn our lives over to him, he can use us in ways we can’t even imagine. However, we have to be willing to put aside what we think we can do in order to do what God truly wants us to do—just like the fishermen Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 8:23–9:3~

### REFLECTION

**I**saiah delivers words of comfort to the first to fall under the Assyrian conqueror to the effect that they’ll be the first to appreciate God’s deliverance. It’s important to our future study of Matthew to realize that even though the people of Israel will eventually go into exile in Babylon and then return to Jerusalem to rebuild it, Israel is in the throes of a steady decline that will leave her a subject state of stronger nations until the time of Jesus and beyond. In Matthew, Jesus is portrayed as the new Moses, who will lead his people out of exile. His primary mission isn’t to free his people from the domination of foreign oppressors, but to lead his people, a newly reconstituted Israel, out of the exile they suffer due to sin.

The light that shines when Jesus is celebrated as the “light to the nations” is cast here on the people of Israel, who have been

subjected to the rule of the Gentiles. As Jesus is revealed to the Gentiles on Epiphany in the heart of Judah, he's now prophesied in Isaiah as revealed in the "District of the Gentiles," who've overrun the Jews. In this way, even the subjugation of Israel works for the good of the world, as it is from their midst that the light of Christ will shine.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14~

## SECOND READING

~1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17~

## REFLECTION

**I**n Christianity, the message is more important than the messenger (the only exception being Jesus himself—both messenger and the message of the Gospel). Despite having gifts that would have guaranteed Paul a prominent position in Jewish society, he sacrificed everything to embrace the very Jesus whom he'd formerly persecuted.

Although God has graced his Church with people of every conceivable kind of talent and temperament, these gifts are for naught if that diversity isn't united in a common commitment to Christ and his teaching. When all of our diverse gifts are given back to Christ, he directs them through himself in a gift of praise to the Father.

The last phrase in this passage ("that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning" is one that Pope St. John Paul II has used on several occasions to decry the attempt on the part of some to downplay the seriousness of sin. The one sin that Paul draws into particularly sharp focus for us here is the sin against the unity of the Church. All sin, in some measure, offends against the unity of the Church because it detracts from the witness we're to give of her holiness.

## GOSPEL

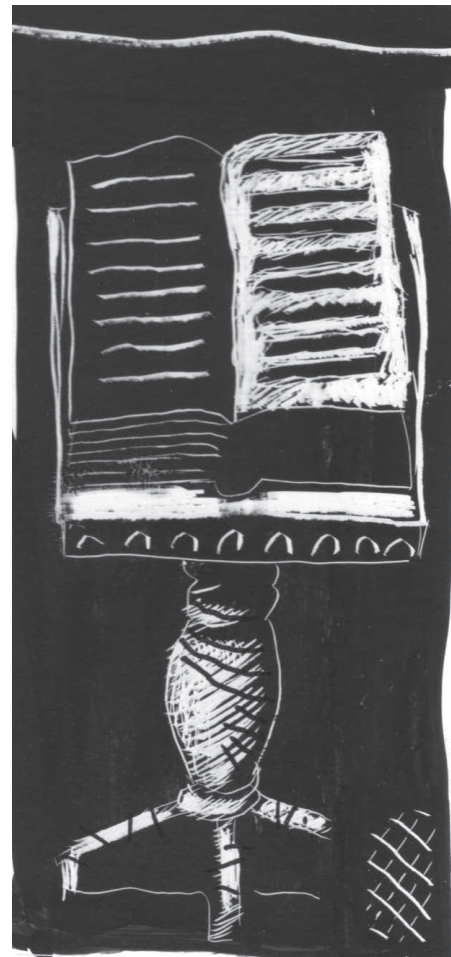
~Matthew 4:12-23~

### REFLECTION

**O**ur reading begins with the account of what happened after the arrest of John the Baptist. With the decline of John, Jesus's rise will begin. Next, we see Jesus calling his first disciples, who come immediately from their work and abandon everything to answer his summons.

Jesus begins in Galilee, called Galilee of the Gentiles in Matthew's version of Isaiah 9:1. That Jesus should begin a "reconquest" of Israel in the same area where Assyria had begun its conquest of the northern kingdom 750 years earlier is significant—particularly since the ten northern tribes had ceased to exist for all practical purposes. This is just the first of many signals in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus has come to reconstitute Israel. His choice of twelve apostles, who he says will judge the twelve tribes of Israel, is the clearest indication of this (Matthew 19:28).

The journey from Galilee to Jerusalem will have its counterpart in the life of the Church when the disciples are told to return to Galilee from Jerusalem after the Resurrection for a meeting with the risen Lord and as a prelude to their own ministry of proclaiming the Gospel. Matthew's Gospel describes a circuit which is closed at its end but opens onto the future of the Church as well.





# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS



## STEP #1 OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying this prayer for God's guidance written by St. Therese of Lisieux.**

Govern by all thy wisdom, O Lord,  
so that my soul may always be serving thee as thou dost will,  
and not as I may choose.  
Do not punish me, I beseech thee,  
by granting that which I wish  
or ask if it offended thy love,  
which would always live in me.  
Let me die to myself,  
so that I may love thee.  
Let me live to thee,  
who art in thyself,  
the true life.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**This week we are going to look at Jesus's call to his first disciples to become "fishers of men" instead of fishermen. What attributes do you think those first disciples had that made them good fishers of men? Let's list some of these together.**

*(Have a whiteboard or large sheet of paper ready to write down the group's ideas.)*

*(Some qualities might include confident, bold, decisive, adventuresome, innovative, creative, willing, trusting. If no one comes up with faith, be sure to add it to the list.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**As you watch this short video on the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, think about what it might have meant to the first disciples to hear the words “Come, follow me.”**



(Play the video for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTION #1**

**What happened 750 years earlier in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali that makes the area so important to Jesus’ ministry?**

*(Assyria had begun its conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in this area. It represents one of the worst military disasters in the history of Israel. By choosing this location to begin his preaching on the coming of the kingdom, Jesus is turning history upside down and signaling a new beginning.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTION #2****What would it take for you to leave your “fishing nets” and follow the Lord with your whole heart?**

*(Answers to this question will be personal, and people might not feel comfortable sharing. One way to aid in this might be for you to first share your own responses and invite others to contribute. Another could be to have each person turn to a neighbor and share one on one rather than with the entire group. If you sense that the group isn't going to want to share at all, allow time for members to write in their journals for personal reflection at a later time.)*

*One of the major reasons people resist the call of the Lord is fear—fear that they will be asked to do things they really don't want to do or to give up things that they really don't want to give up. This could be a good time to point out that God uses our innate gifts and talents to bring us to the best life possible. He isn't going to ask us to do things that would be impossible or make us utterly miserable. When we say “yes” to the Lord, we are saying “yes” to a truly abundant life.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER****ASSYRIA**

The Assyrian Empire was located in the middle of four modern countries: Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. The word Assyria comes from the phrase “mât Aššur,” which means “the country of the god Aššur,” the principal god worshipped by the people. One of the greatest empires of ancient times, Assyria was conquered by the Babylonians in 612 BC.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Jesus called each of his disciples individually. Let us now enter into the scene of the Gospel and imagine that we are there at the Sea of Galilee.**

### **PRAYER:**

Imagine that you are working alongside Peter and Andrew. You see a man walking along the shore. He stops and begins talking. What is he saying? What is he talking about? All of a sudden, he says to Peter and Andrew, “Come after me and I will make you fishers of men.” What is your reaction to those words? Now see Peter and Andrew putting down their nets and getting ready to walk off with this man, Jesus. What are you feeling? What do you do? As they walk away, Jesus turns back and looks directly at you. “Come, too,” he says. “Come with us. Come with me.” What do you say? What do you do?

### **RESOLUTION:**

What are some ways that Jesus may be asking you to “come and follow” him more closely? Write down a resolution to help you follow Jesus more in this area in your life this week.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *Learning to hear the Lord’s voice and guidance is something that takes time and experience. Part of this week’s lesson is to introduce members of the group to the idea that Jesus still calls each of us as individuals. Encourage participants to spend a few minutes each day in silent prayer, just being aware and listening for the Lord’s direction.*
- *If there is time, you may want to ask members to share some of the feelings that arose when they thought about Jesus calling them just as personally as he called Peter, Andrew, James, and John. For some, this might be the first time they have ever considered that Jesus wants us to have a personal, intimate relationship with him that extends beyond church walls.*

**DIGGING DEEPER**  
THE SEA OF GALILEE



The Sea of Galilee is also known as Kinneret, which is Hebrew for "violin," because it is said to resemble that instrument. Commercial fishing continues to be an important industry there, as it has been for 2,000 years.

**STEP #6**  
**STUDY WRAP-UP —**  
**CLOSING PRAYER**

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today in prayer.**

Dear Jesus, you called your disciples  
from the shore of the Sea of Galilee.  
Today you call us from different shores and different seas.  
From the shores of our ordinary lives.  
From the seas of pain, illness, sorrow.  
But you do more than merely call.  
You come to meet us where we are,  
to extend your love and friendship,  
to invite us to change our lives.  
This week, help us to hear your voice  
and answer your call,  
knowing and trusting  
in your everlasting love and care.  
Amen.

# LEADER GUIDE

## 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION  
OF THE LORD

✧ YEAR A ✧

## MARY'S CROSS



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### Leader Preparation Overview



**When Joseph and Mary** came to the Temple forty days after Jesus was born in order to fulfill the ritual of the presentation of the firstborn, Mary was adjusting to life with a new baby and a husband. She probably wasn't thinking about all the struggles and hard times that would lie ahead for her baby boy.

At least not until Simeon comes up to her and tells her that her son is destined for the fall and rise of many and that a sword will pierce her own heart, causing profound suffering. At that moment Mary might have begun to wonder just what she had agreed to when she had said "yes" to the angel's request a little less than a year before. As Simeon, and later Anna, spoke to her, Mary must have begun to realize that, as Venerable Fulton Sheen put it, "from that moment on, every time she would lift infant hands, she would see fall across them the shadow of nails."

In her role as Jesus' first and most perfect disciple, Mary shows us that the suffering lies at the heart of being a Christian. Almost from the moment of his birth, she was aware of his ultimate destiny. She was willing to follow her son to the cross. Are we willing to follow him to our own Calvary?

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "Reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to take time to read the Scripture passages from each reading before beginning Lectio Divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD

### FIRST READING

~Malachi 3:1-4~

### REFLECTION

**T**his passage from **Malachi** at times in the liturgy is applied to John the Baptist: "Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me"; and at other times—as on this Feast of the Presentation—to our Lord himself: "Suddenly there will come to the temple the LORD whom you seek." Both the one who goes before and the One who comes after are referred to as a "messenger." Of course, St. John the Baptist is the first messenger of the "messenger of the covenant," which John foretells and which Jesus fulfills.

Interestingly, Malachi, the name of this prophet whose text we are reading, also means "my messenger." This reminds us that each of us is to serve in this same kind of prophetic role in the world in which we find ourselves. Each of us, as a part of the pleasing sacrifice to the Lord that our new covenant lives present, is to prepare for the Lord's coming in the lives of others by testifying to his coming into the temple of the Holy Spirit, which we are! Our experience of faith often includes refinement in the fires of temptation, and the moral purification from sin that is like the lye applied to cleanse and whiten wool. Once tried and tested and so refined, we can shine like silver or gold before those who need a testimony as to the eternal value of life in Christ.



## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 24:7, 8, 9, 10~

## SECOND READING

~Hebrews 2:14-18~

### REFLECTION

**I**n our second reading we find the same principle that we found in our first. Jesus himself was tested and suffered to win the possibility of our own purification. In so doing, he unites himself directly with each one of us. And that is, in a certain sense, the very substance of what we celebrate on this feast. God himself, the One entirely beyond time, enjoying the eternal peace of his immutable beatitude deigns to enter the realm of change. He comes down from the divine rest to enter into our human restlessness. Embedded, as we are, in the realm of matter and change, we are subject to constant change—the change of incline, of growth, as well as the change of decline, of death.

While we tend to see these as opposites (and they can be and often are), Jesus makes the ultimate decline, the decline into death, a ladder to life. That is what happens when divinity meets humanity. Humanity, even in its worse dimensions, is immeasurably altered by that which is unchanging. The mutable changes to immutability, the mortal rises to immortality, death is made the doorway to life unending. In the Presentation of this Child in the Temple, we are being presented with a gift that surpasses even the innocent beauty of a new human life being borne in the arms of its mother and offered in thanks back to the God who gave it. We are presented with more than just the gift of a mother's love and gratitude to God for her son; we are presented with the Gift of God's own Son to that Mother and through her to all of her children. In fact, it is a mutual presentation in which she gives back to him, for us, what he has given to her, for us.

## GOSPEL

~Luke 2:22-40~

### REFLECTION

**L**uke paints a remarkable scene for us. A soft footfall on the pavement of the Temple interrupts the cacophony of official and private prayers, said or sung in Hebrew, as a couple approaches the small altar where the offerings of the poor are made. Then the Passover of the firstborn of Israel during the tenth plague of Egypt is recalled by an offering of the first fruits of the womb. But unlike all the other ransomings of the firstborn of Israel in this Temple, which have been symbols or recollections of the older Passover or ransoming, this offering and ransom is the event of which all the others were merely prophecies. All the offerings made on sand-scoured desert altars or barren heights, all the offerings made in the echoing chambers of this Temple—through thousands of years—point only to this offering, which passes through the hands of a poor provincial girl.

Perhaps she knows that her offering is really his offering and that its fulfillment is yet to come. In this first representation of the new and eternal sacrifice, which will be offered until the end of time in the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word is proclaimed by Anna, and by Simeon in his hymn of answered faith and hope fulfilled; and then a Jewish priest, whose name is entirely lost to us, but whose very anonymity is itself a type for all the Christian priests to come, becomes the first to hold the Christ aloft an altar before the faithful who await the redemption of Jerusalem, as we do today at our Mass. And in that moment we see that the One that Mary and Joseph ransom for a pair of birds, has, in fact, ransomed us all.

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**SAY:** Welcome to our study of **Opening the Word for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord.**

**Let's open our time together by praying St.**

**Alphonsus de Liguori's Prayer to the Sorrowful Mother:**

O my afflicted Mother! Queen of martyrs and of sorrows, you did so bitterly weep over your Son, who died for my salvation; but what will your tears avail me if I am lost? By the merit, then, of your sorrows, obtain me true contrition for my sins, and a real amendment of life, together with constant and tender compassion for the sufferings of Jesus and your dolours. ... O my Mother, by the grief you did experience in seeing your Son bow down His head and expire on the cross in the midst of so many torments, I beseech you to obtain me a good death. Ah, cease not, O advocate of sinners, to assist my afflicted soul in the midst of the combats in which it will have to engage on its great passage from time to eternity. And as it is probable that I may then have lost my speech, and strength to invoke your name and that of Jesus, who are all my hope, I do so now; I invoke your Son and you to succour me in that last moment; and I say, Jesus and Mary, to you I commend my soul. Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**SAY:** In today's Gospel, we are told that Mary and Joseph fulfilled both law and custom by presenting Jesus in the Temple. What are some things that are customary for families to do with newborn children in our culture?

#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- Possible answers include introduce the child to family and friends, have a baby shower, take pictures, prepare a baby book, have the child baptized, etc.

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**SAY:** On the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, we read about what happened to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph shortly after Jesus' birth.



(Play the video for The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

#### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**SAY:** Why does the presenter say Mary would initially have been comforted when she heard Simeon's first part of the prophecy? Why would her happiness have immediately been tinged with sorrow?

#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- At first Mary would have been comforted because Simeon's first words echoed prophecies of the Messiah in Isaiah, confirming what the angel had told her.
- How much of these words Mary grasped right at the moment, the Scriptures do not say. But she surely would have come to understand that while her son was to rescue his people, it wasn't going to be the way everyone had been expecting. It would entail death and suffering—the sword.

#### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**SAY:** Why is the Presentation in the Temple sometimes called Mary's second Annunciation?

#### **LEADER TIP:**


- In the first Annunciation, Mary learned she was to be the mother of God. In this, the second Annunciation, she learned more of the details of the suffering that this was going to entail.

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #3**

**SAY:** How does Mary show us the way to accept the inevitable crosses of our lives?

**LEADER TIP:**

- *Mary always said “yes” to God, even when she didn’t understand or when it would cause her sorrow. Following her example, we can learn to say “yes” to God in our lives, knowing that he will be with us in all things.*

**DIGGING DEEPER****ANNA AND SIMEON**


When Jesus was presented in the Temple, he was recognized as the Messiah by both Simeon and Anna. Interestingly their reactions are quite different. Once he saw the Messiah, Simeon was ready to go in peace to God. Anna, on the other hand, began telling everyone who was looking for the redemption of Israel about the child (Luke 2:38). In this regard, she is one of the first to bear witness to Christ. She is called a “prophetess” in Luke 2:36, the only woman in the New Testament to be specifically called by that term.

STEP #5  
LECTIO DIVINA —  
PRAYER &  
RESOLUTION



**SAY:** Today we have seen Mary and Joseph at one of the happiest moments of their lives—the presentation of Jesus in the Temple—which was also the beginning of Mary’s great sorrow. Let us enter into that scene.

**PRAYER:**

Imagine that you are in the Temple when Mary and Joseph arrive with Jesus. You see Simeon approach and allude to the prophecies from Isaiah about the coming of Israel’s redeemer. You look at the baby in Mary’s arms. What do you think? Do you believe that it is possible that this child could be the Messiah? Next, you hear Simeon’s stark words about the opposition the child will face and the suffering Mary will endure as a result. What enters your mind when you realize that accepting Jesus as the Messiah also means accepting the sword and the cross?

## RESOLUTION:

This week take some time to consider that accepting Jesus as the Messiah always means accepting the crosses that are to come. What cross are you carrying right now that you can offer to Jesus?

**SAY:** Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.

## STEP #6 STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

### LEADER TIPS:

- You may want to share Venerable Fulton Sheen's quote: "From that moment on, every time she would lift infant hands, she would see fall across them the shadow of nails."
- Suggest that members of the group read Isaiah 49:6 as one source of Simeon's prophecy.

**SAY:** I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance. Let's close our time together today by saying this prayer devoted to Mary's Sorrow that was approved by Pope Pius VII in 1815.

I grieve for you, O Mary most sorrowful, in the affliction of your tender heart at the prophecy of the holy and aged Simeon. Dear Mother, by your heart so afflicted, obtain for me the virtue of humility and the gift of the holy fear of God.

Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou amongst women,  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
pray for us sinners,  
now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧

# SALT AND LIGHT



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### Leader Preparation Overview



In order to understand what Jesus is telling us in today's Gospel, we need to consider what salt and light meant in his time. Because we can buy all the salt we could ever need at our local grocery and we have light anytime we want at the flick of a switch, we may not realize how special both were in ancient Israel. Salt was so valuable it was part of the pay of Roman soldiers. Light came only in the form of fire or small oil lamps. In both cases, salt and light were valuable.

That's what Jesus is telling us in this week's Gospel: We must be valuable signs of God's love and grace for the world. We need to season and preserve the world like salt and illuminate the darkness of sin and despair like a light in the night.

But how do we do that? It's not enough to just go to Mass each Sunday and then hide out the rest of the week under the barrel of daily life. We have to learn how to take our faith out of the box of the church and bring it into the world. We have to live every moment of our lives as true witnesses to the Faith we have received. This is more than just a good idea. It's one of Jesus's basic instructions on how we are to live as children of God.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 58:7-10~

### REFLECTION

**T**his passage reminds us that it would be wrong to consider the just or righteous treatment of the less fortunate as simply a penance to be undertaken in the season of Lent. Justice is a constant requirement for all people, whether they have any religious affiliation or not. Feeding the hungry and meeting the needs of the afflicted is always required, even if there were no reward attached to such behavior. Justice ennobles the person who is just by honoring the nobility of others.

Although we should not need a reward for righteousness, our good God has built the universe such that goodness builds upon goodness. He also attaches to just acts a merit beyond their deserts. That's why Isaiah can say to us that, if we act with justice, our "wound shall be quickly healed." The wound of sin that we all bear is beyond our healing; but God, in his kindness, has attached reparative value to our good acts so that in Christ we are healed—the whole world is healed—through our small acts of justice.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 112:4-5, 6-7, 8-9~

## SECOND READING

~1 Corinthians 2:1-5~

## REFLECTION

**P**aul doesn't see the success of the Gospel as depending on his actions. Rather, it is the power of God that converts hearts when Paul preaches. We see this proven in that the content of his preaching should have caused it to be rejected! Paul preached that a mocked, beaten, and crucified man is the King of the Universe, the Almighty God! By all measures, Paul's words should not have been accepted; instead, Christianity became the largest religious movement in the history of the world. More than two billion people follow the Crucified One.

Paul tried the standard approach of appealing to the world on its own terms when he addressed the Athenians in Acts 17. We're told that they were anxious to hear something new, but instead Paul failed to deliver what they were looking for. The whole presentation flopped and resulted in few conversions to the Faith. But the Corinthians did hear something new from Paul; he spoke of "nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified." They recognized his preaching as not something new, but the Good News. When speaking about the faith to our own friends, family, and even our fellow Catholics, we ought to be more confident in a simple appeal to the Cross or, more importantly, to him who hung upon it.

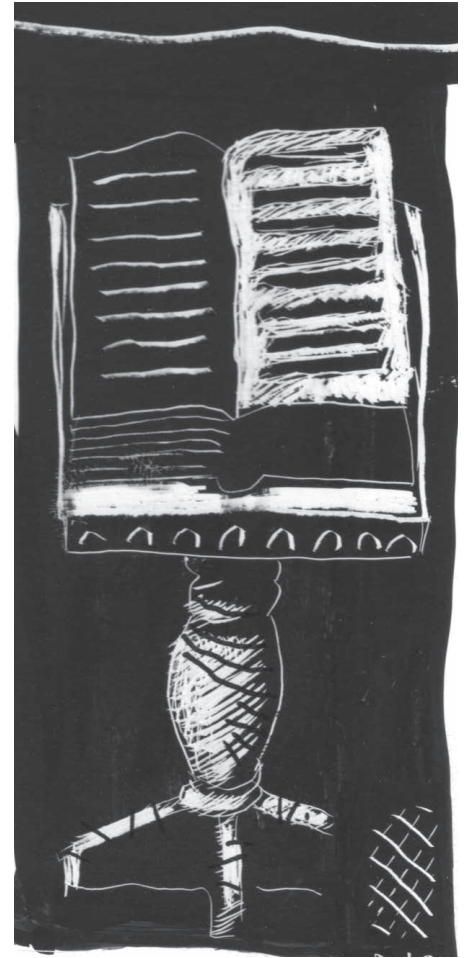
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 5:13-16~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this section from his **Sermon on the Mount**, Jesus reminds us that we are the world's light, like a city set on a hill. Jerusalem was set upon a hill. The light that a city could cast at night was fantastic to an ancient man or woman—the sheer size of the combined human effort and the common concern for mutual welfare that a city represented made it all the more marvelous.

The city of which Jesus speaks isn't thrilling for the same reason that New York or Paris are thrilling. The city we are citizens of attracts for much of the same reason as Jerusalem attracted the Jews. On its highest mount, Zion, the Temple drew Jews from all over the world, because there one could experience not the highest things of earth but rather the lowest realms of heaven. As Jesus says in the last line of this passage, we are to attract others by our heavenly goodness and by the praise that we give to our heavenly Father. We are not to desire that others look up to us, but rather that they might join us on that height which is the Church, so that we might both look up together.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying an Act of Consecration to our Lord.**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
 I consecrate myself today anew  
 and without reserve to your Divine Heart.  
 I consecrate to you my body with all its senses,  
 my soul with all its faculties,  
 my entire being.  
 I consecrate to you all my thoughts,  
 words and deeds,  
 all my sufferings and labors,  
 all my hopes, consolations, and joys.  
 In particular I consecrate to you  
 this poor heart of mine  
 so that it may love only you  
 and may be consumed as a victim  
 in the fire of your love.  
 Amen.

—Apostles of Prayer

#### **DIGGING DEEPER** A SPRINKLE OF SALT



The word “salary” comes from the Latin *salarium*, which was the money paid to a Roman soldier in order to purchase salt. The Romans knew that salt was essential for health, especially for people working (or fighting) in hot climates. Evidence of salt extraction from seawater dates back to prehistoric times.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Jesus tells us that we must be salt for the world. Nowadays salt has gotten a bad reputation because too much salt can raise blood pressure and impact our health. So what are some of the positive things that we use salt for today besides flavoring food?**

*(Depending on the mood of the group, you may want to create a list on a white board or sheet of paper.)*

*Some things that might be mentioned: preserving food such as pickles, thawing ice on roads, preparing a gargle for sore throats, removing wine stains, extinguishing grease fires, killing weeds, and more. There are more than fourteen thousand recorded uses for salt!)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**In this week's video, presenter Teresa Tomeo gives us some personal insight into what today's Gospel means to her and her family. Let's watch together now.**



(Play the video for Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**What are some ways that you might be able to take your faith beyond the walls of the church?**

*(Participants' answers will necessarily be personal, but as people share, try to generalize and summarize the answers. For example, if someone says that they visit an elderly grandparent in a nursing home, you might add that visiting the sick and caring for the elderly, family member or not, can be a valuable witness.*

*Try to help people think outside the box of “church ministry” to see how being fair in business, giving a full day’s work for a day’s pay, always telling the truth, avoiding gossip, etc. can also be ways of adding salt and light to the world.)*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**In the Gospel, Jesus gives a specific reason why we must let our light shine before others. What is that reason?**

*(Jesus tells us, “Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.” In other words, the main reason for letting our light shine is to glorify God.*

*The world encourages us to promote ourselves in order to get ahead, make more money, be more successful. Jesus says that we are not to promote ourselves, but to make God known to the world through our actions.)*



## STEP #5

### LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Jesus gave his instructions about being salt and light during the Sermon on the Mount, so we can be assured that they are meant for all of us, not just the apostles. Let's reflect now on what these words can mean for each of us.**

#### **PRAYER:**

Imagine Jesus saying to you, “You are the light of the world.” What does that mean to you? Does it make you feel encouraged or overwhelmed? Now, in the stillness of your being, ask Jesus to reveal to you a way that you can become a light to the world. What comes to mind? Is it something you are currently doing or something new that you are being called to do?

#### **RESOLUTION:**

Now hear Jesus say, “Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.” What is one good deed that you can do this week that will glorify the Father? Choose a specific day and time to do it so that it doesn't go the way of unfulfilled good intentions.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *Remind participants that a good deed doesn't have to be major to be important. Opening the door for a mother pushing a stroller, allowing someone else to have the “good” parking place, and being kind to an animal can all be good deeds.*
- *Encourage members of the group to be specific when choosing a time to do their deed. It's all too easy to let the intention take the place of the action. Suggest that they ask someone in the group to hold them accountable by reporting back next week.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today by praying the Collect for the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time.**

Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care,  
that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace,  
they may be defended always by your protection.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧

# THE NEW LAW

### Leader Preparation Overview



This week's Gospel is all about the Law. It starts with the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, which contains Jesus's teaching about loving your enemies, as well as the Beatitudes.

We may never have given any thought as to why Jesus gave these teachings on the side of a mountain, but the time and place matter if we are to truly understand how radical Jesus's message was in his time.

In first-century Israel, the hill country of Galilee was the hotbed of revolt. Revolutionaries and radicals sometimes went to this area to plot against Herod and the Romans, who were a hated occupying force. If you saw Jesus heading to the Mount, you might have assumed he was going to give a fiery speech against the Roman oppressors. If you had followed him, what you would have heard is a not a "Down with Rome!" speech, but a set of teachings about how he came not to abolish the Law of the Old Testament, but to fulfill it.

Jesus's message was radical and revisionary, but not in the way people expected. Jesus didn't come to say that he would free us from the moral standards of the Old Testament Law, but instead he "ups the ante." For instance, adultery is condemned under the Old Law; Jesus says that even thinking lustful thoughts is sinful under the New Law. He refocuses attention, not on a series of commands written in stone, but rather on a law that is written in the hearts of humanity. His is a revolutionary teaching, not against an oppressive government but against our own hardness of heart.

In this week's Gospel, Jesus calls us to give more than we can ever imagine, but he also promises to give us the grace and ability to fulfill that call.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~ **Sirach 15:15-20** ~

### REFLECTION

**T**he attainment of wisdom is Sirach's primary theme in this passage. The first step toward wisdom is to fear the Lord, that is, to reject sin. This passage addresses the freedom we have to adhere to that law of God which leads to true wisdom—or not. We're free to choose, but Sirach makes it clear that the choice isn't equally weighted on both sides. You might say that we're free to choose but not free to sin.

Our choice isn't an arbitrary one in which good or evil are merely neutral alternatives. Obedience to the law leads to life, and disobedience to death. Righteousness conforms to our nature, made by the all-wise God, and lawlessness causes our very nature to decay. We may be free to choose to sin, but our freedom isn't a permission to sin, as is sometimes thought today. Sirach says that freedom is only ennobling when it's exercised in pursuit of wisdom through adherence to the Law of the Covenant. The gift of freedom can't be understood apart from the Giver. Sin is exactly a violation of our freedom because it leads to the ultimate slavery—death. Our ability to choose to sin should never be misunderstood to be a “freedom to sin.”

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~ Psalm 119:1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34 ~

## SECOND READING

~ 1 Corinthians 2:6-10 ~

## REFLECTION

**W**e can only imagine the flame that the realization of God's plan in Christ sparked in St. Paul. He entirely poured himself out in the service of the Gospel. We can see a glimpse of Paul's goal in the description of the Beatific Vision of Heaven he gives us: “Eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart what God has prepared for those who love him.” It's somehow fitting that the mysterious plan of God should have a mysterious goal.

As we begin to draw back the curtain on the Christian mystery by our participation in the liturgy, the reading of Scripture, private prayer, and works of mercy, we find that as the mystery of Christ's life begins to take shape in our souls, the mysterious life of Heaven begins to sprout there, too. It's out of this kind of experience that St. Paul speaks in this passage. Owing to his direct participation in the plan of God, the mystery of Christ wasn't merely a goal, but the a wisdom that Paul carried around with him. He drew from this inner wellspring when he shared the revelation of the mysterious plan of God that we call the Gospel.

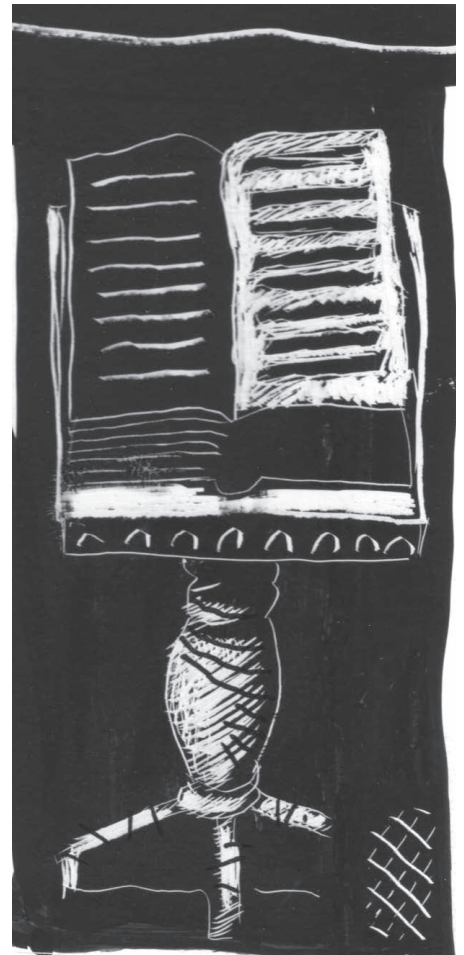
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 5:17-37~

### REFLECTION

**M**atthew shows us that Jesus understood himself to be an important instrument in God's plan for the future of Israel and the Gentiles as well. In this passage, Jesus explains that his intention isn't to abolish all that has preceded him in God's revelation to the Jewish people, particularly the laws given through Moses. Rather, he has "come not to abolish, but to fulfill" Jesus's position on the Law is perfectly in concert with both his divine nature and his human nature. He will fulfill, not abolish, all that has gone before.

He shows us just what he means by giving a list of particular references to murder, adultery, divorce, and false witness. In each case, with one exception, he doesn't abolish what went before. On the contrary, he strengthens the requirement, placing a deeper obligation on the Christian disciple than the Mosaic Law had done on the Jew. We see Jesus not only acting as the new Moses, but correcting Moses and speaking on behalf of God's original design. In Matthew, Jesus isn't merely a new Moses but the God who spoke to Moses. It's in this capacity that he fulfills the Law by calling the disciple, not merely to obedience, but also to a deeper, more obedient love.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let us begin by praying:**

Heavenly Father,  
bless us as we come together  
in your name.  
Send the Spirit of Jesus  
into our hearts  
to guide us in our discussions  
for the good of all.  
Father, we ask this grace  
through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**This week we are going to look at Jesus's teaching about the Law. Before we get into that, what are some of the laws of our country that we all should follow? What are the purposes of these laws?**

*(Possible answers might include paying taxes, obeying speed limits, not committing murder or theft, and educating children.)*

*These laws are given to help maintain order and harmony in society.)*



# STEP #3

## LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Today we are going to look at the New Law of Jesus given in the Sermon on the Mount—a law that has a much higher aim than governmental laws. While laws of the government typically aim to maintain order and harmony in society, we will see that Jesus’s law does so much more: It calls us to love, not merely avoid hurting each other. Let’s watch this short video together.**



(Play the video for Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**The presenter says that Jesus didn't abolish the Old Testament Law but actually "upped the ante." What are some examples of how Jesus did this?**

*(The Old Law forbade adultery, but Jesus says that even thinking lustful thoughts is sinful. The Old Law forbade murder, but Jesus says that even anger in one's heart is sinful.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**The point of the Old Law was to get the Israelites to follow and obey God. What is the point of the New Law? (Hint: it has to do with our hearts.)**

*(The point of the New Law of Jesus is to change our hearts and make us each into a new creation. It is to transform our hearts and make us love like Christ did. The aim of the New Law is not merely to avoid harming others or to avoid breaking a set of rules. The New Law leads us to love.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER****CONTENTS OF THE LAW**

The Old Testament Law is found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It includes the Ten Commandments, moral and social laws, food laws, purity laws, feasts, offerings, priestly instructions, and other ceremonial laws.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**In today's Gospel, we see Jesus as he begins his great discourse on what it means to live under the New Law. Let's join him now in prayer.**

### **PRAYER:**

You are seated comfortably on the grassy slope of the hill. The sun shines brightly on Jesus's white robes and you settle in to listen to him talk. Suddenly you hear him say, "Therefore, if you bring your gift to that altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift." What goes through your mind when you hear these words? Is there someone with whom you need to reconcile? Is there something you need to do to make amends? Let Jesus bring to mind what it is he would have you do.

### **RESOLUTION:**

If a person or situation came to mind as you were praying, decide what you can do this week to be reconciled. List the steps you will need to take to accomplish this.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *Taking a hint from 12-Step Programs, suggest that if contact with a person is not possible (they have died or you have lost touch), writing a letter and asking forgiveness can be a healing substitute.*
- *Stress the importance of translating the good idea and thought into action. It's not enough to think about reconciliation. You have to become reconciled in actuality.*

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with a prayer asking that we might obey Jesus' New Law.**

Jesus, almighty King of Kings,  
You who obeyed your Father to the end,  
Teach me the meaning of obedience.  
My soul burns to comply to your will,  
Striving to obey your Law.  
While my spirit seeks to follow your way,  
my worldly nature another.  
Bless me with the strength to obey,  
To always obey you until my last breath.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 7<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



# LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

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### Leader Preparation Overview



In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out many of his basic life teachings. Several of them are extraordinarily difficult for us to understand, much less put into practice. Two of these are the famous “turn the other cheek” and “love your enemy” admonitions. To understand what Jesus is saying and what it means to us today, we first need to understand the context in which Jesus is speaking.

He is addressing the Jews, the Chosen People. They have been given the truth about the one God and God’s commandments in the Law. God entered into a special relationship with them because God wanted them to be the means by which these truths were conveyed to the entire world. Many Jews in the first century, however, saw non-Jews, i.e. the Gentiles and especially the Romans, as enemies. They distanced themselves from the Gentiles and some fought against their Gentile oppressors. But Jesus calls the Jews to love their enemies—to love the very Gentiles who have lived an immoral life far from God and have inflicted so much suffering on the Jewish people.

One way of understanding what Jesus is saying about the need to love your enemy is to think of an iron bar. In order to bend it, you first must heat it. In the same way, if you want to move people

and convert them, then you need to apply the heat of love. We can never change the world simply with the iron bar of stating the truth. The proclamation of the truth must be imbued with love.

If we merely announce the truth about such things as abortion and marriage, but we do so without loving the people we are speaking to, then it won't make much difference. They will not change. If we want to convert a pagan, or someone from the secular culture, then we must do so by first applying the radical kind of love Jesus proposes in his teachings.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18~

### REFLECTION

**O**ur passage, addressed to Moses, begins, 'Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.' This code expands on the Ten Commandments and describes the parameters of just relationships amongst the Israelites, as well as between the Israelites and the foreigners that entered their land. Leviticus 19:18 says, "Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." It's understandable that an Israelite would interpret this to mean that although he was to love his neighbor, it was permissible to hate his enemy, as Jesus remarks in Matthew 5:43.

It's true that the Israelites were told to love foreigners, but only when they became resident aliens in the land of Israel. Those beyond the land were considered to be beyond the reach of the Law. The lack of specificity about how to treat those who weren't Israelites made this question worth posing to Jesus. "Be perfect," Jesus says, just as Leviticus said, "Be holy." That's the end toward which God has always aimed: our holiness. A clear mark of holiness is love of neighbor, friend, and foreigner.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 103: 1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13~

## SECOND READING

~1 Corinthians 3:16-23~

## REFLECTION

**I**n this passage, St. Paul says that we are temples and that "if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person." This may at first sound like a threat of revenge against those who make themselves enemies of Christians. But if we compare this passage with 1 Corinthians 6:18-19, we could also suggest that it is a warning to Christians themselves not to desecrate their own bodily temples by sin. In Romans 12:1, Paul calls on Christians to "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." In so doing he completes the transference of the temple image to us. As Jesus's body was both the temple and sacrifice of the New Covenant, so our bodies are both temples and sacrificial offerings as part of our participation in that Covenant.

Talking about bodies being temples and sacrificial offerings might sound like nonsense to the worldly-wise. The world considers terms like "holiness" and "sacrifice" to be virtually meaningless. St. Paul counsels against that kind of worldly calculation. If that is wisdom, he warns, then we'd better be fools for Christ. Believing that Christ is the center and meaning of human history, we'd be foolish not to try to conform ourselves to his example.



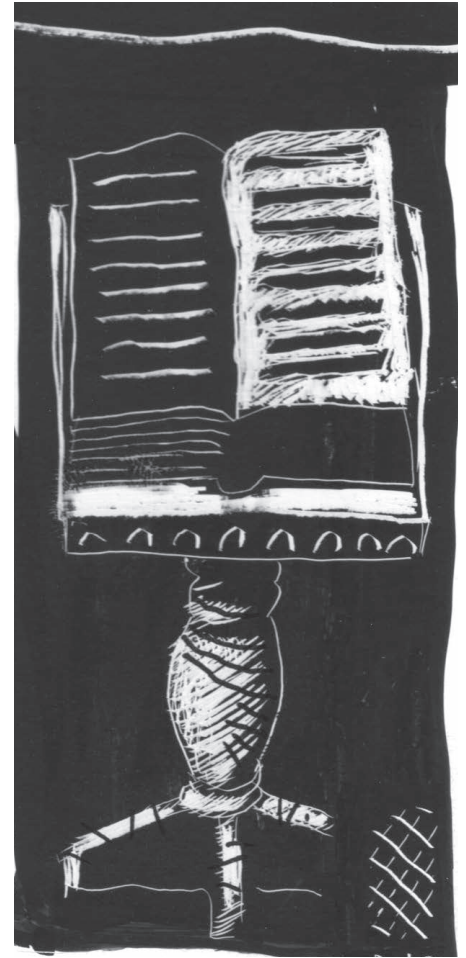
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 5:38-48~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this passage, the connection between the Torah, the Old Law, and the New Law in Christ is even more pronounced. Jesus says five times (the number of books of the Old Law) you have heard the commandment..." and then extends, tightens, or strengthens that law by phrasing it in a new commandment. Jesus is clearly acting as the voice of the Law as had Moses.

If we look at the sources for the commandments of the Old Law that Jesus cites, we see that he's not just quoting Moses. In each case where Jesus is citing the Old Law, he makes reference to a direct command from God himself. The first two references are from the Ten Commandments, but the last three are from the Levitical code. Each of those commands in Leviticus closes with the phrase "I am the Lord" or "I, the Lord, am your God." By citing and then changing these commands of Yahweh, Jesus is implicitly saying the same thing, "I am the Lord." Only the Lord could change his law. Matthew thereby shows us that Jesus isn't merely a new Moses, but the God who spoke through Moses and who has the authority to promulgate a New Law.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together with prayer:**

God, my Father,  
 may I love you in all things and above all things.  
 May I reach the joy which you have prepared for me in heaven.  
 Nothing is good that is against your will,  
 and all that is good comes from your hand.  
 Place in my heart a desire to please you  
 and fill my mind with thoughts of your love,  
 so that I may grow in your wisdom and enjoy your peace.  
 Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**This week we will be looking at more of Jesus's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Before we watch the video, let's talk for a moment about how you define an "enemy."**

*(Possible answers might include those who hurt us, criticize us and seem out to get us; those who compete with us for recognition; those who have different values or outlooks on life; those who fight against our country or the Catholic Church.)*

*Try to get people to think about what makes an enemy—is it just someone who thinks differently? Or is it someone who is violent against us? Help participants explore what an enemy is in today's world.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Now let's watch this short video about one of the hardest teachings of Jesus—the command to love our enemies.**



Play the video for Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately five minutes.

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**How did the Jews of Jesus's time view non-Jews in general, and Romans in particular?**

*The Jews saw non-Jews, i.e. Gentiles and Romans, as their sworn enemies.*

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**The presenter, Tim Gray, uses the example of iron to explain how we should treat our enemies. What does he say, and how does that relate to Christian truth?**

*Iron cannot be easily shaped unless it is heated, but once it has been heated, it is easily malleable. Similarly, if we are to reshape those who are lost in the hardness of sin, we can't change them by truth alone. We need also love.*

### **DIGGING DEEPER**

#### **GO FOR TWO MILES**



According to Roman military law, soldiers had permission to force civilians to carry equipment or even personal items for one Roman mile (4854 feet). This sheds light on Jesus's teaching about going for two miles. For a Jew in the first century, this teaching would be shocking. It meant that if a Jew was coerced into that service by a Roman soldier, he or she should perform an act of generosity and service for him and go twice as far as required. Jesus's teaching inspires us today to perform extra acts of love, service and kindness toward those who frustrate us or hurt us—those "enemies" in our lives whom we may rather avoid.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**This week we continue to be with Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount.**

### **PRAYER:**

As you sit and listen to Jesus as he teaches, you suddenly hear him say, “Offer no resistance to one who is evil.” What? Aren't we supposed to fight against evil in the world? What can this mean? Reflect for a moment on what Jesus himself did when he was arrested and crucified. What does his example mean for you right now, today, in your life?

### **RESOLUTION:**

This is one of Jesus’s hardest teachings. During this week, reread the Gospel and take some time to pray about how this can apply to you and your family. If there is someone you consider an “enemy,” bring that relationship before the Lord and ask to be shown how to demonstrate love to that person.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### ***LEADER TIPS:***

- *Reassure members of the group that the teachings contained in this week’s Gospel are very challenging.*
- *Suggest that the first step in understanding is prayer. Encourage members to pray about these teachings and to be open to the prompting of the Spirit.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with this prayer to the Holy Spirit.**

Assist me, O Holy Spirit,  
in all my trials of life,  
enlighten me in my ignorance,  
advise me in my doubts,  
strengthen me in my weakness,  
help me in all my needs,  
protect me in temptations  
and console me in afflictions.  
And help me to go the extra mile,  
to love, serve and forgive my enemies.

Graciously hear me, O Holy Spirit,  
and pour your light into my heart,  
my soul, and my mind.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## 8<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## DO NOT WORRY

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### Leader Preparation Overview



It's fitting that this Gospel begins with the admonition reminding us that we cannot serve two masters (God and money) and then delves into Jesus's teaching on worry, because money is often at the top of our worry list. We worry about how to get money if we don't have enough, and we worry about how to keep it when we do have it.

Jesus reminds us that God knows we need food, clothing, and shelter, all of which require money in our culture. However, he tells us that we shouldn't focus our attention on any of these things because if God takes care of the birds and the flowers, how much more will he care for us.

The reality is that when our anxiety is high, our trust in God is low. Likewise, when our trust in God is high, our anxiety levels decrease. As the psalmist says, "Only in God is my soul at rest." Those who do not know God are perpetually anxious and are never able to find lasting peace. As Christians, we are called to a radical trust in a heavenly Father who will take care of us in all our needs. The question is: How will we respond to the temptation to worry—like a nonbeliever, or as a faithful disciple of Christ?



**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 49:14-15~

#### REFLECTION

**T**he readings for this Sunday concern what St. Paul calls in the Second Reading “the motives of our hearts.” In that regard, this first text from Isaiah reminds us of the foundation that our hearts require to be fully “at rest,” as it says in the Responsorial Psalm. We must be confident in the exquisite care that God has for us. Many of us feel as Zion does in this reading. When we look around us, whether at the challenges that we face in our walk of faith or at the troubles which plague the wider world, we can feel that “the Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.” When we momentarily forget the promises that Jesus makes in the Sermon on the Mount in today’s Gospel, we, likewise, feel forgotten by God.

That is why the work of remembrance is so critical. (Recall that Jesus says that we are to celebrate Mass in remembrance of him.) If we fail to remember him and who he is, the God who cares for us more than the very best of loving mothers, then we tend to feel forgotten by him in our difficulties. When we remember him and who he is, the God who died for us on the Cross, we immediately recognize in faith that he is present with us in the very midst of those difficulties and working with a divine ingenuity to draw out a greater good from them than we could ever imagine. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, he only permits evil because he “mysteriously knows how to derive good from it” (CCC 311).

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 62:2-3, 6-7, 8-9~

## SECOND READING

~1 Corinthians 4:1-5~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this Second Reading, St. Paul reminds us that many of the wonderful things that God provides us, even in the midst of difficult situations and complex human relationships, come to us through “stewards,” those who have been charged with giving to God’s people “their portion of food at the proper time” (Luke 12:42, RSV: 2CE). These stewards—and here we could think of our deacons, priests and bishops—are to be concerned with whether they are acting in a trustworthy way toward this commission they have received from the Lord. After all, as Psalm 104:27 reminds us, he is the real source of the goods the stewards dispense: “These all look to you, to give them their food in due season.” (RSV: 2CE).

But Paul also reminds us that we ought not to judge the hearts of those stewards whom God has placed in authority over us. “Do not make any judgment before the appointed time, until the Lord comes, for he will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will manifest the motives of our hearts.” This is to be our attitude toward those in authority over us in the Church, even those whom we suspect of violating the trust they have received, because it is the attitude we are to assume toward all. Christians are not to judge the hearts of others, even when we can see plainly that their acts deserve, and may even require us to deliver, a public condemnation.

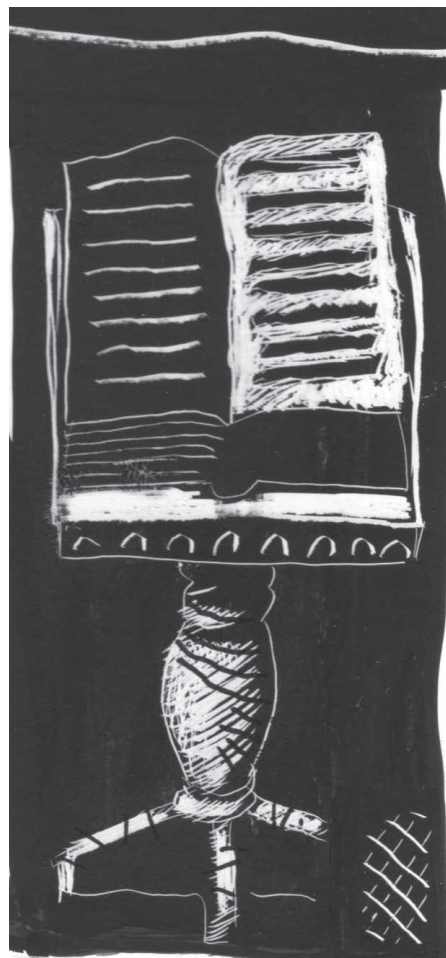
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 6:24-34~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this famous passage from the heart of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, a passage which has moved so many saints to surrender everything in confidence to God, we are schooled on that quality that Jesus calls in the Beatitudes purity of heart. In the chapter just preceding this one, Jesus tells us, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8, RSV: 2CE). Here Jesus tells us that to be pure, our hearts cannot be divided; we can't have two primary loves. God and his kingdom must have a place of absolute priority over everything else. He is the "pearl of great price" (Matthew 13:46), the "treasure buried in a field" (Matthew 13:44), that we are asked to surrender all else to attain.

But recalling who God is—absolutely trustworthy, the One who will always give us "food in due season," the one who loves us more than even a mother loves her child—we recognize that this great gamble of giving all to him is no gamble at all. To prove this we need only look at the birds and the flowers. Every one of his creatures is cared for in God's providential ordering of nature; still more can we as sons and daughters of our heavenly Father be absolutely confident of his care and concern for us. So, if we give all for him, he will give us far more in return—in fact, his very self, which is all!



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying this prayer of trust in God, written by Thomas Merton.**

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.  
 I do not see the road ahead of me.  
 I cannot know where it will end.  
 Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
 But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.  
 And I hope I have that desire in all I am doing.  
 I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
 And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.  
 Therefore, I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost in the shadow of death.  
 I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**In today’s world, worry is rampant. We worry about everything from our families and jobs to the end of the world and everything in between. What are some of the things that we worry about that we really can’t do anything about at all?**

*(Possible answers might include the end of the world, what other people do, the global economy, death, the future.)*

*Try to get people to think about some of the extreme things we worry about so as to help them get ready for the message that we must not worry at all, even about things we think are worth worrying about.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**This week we are going to study one of the passages of Scripture that many of us think was written just for us—Jesus’s teaching on the futility of worry. Let’s see what the presenter has to say about it.**



(Play the video for Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately four minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**Why do you think that worry is such a common problem for so many people?**

*(Worry comes from a lack of trust in God and wanting to be in control.*

*Worry makes us feel like we are doing something about situations we feel are out of control.*

*Worry feels like it comes without our control; that it just happens, and therefore we don't have any way to prevent it.)*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**The presenter said that our anxiety is high when our trust in God is low. Do you find that to be true in your own life? How can you increase your trust in God when you are feeling worried or anxious?**

*(It is seldom easy to trust God. Even great saints have had their struggles, so acknowledging the difficulty may be important to your group.*

*Paradoxically, the only way to increase trust is actually to begin trusting. Encourage your group to begin turning small things over to God and gradually allow that to build trust for greater things.*

*Some practical things to do include reading today's Scripture over and over, praying, talking with others, reading stories of the saints who trusted God in difficult situations.)*

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**The same words Jesus said to those listening two thousand years ago, he says to us right now. Let us listen to what he is saying to us.**

### PRAYER:

Bring to mind something that concerns you or that you are worried about right now. Allow yourself to feel any anxiety or fear that might arise. Now imagine that you are with crowds on the Mount as Jesus is teaching. He comes toward you and speaks the words of today's Gospel directly to you: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life ... can you by worrying add a moment to your life-span? How do these words challenge you? How do they comfort and encourage you? What might you say to Jesus in response?"

### RESOLUTION:

This week, consider at least two ways in which you might use the words of Jesus about not worrying to bring a sense of peace and calm to your life.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and re lections and your resolutions.**

### DIGGING DEEPER

#### LILIES OF THE FIELD



The lilies of the field Jesus referred to are not the same as the lilies we know, which do not grow in Israel. Several candidates have been suggested, including bright scarlet poppies, which bloom after a spring rain. One type of rare lily, the Madonna Lily, does grow in some high valleys. Consisting of groupings of white blossoms with a sweet heavy scent, they bloom during the month of May.

### LEADER TIPS:

- Sometimes people think that God will get tired of hearing us ask for help, because we get tired when people constantly ask us for help. Assure the group that God won't get tired of our prayers; he actually tells us to ask for help whenever we need it—no matter how often that might be.
- Affirm that worry is a normal reaction to stressful situations, but as Christians, we have the Spirit to help us rise above our normal reactions and put our trust in God.



# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with this prayer against worry.**

O God, my beloved Father,  
I thank you for this day.  
You know how worried and anxious I am about...  
Help me to be sensible and to see that  
worrying about things does not make them any better.  
Help me to be calm and serene in such situations of life.  
Help me to cast all my worries and anxieties upon you  
for I know that you care for me.  
Help me to be sure that nothing can happen to me  
through which you cannot bring me in safety  
and that nothing can separate me from your love.  
I believe and trust that your everlasting arms  
are underneath me and above me  
and give me something of the peace  
that the world cannot give and cannot ever take away.  
Jesus my Lord you said to me,  
"Take courage; it is I; do not be afraid."  
Jesus, I praise you.  
Jesus, I love you.  
There is power in your mighty name. Alleluia.  
Holy Spirit, my consoler,  
give me comfort in all difficult situations of life.  
I trust in your power.  
Enrich me with your powerful intervention.  
Thank you, Lord.  
Praise you, Lord. Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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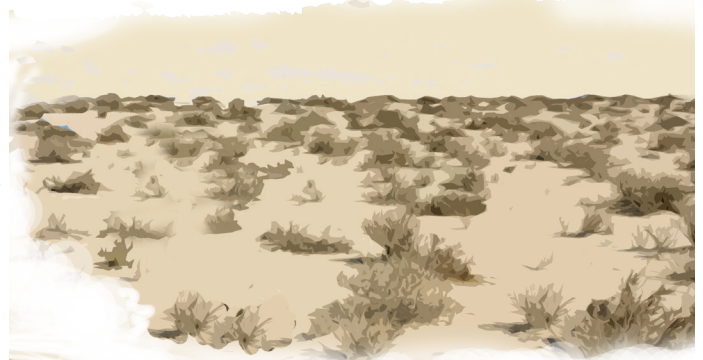
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# LEADER GUIDE

## 1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT

✧ YEAR A ✧



# INTO THE DESERT

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## Leader Preparation Overview



**We begin our Lenten readings** in a most appropriate place: the desert. In the desert, life is stripped to basics and everything, including our weakness, is exposed. We are forced to stand alone and vulnerable before God.

Our faith is put to the test. Little wonder, then, that Jesus went to the desert to fast and pray before plunging into his public works. It's there, amid the rocks and reptiles, that the devil comes to him with three temptations.

When we read about the temptations, it's easy for us to dismiss them as having no relevance to our own lives. When was the last time you were tempted to change stones to bread, for instance?

While the specifics of the temptations don't resonate with us, the lure of pushing God aside, of making him secondary in our lives, lies at their heart—and that is a common temptation for all of us. For example, when we struggle with daily concerns of how to pay our bills or provide for our families, we are tempted to turn from God's way and pursue our own path. That's, in a sense, what the devil was suggesting to Jesus when he told him to turn stones to bread.

The same is true with the other two temptations. The devil was urging Jesus to prove his divinity by jumping off a building. We often want God to prove he is God by giving us exactly what we want, when we want it. And just as the devil tempted Jesus with the glory and power of this world, so he tempts us, deep down, to crave power, wealth, and fame and the lifestyle they provide. We are drawn to the ways of the world and both covertly and overtly deny our faith if we think we can get away with it.

This Lent, we are called to remember the primacy of God and to turn to him in our moments of weakness and need.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "Reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to take time to read the Scripture passages from each reading before beginning Lectio Divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

### FIRST READING

~Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7~

### REFLECTION

**H**ow fitting that on the **First Sunday of Lent** we hear about the first sin of mankind. Adam and Eve exhibit shame and try to avoid God's presence after they eat the forbidden fruit. But within eight verses of the story of the Fall, we see the fruit of that first sin in the murder of Abel by Cain.

The whole flow of the Old Testament describes the consequences of the Fall. The repeated interventions by God in human history are explicitly aimed at rectifying the subsequent disobedience and sin and

building a renewed relationship between God and Israel and amongst the Israelites themselves through what's called the Covenant. It was this sense that something was amiss that gave rise to the messianic longings of the people of Israel. The people had to be delivered, even if they weren't quite sure what to call the thing that oppressed them.

So we struggle with sin as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. That struggle didn't end with the coming of Christ. Although God has promised us the grace to combat sin in our lives, we're still Israel, a name which means "struggle." Lent is that time during the liturgical year when we take up that struggle with special earnestness.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 5:12-19~

## REFLECTION

**S**t. Paul's correlation between Adam and Christ is far more than just a description of the mechanics of salvation (i.e., Adam broke it and Jesus fixed it). St. Paul's experience of the risen Lord on the road to Damascus apparently set working in him a complete reassessment of the whole of biblical history in light of the remarkable event which was Christ. Once he recognized Christ as the fulfillment of his Judaism, Paul began to see Christ everywhere in the Old Testament.

That tendency to read the Old Testament in the light of Christ is something that the Church has done ever since. Those associations are made particularly in the liturgy which pairs the readings from the two Testaments to draw parallels between Christ and the figures and events from Israel's history. In the liturgy we, too, are incorporated into that unification of all things in Christ that St. Paul recognized as the center of the Good News. We repeat and share in the trials and triumphs of the Old Testament from Adam to Ezra as we read those stories and then apply to ourselves the victory of Christ over sin through the sacraments he left us.

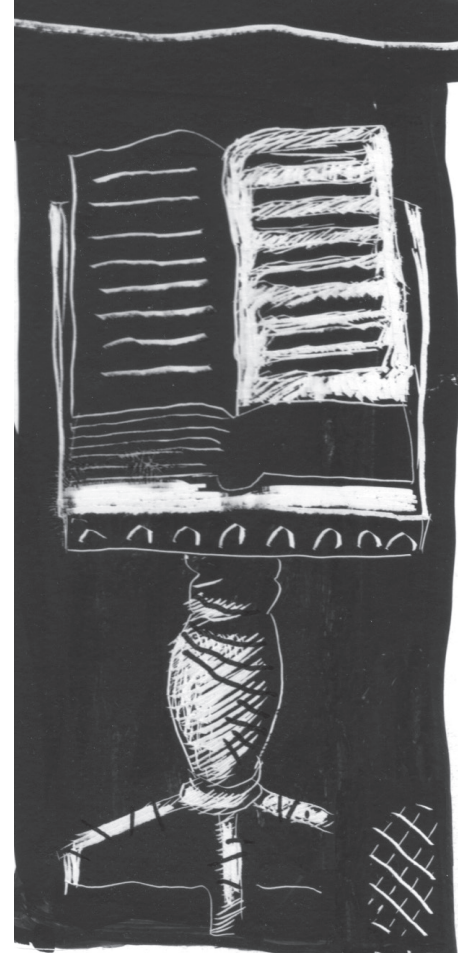
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 4:1-11~

### REFLECTION

**M**atthew is intent on showing us that Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish hopes and prophecy. And the Church has specifically paired our first reading and this Gospel passage to highlight certain parallels between the Old and New Testaments. The most obvious is that both are temptation scenes: the first successful (Adam and Eve), and the second unsuccessful (Jesus defeats Satan). But if we look a little closer, we can see another close parallel.

Both Eve and Jesus are tempted with food, death, and power. This threefold temptation bests Eve in the absence of Adam. But in the second temptation, the new Adam is the subject of the temptation and the future Eve, the Church, is at a safe distance. Interestingly, in chapters 26, 27, and 28 of Matthew, Jesus will successfully give food to his followers in the Eucharist, will go to his death on the Cross, and receive power from the Father in his Resurrection. What Jesus refused to the devil at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, he gives freely at the end of his Gospel. Ironically, what Satan promised to Eve and could not deliver, Jesus offers freely to the new Eve, the Church, in the Paschal Mystery.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**SAY:** Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the First Sunday of Lent. Let's open our time together with prayer.

O Jesus, wash away my sins with your Precious Blood.  
O Jesus, the struggle against temptation is not yet finished.  
My Jesus, when temptation comes near me,  
make me strong against it.  
In the moment of temptation may I always say:  
“My Jesus, mercy! Mary, help!”  
Amen.

(<http://lordcalls.com/prayers-for-different-people/prayer-for-oneself>)

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**SAY:** This week we begin our Lenten journey by reading the story of Jesus' temptations in the desert. What are some of the major temptations people face today when trying to live a good and moral life?

#### **LEADER TIP:**

- The list of temptations could be endless—from sex to money to power to addictions. Don't spend too much time with specifics, but try to get participants to see that no matter what our state in life, we all experience certain temptations.



## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**SAY:** In this video, we will see how the temptations of Jesus are really the same kind of temptations we all face. You may want to take some notes on what the presenter is saying for our later discussion.



(Play the video for the First Sunday of Lent. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

#### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**SAY:** In the first temptation, the devil urges Jesus to turn stones to bread. What is this temptation really all about?

#### **LEADER TIPS:**


- Jesus had been fasting and was hungry, so the devil was preying on his vulnerability and basic need for nourishment.
- When the basic necessities are taken from us, we, too, are tempted to turn from God and find our own way. In those times, we need to remember that “man does not live by bread alone.” Even in the times when basics of life are absent, we must depend on God for provision.

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**SAY:** In the second temptation, the devil tells Jesus to throw himself off the temple and let angels rescue him. What is this temptation really all about?

### DIGGING DEEPER

#### THE TEMPTATIONS OF CHRIST

 “At the heart of all temptations... is the act of pushing God aside because we perceive him as secondary, if not actually superfluous and annoying, in comparison with all the apparently far more urgent matters that fill our lives.” —Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*

### LEADER TIP:

- The devil is asking Jesus to have the Father prove his faithfulness. We often want God to prove he is God and to prove he is faithful to us by asking him to give us exactly what we want. However, God knows what is best for us. Even if we don't get what we want, we have to trust God is still providing.

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #3

**SAY:** In the third temptation, the devil tells Jesus he can have all the power of the world if he will bow down in worship. What is this temptation about?

### LEADER TIPS:

- This temptation may be the easiest to understand because most of us have experienced the tug of power, wealth, and fame.
- At the heart of this temptation is a denial of God as God. We can deny God by following public opinion, by putting our trust in material objects, by choosing worldly pleasure and influence over godly pursuits.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**SAY:** The story of the temptations of Christ is one of the best known in the Gospels. Let's look at what Jesus says in this story and how it might apply to our own lives.

### PRAYER:

Picture Jesus sitting beside you and saying the same three responses he gave to the devil. He says:

“One does not live on bread alone, / but on every word that comes forth / from the mouth of God.”

“You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.”

“The Lord, your God, shall you worship / and him alone shall you serve.”

Which of these three responses of Jesus speaks the most to you and your life right now? How so?

### RESOLUTION:

Considering the statement of Jesus that relates most to your life now, find at least one practical way to implement Jesus' teaching this week.

**SAY:** Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- Encourage participants to read the Gospel passage this week and listen for the messages that Jesus might want to impart to them.
- You may want to begin the prayer by saying that we are going to turn the admonitions Jesus gave the devil into words of advice for our own lives. This is not meant to say that we are like the devil, but rather that we are using Jesus' words to help us better understand our own sinful natures.

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**SAY:** I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, especially the Gospel. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance. Let's close our time together today with the Our Father, praying that the Lord help us not give in to temptation.

Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done  
on earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us,  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil. Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT

✧ YEAR A ✧

# LIVING WITH CONTRASTS



### Leader Preparation Overview



We tend to believe good times will last forever. (Just look at what happened before the Great Recession of 2008.) While it's nice to be optimistic in that respect, we tend to worry that the bad times will last forever as well. The truth is that life is a series of contrasts—mountaintop experiences followed by deep valleys.

This week's Gospel, about the Transfiguration, clearly shows us that we all live amid contrasts. The disciples are so excited by what they have witnessed that they want to build tents to commemorate the event, and then, almost immediately, they are nearly paralyzed by fear. The same is true for us, especially when it comes to our faith. At times we have bright moments when all seems so clear and obvious, and then we begin to experience doubts and uncertainty. Sometimes it even seems as if God himself has withdrawn from us.

We must not be surprised by these contrasting experiences, but instead we should use this week's reading as preparation for what we will do when the contrasts occur. For us, as for Abraham in the first reading, the disciples, and all who have gone before us in faith,

it is only when we listen attentively to God's beloved Son that we will have the courage and grace to deal with all that life is sure to hand us.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "Reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to take time to read the Scripture passages from each reading before beginning Lectio Divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

### FIRST READING

~ **Genesis 12:1-4a** ~

### REFLECTION

**T**his reading for the **Second Sunday of Lent** continues our tour of the peaks of salvation history. One could say that this passage represents God's mission statement. The general intent expressed is to provide Abraham—and through him, "all the communities of the earth"—with a land, blessing, and a great name. All of this depends, of course, on his generating an heir. Without the birth of Isaac, there could be no nation, land, blessing, or the passing on of his name.

Abraham does receive these promises. That we're still reading about Abraham four thousand years after the events recounted here is largely due to the fact that these promises made to him in Genesis 12 were fulfilled. Our faith is that they were fulfilled in a far more fantastic way than Abraham could've ever imagined. The land promised has been extended, by the mission of the Church received from Christ, to include the whole world. The blessing is given to all who come to her sacraments. The name is that of Jesus, the only name under heaven by which we're saved.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 33:4-5, 18-19, 20, 22~

## SECOND READING

~2 Timothy 1:8b-10~

## REFLECTION

**H**ardship is something we naturally seek to avoid, but St. Paul has given us some reason for embracing the thing our natural inclinations reject. God has saved us, he says, “and called us to a holy life.” To be holy is to do what we see Christ doing. If he suffered for the sake of the Gospel, then so should we. The salvation which comes to us as a consequence of the suffering of Christ is the fruit of the Father’s plan, which included (even required) suffering. In other words, our hardship is part of the plan of our salvation, won by Christ through suffering and appropriated by us through our share of his suffering in and for the Body of Christ—the Church. What was unredeemed before Christ has become a tool in the hand of God to shape us in conformity with his plan for the kingdom.

In this way, he has "destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." One of the revolutions that the Gospel brings about is this reversal of fortunes in which the greatest misfortunes—even death itself—is made an instrument of eternal life.



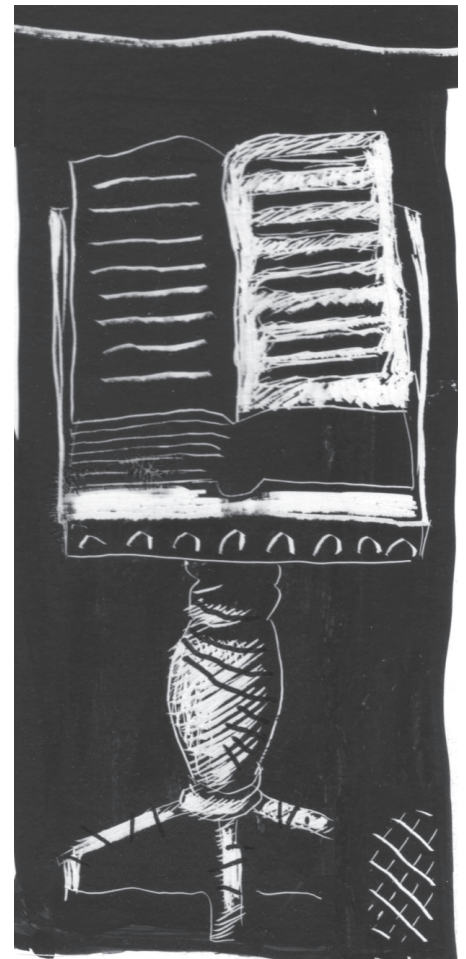
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 17:1-9~

### REFLECTION

**T**his Gospel reading represents a confluence of themes from the Old Testament. Mt. Tabor has been spoken of as a second Mt. Sinai—where the Ten Commandments and the ceremonial law of the Old Covenant were received. This fits nicely into Matthew’s theme of Jesus as the new Moses.

Several elements in this narrative also suggest a connection with the Jewish Feast of Booths (Sukkot). It’s significant that Jesus’ coming to Mt. Tabor also results in a manifestation of God’s glory and the presence of a cloud, both of which are associated with the Feast of Booths. Jesus is thereby simultaneously portrayed as the new Law, the new manifestation of God, and the new Temple; all of which were elements of importance in the Jewish celebration of the Feast of Booths. It’s sometimes overlooked that Moses and Elijah were the only two figures in the Old Testament who spoke directly with God, both on Mt. Horeb (another name for Mt. Sinai). If Tabor is intended to represent a new Sinai, then we ought to consider the possibility that Matthew is showing us that Jesus is more than simply a new Moses or Elijah; he’s also the God who spoke to Moses and Elijah on Mt. Horeb—as he’s now shown doing on Mt. Tabor.



### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *It's never too late to have a good Lent! This week's Gospel can serve as a new beginning if people have been a bit slow on getting started this year. Encourage participants to use the idea of transfiguration as a theme for their own lives.*
- *If there is time, you may want to use a white board to list the various contrasts in the Gospel so that people can see them more clearly.*

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**SAY:** Welcome to our study of **Opening the Word** for the **Second Sunday of Lent**. Let's open our time together by praying this traditional prayer for this season.

Mercifully, O Lord,  
work thy sanctification within us  
by means of these mysteries;  
may they both cleanse us from earthly vices,  
and lead us to heavenly gifts.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ,  
Thy Son, who livest and reignest with thee  
in the unity of the Holy Ghost,  
One God, world without end.  
Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**SAY:** We sometimes refer to high points in our lives as “mountaintop experiences.” What are some mountaintop experiences you might have had?

**LEADER TIPS:**

- Possible answers might include the birth of a child, a wedding, a new job, a promotion, living in a place with close friends and family, buying a dream house, taking a special vacation.
- Explain that the term “mountaintop experience” is rooted in God’s many dealings with the Israelites that occurred on mountaintops.

**DIGGING DEEPER**  
MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCES



In Scripture, God often deals with his people on a mountaintop. Some of these significant encounters include:

- Noah’s Ark resting on Mt. Ararat
- Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in the mountains of Moriah
- Moses’ receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai
- Elijah’s challenging the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel
- King David’s building his kingdom in Jerusalem on Mt. Zion
- Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount

# STEP #3

## LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**SAY:** This week we are going to look at the Transfiguration of Jesus in a new way, one that has many implications for the way we lead our own Christian lives.



(Play the video for Second Sunday of Lent. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**SAY:** What are some of the contrasts that the presenter talks about in today's Gospel account of the Transfiguration?

#### **LEADER TIP:**

- Some contrasts include: a bright light followed by a shadow; Jesus being in the company of Moses and Elijah and then being alone; the disciples saying how good it was to be there and then being filled with fear; Jesus' talking about death and then resurrection; Jesus' warning the disciples not to talk about what happened and then later mandating them to tell all people.

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**SAY:** How can this week's reading help prepare us to live with the contrasts that occur in the Christian life?

#### **LEADER TIP:**

- This Gospel, with its contrasts, reminds us that the Christian journey will always contain highs and lows. We will have times when things go well and, like the disciples, we will say, "It is good to be here." Then there will be other times when everything seems to fall apart and even God himself seems distant.

#### **DIGGING DEEPER**

##### MOUNT OF THE TRANSFIGURATION



We don't know exactly where the Transfiguration took place. We are told only that it was a high mountain. In the third century, Origen identified Mt. Tabor as the location, and St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. Jerome agreed. The Church of the Transfiguration is located there, but other mountains, including Mt. Hermon, have been proposed as the location.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**SAY:** In today's Gospel, we are witness to one of the great mysteries and miracle events in Jesus' life. Let us enter into the scene in prayer.

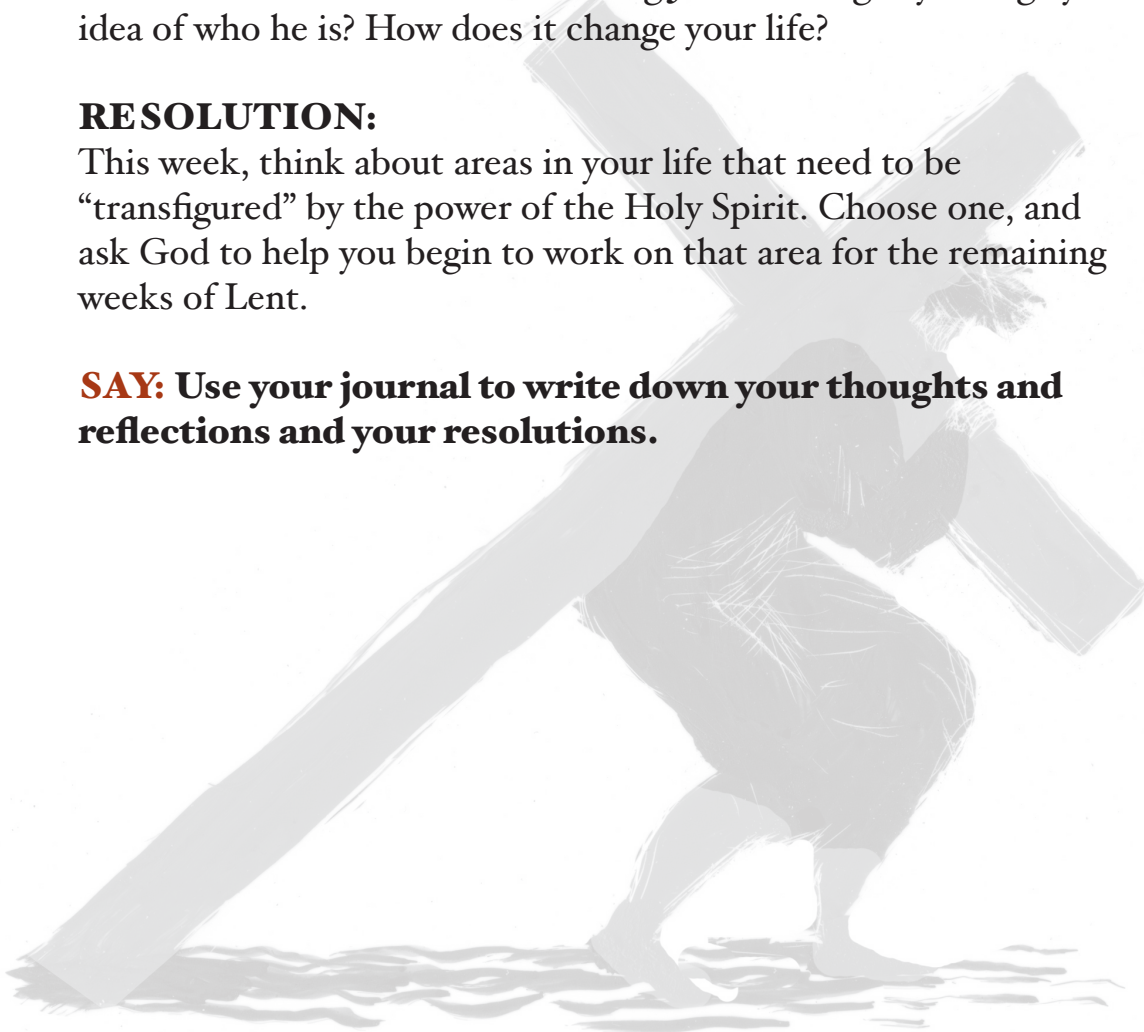
### **PRAYER:**

Imagine that you are with the disciples when Jesus is transfigured. You see him appear with Moses and Elijah. What goes through your mind as you witness this event? What do you feel? Excitement or fear? How does seeing Jesus in his glory change your idea of who he is? How does it change your life?

### **RESOLUTION:**

This week, think about areas in your life that need to be “transfigured” by the power of the Holy Spirit. Choose one, and ask God to help you begin to work on that area for the remaining weeks of Lent.

**SAY:** Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.



# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**SAY:** I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance. Let's close our time together today with prayer:

Dear Lord,  
We come before you today  
with our needs and desires,  
hopes and wants,  
joys and fears.  
We are aware that it is only through your Word,  
your grace,  
your love,  
that we can become the people you have created us to be.  
Help us become transformed into your image,  
that we may better love and serve you with our lives.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT

✧ YEAR A ✧

# A MESSIAH FOR ALL PEOPLE

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**In ancient times**, access to a reliable well was essential. Without a steady supply of clean water, life would be difficult, if not impossible. In this week's Gospel, we see Jesus sitting by a well in the country of Samaria. It's noon, and we can assume that he is hot and tired. We know he is thirsty, because he asks a woman who is there drawing water to give him a drink.

This woman, known to us as the Samaritan Woman at the Well, has a checkered past. The upstanding women of the community drew their water early in the day; she doesn't want to be seen so she comes at an off-hour. When Jesus, who is a Jew, speaks to her, she is taken aback. Jews didn't usually speak with Samaritans. In fact, a little later when his disciples join him, they aren't too keen on the fact Jesus was chatting with a Samaritan woman either.

In this week's study, we will see that this Gospel scene has a kind of nuptial quality about it because a well is where a groom would come to meet his bride. Like a bridegroom lovingly seeking his



bride, Jesus ardently desires this Samaritan woman (and her people whom she represents) to be reunited with God. The Samaritan woman has been a bride five times, and Jesus points this out. But then he goes beyond reminding her of her failure by reaching into the recesses of her deepest wounds of rejection and lack of love to tell her that he is, indeed, the long-awaited one, the Messiah—the one who will fulfill her deepest thirsts and longings. Through her, Jesus invites the Samaritan people, who were separated from the people of Israel, to return to their true bridegroom. By extension, he also invites all of us who come to him with open, thirsting hearts to join him at every Mass—at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb—so that we might say with the Samaritans: “This is truly the savior of the world!”

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "Reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to take time to read the Scripture passages from each reading before beginning *Lectio Divina*.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

### FIRST READING

~Exodus 17:3-7~

### REFLECTION

**B**etter the slavery you know than the freedom you don't—that could be the theme for this reading. Though the Israelites have just left a life in Egypt that has been described as “the whole cruel lot of slaves,” they seem to have forgotten this when saying to Moses, “Why did you ever make us leave Egypt?” We'd think the answer would be obvious. But human nature is such that our memories are short, and our threshold for discomfort is low.

This reading presents us with a wonderful metaphor for the spiritual life—that of thirst. In the desert, the Israelites long for the more easily accessible waters of Egypt. Yet God shows them that if they trust him, they can be sure of water anywhere. With God, one isn't forced to fearfully hug the banks of the Nile like slaves to stay alive; one may chart a course straight out of the desert with faith confidently knowing that he will provide. In this desert of modern life, we may likewise be certain that God will give us the living water we need to survive. Certainly he's the source of living water that we can count on—even in the desert places.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9~

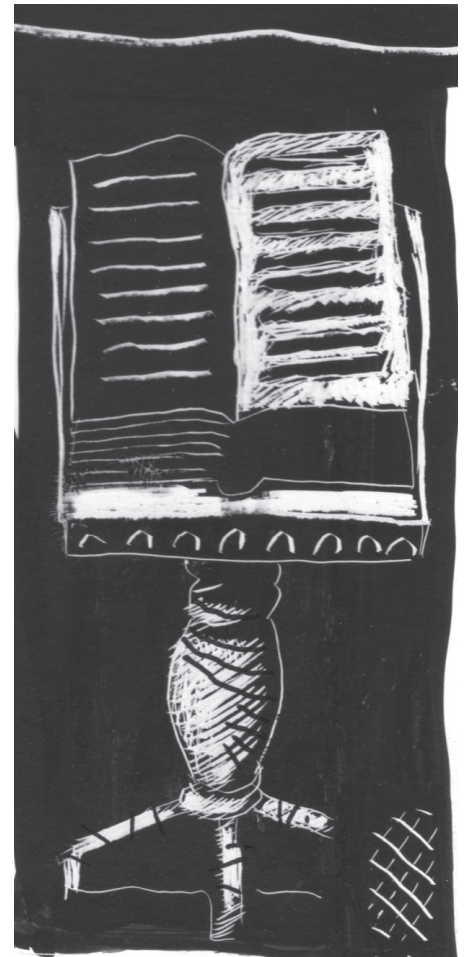
## SECOND READING

~Romans 5:1-2, 5-8~

## REFLECTION

**S**t. Paul expresses the fulfillment of the promise given by Christ in our Gospel reading of streams of living water that will become a “fountain within...leaping up to provide eternal life.” St. Paul writes to the church at Rome that “the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

It was from the pierced side of Christ, which flowed blood and water, that the saving tide began to flow. St. Paul identifies that saving death as the source of the gifts of faith, hope, and charity, which transform godless, powerless, sinners into children of the Father. He implicitly reminds us that if any boasting is to be done, it's in “the grace in which we now stand.” *Grace*, of course, means “gift.” So if any glory is to be given, it should redound to God who gives—not to the undeserving who receive it, among whom St. Paul includes himself.



## GOSPEL

~John 4:5-42~

### REFLECTION

**A**t the time of the Messiah's coming, Rome held Israel in its imperial grip. Yet despite its many struggles, Israel knew that "salvation is from the Jews," as Jesus says to the Samaritan woman in today's Gospel. That phrase suggests that salvation is intended to be passed "from" Israel to all nations. This scene points to the future extension to all nations of the salvation won by Christ. Samaria represents the first step in spreading the Gospel to the whole world.

Jesus points ahead to "an hour" when worship "in Spirit and truth" will be offered to God not merely "on this mountain nor in Jerusalem," but everywhere in the world. Although the Jews are God's firstborn, we see in this passage that in Jesus, God's plan is for the whole world, for every soul.

Jesus encourages his disciples to look at the world anew and to see beyond the borders of Israel and beyond the national and racial limits of Jacob (Israel). "Open your eyes and see! The fields are shining for harvest!" he exclaims. The universal purpose of God's saving work in Christ is given its last word in the last line of this reading, appropriately spoken by the Samaritans: "This is truly the savior of the world!"

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**SAY:** Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Third Sunday of Lent. Let's open our time together by praying these words that are adapted from the First Scrutiny of the Elect, which appears this Sunday in Masses for those preparing to enter the Catholic Church through RCIA:

We pray that, like the woman of Samaria, we may review our lives before Christ and acknowledge our sins...

That we may be freed from the spirit of mistrust that deters people from following Christ...

That, while awaiting the gift of God, we may long with all our hearts for the living water that brings eternal life...

That, by accepting the Son of God as our teacher, we may become true worshipers of the Father in spirit and in truth...

That we may share with our friends and neighbors the wonder of our own meeting with Christ...

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**SAY:** The story in this week's Gospel is one that many of us have heard before—the Samaritan Woman at the Well. What are some of the things you might remember about this incident?

**LEADER TIPS:**

- Allowing participants to talk about the story in general helps to give a context for later, deeper analysis of what is actually going on below the surface events.
- Some of the things people might say include: Jesus was thirsty, the woman had been married many times before, Jesus called himself “Living Water,” the woman was an outcast, she told everyone in her village about Jesus.

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**SAY:** Let’s take a few minutes now to watch this video about Jesus as he talks with the woman at the well. Listen for ideas that you might not have ever considered before as the presenter speaks.



(Play the video for Third Week of Lent. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**SAY:** What does the presenter say happened at wells in ancient times?

### **LEADER TIP:**

- *In ancient times, a bridegroom would meet his bride at the well. In meeting this woman at a well, we can see imagery of Jesus as the bridegroom, calling both the Samaritan people and ourselves into union with him.*

### **DIGGING DEEPER**

#### THE SAMARITANS



The Samaritans were a group of people who claimed to be the direct descendants of two tribes of Israel who survived the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by Assyria in 722 BC.

They claimed that they had preserved the true religion of the Chosen People, and the religion as practiced by the Jews had been changed and altered during the Babylonian exile. Both Samaritan and Jewish rabbis taught that it was immoral to have contact with the other group and neither was to enter the other's land. For Jesus to not only be traveling in Samaria, but to be talking to not just a Samaritan, but a woman in addition, would have been utterly scandalous.

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**SAY:** Why do you think that Jesus chose the Samaritan woman to reveal he is the Christ, the Messiah?

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *This is a challenging question with no "right" answer, but at least part of the reason is that Jesus wanted to show that he had come for all people. By speaking to a Samaritan—and a woman—he clearly sent a message that he was to be the Savior of the entire world, not just the Jewish people and not just to men. He was also giving an example to his disciples that the Good News was to be spread beyond the borders of Israel.*
- *It is also possible that in the Samaritan woman Jesus encountered someone whose heart was ready and receptive to his message—someone who was willing to spread that message to others. In speaking to her, he was able to introduce salvation to the Samaritans in a way that might not have been otherwise possible.*
- *This particular Samaritan woman's history embodies the history of her people. The Samaritans had become involved with five other nations, worshiping their gods instead of the One, True God. The woman, in turn, had been married five times. Jesus invites both the woman and the Samaritans to leave their "adulterous" relationships and return again to their original love relationship with God.*

### **DIGGING DEEPER**

#### SAMARITAN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS



Like the Jews, the Samaritans believe there is only one God and that the Torah was given to Moses by God. However, they believe that Mount Gerizim, located in the West Bank, not the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, is the location of God's holy of holies. In their version of the Ten Commandments, the sanctity of Mount Gerizim is affirmed. It is to this location that the Woman at the Well is referring when she says, "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem."

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**SAY:** The story of the woman at the well is one of the most evocative and moving stories in the Gospels. By placing ourselves in the scene, we, too, can experience Jesus' invitation to partake of "living water."

### PRAYER:

Prayerfully consider what you thirst for in life—what you spend your time and energy pursuing most. Perhaps it is success at work, the success of your kids, your favorite sport, entertainment, being liked, financial security. Now imagine Jesus saying specifically to you: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." How do these words apply to you? Reflect in prayer on your own experience of how your pursuits for the things of this world leave you "thirsty again" and on how only Jesus can fulfill your deepest thirsts.

### RESOLUTION:

Ask Jesus how you can turn to him more this week to find your deepest thirsts quenched in him instead of turning to the things of this world.

**SAY:** Use your journal pages to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.

### **LEADER TIP:**

- Encourage participants to write down a time and a place where they will carry out this week's resolution. Without a concrete commitment, it will remain a "good idea" but not be translated into life-changing action.



# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**SAY:** I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance. Let's close our time together today with prayer from the words of the Divine Office:

This time of fasting has opened to us the gates of paradise. Let us accept it praying and beseeching that on the day of resurrection we may be glorified in the Lord. In all circumstances we must conduct ourselves as God's ministers, in much patience.

Let us pray. Lord, God all-powerful,  
accept our poor prayers  
and stretch out your powerful hand to defend us.  
This we ask of you through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT

✧ YEAR A ✧



# HEALING OUR BLINDNESS

## Leader Preparation Overview



**On the surface**, today's Gospel would appear to be about the physical healing of a blind man, but underneath lies a play on the word "sight." In this event, Jesus is challenging those around him, including his own disciples, to "see" the world in a new way. He points out to them...and to us...that it is entirely too easy to operate with a set of false assumptions; to be "blind" to the things of God in our lives. Like those in this account, we can think we are seeing clearly, but in fact we are blinded by our own assumptions, prejudices, and egos. Of all the characters in the story of the blind man, the only one who has the gift of true sight is the blind man himself who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah.

In this reading, we are called to ask ourselves if we see things the way God sees them or if we are looking through the eyes of the world; to examine where we might be blind spiritually; where we are looking at appearances, not reality. As God says to the prophet Samuel in the first reading: "Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart."

This Gospel reminds us that the way we see best is through the eyes of faith, for then we see the world the way God sees it. But first we have to recognize that without Jesus, we are truly blind.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "Reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to take time to read through each reading from the prayer journal with your group before beginning Lectio Divina. See Introduction for details.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

### FIRST READING

~Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this passage, God directs Samuel to take up his horn of oil and go to Bethlehem where he will point out the future King of Israel. The horn was in itself loaded with significance. The ram's horn was blown as a signal in war and to announce religious events. Jewish lore suggests that its use in signaling the morning and evening sacrifices stems from Genesis 22 where Abraham finds a ram caught in a thicket, which God has provided as a substitute sacrifice for his son, Isaac. The horn is also a symbol of authority for the prophets Zedekiah and Zechariah. David was anointed from the horn of Samuel and then received the authority of kingship.

In the Gospel of Luke, Zechariah is struck dumb for doubting the prophecy of the Messiah and doesn't speak again until the birth of John. At this time, he says, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he...has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:68-69). The anointing from the horn of the prophet Samuel of the first king of the house of David is loaded with significance for those of us who profess Jesus as the horn of our salvation and the anointed one of God.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6~

## SECOND READING

~Ephesians 5:8-14~

## REFLECTION

**P**aul explains in this passage not simply a Christian perspective toward immorality but a universal psychological principle. St. Ignatius makes a similar point in his *Spiritual Exercises* in saying that the devil will always tempt us to keep our sins secret. Sins that go unconfessed tend to grow in us.

What remains in the dark cannot be seen for what it is. Of course, neither Paul nor Ignatius would say that our sins should be made public. No Christian is required to make a public confession of sins. Some choose to do so as part of a healing process or to make restitution with a public witness of their repentance because they've been public in their sin.

Confessing sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is good for the soul because it dissipates our exaggerated illusions as to either the insignificance or the gravity of our sins. When confessed, all sins appear for what they are, too miserable to weigh us down. Some sins are slight, some are grave; but when we hide them we lose the capacity to judge which is which. The very light that we shine on our sins in confessing them purifies us and turns us away from sin. As St. Paul says, "All that then appears is light."

## GOSPEL

~ John 9:1-41 ~

[Short Version John 9:1, 6-9, 13-17, 34-38 text in brackets and indented is omitted]

## REFLECTION

**T**his section of **John's Gospel** focuses on the division that Jesus has engendered among those who follow him and those who don't. The argument between the factions runs like this: Because Jesus had supposedly violated the Sabbath by making clay, which he used to smear the man's eyes, the Pharisees claim that Jesus couldn't be from God. That is, if Jesus is a sinner, he shouldn't be able to work miracles. They question the man born blind and his parents and find that he was indeed born blind. So they must call into question that it was Jesus who gave him sight. Failing in that, they can only throw the formerly blind man out of the synagogue since they can't deny that Jesus must have healed him and therefore must be God.

Some say this story would've spoken directly to the position of the Jewish Christians who'd been put out of the synagogues themselves at the time that John's Gospel was written. This story would've given them hope that their separation from the synagogue wasn't a sign of their having been cut off from God, but the necessary result of Jesus' mission "to make the sightless see and the seeing blind."

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**SAY:** Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Fourth Sunday of Lent. Let's open our time together in prayer.

Jesus, you gave sight to the blind man,  
So we come now and ask:  
Give all who are sick this day  
the courage to face and overcome their fears.  
Be with them when they are alone or rejected.  
Comfort them when they are discouraged.  
And touch them with your healing Spirit that  
they may find and possess eternal life, now and forever. Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

*Bring a small decorative item to class in a brown bag. Make sure that the item isn't easily identifiable by touch (such as flowers or a pen, for example). You will be passing the bag around and having people reach inside and describe what they feel.*

**SAY:** In this week's Gospel, Jesus heals a blind man. Before we get into the readings, let's do a slightly different opening exercise. I want you to reach inside this bag and then describe what you feel without looking at it, as if you were blind.

*After everyone has described the item, remove it from the bag.*

**Here's what you were all feeling. Does it look like you thought it would? What's surprising about it?**

**LEADER TIP:**

- *If you have time, allow for a bit of discussion about how not being able to see what you are asked to describe results in very different perceptions of an item.*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**SAY:** We have just seen how being unable to see can dramatically affect our perception. Now we are going to take a closer look at how blindness can be both physical and spiritual as we read about one of Jesus' more controversial cures—the healing of a blind man on the Sabbath.



(Play the video for Fourth Sunday of Lent. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**SAY:** What are some of the false perceptions the disciples had about the blind man?

#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- They believed that his blindness was a result of either his sin or his parents' sins.
- They assumed that illness was a punishment from God.

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**SAY:** What are some of the ways that the characters in this story were blind? The disciples? The Pharisees? The neighbors?

#### **LEADER TIP:**

- The disciples were blind to the idea that illness isn't equated with sin. The Pharisees were blind to the idea that Jesus was good even though he broke the Sabbath law. The neighbors were blind to the idea of the entire cure.

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #3

**SAY:** What are some of the ways that you might be blind? You don't need to share these, but write down any insights you might have in your journal.

### DIGGING DEEPER

#### POOL OF SILOAM



The actual Pool of Siloam was discovered in 2004 when a utility crew digging a drainage pipe hit the stairs with a tractor. The pool is fed by a 1,780-foot conduit that starts at a spring, the only source of fresh water in that area of Jerusalem. The spring and the pool were heavily guarded since the time of King David so that the citizens would have water even if the city were under siege by enemies.

## STEP #5

### LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**SAY:** Today's Gospel contains the beautiful story of Jesus healing the man who was born blind and his subsequent profession of faith. Let us now approach Jesus in prayer.

#### PRAYER:

Imagine that you are with the blind man who was cured when Jesus comes to find him. You hear Jesus ask, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" and you hear the man respond, "I do believe, Lord." Now see Jesus turn toward you and ask you the same question. Do you believe that Jesus is truly the Son of Man? How do you respond to Jesus? What do you think he might say to you in return?

## **RESOLUTION:**

We all need to ask ourselves the hard questions about our beliefs so that we can grow and mature in our faith. This week, consider Jesus' question, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" and ask that he help you come to a greater understanding of who he really is and that you live your life more in union with him.

**SAY:** Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *Because this lesson focuses on healing, you may want to take some time to talk about healing. Remind participants that some people can get the mistaken idea that God wants us to be sick and suffer. While it is true that God allows sickness and suffering (which entered the world because of the first sin), God is not the inflictor of our pain. Jesus is the Divine Physician, who has come to bring us life.*
- *Point out that the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick isn't just for those in immediate danger of death, but for anyone who is suffering from a serious or debilitating illness. Encourage those who are sick to seek out the Sacrament.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**SAY:** I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance. Let's close our time together today with prayer:

Lord, you invite all who are burdened to come to you.  
Allow your healing hand to heal me.  
Touch my soul with your compassion for others;  
touch my heart with your courage and infinite love for all;  
touch my mind with your wisdom,  
and may my mouth always proclaim your praise.  
Teach me to reach out to you in all my needs,  
and help me to lead others to you by my example.  
Most loving heart of Jesus,  
bring me health in body and spirit  
that I may serve you with all my strength.  
Touch gently this life which you have created,  
now and forever. Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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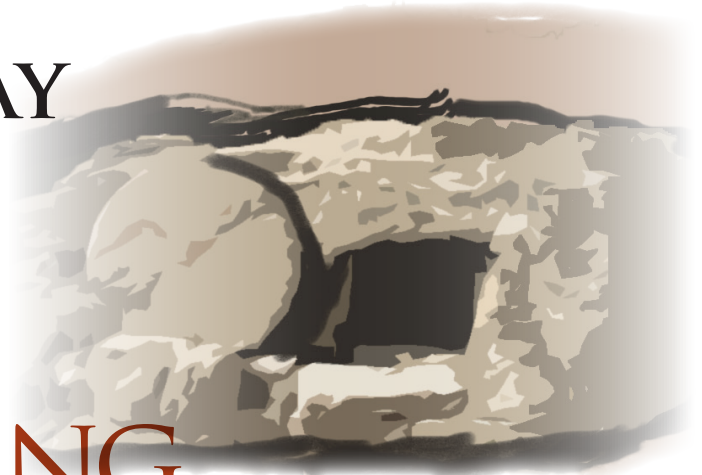
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# LEADER GUIDE

## 5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT

✧ YEAR A ✧

# THE RAISING OF LAZARUS



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### Leader Preparation Overview



**The story of the raising of Lazarus** is more than just an account of a miracle. The raising and unbinding of Lazarus sheds light on how God wants to heal the dead areas of our lives and free us from whatever sins, burdens, or wounds prevent us from living life to the fullest.

When Jesus arrives at the tomb, he has the stone rolled away and calls Lazarus to come out. Lazarus emerges, although he is still bound in the burial cloths. We are often like Lazarus. We have areas in our lives that are dead and need to be enlivened again by Christ. But we also may be bound either by our own sins or by the hurts others have inflicted on us. We may carry great burdens or worries or dysfunctional patterns of relating to others that bind us down and keep us from peace and happiness. Jesus wants to free us from those wounds; he wants us, like Lazarus, to be unbound.

This week's Gospel shows us Jesus wants us to let him into all those places that have been rendered dead by sin. He wants to weep with us in his humanity, but also to reveal his divinity and

bring about a total healing. He wants our better selves to step forward as he says to each of us, “Come out.” Even if our situation seems hopeless—and certainly Lazarus’ death seemed hopeless for his many mourners—nothing is impossible for God. All we need to do is surrender our lives to him and trust in him, for him to be able to bring us to new life.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "Reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to take time to read the Scripture passages from each reading before beginning Lectio Divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

### FIRST READING

~Ezekiel 37:12-14~

### REFLECTION

**T**his passage follows Ezekiel’s famous vision of the dry bones in the first half of chapter 37. The prophet is shown a dry valley full of bones and is commanded to prophesy. When he does, the bones come together and are covered with flesh. Again he prophesies, and the breath of life comes into the bodies. Ezekiel, whom the Spirit of the Lord addresses as “son of man,” is told that this scene represents the resurrection of Israel, which is now in exile in Babylon. The “son of man” who speaks and causes Israel to rise from exile points liturgically to the “Son of Man” who will speak and cause Lazarus to rise. Ezekiel paves the way for the extension of the Covenant to the Gentiles by expanding the Jewish conception of God’s providence to extend it into all nations.

We who live in the New Covenant in Christ recognize in this reading not only the resurrection of Israel but the resurrection of Jesus, the new Israel. Jesus is both the prophet of the resurrection, the new Ezekiel and Son of Man, and also the subject of the resurrection. We see our own resurrection to life in Christ as members of the Body of Christ in this prophetic vision of Ezekiel.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 8:8-11~

## REFLECTION

**I**t's easy to assume that the term "flesh" denotes something essentially evil in this short passage. However, flesh is good in that it has its origin in God, and is still further ennobled when our flesh is assumed by Christ. Adam exclaims that Eve is flesh of his flesh when shown her by God, in an expression that suggests the deepest communion of love. In the Hebrew conception, body and soul are united in a personal being. Paul uses the term in the Hebrew way; he's not making a distinction between body and soul in which the body is evil and the soul is good. Rather, he's making a distinction between life with Christ versus life without Christ.

In essence, Paul is saying that if we remain merely earthly creatures—in the flesh—we remain outside the dying/rising salvational scheme that Christ gave us. This scheme is effected in us by the grace of Baptism, in which we're anointed and made Christians. When we cooperate with that grace, we "are not in the flesh."





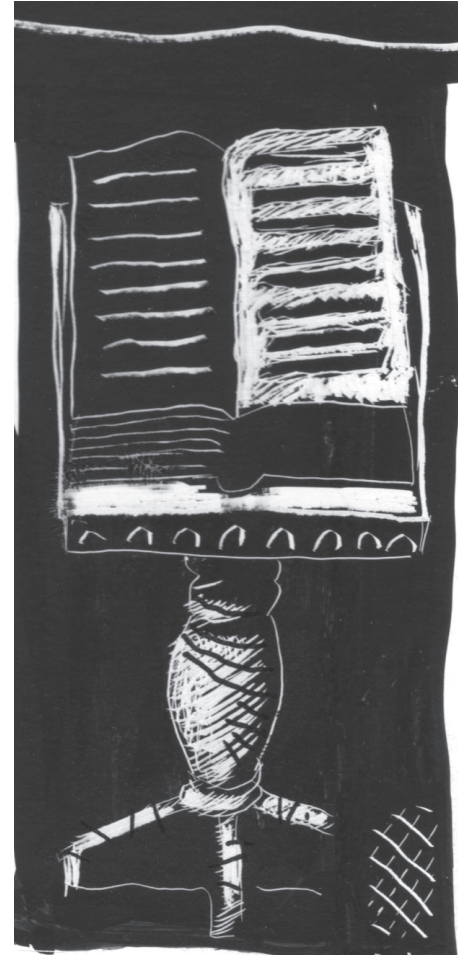
## GOSPEL

~ John 11:1-45 ~

### REFLECTION

**W**e might find it shocking that the greatest miracle that Jesus performed to define his saving mission as one to free mankind from death is the catalyst that causes the Jewish authorities to plot his death. The very act of life-giving ends in death-dealing. By definitively showing that he is “the resurrection and the life,” Jesus precipitates his own death. The same act that causes Mary, Martha, and many of the Jews who had come to visit them to have faith in Jesus causes the opposite reaction in the Jewish authorities. There’s no halfway in John’s Gospel. One can walk in darkness or light, one is blind or sighted, one is alive or dead; no middle ground exists.

Lazarus will die again, of course. But by that time there will be no death at all for those who believe. And it seems unlikely that Lazarus would ever be able to doubt Christ after this episode. Those who believe will have their faith confirmed by this event, and those who won't will find their resistance hardened by it. In no other episode in the Gospel story is Jesus shown so clearly for what he is: the resurrection and the life.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1 OPENING PRAYER



**SAY:** Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Let's open our time together by praying this Lenten Prayer.

God, heavenly Father,  
look upon me and hear my prayer  
during this holy Season of Lent.  
By the good works you inspire,  
help me to discipline my body  
and to be renewed in spirit.  
Without you I can do nothing.  
By your Spirit help me to know what is right  
and to be eager in doing your will.  
Teach me to find new life through penance.  
Keep me from sin, and help me live  
by your commandment of love.  
God of love, bring me back to you.  
Send your Spirit to make me strong  
in faith and active in good works.  
May my acts of penance bring me your forgiveness,  
open my heart to your love,  
and prepare me for the coming feast  
of the Resurrection of Jesus.  
Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**SAY:** This week we read about one of Jesus' great miracles—raising his dear friend Lazarus from the dead. Do you think that miracles still occur in today's world? Have you ever experienced a miracle in your life? If so, can you share a bit about it with us?

#### **LEADER TIP:**

- *It's possible no one in the group has experienced a miracle. If no one steps up, use an example from your own life or from someone you know, or return to the discussion about the possibility of miracles in today's world. You might add the question: Why do you think that we don't see the kind of miracles happening today that happened in the early church?*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**SAY:** This week's presenter helps us see how the story of the raising of Lazarus is relevant to our own lives today. Feel free to take notes as we watch this short video.



(Play the video for Fifth Sunday of Lent. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**SAY:** How does the story of the raising of Lazarus show both Jesus' human and divine natures?

#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- Jesus mourns the loss of his friend, which underscores his humanity.
- Jesus brings Lazarus to life again, showing his divine power.
- The story shows God is both with us in our pain and suffering and also invites us to turn that pain and suffering over to him for healing.

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**SAY:** How do sins that others have committed bind us? How can Jesus free us from them?

#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- The nature of sin, and how it affects more than the individual who commits the sin, is a major theological point. There won't be time to get into a full discussion in one short session, but try to bring out the idea that no one can sin alone. Sin always touches other people, either directly, as in the case of rape, lying, etc., or indirectly, such as the use of pornography denigrating women in general.
- Some of the ways the sins that others have committed bind us are through shame, false guilt, anger, desire for revenge, hopelessness, and hatred. Jesus can free us from these by helping us both forgive the person who harmed us and by forgiving ourselves.

#### **DIGGING DEEPER**

##### JEWISH BURIAL CUSTOMS



In New Testament times, burial was often on the day of death. Unlike some of their pagan neighbors, Jews never practiced cremation. Bodies were usually placed in a tomb carved out of rock or a natural cave, which frequently contained the bodies of several family members. The entrance to the tomb was closed by a large stone.

After desiccation (about a year), the bones were permanently placed in an ossuary.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**SAY:** Today's Gospel gives us one of the most engaging pictures of Jesus as he mourns the death of his close friend. Let's spend some time in prayer over this scene.

### PRAYER:

Think back over your life and choose a moment where, through your sin or the sin of another, you might have become spiritually dead and entombed like Lazarus. Feel the way the sin binds you, entrapping you in ways that prevent you from being the whole and holy person God created you to be. Take a few moments to consider that sin and all the ways it has hindered your life. Ask God to forgive you if it is a sin you committed. If the sin has been committed against you, ask God to forgive that person and to help you let it go. Imagine Jesus calling your name and saying to you what he said to Lazarus: "Come out!" Hear him say that you are now untied and free.

### RESOLUTION:

This week, ask Jesus to release you from any sin or hurt that might still be binding you. Consider receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation for forgiveness and for the grace to be unbound.

**SAY:** Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.

### **LEADER TIP:**

- Have a list of Confession times in your parish and neighboring parishes ready to hand out. Remind participants that in most parishes Confession can also be arranged by private meeting.

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**SAY:** I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week’s Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance. Let’s close our time together today with prayer.

Dear Jesus,  
Like Martha, “I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God,  
the one who is coming into the world,”  
but sometimes I find it hard to see a way to change.  
Help me to trust more fully in your desire to free me  
and to give me a new, restored life  
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

# PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

✧ YEAR A ✧

## NOT MY WILL



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### Leader Preparation Overview



**The week that begins with Palm Sunday** contains what are sometimes called the “High Holy Days” of Christianity. They are called this because they commemorate the last days of the life of Jesus as he goes from the Last Supper to the tomb and contain the most sacred moments of Christian history.

While there are many aspects of this week that we can look at, our focus in this study is on the Garden of Gethsemane. After the Last Supper, Jesus goes to the Garden to pray and prepare for what lies ahead. Knowing that he will be facing incredible suffering, he prays to the Father, asking that if it is possible that the “cup” he must drink could pass.

In these moments, we see Jesus, the man. He is fearful and anxious, even to the point of sweating blood. Yet, he unites his human will—which dreads the coming events—with his Father’s and is able to not just passively acquiesce to his Passion, but embrace it. He doesn’t deny his pain, but unites it to the Father in an act of perfect love.



The lesson is clear for us. We all are called to love God and do the Father's will, even when it is difficult. But love involves sacrifice—dying to self and making sacrifices for the one we love. Indeed, love demands that we sometimes do things we don't want to do to serve the good of others. We can use the example of Christ in the Garden to accept our crosses as well.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided "Reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to take time to read through each Scripture reading from the prayer journal with your group before beginning *Lectio Divina*. See Introduction for details.

## REFLECTIONS FOR PALM SUNDAY

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 50:4-7~

### REFLECTION

**A**s a servant, Isaiah claims, "I have not rebelled, have not turned back" from God. This is in contrast to his generation in Israel, who had both rebelled and turned away from God. Isaiah was faithful, and for this faithfulness he suffered. His suffering was very intense and painful. He tells of having been beaten. He describes his beard being plucked—a sign of dishonor for the Jews. Yet in all of his suffering, Isaiah puts up no resistance. Despite suffering, Isaiah endures in faithfulness. Again he acknowledges the Lord's help as the cause of his ability to endure. In utmost humility, all of Isaiah's successes are attributed to the work of God, all is for his glory. Although he's to suffer much, he's confident and trusts that God will take care of him.

Isaiah's ministry and life are a prefiguration of Jesus Christ. As a prophet and servant of God, Isaiah prophesies, not only by his words but by his very life, the future Man-God. The faithfulness and suffering of Isaiah point to a similar pattern in the life of Christ. As we prepare for Holy Week and the death and Resurrection of Christ, Isaiah reminds us of the suffering that Christ endured for us.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24~

## SECOND READING

~Philippians 2:6-11~

## REFLECTION

**S**t. Paul exhorts us to have the same attitude as Christ, but what exactly is that? The answer seems to follow upon Paul's description of Christ, who "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped." Jesus was and is always God, so it doesn't make much sense that he'd want to grasp at an equality with God that he already had. Scholars say a better translation of the word *grasp* would be "taken advantage of." It makes more sense to say that "though in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be taken advantage of."

The attitude of Christ, then, was that of not taking advantage of his great powers and privileges as God. Instead, Jesus accepts the humble condition of a slave. Thus, his attitude is one of selfless surrender and great generosity. This is the attitude that St. Paul would have us imitate.

## GOSPEL

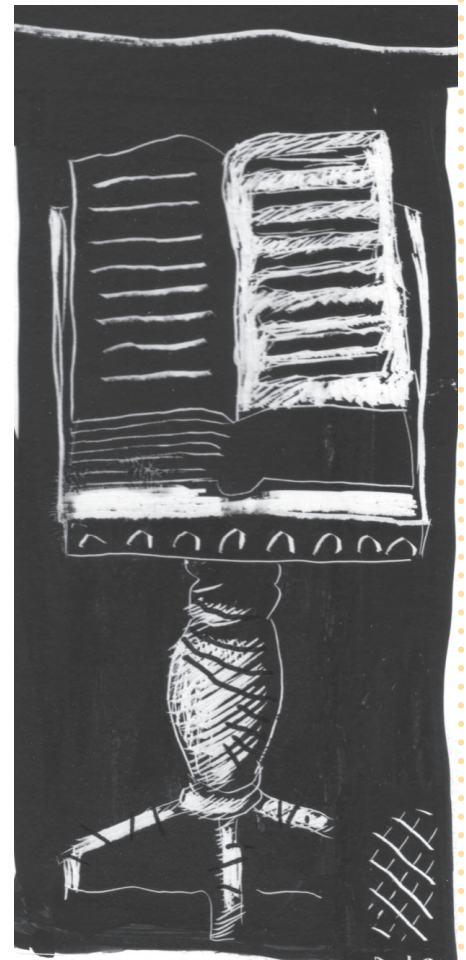
~ Matthew 26:14–27:66~

[Short Version 27:11–54]

## REFLECTION

**A**s Christ enters the holy city of Jerusalem to the acclaim of the people, our part must be muted by our knowledge of what's to come. As Christ knew, we also know that acclaim would quickly turn to accusation and deadly intent. The palm celebration foretold the final vindication and victory of the Messiah in his Resurrection.

This serves as a salutary reminder that each Sacrament, each mystery of the Church, contains within it the whole of the mystery of Christ. Our whole sacramental spirituality as Catholics combines the dark tones of the Passion as well as the bright ones of the Resurrection. Each Eucharist, because it includes the whole mystery of Christ, includes both movements: sorrow and joy. We begin the Mass with the Penitential Rite and end with the Communion Rite. The Eucharistic meal includes both the Passover Seder Supper of Holy Thursday and the sacrifice of Calvary on Good Friday. The Lord we truly receive in Holy Communion is the Risen Lord of Glory who is present in the consecrated host—body, blood, soul, and divinity. Because the Palm Sunday Liturgy includes both the foretaste of Christ's glory in the procession of the palms and the bitter agony leading up to the sacrifice of Calvary, it's a good time to reflect upon the nature of the Eucharist as the whole of the mystery of Christ.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1 OPENING PRAYER



**SAY:** Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for Palm Sunday. Let's open our time together in prayer.

Passion of Christ, strengthen me!  
Strengthen me under the pressure of temptation.  
Strengthen me when principle is at stake.  
Strengthen me to do your will, my God.  
Strengthen me in moments of suffering, in times of loneliness,  
in periods of depression. Strengthen me that I may never swerve  
from you, dear Christ,  
nor weaken through human respect,  
through a desire to be popular,  
through hope of social distinction.  
Strengthen me to accept my cross  
and carry it generously to the end.  
On the battlefield of life,  
stand by me  
that I may never prove a traitor in the ranks.  
Stand by me  
that I may not be dazzled by the glitter and glow  
of the enemy camp.  
Amen.

(<http://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=1687>)

# STEP #2

## INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**SAY:** What do you do when there is something you know you have to do but really don't want to do it? For example, let's say you have to have a hard discussion with someone and you know they aren't going to take it well. How do you handle it?

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- Some possibilities might be procrastinating, ignoring it until there is no choice, hoping it might go away.
- Some people might say they take care of it right away to get it over with.
- There are no "right" responses. The idea is to get people to think about how we, as humans, deal with difficult situations.

# STEP #3

## LECTIO DIVINA —

## SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**SAY:** Today, Palm Sunday, we begin the great journey of Christ's Passion that will culminate in the feast of Easter. Let us begin this Holy Week by watching this short presentation.



(Play the video for Palm Sunday. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**SAY:** Dr. Sri says that Jesus’ statement “Your will be done” tells us something very important about him. What does this statement show us, and why is it important?

#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- Jesus’ statement points to his humanity, which is dreading what is about to unfold. If Jesus is truly human, he would not look forward to his passion, for suffering and death is repugnant to human nature.
- However, it also shows that his human will is united with the divine will so that he is able to embrace the coming cross.
- He gives us a model for our own lives so that when we face difficult trials, we understand the importance of doing God’s will, not our own.

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**SAY:** In the video, we are told that love always places a demand on us. What is that demand?

#### **LEADER TIP:**

- Love demands sacrifice for others. We are called to die to ourselves and do things we may not want to do, but we do them anyway for the sake of the ones we love.

#### **DIGGING DEEPER** GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE



The name Gethsemane comes from a word meaning “oil press” and refers to olive oil pressing. The olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane are among the oldest in the world. Carbon dating of several trees gives dates of 1092, 1166, and 1198, and DNA testing indicates that all three trees came from one original tree. Probably none of the olives in the Garden today were growing at the time of Christ, because the Romans cut down all the trees in the area when they destroyed the Temple in 70 AD.



## STEP #5

LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER &  
RESOLUTION

**SAY:** Today's Gospel takes us from the Last Supper to the Cross, but we are going to focus on just one part—the time in the Garden.

**PRAYER:**

Put yourself in the scene of Jesus in the Garden at Gethsemane. You are with the other disciples in the Garden as Jesus leaves you to pray alone. Dimly, through the darkness, you can see him fall prostrate in prayer and you hear him say, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will.” What do you think as you hear Jesus, the strong, confident man, cry out to the Father to be spared the “cup”? Now imagine that you can say something to Jesus. What would you say? What does he say back to you? Hold those thoughts in your heart for a few minutes.

**RESOLUTION:**

Is there a bitter “cup” that you are being asked to drink? Perhaps you sense that you should do something that you dread to do—such as admit a fault, apologize to someone, tell someone the full truth about something you’ve been hiding, or confess your sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Or perhaps you are facing some trial with family, an illness, or a financial problem. This week, remember Jesus in the Garden and pray for the strength and resolve to do God’s will and accept your cup.

**SAY:** Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.

**LEADER TIP:**

- Everyone has something difficult to deal with. You may want to take a few minutes at the end of the session to pray for people's needs.



# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**SAY:** I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance. Let's close our time together today with this prayer from Micah 7:7-8.

I will look to the LORD;  
I will wait for God my savior;  
my God will hear me!  
Do not rejoice over me, my enemy!  
Though I have fallen, I will arise;  
though I sit in darkness, the LORD is my light.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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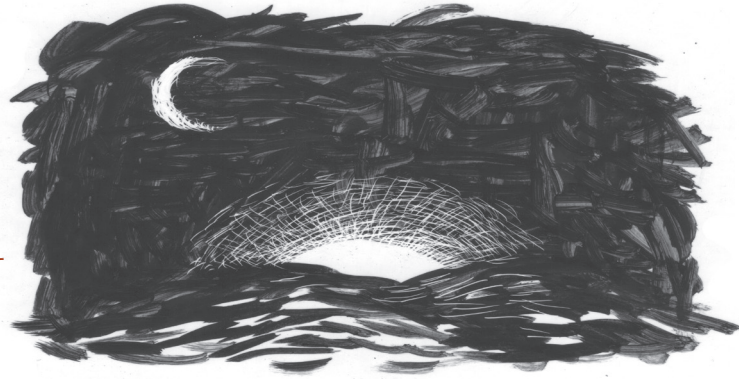
# LEADER GUIDE

## EASTER SUNDAY

### SOLEMNITY OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

✧ YEAR A ✧

## HE IS RISEN



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### Leader Preparation Overview



**On the first Easter**, it seems as if practically everyone but the enemies of Jesus had forgotten that he said he would rise on the third day. In the Gospel accounts, only those who opposed Jesus are reported as remembering that he predicted his death and resurrection. They assumed that his followers would also remember and attempt to steal his body as “proof” that he had risen from the dead, so they asked the Romans to post a guard at the tomb. They need not have bothered since the disciples had apparently forgotten—or completely misunderstood—what Jesus had told them over and over. Instead, the fearful Apostles were in hiding, and the women were planning to anoint a dead body.

However, just as the failure of those closest to Jesus to believe in his Resurrection led to the proclamation of the Jesus's living presence throughout the world, so can we grow in faith and trust in his living presence as well.

Though the mysteries of the Faith are not readily understood, we should ask for the grace to believe—to grow in the virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity. With these gifts, we have the power to recognize the importance of the Resurrection, and how it can transform our lives.

Alleluia, he is risen. He is risen indeed.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

# REFLECTIONS FOR EASTER SUNDAY

## FIRST READING

**Acts of the Apostles 10:34a, 37-43**

### REFLECTION

**T**his reading, which gives us a proclamation of the Easter mystery by St. Peter from the Book of Acts, surprisingly, is not an Easter sermon. It is delivered some time after the experience of the Resurrection to a group of Gentiles who have asked Peter to tell them the Gospel. Cornelius, the head of the household that St. Peter is addressing, says, “Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord” (Acts 10:33, RSV: 2CE). This verse, which just precedes our first reading from the Lectionary, perfectly reflects the attitude that we ought to express when we come to this Holy Eucharist on the liturgical feast of Easter each year.

We are even further in time from the events of which Peter speaks than were Cornelius and his household in Caesarea. Yet, those events are made present to us through “witnesses,” as St. Peter calls the Apostles. And the heirs of those witnesses, the bishops of the Church and their co-workers, our priests, echo that witness in the celebration of the Sacraments. In the Mass, Christ's sacrificial offering is made present to us in its original power and glory. What Peter preaches and that which we celebrate at Easter Mass is not merely history, but a timeless mystery of Christ's saving work, which is still very much with those of us who even now “receive forgiveness of sins through his name.”

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23~

## SECOND READING

**Colossians 3:1-4**

Optional Second Reading

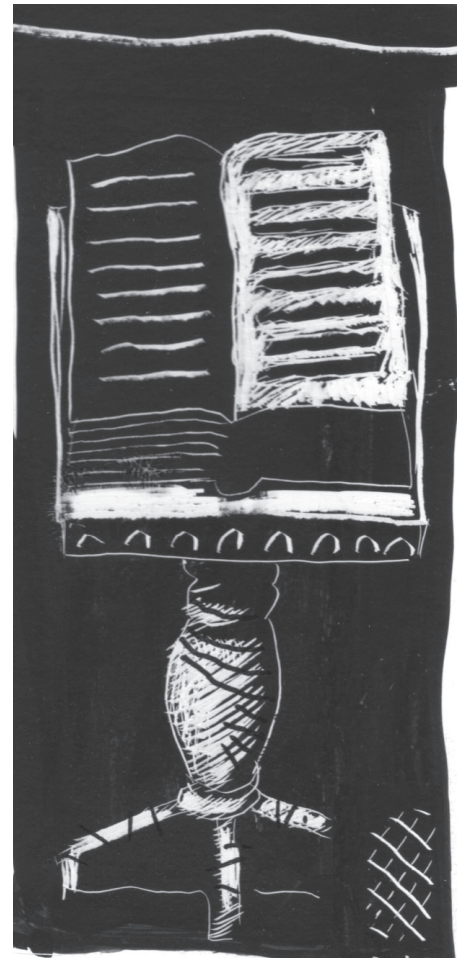
**1 Corinthians 5:6b-8**

## REFLECTION

**T**he Church gives us two options for a second reading for this Easter Eucharist, only one of which we will hear at Mass. Both of them make reference to the mysterious way that the Christian is made one with Christ, and so both are worth a great deal of reflection. The first, from St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians, recalls the way that we are united to Christ through Baptism. His death and rising are the realities that we enter when we go down into the waters and rise up out of them as new creatures in him. Here St. Paul tells us that if we are united with Christ in his dying and rising, we are also united with him in his Ascension to the right hand of Glory! Through Baptism, we also live in glory, though we operate down here on earth. In the Eucharist, God's glory becomes manifested to us, and we participate in it.

**Or 1 Corinthians 5:6b-8**

And the Holy Eucharist is the (perhaps veiled) topic of the optional Second Reading. In 1 Corinthians 5, St. Paul makes a subtle comparison between Christian life and the mysterious events of the Jewish festivals that Jesus fulfills in his Paschal Mystery. The unleavened dough that he says we are to be represents our partaking in the unleavened bread that Jesus offers in his Blessed Sacrament. The clearing out of leaven was a standard part of the feasts that Jesus celebrated during Holy Week. Leaven, a symbol of sin, was to be cleared from a Jewish home for the Passover and feast of Unleavened Bread, the two feasts of that week of his Passion. We are united to Jesus in his fulfillment of those feasts in our celebration of the Eucharist of the Holy Triduum. At Easter Eucharist, we share specifically in the mystery of the Jewish feast of First Fruits, the day that Jesus rose from the dead. As St. Paul says in chapter 15 of this same letter, all will rise: “Christ the first fruits, then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ;” (1 Corinthians 15:23). As Jesus said so clearly in John 6:51, “Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”



## GOSPEL

~ John 20:1-9 ~

### REFLECTION

**T**here is so much to consider in this Gospel passage; even the first few words give us a whole world of things to ponder. “On the first day of the week,” we are told, “Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning.” As already noted, the first day of that week in that year was the feast of First Fruits. Again, St. Paul calls Jesus the first fruits of those who are to rise from the dead. That means that we are part of the full harvest, of which Jesus is the first fruits. According to the Jewish practice, that full harvest of which the feast of First Fruits was but a promise, came on the harvest feast of Pentecost, fifty days after. As we know from Acts 3, on Pentecost the Holy Spirit fell on the apostles and disciples, bringing a great harvest of souls (three thousand, in fact).

The “first day” is also saturated with meaning on other levels. Jesus had rested in the tomb on the old Sabbath of Israel. Just as the Creator God had rested after his week’s work of making the world on the seventh day, Jesus, who has re-created the world by his Passion week, rested in the sleep of death on that Sabbath. Now, he rises to new life on a new first day, as a sign of the first day of the first creation, the day when God had made light, and of the new creation he has worked in his Paschal Mystery. Just as the light dawns on the new creation, Mary’s arrival early in the morning is a sign of the new light and life that this Easter brings.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for Easter Sunday. Let's open our time together by praying this prayer for faith by Pope Paul VI.**

Lord, I believe:

I wish to believe in thee.

Lord, let my faith be full and unreserved,  
and let it penetrate my thought,  
my way of judging Divine things and human things.

Lord, let my faith be joyful  
and give peace and gladness to my spirit,  
and dispose it for prayer with God  
and conversation with men,

so that the inner bliss of its fortunate possession  
may shine forth in sacred and secular conversation.

Lord, let my faith be humble and not presume  
to be based on the experience of my thought and of my feeling;  
but let it surrender to the testimony of the Holy Spirit,  
and not have any better guarantee than in docility to Tradition  
and to the authority of the magisterium of the Holy Church.

Amen.



## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**On the first Easter, Peter and the other disciple “saw and believed” after seeing the burial cloths of Jesus. We who live today have faith in the Resurrection without the benefit of seeing an empty tomb. While faith in the Resurrection can seem difficult, we commonly talk about having faith in ordinary, daily things. For instance, people say they have “faith” that the sun will rise each morning. What are some other things in which people say they have faith?**

*(Possible answers might include the seasons, death, taxes, that our cars will start, that our equipment will work, that co-workers will do their jobs.)*

*This question is meant to help people understand that we can have faith on a human level, which in limited way reflects the virtue of Faith.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**On this Easter Sunday, let us recall the events of the Resurrection by watching this short video together.**



(Play the video for Easter Sunday. This will play for approximately seven minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**Who forgot that Jesus said he would rise again?  
Who remembered?**

*(Jesus's enemies remembered that he said he would rise again.  
His disciples and the holy women seemed to have forgotten his words.)*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**How did the presenter define *faith*? How did he define *hope*?**

*(Faith is the ability to believe in God and the mysteries he reveals.  
Hope is the ability to trust completely in God.)*

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #3

**Who does the presenter suggest was the first person to see the Risen Lord? Why might that person have been the first?**

*(Mary Magdalene may have been the first to see the risen Lord because she may have been the only one of Jesus's followers who remembered his promise and therefore wasn't surprised.)*

### **DIGGING DEEPER**

#### **THE RESURRECTION**



The mystery of Christ's Resurrection is a real event, with manifestations that were historically verified, as the New Testament bears witness. In about A.D. 56, St. Paul could already write to the Corinthians: "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve..."<sup>490</sup> The apostle speaks here of the living tradition of the Resurrection, which he had learned after his conversion at the gates of to Damascus.<sup>491</sup> —CCC 639

<sup>490</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

<sup>491</sup> Cf. Acts 9:3—18

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today we celebrate the great mystery at the heart of our faith—the Resurrection.**

### **PRAYER:**

Picture yourself in a room with the other disciples early on that first Easter Sunday. Suddenly Mary Magdalene bursts through the door and announces that someone has taken Jesus's body out of the tomb. What is your first thought? Would you remember that Jesus said he would rise again on the third day? What would you do in response to this announcement?

### **RESOLUTION:**

Sometimes we say that we believe Jesus rose from the dead without really thinking about what we are saying. Take some time to prayerfully consider what it means to you in your daily life that Jesus has truly conquered death and is alive.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *After two thousand years, it can be difficult for us to imagine what it must have been like for the Apostles and the holy women to realize that Jesus was alive. Encourage participants to think about what they profess in the Creed. Explain that it is natural to have some doubts, but doubt is not the same as disbelief.*
- *If you have time, play an Easter hymn such as "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today" at the beginning of the closing prayer.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week’s Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I’d like each of us to share one take-away from today’s session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn’t know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let’s close our time together today with prayer:**

We do not pretend that life is all beauty.  
We are aware of darkness and sin, of poverty and pain.  
But we know Jesus has conquered sin and passed through his own pain to the glory of the Resurrection.  
And we live in the light of his Paschal Mystery -  
the mystery of his Death and Resurrection.  
“We are an Easter People and Alleluia is our song!”  
We are not looking for a shallow joy  
but rather a joy that comes from faith.

(Pope St. John Paul II, Angelus, Adelaide, Australia)

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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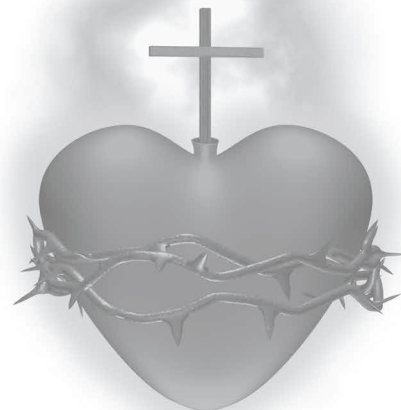
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# LEADER GUIDE

## 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

✧ YEAR A ✧



# PEACE AND MERCY

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## Leader Preparation Overview



**The second Sunday after Easter** is designated Divine Mercy Sunday. It's a recent feast in the Church, instituted in 2000 by Pope St. John Paul II. He felt that immediately after Easter, while the Paschal mysteries were fresh in our hearts, we needed an opportunity to reflect more deeply on God's great mercy manifested in the Resurrection.

So how does this feast fit with the Gospel reading of Jesus's appearance in the Upper Room? When the reading begins, the disciples are hiding in fear for their lives, certain that the officials would be coming to get them just as they came for Jesus. Compounding their fear is the recognition that they had abandoned Jesus in his hour of greatest need. They are scared, disgraced, and guilty. At that very moment, who should enter into their sorrow and shame but Jesus himself. Jesus comes, despite the locked doors, to stand in their midst, offering them both peace and mercy. In addition, he tells them that through the power of the Holy Spirit, they, too, will have the ability to extend mercy by forgiving sins.

Today, through our priests who have been ordained in apostolic succession, we, too, can receive mercy and forgiveness. All we need

to do is repent and trust in the mercy of God. Indeed, today's feast invites us to trust that no matter what wrong we may have done, Jesus loves us and wants us to experience his mercy. That's why one simple prayer associated with Divine Mercy devotion sums up the confidence we should have in Christ's mercy: "Jesus, I trust in you."

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

### FIRST READING

**Acts 2:42-47**

### REFLECTION

**W**e now enter that part of the liturgical year that serves as a kind of debriefing for the newly baptized. We can imagine the Church telling them, "Now that you are one with us, this is the way we live: we are 'devoted...to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.'" This small, understated verse describes the genius of Catholicism.

Commentators have also seen in this list of the four concerns of the early Church (the teaching of the Apostles, common life in Christ, the breaking of bread or the Eucharist, and the life of prayer) a description of the classical divisions of catechesis. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is ordered along the same fourfold



division: the Creed, the Sacraments, the Commandments, and prayer. The *Catechism* purposely changed the ordering to make the point that life in Christ, what our reading calls “communal life,” can only be lived as a consequence of the graces received in the Sacraments. So it’s fitting that the Sacraments, represented in our reading by the phrase “the breaking of bread,” should be treated before, and the moral life or the Commandments, treated after.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24~

## SECOND READING

~1 Peter 1:3-9~

## REFLECTION

**T**he “**new birth**” to which St. Peter refers is that Baptism which has been newly received by the neophytes (literally meaning “new plant,” used by the early Church to refer to those who had just entered her by Baptism). At the Easter Vigil, they received an “imperishable inheritance incapable of fading or defilement.” The pledge of salvation that we and the newly baptized have received doesn’t preclude the possibility of suffering. Easter doesn’t mean that suffering is at an end but that suffering is a means to the end of Resurrection. Suffering isn’t ended but transformed in the new life we receive from Baptism.

Part of the trial that our faith undergoes is that we “have not seen him.” We’re given many signs of his love and mercy but these often recede into the background of our lives as time passes. But if we retain an awareness of the special gifts God has given us and the small miracles he has performed in our own lives, then this helps us to walk in faith—even without seeing him. Clinging to the promise of our Baptism, even in the midst of trials, supplies us with cause for rejoicing.

## GOSPEL

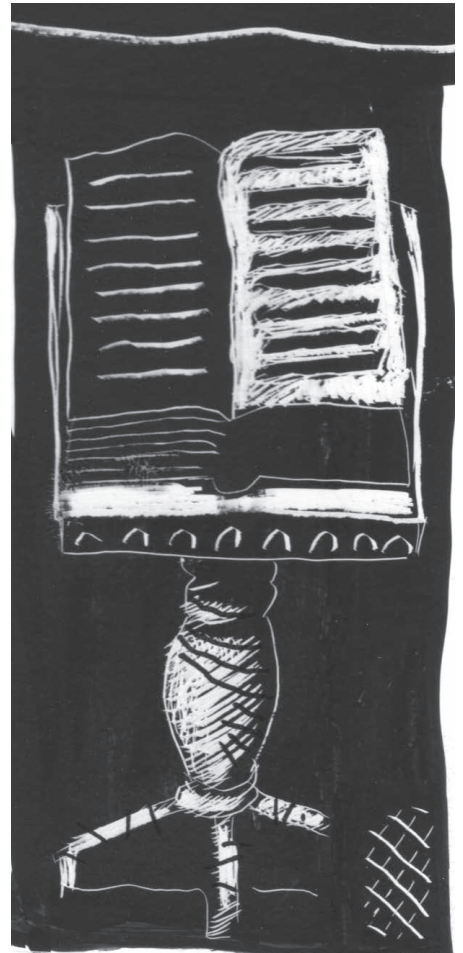
~ John 20:1-9 ~

### REFLECTION

**A**s a Church we're present on Easter morning to witness the risen glory of Jesus Christ. We share the joy and recognition of St. Mary Magdalene and the Apostles. But, just as we're represented collectively as a Church in the characters of Mary Magdalene and the Apostles, so are we also absent and doubting on that first Easter day in the person of Thomas.

The Second Sunday of Easter could be called Thomas's Easter. He represents that part of us that holds out against faith—relentlessly asking for proof and confirmation. Because of this, Thomas is a particularly good model for our age. He demands an empirical, tangible demonstration that Jesus is risen in the flesh.

In John's Gospel, seeing is believing. John seems to emphasize the evidence that sight supplies to the identity of the Lord Jesus. Sight and blindness are metaphors for enlightenment and sin. So there's this tension between the evidence that Jesus gives us and our human insistence that he continually reinforce our faith with signs. The Catholic conception of belief has always respected both our human need to be shown the truth and our spiritual need for the faith that perfects our reason. The Church respects both because Jesus respected both.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Second Sunday of Easter, also known as Divine Mercy Sunday. Let's open our time together by praying these words from a Catholic devotion known as the Chaplet of Divine Mercy:**

Eternal Father,  
I offer you the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity  
of your dearly beloved Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ,  
in atonement for our sins and those of the whole world.  
For the sake of his sorrowful Passion,  
have mercy on us and on the whole world.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**This week we celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday. How would you define *mercy*? What are some examples of mercy that you can think of?**

*(The Oxford Dictionary defines mercy “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.” As participants give their definition, make sure both compassion and forgiveness are mentioned.)*

*One example of mercy that you may want to share is Pope St. John Paul II's forgiving of Mehmet Ali Ağca, the man who tried to assassinate him, and asking that Ağca's sentence be commuted.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Let's take a few minutes now to watch this video about Divine Mercy Sunday and the Gospel, which looks at Jesus's first appearance to the disciples after the Resurrection.**



(Play the video for the Second Sunday of Easter. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journals to find these questions.*

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**The presenter, Jules Miles, explains how and why Pope St. John Paul II designed this Sunday as Divine Mercy Sunday. What did she say about this feast?**

*(Pope St. John Paul II thought we needed this Sunday because the saving mystery of Jesus's Death and Resurrection would be fresh in our hearts and we would be better able to reflect on the miracle of mercy that lies in the heart of the Resurrection.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER**

## DIVINE MERCY DEVOTION



The Divine Mercy devotion was first instituted by the twentieth century Polish saint, St. Faustina Kowalska, who reported a series of visions of Jesus in which he asked her to tell the world about the mercy of God. She had the image of Jesus as he appeared in the visions painted. In the painting, Jesus is shown with rays of red and blue, representing blood and water, emanating from his heart along with the words "Jesus, I trust in you!" Jesus explained to St. Faustina that "the pale ray stands for the Water, which makes souls righteous; the red ray stands for the Blood, which is the life of souls. These two rays issued forth from the depths of my most tender Mercy at that time when my agonizing Heart was opened by a lance on the Cross."

The three main messages of the devotion are to ask for God's mercy, to be merciful to others, and to trust completely in Jesus. The feast of Divine Mercy had been celebrated in Poland and Vatican City, but on April 30, 2000, the day of Sister Faustina's canonization, Pope St. John Paul II decreed that throughout the world the Second Sunday of Easter will receive the name Divine Mercy Sunday, a perennial invitation to the Christian world to face, with confidence in divine benevolence, the difficulties and trials that mankind will experience in the years to come.

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**What does Jesus say when he comes into the midst of the Apostles in the locked room? What is the significance of these words?**


*(The first thing Jesus says is “Peace be with you.”*

*Jesus gives a message of peace to his disciples because his peace is the only peace that can truly save and comfort.*

*Just as he came to the disciples in the midst of their sorrow, grief, and shame, Jesus comes to us to give us that same peace if we are willing to trust him.)*

### **DIGGING DEEPER**

#### **DIVINE MERCY DEVOTION**

 Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska (August 25, 1905—October 5, 1938) was a Polish nun, often called the Apostle of Divine Mercy. Throughout her life, she experienced numerous visions and conversations with Jesus, which were published as *Diary: Divine Mercy in My Soul*. The Divine Mercy devotion was approved in 1978 and is now honored by more than 100 million Catholics around the world. In April 2000, St. Faustina was named the first saint of the twenty-first century by Pope St. John Paul II.

## STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER &amp; RESOLUTION



**Like the disciples in today's Gospel, we can often feel fearful, guilty, and ashamed. Let us place ourselves in the scene and listen as Jesus offers each of us his peace.**

**PRAYER:**

Imagine you are in the closed room with the other disciples hiding in fear early on that first Easter Sunday. The door is bolted but suddenly Jesus is standing right before you and says, "Peace be with you." How do you envision the other Apostles responding to Christ's appearance? How might you respond?

**RESOLUTION:**

If we are to have the peace Jesus wants for us, we must learn to trust in his mercy and goodness. Consider one area in your life where you lack peace. How can you increase your peace by increasing your trust? As you contemplate this, pray, "Jesus, I trust in you."

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

**LEADER TIPS:**

- *Remind participants that Pope St. John Paul II, who instituted the feast of Divine Mercy, realized that trust is difficult and encouraged us to pray for the ability to trust and to affirm our trust through the prayer, "Jesus, I trust in you."*



# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today by praying the closing prayer from the Chaplet of Divine Mercy.**

Eternal God, in whom mercy is endless and the treasury of compassion inexhaustible, look kindly upon us and increase your mercy in us, that in difficult moments we might not despair nor become despondent, but with great confidence submit ourselves to your holy will, which is Love and Mercy itself.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

✧ YEAR A ✧



# OUR EMMAUS ROAD

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## Leader Preparation Overview



**The two disciples on the road to Emmaus** in today's reading came to know the Lord in the "breaking of the bread"—the Eucharist. We can see that their encounter with Jesus that day parallels the way Jesus comes to meet us in every Mass.

First, just as Jesus spoke to the two disciples on the road about the Scriptures, so Jesus speaks to us through the Scriptures in the Liturgy of the Word. Then, just as Jesus explained the Scriptures to the disciples on the road, so do we have those words interpreted for us by the priest so that we can begin to understand what they mean for our lives. The first half of the Mass, like the first half of the journey to Emmaus, focuses on the Word of God.

Then, as we experience the "breaking of the bread," Jesus gives us his very self, his Body and Blood. At that moment, our eyes can be opened and we are able to see Jesus in our midst. When we receive the Lord with an open and receptive heart, we know that he is alive ... and with us. We begin to have a glimpse into the awesome plan of God for our own lives. The second half of the Mass, like the second half of the Emmaus story, centers on meeting and recognizing Jesus.

Finally, like the disciples who run back to Jerusalem to share the Good News, we too, at the end of every Mass, are commissioned to be ambassadors of Christ who has revealed himself in the Word and in the Eucharist.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

### FIRST READING

**Acts 2:14, 22-33**

### REFLECTION

**P**eter's main theme in addressing his fellow Jews is that Jesus is the promised Messiah, as demonstrated by the signs he worked and his Resurrection. Messianic expectations of the Son of David included mastery over nature. The messianic heir of Solomon was expected to perform signs of the kind preserved in the legends of Solomon. Peter proposes that Jesus had passed this test and that his miracles were, in fact, his "credentials" from God. The Resurrection is presented by Peter as the fulfillment of Psalm 16, which promises that the faithful one won't undergo the corruption of the grave.

The Jewish population gathered in Jerusalem didn't need much more in the way of sacramental preparation. We're told that three thousand were baptized as a consequence of Peter's preaching. The faith of the Jews made it possible to receive them quickly into the

Church. It was enough for Peter to announce that what had been believed about the Messiah had indeed been fulfilled in Christ. As good Jews who knew the teaching of Judaism, they needed only to profess faith that Jesus was the culmination of that tradition as Messiah and Lord.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 16:1-2, 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11~

## SECOND READING

~1 Peter 1:17-21~

## REFLECTION

**W**e hear in this reading a much more mature Peter than we heard in the first reading. This letter is believed to have been written thirty years or more after that first proclamation of the Gospel in Acts. The themes are remarkably the same, however. The Gospel still revolves around the basic idea that Jesus was the chosen one of God who suffered, died, and was raised. By that Resurrection we're given cause for a faith and hope, which save us from the "futile" way of life we would otherwise live.

That faith makes us strangers or exiles on this earth and aware of the just judgment that the Father will pronounce on those who don't conduct themselves with the reverence due him. The mercy we receive through his Precious Blood doesn't exempt us from his justice; rather, it demands that we act reverently and with mercy. So reverently, in fact, that our status as aliens in this land is manifest to those who don't share our faith.

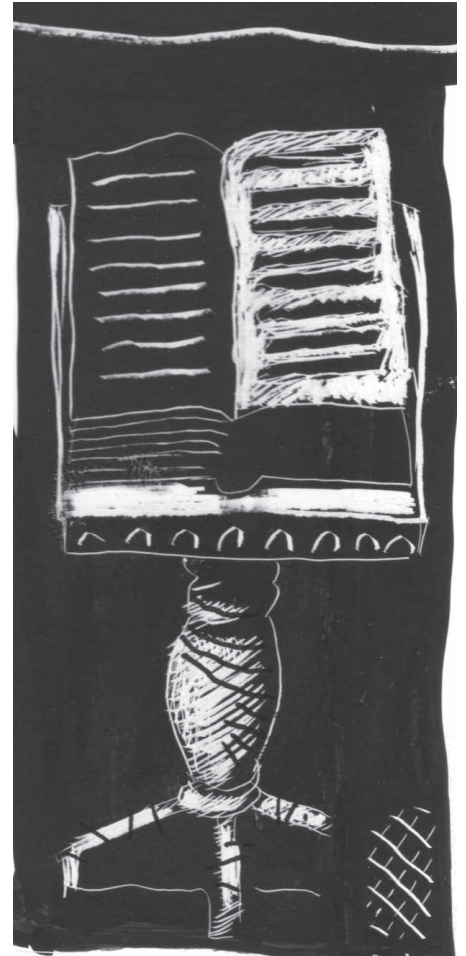
## GOSPEL

~ Luke 24:13-35 ~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this reading, we see Jesus seeking two disciples who are leaving Jerusalem in despair over Jesus's death and apparent failure. Jesus's meticulous care in gathering up and confirming his disciples in faith after his Resurrection ought to give us great confidence in his love for all, even those who have walked away from him. The lesson for us is that without the gift of faith, even the obvious can seem obscure. This story in Luke also gives us some direction as to where to find the grace necessary to overcome our ignorance. We're told that in the "breaking of bread" they recognized him. That term is widely considered to have been a kind of code term in the early Church for the celebration of the Eucharist.

This narrative itself exhibits a form like that of the Mass. It begins with a Liturgy of the Word: "Beginning, then, with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the Scriptures." It closes with the "breaking of the bread," as happens in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Through the Sacraments generally, and the daily Sacrament of the Eucharist particularly, the Church learns to see clearly what was formerly obscure.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of Opening the Word for the Third Sunday in Easter. Let's open our time together by praying this Easter Prayer of St. Hippolytus of Rome.**

Christ is Risen: The world below lies desolate  
Christ is Risen: The spirits of evil are fallen  
Christ is Risen: The angels of God are rejoicing  
Christ is Risen: The tombs of the dead are empty  
Christ is Risen indeed from the dead,  
the first of the sleepers,  
Glory and power are his forever and ever.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**This week's Gospel takes place on a journey, as two of Jesus's disciples travel from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It was a journey that changed their lives forever. Have you ever taken a trip or a journey that turned out to be life-changing in some way?**

*(You may want to begin by talking about one of your own experiences with travel. If people need prompts, suggest these ideas: the first time you left the country, the first time you traveled alone, or the first time your child traveled without you.)*

*A journey doesn't necessarily have to involve long distances. Sometimes the journey to the hospital to give birth, or to be with someone who is dying, can be a life-changing experience and time of encountering Christ as well.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Let's take a few minutes now to watch this video as the presenter talks about the encounter with Jesus the two disciples had on the road to Emmaus.**



(Play the video for the Third Sunday of Easter. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**The story of the two disciples meeting Jesus gives us a template for how we encounter Jesus in the Mass. How does the Liturgy of the Word begin our meeting with Jesus?**

**How is the Liturgy of the Word in the Mass like the experience of the disciples on the way to Emmaus?**

*(Responses should include the ideas that just as the disciples had the Scriptures presented and explained to them at the beginning of their encounter, so we have the Scriptures presented and explained to us in the first half of the Mass.)*

*It might be helpful to briefly explain that the Mass is divided into two parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. If you have a missal available, you may want to show exactly where these two parts begin [the First Reading] and end [Prayers of the Faithful].)*

#### **DIGGING DEEPER** LITURGY OF THE WORD



**The Liturgy of the Word consists of eight parts:**

1. *The First Reading from either the Old Testament or the Book of Acts*
2. *The Responsorial Psalm*
3. *The Second Reading from the New Testament (excluding the Gospels)*
4. *The Gospel Alleluia*
5. *The Gospel Reading*
6. *The Homily*
7. *The Profession of Faith in the Creed*
8. *The Prayers of the Faithful*

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

### **Why do you think the disciples were unable to recognize Jesus before the Breaking of the Bread?**

*(This question doesn't have an easy or ready answer, but it is a question Christians have wrestled with for centuries. People may offer ideas such as the Eucharist removed spiritual blindness or the disciples received the gift of faith at that moment. Since there is no "right" answer, the point is to help people understand that the way the disciples recognized the Risen Lord was through the "breaking of the bread." It is in that same "breaking of the bread" that we can recognize him as well.*

*The main idea behind the question, and this study, is to affirm the reality of the Resurrection and the fact that the Mass is the way we today have our Emmaus Road encounter with Christ.)*

#### **DIGGING DEEPER**

##### **EMMAUS**



Emmaus, meaning "warm spring," was a small town located about seven miles northwest of Jerusalem. In addition to the mention in the Gospel, Emmaus was the site of other events in both Old and New Testament times. Around 166 BC, Judas Maccabeus fought a battle there (1 Maccabees 3:55–4:22). Before the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, the Emperor Vespasian's fifth legion was stationed there. It probably was located at or near the Palestinian village of Imwas, which was destroyed in 1967.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**The story of the two disciples is one of the most detailed and descriptive in the New Testament. Let's join them now, as they meet the Risen Lord.**

### PRAYER:

Imagine that you are in the inn with the two disciples. During the meal, the man who has been talking to you all day takes bread and blesses it. In that moment, you realize that he is Jesus. He is alive! The women were right—Jesus has been raised from the dead. He disappears, but you think: “Was not my heart burning within me while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?” How do you recognize Jesus today in the Scriptures? In the Eucharist?

### RESOLUTION:

As you read Scripture and receive Holy Communion this week, be open to the ways Jesus reveals himself to you.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIP:**

- *Use this time to encourage participants to see the Mass as the way Jesus comes to us today, both in the Scriptures in the Liturgy of the Word and in the breaking of the bread in the Eucharist.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week’s Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you, especially on the Gospel reading. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I’d like each of us to share one take-away from today’s session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn’t know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let’s close our time together today with prayer.**

Dear Jesus, we long to recognize your presence in our lives. Help us to feel the burning in our hearts as we read the Scriptures. Enable us to experience you in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup. But most of all, Lord, grant us the ability to be a witness to you as our Savior and Redeemer so that all the world might know that you have entered into the glory of the Father. Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

✧ YEAR A ✧



# THE GOOD SHEPHERD

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## Leader Preparation Overview



**We like the idea of Jesus** as the Good Shepherd, but we seldom like the idea of being sheep—people who blindly follow anyone or anything. However, that's not what sheep and shepherds are like in real life. In

cultures where sheep are still herded by individuals, a deep bond and trust exist between the shepherd and his flock. The sheep know and trust their shepherd so intimately that all he has to do is call them by name. And he knows each of his sheep so well that he has given them individual names! That's the kind of relationship Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel... a deep bond of love that enables us to trust that Jesus is leading us on the path that leads to abundant life. He tells us it is through listening to him and his voice that we can truly find the green pasture and still water that we all desire to have.

But how are we to know and hear our shepherd's voice? The only way we can hear him is by finding some quiet time away from all the noise of life so that we can concentrate on prayer. This doesn't necessarily mean the formal reciting of words, but simply being in the presence of the One who loves us. We need to silence ourselves in order that we can begin to discern the small, still whisper in our hearts. It is only when we take that time that we are able to enter into the kind of relationship with God that gives us abundant life here, and in the next world to come.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

## FIRST READING

**Acts 2:14a, 36-41**

## REFLECTION

**P**eter announces to his audience, “Let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” In that phrase is fulfilled Jesus’s command that his gift of salvation be preached first in Jerusalem. Peter, as his vicar on earth, now takes up that concern and will extend it in what will be an ever-widening sphere of proclamation “throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Peter’s directness seems to work: he doesn’t mince words as to the complicity of his audience in the Crucifixion, yet they respond with contrition. Peter’s intrepidity in announcing both the fault and favor that Jesus’s death brings is a clear sign of God’s work. Peter had denied even an association with Jesus the night of Jesus’s arrest and trial. Now, here’s Peter crying out, welcoming such a connection between himself and Jesus, before the whole assembly of Israel. Only grace could do that! The same grace that’s at work *in* Peter seems to be at work *through* Peter, whose courageous proclamation of the Gospel draws thousands of souls into that grace.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6~

## SECOND READING

~1 Peter 2:20b-25~

## REFLECTION

**T**his reading reminds us that the Resurrection can't be a promise of life without Jesus's passage through death. By virtue of our Baptism, we participate in the same dynamic spiritual process as Jesus. We pass, by grace, through death to life. "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps." Peter suggests an approach to suffering which is opposite to the first impulse in our nature.

We often want to tell ourselves that when we suffer, God doesn't will our pain. We want to tell ourselves, and others, that suffering doesn't matter so much in the long run. God didn't will suffering and death; sin brought that into the world. Peter doesn't say suffering is unimportant in comparison with the good that will come, but he says, "It was for this you have been called." He reminds us that Jesus didn't just suffer—he embraced suffering. Only love can transform the way we look at suffering, and Jesus is Love Incarnate. Jesus teaches us to embrace what we cannot change and that embrace transforms pain into the path to life.



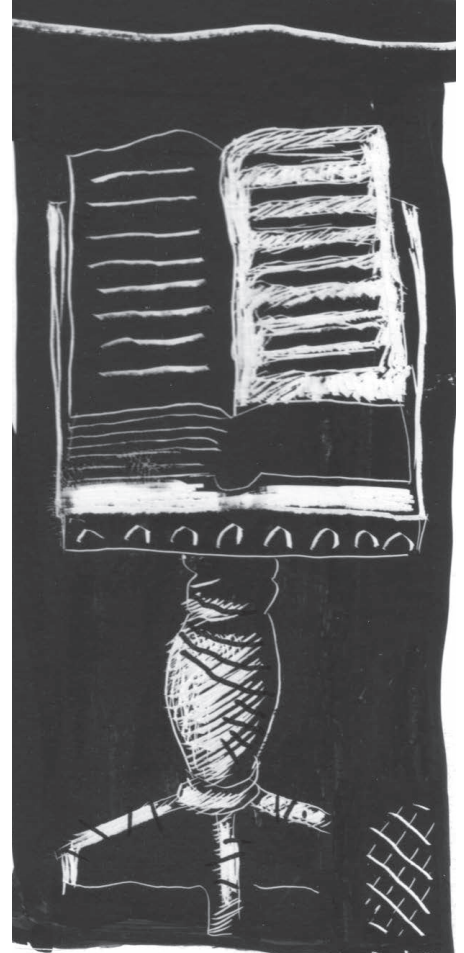
## GOSPEL

~John 10:1-10~

### REFLECTION

**T**he way of the Lord Jesus isn't simply a path but a way to a place: the Church. He doesn't say, "Live anywhere you want," but rather, "Whoever enters through me will be saved." The implication is that elsewhere one may not be saved. Sheep need protection. Jesus invites us to see ourselves in that role of utter dependence on him; he invites us to enter in and be kept safe by him, the Good Shepherd. He invites us to the humble realization that we're like sheep who, without him, are subject to those who would "steal and slaughter and destroy."

Those who don't want to follow the Shepherd, who don't like the sound of his voice when he tells us we're like sheep, demonstrate by that very fact that they're not his. Only those who recognize themselves in his description of his sheep have really heard his voice. Those who don't hear his voice are likely to say something like, "I resent the implication that I'm no more than a sheep," or "You people are nothing but sheep." To which we sheep might respond, "Yes, 'The sheep hear his voice as the shepherd calls his own...by name.'"



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Fourth Sunday of Easter. Let's open our time together by praying the first part of Psalm 23, the Responsorial Psalm for this week.**

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not  
want. In verdant pastures he gives me  
repose; beside restful waters he leads me;  
he refreshes my soul.  
He guides me in right paths  
for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk in the dark valley  
I fear no evil; for you are at my side  
with your rod and your staff  
that give me courage.

—Psalm 23:1-4

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Today’s Gospel compares the followers of Jesus with sheep. What does it mean in our culture to be a “sheep”? Is it negative or positive to be a sheep?**

*(Possible answers might include following someone or something blindly or without thought, being “sheeple” who accept whatever they hear without question, or simply being “dumb.”*

*Bringing out the negatives that our culture holds about sheep will help set up what Jesus really means when he says he is the Good Shepherd later on in the lesson.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**I’m sure we’ve all seen pictures of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, holding a lamb on his shoulders. Let’s hear what the presenter has to teach us about this image.**



(Play the video for Fourth Sunday of Easter. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journals to find these questions.*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**When we began our study today, we talked about what our culture thinks it means to be called a “sheep.” What do you think that Jesus meant when he said he was our shepherd?**

*(A shepherd watches out for his sheep, protecting them from danger and keeping them safe. Jesus is saying that he will be our protector and guardian.)*

*Though our culture looks at being a sheep in a negative light, Jesus is emphasizing his role as our shepherd, our guide. It is good to be a sheep when we are placing out trust in the Good Shepherd.)*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**What does the presenter say is essential if we are to hear God’s voice?**

*(We must have quiet and silence, away from the electronic noises that fill our world, if we are going to be able to truly hear God speaking to us.)*

**Have you ever had a time when you sensed God’s voice—maybe not an audible voice, but you sensed him speaking to you in your soul? Share a bit about that experience.**

*(Remind participants that it can be very difficult to sort out God’s voice with all the clamor of the world. Encourage them to persist in this exercise during the rest of the week.*

*Sometimes people can “hear” God best through journaling, instead of merely “listening.” God speaks to us in the best way for us to hear.*

*Stress that God will never tell us to do anything that is contrary to Scripture or Church teaching. If we think we are hearing such a message, it is not coming from the Good Shepherd!)*

#### **DIGGING DEEPER**

##### **SCRIPTURAL SHEPHERDS**



Many of the great figures of Scripture were shepherds, including Abraham, Jacob, Moses, King David, and the prophet Amos. In the New Testament, angels first announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds in the fields. Throughout the Scriptures, the image of a shepherd tenderly caring for his flocks is an image of God’s care for his people.

## STEP #5

### LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**In today's Gospel, we hear Jesus saying, "The shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." Let's reflect for a moment on what that means to us.**

#### **PRAYER:**

Imagine you are with the disciples as Jesus begins to talk. He looks directly at you and says, "Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate for the sheep." What does this mean to you? Do you see yourself as one of Jesus's sheep? How is he your gate? Now hear him say to you, "Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." What kind of pasture does your soul long for?

#### **RESOLUTION:**

Set aside some time this week and turn off your computer, your cell phone, and any other electronic devices. Go into a private place where you can meditate on what it means to have Jesus as your shepherd.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

#### **LEADER TIP:**

- *In our self-reliant culture, it can be hard for people to think of themselves as sheep needing a shepherd. If participants seem uncomfortable, focus more on the aspect of finding safe pasture and being led in the right direction for their lives.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today by praying the second half of Psalm 23.**

You spread the table before me  
in the sight of my foes;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Only goodness and kindness follow me  
all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
for years to come.

—Psalm 23:5-6

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

✧ YEAR A ✧

# THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE



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### Leader Preparation Overview



**Most of us have been either literally** or figuratively lost at some time, not knowing which way to go, and feeling a surge of fear and panic. The Apostles in today's Gospel were feeling lost, because Jesus had just told them he was going to leave them in order to be crucified and die. Thomas said what must have been in all their hearts: "We do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus's answer might have been confusing. He didn't give instructions or directions. Instead he told them that he himself was the direction. He said that he was the way, the truth, and the life.

We can understand the meaning of his words only when we realize that he was saying that he was going to the Father and that if we want to go to the Father, we must go through the Son, within the power of the Holy Spirit. That's how our prayers work and that's how blessings come to us—always through the Son. We know Jesus, and in knowing him, we come to the Father.

Unlike the Apostles, we haven't had the experience of being physically in the company of Jesus, so how can we get to know him? The answer is simple: through the Holy Mass, by receiving Christ in the Sacraments of the Church, by studying his Word,

participating in the sacraments of the church, and through our prayers and devotions. When we do those things, we come to know Jesus. And then we can truly confess that he is our way, our truth, and our life.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

## FIRST READING

~Acts 6:1-7~

## REFLECTION

**T**his passage shows that the early Church had a discernible structure from the beginning. The threefold offices of bishop, priest, and deacon are seen in their infancy, and the witness of the Apostolic Fathers to the threefold hierarchy is also clear.

Several interesting features present themselves in this passage. First, the Church's concern about the charity being extended to the widows of Greek-speaking Jews in the Jerusalem community is apparent in the choice of deacons. All of the names listed of the first seven deacons are Greek names; they may have been Hebrew-speaking Jews with Greek second names, but the implication is that the Apostles, and the community in general, are bending over backward to see that all charity is being distributed fairly. Second, we see an ordination ceremony of

these deacons. The laying on of hands was part of the ordination ceremony among the Jews, and the Christian community seems to have easily taken up the practice, possibly in keeping with Jesus's principle that the old wasn't to be abolished but rather fulfilled. Although the community presents the candidates, it's the apostles who pray and lay hands on them, which remains the form and matter of the ordination ceremony today.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19~

## SECOND READING

~1 Peter 2:4-9~

### REFLECTION

**T**his passage is packed with allusions references to Old Testament events that mean much more than what's apparent on the surface. Moreover, the words about being built like living stones into a spiritual temple where we offer spiritual sacrifices as a holy priesthood are the vocabulary of Judaism. So we shouldn't be surprised that the Jewish Peter speaks to Christians using the vocabulary of his Jewish roots.

Jewish and Christian scholars have suggested that because of Israel's failure to receive all that God wished to give them and their continual rebellion that promise, repeated here by Peter, was never completely fulfilled. As the theory goes, the whole of the regime of Temple Judaism—its Temple, priests, and sacrifices—were only a preparation for a time when God would fulfill his promise in making Israel the “holy nation” God intended it to be. St. Peter is apparently saying that this has been accomplished in Christ. Although we still have ordained or ministerial priests in the Church, we all receive a share in Christ's priesthood through Baptism, which makes us the “consecrated nation” that God willed so long ago on Sinai and which Christ formed by his sacrifice on the Cross.

## GOSPEL

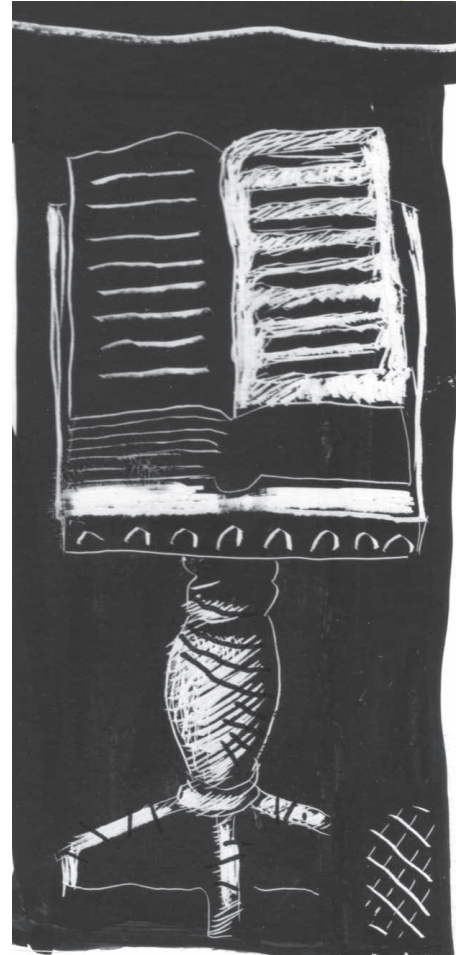
~John 14:1-12~

### REFLECTION

**T**his passage points us toward the **Ascension**. Jesus tells the apostles that he's going to prepare a place for them "in my Father's house." We discover that Jesus is leaving to go to the Father, but he assures his disciples that this absence is only so that he may prepare a place for them. He promises, "I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. Where I am going you know the way." The last part of that phrase is a reflection of Jesus's Incarnation and mission. He comes to us to dwell with us in time, in the flesh, and in so doing, wins us the ability to dwell with him in eternity.

What makes this astounding thing possible is Jesus's unity with the Father in the Holy Trinity. So much of what Jesus promised requires his divinity. Unless he was God, he couldn't save us from sin, he couldn't gain us entry to Heaven, and he couldn't give us his flesh to eat.

This is what Jesus reveals in the second part of this passage. "I am in the Father and the Father is in me," Jesus says in language that seems to stretch to the breaking point in trying to convey these divine truths.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Fifth Sunday of Easter. Let's open our time together in prayer.**

You are the way, the truth, the life  
Without the way there is no going  
Without the truth there is no knowing  
Without the life there is no growing  
Show us the way, that we may go  
Teach us the truth, that we may know  
Grant us the life, that we may grow  
Eternally.  
Amen.

—Theodore J. (Ted) Tracy, S.J.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Today's Gospel reading is about finding the right way. Have you ever been lost? Maybe in a strange city or a foreign airport? What are some of the things you felt when you didn't know where to go?**

*(Possible answers might include panic, fear, worry, scared, upset, determined, or resolved to find the right way.)*

*Acknowledge that participants can have a variety of feelings, but that most people feel a certain sense of fear when they don't know where they are or where to go.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**This week we read the famous passage in which Jesus says he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Let's watch this short video to learn more about what this means for our lives.**



(Play the video for Fifth Sunday of Easter. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**What is the difference between saying that Jesus is “the” way and Jesus is “a” way?**

*(If Jesus is merely “a” way, then there are other, equally valid paths that one may take to the Father. But Jesus says that he is “the” way, indicating that he is the only sure path.*

*Participants may want to get into a discussion about salvation outside the Catholic Church. If that happens, refer to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which reads, in part: “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.” —CCC 847)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**According to the presenter, how can we come to know Jesus, who is the Way?**

*(We come to know Jesus, who is our Way, our Truth, and our Life, by participating in the Liturgy and the Sacraments, studying the Word of God (as in this study), and through personal prayer and devotion.*

*Point out to participants that the quote from St. Thomas Aquinas that the presenter used can be found in their journals.)*



## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #3

### What were Christians called before they were known as Christians?

*Christians were originally known as “The Way,” because they demonstrated by their lives the way we are all to live.*

#### **DIGGING DEEPER**

##### ST. THOMAS AQUINAS AND JESUS AS THE WAY



The quote used in the presentation can be found at *In Ioannem*, Chapter 14, Lecture 2, 1866-1870:

“If then, you ask which way to go, accept Christ, for he is the way....  
If you ask where to go, cling to Christ, for he is the truth we desire to reach....  
If you ask where to remain, remain in Christ, because he is the life.”

## STEP #5

LECTIO DIVINA —  
PRAYER & RESOLUTION

**At some point in each of our lives, we must come to accept Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life if we are to be Christian. Let us consider those words in light of today's Gospel.**

**PRAYER:**

In prayer, imagine Jesus saying the words of today's Gospel directly to you: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Ask Jesus to show you what it means that he is the Way for you. Is there a certain way he wants you to follow him more closely now? Then ask Jesus what it means that he is the Truth for your life. Is there a certain truth—a truth about him, about yourself, or about the Catholic Faith—that he wants you to believe in or understand better? Finally, ask Jesus to show you what it means that he is the Life. Do you seek fullness of life in Jesus or in other things or people of this world?

**RESOLUTION:**

During the week, refer back to the insights you gained in our prayer time. Reread the Gospel and the quote from St. Thomas Aquinas in your journal. If you have questions about what it means for Jesus to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life, bring those concerns to him in prayer or talk about them with another member of this group.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

**LEADER TIP:**

- *This particular prayer exercise is, by its nature, deeply personal. There is not nor can be any message or insight that is universal. The goal is to build a relationship with Jesus, not to come up with an accurate answer.*
- *If participants say that they don't "hear" any response, encourage them to continue to listen for the small, still voice in their hearts over the course of the week.*
- *Commit to praying for each member of your group for clarity and insights.*

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together with prayer.**

We praise thee, O God;  
we acknowledge thee to be our Lord.  
All the earth doth worship thee,  
the Father everlasting.  
To thee all Angels;  
to thee the heavens and all the powers therein.  
To thee the Cherubim and Seraphim  
cry with unceasing voice:  
Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts.  
The heavens and the earth are full  
of the majesty of thy glory.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## 6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER ✧ YEAR A ✧



# THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

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## Leader Preparation Overview



**While our salvation was won by Jesus's Death**, our lives in Christ are not completely fulfilled until we receive the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, that Jesus promised to send us. That Spirit of truth is the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. It is only through the Spirit that we are able to enter into the fullness of communion with the Father and the Son and embrace the Good News of the Gospel in our daily lives.

Today's First Reading shows us how that works. Although Jesus himself had passed through Samaria, and even revealed himself as the Messiah to the woman at the well, it wasn't until after the Holy Spirit had come that the people in that region were able to fully accept Philip and his teachings about Jesus. Then, once they were able to accept Jesus through Baptism, Peter and John came, prayed, laid hands on the people, and the Holy Spirit descended upon them.

This reading may shed some light on the important distinction between the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. Baptism brings us into the family of God, but Confirmation enables us to live out the Christian message with greater courage and conviction through the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, Jesus says that not only is the Spirit *with* us, but he also actually remains *within* us. This is why Jesus tells us that "I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you." Through the action of the Spirit, we are united in an unprecedented way with God and can truly become his sons and daughters.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

### FIRST READING

**Acts 8:5–8, 14–17**

### REFLECTION

**T**his reading shows the growth of the Church in several ways. After Jerusalem, Samaria is to be the next, followed by the rest of the world. Philip is the one who preaches the Word with power in Samaria, picking up where Stephen left off. The deacons of the Church are seen as exercising the charism received from their Ordination, and this is confirmed by miraculous signs and conversions. We see, therefore, an extension of the ministry of the Church beyond the Apostles and an indication that her territory will extend throughout the world.

The mention that the crowds who heard the Gospel in Samaria were attentive “without exception” may also suggest the first instance of the principle that would become an axiom in the early Church: “The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians.” We’re perhaps seeing in Samaria the fruit of the seed sown by St. Stephen in his martyrdom for Christ.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

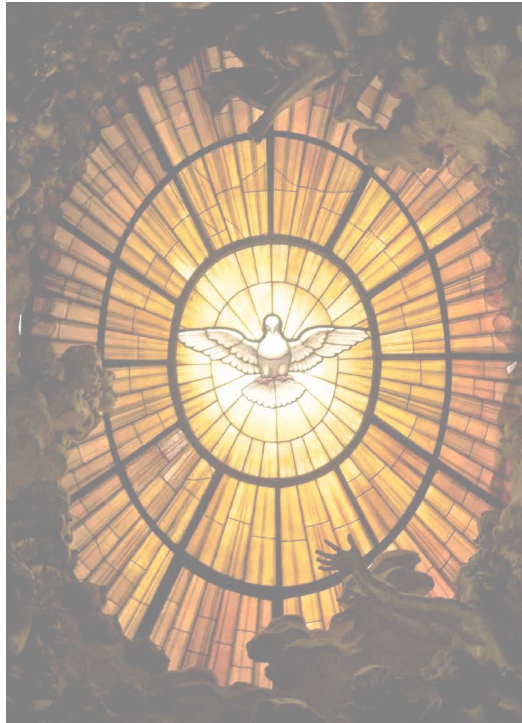
~Psalm 66:1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 16, 20~

## SECOND READING

~1 Peter 3:15-18~

## REFLECTION

**I**f it isn't clear by now, Peter is writing to a church that's suffering or is likely to suffer. But the suffering of the Church, whether obvious or secret, is a fact of our history, too. It's of the nature of Christian discipleship to suffer like Christ. Peter's particular point this week is that Christ's suffering was salvific and therefore, our sufferings should be as well. But if this is to happen, we need to know, the *why* of Christ's suffering. He chose to suffer to "lead you to God," the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous. That is, he suffered for us who were his enemies by sin. This is how he loved his enemies, not by speaking sentimental words of love to them, but by suffering for them. Those are the footsteps that we're called to walk in. And we ought to have no illusions—they're hard to follow.



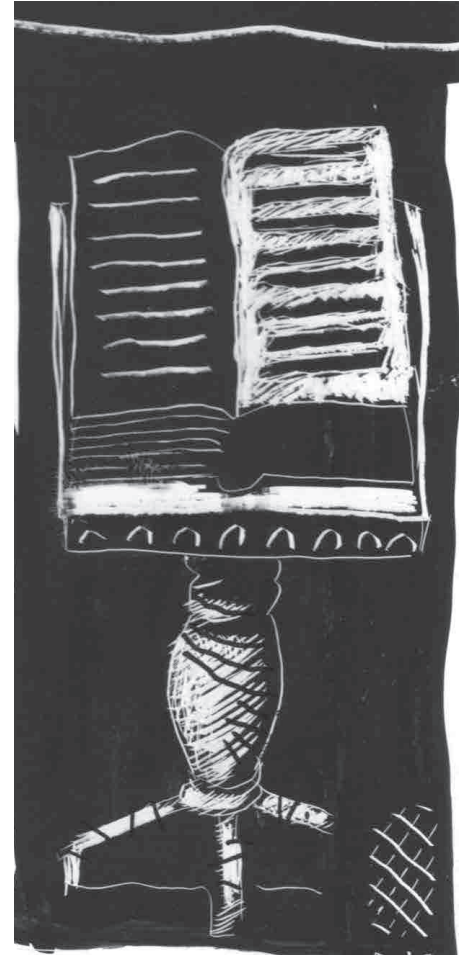
## GOSPEL

~John 14:15-21~

### REFLECTION

**J**ohn begins his Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word,” and the importance of words in his Gospel is partly derived from that foundational statement. As *the Word*, Jesus is the definitive law of God. In himself he expresses the new law, the new commandment, the new covenant of love. He makes clear in this passage that like the old covenant, one must obey the commandments of God as an act of love for God. For the Jews and for Jesus, love and law aren’t opposed—they’re vitally linked.

This obedient love leads to “seeing” and “recognizing” in John. In the RSV edition, “recognize” is translated as “know,” which better connotes of an active relationship between the knower and the one known. So obedient love, keeping the commandments, leads to a “knowing” that’s mysterious and, perhaps, comparable to the knowledge of marriage. The world cannot know the Son, Spirit, or Father in this way; rather, only the obedient disciple can be caught up in this embrace. In that embrace, love and law melt into one; just as the vows of marriage are at one and the same time a law under which the spouses place themselves and a word of love that they share.





# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Sixth Sunday of Easter. Let's open our time together by praying the first half of this great hymn to the Holy Spirit.**

Come, Holy Ghost, Creator blest,  
And in our souls take up your rest;  
Come with your grace and heavenly aid  
To fill the hearts which you have made.

O Comforter, to you we cry,  
O heavenly gift of God Most High,  
O fount of life and fire of love,  
And sweet anointing from above.

You in your sevenfold gifts are known;  
You, finger of God's hand we own;  
You, promise of the Father, you  
Who do the tongue with power imbue.

Kindle our senses from above,  
And make our hearts overflow with love;  
With patience firm and virtue high  
The weakness of our flesh supply.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**In today’s lesson we will learn about how Philip brought the Gospel to Samaria. The Samaritans and the Jews were bitter enemies, even though they were descendants of the same people. Who are some of the people we consider our “enemies” today, even though we are all children of the same God?**

*(Possible answers might include people of a different race, sexual orientation, political affiliation religion, culture, country, etc.)*

*Other answers might include people we struggle to get along with, or enemies of our country.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Today’s Gospel contains Jesus’s promise never to leave us orphans but to send “another Advocate.” Let’s explore what the presenter has to tell us about that Advocate, the Holy Spirit.**



(Play the video for the Sixth Sunday of Easter. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journals to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**According to the presenter, why did the Samaritans not fully accept Jesus himself, but then accept Philip when he preached to them?**

*(Jesus came to Samaria before the Crucifixion, when the Holy Spirit had not yet come. It was through the power of the Holy Spirit that the people were able to hear and accept the message brought to them by Philip.*

*If you have time, you may want to share some of the information from the Digging Deeper text about Samaria with the group.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**What is the distinction between Baptism and Confirmation?**

*(Through Baptism we come to share in God's life. The Holy Spirit dwells within us and we have a new relationship with God as his children through his Son, and are joined to the Body of Christ in the Church. Confirmation perfects the grace of Baptism and through the Holy Spirit deepens our communion with Jesus and the Church and strengthens us for our mission of faithfully and courageously witnessing to the Gospel with our lives in our world (see CCC 1316).*

*You may want to explain that in the early Church, Baptism and Confirmation were typically celebrated along with First Holy Communion, as we now do at the Easter Vigil.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER****SAMARIA**

**Samaria is a mountainous region in northern Palestine. In Old Testament times, it was captured by the Israelites from the Canaanites. When the Assyrians conquered the area, much of the population was taken into the Babylonian Exile. The region became a Roman province in 6 AD. In addition to meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus healed ten lepers on the border between Galilee and Samaria (Luke 17:11-19).**

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today, let us open ourselves to the Holy Spirit in prayer.**

### **PRAYER:**

Picture yourself in the crowd in Samaria as Peter and John pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit. You watch as they lay hands on the people. Now imagine that Peter comes to you and lays hands on you. What do you tell him? What does he say to you?

### **RESOLUTION:**

Ask the Holy Spirit to enter into your being in a new and profound way this week. Watch for evidence of his presence and give thanks.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and re lections and your resolutions.**

### ***LEADER TIPS:***

- *If some participants have not yet been confirmed, take time to discuss the Sacrament of Confirmation with them and help them make plans to receive it.*
- *Some people may question why we can't just pray to receive the Spirit as other churches do. For explanation and background, see the Catechism of the Catholic Church 1287–1321.*

## STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today with the second half of the prayer to the Holy Spirit.**

Come, Holy Ghost, Creator blest,  
And in our souls take up your rest;  
Come with your grace and heavenly aid  
To fill the hearts which you have made.

Far from us drive the foe we dread,  
And grant us your peace instead;  
So shall we not, with you for guide,  
Turn from the path of life aside.

Oh, may your grace on us bestow  
The Father and the Son to know;  
And you, through endless times confessed,  
Of both the eternal Spirit blest.

Now to the Father and the Son,  
Who rose from death, be glory given,  
With you, O holy Comforter,  
Henceforth by all in earth and heaven.

Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

✧ YEAR A ✧

# THROUGH THE EYES OF FAITH

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**The Apostles didn't get it.** Despite the fact Jesus told them that he was going to die and eventually ascend to the Father, they were still confused. Even in the very last moments before Jesus was to leave them, they thought he was going to restore the kingdom of Israel

and become a political ruler who would reestablish the throne of David. They really didn't get it until after the Ascension, when the Holy Spirit came and enlightened them. It's not surprising, then, that we, too, sometimes wonder why the Son had to ascend and what it means to be seated at the right hand of the Father.

Jesus returned to the right hand of the Father, not to leave us but to lead us all the way to heaven. The great paradox is because he has ascended, he is able to remain with us in a profound new way.

If Jesus had remained on earth in his physical body, he would have been present and visible in only one place. Now he is present in his Mystical Body, the Church. He is truly present in the Scriptures, in Baptism, in Confession, and in every sacramental action of the Church. And he is really present in his Body and Blood in the

Eucharist. We see him, not with our human sight, but with the eyes of faith. What we are called to do, as faithful believers, is to let the world know that the Jesus who ascended into heaven is still with us, in the Church and through the Sacraments.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

## FIRST READING

~Acts 1:1-11~

## REFLECTION

**T**his First Reading for this important celebration brims with wonderful mysteries of the kingdom that Jesus establishes in the Church. This passage is an important witness to the character of the forty days since Jesus's Resurrection from the dead. Luke tells us that it was a time of instruction for the apostles, especially about the reign or kingdom of God. This suggests that part of our faith that we refer to as Sacred Tradition, which "the Church, in her doctrine, life, and worship perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes."<sup>37</sup> (CCC 78). Jesus seems to have appeared during this period to teach these first bishops of the Church what they were to teach their flocks. Although this is speculation, we might assume that they were told where to take this message, since we know that they went all over the world proclaiming the Gospel.



They might also have been told how the Church would be ordered or worship offered. We could guess this because the Church offices, then called *episkopos*, *presbyter*, and *diakonos* (bishop, priest, and deacon) seem to appear in the rest of the New Testament without explanation; and the “breaking of bread,” the earliest term for the Eucharist or Mass, likewise seems to happen immediately in the life of the early Church, as we see in the next chapter of Acts at 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.”

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9~

## SECOND READING

~Ephesians 1:17-23~

## REFLECTION

**T**his beautiful prayer for believers from St. Paul echoes down through the centuries and resonates us today. In a sense, he is still praying it from heaven on our behalf, that we might know “the hope that belongs to his call,” “the riches of glory in his inheritance,” and “the surpassing greatness of his power.” All of this is also on display for us on this feast in the narrative about Christ’s Ascension in the First Reading. Paul will go on to explain in this same letter the dynamic by which we gain these great gifts for which he prays. At Ephesians 4:8 he quotes Psalm 68 as saying, “He ascended on high and took prisoners captive; he gave gifts to men.” He goes on to note that the “inheritance”

*he mentions in this reading is won by Christ’s descent “into the lower parts of the earth” followed by his ascent “far above all the regions.”* In this way, Christ embraces all things, fills all things, from the depths to the heights (4:9-10). He then tells us that this work of descending and ascending yields the whole ministry of the Church: of apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, the whole “to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (4:12). This is the

marvelous inheritance that Christ bequeaths to us in his Ascension to the right hand of the Father, his call, his glory, his power, present for us in the life of faith.

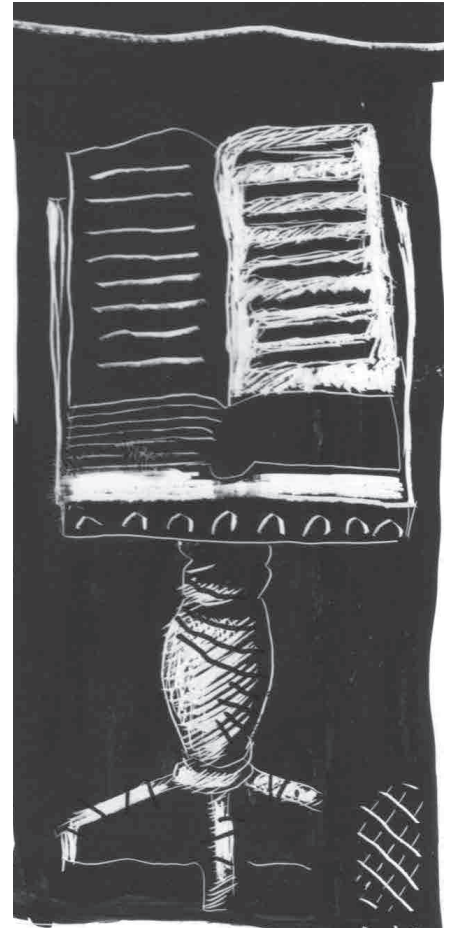
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 28:16-20~

### REFLECTION

**I**nterestingly, this passage from the end of Matthew's Gospel is not traditionally considered to be a description of the Ascension, which, as we see in the First Reading from Acts, is believed to have happened, not in Galilee, but on Mount Olivet, not far from Jerusalem where Jesus had asked the Apostles to stay until Pentecost. In Matthew's and Mark's accounts, the first witnesses at the tomb are told that Jesus would meet the disciples in Galilee but they appear not to go, because of their unbelief, and so Jesus appears in Jerusalem to them. But later they did go to Galilee. In John's Gospel we see a clear description of one of these later meetings with Jesus in Galilee, where Jesus's ministry had begun.

Why does the Church give us a Gospel Reading that precedes the Ascension, instead of a report of the Ascension as we see at the end of Luke's Gospel? Perhaps the Church wants to emphasize the commission that Jesus gives to his disciples in this episode from Galilee. In the same place that Jesus had started his own ministry, he brings his followers into that same ministry of discipling all the nations. When Jesus ascends to the right hand of the Father, he assigns to us the work he had begun. But first, we must receive the Holy Spirit, whom the Son will send from the Father, to make this work possible.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Ascension of the Lord. Let's open our time together in prayer.**

Lord Jesus, in this Easter season  
we celebrate today your Ascension to God's right  
hand as the goal of your Resurrection from the dead.  
We thank you that you have not left us orphans,  
because you remain with us to the end of time.  
May we always be glad  
when we think of the many ways you are with us  
to the end of time:  
in the Eucharist,  
in your Word,  
in one another,  
in your ministers.  
May we respond to your presence  
by keeping your commandments, above all,  
to love one another as you have loved us.  
Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**This week we are going to talk about the Ascension of Jesus into Heaven. What do you imagine when you think about the Ascension?**

*(More than likely, participants will say they see Jesus rising up into the clouds with angels surrounding him, as is shown in many religious paintings.)*

*You may want to share some pictures or even a clip from a religious film like the History Channel's 2013 special on the Bible to see how artists have envisioned the scene.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**The Ascension marks the end of Jesus's earthly ministry, but in many ways, it marks the beginning of our ministry. Let's listen as Fr. Riley breaks open the meaning of this event for us.**



(Play the video for the Ascension of the Lord. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**According to Fr. Riley, why did the Son have to ascend to the Father?**

*(Jesus ascended, not to leave us, but to lead us; not to abandon us, but to be our hope. Christ leads the way to heaven by going before us. If Jesus had not ascended, the Holy Spirit would not have descended.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**What is the work of every baptized Christian, as outlined in the video?**

*(Every baptized Christian is called to make Christ present in this world. We each have work to do—work that only we can do. Every one of us is called to bring the message of the Gospel to the world in our own unique way. We are all called to “make disciples of all nations,” as Jesus commanded just before he was taken into heaven.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER****ASCENSION THURSDAY AND HOLY DAYS OF OBLIGATION**

For centuries, the feast of the Ascension was celebrated on a Thursday, the fortieth day after Easter. However, in some dioceses, the commemoration has been moved to Sunday. This doesn't mean that the Church has changed its mind about when the Ascension occurred, but the Church allows bishops to move certain feasts pertaining to the life of the Lord to the nearest Sunday if they believe it will help the faithful better understand and participate in the celebration. Ascension Day is one of those feasts that is often moved.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**In today's Gospel, Jesus ascends to the Father, but before he does, he gives us a special charge. Let's consider what that means as we gather in prayer.**

### **PRAYER:**

Imagine being with the apostles just before Jesus ascends into Heaven. You hear Jesus say to the disciples, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem... to the ends of the earth." Now prayerfully consider those words being spoken directly to you. Imagine Jesus asking you specifically to be his witness in the world. In prayer, ask Jesus how you can be a better witness to his Kingdom on earth today.

### **RESOLUTION:**

Based on this prayerful meditation, come up with one specific thing you can do this week to be a better witness to Christ in your daily life. Then ask Jesus to help you live out this resolution.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *If participants need some ideas about how to be a witness, remind them that it isn't necessary to do great things. Small things done with love can be just as powerful.*
- *As an example, you might tell how, on the day of his election, Pope Francis reordered the way things were usually done, waiting to have the cardinals pledge their allegiance until after he addressed the crowd, because it was raining and he didn't want all the people standing out in the cold longer than necessary.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with prayer:**

O Almighty God,  
whose blessed Son our Savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all  
heavens that he might fill all things:  
Mercifully give us faith to perceive that,  
according to his promise, he abides with his Church on earth,  
even unto the end of the ages;  
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 7<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

✧ YEAR A ✧



# THE WORK OF THE FATHER

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## Leader Preparation Overview



**In today's Gospel**, a passage known as the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus in John 17, Jesus talks about the work the Father gave him to do. We might ask, "Exactly what is his work?" And many Christians probably would answer, "Dying on the Cross for the salvation of humanity." But as we unpack this reading, it becomes apparent that Jesus had something more in mind. Jesus certainly wants to save the human family, but he seems to see the need to focus on the Twelve Apostles. The work the Father gave him was to form those twelve men to be his disciples so that they would take the Gospel to the ends of the earth and make his message endure through the ages.

This challenges us to consider on a deeper level: What is our work? If we use Jesus as our example, the answer has to be that God wants us to take the same kind of ownership for the people in our lives as Jesus did in his. He wants us to invest our lives in relationships in order to become a vessel of God's love and grace for the world. Today's Gospel carries a powerful lesson for us: like Jesus, our real work, the work the Father has given us, is rooted in relationship and discipleship.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

## FIRST READING

~Acts 1:12-14~

## REFLECTION

**A**fter reading various passages from Acts that indicated the mission and growth of the infant Church after the Resurrection, we return now in our Lectionary readings to the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. We do this because this section of Acts exactly matches our place in the liturgical year. Having celebrated the Ascension of the Lord, we now await the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Church is again reminding us that what we read in Scripture, we live in the Sacraments.

We don't simply imitate what we read or dramatize it in some way in the Sacraments; we actually receive sacramentally what the disciples received. To receive the Holy Spirit we need to prepare by retiring with Mary, the faithful women, and the Apostles to an upper room of prayer to invite a fresh anointing from the Spirit. The world won't recognize the Spirit because it doesn't receive the Son with obedient love. That's why we attend this Sunday Eucharist: to receive the Son so that we might recognize the Spirit at Pentecost.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 27:1, 4, 7-8~

## SECOND READING

~1 Peter 4:13-16~

## REFLECTION

**T**his passage describes what the saints have consistently referred to as the height of Christian discipleship. St. Peter's phrasing is very close to the Beatitude: "Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven" (Matthew 5:11-12). The common teaching is that this isn't only the last Beatitude, but the greatest. The reasoning goes that if we suffer for Christ, we're most conformed to him in his total gift of himself to the Father for our salvation. By that same reasoning, martyrdom is the highest calling; all vocations, whether lay, religious, or Holy Orders, participate in some measure in the character of the martyr's self-offering to Christ.

Every philosophy and religion has wrestled with human suffering, either to accept or reject it, but none considers it blessed. In this, Christianity is utterly unique. Because God has united himself to us in our suffering by suffering in the Person of Jesus, he has made suffering a blessing. Only this can transform suffering from a curse to a source of union with God.

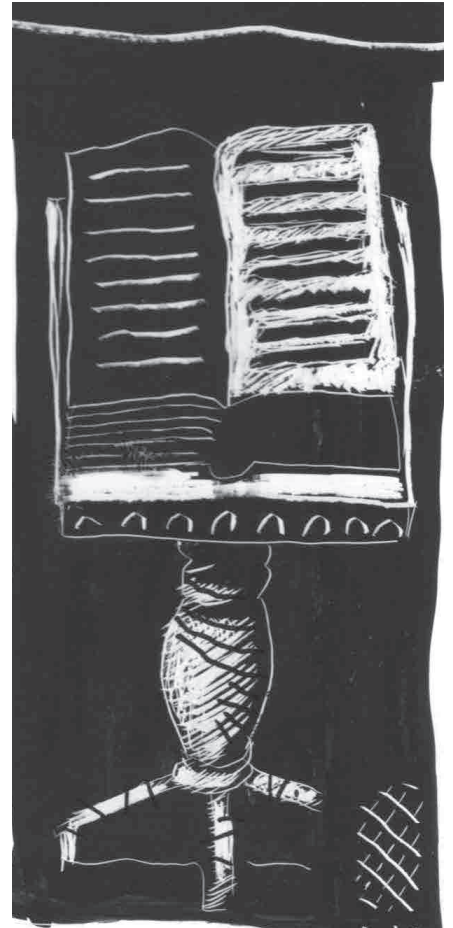
## GOSPEL

~John 17:1-11a~

### REFLECTION

**T**he *Catechism* says explicitly that John 17 (the High Priestly Prayer) “embraces the whole economy of creation and salvation” (2746) and then goes on to list some of these themes in 2748: “God and the world; the Word and the flesh; eternal life and time; the love that hands itself over and the sin that betrays it; the disciples present and those who will believe in him by their word; humiliation and glory.”

There’s clear division in Jesus’s prayer. The first part is the “prayer of glory” in verses 1 through 5. This section testifies most strongly to the origins of salvation history in the Godhead and in Eden. Jesus confesses that he is one in glory with the Father. Jesus speaks of the “work” he has completed, suggesting the re-creation (our salvation), which he performs to parallel the work of creation that he shared with the Father at the beginning of time. Another theme is expressed in the verb “to know.” This is a clear reference to that deep, marital, covenantal form of knowing. In the second section of this passage, verses 6 through 11, Jesus has revealed that “Yahweh saves,” which is the import of his name in Hebrew. It is precisely as God that Jesus saves us, which is revealed in his very name.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Seventh Sunday of Easter. Let's begin now with prayer.**

Lord God,  
We come before you now, with all our needs, our hopes, our dreams, our sorrows.  
We want to do the work you have given us.  
We want to love the people you have placed in our lives.  
We want to become the men and women you have created us to be.  
But we cannot do these things alone.  
We need you to help us, to guide us, to strengthen us.  
Come now, Lord God,  
And enter into our lives in a new and powerful way  
So that we can become all that you desire for us.  
Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**In today's Gospel, Jesus fervently prays for his disciples in their presence. How powerful that must have been for the disciples to hear their master pray for them! Have you ever had someone say they were going to pray for you and you knew that they really were going to do it? What does it feel like to have someone pray for you and your intentions?**

*(One point you may want to make at the end of the discussion is that if we say we are going to pray for someone, we need to actually follow through with that promise. All too often, we say we will pray and then don't actually do it—but telling someone we will pray for them is a serious commitment of faith.)*

#### DIGGING DEEPER

##### INTERCESSORY PRAYER



“Intercession is a prayer of petition which leads us to pray as Jesus did. He is the one intercessor with the Father on behalf of all men, especially sinners.<sup>112</sup> He is ‘able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.’<sup>113</sup> The Holy Spirit ‘himself intercedes for us . . . and intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.’”<sup>114</sup>

—CCC 2634

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA —

### SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**The Gospel of John contains some of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament, but also some of the most difficult to understand. In this video, we get some insights into Jesus's prayer for his disciples—a part of John's Gospel that is known as Jesus's High Priestly Prayer.**

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Rom 8:34; 1 Jn 2:1; 1 Tim 2:5-8.

<sup>113</sup> Heb 7:25.

<sup>114</sup> Rom 8:26-27.



(Play the video for Seventh Sunday of Easter. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**According to the presenter, what is the “work” that Jesus believed he was given by the Father?**

*(Jesus saw his fundamental work as forming the twelve men he chose as apostles to be his followers, so that they could pass on his message to us.)*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**How is the work the Father gives us related to Jesus’s own work?**

*(As the presenter said, this is not an easy passage, so you may have to explain this in more detail or even replay the video.)*

*Basically, the presenter says that just as Jesus’s work involved an intimate relationship with his Apostles in order to form them into disciples, our work involves our intimate investment in the people God has placed in our lives in order to help them—and ourselves—grow in faith and love.)*



# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Let's place ourselves in today's Gospel, along with the disciples, and listen to what Jesus is saying about each of us.**

### **PRAYER:**

Imagine Jesus praying to the Father the prayer from today's Gospel, reading specifically for you. He says to the Father: "I do not pray for the world but for the one you have given me, because (insert your name) is yours, and everything of mine is yours and everything of yours is mine, and I have been glorified in (insert your name)." What goes through your mind as you hear this prayer? How does it feel to know that Jesus is praying for you right now? What would you want Jesus to ask the Father on your behalf?

### **RESOLUTION:**

This week, whenever you are tempted by fear, discouragement, or doubt, remember that Jesus is praying for you before the Father. Allow that thought to drive out any negative feelings or emotions.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIP:**

- *Encourage group members to each reread Jesus's prayer this week, but substitute their own name. Reading the Scriptures and making them personal is a powerful way to increase faith.*

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

***I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.***

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today by praying another prayer Jesus prayed with his disciples—the Our Father.**

Our Father, Who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be Thy Name;  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## PENTECOST SUNDAY

✧ YEAR A ✧



# THE HOLY SPIRIT

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## Leader Preparation Overview



**This week we celebrate** Pentecost, the feast of the Church's birth. With a roaring of the heavens and in tongues of fire, the Holy Spirit comes and enlightens the Apostles. Peter begins to preach with boldness and authority what Christ's life and Death truly means.

From that moment, the great mission of the Church begins.

The Apostles were emboldened to spread the Gospel, not on their own, but through the power of the Holy Spirit who descended on the upper room that spring day.

Who and what is the Holy Spirit? In many ways, the Holy Spirit is the most difficult of the three Persons of the Trinity for us to comprehend, yet he is fully and truly God, co-equal with the Father and Son. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. The mutual, eternal, perfect love of the Father and the Son is the third Person of the Holy Trinity—the Holy Spirit.

When we are baptized, the Holy Spirit is breathed into our souls, but the Spirit's work within us is intensified in the Sacrament of Confirmation. When we are confirmed, like the Apostles, we are strengthened to give greater witness to the faith. The Holy Spirit comes to each of us, bestowing his gifts. He directs us in a particular way, as a member of the Body of Christ, for the common good of the entire Church.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR PENTECOST SUNDAY

### FIRST READING

**Acts 2:1–11**

### REFLECTION

**T**he Jewish feast of Pentecost was both a harvest festival and a celebration of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai after the Passover. The events surrounding the giving of the law can be seen in Exodus, chapters 19 and 20. God demonstrated his power with remarkable signs on Sinai so that the covenant formed with Israel might be riveted in the memories of his people.

The author of the Book of Hebrews speaks of these events in Exodus, contrasting it with the new Christian covenant: “You have not approached that which could be touched and a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and storm and a trumpet blast and a voice speaking words such that those who heard begged that no message be further addressed to them,” (The author of Hebrews goes on to say, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,” (v. 22; RSV: 2CE). He goes on to also mention the angels and the assembly of the first-born of a new covenant, the mediator of which is not Moses, but Jesus, God Incarnate. Pentecost is this new covenant assembly on Mount Zion, the

location of the Upper Room where Mary and the Apostles gathered in prayer to await the gift of God's Spirit and the fullness of the new covenant in Christ. When we assemble for Mass with the angels and the first-born above to recall that event, we are taken up into that originating event of our faith and united with the heavenly Jerusalem.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34~

## SECOND READING

~1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13~

## REFLECTION

**I**n this passage from Paul's great ecclesiological (relating to the theology of the Church) chapter from 1 Corinthians, we see that God's new covenant people are Spirit-formed.

The principle theme is the unity of the Church born from the one Spirit who inspires all the various gifts with which we are to be endowed. St. Paul's experience was of a Church rich in spiritual gifts, so that he could say, "To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit." In the Revised Standard Version the same text (12:7) is rendered, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

We might want to ask ourselves: *In what way do I manifest the Spirit to others for the common good of the Church?* And if we want to get some ideas as to how we might manifest the Spirit, we should read the middle verses of this passage, which we don't hear at Mass, 12:8-10. There we see that wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues are given to each one individually as the Spirit will (v. 11). Is this the Church we see today? If not, perhaps we have not yielded to the coming of the Spirit. This is the day to begin.

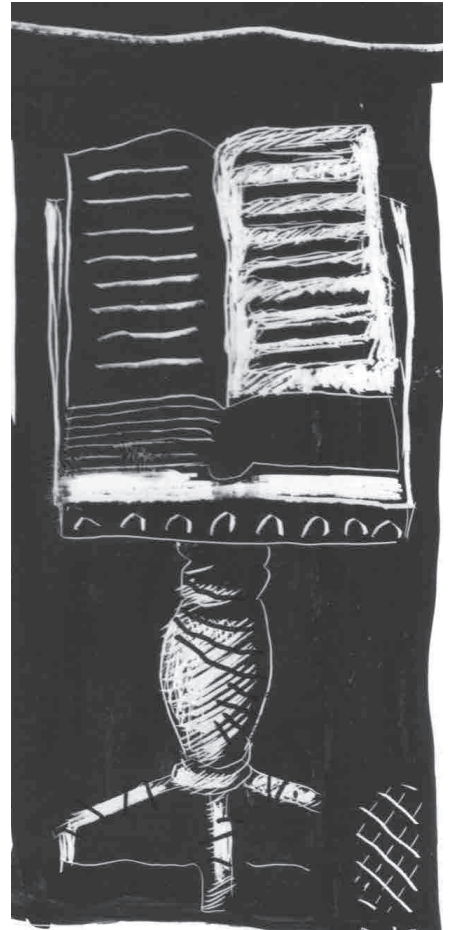
## GOSPEL

~John 20:19-23~

### REFLECTION

**O**n the feast of the Ascension we noted that the Gospel reading for that day actually reported an event prior to the Ascension, a meeting after the Resurrection of Jesus and his disciples in Galilee, during which Jesus told them that they were to disperse throughout the world baptizing and making disciples. Similarly, in the readings for Pentecost we hear about a post-Resurrection appearance of Jesus to his Apostles prior to Pentecost, in which he tells them about a critical part of their future ministry. Though on the Ascension Jesus instructed the Apostles in their ministry of teaching and Baptism, today he gives them the power to forgive sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Jesus breathes the Spirit on them for this purpose, saying to his bishops, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

Here Jesus echoes what he had said earlier to them: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18). Now they receive the gift of the Spirit to perform that ministry. Of all the wonderful gifts that the Spirit bestows upon the Church, this is perhaps one of the greatest, coming to us through the ministry of our bishops and priests. The mission of Son and the Spirit is to free us from sin, that slavery that binds us beyond our own power to loose. And the Son and Spirit are still working in the hierarchical ministry of the Church—which is a ministry, not of power as the world speaks of it, but of the divine power of mercy.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for Pentecost. Let's open our time together by saying this prayer to the Holy Spirit written by St. Alphonsus Liguori.**

Holy Spirit,  
Divine Consoler,  
I adore You as my true God,  
with God the Father and God the Son.  
I adore You and unite myself to the adoration  
You receive from the angels and saints.

I give You my heart  
and I offer my ardent thanksgiving  
for all the grace which You never cease to bestow on me. Amen.



## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost and the sending of the Holy Spirit. What do you envision when you pray to the Holy Spirit?**

*(Tongues of fire, a dove, and a wind are all possible answers.)*

*If people say they have trouble envisioning the Spirit, affirm that it can be a challenge and then suggest that they pray one of the prayers from this week's lesson to develop a deeper relationship with the Spirit.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**As we celebrate Pentecost, let's learn a bit more about what the Holy Spirit meant in the lives of the Apostles—and what the Holy Spirit means in our lives today.**



(Play the video for Pentecost. This will play for approximately seven minutes.)

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## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journals to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1****According to Father Riley, what is the Holy Spirit?**

*(The Holy Spirit is God, the third Person of the Trinity, co-equal with the Father and the Son. He is a person in the fullest sense of the word.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2****Who is the Holy Spirit?**

*(The Son is God the Father's self-knowledge, the Logos, the Word of God. The Holy Spirit is the relationship between the Father and the Son. The mutual, eternal, perfect love of the Father and the Son is a divine third Person—the Holy Spirit.)*

*See Article 8 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church for a more in-depth explanation.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER****CONFIRMATION**

“Baptism, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of Confirmation together constitute the ‘sacraments of Christian initiation,’ whose unity must be safeguarded. It must be explained to the faithful that the reception of the sacrament of Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace.<sup>89</sup> For ‘by the sacrament of Confirmation, [the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.’”<sup>90</sup> —CCC 1285

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Roman Ritual, Rite of Confirmation (OC), Introduction 1.

<sup>90</sup> LG 11; Cf. OC, Introduction 2.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Father Riley quotes St. Cyril of Jerusalem. Let us use that quote for our meditative prayer today.**

### **PRAYER:**

“The Spirit makes one man a teacher of divine truth, inspires another to prophesy, gives another the power of casting out devils, enables another to interpret holy Scripture. The Spirit strengthens one man’s self-control, shows another how to help the poor, teaches another to fast and lead a life of asceticism, makes another oblivious to the needs of the body, trains another for martyrdom. His action is different in different people, but the Spirit himself is always the same.”

What action of the Holy Spirit that St. Cyril mentions do you notice most in your life? What action of the Spirit do you want to allow more into your life? Spend a few minutes in silent prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to help you in that way.

### **RESOLUTION:**

Once you have determined a potential gift of the Spirit in your life, consider ways that you might bring that gift into fullness in your family, your work, and your parish.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

**LEADER TIPS:**

- *Discerning the work of the Spirit isn't always easy, but, as Father Riley said, asking for that revelation is a prayer that will always be answered. Encourage participants to pray for wisdom and insight.*
- *Galatians 5:22 lists additional signs of the Spirit in a person's life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

**STEP #6****STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER**

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today in prayer.**

Father,  
 Through Cyril of Jerusalem  
 you led your Church to a deeper understanding  
 of the mysteries of salvation.  
 Let his prayers help us to know your Son better  
 and to have eternal life in all its fullness.  
 Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
 who lives and reigns with you  
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
 one God, forever and ever.  
 Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## THE MOST HOLY TRINITY SUNDAY



✧ YEAR A ✧

## THREE PERSONS—ONE GOD

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**In our reading from Exodus,** Moses has an incredible encounter with God. Moses didn't want an abstract knowledge of God, but wanted to know the Person of God, to see the face of God, to learn God's name. In response, God reveals his innermost name.

Why is this so important? When we know a person's name, we can enter into a relationship with them. So when Moses learns God's name, he begins to learn God's character as well.

Moses talks about God's rich, steadfast love, and those characteristics become a kind of mission statement: "The LORD, the LORD, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity." In fact, this "mission statement" from Exodus 34 is the most quoted line of the Pentateuch. Throughout their history, the Israelites have held onto God's mercy and from that identity comes God's deeds—his mercy, his kindness, and his steadfast love.

Then in the Gospel of John, we get the famous line about God so loving the world, that he gave his only Son. This highlights two of the key actions of God: first his love, and second, his giving. Through this we learn that love is an action, not a feeling, and that love is expressed in giving.

From all of this we come to realize that God is a loving God who wants to share his goodness with us, so he gives us the Son, who infinitely gives himself back to the Father. This love and mutual self-giving is the Person of the Holy Spirit, for God is love and his deeds are love. God is one God, with Three Persons united in love, and the Holy Spirit is the manifestation of that giving love.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE MOST HOLY TRINITY SUNDAY

### FIRST READING

**Exodus 34:4b–6, 8–9**

### REFLECTION

**I**n this passage from Exodus we get just a glimpse of a larger and richer scene in which God grants to Moses, as the mediator for Israel, a forty-day-long mystical experience of himself so profound that it alters Moses's appearance, causing his face to shine or glow (34:29). In this scene, though prostrate on the ground in adoration, Moses, in a remarkable show of intimacy, can say to this awesome God, "If I find favor with you, O LORD, do come along in our company." God acknowledges this simple invitation to "come along," declaring in a later verse, "Behold I make a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been wrought in all the earth or in any nation" (Exodus 34:10; RSV:2CE).

Unlike Moses, who makes “haste to bow his head” (Exodus 34:8; RSV: 2CE), the Israelites are “stiff-necked” (v. 9), yet God elects them for what he calls a “terrible thing” (v. 10), an awesome display of his grace and mercy at Sinai and beyond. Through them, in their Messiah, Jesus Christ, he will reveal the inner secret of his eternal mystery of personal communion, of which the covenant he forms with this people is but a faint reflection. But already, in Moses, we see that covenant communion with God is transformative in the deepest sense. Not only does it make his face glow, but it also makes his life of surrender to God a magnificent beacon for the whole human race down the centuries.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Daniel 3:52, 53, 54, 55~

## SECOND READING

~2 Corinthians 13:11-13~

### REFLECTION

**I**n our **Second Reading**, from the Lectionary we get a very similar message to the passage from Exodus in our First Reading.. St. Paul, in effect, exhorts the Corinthians not to be “stiff-necked.” If they will mend their ways and live in love and peace with one another, then “the God of love and peace” will be with them. In order to have God remain “in our company,” we must remain true to the great commandment of the new covenant to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves. From its foundations, one of the primary characteristics of the Church has been the love that its members show for one another.

That shocking love displayed among early Christians was one of the clearest signs that God had bestowed his special grace upon them, and it gave the Church a tremendous gravitational force, attracting new adherents at a surprising rate. If we don’t see a dramatic harvest of souls in our own day, ought we not to ask ourselves whether our love for our neighbor would shock anyone enough to cause them to investigate the Christian life? If not, then what we need is more of the “love,” “grace” and “fellowship”



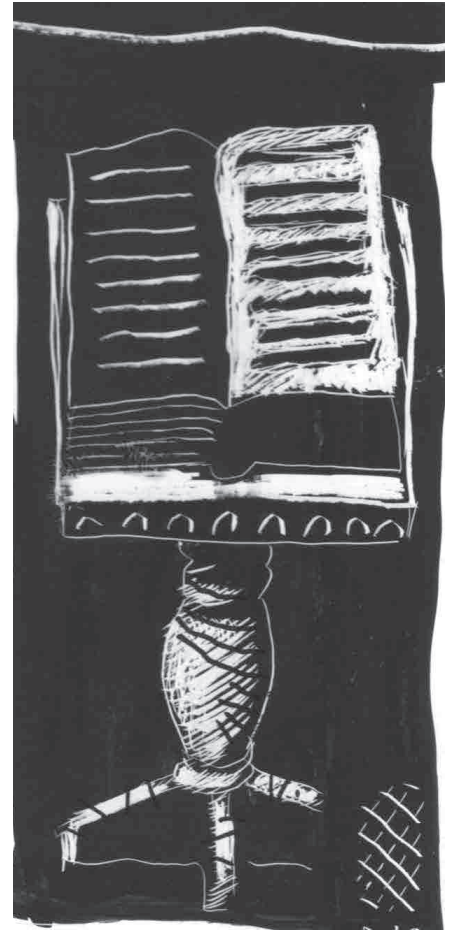
of the three Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—to which St. Paul commits the Corinthians in the closing words of this passage, which also closes the entire epistle from which it is drawn.

## GOSPEL

~John 3:16-18~

### REFLECTION

“**G**od so loved the world...” This is one of the best known phrases from the Bible. It’s not at all uncommon to see “John 3:16” on placards at sporting events or even on roadside billboards. It has become emblematic of the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ because it tells us in brief about the whole of salvation history and the Father’s plan for the human race. In Jesus, the Father’s only Son, the Father announces not only his intent to save the world, but also his very divine identity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the Person of Christ, these two dimensions of the Gospel, redemption and revelation, are intimately united. By revealing who he is, God simultaneously reveals his saving love. The God who loves us to the end—as St. John will later say in Chapter 13 in his Gospel—reveals the depth of that love first in his self-revelation to us that he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Out of the immense fire of love that God is in himself—the eternal exchange of love between the three divine Persons—comes the saving love of Christ’s Incarnation. The pierced side of our Savior on the Cross pierces our hearts to reveal the essence of Trinitarian love. The immensity of the divine love, in both its redeeming and revealing dimensions, fills us with the confidence that he comes not to condemn the world, but so that we “might not perish but have eternal life.”



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Most Holy Trinity Sunday. Let's open our time together by praying the first part of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity's prayer:**

O my God,  
Trinity whom I adore; help me to forget myself entirely that I may be established in you as still and as peaceful as if my soul were already in eternity. May nothing trouble my peace or make me leave you, O my Unchanging One, but may each minute carry me further into the depths of your mystery. Give peace to my soul; make it your heaven, your beloved dwelling and your resting place. May I never leave you there alone but be wholly present, my faith wholly vigilant, wholly adoring, and wholly surrendered to your creative action.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**When God revealed his name to Moses, he was also revealing some of the characteristics of his nature. What are some of the names of God that you know, and how do they reveal God’s character?**

*(Possible answers might include Father, Lord, Son, Holy Spirit, Yahweh, Jehovah, Jesus, Good Shepherd.*

*Father shows how God loves each of us as his child.*

*Lord points out our relationship to God, as the ruler of our lives.*

*Son indicates both the interpersonal relationship of the three persons of the Trinity, but also shows that since we are all children of God, Jesus is also our brother.*

*Holy Spirit is God as the love of the Father and Son made manifest.*

*The exact meaning of Yahweh is unclear, but it is generally assumed to be related to God's statement to Moses, “I am who am.” It indicates God's eternal, creative nature.*

*Jehovah can mean “The Existing One” or “Lord” and shows God's sovereignty.*

*Good Shepherd reveals God's individual care and love for each person.)*

#### **DIGGING DEEPER**

##### **NAMES OF GOD**



**The Old Testament has numerous names of God, which reflect his character and his deeds. Here are just a few:**

- *Jehovah-Jireh: “The Lord our provider” (Genesis 22:14)*
- *Jehovah-Nissi: “Our banner, a banner of love and protection” (Exodus 17:15)*
- *Jehovah-Shalom: “Our perfect peace” (Judges 6:24)*
- *Jehovah-Tsid-Kenu: “The LORD our justice.” (Jeremiah 33:16)*
- *Jehovah-Sabaoth: “The Lord of Hosts, our Protector” (Psalm 46:7)*
- *Jehovah-Raah: “Our Shepherd who tenderly leads us, loves us, and will keep us safe” (Psalm 23)*
- *Jehovah Rapha: “I am the Lord your Physician” or “I am the Lord your Healer” (Exodus 15:26)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Today we celebrate the feast of the Most Holy Trinity. Let's listen to what the presenter explains about this central teaching of the Christian faith.**



(Play the video for the Most Holy Trinity Sunday. This will play for approximately seven minutes.)

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**According to the presenter, what is one key to God's identity, his "mission statement," so to speak?**

*(According to the presenter, one way we can view God's "mission statement" is in the quote from Exodus 34, the most quoted line from the Pentateuch: "The LORD, the LORD, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity.")*

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**What are some qualities of the Trinity that the presenter talks about?**

*(The Trinity is based in love and mutual self-giving.*

*The Father gives the Son to us, and the Son gives himself back in love to the Father.*

*The Person of the Holy Spirit proceeds from the mutual love and self-giving of the Father and the Son.)*

## STEP #5

### LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**This Sunday, we are asked to think about the nature of God.**

#### **PRAYER:**

In the reading from Exodus, we are told that the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and rich in kindness and fidelity. Do you think God is merciful in your life? Slow to anger? In what ways have you experienced God's kindness and fidelity? How does this description of God's character help you grow in your relationship with God?

#### **RESOLUTION:**

Consider all the ways that God has been gracious, slow to anger, and kind to you. You may want to write down these things this week so that you remember them and can see how God is intimately involved in your life.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts, reflections, and your resolutions.**

**LEADER TIPS:**

- Encourage participants to experiment with their prayers to notice if they expect different things from different Persons of the Trinity.
- A gratitude journal is an excellent way to become more aware of God's goodness.. Suggest starting such journals to your group.

**STEP #6****STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER**

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today with the last part of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity's prayer:**

O my 'Three,'  
 my All,  
 my Beatitude,  
 infinite Solitude,  
 Immensity in whom I lose myself,  
 I surrender myself to you as your prey.  
 Bury yourself in me  
 that I may bury myself in you  
 until I depart to contemplate in your light  
 the abyss of your greatness.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

# THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (CORPUS CHRISTI)

✧ YEAR A ✧

## TAKE AND EAT



### Leader Preparation Overview



**When we receive Holy Communion**, we hear the words, “This is my Body” and “This is my Blood,” to which we dutifully answer, “Amen.” But have you ever considered exactly what those words mean?

Today’s Gospel asks us to examine Jesus’s statement in a new way, because when we really look at them, his words are as shocking now as they were two thousand years ago. Jesus is telling us to eat his flesh and drink his blood! Little wonder people thought he was suggesting cannibalism when they first heard this teaching.

As Catholics we receive the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ each time we receive the Eucharist. But do we really believe that? It’s a question worth examining because in the Mass, Jesus is truly made present under the appearance of bread and wine.

Each time we attend Mass, we celebrate the fact our God loves us so much that he nourishes us with himself so that we can become saints. It is both the greatest gift—and greatest mystery—of our faith. Ultimately, it is also the principal reason to be a Catholic—in order to receive the Lord in Holy Communion, just as he commanded the Jews of his day...and invites us to do today.



**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

## FIRST READING

~Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14b-16a~

## REFLECTION

“He therefore let you be afflicted with hunger, and then fed you with manna, a food unknown to you and your fathers, in order to show you that not by bread alone does one live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the LORD.” In this evocative text from Deuteronomy, we see into the way that God makes history and its events into lessons of wisdom for his people. At this early stage in the formation of the Israelites people, God brings them out of bondage from Egypt; yet, he allows them to suffer in order to form their obedience to and reliance on him. This will be a vital lesson, one to which the psalmists and prophets will return often to help Israel remember its reasons for covenant fidelity to God.

This same lesson for Israel can work in just the same way for the new people of God, the Church. We grumble often, just as did the Hebrews, over our difficulties. Like them, we sometimes lack

the faith to see that everything God allows to happen to us, whether positive or negative in our perspective, is intended for our good. Every difficulty prepares us to adhere to him with a deeper obedience and love. Like Israel, the hardest lesson we have to learn is one of the simplest: that God is infinitely good and only wills our good.

## SECOND READING

~1 Corinthians 10:16-17~

### REFLECTION

**S**t. Paul's **First Letter to the Corinthians** gives us the earliest description from the Christian era of the Church's faith in the Eucharist. Jesus, of course, would have uttered the clear words that we hear today in John's Gospel many years before Paul's letter (written around 57 AD), and those words very much help us to see what Paul is referring to. But if we didn't have John 6 (or Luke 22) to help us, we could still go a long way to reconstructing the Eucharistic Faith of the earliest Christians.

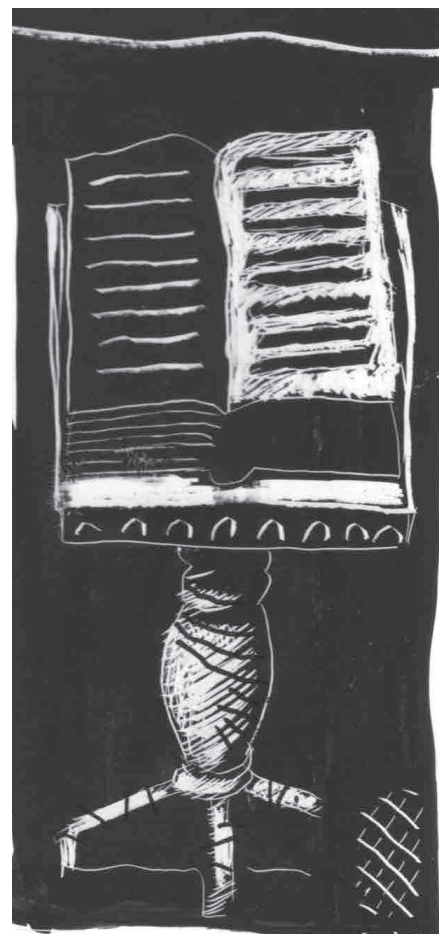
Here Paul says that the "cup of blessing"—likely a reference to the third cup of the Jewish Passover Seder that Jesus offered at the Last Supper—is a "participation in the blood of Christ," and then that the "bread that we break"—likely an echo of the many New Testament references to the "breaking of bread" as a common facet of the early Church—is also a participation in his body. This word in the Greek is *koinonia*, which is sometimes translated as "communion" or "fellowship," as well as "participation." It comes from the root *koina*, meaning "common." In the many uses of the term in the New Testament, it implies a deep form of shared life. Paul goes on to say that this sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ makes for both a mysterious sharing of his life and a mysterious sharing of oneness in his Body, the Church.

## GOSPEL

~John 6:51-58~

### REFLECTION

**T**he Church usually pairs the first Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading so that we can see that Jesus is the fullness of revelation and the summation and completion of the divine plan. But this habit of pairing Old Testament and New Testament texts to show their interrelation and to cast light on the mystery of Christ and his Church is not something made up by the Church. Rather, it is something she inherits from Christ and the Evangelists who recorded the words and acts of his ministry. When Christ says of his own Body and Blood, “This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever,” he is making a clear association between the manna of the Exodus, which fed the natural hunger of the Hebrews in their desert journey, and the new manna from Heaven, which he will give to feed our deepest hunger. And just as the Exodus manna was real food, so too is the bread he will give: “For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.” And this real sharing of his Body and Blood will yield just the sort of *koinonia* that St. Paul mentions in our Second Reading: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” The Eucharist is thus the sacrament that binds the Church together into Christ's Body.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for Corpus Christi Sunday, also known as the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ. Let's open our time together by praying the famous prayer called the *Anima Christi*, which means "Soul of Christ."**

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.  
Body of Christ, save me.  
Blood of Christ, inebriate me.  
Water from Christ's side, wash me.  
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.  
O good Jesus, hear me.  
Within thy wounds hide me.  
Suffer me not to be separated from thee.  
From the malicious enemy defend me.  
In the hour of my death call me  
and bid me come unto thee,  
that I may praise thee with thy saints  
and with thy angels,  
forever and ever. Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**In today’s Gospel, Jesus teaches about the Eucharist—giving us his Body and Blood to eat and drink—which is very shocking to the people. The crowds are upset, and even some of Jesus’s own disciples leave him over this teaching. Have you ever been shocked by something? Maybe it was on the news or perhaps it was something in your own life, but when was the last time you were truly shocked by something you saw or heard? What did you do?**

*(Possible answers might be hearing of a murder or accident on the news or learning of a death in the family.)*

*Reactions will differ, but one common theme will probably be shock and disbelief. Depending on the event, other emotions might be anger or disgust. The idea is to get participants to connect with the reactions of Jesus’s disciples to this news.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**As we take a look at the great gift Jesus left us when he gave us his Body and Blood in the Eucharist, let’s think about how shocking it might have been the first time people heard Jesus say, “Eat my Body and drink my Blood.”**



(Play the video for Corpus Christi. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1


**Have you ever stopped to consider that the Eucharist is truly the Body and Blood of Our Lord? Does it seem shocking to you that, as Catholics, we believe that we literally are fed by our God? Can you understand why it would be shocking to others?**

*(This is a wonderful chance to help people really understand the idea that we don't just think of the Eucharist as a commemoration or a remembrance, but that it truly is the Body and Blood of Jesus.*

*If participants have questions, see the explanation of Transubstantiation in "Digging Deeper.")*

### DIGGING DEEPER

#### TRANSUBSTANTIATION



**"The Council of Trent summarizes the Catholic teaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist by declaring: 'Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation.'"**<sup>206</sup> —CCC 1376

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**What two sacraments did Jesus institute at the Last Supper?**

*(Jesus instituted the Eucharist when at the Last Supper he said, "Take and eat...This is my body." He instituted the Sacrament of Holy Orders when he said, "Do this in remembrance of me," commanding the Apostles to make present the mystery of the Last Supper in the Eucharist.)*

<sup>206</sup> Council of Trent (1551): DS 1642; cf. Mt 26:26 ff.; Mk 14:22 ff.; Lk 22:19 ff.; 1 Cor 11:24 ff.

## STEP #5

### LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**In today's Gospel, we, along with the disciples, are first told by Jesus that we must eat his Body and drink his Blood to be saved.**

#### **PRAYER:**

Picture yourself listening to Jesus.

You hear him say that “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.” For a moment put aside what you know about the Eucharist and imagine what might go through your mind when you hear those words. Are you shocked? Horrified? Curious? If you could ask Jesus a question at that moment, what would you ask? Now imagine yourself attending Mass. It's time to receive the Eucharist, and as you approach the altar, think about Jesus's words. How does this change the way you receive the Eucharist?

#### **RESOLUTION:**

The next time you receive Communion, really think about the fact that you are receiving the actual Body and Blood of the Lord, under the species (or appearance) of bread and wine. Make sure that you are in a worthy state (no serious sin) before you receive.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

#### **DIGGING DEEPER**

##### **CORPUS CHRISTI HISTORY**



The feast began in 1246 when St. Juliana of Mont Cornillon convinced her bishop to celebrate a day in honor of the Body and Blood of Christ. The devotion spread, and on September 8, 1264, Pope Urban IV established it as a universal feast of the Church. At the Pope's request, St. Thomas Aquinas composed the official prayers of the Church for the celebration, including the hymns “Pange Lingua Gloriosi” and “Tantum Ergo Sacramentum.”

#### **LEADER TIPS:**

- Encourage participants to examine their conscience before receiving Communion and go to Confession if they are in a state of mortal sin.
- For further reading on the Eucharist, see Pope St. John Paul II's encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, available at: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).



## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today with the "Tantum Ergo Sacramentum," a Eucharistic hymn written by St. Thomas Aquinas for the Feast of Corpus Christi.**

#### **Tantum Ergo Sacramentum**

Down in adoration falling,  
Lo! the sacred Host we hail;  
Lo! o'er ancient forms departing  
newer rites of grace prevail;  
faith for all defects supplying,  
where the feeble senses fail.

To the everlasting Father,  
and the Son who reigns on high,  
with the Holy Ghost proceeding  
forth from each eternally,  
be salvation, honor blessing,  
might and endless majesty. Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 12<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



# DO NOT BE AFRAID

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**Jesus was very clear** about the cost of discipleship. It might entail family division, persecution, and even death. He didn't mince words when he talked about the hardships his followers would face. And yet, at the same time he says, "Do not be afraid."

Isn't this a bit of a contradiction? Does it seem odd that Jesus warns us about future difficulties but then tells us not to worry?

However, the key to understanding this Sunday's Gospel reading lies in what Jesus means by "fear." First, Jesus is telling us that we should not fear our enemies in this world. We needn't have the kind of stomach churning, heart-pounding fear that comes from being terrified of the persecutions we may face. God the Father knows us even down to the hairs on our head, and he will be with us to help us face whatever sufferings we might encounter.

In today's Gospel, the Lord encourages us, instead of fearing persecution, to have instead a healthy fear of the Lord—which is the fear or awe that a person might have in the presence of a good, noble, and magnificent king.

That kind of fear empowers us to live out the Christian life in a heroic, unfearful manner. By trusting in such a good God who will be with us in whatever obstacles we might face, we are free to be bold in our witness to the Gospel. Now while it's true that some Christians may be asked to give up their lives as a result of following Jesus, for most of us our call to heroism will consist of the daily sacrifices that ordinary life calls for. The sacrifice of forgoing gossip, of enduring insults, of being misunderstood, of holding our tongues and our tempers.

While today's Gospel might seem foreboding, we have nothing to fear. Even the worst thing that could happen--death--has been conquered by Christ's Resurrection.

***LEADER TIPS:***

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE TWELFTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING ~Jeremiah 20:10-13~

### REFLECTION

**T**he first words of our **First Reading** can be quite chilling. “Terror” is a word with which we have become all too familiar, and the prophet Jeremiah suffered the threat of it from his own people for having prophesied to them about their infidelities and sins. As a consequence, he is considered not only a prophet of the Babylonian exile, which was the punishment that God exacted the infidelities and sins the part of his people, but also prophet of the suffering Saviour. Many of Jeremiah’s words are employed in the Lenten season to express the inner turmoil of Christ himself as he approached and underwent his Passion and Death. But his words extend, too, to Christ’s Resurrection, which we can see reflected in the final portion of this text, which launches into a brief and energetic song of praise to God for vindicating the poor one and saving him from death.

As we have so often seen in the Lectionary, this theme of the suffering prophet will be echoed in the texts that follow, showing that God has arranged history so that his lessons of wisdom are repeated or echoed throughout that history. We might be reminded of the old educational maxim that “repetition is the mother of learning.” This week we see Jeremiah, then Paul, and finally our Lord Jesus reinforce the importance of his saving work and to convince us of his love. We are all slow learners of this lesson, and so it bears repeating.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 69:8-10, 14, 17, 33-35~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 5:12-15~

### REFLECTION

**S**t. Paul teaches the Church in Rome that Jesus, and the great gift he gives us, is best understood in the light of the loss of the gift of grace that we suffered in Adam. He tells us that Adam is a "type" of Jesus; that is, he serves as a prophetic reflection of the Christ to come. How so? Didn't Adam sin and pass the effects of his sin, to us? While Adam deprived us of original justice, the harmony between himself, Eve, and the rest of creation, through his sin, his likeness to Christ is not in his sin. Rather, the effects of both Adam's and Jesus's acts had universal effects for the human race. Adam, as the first man and father of all, passed the guilt original sin to us all, as a kind of genetic defect. Jesus, who also only had God as his Father, grants us a new sonship: not the natural and fallen sonship that we gain from Adam but a new share in a supernatural sonship, his own Sonship, which is untainted by any such defect.

## GOSPEL

~Matthew 10:26-33~

### REFLECTION

**O**ur passage from chapter 10 of the Gospel of Matthew falls after Matthew presents Jesus first as prophetic teacher in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) and then as a miracle worker (chapters 6-9). This reading shows us Jesus sharing his own authority and mission with the Twelve Disciples. What this tells us, is that, just as figures like Adam and Jeremiah speak through their lives and actions of the coming of Jesus, those of us on the other side of his coming who are sent into the world in his name to continue his mission express that same principle of repetition or echoing of the divine message. Being true to that mission, even with all the trials it will bring, unites us vitally with Christ, both now and in Heaven. The *Catechism*, quoting St. John Eudes, tells us:

We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries and often beg him to perfect and realize them in us and in his whole Church.... For it is the plan of the Son of God to make us and the whole Church partake in his mysteries and to extend them to and continue them in us and in his whole Church. This is his plan for fulfilling his mysteries in us.<sup>194</sup> (CCC 521)

All of history has been prepared by God to grant us this wonderful place in his plan: to manifest him by fearlessly taking up the prophetic mantle ourselves.

<sup>194</sup> St. John Eudes, LH, Week 33, Friday, OR.

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word*  
for the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time.  
Let's begin by praying together Saint Thomas Aquinas's  
"Prayer before Study."**

Creator of all things,  
true source of light and wisdom,  
lofty origin of all being,  
graciously let a ray of your brilliance penetrate into the darkness  
of my understanding and take from me the double darkness  
in which I have been born,  
an obscurity of both sin and ignorance.  
Give me a sharp sense of understanding,  
a retentive memory,  
and the ability to grasp things correctly and fundamentally.  
Grant me the talent of being exact in my explanations,  
and the ability to express myself with thoroughness and charm.  
Point out the beginning, direct the progress, and help in completion;  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.



# STEP #2

## INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**In this week's Gospel, Jesus says, "Fear no one." Have you ever experienced a time when you were very afraid of someone? Would anyone like to share briefly what happened?**

*(Limit the sharing to one or two people so as not to get caught up in talking about fearful things, but to move on to Jesus's command to be not afraid.)*

*(If no one offers to share you might want to refer to some generic situation in which a person can cause fear, such as a mean boss or a person with a violent temper, etc.)*

# STEP #3

## LECTIO DIVINA – SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Our presenter Patrick Coffin will help us understand how Jesus can tell us that we should expect bad things to happen when we are his followers, yet we shouldn't be afraid. It may be helpful to take notes as we watch this short video.**



(Play the video for the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DEVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journals to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**Why does the presenter in the video say that we shouldn't have fear when faced with difficulties, or even death?**

*(Not even a sparrow that is worth almost nothing falls to the ground without God's knowledge. Since we are worth much more than a sparrow, we should not be afraid that God will abandon us, even in death. This is a hard teaching to put in practice, especially in today's world when there are so many things to fear. Encourage participants to memorize the verse, "So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" and to recall it when difficult and fearful times come.)*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**In the video, Patrick gives some examples of how we can deny Jesus without putting up a billboard or writing an editorial. What are some of the ways he mentions?**

**What are some others you can think of?**

*(The presenter talks about denying Jesus by permitting gossip or by allowing actions we know to be wrong to go unchallenged. Other ways we might deny Jesus are to not defend the teachings of the faith, to allow others to mock the Church, to pretend we aren't really all that devout, to fail to live out the commandments or to neglect the precepts of the Church.)*

### DIGGING DEEPER EYE ON THE SPARROW



- Normally we think of a sparrow falling to the ground as meaning it has died, but the word used here can also be translated to mean "light upon" the ground. Jesus may be saying that not only does the Father know when each sparrow dies, but he also knows each time that it lands upon the ground. Such an intimate knowledge of creation is intended to give us great comfort that God indeed is with us in every moment of our lives.
- The word "cent" is the translation of a Greek word for a coin that was worth 1/16 of a denarius, the average laborer's daily wage. In a parallel passage, Luke writes, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?" (Luke 12:6-7; RSV: 2CE). One would assume that if two sparrows cost one cent, then four should cost two pennies, but sparrows were so worthless, a fifth was thrown in by the merchant if a person spent two cents.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA – PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today's Gospel presents us with some definite challenges. Let's take a few minutes to prayerfully consider one of these challenges.**

### PRAYER

Jesus says to us, "Do not be afraid." Stop and consider what you fear. Are you afraid of something happening to your family? To your health? Financially? Are you afraid of death? Bring those fears up and then allow yourself to hand them over to Jesus. Hear him say again, "Do not be afraid" as you turn each one over to him. Which one is the most difficult to relinquish? Why?

[Optional second step of this meditation: Now close your eyes and pay attention to your breathing. On each inhale, say to yourself, "Be not afraid." On each exhale, say, "I trust in you, Jesus." Continue doing this for the count of ten. When you have finished, open your eyes and write down your thoughts in your journal].

### RESOLUTION:

This week, make a deliberate effort not to be afraid and in moments when you find yourself tempted to fear, remember Jesus's words that you are worth more than "many sparrows" in God's eyes.

### DIGGING DEEPER BE NOT AFRAID



More than 300 passages in Scripture deal with fear. Here are five you may want to share with participants.

"For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control."  
(2 Timothy 1:7).

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid."  
(John 14:27).

- "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you" (Psalm 56:3).  
He shall not fear an ill report; his heart is steadfast, trusting the Lord. His heart is tranquil, without fear, till at last he looks down on his foes.  
(Psalm 112:7-8).
- "I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears" (Psalm 34:4).

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

**LEADER TIP**

*Today's prayer utilizes our breathing as a way to calm down and focus on Jesus's words. This technique is particularly helpful when dealing with anxiety and fear, which lie at the heart of this week's Gospel.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP – CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today by praying Psalm 91.**

You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shade of the Almighty,  
Say to the LORD, "My refuge and fortress,  
my God in whom I trust."  
He will rescue you from the fowler's snare,  
from the destroying plague,  
He will shelter you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a protecting shield.

You will not fear the terror of the night,  
     or the arrow that flies by day,  
 Nor the pestilence that roams in darkness,  
     nor the plague that ravages at noon.  
 Though a thousand fall at your side,  
     ten thousand at your right hand,  
     near you it shall not come.  
     You need simply watch;  
 the punishment of the wicked you will see.  
 Because you have the LORD for your refuge  
 and have made the Most High your stronghold,  
     No evil shall befall you,  
     no affliction come near your tent.  
 For he commands his angels with regard to you,  
     to guard you wherever you go.  
 With their hands they shall support you,  
     lest you strike your foot against a stone.  
 You can tread upon the asp and the viper,  
     trample the lion and the dragon.  
 Because he clings to me I will deliver him;  
 because he knows my name I will set him on high.  
     He will call upon me and I will answer;  
     I will be with him in distress;  
     I will deliver him and give him honor.  
 With length of days I will satisfy him,  
     and fill him with my saving power.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 13<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



# FINDING OUR LIVES

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## Leader Preparation Overview



**If you ask people what they want**, they'll often say that they want a new car, a better job, a bigger house, or some other possession. But if you probe a little deeper, you'll find that they don't really want possessions. Rather, they desire a sense of fulfillment, a feeling of being loved and cherished.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us that "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." In other words, the only way we can become truly happy and fulfilled is by giving ourselves in love to God and the people he has placed in our lives. We have to go beyond ourselves and our own selfish interests if we are to live the truly abundant life Jesus has promised. As Pope St. John Paul II often emphasized, "Man finds himself only by making a sincere gift of himself to others." It isn't always an easy choice, but it is the only way to a truly rewarding life.

This week, in addition to the great lesson on the importance of self-giving love, Jesus also tells us, "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me." This has profound implications in today's world, where so many claim to be "spiritual but not religious." By this statement, Jesus explains that

he has invested his authority in his Apostles. That same authority has been handed on over the centuries to the bishops and priests with the result that if we want to accept Jesus in our lives, we must accept the teachings of Jesus's successors and the Church in which they serve. In other words, to be “spiritual,” we must also be “religious.”

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

# REFLECTIONS ON THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16a~

## REFLECTION

**I**t has been said that the books of Kings, the second of which supplies our First Reading, are demonstrations of God's justice. Each of the failures of the kings of Israel and Judah bring down a punishment upon the land they govern as predictable as that night will follow day. The episode in this story is not otherwise, but the just reward given is not for ill deeds but for good ones. A woman called only “the Shunammite” (because she lived in a town called Shunem) offers hospitality to the prophet Elisha, building a little place for him to stay in her own home when he passed by and needed lodging, and this only



because she recognized him to be a holy man of God. She is richly rewarded for her kindness when God grants to this woman who had been previously childless a son to take up into her arms, through the intercession of Elisha.

Later in the same story we find that the child, now grown, dies tragically. The good woman, in great sorrow, appeals again to Elisha the prophet who comes down off of Mount Carmel and goes to great lengths in his appeal to God for the return of life to the child, who does indeed come back to life so that the Shunammite might again take up her son (see 2 Kings 4:36-37). So the just reward for service done to God's prophet is even greater than we see in this reading! In our own day, when those who have been given God's authority in the Church are much maligned, we would do well to offer our aid to them whenever possible.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 89:2-3, 16-17, 18-19~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 6:3-4, 8-11~

## REFLECTION

**J**ust as the son of the Shunammite was raised from death by the power of God, so was the Son of Mary raised from the dead. In his case, however, that just vindication of his perfect righteousness led to an eternal Resurrection, so that “Christ being raised from the dead will never die again” (Romans 6:9 RSV). And St. Paul makes clear that by our Baptism we share both in the death he died and in the Resurrection by which Mary again took up her Son. So the first of our readings in combination with this one from Romans provide us with what we could call a “mystagogy” of the Sacrament of Baptism. “Mystagogy was that form of instruction on the sacraments in the first centuries of the Church which enabled those (in the grace of that very sacrament) to see the power it conveyed more clearly. This instruction often took the form of an analysis of an Old Testament reading which served as a prophetic pointer toward the sacrament being explained. In this case, the mystagogy of St. Paul on the mystery of Baptism is expanded and deepened when the Church pairs it with the First Reading from Second Kings to help us see the dramatic power of Baptism by which we are brought back to a new and eternal life and taken up into the arms of holy mother Church.

## GOSPEL

~Matthew 10:37-42~

### REFLECTION

In this Gospel reading we see once again the mystery of the unity of all the holy ones in Christ. As noted last week, in chapter 10 of Matthew Jesus is bestowing a share in his own authority upon the Apostles as they are sent out. They are warned that the preaching of the truth will evoke a division between those who accept the truth and those who won't. He promises to those who aid them in their mission a share in the reward of the missionary. And that is because those whom Christ sends bear him mysteriously within themselves such that to welcome them is to welcome him. St. Luke gives us a parallel text, "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16).

To reject the Apostle is to reject both the Son and the Father! That is the sad state of those who refuse the truth and end up on the wrong side of the division that the Divine Truth introduces among men. But those who hear the truth and aid those who preach it, in even the smallest ways, will have their reward, too. As we see in this text, even a little water is a great gift when the cause for which it is given is that of the Son's own mission of love from the Father. In this great cause, we must value nothing more than that cause itself.

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word*  
for the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.**

**Let's open our time together by saying this Act of  
Consecration of Our Lives to Jesus written by St. Margaret  
Mary Alacoque.**

I give myself and consecrate to the Sacred Heart of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
my person and my life, my actions, pains and sufferings,  
so that I may be unwilling to make use of any part of my being  
other than to honor, love and glorify the Sacred Heart.  
This is my unchanging purpose, namely, to be all His,  
and to do all things for the love of Him,  
at the same time renouncing with all my heart whatever is displeasing to Him.  
I therefore take You, O Sacred Heart,  
to be the only object of my love,  
the guardian of my life,  
my assurance of salvation,  
the remedy of my weakness and inconstancy,  
the atonement for all the faults of my life  
and my sure refuge at the hour of death.

Be then, O Heart of goodness, my justification before God the Father,  
and turn away from me the strokes of his righteous anger.  
O Heart of love, I put all my confidence in You,  
for I fear everything from my own wickedness and frailty,  
but I hope for all things from Your goodness and bounty.

Remove from me all that can displease You or resist Your holy will;  
let your pure love imprint Your image so deeply upon my heart,  
that I shall never be able to forget You or to be separated from You.

May I obtain from all Your loving kindness  
the grace of having my name written in Your Heart,  
for in You I desire to place all my happiness and glory,  
living and dying in bondage to You.

Amen.

# STEP #2

## INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**I'm sure many of you have heard someone say they were "spiritual but not religious." What does that mean to you when you hear it?**

*(This could start a lively discussion, so be sure to watch the time carefully. Generally people who say this mean that they don't want to belong to a church, with its rules and regulations, but prefer to make up their own ideas about what's right and wrong. Often they have been hurt or offended by someone in a church and have decided to throw "the baby out with the bathwater.")*

# STEP #3

## LECTIO DIVINA – SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**On this Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we are going to look at two of Jesus's sayings that can cause some confusion. Dr. Edward Sri will help us understand what they mean for us right now.**



Play the video for the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DEVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journals to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**Have you ever experienced a time when you lost your life for the sake of Christ only to find it? In other words, has there been a time when you made a sincere gift of yourself only to find you received more than you gave?**

*(You may want to have an example from your own life prepared in case members of the group are initially reluctant to speak.)*

*Some answers might include becoming a parent or times with a sick family member, especially one who is dying.)*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**Based on the video and Jesus's words, what might you say to someone who says they don't need to belong to a church?**

*(Jesus said clearly that he has invested his authority in his Apostles. Because that authority has been passed down over the centuries to the bishops and priests through apostolic succession, if a person wants to become truly spiritual, they must accept the teachings of Jesus's successors and the Church in which they serve. In other words, to be "spiritual" we must also be "religious" and a member of Christ's Church.)*

### DIGGING DEEPER APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION



Apostolic succession refers to the unbroken line of bishops in the Catholic Church, dating to the time of Christ. Each bishop is installed by a bishop who was installed by a bishop... going all the way back to Apostles in the first century. Only the Catholic Church has this unbroken line of succession.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA – PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**In today's Gospel, Jesus presents us with some challenging teachings so let's spend some time in prayer about them.**

### **PRAYER:**

Imagine that you are with Jesus as he is teaching. Perhaps you are in a courtyard together after having eaten a meal. Jesus has been talking about the price of becoming his disciple and he suddenly says, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." You aren't sure you understand, so you take a deep breath and ask, "What do you mean?" Now see Jesus coming to you, looking directly at you and answering you personally. What does he tell you? Listen carefully to his response and then write down whatever comes first to your heart and mind.

### **RESOLUTION:**

Reread what you wrote down after the prayer and choose one concrete action that you can perform with regard to your insight. If you are still struggling with this, resolve to spend a few minutes each day this week praying about it until you receive some clarity from the Lord.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and our resolutions.**

### **DIGGING DEEPER** THE CHURCH BRINGS US CHRIST



"Even today, some say, 'Christ yes, the Church no,' like those who say, 'I believe in God, but not in priests.' Nevertheless, it is the Church that brings us Christ and that brings us to God. The Church is the great family of God's children."

—Pope Francis

### **LEADER TIP**

*Not everyone will obtain an immediate insight after prayer, so be sure to mention that Jesus will answer the prayer for insight and wisdom, but sometimes it takes a bit of persistent prayer. Encourage all the participants to "wrestle" with this over the next week by doing the exercises in their journals.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP – CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today with this prayer written by St. Alphonsus Liguori.**

O my God, help me to remember that I came into this world with nothing, and shall take nothing from it when I die.

To gain You, I must leave all.

But in loving You,

I already have all good things,

the infinite riches of Christ and His Church in life,

Mary's motherly protection and perpetual help,

and the eternal dwelling place Jesus has prepared for me.

Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 14<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## LIGHT BURDENS

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**Sometimes we are tempted** to think that it would be so much easier to believe in Jesus if we were living when he was on earth. Maybe ... but maybe not. Today's Gospel tells us that it has never been easy to understand all of Jesus's teachings, even for those who heard him in person.

What, for instance, would the disciples have made of the saying "My yoke is easy and my burden light"? It's unlikely that they would have immediately understood what he was talking about. After hearing Jesus say these things, they probably discussed the teachings among themselves, puzzling over what he was truly saying. How can one man make everyone's burden light? And what is the yoke he is talking about?

In some ways, today we have it easier than they did because we know from Church teaching that Jesus was referring to the "yoke of faith," which makes our other burdens including illness, finances, difficult life circumstances, and anxiety easier to bear. It's not always easy to have faith, but when we bring our burdens to the

Lord in faith, meekness, and humility, Jesus helps us carry them—and in doing so, they become lighter and more bearable. The yoke of faith gives us rest from the cares of the world, and allows us to live more peacefully as children of God in the Kingdom of God.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Zechariah 9:9-10~

### REFLECTION

**T**he Prophet Zechariah sees a vision of the future messianic king of a reunited Israel, but he is not a king of the typical sort. While most kings gain or retain their dominion by force of arms. This king will “banish the chariot” and “the warrior’s bow.” And he will establish a peace that extends well beyond the boundaries of the present country of Israel. He is a “savior,” but not a military one. His dominion is rooted not in might, but in righteousness, in meekness. Moreover, he will arrive, not on a war horse, but on a mere “colt, the foal of an ass.”

The Hebrew *moshiach* refers to the anointing that kings (as well as priests and prophets) would have received as a sign of office.

But the hope of Israel, as seen here in Zechariah, is for more than a duly anointed king of the Davidic line who would defeat her enemies. The deepest desire of the prophet and his people—as for us—is for *shalom*, that peace that no ordinary king can provide. This sort of peace is not enforced, but the subject of a proclamation, as the prophet says. Only the true King, whose divine dominion extends even beyond “the ends of the earth” to the heights of heaven, can supply this deeper peace by a word of proclamation. Although the prophet hints at this proclamation, it is realized in the Gospel.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm: 145:1-2, 8-9, 10-11, 13-14~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 8:9, 11-13~

## REFLECTION

**T**o enter the kingdom of the Messiah described by the prophet Zechariah, who is meek and yet capable of bringing peace by a mere command, we must learn to live in a new way. That way of living is a gift—a gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. Just as he is not a king “according to the flesh,” we are not to be his subjects “according to the flesh.” In this exhortation against “the flesh,” St. Paul does not mean that we are to reject everything bodily, but only that which is connected to what he calls a few verses earlier “sinful flesh” (8:3). If you live by, sinning in the flesh, he warns, “You will die.” But if we live according to the dictates of the Spirit, even our “mortal bodies” will be drawn into the life of this new spiritual kingdom. We are, by God’s design, embodied spirits, different from both animals and the angels. Our particular way of cleaving to God is not disembodied, nor is it animalistic. When we surrender ourselves to the Spirit of God, he transforms us, body and soul, into “heirs with Christ” of the heavenly Kingdom that immeasurably surpasses anything that earth can offer (8:17). Our way to that inheritance is the same that he trod: through suffering and death.

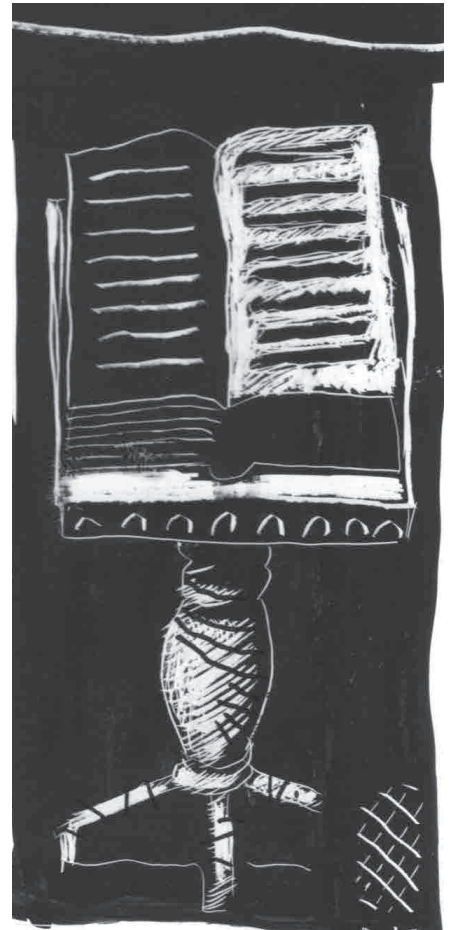
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 11:25-30~

### REFLECTION

**W**e sometimes puzzle over this **image of the yoke**, which is the mechanism used by farmers to bind draft animals to each other and to the equipment that they labor to pull. It sounds to us as though Jesus isn't doing us any favors by offering us such a yoke. He does say specifically that his yoke is "easy" and "light," but why should we want to be bound up like a draft animal, even if the instrument that binds me is relatively comfortable?

Rabbi Joshua ben Korhah was asked once why it is that in the twice daily ritual of Jewish life called the *Shema* prayer, the first portion speaking of love of God and his word (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) should precede the portions which speak of the obligations of Jewish life (11:13-21). His answer was "so that one might accept upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven first; afterwards, he accepts upon himself the yoke of the commandments." Thus, the yoke that Jesus speaks of is a symbol for a covenantal, familial relationship with God. What Jesus offers us is a new way to enter the kingdom of God, the covenant with God, one which does indeed involve obedience, but which is made easy and light because of the grace that he wins for us by his own obedience. He first models the obedience he asks for by being "meek and humble of heart." His own obedience to the Father and love for us comes first; then he asks us to take on ourselves the yoke *he* has already carried for *us*. When he says that it is "*my* yoke," he means that it is the one he not only wears, but also that he shares.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1 OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together in prayer:**

Our Father,  
Who art in Heaven,  
hallowed be Thy name;  
Thy Kingdom come,  
Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
Amen.

(<http://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=216>)

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Jesus talks about a yoke in today’s Gospel. How many of you have ever seen a yoke? When we used animals instead of machines, they were very common. One thing to note about a yoke is that it is designed so that the burden doesn’t fall on just one animal; it is designed so they share the workload. How might a yoke be a good image for how Jesus wants to help us carry our burdens in life?**

*(Get a picture of a yoke to show people who might not have any idea what one actually looks like. A good image can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/kgqbzgl>.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**In today’s Gospel, Jesus says, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light,” but what is Jesus really talking about? Let’s see what the presenter can share on this passage.**



(Play the video for Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**The presenter gave one possible explanation for what Jesus was talking about when he referred to things hidden from the wise. What are these hidden things?**

*(The hidden things relate to the Kingdom of the Messiah—those who are expecting a material kingdom or a material king cannot see the deeper mysteries of Christ's Kingdom.)*

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**What new insights about Jesus's "easy" yoke did you gain from this presentation? What is this yoke? How has this changed your idea of why he said his burden is light?**

*(Ideally people will glean the idea that the yoke Jesus is talking about isn't the trials of life, but rather the yoke of faith that enables us to carry our daily burdens.*

*Don't be afraid to acknowledge that life is hard and some burdens are difficult—even when we have faith. But even if Jesus doesn't take away all our burdens in life, he does, as the presenter explained, help us carry them if we come to him in faith.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER**  
**YOKE IN SCRIPTURE**


Yokes are referred to in Scripture more than sixty times. The first reference is in Genesis 27:40 when Esau begged for a blessing after Isaac had accidentally given the blessing of the first-born to Jacob. Esau's father tells him: "By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck" (RSV: 2CE).

Another famous reference to a yoke is in Galatians 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (RSV: 2CE).



# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today's Gospel gives us a wonderful opportunity to enter into prayerful reflection.**

### **PRAYER:**

Meditate on Jesus' words: "My yoke is easy, and my burden light." What is the heaviest burden you carry now in your life? Envision that burden resting on your shoulders and ask Jesus to help you carry it. Imagine turning the weight over to him. Prayerfully envision Jesus with you, helping you carry your heaviest burden.

### **RESOLUTION:**

Each morning this week, begin your day by asking Jesus to help you carry this burden—and trust that he is truly with you and that he loves you so much he does not want you to carry this on your own.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### ***LEADER TIP:***

- *Remind participants that turning our burdens over to Jesus isn't something that happens once and for all time, but something we have to do continually, sometimes many times in a day. To do so isn't to fail, but rather to build trust and confidence in God's provision.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today with prayer:**

Dear Jesus,  
 So often I insist on carrying my burdens all by myself.  
 I forget or resist asking you for help,  
 Perhaps because I am afraid that you won't help  
 Or perhaps because I believe I can do it alone.  
 Help me to let go of my burdens  
 And trust that you mean what you said:  
 That your burden is easy and your yoke is light.  
 And that you will give me the rest I so long for.  
 Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 15<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧

### THE SOIL OF OUR LIVES



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#### Leader Preparation Overview



**When we hear the parable of the sower and seed,** it can be easy to assume it is meant for someone else. After all, we are good soil, right?

This week we are challenged to look a bit more deeply at our own lives and assess just what kind of soil we really are. All too often, many things like sin, busyness, worry, work, and other activities keep us from receiving fully the teachings of Christ. Our initial excitement and enthusiasm for the Gospel can give way to a sort of dull acceptance. The good seed that was sown in our lives can begin to wither and die. The soil of our lives isn't all that good.

But it doesn't have to be that way. God, the Divine Sower, is always willing to sow new seeds in our lives. However, just as a lot of work goes into preparing—and tending—the soil of an actual garden, so too we have to make sure that the soil of our souls is prepared and cared for so that we can be in the right frame of mind and heart to receive the Word of God in new and deeper ways, now and for the rest of our lives.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## FIRST READING

~Isaiah 55:10-11~

## REFLECTION

**T**he reasons the Church would pair text from Isaiah with the parable of the sower from Matthew 13 are obvious. The seed of the sower is the Word of Truth that Jesus himself brings in the Gospel. And, as Isaiah says in chapter 55, that word will not be sterile, but will be food and drink, bread, wine, water, and milk, for those who hunger and thirst. The Word that the Father sows in the earth (recall Jesus is laid in a tomb) will sprout, like the mustard seed or a grain of wheat that dies, and yield a tremendous harvest of souls. That seed of faith is watered by a constant rain of grace from above yielding bread for all. St. Peter Chrysologus extends this metaphor in his description of the Eucharist in one of his sermons: “[Christ] himself is the bread who, sown in the Virgin, raised up in the flesh, kneaded in the Passion, baked in the oven of the tomb, reserved in churches, brought to altars, furnishes the faithful each day with food from heaven”<sup>132</sup> (CCC 2837).

<sup>132</sup> St. Peter Chrysologus, Sermo 67:PL 52,392; cf. Jn 6:51.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 65:10, 11, 12-13, 14~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 8:18-23~

## REFLECTIONS

**I**n this text from Romans, St. Paul points us toward the fullness of the Kingdom that will eventually be revealed in Christ. Though Jesus and his Gospel have been sown in the world already, the life of grace we now enjoy in the Church is expressive of the Kingdom in “seed and beginning,”<sup>249</sup> as the *Catechism* puts it (CCC 541). While the gifts we share in the Church are wondrous, we still fight against our own concupiscence, which makes us “captive to the law of sin” (Romans 7:23). One day we will be entirely free of that weakness, and the full work of Christ which has been germinating, and growing will be disclosed in full.

That “glorious freedom of the children of God” will mean a change, not only in the souls of men, but also in the rest of creation. Just as Adam’s sin brought sickness, death, and the natural forces that work against us into the world, so also, when we are freed from these forces, the natural world itself will be healed of the weaknesses that human sin introduced into it. St. Peter says that we “waiting for and hastening[d] the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:12-13; RSV: 2CE).

<sup>249</sup> LG 5.

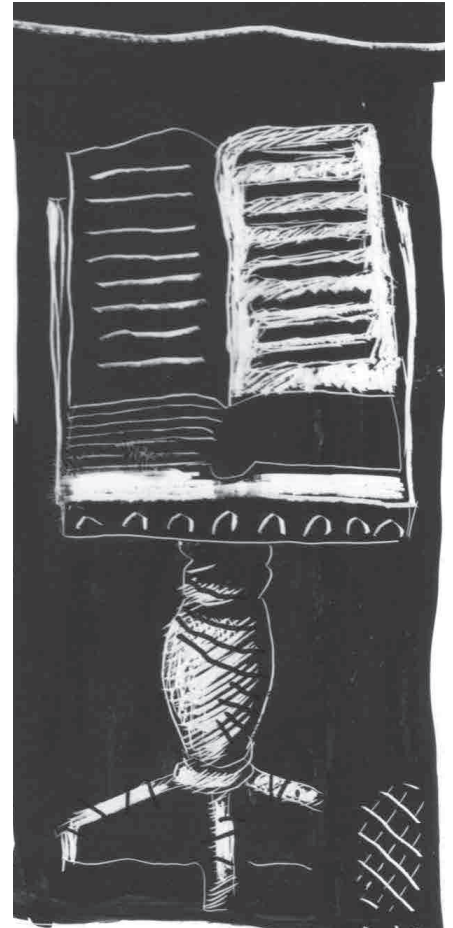
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 13:1-23~

### REFLECTION

**T**his parable from Matthew's Gospel and its explanation is often misunderstood. To some it sounds as though Jesus is saying that he specifically intends that some of his hearers will fail to understand him and so miss the salvation he brings! That, of course, is not what this Gospel means. (Recall that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth," 1 Timothy 2:4; RSV: 2CE) The key to unlocking the meaning of Jesus's words is to recognize how parables function.

"Why do you speak to them in parables?" the disciples ask. Jesus responds, "Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted." While that last phrase, "to them it has not been granted," might suggest that God has withheld something that makes understanding the parable possible, in fact—and this is made clear in the parable of the sower he tells—the reception of the meaning of the parable depends upon our free decision to be cultivated by God's grace. The good soil (we could say the good soul) that receives the seed (which is the word of the parable itself) is willing to be tilled by God's grace. That is why Jesus says, "To anyone who has [in other words, anyone who has freely received God's grace] more will be given." But Jesus also warns that "from anyone who has not [that is, has refused to receive God's grace] even what he has will be taken away." We are given the choice: either to become "good soil" and receive the riches of grace, or to reject God's Word.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying this prayer from St. Pope John XXIII.**

O Jesus, come back into our society,  
our family life, our souls  
and reign there as our peaceful sovereign.  
Enlighten with the splendor of faith  
and the charity of your tender heart  
the souls of those who work  
for the good of the people, for your poor.  
Impart in them your own spirit,  
a spirit of discipline, order and gentleness,  
preserving the flame of enthusiasm  
ever alight in their hearts.  
May that day come very soon,  
when we shall see you  
restored to the center of civic life,  
borne on the shoulders of your joyful people.  
Amen.



## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**How many of you are gardeners? What are some of the things you do in the spring to get ready to plant?**

*(Expect responses such as tilling the soil, fertilizing, removing weeds, choosing seeds or plants, etc.)*

*(If, no one is a gardener in your group, then ask them to think about what it might take to prepare the soil for planting.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**This week we read in the Gospel about the sower and the seed. Let's listen to what the presenter has to say about this parable.**



(Play the video for Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.  
This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**According to the video, why must we be “ready soil” to receive the Word of God?**

*(If we aren’t ready to receive the Gospel message, we may end up losing our initial enthusiasm and other things may begin to take priority over our faith.)*

*The presenter talks both about how we need to be sure our own soil is prepared, as well as make sure that the soil of others is ready. If necessary, you may want to clarify that difference to your group.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**Why do you think that Jesus told this parable to the crowd? Why did he tell it to his disciples?**

*(He wanted the crowds to think about how they are receiving the message in their own lives and decide what kind of soil they were. (Read the long form of the Gospel for Jesus’s explanation.)*

*He may have wanted his disciples to realize that evangelization can be difficult and discouraging, and it is not necessarily their fault if the message is not received.*

*The goal of this question is to get participants to think a bit about what the soil of their own lives is like—how they are receiving and living out the Gospel.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER****CROPS OF ISRAEL**

**What would the sower in the parable have been planting? Grains, such as wheat and barley, lentils, chickpeas, onions, cucumbers, melons, flax, and spices were grown in Israel in Jesus’s time, along with dates, pomegranates, almonds, and grapes.**

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**In our prayer today, let's take some time to consider what kind of soil we may be.**

### **PRAYER:**

Are you a hard path, where the birds of doubt devour the seed of faith as soon as it is sown? Do you have in your soul some rocky ground, where the seed of good works sprouts quickly but soon withers under trial or suffering? Do you have in your soul some thorny soil, in which material possessions and worldly concerns choke off good intentions as soon as they come to you? Or do you have rich soil, ready and willing to accept the Word of the Lord and let it take root to transform your entire life? Now ask Jesus, the Divine Gardener, to help you prepare the soil of your heart and mind in a way that will produce abundant fruit.

### **RESOLUTION:**

If the soil of your life isn't the way you would like it to be, prayerfully ask the Lord about one thing you can do to till the hardness of doubt, remove the rocks of sin, or pull out the thorns of worry and materialism. And then ask God to give you the grace to follow through on this intention this week.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *Most people will want to think they are "good soil," so remind them that the presenter talked about being willing to take things more slowly, if necessary, to grow a deep and abiding faith.*
- *Remind participants that just as we don't plant a garden once and have it last forever; there are always more opportunities to accept the seeds of a deeper faith. Guilt over missed chances is futile, so encourage group members to make a new beginning right now with a renewed commitment to produce good fruit.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today with prayer:**

Oh Divine Sower,  
Grant that the soil of my heart be rich and fertile,  
Ready to receive your word,  
Ready to accept your love.  
Let me become a garden of your grace  
So that I might bear good fruit in this life  
And enjoy the bountiful harvest with you in the next. Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 16<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## FAITH AND PATIENCE

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**This week we read three of Jesus's most famous parables:** the sower and the seed, the mustard seed, and the yeast in the three measures of flour. What do all of these have in common? You might say they are stories about faith and how it grows and develops. This is correct, but they also have something else in common: the theme of patience.

The farmer who sows the seed has to wait until both the wheat and the weeds mature before he can begin to sort them out. If he uproots the plants too early, he risks destroying his crop along with the weeds. The mustard seed, which is miniscule, eventually becomes a huge bush. But patience is required for the seed to take root and reach maturity. Finally, the woman who kneads the yeast into the flour has to wait for the bread to rise before she can bake it.

In all three cases, it's necessary to wait until you see the final result. You may know that there will be a crop of wheat, a large bush, and loaves of bread, but it takes time and patient waiting before you can see them. You have to trust in the process.

The same is often true with our desire to share the Faith. We want people to embrace the Gospel right away; we want an immediate, enthusiastic response to the Good News of salvation. It didn't work like that in the time of Jesus, and it doesn't today. Most of the time (there are always exceptions), we have to sow the seed or mix in the yeast—and then sit back and wait. No matter how much we might want to rush things, we need patience as we wait for faith to develop ... from tiny seeds and grains of yeast.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Wisdom 12:13, 16-19~

### REFLECTION

**T**his part of the **Book of Wisdom** is sometimes called the “book of human folly,” where the author discusses our human waywardness. These verses show us the greatness of God’s mercy in the face of our folly. We have a decided tendency toward idolatries of all kinds, acting as though other things are “god,” rather than founding our lives upon the one, true God. But he has so arranged the world that it teaches us of him and slowly corrects our misplaced adoration—whether it be directed toward money, power, or honors—to show us that he is the sovereign Lord of the world whose right due is our worship.

For many this is a lifelong process. In some cases, God gives us successes so that we will be moved by gratitude to thank him for his gifts. In others, he weans us from our false sense of security by depriving us of those things that gave us that false security. In all these things, God is acting as a gentle and patient Teacher who draws us along toward himself. So even when we find ourselves distraught over the loss of something, or even someone whom we found precious, we have “good ground for hope” that all of God’s lessons are intended for our good and to encourage the love we will share with him for all eternity.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 86:5-6, 9-10, 15-16~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 8:26-27~

## REFLECTION

**G**od is so good! Not only does he enable us to enter into new life with him by a gratuitous gift of grace that we could not hope to merit on our own, but he also supplies everything that we may need on the journey upon which that grace directs us. Here St. Paul tells us that the presence of God in our souls that we receive by Baptism is not an inert presence that we are aware of and can gaze at, as if it were a kind of museum exhibit, but a dynamic presence, always at work in us. The Spirit that comes to dwell in our souls attends to us so closely that he aids to the extent of articulating our needs for us. Even when we don’t know what or how to pray to God for what we need, he will inspire in us the prayer he wants us to pray to him! He leaves nothing to chance. Just as a parent will fill in the blanks when a little child haltingly asks for things that he doesn't know the name for, so the Spirit helps us name our needs and intercedes for us.. Those who live in the Spirit will find that they gain a new kind of articulateness in their mediation for others, too—the Spirit guiding them in their intercessory prayers for brothers and sisters in need.



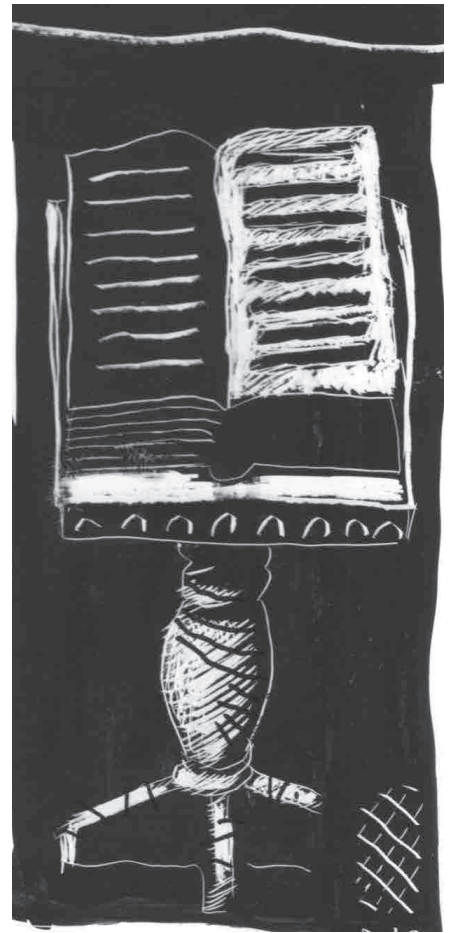
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 13:24-43~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this Gospel passage we find corroboration of what we saw in the readings from previous Sundays, also from Matthew's Gospel. At verse 34 of Matthew 13 we read, "He spoke to them only in parables." The parables that Jesus tells function almost like medical heart monitors. When told, they register our state of heart, based upon how we respond to them. The weeds and the wheat, the mustard seed, the yeast that leavens the whole batch of dough ... these are figures that represent the mysteries of the Kingdom to those to whom they are addressed. To be able to "hear" them for what they tell us, we must have hearts that are open to the proclamation of that Kingdom. To hear them requires that we be open to the grace to do so.

And how do we gain this grace, the grace to hear? Matthew tells us that those to whom "it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom" (Matthew 13:11; RSV: 2CE) are those who "went into the house." This simple locution speaks volumes. At the beginning of chapter 13 Matthew reports, "The same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea." He tells the parables that follow outside of this house and he explains their meaning inside the same house. The house of Jesus is the Church. If, having heard the proclamation of the Kingdom, we wish to know its secrets, we must enter the house of Jesus. Jesus is both the Word spoken in the world and the very interpretation of that Word. But to hear it fully, we must go and abide with him where he will reveal to little ones the secrets of his Kingdom.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of Opening the Word for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying for patience.**

God, teach me to be patient,  
teach me to go slow.  
Teach me how to wait on you  
when my way I do not know.

Teach me sweet forbearance  
when things do not go right,  
so I remain unruffled  
when others grow uptight.

Teach me how to quiet  
my racing, rising heart,  
so I might hear the answer  
you are trying to impart.

Teach me to let go, dear God,  
and pray undisturbed  
until my heart is filled with inner peace  
and I learn to know your will. Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**We've all heard the saying, "Patience is a virtue," but many of us find it hard to be patient. What are some times when you are the most impatient?**

*(Most answers will probably involve some kind of waiting, like waiting in line, waiting for a phone call, waiting for a job offer, etc.)*

*This can be the opportunity for a bit of light-heartedness as you talk about the humor that can result as you wait for something or someone —if you look for it!)*

#### DIGGING DEEPER

##### THE SMALLEST OF SEEDS?

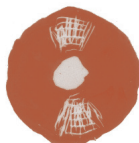


Mustard seeds are usually about one or two millimeters in diameter, which makes them very small, but not the smallest of all seeds. The mature plant is eight to ten feet tall, which makes it big, but not the largest of all plants. So was Jesus wrong? We have to remember that Jesus wasn't giving a botany lesson; he was telling a story. Mustard seeds would have been the smallest commonly sown seed his audience would have known, and the mustard plant the largest commonly grown garden crop. The contrast between the tiny size of the seed and fully grown plant would have been striking, which was the point Jesus was trying to make.

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Jesus often taught in parables. Sometimes we don't fully understand the parables, but neither did his followers. Let's listen as the presenter talks to us about three of Jesus's most famous parables.**



(Play the video for Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately seven minutes.)

# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**What is the common theme in all three of Jesus's parables in this week's Gospel?**

*(The common theme, according to the presenter, is patience. However, if someone says faith or the development of faith, that's also correct.)*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**Which one of the three parables in today's Gospel (sower and seed, mustard seed, woman with bread) do you relate to the most? Explain how the parable might apply to your life.**

*(Answers will be very personal and individual, so don't force sharing. You may want to answer this yourself first. Hopefully, participants will begin to understand how we all need patience, both as we grow in faith and as we begin to share our faith with others. If God is willing to wait for us, we need to be willing to wait for others.)*

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Some of the most beautiful images in the Gospels come from Jesus’s parables. Let’s take some time now to prayerfully consider one of them.**

### **PRAYER:**

Picture yourself in a kitchen. There is a large bowl of flour on the counter and a measure of yeast. Mix the yeast into the flour. Now imagine Jesus says to you, “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast.” What thought comes to mind? Is there a question you would like to ask Jesus about this? What does he say?

### **RESOLUTION:**

Think of at least two ways you might be “yeast” for the Kingdom in your family or your work. How important is it to you to be that yeast?

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIP:**

- *While the reason for studying the Mass readings is to encounter Christ in Scripture, we also study Scripture in order to grow in virtue. Learning to become more patient is a practical way to apply the lessons of Scripture to everyday life.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today with another prayer for patience—because most of us need more patience!**

Patience is a virtue of the Lord:  
 He awaits the return of his children.  
 Forgive my trespasses, Oh Lord Jesus,  
 for many times have I tested you.  
 I deserved the wrath of your hand,  
 but you saw greater things for me;  
 your patience has been enormous!  
 Grant me a droplet of such endurance,  
 that I may abolish my impious impatience,  
 refraining from using unpleasant words,  
 and always reflecting your serenity.  
 Great is the Lord Jesus in his ways!

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 17<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## CHOOSING THE HIGHER GOODS

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**The Bible often challenges us** to compare the good we find in the world with the good we find in God.

Today's Scriptures focus on comparing God's Word, law, commands, and will with earthly goods and riches.

Psalm 119 tells us that while gold and silver are valuable, God's wisdom is even more valuable. The relative good of precious metals pales in comparison with the good to be found in God.

The Gospel reading also asks us to make a comparison between the wealth of the world and the wealth of faith. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is more valuable than anything in this world. Like the merchant searching for fine pearls or the man seeking a treasure buried in a field, we must be willing to give up all that we have in order to gain Heaven.



The fact is that the acquisition of Heaven comes at an incredible cost. If we are going to follow the Lord, we have to desire him more than anything the world offers: more than power, prestige, or wealth. If we are going to pursue God's way of wisdom, we must place everything in this world below our desire for to become saints.

This lead us to the fundamental questions of life: What have you and I given up to become a follower of Christ? What are you and I willing to give up?

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~Kings 3:5, 7-12~

## REFLECTION

**K**ing Solomon certainly made a good start to his reign, asking only for those gifts he would need to rule wisely and well. Pleased with his humble request, God gave him a matchless wisdom that is renowned still. But the great wealth and power that accrued to Solomon because of his gifts led him away from God. First Kings 11:4 tells us that "when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father" (RSV: 2CE).

Solomon's heart was turned from the true God by other loves—loves that drew him away from that one love that he had first sought. In the end, Solomon's story is not so much a lesson in the search for wisdom as a cautionary tale. From the heights of the divine favor, Solomon ended by building altars to gods that would eventually demand the sacrifice of the children of the kings of Israel and would lead to the division and eventual total destruction of Israel. This man to whom God had appeared twice (see 1 Kings 11:9) and who had been given every earthly and spiritual gift fell because of his pride, reminding us that we should never relax our vigilance in being single-minded for God and for the things of God. When we come to believe that what we have is due to our own powers, those powers themselves cease to be gifts and become a curse.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-128, 129-130~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 8:28-30~

## REFLECTION

**S**t. Paul reminds us that from start to finish, everything comes from God. He calls us into existence and then orders our lives in such a way that we have the requisite natural and supernatural gifts to make it home to him. He calls, justifies, and then glorifies those whom he predestined for his purposes. But Paul does not mean that we are locked into a mechanical process that leaves no room for the operation of human freedom. As he says, "All things work for good for those who love God." Who or what we will love is the critical human question. When we love that which is below us, we fall. When we love that which is above us, we rise. The Church teaches that everyone receives sufficient grace for salvation. If we respond positively to that grace by loving God in return, that sufficient grace will flower into salvation. If we waste it, turning our love in the wrong direction, that attraction will lead us further away from our true purpose. Thus, our eternal destiny depends on who or what we love.

## GOSPEL

~Matthew 13:44-52~

## REFLECTION

**T**he Danish religious philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, in a book called *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, strives to convince us to reject spiritual mediocrity. We tend to want to make a deal with God. "If you don't trouble me too much, I will confess faith in you and worship you ... on Sunday, that is." Our modern culture, which has yielded untold numbers of conveniences and technologies, only reinforces our sense that God and his religion make nice decorative additions to a life that is largely of our own choosing and making. For many of us, what would really be changed if we if we chose not to be Christians, but rather ethical pagans?

Jesus's short parables, however, reveal that the problem with this kind of calculation is that it attempts to weigh finite things against something of infinite weight. God is the very foundation of all things, the Source and Sustainer of the whole material universe and spiritual realm. He is the ultimate treasure, the pearl of great price that any rational man would sell everything to obtain. Even the whole universe cannot outweigh him in fact, innumerable universes would be nothing but dust in comparison. Every ounce of our energy ought to be expended in seeking him and striving for sanctity. After all, when we live that way, God supplies all the rest, or as St. Paul put it, "All things work for good for those who love God."

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for  
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's  
open our time together in prayer.**

Lord Jesus,  
give us the humility wherever pride reigns,  
pardon wherever offense abides,  
grace wherever sin abounds;  
we pray to You;  
Jesus Christ, risen Lord, have mercy on us!

—From *Biblical Prayers* by Lucien Deiss

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Today's readings invite us to compare the genuine goods this world offers with the spiritual goods God offers us. What do you think most people would consider the most valuable thing in the world?**

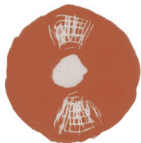
*(Possible answers might be gold or other precious metals, money, wealth, family life, love, faith, wisdom, or hope.*

*The answers themselves aren't as important as getting participants to think about what they themselves consider valuable.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Today's Scripture readings ask us to make a comparison between the riches of the world and the riches God offers. Let's see what Tim Gray has to say about this topic.**



(Play the video for Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately seven minutes.)

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## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**What is the difference between moral relativism and what Dr. Gray calls the “righteous relativism” the Church is calling us to?**

*(There are certain things in life that are always wrong [for example, abortion], and things that are always good [like protecting life]. We cannot be relativistic about morality, but we can and should be “relativistic” toward the good things of the world vs. the good things of God in the sense that we should see their relative good compared to spiritual goods. Whatever legitimate goods the world offers, they are nothing compared to the spiritual goods we find in Christ.*

*It is in this sense that Tim Gray says we should be “relativistic” about the good things of God, as compared to worldly goods, so that we might make the kinds of choices that ultimately lead us to Heaven.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**What does Psalm 119 compare gold and silver to? What does the Gospel compare Heaven to?**

*(The psalmist compares God’s word and wisdom to gold and silver. The Gospel compares heaven to a treasure in a field and a pearl of great price.)*

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today's readings all center around having the wisdom to discern what is truly valuable in life. Let us pray now for that wisdom.**

### **PRAYER:**

King Solomon was a successful and powerful king. And yet he begged God for greater wisdom to guide his life and his leading of the people of Israel. He prayed, "Give your servant, therefore, an understanding heart to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong." Meditate on these words, and prayerfully consider areas in your life where you, like Solomon, need more wisdom from God to guide you. Ask the Lord to help you.

### **RESOLUTION:**

What can you do this week to seek God's wisdom in a particular area where you sensed you needed his guidance more? Imitate Solomon's desire for wisdom and ask the Lord to help you pursue the true spiritual goods in life, not just the goods of this world.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **DIGGING DEEPER** **THE WISEST KING**



King Solomon is mentioned in both the Bible and the Qur'an as the son of David and the king of Israel. His mother was the famous Bathsheba. The Bible says he was the builder of the first Temple in Jerusalem and a man of great wisdom and insight. One of the best-known examples of Solomon's wisdom is the story of two women who both claimed to be the mother of a baby. When Solomon suggested that they cut the baby in half, the true mother was willing to give him up rather than allow him to be killed. Because of that, Solomon knew she was the real mother. Solomon is believed to have ruled Israel from 970 to 931 BC.

### **LEADER TIP:**

- *Remind participants that they won't necessarily have great insights each time they do lectio divina, but no matter what happens, a good question to ask at the end is: "What did I become aware of in this reading that I had never thought of before?"*



# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue,*

**Let's close our time together today with the words of King Solomon from 1 Kings 8:56-61.**

“Blessed be the LORD  
 who has given rest to his people Israel, just as he promised.  
 Not a single word has gone unfulfilled  
 of the entire gracious promise he made through Moses his servant.  
 May the LORD, our God, be with us as he was with our ancestors  
 and may he not forsake us nor cast us off .  
 May he draw our hearts to himself,  
 that we may walk in his ways and  
 keep the commands, statutes, and ordinances  
 that he enjoined on our ancestors.  
 May these words of mine, the petition I have offered  
 before the LORD, our God,  
 be present to the LORD our God day and night,  
 that he may uphold the cause of his servant  
 and the cause of his people Israel as each day requires,  
 so that all the peoples of the earth may know  
 that the LORD is God and there is no other.  
 Your heart must be wholly devoted to the LORD, our God,  
 observing his statutes and keeping his commandments,  
 as on this day.”  
 Amen.

# LEADER GUIDE

# THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD

✧ YEAR A ✧

IT IS GOOD  
THAT WE ARE HERE



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## Leader Preparation Overview



**All four of today's Scripture readings** focus on the glory and majesty of Jesus as king. His glorious kingship is foretold by the prophet Daniel in the vision he receives of “one like a Son of man” receiving an everlasting dominion from God, the “Ancient One.” In the Responsorial Psalm we sing to our Lord who is king over all the earth. In the second letter of St. Peter, we actually get a firsthand account from Peter of what we will hear about again in the Gospel reading from St. Matthew—the glory and majesty that Peter witnessed on the Mount of the Transfiguration.

Together all of these Scripture passages point toward the divinity of Jesus Christ, one of the most important points of our faith as Christians. This key doctrine is also a great mystery: How can Jesus be fully God and fully man? What does that mean? How well do we understand this claim? Can we explain it and defend it?

These are all important questions and great topics for further study—but today we step aside from our struggle to understand and seek to just be with God. The Transfiguration was a moment of glory and strength before the scandal and horror of the Cross. As you lead your

group through today's readings and discussions, remember that even when we don't fully understand, it is good that we are here with God. Understanding, courage, and all the rest will follow. Rest in his love.

### **LEADER TIP**

*We've provided "Reflections" for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*

*Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS ON THE THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD

## FIRST READING

~Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this prophetic vision, received by the Prophet Daniel, we see what is usually interpreted as an eschatological scene, that is, one having to do with the end of the world at the time of Christ's Second Coming. In it we see "one like a Son of man" receive "dominion, glory, and kingship" from "the Ancient One." Daniel, because of his purity and commitment to God's covenant, is given wisdom and prophet insight into the mysteries of God's plan. In a series of four visions in this section of the book, he is given revelations of proximate and distant events in that plan, including

the timing of the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile and the arrival of the Messiah.

Jesus identifies himself with Daniel’s vision in Matthew 24:30 when he says about his Second Coming: “Then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” Every Mass—indeed every celebration of any of the sacraments—is a foretaste of that event that still awaits complete fulfillment. If we greet him with love at each of these liturgical events, we will not have the experience of mourning as do “the tribes of the earth”; we will instead experience a joyful reunion with One we have come to know intimately, as we will already be citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 97:1-2, 5-6, 9~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 6:3-4, 8-11~

## REFLECTION

**T**his Second Reading presents us with a relatively rare occurrence in the New Testament. In it, St. Peter corroborates an event recorded in all three of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. None of those three were eyewitnesses to the event to which only Sts. Peter, James, and John were privy. Here Peter says, essentially, “Yes, this did happen.” And he uses his own experience of that event to assert, more generally, that the Gospel is not a collection of “cleverly devised myths.” His immediate experience of the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor is also a source of guarantee that his own ministry, received as direct mission from Jesus himself, includes a “prophetic message that is altogether reliable.”

As the first pope and the “Rock” upon which Christ built his Church, this also represents a guarantee of the reliability of the Faith we receive through this same Church in our own day. This Faith is still for us “a lamp shining in a dark place.” It isn’t inappropriate to think that in some ways, the darkness of our day is a little thicker than St. Peter would have experienced in the first century of Christianity. Later in this same letter he warns that “scoffers will come the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming?’” In our day scoffing has become the primary aim of elite culture. The claims of Christianity are disputed everywhere. As St. Paul said, “Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (Romans 13:11).

## GOSPEL

~Matthew 17:1-9~

## REFLECTION

**T**he event recounted in this passage from Matthew takes place, scholars tell us, on the feast of Tabernacles in the Jewish festival calendar, which is both a harvest festival and a celebration of the giving of the Mosaic Law on Mount Sinai. Recognizing that fact helps us to see a little more deeply into this mysterious scene. When Moses went up to receive the Law, he took with him three Levites—Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu—who would all serve in the priestly office in the Jewish liturgies. Jesus, likewise, takes three priestly figures with him up Mount Tabor—Peter, James, and John. Moses and these others “beheld God” on Sinai (Exodus 24:11) and Moses also beholds God now on Mount Tabor in the Person of Jesus Christ. Moses’ presence on this other mountain makes clear to us that, not only is Jesus the same God seen on Sinai, as the revelation of his glory makes clear, but that he is also the new Law Giver, a new Moses in his humanity.

The presence of Elijah the Prophet, who also encountered God on Mount Sinai (called Horeb), indicates that Jesus is the fulfillment of all prophecy and the ultimate prophet and the bearer of a new teaching, and so the voice of the Father insists that we must “listen to him.” All these signs, the presence of these two figures from the Old Covenant,

the bright cloud, and the divine voice, fill the three Apostles with awe and they can't help but cast themselves on the ground in adoration. They now see, to fortify them in the trials of his coming Passion, the full glory of Christ's divine Sonship. St. John, who is the only one of the Gospel writers not to include this event, may have still have been in awe of it when, now decades later, he says in the Prologue to his Gospel, "We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14).

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for  
The Transfiguration of the Lord. Let's open our  
time together in prayer.**

O my Divine Savior,  
Transform me into yourself.  
May my hands be the hands of Jesus.  
Grant that every faculty of my body  
May serve only to glorify you.  
Above all,  
Transform my soul and all its powers  
So that my memory, will and affections  
May be the memory, will and affections  
of Jesus.  
I pray for you  
To destroy in me  
All that is not of you.  
Grant that I may live

But in you, by you and for you,  
So that I may truly say,  
With St. Paul,  
“I live—now not I—  
but Christ lives in me.”  
Amen.

(Prayer to Christ the King taken from [www.catholic.org/prayers](http://www.catholic.org/prayers))

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**In today’s readings we see a common theme of being in God’s glorious presence, culminating in the tremendous experience of Sts. Peter, James, and John on the Mount of the Transfiguration.**

**What do you think of when you think about the glory of God?**

*(God reveals his glory to us in many ways, and each of us experiences this revelation in a slightly different way. Some possible responses include God’s glory revealed in nature, especially in something powerful like a thunderstorm or the ocean, or something strikingly beautiful like a sunset; God’s glory revealed in the liturgy, especially as celebrated in a majestic cathedral or with particularly beautiful music. For further discussion, you may point participants to the First Reading from Daniel and discuss the way God’s glory is described when he reveals himself in visions in the Old Testament.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA – SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**The Transfiguration is a familiar Bible story, and it might seem like something long ago and far away—but it has very important applications for us. Let’s take a few minutes to watch this video and look at what this reading means for us today.**





Play the video for The Transfiguration of the Lord. This will play for approximately four minutes.

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## **DIGGING DEEPER**

### **MOSES AND ELIJAH**



Of all the important figures from the Old Testament, why is it Moses and Elijah who appear at the Transfiguration?

One common interpretation is that they represent the Law and the Prophets, the two major parts of the Jewish Scriptures. Moses was the instrument of God's law at Mount Sinai and in the wilderness, and Elijah can be seen as emblematic of the many prophets who proclaimed God's word and called his people to repentance and faith. These two representatives are present at the revelation of the glory of Jesus, who fulfills both the Law and the promises of the Prophets.

Another explanation is that Moses and Elijah are present because both of them were assumed bodily into Heaven. There is a Jewish tradition that the Archangel Michael took Moses' body into Heaven (you can find an allusion to this tradition in the letter of St. Jude verse 9), and Elijah was carried up to Heaven in a whirlwind (see 2 Kings 2:1-12).

Dr. Brant Pitre gives yet another explanation in his book *The Case for Jesus*. In his discussion of the Transfiguration, Dr. Pitre looks back at the theophanies—the revelations of God—that both Moses and Elijah experienced on Mount Sinai. God appeared to Moses in Exodus 33:18-23 and to Elijah in 1 Kings 19:9, 11–13, but neither of them were able to see his face. Now, on the Mount of the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah are finally able to see what they were not allowed to see before—the face of God in all his glory. (For more on this, see *The Case for Jesus*, New York: Image, 2016, pp. 132-134).

Of course, one of the beautiful things about Scripture is that there are layers upon layers of meaning. None of these explanations are contradictory, and each one sheds light on the meaning of the Transfiguration.

# STEP #4

## LECTIO DEVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTION #1

**We tend to give Peter a lot of grief for his suggestion that he build some tents for Jesus and Moses and Elijah on the mountain. But we might not have reacted with any more presence of mind.**

**The Gospel reading says that Peter, James, and John were “terrified” at what they witnessed at the Transfiguration. Why do you think they felt terrified? Do you ever experience any kind of fear in reaction to God? Why?**

*(Help the participants understand the description “terrified” in light of how overwhelming the whole experience would have been. You can also point out that while the Apostles were coming to a point of having faith that Jesus was divine, believing that is a whole lot different than actually seeing it.*

*Participants may share about feeling fear—or perhaps awe—in response to an experience of God or coming to a greater understanding of his majesty. If they do not want to share about anything personal, ask about different kinds of fear and if there can be good reactions of fear in response to God. A good fear of the Lord—one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit—is a right understanding that he is God and we are not. Proverbs 1:7 says that “fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”)*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTION #2

**In the video Jim Beckman invites us to focus on Peter’s words, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here!”**

**God is always present with us, but we are not always aware of him. What can we do to not take God’s presence for granted? What can we do to honor his glory and remind ourselves that “it is good that we are here” with him specifically at Mass?**

*(We are reminded of God's presence when we take time to pray throughout our day, and not just in the morning or before meals. It is also a great reminder to talk to other people about God. This doesn't have to be evangelizing (although it's important to look for those opportunities); it can be as simple as asking someone to pray for you or saying "God bless you" to someone (and not just when they sneeze!).)*

*We can be mindful of God's glory at Mass by taking time to prepare ourselves mentally and spiritually as well as physically, being quiet and reverent in the church, taking time to remind ourselves that the saints and angels are present with us as we worship, etc. Try to help the conversation move along so that it doesn't fall into the temptation of complaining about other people not being mindful enough of God's presence and glory.)*

## STEP #5

### LECTIO DIVINA – PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**We will see the fullness of God's glory unveiled in Heaven, and we experience pieces of that glory even here on earth. Let's take some time to enter into prayer and reflection with today's Gospel reading and contemplate the glory of God.**

#### **PRAYER:**

Peter, James, and John were Jesus' most intimate friends. They had traveled with him, learned from him, ate with him, and (we can assume) laughed with him for three years. But on the mountaintop they witnessed something totally beyond their years of experience with Jesus. Prayerfully put yourself in this Gospel reading. What are your expectations as you climb the mountain with Jesus? How do you feel when you see him transfigured and see his glory revealed? What do you think when you hear the voice of the Father speaking from the cloud, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him"?

## **RESOLUTION:**

God in all his glory dwells within the hearts of the faithful. He comes to us in the Eucharist at each and every Mass—his glory is veiled, but it is still fully present. This is a great and beautiful mystery of our Faith.

Peter may not have fully understood what he witnessed and heard at the Transfiguration, but he did recognize the importance of being in Jesus' presence. Ask God if there are any areas in your life where something is getting in the way of simply being present with him. Surrender those obstacles to God in prayer. Each day this week, try to be more aware of God's glorious presence with you.

## **Use your Prayer Journal to write down your thoughts, reflections, and your resolutions.**

*(Many things can get in the way of simply being present with God. Sometimes what gets in the way is sin—a bad habit, wanting our own will over God's, disordered attachment to possessions, pride, etc. But often, even things that are good by themselves can get in the way of our experience of God if we don't keep our priorities straight. Wanting to know or understand why something is happening or what something means is generally a good thing, but we can be so focused on figuring it out that we fail to be present with God in prayer.)*

### **DIGGING DEEPER** **SON OF MAN**



One of Jesus's favorite titles to use in reference to himself in the Gospels is "the Son of man." This sounds like he is emphasizing his humanity—and the phrase is certainly used that way in some places in the Old Testament. But when Jesus applies the title to himself, he is announcing that he is the long-awaited Messiah by making a reference to the book of the prophet Daniel. In today's First Reading, we hear one of Daniel's visions about the coming Messiah, who he describes as "one like a Son of man." Notice that Daniel's Messiah is "like" a Son of man. There's something human about him, but there's something more than human as well. And in today's reading, the Son of man is present in Heaven with the Ancient One. He comes on the clouds and receives everlasting kingly authority from God. Daniel is foretelling not just a new heir to the Davidic throne—he's prophesying a new king of Israel who is more than a mere man. This prophecy from Daniel is confirmed in today's Gospel, when the voice of the Father proclaims the Messiah to be his "beloved Son."

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP – CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week’s Scripture readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I’d like each of us to share one take-away from today’s session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn’t know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let’s close our time together with prayer:**

Father of mercies, you glorified your heavenly Son  
and revealed yourself in the bright cloud,  
grant that we may listen in faith to have a love for the word of Christ.  
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.  
Amen.

(Adapted from the Novena to our Lord of Transfiguration  
[www.ewtn.com/Devotionals/novena](http://www.ewtn.com/Devotionals/novena))

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 19<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## STORMS OF LIFE

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**Have you ever been in a storm at sea?** If you have, you know how terrifying it can be. Now imagine being in a storm in a small wooden boat...and not knowing how to swim! (It's been suggested that most fishermen in Jesus's time didn't know how to swim.) This is the scene we have in today's Gospel.

Jesus has just performed the miracle of the feeding the 5,000 and has sent his disciples ahead of him, saying he will meet them on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. It's the darkest time of night and the wind is against the boat. As any sailor will tell you, that's when a boat is most likely to capsize. In the darkness, the disciples see Jesus coming toward them, walking on the water. They cry out in fear and Jesus responds, "Take courage. It is I." In doing so, he utters the Divine Name, indicating that he is more than a teacher or miracle worker; he is God.

Peter isn't sure that this is really Jesus so he asks the figure to command him to come. Jesus obliges with a single word: Come. Now this is where the story gets really interesting. As long as Peter

keeps his eyes fixed on Jesus, he is fine. The minute he notices that he is walking on water in the middle of a raging storm, he sinks. After crying out for help, he is rescued by Jesus, who calms the storms and comforts the disciples.

Peter's lesson is our lesson, too. We need to trust Jesus, not only in the good times, but also when the storms of life batter us. Would that we could know his presence in our lives, in our dark days, our bright days—and every day.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~1 Kings 19:9a, 11-13a~

## REFLECTION

**A**s noted in the reflection on the **Second Reading** from last Sunday (the 18th Sunday) from Romans 8, everything that God has made, however vast or naturally powerful, is only a creature before the God who is Creator of all. In this passage from 1 Kings, Elijah the prophet, who is fleeing from a threat of death by the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and who is about to undertake a difficult mission to undermine their authority, is given a special vision to fortify him for the task. God demonstrates his transcendence and power



by signs that resemble those shown to Israel at this same location (Horeb is also called Mt. Sinai) at the time of the Exodus: violent wind, earthquake, and fire. And then, with shocking irony, God communicates to Elijah, not in these signs of his power, but in a whisper.

In so doing, God is in effect saying to his prophet, “I who control the immense forces of nature am with you in littleness, in gentleness, in intimacy.” Perhaps we should see in this Old Testament revelation of the majesty of God a sort of prophecy of the humble birth of the divine child at Bethlehem, of the baptism of the sinless One in the Jordan by John, or the mystery of Christ’s self-offering like a lamb led to slaughter. As one theologian has put it, the more God humbles himself, the more he reveals who he is.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm: 85:9, 10, 11-12, 13-14 ~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 9:1-5~

### REFLECTION

**T**his passage is the beginning of a larger reflection by St. Paul on the mystery of Israel’s failure to recognize its own Messiah, other parts of which we will see in the Sundays that follow. Paul expresses his compassion for his own Jewish people, “only a remnant” of which have accepted Jesus (Romans 9:27). Paul’s heartbreak is born of the fact that Israel had been the subject of a tremendous series of divine favors: the patriarchs, promises, prophets, covenant adoption, the glory of her revealed law, and Temple worship. How could it be that at this critical juncture of salvation history, in which God fully reveals himself in the Messiah for whom Israel had longed—she would miss her “visitation”? (Luke 19:44). For Paul, and for us, this is a mystery, which is somehow part of God’s plan for the salvation of the world, but a great sorrow as well. St. Peter

on Pentecost says that it was ignorance on their part that made them fail to see who Jesus was (see Acts 2:14-36). But many more refuse, even after the Resurrection, to recognize in Jesus the fulfillment of the very promises in which they hoped. Paul himself had been one of those who could not see this truth, and had been taken directly in hand by God so that he could serve the mission to the Gentiles. And so his sorrow is likely over the fact that the rest of Israel has not received a similar grace and, again, the reason for that will only be known when Israel finally does come to see in Jesus her Messiah.

## GOSPEL

~Matthew 14:22-33~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this Gospel text we can see a reflection of the themes from the First Reading. Elijah had just received a miraculous meal (1 Kings 19:5-8) before beholding his vision of the power and gentleness of God on the mountain. In Matthew 14, the feeding of the five thousand precedes Jesus's retreat to the mountain to commune with his Father, and then he comes down and demonstrates his divine power by walking upon a storm-tossed sea.

Peter is cast in a role like Elijah, who is a man of remarkable faith, capable of prophesying boldly to kings, and yet who fears for his life. Peter, too, is bold enough to be the only one who invites Jesus to call him out on to the turbulent waters and yet who doubts when he sees just how stormy that sea is. We, too, are people of faith who still fear and second-guess our earlier commitments to God. Sometimes our faith, expansive and even heroic at the outset, turns to "little faith" when the struggles begin.

Peter supplies an iconic response for all of us, crying out to the Lord for help when his faith turns from heroic to “little.” Note that Jesus immediately responds, taking Peter’s hand. He will always do the same for us.

## SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

### STEP #1

#### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let’s open our time together by praying this short prayer by St. Teresa of Kolkata.**

Lord, increase my faith,  
bless my efforts and work,  
now and for evermore. Amen.

### STEP #2

#### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Today’s Gospel is about the disciples caught in a severe storm. What is the worst storm you can recall? If you’ve been in a scary, severe storm, would you share with the group how you felt in the middle of it?**

*(Most likely people will talk about being frightened and wondering if they would get out safely. It’s possible someone may say that they simply trusted in God.)*

*Try to emphasize the more negative aspects of being in a dangerous storm in order to set the stage for what the disciples were likely thinking and feeling.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Today we join Patrick Coffin as we look at the Scripture account of Jesus walking on water.**



(Play the video for Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

#### DIGGING DEEPER

##### BIBLE TIME



In Jesus's time, the twenty-four hour day was arranged into four parts called watches. First watch: sunset to 9 p.m. Second watch: 9 p.m. to midnight

Third watch: midnight to 3 a.m.

Fourth watch: 3 a.m. to sunrise

In addition, the daylight hours were divided into four "hours."

First hour: sunrise to 9 a.m.

Third hour: 9 a.m. to noon

Sixth hour: noon to 3 p.m.

Ninth hour: 3 p.m. to sunset

Jesus was crucified in the third hour (Mark 15:25) and gave up his spirit in the ninth hour (Matthew 27:46-50). The Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles and Mary in the third hour (Acts 2:15).

## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

#### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**When the Apostles first saw Jesus, they were terrified and cried out in fear. What is the significance of Jesus's response to them, according to the video?**

*(Jesus said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." In doing so, he used the words that indicate the name of God, the great "I am." When he said this, he was telling them that he was more than a teacher or miracle worker; he was God.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**At what point does Jesus rescue Peter? Why does he wait when he can see that Peter is drowning?**

*(Jesus waits until Peter asks for help; then he reaches out and rescues him.)*

*While we can't be sure why Jesus waits, it seems likely that he wants Peter to acknowledge his need before intervening in order to strengthen Peter's faith.*

*If you have time, you may want to show Rembrandt's famous painting of Christ in "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee." It can be found on [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org).)*

**STEP #5****LECTIO DIVINA —  
PRAYER & RESOLUTION**

**In the video, Patrick says that we should place ourselves into this scene. Let's do so now in our prayer time.**

**PRAYER:**

Imagine you are with the disciples seated, or perhaps fearfully lying in the stern of the boat. You see a ghostly image coming toward you and at first you are not sure who it is. Suddenly you realize it is Jesus when he says, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." Jesus then bids you, like he did Peter, to come out onto the water and walk with him. What would you do? How would you feel about leaving the boat? Would you take Jesus up on the invitation?

**RESOLUTION:**

Prayerfully consider how Jesus may be wanting you to "get out of the boat" and give up control by entrusting something in your life to him. Ask Jesus to help you surrender that to him with confidence, remembering what he told the Apostles: "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

***LEADER TIPS:***

- *Knowing a few Scripture verses by heart can be a great comfort, especially during difficult times. The words of Jesus in today's Gospel are particularly comforting. Encourage participants to commit them to memory.*
- *At the end of the prayer time, remind participants that Jesus clearly said the words "I am," indicating his divine nature. This is an important event in the Gospels because it is the first time that the disciples hear him articulate his identity so clearly.*

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today with prayer. If you are not currently in a difficult or fearful situation, offer this prayer for someone who is.**

O Lord, hear my cry pouring out from a troubled heart.  
The sorrow which clutches at my soul has driven me to you  
my protector,  
my true friend in time of need.  
You know, my God, all my failings, my faults  
and my sins as well as the torment gripping my soul.  
My greatest sorrow should be for my disregard of your holy  
commandments in the past, and I sincerely hope that you will  
grant me the grace of true contrition.  
O my Savior, hide not your face from me in this tribulation,  
let the light of your countenance shine upon me that I may be  
illuminated by its love.  
If it be your will, lighten this burden from me,  
yet should it be a means of my salvation, help me,  
help me O Lord, to carry this cross,  
for alone I can do nothing.  
Radiate your love upon your prodigal child O Lord,  
this beggar who knocks at your door seeking shelter  
in your sacred heart;  
this once proud earthen vessel made of clay seeks you, O Christ,  
and in a newly found faith, firmly believes that you  
will receive him in your limitless love and mercy.  
Amen.

—[ourcatholicprayers.com/tribulation-prayer](http://ourcatholicprayers.com/tribulation-prayer)

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 20<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧

### GREAT FAITH AND PRAYER

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#### Leader Preparation Overview



**In this week's Gospel,** Jesus goes into Gentile (non-Jew) territory and encounters there a Canaanite whose daughter is ill. She learns he is there and goes to him, begging for help. At first Jesus doesn't answer her, but she continues to beg for his help.

Even when he tells her that it isn't right to give the food of the children to the dogs, she retorts by saying that even the dogs get crumbs. Jesus is so impressed by her boldness that he heals her daughter, saying, "Oh woman, great is your faith!"

From this story, we learn two important points. The first is that persistent prayer backed by unwavering faith will receive an answer from the Lord. We don't always receive the answers in the way we want or expect to, but if we pray persistently, we will see our hearts open up to the good thing God wants for us.

The second is that we who live 2,000 years after Christ can still receive his healing and blessing. He healed the woman's daughter from a distance and he can still heal us today. Time and space are no barriers to the Lord of all time and all space.

Since many of us have had the experience of praying when it seems as if our prayers are battering against a brick wall, this Gospel story of the persistent woman serves to increase our faith in the love and mercy of the Lord for each one of us.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 56:1, 6-7~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this passage from the Prophet Isaiah, we see another clear indication that God's plan, advanced by way of Israel, is a plan "for all peoples." In the period following the Maccabean revolt (see 1 and 2 Maccabees), a number of Gentiles began to attach themselves to Judaism. The Jews responded by establishing a process by which these foreigners could be incorporated into Israel, which included a ritual bath, or baptism. At that time it might have appeared to them that this prophecy of Isaiah was beginning to be fulfilled.

But the full import of this prophecy is only seen when Jesus opens the fullness of the covenant to those beyond the tribal limits of Israel, as we see hinted at in the Gospel for this Sunday. This prophecy from Isaiah suggests that kind of full inclusion, indicating that foreigners would minister to God and serve him, even in the Temple on Mt. Zion. That is, these people would enter fully into the ritual life of the covenant with God and not merely stand in the outer courts of the Temple (“the court of the Gentiles”). That happens in the Catholic Church. The term *catholic* means “universal.” In this universal Church founded by Christ, we who are not Jews by blood become priests, prophets, and kings by Baptism, and are made full participants in the perfect offering and sacrifice that Jesus makes of himself to the Father in the Holy Mass.

## RESPONSORIAL

**PSALM ~Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8~**

## SECOND READING

**~Romans 11:13-15, 29-32~**

## REFLECTION

**P**aul was the agent chosen by God to announce the extension of full covenant life to the Gentiles. While the ultimate reasons for this election by God are known by him alone, it is quite possible that Paul was chosen because of his unique qualifications to play this role in the divine plan. First, he was deeply committed to a radical embrace of Jewish life as one of the Pharisees, a group that endeavored to live the Jewish religious law piously. Next, he was adamantly and actively opposed to the nascent Christian movement called “the Way,” to the point that he seems to have spearheaded its suppression by the Jewish authorities. He was also a scholar of the highest caliber, which made him capable of making the argument for covenant extension to the Gentiles from a perspective *within* Judaism itself, once he came to recognize the truth of Christianity.

All of this made Paul a particularly effective instrument in the final part of the early phase of the Church's foundation. But, the failure of the Jewish people as a whole to recognize what Paul had come to see so clearly remained a mystery to him. In this text from Romans, he makes clear that although the reasons for this remain shrouded, the "call of God" for the Jewish people remains intact. They are not abandoned, they are not excluded from God's plan, anymore than the Gentiles had been excluded from God's plan for Israel. It remains a plan for all people.

## GOSPEL

~Matthew 15:21-28~

### REFLECTION

**A**s already noted, God's plan for the human race has been from the beginning a universal plan, intended to include all. And so, it might seem rather odd that Jesus, who is the personification of that plan, should seem at first so standoffish toward this Gentile woman who appeals to him for help. The key to understanding this text lies in the fact that, as Jesus makes clear, at this stage in the fulfillment of that plan, his primary mission is for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Jesus gives clear indications that his saving work will find greater extension in episodes like this one with the Canaanite woman and in chapter 4 of John's Gospel, where he discloses his mission and identity to the Samaritan woman at the well. These non-Jews receive remarkable favors from Jesus that are credited not to national origin but to faith. But Israel must be courted first, because, as he tells the Samaritan woman, "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22).

Jesus doesn't disclose the full extent of the divine plan at this early stage because it would have introduced an obstacle to his disclosure of that plan with regards to the Jews. They are the children who need to be attended to first so that they can lead others to him. Jesus calls the Canaanite woman a "dog" because the Jews used this term to indicate the barbaric practices of

the Canaanite people. It is less an insult than an indicator of the outcast position of the woman. Note that she acknowledges the sins of her people in asking for his aid, which he then provides in full.

## SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

### STEP #1

#### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying this prayer attributed to St. Patrick.**

God's eye to look before me,  
 God's ear to hear me,  
 God's word to speak for me,  
 God's hand to guard me,  
 God's way to lie before me,  
 God's shield to protect me,  
 God's hosts to save me  
 Afar and anear,  
 Alone or in a multitude. Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Today's Gospel reading teaches us about persistence in prayer. Have you ever prayed for something for a very long time before you received an answer? What made you persist in your prayers?**

*(If you have an example from your own life, you may want to begin with that to help set the tone for the discussion.)*

*(Reasons for persistence could include confidence God would answer, no hope other than God, stubbornness, etc.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA —

### SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Persistence in prayer can bear much fruit, as we will see in today's study. Let's watch this short video on today's Gospel reading, which offers one great example of someone whose persistence with the Lord was rewarded.**



(Play the video for Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**According to the presenter, why did Jesus initially refuse the woman's request to heal her daughter?**

*(God's promise was given to the chosen people, the Jews. The fulfillment of all the promises of God in the Old Testament were for the people of Israel, even though his ultimate plan was that salvation would go out to the entire world through the Jewish people. The woman who approached him was a Gentile, a non-Jew, and it was not yet time for Jesus to extend his mission. However, out of compassion, he healed her daughter anyway.)*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**What does Jesus say is the reason he was willing to grant her request?**

*(Jesus praises the woman's faith and says that because of her faith, her prayer was answered.)*



# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**The woman in today's Gospel offers a beautiful example of how we are to persevere in prayer.**

### **PRAYER:**

What is the deepest prayer on your heart? Imagine that you are with the woman in today's Gospel. You hear her banter with Jesus and you see her joy at being granted her request. Now you come before Jesus with your desire, your prayer. Picture yourself presenting that petition to him. Do you truly believe that he will answer your prayer? Are you willing to persevere in making this request if it is not answered right away? Are you open to having your heart conform to his will if he should respond to your prayer in a way other than what you request?

### **RESOLUTION:**

Make a "Prayer List." Write down what you are praying for and then record the response: Yes, No, or Wait. Keep the journal for at least a month and pay attention to how God is responding to your requests. Also trust that God wants what is best for you and sometimes answers our prayers in unexpected ways that are truly for our best.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **DIGGING DEEPER EVEN THE PUPPIES**



The Greek word used for *dogs* in this parable likely isn't the standard word for an outside dog running in the streets, but rather is a diminutive meaning something more like a pet or a puppy. When the woman says to Jesus that even the dogs get the crumbs, she is using the image of a household pet, begging at the table. The whole exchange, rather than being as harsh as it sounds in English, has a more playful tone about it.

### **LEADER TIP:**

- A "Prayer List" is a concrete way to see how God is answering our prayers. Most people who keep such a list discover that God answers "Yes" far more often than "No." It also highlights the importance of persistence, since many times a prayer isn't answered right away—hence the "Wait" category.

## STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today with prayer:**

Behold me at your most holy feet, O dear Jesus,  
to manifest to you my gratitude for the continual favors  
which you have bestowed upon me,  
and still wish to bestow upon me.  
As many times as I have invoked you, O Jesus,  
You have made me content;  
I have often had recourse to you, and you have always consoled  
me. How shall I express myself to you, dear Jesus?  
I thank you!  
Yet one more grace I desire of you, O my God,  
If it would be pleasing to you...  
[here silently mention your request].  
If you were not omnipotent, I would not make this request.  
O Jesus, have pity on me.  
May your most holy will be done in all things.

—St. Gemma Galgani

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## 21<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



# KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

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## Leader Preparation Overview



**“Who do you say that I am?”** That question, asked by Jesus to Simon Peter in today’s Gospel, sets the stage for a key foundation of the Catholic Church. Once Simon states that Jesus is the Messiah, then Jesus blesses him, changes his name to Peter (which means rock), and says that he will build his church upon that rock.

This week’s study will draw out two important themes from this passage. First, the symbolism of the rock. Solomon, the great king of Israel, built the Temple on the rock where Abraham offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice. With this background in mind, we will see that Jesus is saying that he is the new Solomon. Like Solomon, Jesus is the builder of the new temple, the Church. And just as Solomon built his temple on the rock of Abraham’s sacrifice, so Jesus will build his—though not on a physical rock, but on Peter, the new rock. This new temple, which Jesus refers to as his kingdom, will be his church—the Catholic Church.

Second, the keys. Jesus, knowing that he will not be physically present much longer, hands over the “keys of the kingdom” to Peter.

We will see that in the Bible, the keys are a symbol for the king’s prime minister, the caretaker of the kingdom. By giving Peter the keys of the kingdom, Jesus is appointing Peter as his prime minister in the kingdom he is building. From that moment on, Peter and his successors, the popes, have held a central leadership role for Christ’s Church—one that recalls the prime minister of the Davidic kingdom of old.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~Isaiah 22:19–23~

## REFLECTION

**T**his passage, because of the mention of the “key of the House of David,” has always been paired by the Church with the Gospel reading from Matthew 16 that we have today in the Lectionary. Eliakim has been prophesied by Isaiah to be the rightful holder of the important office of steward of King Hezekiah’s house. Hezekiah is the heir of the House of David and has tried to reform the kingdom, but has entered into an alliance with Egypt against his enemies from the north, contrary to God’s will. His current steward, Shebna, has apparently been complicit in the plans to fortify the city of Jerusalem against an attack from the north and to enter into an alliance with the great power to the south.

God reveals to Isaiah that he himself is the only real safeguard against Israel’s enemies and that Hezekiah’s reforms will have to include a steward, or right-handman, who understands just exactly who God is and what role he is to play in the life of his people. All this is borne out when, finally, the Assyrians do invade from the north, and, just when they are about to strike, the army of Sennacherib is suddenly and mysteriously slain by an angel and the survivors depart! (See 2 Kings 19.) Worldly calculations, political machinations are never a substitute for reliance upon the sovereign power of the Most High. We are to be prudent in how we arrange our affairs, as any good steward of the gifts of God must be, but prudence is not cunning and must be informed by faith.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

-Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 6, 8-

## SECOND READING

-Romans 11:33-36-

## REFLECTION

**T**his short hymn of praise from St. Paul springs forth in response to his reflection upon the remarkable surprise that God reveals about the place of the Gentiles, or non-Jewish peoples, in God’s plan of salvation. Although they had seemed lost in the morass of pagan culture of the time, God had made clear that they were to be part of God’s covenant plan of love in no less a way than the Jews. As Paul notes, from the Jewish perspective that he had grown up with, this was entirely unexpected—as he says, “inscrutable.”

And yet, Paul also tells us that this “judgment,” though unforeseen, does make sense. In verses 28-32 of this same chapter of Romans, he says that God has done so “that he may have mercy upon all.” Because God is infinite and entirely transcends our experience, the things he ordains are not always immediately clear to us. But, precisely because he

is supreme in being, he is also supremely wise. Everything he wills is ordered to bring the maximum good. We are fallen; the world has been wounded by human sin. God permits our trials, many of which are born from either our sin or the sin of others, only because he knows how to make a mercy of even the greatest trials. Often we cannot see what he has planned for us beyond the current circumstance in which we find ourselves, but we can be absolutely certain that God has in store for us a depth of “riches,” even if they be hidden from us now.

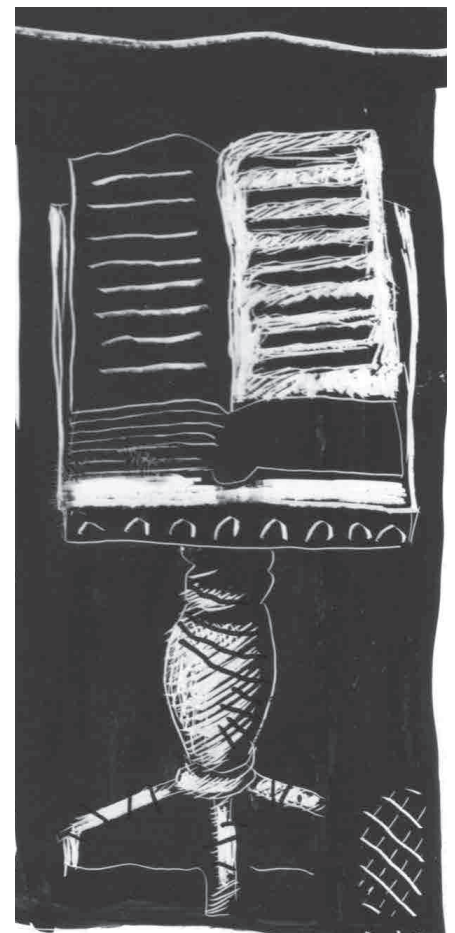
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 16:13-20~

### REFLECTION

**I**n this text we see echoes of the first and second readings. The “keys” offered to the steward of the House of David in the first reading are disclosed as a prophecy of the “keys to the kingdom of heaven” given now to Peter. Like Eliakim, who is a steward chosen by God because he knows who God is and how to follow him, Peter, by a special gift of revelation, knows who Jesus is: “the Son of the living God.” Peter, though weak and human, is to be the fixed “peg in a sure spot,” who will guide the kingdom for his King when he ascends to heaven.

That Peter, an unlettered fisherman — not a levitical priest, not a scholar of the law — should take this important place in the kingdom is “inscrutable.” And that God should use a mere man as his viceroy and that he should found a Church made up of sinful men to do his divine work is “unsearchable.” That he should allow weeds and wheat to grow in the same field is a difficult thing for us to understand, and often still more difficult for us to bear. But once committing himself to come among us as a man, with all that that means, God remains true to the logic of his choice. Men, sometimes sinful, sometimes saints, will be called to hold those keys and to exercise the remarkable role of the steward of the kingdom of God, that office that we refer to as the papacy.





# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying this traditional prayer to St. Peter.**

Thou art the Shepherd of the sheep, the Prince of the Apostles, unto thee were given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. "Thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my Church." Raise us up, we beseech thee, O Lord, by the apostolic assistance of blessed Peter, Thine Apostle; so that the weaker we are, the more mightily we may be helped by the power of his intercession; and that being perpetually defended by the same holy apostle, we may neither yield to any iniquity, nor be overcome by any adversity. Through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**In this week's Gospel, Jesus gives Simon a new name, Peter, which means rock. What do you think this new name tells us about Peter?**

*(Participants likely will mention how Peter is a rock in the sense that he is a solid foundation for Christ's Church.)*



## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Today we are going to look at how changing Peter's name is essential to understanding the foundation of the Catholic Church.**



(Play the video for Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately seven minutes.)

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**According to Dr. Gray, how does the relationship of Jesus to the Catholic Church resemble the relationship of a king to his kingdom?**

*(Just as every king must have a kingdom, so, too, Jesus, as our King must have a kingdom. His kingdom is not earthly property, but the Church and its members.)*

*A king has a prime minister who helps him rule in his absence. Likewise, Jesus has appointed his “prime minister” in the person of the pope who will take care of his kingdom, the Church, until his return.)*

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**Dr. Gray explains that Jesus was a “tekton.” What is a tekton? How does Jesus’ being a tekton relate to his renaming Simon to be Peter, the rock?**

*(A tekton is one who builds primarily with stone. At the climax of his ministry, Jesus, the master stone builder, appoints Peter to be the rock, the stone, on which he will build his entire kingdom.)*

## STEP #5 LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION

### DIGGING DEEPER A MASTER BUILDER



The Greek word *tekton* is used to mean someone who isn’t just a builder of furniture or tools, but an artisan who is skilled in construction and design work and who can build with stone as well as wood. A tekton was a craftsman, not a mere common laborer.



**Let’s now prayerfully reflect on this great gift of Peter and the papacy that Jesus gave the Church.**

### PRAYER:

Put yourself into this pivotal scene in which Jesus elevates Peter to this important leadership role in his kingdom. Picture Jesus with all of the twelve Apostles but singling out Simon and changing his name to “Rock” (Peter). Then imagine Jesus saying those sacred words to him: “You are rock and on this rock I will build my Church.” Prayerfully ponder what you think this means for you and for the Church Jesus established.

### RESOLUTION:

Come up with one resolution you can do this week that either helps you accept the leadership role of Peter’s successors, the popes, more in your life or helps you express greater gratitude for this gift Jesus left his Church.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

**LEADER TIP:**

- Explain that just as Peter was the ordinary name for “rock,” and so Jesus was calling Peter the equivalent of “Rocky,” so, too, our names sometimes have meanings we don’t think of.

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week’s Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I’d like each of us to share one take-away from today’s session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn’t know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let’s close our time together today with this short prayer:**

God, you give us an example of faith in St. Peter.

Grant that your Church may follow  
his teachings and example in all things,  
for it is through him that the Church began.

Help us to love and respect all those who follow in his path, Our  
priests, bishops, and especially the Successor of Peter, our pope.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 22<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧

### THE WORD BURNING WITHIN

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#### Leader Preparation Overview



**Jeremiah is angry in today's first reading.** So angry, he says that God had duped him. The connotation is that God has somehow let him down and deceived him. If you know something about Jeremiah's life, it's easy to see why he feels this way. God called him to be a prophet and then appointed him to bring very bad news to the Israelites: they were going to be sent into exile for their sins. Needless to say, such a message wasn't very popular and the prophet has to bear the brunt of the people's anger. In turn, Jeremiah becomes angry with God for saddling him with such a thankless task. In the end, however, Jeremiah concedes that even if he wanted to, he couldn't deny the Word of God that burns within him.

We can find ourselves in a similar place. When the Word of God burns within us, it can be sweet, but sometimes it can be very difficult. If we are to faithfully pronounce that Word, we must be totally in love with the Lord, for it is only when we are enamored

with God that we can do what St. Paul says: offer our entire lives as a sacrifice to God to be consumed.

Just as Jeremiah was consumed and transformed by the Word that burned within him, we likewise need to be transformed until we become completely pleasing to the Lord. This transformation then leads us from thinking in human terms to thinking as God thinks—and putting on the mind of Christ, as St. Paul says, so that we can unite ourselves fully and completely with Our Lord.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Jeremiah 20:7-9~

### REFLECTION

**T**his week we get a kind of coda to the readings we saw last week, on the 21st Sunday of the Year. Jeremiah complains to God—something that he was not shy about doing—about the weight and burden that his prophetic mission represents. For doing the good thing that God has set for him, acting as prophet of the Most High, he receives “derision and reproach.” In this way he reminds us of the old quip, “No good deed goes unpunished!” It is unsearchable, it is inscrutable that doing the good things that God asks of us should bring the

difficulties that often come with discipleship. It just ought not to be.

But, as we saw in the reflection last week, God's ways are wise beyond human understanding, and our puny "ought nots" cannot penetrate the vast dimensions of God's providential love and mercy. And so the prophet Jeremiah knows, despite the honest expression of frustration that he makes to God, that his will must be done! God's purposes, however dark to us, burn like a flame within those who have committed themselves to him in faith, hope, and love. While that fire may not always give us much light on the path of faith, it will always warm us if we consent to his purposes and give him our lives.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 12:1-2~

## REFLECTION

**T**here is a very interesting juxtaposition of images in this short reading from Romans. Note that St. Paul tells us that we should make of our bodies a "living sacrifice," and then calls that an act of "spiritual worship." This interesting interplay between the body and spirit points to something very important about our faith. While we tend to think of material things, like our bodies, as more earthly, and our souls as more heavenly, the incarnational pattern that stands at the heart of our faith should make us think again.

Jesus, though pure Spirit in his divine nature, chose to enter the realm of matter, taking to himself a body along with the spiritual soul of the human nature that he possessed. That body became the very instrument by which he worked our salvation on the cross. That supreme act of love for his Father and for the human race was, of course, supremely "spiritual."

The love that he experienced in his human soul and still more in the divine Spirit he possessed was expressed in a bodily act. We are embodied spirits and so to act humanly means that the soul or spirit will usually express itself in the body. But that does not mean that such an act is merely material. And that is why the spiritual worship that we offer in the sacraments is so bodily, made up of sights and sounds, words and gestures. Worshiping with our bodies helps us to see that love, to be truly spiritual, must be expressed and acted upon, not merely felt.

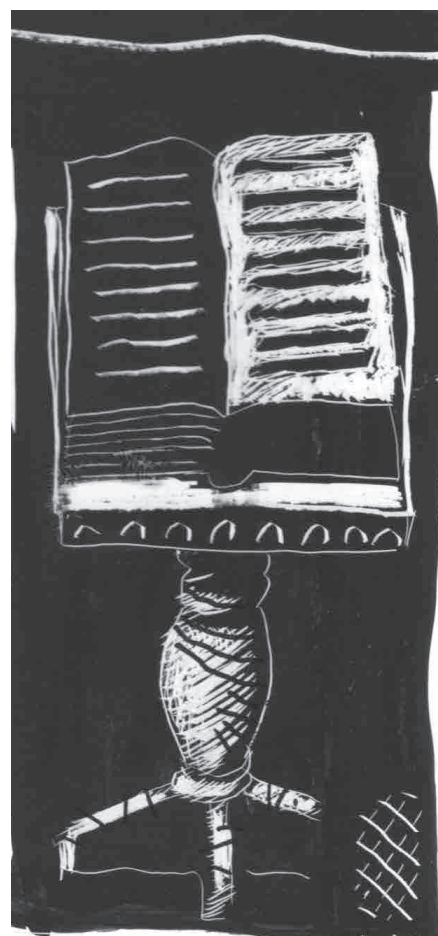
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 16:21-27~

### REFLECTION

**O**ur Gospel passage follows directly upon the text from last Sunday, where Peter is raised to the loftiest position in the kingdom after that of Jesus himself. And what do we see this week? He is called “Satan!” Assuming that both of these passages together comprised only several minutes of conversation, Peter must have felt like he was on a roller coaster. Notice that Jesus first talks about the fact that he must suffer. Then, after Peter puts his foot in his mouth—probably quite innocently thinking that he was expressing his love for Jesus—Jesus tells Peter that anyone who would follow him must suffer, too.

We can easily misunderstand Jesus to be saying to Peter, or to us, “No, don’t you get it? Being crowned and celebrated the messianic king would be bad, and suffering an ignominious death is good.” Jesus isn’t really turning the world upside down. He isn’t saying that pleasure is bad and pain is good. He is telling us the unvarnished truth that in a world of sin, love will suffer. And if we choose to love as he did, we suffer as he did. The really revolutionary and revelatory element here is that the reward will far surpass the sacrifice, such that what we call “life” will seem pale next to that new kind of life that love will gain. But, again, we ought not to think that suffering is the point; it is love that gains the prize of glory.





# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying part of today's responsorial psalm.**

O God, you are my God—  
it is you I seek!

For you my body yearns;  
for you my soul thirsts,  
In a land parched, lifeless,  
and without water.

I look to you in the sanctuary  
to see your power and glory.

For your love is better than life;  
my lips shall ever praise you!

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**In the first reading, the prophet Jeremiah is quite upset with the Lord, but it ends by saying that he cannot remain upset because the Word of the Lord burns within him. Have you ever had an experience when you were very upset with someone but couldn't remain angry because you loved that person too much?**

*(Be careful not to let the sharing go on too long, especially if several people want to talk about their experiences. You don't want this to become a gripe session.)*

*Point out that the prophet apparently had a close enough relationship with God to feel comfortable complaining.)*

# STEP #3

## LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Today we are going to be considering what effect the Word of God had on a prophet—and what effect it can have on us.**

### DIGGING DEEPER

#### THE DUPED PROPHET



Jeremiah did not have an easy time being a prophet. In fact, because of the difficulties that he talks about in the books Jeremiah and Lamentations, he has been called the “weeping prophet.” It was his unfortunate lot to tell the Israelites that Jerusalem would be destroyed by invaders from the North and the people taken into captivity in a foreign land. Needless to say, such prophecy did not go over well with the Israelite king, who threw him in a cistern and threatened him with death. When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took over Jerusalem in 586 BC as Jeremiah had said, he freed Jeremiah.



(Play the video for Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journals to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**Despite his anger, Jeremiah could not deny the Word burning within him. What, according to the presenter, was the reason Jeremiah could not deny the Word?**

*(The presenter says that it was the love of God that enabled Jeremiah to continue with his thankless task.*

*You may want to spend some time talking about how the love of God is transformative in our lives and helps us become the priests, prophets, and kings we are called to become.)*

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**What does the presenter say happens when we become transformed and pleasing to the Lord?**

*(This transformation leads us from thinking in human terms to thinking as God thinks—and putting on the mind of Christ, as St. Paul says, so that we can unite ourselves fully and completely with our Lord.)*

## STEP #5

### LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**This week, let us meditate on the words of the responsorial psalm, which expresses our desire to be united with God as Jeremiah was.**

#### **PRAYER:**

“O God, you are my God whom I seek; My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.” In what ways are you seeking God right now? How is your soul thirsting for God? Consider a time when you felt particularly close to God, when you experienced some kind of inner transformation and you could say with the psalmist: “You are my help, and in the shadow of your wings I shout for joy.”

#### **RESOLUTION:**

This week, allow yourself to spend some quiet time in the presence of the Lord. Ask yourself how, like Jeremiah, the Word of God can burn within you.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

**LEADER TIP:**

- *Learning to feel and express emotion in prayer is an important part of having faith become real and not just a mental exercise. Unless we can be totally honest with God about our lives, we will never be able to enter into a complete love relationship with him any more than we can love another human without having honesty at the core of the relationship.*

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with this prayer.**

Lord, what do you want me to do?  
What decision do you want me to make?  
Where do you want my life to go?  
The only way I can decide, Lord, is to put myself in your hands.  
Like a potter takes clay and makes something of it,  
like you took a rib and made a woman,  
take me and give me whatever shape you want.  
Or if you want, break the clay to pieces and start over again.  
Do with me whatever you want.

It doesn't matter if I am loved or hated,  
praised or calumniated, consoled or friendless.  
What matters is that your will be done in me.  
Help me to follow the example of your Mother

and say, "Let it be done to me according to your Word."  
I'm not looking for any big sacrifice, Lord, or any heavy cross.  
Something like that would only make me proud.  
Help me to do your will in little things,  
to put up with misunderstandings, rash judgments,  
confusion and frustration,  
to be patient and peaceful with those who drive me crazy.

Let me love you by doing the little things  
that will not bring me any satisfaction.

Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 23<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧

### OUT OF BONDAGE



#### Leader Preparation Overview



**Is there someone in your life you need to forgive?**

If we look deep enough, most of us will admit that there is someone we still haven't forgiven for something that was done to us; perhaps something that happened years ago.

One of the great spiritual truths is that forgiveness is as much for ourselves as it is for the other person. If we do not forgive, we hold that person in bondage to their sin. And we hold ourselves in bondage both to the sin and the sinner as well.

It isn't always easy to forgive. Sometimes we don't even want to forgive. We begin the process, and it is a process, by asking for *the desire to desire to forgive*. Eventually, as that desire takes root, we learn to let go of our mistaken notions about forgiveness and come to understand what forgiveness really consists of.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that the sin doesn't matter. It doesn't mean that we forget something bad happened to us. It doesn't mean everything is "all better," and it certainly doesn't mean that restitution and justice aren't needed. True forgiveness is a free will

action, prompted by God, that frees us from bondage. It's not an emotion; it's an act of the will. It's making a decision to let go of the chains that bind us, and then moving forward.

Remember that the Lord tells us that everything can be worked to the good for those who believe, including the greatest of sins committed against us. One of the keys to having that happen is our cooperation with God's requirement to forgive. But first, we have to be willing to take that first step of the will.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~Ezekiel 33:7-9~

## REFLECTION

**T**here is a particular responsibility that goes with the prophetic office. Ezekiel, whose name means “God strengthens,” was given a very important mission as regards the people: to warn them of Jerusalem’s impending destruction, and then to bolster their hopes in the Babylonian exile. This chapter (33) begins as we see here with God telling Ezekiel that he must be the watchman on the wall who warns the city with a trumpet blast about the coming of the enemy. Midway through this same chapter, Ezekiel receives word in Babylon, where he



is living with the first of the Jewish exiles, that the city of Jerusalem has fallen.

His task now is to explain the reasons that God has allowed this to happen to his chosen people in the hope that this will finally turn their hearts back to the God who first gave them the land they have now lost. Because remembrance of God's past actions on behalf of his people is so important to maintenance of the covenant with God, when they forget him and his works, God repeats himself, so to speak. By sending them back to the area where Abraham had first come from when God called him out of Babylon and into the promised land, he is reminding them that what he has given he can take away. But God is also true to his promise, and that is the message of Ezekiel: that God will lead his people back again, in the way he led their father Abraham, out of Babylon and back into the land of promise.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 13:8-10~

## REFLECTION

**I**n this portion of Romans, St. Paul is concerned with explaining to this community of Christians how they should conduct themselves in the world. And here, as a kind of summation of the whole, he gives the central moral teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: love. He lists four of the last seven of the Ten Commandments, those having to do with how we are to treat our neighbor; note that he doesn't even bother to list the rest, finishing his list with a rather surprising, "whatever..." We shouldn't take from this that St. Paul doesn't know or care about the Ten Commandments!

The critical part of this teaching is that love *accomplishes* all of the commandments, whatever they may be. We must

be clear that he is not saying that love *substitutes* for the law or erases the law, but that love *accomplishes* what the law commands. He means that the love that has come to dwell in our hearts by the grace of Jesus Christ and his Spirit moves us to live in a way that is not simply expressed by a moral code. Supernatural charity or love is a new power that enables us not only to obey the “shalt nots” of the old law, but to live in a positive disposition which is ordered to more than simply observing justice toward our neighbor. Jesus commands us not only to be just to our neighbor, which is what the law required, but to love our enemies!

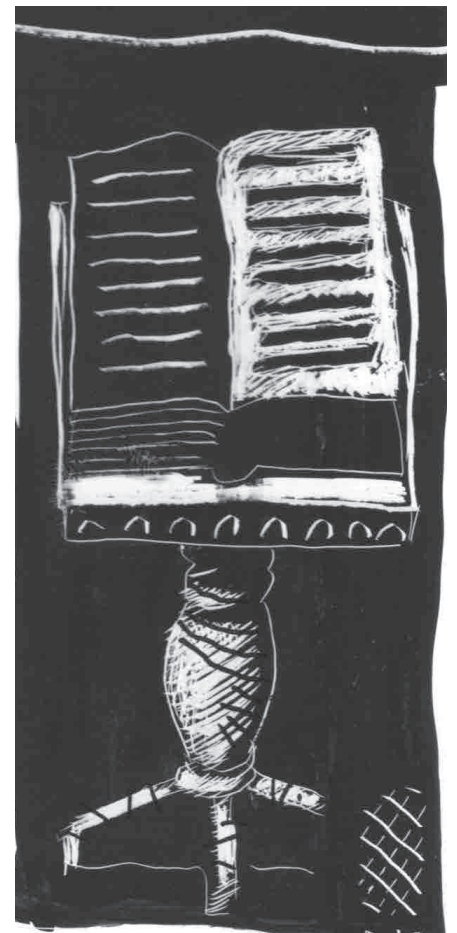
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 18:15-20~

### REFLECTION

**A**fter having given the “keys of the kingdom” to Peter in Matthew 16 (the Gospel reading two Sundays ago), we now see an aspect of the power to bind and loose that Peter receives being extended to the disciples. The Church itself is given a certain authority in the world. Reminiscent of the prophetic commission that we see in the first reading, Christians are to be “watchmen” over others who may stray from the truth. We have a prophetic responsibility, which we have received by Baptism, to speak honestly and directly to those in the Church (a “brother”) who may begin to stray from the path of love that Paul describes in Romans.

Jesus tells us that to guard against this simply being taken as a personal grudge by the one receiving the correction, we should go with others who can thereby make clear that this is not personal, but rather an objective matter of proper Christian conduct. You might be tempted to think that when Jesus says, “If he refuses to listen...treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector,” that he means reject him all together. But we need to recall that the person who recorded this Gospel



for us was a tax collector named Matthew. And Luke tells us about how Jesus treated the tax collector named Zacchaeus (Luke 19). Likewise, St. Paul is sent to preach the good news to the Gentiles by Jesus (Acts 9:15). Sometimes Christian love will have to be tough love, giving clear signs of God's disfavor at sin, but love and mercy are to have no limits for those in Christ.

## SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

### STEP #1

#### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by saying this prayer from St. Anselm.**

O Lord my God,  
 teach my heart this day where and how to seek you,  
 where and how to find you.  
 You have made me and remade me,  
 and you have bestowed on me  
 all the good things I possess,  
 and still I do not know you.  
 I have not yet done that  
 for which I was made.  
 Teach me to seek you,  
 for I cannot seek you  
 unless you teach me,  
 or find you  
 unless you show yourself to me.  
 Let me seek you in my desire,  
 let me desire you in my seeking.  
 Let me find you by loving you,  
 let me love you when I find you.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches about the importance of forgiving those who have wronged us. Do you think that it is easy or hard to forgive someone who has offended you?**

*(Expect that some people will find it easy and others will find it hard. Use this question as a way to introduce the theme of forgiveness in today's video.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**In The Lord's Prayer, we are told to forgive all who trespass against us. But have you ever considered why forgiveness is so important? Let's listen to today's video and find out.**



(Play the video for the Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

#### **What is forgiveness, according to the video?**

*(Forgiveness is a free act of the will. It isn't an emotional feeling, but a conscious, deliberate action on our part.)*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

#### **What are some of the things forgiveness *doesn't* mean?**

*(Forgiveness doesn't mean that the sin or offense doesn't matter. It doesn't mean we forget that something happened. It doesn't mean that everything is okay. It doesn't mean that retribution isn't needed or that justice shouldn't be served.)*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #3**

#### **According to the presenter, what happens to us when we don't forgive? What happens to the person we haven't forgiven?**

*(When we don't forgive, we allow ourselves to be held in bondage to the sin that was committed against us.*

*When we don't forgive, we keep the other person in bondage to their sin as well.)*

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today we heard about the importance of forgiveness, both for ourselves and for the people we forgive.**

### **DIGGING DEEPER** LOOSED ON EARTH



*“In imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins, the Lord also gives them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church. This ecclesial dimension of their task is expressed most notably in Christ’s solemn words to Simon Peter: ‘I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’ The office of binding and loosing, which was given to Peter, was also assigned to the college of the apostles united to its head.” —CCC 1444*

### **PRAYER:**

Listen now as Jesus comes before you and says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.” As you hear those words, is there someone you believe has “sinned against you”? Have you done as Jesus commands by telling this person how you feel, or are you harboring secret ill will? How do you respond to Jesus?

### **RESOLUTION:**

Consider the people in your life whom you may need to forgive. Make a plan to talk with them in order to resolve your differences.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *The Sacrament of Confession can be of great value in gaining the grace to be able to forgive. Encourage group members to go to Confession and explain to the priest their difficulty in forgiving.*
- *Remind participants to be gentle with themselves as they work through deep issues that have caused pain and anger. They don’t need to rush into trying to feel something; it is enough to have the genuine desire to forgive. Feelings may or may not come later.*

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with the Our Father, paying special attention to the part about forgiveness.**

Our Father, Who art in heaven  
Hallowed be Thy Name;  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil. Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 24<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧

### FORGIVEN DEBT



#### Leader Preparation Overview



**Forgiveness is never easy.** We can identify with Peter, who wonders how many times he has to forgive someone who harms him. He had to be shocked when Jesus says seventy-seven times, meaning an unlimited number of times.

Since most of us have trouble forgiving even once or twice, such a standard is hard to comprehend. To help Peter, and us, understand that we are to forgive so much because we have been forgiven so much, Jesus tells the parable of the servant who owed a great debt to his master.

When we hear this story, we often miss the magnitude of it because we don't understand the currency. The first servant owed 10,000 talents, which would be about 3.6 billion dollars! When he says he would pay back the debt, Jesus' audience would have realized that was ridiculous. No one could ever repay such a debt. In contrast, the servant himself was owed 100 denari, which would be about \$6,000, a not insubstantial amount, but something that could be repaid in time.

Jesus wants us to realize that our debt to God is like 10,000 talents—utterly unpayable—and yet God willingly and lovingly forgives us our debt. The things people do to us are like the debt of 100 denari—hurtful and challenging, but not insurmountable. Jesus is telling us that if God can forgive us our enormous debt, we must be willing to forgive the much much smaller debts owed to us by those who have hurt us.

When we refuse to forgive, as we learned last week, the grudges we hold become chains that bind us. The more we cling to our unforgiveness, the tighter the chains wrap us and, like the servant who was handed over to the torturers in this week’s Gospel, we too are handed over to the torture created by the hardness of our own hearts.

### **LEADER TIP**

- We’ve provided “Reflections” for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they’ll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~Sirach 27:30–28:9~

### REFLECTION

**T**oday’s **First Reading** reminds us we must first forgive others from our hearts in order to receive forgiveness ourselves. Mercy isn’t a magic formula that allows us to break God’s covenant of love while still receiving its reward. Mercy isn’t unconditional; God’s love is unconditional, but his mercy requires that we be merciful. His demand that we be merciful is itself an expression of his love. Love is demanding; it isn’t satisfied

with the sins of the beloved. When we love someone, we can't bear to see him harm himself.

Sirach tells the sinner to beware: there's an internal principle to hatred that makes it self-destructive. It isn't simply because of the psychological harm it does to us. There's a principle of justice at work also which means that when we fail to forgive others, we close ourselves off to God's forgiveness. God is perfect Justice and perfect Mercy, and so his Mercy is just and his Justice is merciful—and we are called to live in imitation of him. If we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven. Even Jesus who is mercy incarnate says so.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 8-9, 11-12~

## SECOND READING

~Romans 14:7-9~

## REFLECTION

**S**t. Paul answers the question that innumerable saints and Doctors of the Faith have pondered with an almost casual assurance: Why did Jesus die and rise? “That he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.” By assuming our humanity, including our capacity to die, Christ saved everything that's human.

The early Fathers go much further than that. The natural things that Jesus touched, used, and experienced were made holy by his contact with them. The dynamism of the Person of Christ causes everything he touches to take on a kind of sacramentality. St. Jerome said, “Everything that Jesus does is a sacrament.” He goes on to explain that because Jesus walked, sat, slept, and ate, these actions have gained a saving aspect for us, too. Jesus had to die to be the Lord of the dead; that is, having mastered or taken authority over this final human act, Jesus became Master, Savior, of the dead. In him, even death becomes a gateway to blessing.

## GOSPEL

~Matthew 18:21-35~

### REFLECTION

**J**esus, the Master Teacher, doesn't simply say in this reading that we should forgive others if we wish to receive mercy; he shows us what it would look like if someone were forgiven who refused to forgive others. St. Peter asks how often we should forgive those who offend us and Jesus says, "Seventy-seven times." Jesus then illustrates his point with a striking story: "That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to..."

The example gives the instruction about forgiveness extra weight. By the time the story is reaching its climax, Peter is likely feeling real disgust for the actions of the unforgiving official and real pity for the servant that got "throttled." Then, when the evil has been made evident in the actions of the corrupt official, Jesus delivers the personalized moral message. No doubt we join Peter when we react to the moral of the story with a desire to be merciful like the master and avoid the corruption—and punishment—of the unforgiving servant. The Master Teacher has gently introduced the concept of Divine Mercy to Peter and to us.

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying part of the prayer for **Divine Mercy**.**

Eternal God, in whom mercy is endless  
and the treasury of compassion inexhaustible,  
look kindly upon us and increase Your mercy in us,  
that in difficult moments we might not despair  
nor become despondent, but with great confidence  
submit ourselves to Your holy will,  
which is Love and Mercy itself. Amen.

But in you, by you and for you,  
So that I may truly say,  
With St. Paul,  
“I live—now not I—  
but Christ lives in me.”  
Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**Have you ever been forgiven for something that you thought was unforgivable? How did that make you feel?**

*(If the introductory question doesn't create a discussion, you might want to talk about how families are sometimes able to forgive a murderer, even on death row. Discuss how difficult it would be to forgive someone who took the life of your child or spouse.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA – SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**This week we are going to examine one of Jesus' parables about forgiveness. Let's watch this short video and see what new insights we might gain.**



Play the video for the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately four minutes.

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**How many times does Jesus say that we are to forgive?**

*(Jesus says we are to forgive seventy-seven times; in other words, we are to forgive endlessly.)*

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**What effect does the generosity and compassion of the master have on the first servant? What effect should God's generosity and compassion have on us?**

*(The master is merciful to the first servant, but that servant's heart is not transformed by his experience of mercy. Instead of showing mercy to his fellow servant, he demands repayment. He does not imitate the mercy of the master.*

*Our experience of God's generosity and compassion should lead us to show mercy to others. Our hearts should be transformed by mercy, leading us to live lives in imitation of God's abundant mercy.)*

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA – PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**The theme of today's Gospel is God's incredible mercy to each of us. Let's consider that gift together now in prayer.**

### PRAYER:

We all know that we have sinned. As you think about your life and areas where you have failed to do the good you know you could have done, imagine Jesus reaching out and saying to you, "My dear Servant, I have paid this debt for you. It is completely erased, taken off my Father's books. It is no longer held against you. As the Father has forgiven you, now, go and do the same to anyone who has harmed or offended you." As you consider this, offer your own prayer of gratitude to the Lord.



## **RESOLUTION:**

Is there someone you need to forgive? Set aside some time this week to spend before the Blessed Sacrament—either in an Adoration Chapel if your parish has one or before or after Sunday Mass—thanking Jesus for having paid the debt of your sins and asking for the grace to forgive those who have sinned against you.

**Use your Prayer Journal to write down your thoughts, reflections, and your resolutions.**

### ***LEADER TIP***

*If you feel like using visuals, you might fill a large jar with sand, representing the huge debt of our sinfulness, and a cup with a few small stones, representing the offenses of others that we are asked to forgive. Pass both around so that participants can see the incredible difference.*

### **DIGGING DEEPER**

#### **RECONCILIATION WITH GOD AND WITH MAN**



Another aspect of this Sunday's Gospel is its illustration of two levels of reconciliation: with God (the master), and with man (the fellow servant). The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that every sin is an offense against both God and neighbor (CCC 1849–1850). In the Sacrament of Reconciliation we find healing for our relationship with God as well as our relationship with the rest of his Body, the Church:

“The confession (or disclosure) of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others. Through such an admission man looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility of them, and thereby opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible.”

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP – CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week’s Scripture readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I’d like each of us to share one take-away from today’s session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn’t know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let’s close our time together with prayer:**

O Lord, Jesus Christ,  
 Redeemer and Savior,  
 forgive my sins, just as you forgave Peter’s denial  
 and those who crucified you.  
 Count not my transgressions, but, rather, my tears of repentance.  
 Remember not my iniquities, but, rather, my sorrow  
 for the offenses I have committed against you.  
 I long to be true to your Word.  
 Please come to make your dwelling place within me,  
 that my heart may be transformed by your mercy and grace,  
 and I will give you praise and glory in love and in service  
 all the days of my life. Amen.

(Adapted from Prayer for the Forgiveness of Sins, found on [www.catholic.org](http://www.catholic.org))

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## 25<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## ENVY AND GOD'S GENEROSITY

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**“My thoughts are not your thoughts nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”**

Perhaps no story in the New Testament proves the truth of that statement more than today's Gospel. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, we are confronted with what we might consider an unfair situation. The owner of the vineyard goes out and hires workers, starting in the early morning and ending close to sundown. But no matter what time of day the workers are hired, all get the same daily wage, even if they only worked for one hour.

Most of us probably will think how very unfair it was that some had to labor all day and others got to waltz in at the last minute, but everyone got the same reward. In fact, the characters in the parable felt the same way and most likely so did Jesus' audience.

But that's what makes the parable so powerful. It's only after we work through our thoughts and feelings about what is right and

what is wrong that we can begin to see beyond the apparent unfairness to the character of the owner, who is a symbol of God, and realize that Jesus is telling us that no one is left out of God’s love. Once we are able to move on from the “injustice,” we are then able to give thanks to God for what he has given us and realize any feelings of envy or comparison to others reflects not on God’s generosity but on our own poverty of spirit.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- We’ve provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they’ll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 55:6–9~

### REFLECTION

**T**he context for this passage is clear: the renewal of the “everlasting covenant, the benefits assured to David” (55:3). Isaiah warns Israel that she should call on the Lord and repent of her covenant unfaithfulness. The logical outcome if Israel doesn’t do this is that she’ll be displaced. Israel is being warned not to presume on God’s covenant love. His “ways,” which are above our ways, are aimed at universal salvation, not merely national or racial honor. God’s whole plan from the beginning aimed at saving “humanity part by part,” as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it (CCC 56), and he’ll use whatever instrument he must to accomplish that.

We see from the historical events following the coming of Christ that Israel wasn't replaced in an absolute sense. St. Paul reminds us that the call of Israel is "irrevocable." Israel wasn't so much replaced as expanded. She now includes us. We're now Israelites in spirit. As such, the prophetic call of Isaiah ought not to be read as a dead letter. It's addressed now as much to us as to the Israel of old. "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call on him while he is near."

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18~

## SECOND READING

~Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a~

## REFLECTION

**W**e see in this reading the classic refutation of the claim that Christians are unconcerned about this life and only intent upon achieving "pie in the sky." Paul states it with elegant succinctness: "'life' means Christ; hence dying is so much gain." Life and death are the same for one who has been incorporated into Christ by Baptism. Life in the flesh hasn't been devalued by the revelation in Christ but elevated to the level of a participation in the glory of Christ—even now.

No one lives so fully as a committed Christian. No one values time so much as one who measures it against the aspect of eternity in heaven. That was the way Paul lived, and he challenges us to do the same.

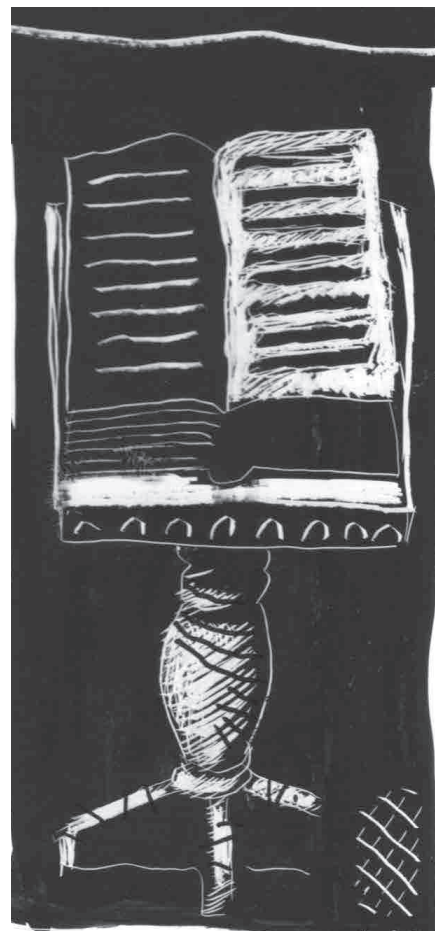
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 20:1-16a~

### REFLECTION

**W**e might assume in this reading that Jesus is referring to eleventh hour or deathbed conversions. We might also read it as a parable about the inclusion of the Gentiles, the nations beyond the borders of Israel, in the saving plan of God. But another reading, one we might call a mystical reading, would suggest that Jesus is simply telling us that God's plan itself isn't always subject to human calculation. It isn't that it's irrational, but rather, unpredictable. The only thing to trust is that all will be ordered for not only his will, but also for our good. He alone has the capacity to order all of time, even those parts of it which seem to represent the worst in human tragedy or even human sin, in perfect accord with our best interest.

The one thing that the Bible ought to teach us is that when we're dealing with God, we should be prepared for surprises. This isn't to say that God will defy his own laws, but he isn't shy about violating ours when conviction, culture, or convention might stand in the way of his plan or our own good. And again, his will is always consistent with our good.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying this prayer written by St. Francis de Sales.

Lord, I am yours,  
and I must belong to no one but you.  
My soul is yours, and must live only by you.  
My will is yours, and must love only for you.  
I must love you as my first cause, since I am from you.  
I must love you as my end and rest, since I am for you.  
I must love you more than my own being, since my being subsists by you.  
I must love you more than myself, since I am all yours and all in you.  
Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**In today's Gospel reading, some people are envious over the generosity of the owner of the vineyard. When we think that someone has received a better deal than we have, we, too, can become envious. What are some areas in our lives where we might experience envy over another's good fortune?**



*(Possible answers might include promotions, happy marriages, children, weight loss, expensive toys, etc.)*

*Help participants understand that it isn't so much the objects we envy as the feelings that are created within us when we see others' good fortune as somehow diminishing our own lives.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**This week we hear the famous parable of the laborers in the vineyard. What message does it have for us today? Let's listen and find out.**



(Play the video for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**The presenter tells us that the owner in this parable is meant to be an image of God. What do the owner’s actions tell us about the nature of God?**

*(God’s ways are not our ways, and what may seem unjust to us is a sign of God’s generosity.)*

*Note: people may have a bit of a hard time getting past the sense of injustice in this story. If that’s the case, talk a bit about how the story isn’t so much about the workers as it is about the owner.)*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**Why, according to the presenter, is envy so destructive?**

*(Envy is destructive because of what it does to our own soul. When we are envious, we are unable to see God’s love and generosity toward us. Envy also keeps us from being thankful for the gifts we have been given.)*

#### DIGGING DEEPER

##### ENVY



*“Envy represents a form of sadness and therefore a refusal of charity; the baptized person should struggle against it by exercising good will. Envy often comes from pride; the baptized person should train himself to live in humility: ‘Would you like to see God glorified by you? Then rejoice in your brother’s progress and you will immediately give glory to God. Because his servant could conquer envy by rejoicing in the merits of others, God will be praised’ (St. John Chrysostom).”*

—CCC 2540

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Let us each imagine now that we are one of the workers in today's parable. Decide now if you are one of the first workers to be hired or one of the later workers before we begin our prayer.**

### **PRAYER:**

Put yourself in the parable. It's the end of the workday. The owner calls all of the workers together and hands out the day's pay. You notice that everyone gets exactly the same amount—those who have worked all day and those who arrived just a few minutes ago. How does that make you feel about the owner? How does that make you feel about your fellow workers? Are you tempted to say something? Does this make you want to work for this owner in the future? Why or why not?

### **RESOLUTION:**

This week, end each day recalling all the gifts that God has given you and thank him for his presence and generosity in your life. Then spend some time in prayer for those who are in need and ask God to pour his generosity upon them.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### ***LEADER TIP:***

- *Point out to participants that our feelings about the justice or injustice of the owner's actions are often based on our situation. If we are the last workers, we may feel grateful, but if we are the first, we may feel angry or cheated. It's not so much what the owner has done as how we feel about it that makes the difference.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with the famous Serenity Prayer.**

God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.  
Living one day at a time;  
enjoying one moment at a time;  
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;  
taking, as he did, this sinful world  
as it is, not as I would have it;  
trusting that he will make all things right  
if I surrender to his will;  
that I may be reasonably happy in this life  
and supremely happy with him  
forever in the next.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## 26<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**It is helpful to understand the context in which** Jesus was speaking when he taught in parables. In the case of our Gospel passage this week, Jesus had been preaching and teaching in the Temple when the chief priests and elders began questioning his authority. In response, Jesus tells them about two sons who are asked to work in their father's vineyard.

For us to fully understand what he was saying, we need to realize that whenever a vineyard appears in the Old Testament, it is an image of Israel. So Jesus is really challenging his audience to look at how they, as the leaders, have been “tending” the people. Have they been saying one thing and doing another? Have they been like the second son, talking respectfully and lovingly to God, but then acting willfully and arrogantly? Or have they been like the first son, who rebels in words but then repents and does the father's will?

In this story, one question we can ask ourselves is this: *Are our actions speaking louder than our words?*

However, Jesus doesn't just leave it at that. He always goes beyond convicting us of our faults to invite us to repentance and humility. The entire message of the Gospel is that the mercy of God is always available but God cannot forgive an unrepentant heart. When we are locked in willful pride, we are unable to repent. But when we recognize our sinfulness, then God can do great things for and through us. However, it's not enough for us to just give lip service to repentance. We actually have to become repentant. We have to act, not just talk.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.
- Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~Ezekiel 18:25-28~

## REFLECTION

**T**he general theme of this chapter is **personal responsibility**. The more we learn about human psychology, the more we recognize that we're dramatically influenced by the upbringing we received from our parents. We

do suffer under the influences from the past, but that doesn't mean we aren't free to act in a manner different from that which our past might suggest. Also, in Israel, as in the Church today, there's always a tension between the collective identity of the people and that of the individual as a particular representative of the aspirations of the people. The covenant is a collective institution between Israel and God, yet the prescriptions of the covenant are addressed to individuals. So when one defied God, flouting the covenant law, the corporate Israel was wounded in the person of the unfaithful one and suffered as a consequence of his unfaithfulness.

In short, the people of God live a corporate life of mystical communion, for good or ill. When the people are generally corrupt, even the best among us is likely to suffer. When the individual is vicious, the Body is wounded in some small part—but we're all responsible for our own stand before our God nonetheless.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9~

## SECOND READING

~Philippians 2:1-11~

## REFLECTION

**I**n this passage, **St. Paul appeals** for the unity in the Church. Since unity in the fullest sense could only be obtained by grace in Christ, Paul appeals to the example of the supernatural humility of Christ in coming among us as man. This is the model for all to follow in dealing with others in the community.

Not only is Christ's humility a model for us to follow, but by his coming, he supplies the grace we need to actually follow him in humility. By taking the lowest possible place—that of a corpse—he is “highly exalted,” so that his very name



evokes worship from the whole of creation. Of course his name, “Jesus,” means “God saves.” And so, he doesn’t merely *show* us, he *saves* us. The supernatural humility necessary for a real unity in “spirit and ideals” becomes a possibility for the Church. It’s that possibility that St. Paul is anxious to see become an actuality among the Philippians.

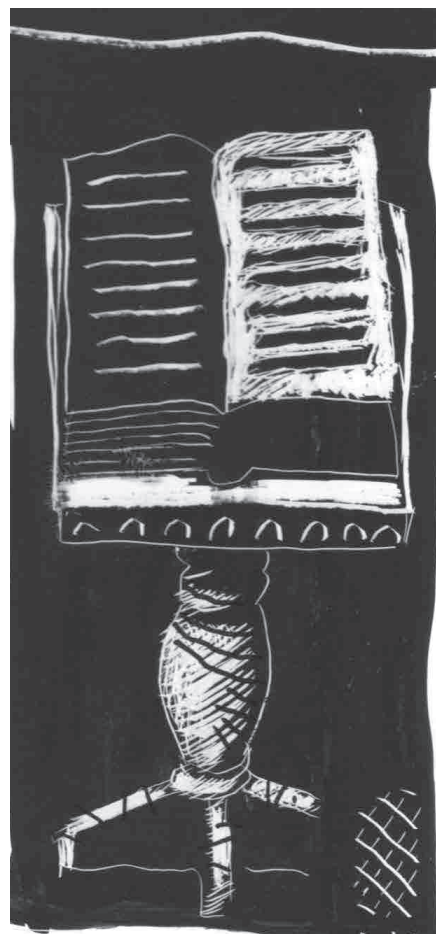
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 21:28-32~

### REFLECTION

**I**t’s possible to read the two sons in this parable as the Jewish and Gentile peoples respectively, but there’s a deeper point that transcends that historical one. In every age of the Church, there are those who say yes to God but then don’t follow him and those sinners who see their sin and repent of it. Jesus suggests to the officials that the conversion of the tax collectors and sinners at the preaching of John should’ve signaled his authenticity as a prophet. If the sinners are converting, take note, he tells us. That’s the sort of fruit one ought to see from God’s work.

Neither Jesus nor John is particularly harsh with sin. They correct it, certainly, but it’s only to unrepentance that they show scorn. Jesus can cleanse us from sin, but he doesn’t have any cure for unrepentance. The unrepentant invariably see themselves as first and the whole offer of salvation as unnecessary. They’ll be the last to enter the Kingdom, if indeed they’re able to enter at all, because the King himself is suspect to them. The King is a Savior and if you have no need of the Savior, you’ll not get the King or his Kingdom, either.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying one of Mother Teresa's favorite prayers.**

O Jesus! Meek and humble of heart,  
make my heart like unto thine.  
From the desire to be esteemed,  
Deliver me.

From the desire to be honored...Deliver me.  
From the desire to be praised...Deliver me.

From fear of being humiliated...  
From fear of being held in contempt...  
From fear of suffering rebukes...  
From fear of being slandered...  
From fear of being ignored...  
From fear of being insulted...  
From fear of being wronged...

Jesus, grant me the grace to desire...  
that others be admired more than I;  
that others be praised and I unnoticed;  
that others be preferred to me in everything;  
that others be holier than I, provided I  
become as holy as I should;  
that I might imitate the patience and  
obedience of your mother, Mary.  
Amen.

—Based on a prayer by Cardinal Merry del Val

# STEP #2

## INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**We’ve all heard the saying “Actions speak louder than words.” What are some ways that you’ve experienced the truth of this statement?**


*(Because of the personal nature of the question, many answers are possible. If people hesitate to share, you might mention things like a serviceman promising to show up at a certain time and then never arriving or a politician who makes a campaign promise he or she has no intention of keeping.)*

# STEP #3

## LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**This week we continue to explore some of the parables of Jesus. Today we hear the story of two sons who are asked to work in their father’s vineyard.**

**DIGGING DEEPER**  
THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

 For more insights on the virtue of humility, read: *Humility: Wellspring of Virtue* by Dietrich von Hildebrand, a German theologian greatly admired by both Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.



(Play the video for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately seven minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their prayer journal pages to find these questions.*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**The presenter explained a bit about the context in which Jesus told this parable. Who was Jesus talking to? What prompted his response?**

*(Jesus was talking to the chief priests and elders shortly after the death of John the Baptist.*

*They had challenged his authority to preach and teach, so he presented this parable in response to that challenge.)*

### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**What was Jesus inviting the priests and elders to do when he talked about the two sons?**

*(Jesus is inviting the priests and elders to repentance and humility. He is trying to get them to see that “actions speak louder than words,” not just in this life, but especially before God the Father.)*

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**In today's Gospel, Jesus asks an important question of the priests and elders, a question we need to answer as well.**

### **PRAYER:**

Put yourself in the scene. Imagine you are with Jesus as the priests and elders come up and begin to question his authority to teach. In response, you hear him tell the parable of the two sons who were asked to work in their father's vineyard. When he finishes, he asks you the same question he asked the priests and elders: "What is your opinion? Which son did the father's will?" Now prayerfully consider which of the two sons you are most like. Listen as Jesus says that tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of heaven before some of those who are listening to him. What does it challenge you to do?

### **RESOLUTION:**

When you feel prompted to do something for the kingdom, ask yourself which son you are being—the one who says "yes" but does not follow through, or the one who initially refuses but then performs the action?

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *Remind participants of James 2:26: "For just as the body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."*
- *If people are curious, the first use of the phrase "Actions speak louder than words" is probably the 16th-century French writer Michel de Montaigne, who proclaimed, "Saying is one thing and doing is another."*

## STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with a prayer that is sometimes attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, although he did not write it.**

(Although commonly attributed to St. Francis, this prayer first appeared in the French publication *La Clochette* in 1912. No author is cited, but it may have been written by the founder of La Ligue, Fr. Esther Bouquerel.)

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace;  
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
 where there is injury, pardon;  
 where there is error, truth;  
 where there is doubt, faith;  
 where there is despair, hope;  
 where there is darkness, light;  
 and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
 to be consoled as to console;  
 to be understood as to understand;  
 to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;  
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## 27<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## THE VINEYARD OF THE LORD

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**It's said there are only a few basic plots for most stories.** What the storyteller does with the plot—the twists and turns that are added—is what makes a story memorable. In this week's Gospel, Jesus takes a story of a vineyard, which would have been very familiar to his audience, and gives it an unexpected twist.

The priests and elders whom Jesus was addressing would have been very accustomed to the image of Israel as a vineyard. Prophets like Isaiah in the first reading had used the illustration for hundreds of years. So Jesus' audience probably wasn't expecting him to use the story against them.

Instead of focusing on the poor fruit that the vineyard was producing, Jesus concentrates on the tenants who are responsible for tending the fields. He says that when the master wants his produce, the tenants mistreat and even kill the messengers. When the owner finally sends his own son, the tenants kill even him.



In hearing that story, the priests and elders had to have realized that they were the tenants who hadn't been good stewards of the master's fields. They had to see that they were the ones who rejected the prophets sent by God. They might not, however, have completely understood that the person telling the story, Jesus, was the Son of God and that in a very short period of time, he would be rejected and put to death.

We *do* know and so we are forced to ask ourselves the question: What kind of a tenant am I in the Father's vineyard? Am I welcoming the Son when he comes to the vineyard to collect the produce, or am I rejecting him by failing to produce good fruit in my words and deeds?

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Isaiah 5:1-7~

### REFLECTION

**T**he vineyard has yielded wild grapes, according to Isaiah, not a fruit suitable for vintage, despite the fact that what were planted were "the choicest vines." That is, the fault in the harvest isn't with the divine Vintner who planted the vines with the intention of harvesting fruit for wine, but with the

vines themselves. The clear meaning is that Israel hasn't been true to her calling to be a counter-cultural witness to the nations of steadfast worship of the One True God.

God says, “Judge between me and my vineyard” and threatens to “make it a ruin.” Judgment passages like this one are always difficult to read. The “thanks be to God” that we say at the close of the first reading seems a bit limp when we get a passage like this. Of course, that limpness in our response expresses the way we ought to feel. After all, it's for good reason that we make the words of Isaiah our own in the Psalm response. *We* are Israel and the judgment pronounced on her always stands as warning to us. We need to bear fruit for the Lord—fruit that's worthy of vintage.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 80:9, 12, 13-14, 15-16, 19-20~

## SECOND READING

~Philippians 4:6-9~

## REFLECTION

**T**his reading sounds rather like good horticultural advice on how to tend the vineyard of the Lord. Pray, think, and live “according to what you have learned and accepted,” he tells us. Root out the weeds of anxiety. Add the nourishment of thoughts “wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, admirable, decent, virtuous, or worthy of praise.” Prune your lives so that your actions reflect the teaching of the Gospel and you'll bear the fruit of your labors, which is peace.

We might ask ourselves if we live in the hope of the Lord, free of anxiety, or in the midst of such a whirl of expectations and activity that we're never really free of worry at all. Are our minds as pristine as those Paul commends, or are they rather a constant media fare of violence, impurity, and scandal? Have we made the Gospel

our guide in life, or have we taken a secularized view of the Church and the world as the measure of our actions? If in each or any of these we see ourselves in the latter rather than the former, ought we to expect the fruit of peace when we've cultivated discord in our souls?

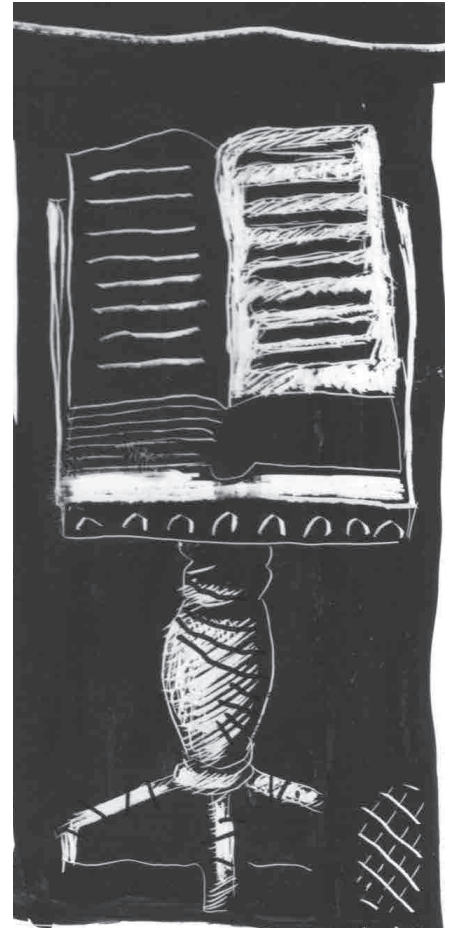
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 21:33-43~

### REFLECTION

**J**esus says bluntly in this parable, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will yield a rich harvest.” Here Jesus suggests that the kingdom of God was already in the world at his coming and that the Jews were the current heirs of it. If the kingdom is synonymous with the covenant, as this passage suggests, then the New Testament is filled with covenant language, since the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God is one of the central elements in Jesus’ teaching and preaching.

The linguistic shift from “covenant” to “kingdom” may be precisely indicative of the prophecy that Jesus utters about the passing of the vineyard to “others who will see to it that he has grapes at vintage time.” The new tenants, the faithful Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus, might have felt more at home with a new designation for the covenant that they were now to inherit. Since Jesus was the new Son of David, what better way to designate the new Davidic covenant than as the definitive “kingdom of God.”



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time. In preparation for this week's study, let's pray the responsorial psalm for the week together.**

**Psalm 80:9, 12, 13-14, 15-16, 19-20**

**R/** The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.

A vine from Egypt you transplanted;  
you drove away the nations and planted it.  
It put forth its foliage to the Sea,  
its shoots as far as the River.

**R/**

Why have you broken down its walls,  
so that every passer-by plucks its fruit,  
The boar from the forest lays it waste,  
and the beasts of the field feed upon it?

**R/**

Once again, O LORD of hosts,  
look down from heaven, and see;  
take care of this vine,  
and protect what your right hand has planted  
the son of man whom you yourself made strong.

**R/**

Then we will no more withdraw from you;  
give us new life, and we will call upon your name.  
O LORD, God of hosts, restore us;  
if your face shine upon us, then we shall be saved.

**R/**

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**This week's readings are all about grapes and vineyards. Why do you think that God often refers to his kingdom as a vineyard?**

*(The Jewish people of both the Old and New Testaments would have been very familiar with working in a vineyard. A vineyard is a great analogy of God's kingdom because of the great fruit that God desires to bring forth in his people.*

*Wine was also associated with the gift of life and joy-both of which are the fruits of God's kingdom.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**As we get closer to the end of the Church year, we continue to hear some of Jesus' most famous parables. This week it is the story of a vineyard, as told to the chief priests and elders. Let's listen to what the presenter has to tell us.**



(Play the video for Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately five minutes.)

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## STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**According to the presenter, the parable of the vineyard would have been familiar to Jesus' audience, but Jesus gave it a surprise ending. What was the surprise?**

*(Jesus' listeners would have known the story of a vineyard, but instead of focusing on the fruit that was being produced, Jesus concentrated on the workers in the field and how they treated both the servants who came to collect the produce as well as the son of the vineyard owner.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**How does the parable of the vineyard apply to the history of Israel?**

*(The vineyard represents Israel, and the tenants represent the Jewish people. Time and again, God, the landowner, sends his prophets to the Israelites, who reject and even kill them. Finally God sends his Son, Jesus, but he, too, is killed. When that happens, the special blessing given to Israel is taken away and the gift of salvation is extended to all people who will accept it.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER****GRAPES AND VINEYARDS**

Grapes were an important food crop in ancient Israel. Although they were primarily used for wine, they were also eaten fresh as well as dried into raisins. Grapes were also used to produce grape honey, a thick, sweet liquid. Grape honey was made by treading the grapes and then boiling the liquid to evaporate the water and create a syrup. Grapes are mentioned more than fifty times in the Bible.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Let us now enter into this week's readings  
in prayer.**

### **PRAYER:**

Close your eyes and envision yourself sitting beside Jesus. He reads the passage from Isaiah, directing it personally to you:

My friend had a vineyard  
on a fertile hillside;  
he spaded it, cleared it of stones,  
and planted the choicest vines;  
within it he built a watchtower,  
and hewed out a wine press.  
Then he looked for the crop of grapes,  
but what it yielded was wild grapes.  
Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes,  
did it bring forth wild grapes?

What do you say to Jesus? Do you try to make an excuse for your lack of good grapes? What does Jesus say in response?

### **RESOLUTION:**

What is one thing, one “good fruit,” that you could do this week to build up the kingdom of God? Make a commitment to act on this thought by writing down a specific action and a time when you can do it.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**



**LEADER TIPS:**

- If participants need some ideas about “good fruit,” refer them to the Spiritual and Corporal works of mercy.
- You may want to create a handout with the Works of Mercy for reference.

**STEP #6****STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER**

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week’s Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I’d like each of us to share one take-away from today’s session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn’t know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let’s close our time together today with this prayer of hope from Pope Francis.**

God of mercy, you know the secrets of all human hearts, for you know who is just and you forgive the repentant sinner. Hear my prayer in the midst of destruction; give me patience and hope, so that under your protection and with you as my guide, I may one day be reunited with my family and friends in peace, tranquility, and love. Grant this through Christ our Lord.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 28<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



# THE WEDDING FEAST OF THE KING

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## Leader Preparation Overview



**Who doesn't love a party**—especially when someone else is footing the bill? Well, in today's Gospel we hear about several people who turned down an invitation to a banquet. And not just any old banquet, but a feast put on by the king! These people even went so far as to kill the servants who invited them. Finally, the king gave up on his chosen guests and opened the banquet to anyone who wanted to come.

While we might think this is an interesting story, it would have been more than that to Jesus' audience. He was speaking to his enemies, the priests and elders. As he told this story, they couldn't have helped but relate the king to God...and perhaps their own actions to those guests who refused to enter the banquet. This story must have struck them where it hurt, so to speak, if they realized that they, as the leaders of the Jews, might not be responding fully to their King, God. Little wonder that they began to call for Jesus' death—to get him off their backs.

But we aren't completely off the hook. We, too, have been called to the new banquet of the King—the one in which everyone is invited through the death and resurrection of Jesus. This new banquet is the family gathering of all the people of God, and it finds its fullest expression in the Mass. God wants us all to join him at this banquet table, but sometimes, like the guests in the parable, we make excuses and find other things to do. If we truly believe that God is the King who invites us, then we should come quickly and joyfully to attend the feast that is the Mass each Sunday.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~Isaiah 25:6-10a~

## REFLECTION

**T**his blessing of the nations harkens back to the period after the flood of Noah, when God made the “everlasting covenant” with him and promised not to destroy the world by water again. The covenant with Noah, unlike the later Hebrew covenant, was a universal covenant with all nations and peoples. In chapter 24, it’s the violation of this early covenant which brings destruction on the whole earth, this time by fire rather than water, so the scene for this reading is just like that, following a second renewal of that ancient universal covenant.

In contrast to the previous chapter where we see the wine and the vine from which it comes mourning the destruction of the earth by fire, in this chapter “a feast of rich food and choice wines” is provided on the “mountain of the Lord of hosts.” The only destruction in that place will be the destruction of death itself. We see in this reading a foreshadowing of the promised wedding banquet of the Lamb, at which death is definitively banished. We believe that our participation in the Holy Eucharist isn’t merely a foreshadowing but a real participation in that marriage banquet in which our God takes all nations to himself in the eternal covenant of love in Christ.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6~

## SECOND READING

~Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20~

## REFLECTION

**S**t. Paul gives a beautiful witness to Christian equanimity in this epistle. There’s a level of energy and optimism that one wouldn’t expect from a man facing extended imprisonment or even death. We’re not left in the dark either as to the source of Paul’s ebullience. “In him who is the source of my strength I have strength for everything,” he says. The Philippians had apparently sought to ameliorate Paul’s suffering in prison, perhaps with a gift or simply by the expression of their concern through a messenger. Paul isn’t an ingrate and responds with thanks but he does so almost apologetically, after declaring that he has grown accustomed to absolute detachment from circumstances, good or bad.

One can almost read between the lines something to the effect: “You could have saved yourself the trouble of your concern for me; I’m filled with joy at being able to suffer for Christ.” Paul is too polite, too fine a Christian, to risk offending with such frankness. Instead, he elegantly builds

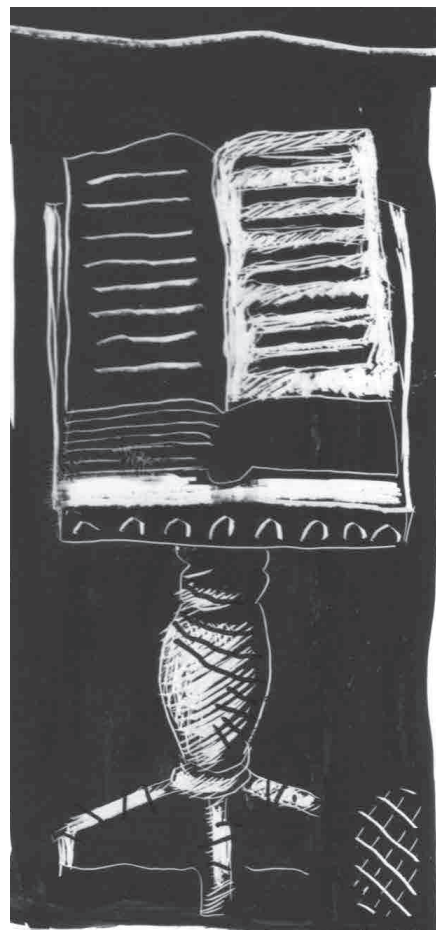
them up in faith by his courage and assures them of his peace in the midst of persecution, without rejecting their gift of consolation. What a sterling example Paul gives to the Philippians and to us.

## GOSPEL

~Matthew 22:1-14~

### REFLECTION

**T**he “reign of God” is thought to have been a current phrase to represent covenant faithfulness. So when Jesus begins a parable, “The reign of God may be likened to...” and then goes on to describe a gross affront to “a king” by invited guests to a wedding banquet, we can guess that the message got through. The Pharisees, who regarded themselves as impeccably faithful to the covenant, seem to have taken some offense to this parable. It’s vital that we get an accurate assessment of the attitudes of the Jewish people in response to Jesus because we’ve been incorporated into Israel by grace. If we see Jews in the Gospel as merely a caricature of stubbornness to the overtures of God in Jesus, we’re unlikely to recognize ourselves and our own covenant shortcomings in them.



The city that Jesus says the king will send his army to destroy is the one we inhabit. It’s the city we live in, not merely the Jerusalem of old. We Catholics are now the invited guests to the banquet. We’re invited each Sunday in anticipation of the wedding feast in heaven. Jesus has won and offered redemption for all, but we can only enter into that redemption by our choice to be redeemed.

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by asking for God's blessing on our gathering.**

Lord Jesus, our brother,  
you have promised to be present among us  
whenever we come together in your name.  
Remain with us as we meet  
for the benefit and love of your people.  
Guide us in our discussions,  
and help us to do everything for your honor and glory  
and for the salvation of your church.

Jesus,  
we praise you,  
for you are our Lord for ever and ever.  
Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**The readings today have a theme of feasting and banqueting—having a party, in other words. What are some of your favorite occasions for having a party or celebration?**

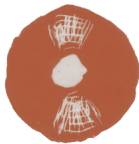
*(Expect a wide variety of responses from birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries to holidays and holy days.)*

*This would be a good place to remind people that we have six holy days of obligation: Solemnity of Mary (Jan. 1), Ascension, the Assumption (Aug. 15), All Saints' Day (Nov. 1), Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8), and Christmas (Dec. 25).)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Today the presenter is going to share with us some insights on the parable of the wedding feast of the king.**



(Play the video for the Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately seven minutes.)

## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**What is the relationship between the mountain in the first reading where God provides a banquet and Calvary?**

*(The mountain in the first reading is Mount Zion in Jerusalem. Jesus dies on Calvary, in Jerusalem, showing us that the banquet prophesied in Isaiah comes to fulfillment in the Cross, where Jesus dies so that we can have eternal life.)*



**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**How is the parable in this week's Gospel a "mini-history" of the story of salvation, according to the presenter?**

*(This story is a miniature version of salvation history in that first God invites his chosen people, the Jews. He invites them again and again, but they continue to reject him and even kill his messengers. Finally, the King reaches out to everyone and invites all to his banquet, meaning that now, all people are invited to become part of God's family through the Church and join in the feast that is the Mass.)*

**STEP #5****LECTIO DIVINA —  
PRAYER & RESOLUTION**

**Today's Gospel offers us the opportunity to examine how we respond to God's invitation in our lives.**

**PRAYER:**

Imagine that you have just received an invitation to come to the feast of the King. His servant has personally invited you, saying that everything is ready. What do you do? Do you drop everything and come to the banquet, or do you keep tending to your business? Do you feel upset that going to the celebration interferes with your plans, so you ignore the invitation? Now think of the invitation to the banquet as being Sunday Mass. How do you feel about attending Mass? Do you go joyfully, or do you think of it merely as an obligation? Or do you sometimes not go at all?

## RESOLUTION:

Before you attend Mass this Sunday, stop for a moment at the back of the church and make sure that you are coming with enthusiasm and joy. Let go of all your worldly worries and enter the sanctuary as if you are going to the King's banquet.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### **LEADER TIP:**

- *If there is time, you may want to talk about how we should dress for Mass, especially in light of the Gospel. While you don't want to create barriers or guilt, reminding people that when coming to church, dressing in clean and appropriate clothing honors both God and your fellow Mass goers.*

### **DIGGING DEEPER** BANQUET FOODS



What would have been served at a sumptuous banquet during the time of Christ? While Jewish dietary laws would have made some differences, especially among the observant Jews, it's likely the feast would have been influenced by Roman banquets of the time. A proper Roman dinner included three courses: the hors d'oeuvres, the main course, and the dessert. Exotic foods from wild animals, birds, and fish were popular, as were dairy products, bread, fruits and vegetables, and wine. The main offering would have been meat, something that wasn't regularly served; lamb was frequently on the banquet menu.

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today with prayer:**

Blessed are you, loving Father,  
for all your gifts to us.  
Blessed are you for giving us family and friends  
to be with us in times of joy and sorrow,  
to help us in days of need,  
and to rejoice with us in moments of celebration.

Father,  
We praise you for your Son Jesus,  
who knew the happiness of family and friends,  
and in the love of your Holy Spirit.  
Blessed are you for ever and ever.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 29<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## RENDER UNTO CAESAR

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**How many times have we heard the expression, “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and render unto God that which is God’s”?** Today’s Gospel gives us the origin of that phrase.

The Pharisees, who have been attempting to trap Jesus for some time, have joined forces with some of their opponents, the Herodians, to pose a tricky question: Is it lawful to pay the census tax? Since the Pharisees didn’t believe it was lawful and the Herodians did, no matter what Jesus answered, someone was bound to be angered.

Jesus’ answer shows his acumen and wisdom. Instead of giving a direct reply, he first calls out the Pharisees for trying to trap him. He understands their motive is to find a reason to kill him, and he lets them know that he recognizes that. Then he very carefully gives the reply we are familiar with, saying that some things belong to God and some things belong to Caesar. It is our responsibility to see the difference and respond accordingly.

This can be quite the challenge for us who live today in an increasingly secularized world. Many want to see how far they can push the limits and have us render unto Caesar that which belongs rightly to God. We must be ready for the test and continue to render unto God that which is God's while still being actively engaged in the secular domain with the good news of the Gospel. Not an easy task by any means, and one that can be accomplished only with the grace of God himself.

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~Isaiah 45:1, 4-6~

## REFLECTION

**I**n this new exodus, which is going to be effected by a non-Jew, we see a foreshadowing of God's plan in Christ. Through Isaiah, God states his purpose in using Cyrus: "That toward the rising and the setting of the sun people may know that there is none besides me." We see Cyrus as a sign by which all nations will come to know God, though Cyrus himself hadn't known him. The implication is that those who've known God in a special way, that is Israel, have been bypassed so that God's universal plan of covenantal love might proceed on course.

The irony is that it's precisely because of this chastening that Israel will become the fit instrument to receive the true Messiah in the years to come. Is it he who will call all nations into the renewed covenantal family of God with the pronouncement, "Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ" (John 17:3).

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10~

## SECOND READING

~1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b~

## REFLECTION

**P**aul enjoyed a considerable success in Thessalonica, which would've been a prosperous town enjoying a heavy flow of traffic by land and sea. It was a bustling seaport and likewise located on the main road east out of Rome. Judging from the content of the letter, Paul's early success in preaching the Gospel there hadn't dissipated after his forced exit by some members of the town's Jewish population who opposed his teaching. The letter is quite praiseworthy toward the Thessalonian Christians, with the only apparent need for doctrinal correction coming in regard to the return or Second Coming of Christ. In fact, Paul says explicitly, "But concerning love of the brethren you have no need to have any one write to you" (4:9).

This week we get only a salutation and an initial commendation for "endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ." However, Paul confesses something that only he could know: that in some measure, the Thessalonians were "chosen" by God to receive a particularly powerful message from St. Paul. His preaching must have been anointed, given the outcome of firm faith borne in these steadfast Christians.

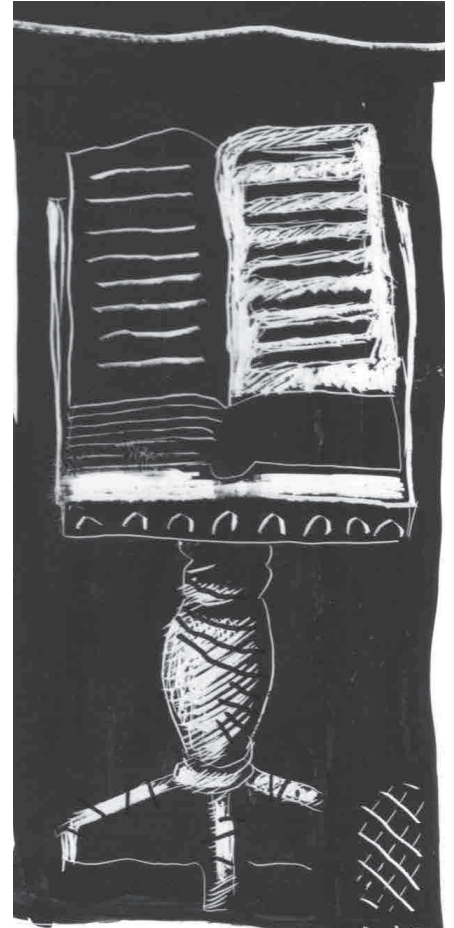
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 22:15-21~

### REFLECTION

This reading represents a turn of the Jewish authorities from defense to offense. The extent of their ire is demonstrated in that the Pharisees and Herodians team up on Jesus in this passage. These are two factions whose *only* common interest would have been stopping Jesus. Interestingly, the dilemma that the Pharisees put to Jesus expresses the difference between the two factions. The Pharisees would've opposed the paying of taxes to the emperor, and the Herodians would've supported such an action. So Jesus, in the presence of each, is being asked by both to offend one or the other.

Jesus' answer is stunning. Jesus asks the Pharisees for "the coin used for the tax,"—the tax required payment in a Roman coin minted by Caesar. The fact they had such a coin suggested their intention was to pay the Roman tax. Jesus rightly calls them "hypocrites." He then says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." What Jesus is saying to the Pharisees is this: "The coin you own owns you. By your sympathy with the Herodians, whom you oppose, you violate the very principle by which you sought to trap me." The last part of Jesus' retort could well have been addressed to both factions: "Give to God what is God's."





# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**SAY:** Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying the great prayer Jesus taught us, the Our Father:

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be Thy Name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil. Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**As Christians we must both live in the world and live for the Lord. Have you ever experienced any prejudice or hostility for your Catholic beliefs? What did you do?**

*(The tone of the conversation will depend on whether or not people have experienced prejudice. If some have, the discussion can focus on how they responded. If no one has experienced prejudice, then redirect the opening toward a more general discussion of prejudice against Christians in our secularized world.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**This week we look at the famous passage where Jesus said to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. Let us see how the presenter helps us apply that to our own lives.**



(Play the video for Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately six minutes.)

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**STEP #4****LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION**

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journal pages to find these questions.*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**In order to trap Jesus, the Pharisees partnered with the Herodians. Why was this such a tricky move?**

*(The Herodians believed in paying taxes to Caesar, while the Pharisees did not, so no matter what Jesus would answer, he would upset one group.*

*However, Jesus outmaneuvered them both with his response.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**According to the presenter, why must Christians be involved in the public square?**

*(Christians must be involved in the public square, a.k.a. the secular culture, because it is our obligation to bring the good news of the Gospel by rendering unto God what is God's in the secular world and resisting rendering unto Caesar that which is God's.)*

**DIGGING DEEPER****THE HERODIANS**

The Herodians were a political party at the time of Jesus who were distinguished from the two major parties, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, by being sympathetic to Herod the Great and his followers. The New Testament mentions two encounters with Jesus, one in Galilee and one in Jerusalem (Mark 3:6, 12:13; Matthew 22:16; cf. also Mark 8:15, and Luke 13:31-32).

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today's Gospel is particularly important for us today who live in a world where Christianity is often being pitted against the government. Let us see how Jesus' teaching applies right now.**

### **PRAYER:**

Imagine that you are with the group listening to the Pharisees confront Jesus about paying the census tax. What do you expect him to say? When he says, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God," are you surprised? Now think about your own life. What in your life rightly belongs to Caesar? Are you giving to Caesar what is Caesar's? What in your life belongs to God? Are you giving that to God? Which is easier to do: pay Caesar or pay God?

### **RESOLUTION:**

As difficult as it may be, when you are paid this week, thank God that you are able to "render unto Caesar" by paying your taxes. Then set aside a donation to give to the Church or to the poor in order to "render unto God" as well.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### ***LEADER TIP:***

- *Be careful not to let the discussion fall into politics or along political lines about taxation or the role of government. If that happens, remind members of the group that Jesus did not align himself with any political faction and one point of this Gospel is to show that God's world and the world of the state are two different things.*

## STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together by praying for those involved in Caesar's work—those in government.**

Dear Heavenly Father,  
we come to you in the mighty name of Jesus,  
thanking you and praising you for our great nation.  
We thank you for the plan you gave to our forefathers  
by which to govern our nation and for the division of powers so  
that our destiny does not rest in the hands of one person.

In praying for those in authority,  
we therefore lift up our Congress and Senate to you.  
We pray that by your Holy Power,  
our legislative bodies would make laws that are just.

Father, we ask you to give them wisdom  
to make decisions that would strengthen and prosper our nation.  
We desire that they would make right decisions  
concerning the politics, the social welfare,  
and the economics of our country.  
We pray that they will be motivated by your hand  
and not their own personal concerns.  
Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## 30<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## LOVING THE LORD WITH OUR MIND

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**Jesus' enemies were always looking for ways to trap him.** In Matthew 22, where today's Gospel comes from, Jesus is tested three times. The test in this week's reading centers on the Pharisees asking Jesus what is the greatest commandment of the law. In response, Jesus quotes the *Shema*, the great prayer from Deuteronomy 6:4, which begins, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" (RSV). That alone wouldn't have surprised his audience. In fact, they would have expected him to say something like that.

What does surprise them, however, is that Jesus subtly changes the wording. Instead of saying that we are to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and *might*, he says we must love with our heart, soul, and *mind*.

So what's the big deal? What's the difference between might and mind?

One insight we can take away is that we must use our intellect to study the truth about God—not just to have "head knowledge," but

because in order to truly love someone, we have to know them. And in order to know someone, we have to know about them. If we are really to love God, we have to know what God is like—his character and his actions.

How can we come to know God? By reading the Scriptures. For if we have never read the Bible, especially the Gospels, we cannot truly say that we love God with our whole mind (as well as heart and soul).

### **LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~Exodus 22:20-26~

## REFLECTION

**I**f Israel's behavior is to be exemplary as a sign to the nations, then those foreigners who cross into her territory will have to be treated in an exemplary manner. It's the ill treatment of aliens that's forbidden in the first verse of our reading. And God makes clear that he himself intends to be the protector of widows and orphans. "If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me...My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans."



This might sound rough, but we need to recognize that police forces didn't exist at this time. Might was law. When someone has had a moral restraint forced upon him, he doesn't develop internal restraints. When the yoke comes off, the slave easily becomes the slave owner. And so, God was speaking in a language that these people, especially those who might be tempted to exercise their might against the weak, could understand. Justice will be swift and sure, God assures the mighty, if you molest my little ones.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51~

## SECOND READING

~1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10~

## REFLECTION

**T**his passage, in a sense, illustrates what's been said above. The Thessalonians had been given to the worship of idols, a capital offense in Israel. Through Paul's preaching they became "models for all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." Through this new pedagogy, one which is anointed of the Holy Spirit, what humankind could ever do on its own simply happens, a miracle of grace.

After a few weeks of instruction by Paul, idol worshippers become the heirs of the promises made through Israel. Through this outpouring of grace, they're delivered "from the wrath to come." That is, justice is no longer held out to them for their sins, but mercy in Christ Jesus. The ancient pedagogy of justice has given way to one of love. Justice hasn't disappeared of course; it's still out there for those who choose not to enroll in this school of love. As St. Paul says, it's still "to come," but deliverance is now possible; the sentence can be lifted.

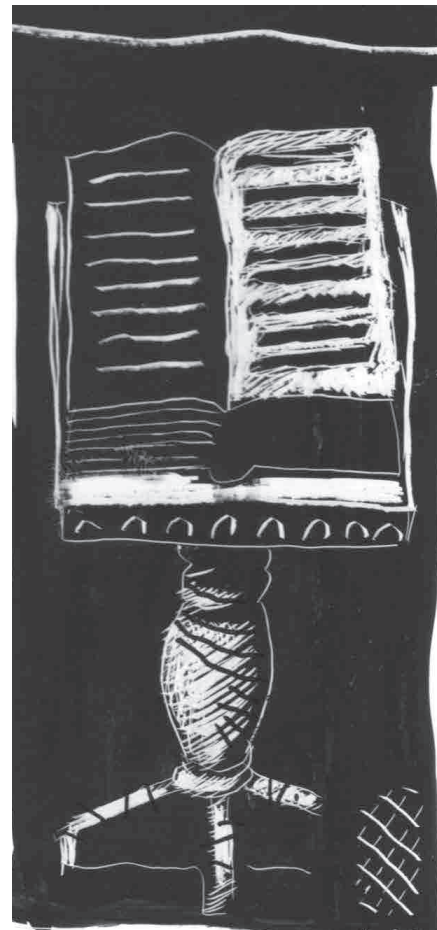
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 22:34-40~

## REFLECTION

**A**s the opening of this episode indicates, the Pharisees have come to Jesus having heard that he has confounded the Sadducees, a rival religious faction to the Pharisees, in an argument over the resurrection of the dead. In that exchange, Jesus came down on the side of the Pharisees, who believed in such a resurrection, accusing the Sadducees of knowing neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. The Pharisees haven't come to try to "trip him up" but to "test" his wisdom further, as one would any rabbi.

The question Jesus is asked by the scholar in the law—"Which commandment of the law is the greatest?"—seems not to be aimed at tricking him or leading him into a rhetorical trap. He responds in a way that wouldn't have surprised a faithful Jew. Jesus' answer is, likewise, straightforward, yet magisterial. He answers with authority and without indictment, as is the case when he knows a questioner is sincere. Jesus is really describing the attitude of one who has entered into the kingdom of God, which is precisely God's sovereignty in the human soul, by virtue of this covenant faithfulness. This passage demonstrates the continuity of Jesus and his message with his—and our—Jewish roots.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying an Act of Love.**

O My God,  
I love you above all things,  
with my whole heart and soul,  
because you are all-good and worthy of all love.  
I love my neighbor as myself for the love of you.  
I forgive all who have injured me,  
and ask pardon of all whom I have injured.  
Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**This week, we are going to talk about love and God's commandments. What do you think "love" is? How is the Christian understanding of love different from what the world calls "love"?**

*(People might say that love is an action, as opposed to a feeling. They may point out that love persists despite obstacles, that it is more than just a physical feeling—it's a decision to seek what is best for another person. The Catechism defines love as willing the good of the other.)*

# STEP #3

## LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**Today we are going to learn about what Jesus says is the greatest commandment and what that means in our own lives.**



(Play the video for Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately eight minutes.)

### DIGGING DEEPER

#### THE SHEMA



“The *Shema* is an affirmation of Judaism and a declaration of faith in one God. The obligation to recite the *Shema* is separate from the obligation to pray and a Jew is obligated to say *Shema* in the morning and at night (Deut. 6:7). The first line of the *Shema*, ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One’ (*Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai ehad*) (Deuteronomy 6:4) is repeated throughout the prayer services. It is said in the morning blessings, in the musaf Amidah of Shabbat and holidays, when the Torah is taken out of the Ark on Shabbat and holidays, as a bedtime prayer, as part of the deathbed confessional, and at various other times.”

—www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org

# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journals to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**What does Jesus say is the greatest commandment?**

**Why is it impossible to separate these two commandments?**

*(The greatest commandment is: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”*

*The second is: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

*It is impossible to separate these two commandments because since human persons are created in the image and likeness of God, you cannot love God and not love other people. In addition, it is impossible to truly love others without the love of God and the grace he offers us.)*

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**The Jewish people had long considered loving God as the greatest commandment. What subtle change did Jesus make in this command, according to Dr. Gray? What does this change mean?**

*(Jesus changes the word “might” to the word “mind.” This change indicates that we are to use our intellect to study the truth about God and our faith. We must learn about God if we are to know and love him.)*

**STEP #5****LECTIO DIVINA —  
PRAYER & RESOLUTION**

**In today’s Gospel, Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, one of the leading religious groups of his time. Although he is speaking to them, he really is speaking to each one of us.**

**PRAYER:**

Picture the scene in your mind. You are at the Temple and you hear one of the leaders ask Jesus what the greatest commandment is. How would you respond? When you hear Jesus say, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,” do you agree? Then you hear him add, “The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Now what goes through your mind? Who do you consider your neighbor? How do Jesus’ words challenge you?

**RESOLUTION:**

Since we are to love God with our minds as well as our souls and hearts, read all of Matthew 22 this week and write down all the attributes of God that Jesus shows us in this chapter. Choose one and practice it in your own life.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

**LEADER TIP:**

- *If people need some ideas, you might suggest these, for example: He is careful in choosing his words, he is straightforward in his speech, he respects the difference between church and state, he asks people to think about topics and use their intelligence.*

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together today by praying Jesus's words found in Mark .**

Hear, O Israel!  
The Lord our God is Lord alone!  
You shall love the Lord your God  
with all your heart, with all your soul,  
with all your mind, and with all your strength.  
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

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# LEADER GUIDE

## 32<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧

# WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS



### Leader Preparation Overview



The story of the Foolish and the Wise Virgins can be difficult for us in the 21st century to fully appreciate. Not only do we not understand the wedding customs themselves, the actions of the Wise Virgins seem rather selfish: why wouldn't they just share with the Foolish Virgins and then everyone could go to the wedding and have a good time?

If the point of the story was to encourage sharing, then that's probably how Jesus would have ended it. But the point is tell us that we must be patiently prepared for the coming of our bridegroom—Jesus himself.

The oil in the story represents the light of faith as it applies to good works and charity. And while there are many things we can do in pursuit of our spiritual life that we can share with others, there are certain things that we can do only for ourselves: things that build up the oil in our own lives—like reading the Scripture, attending Mass, and offering up our daily sacrifices. No one can do those things for us... and we can't do them for anyone else.

As we read this week's Gospel, we are reminded that although we are all invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb, we must do our part by being ready at all times to meet the bridegroom, who will come like "a thief in the night." We must make sure that we have sufficient "oil"



to light the lamps of our lives because no one can give us that “oil” at the last minute.

This wasn't an easy teaching to accept in Jesus' day, and it's no easier today. We all have the tendency to want to be recognized, to be important, to be respected. But Jesus says that if we want to be elevated in the sight of God, we need to humble ourselves in the sight of men. It is only when we recognize hypocrisy in ourselves and take steps to root it out that we can begin to allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, changing us and the world we live in.

***LEADER TIPS:***

*We've provided “reflections” for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*

*Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS ON THE THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~Wisdom 6: 12-16~

## REFLECTION

**T**he **Book of Wisdom**, like Proverbs, continually invites us to seek out wisdom. Wisdom is a virtue and a gift. It is not merely a clever way of thinking but encompasses the whole of living, thinking, and deciding in accord with God's plan. Here, wisdom is personified as a woman, and the passages invites us to seek her with a succession of verbs. We are to love her, seek her, desire her, watch for her, find her, set our hearts on her, and keep vigil for her. All of these verbs are about whole-hearted devotion to the Lord. We need to seek wisdom, not because she is lost, but because we are. We need her guidance, and so we must seek her out. We should keep an eye out for her at morning and at night, as if we were holding a perpetual vigil for her, always ready to do her bidding. This sense of anticipation and vigil-keeping will recur in the second reading and the Gospel, where God calls us to keep vigil for Wisdom Incarnate, Jesus himself. In return for our vigil-keeping, Wisdom will make herself known to us, sit at the gate for us, seek us out, appear to us, and meet us. In ancient times, people would sit at the gate of the city for conversation, and so wisdom will make herself accessible to those willing to look for her. If we respond to God's grace with open hearts, then he will come to meet us, welcome us, and reveal himself to us. It is encouraging to think that the pursuit of wisdom is a two-way street—if we seek her, she will seek us.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8~

## SECOND READING

~Thessalonians 4: 13–18~

### REFLECTION

**W**e do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

Death comes to visit each of our families. At first glance, death seems like the worst catastrophe we could possibly experience. When it befalls those near to us, we can lose hope and feel its awful sting. The early Christians were no different. After hearing Paul preach about the resurrection of the dead and the Second Coming of Jesus, they began to think that no Christian would die before the end of all things. Then, when some of them did die, they became worried that the deceased Christians had missed the boat and lost their chance at salvation. While Paul acknowledges that some believers will be alive when Jesus returns (v. 15), he encourages those who have lost hope: those who have “fallen asleep” as Christians will rise from the dead to greet Christ at his glorious return. We therefore have great hope not only for ourselves, but for our Christian family members and friends who have died. When Jesus returns, “the dead in Christ will rise first” (v. 16), and then the rest of us. Paul depicts the Second Coming in simple but rich terms that recall Mt. Sinai: a word, an angel’s voice, a trumpet, and the Lord’s descent. In the beauty and power of the moment, we will be caught up to meet him in the air. Then the best part: we will be with him forever! When we profess our belief in the Lord’s return and the resurrection of the dead, we acknowledge that Earth is not our true homeland. Only in that great, final “family reunion” of the resurrection will we really feel at home—at home with Jesus forever in Heaven.

## GOSPEL

~Matthew 25:1-13~

### REFLECTION

We typically hate being caught off-guard. In fact, much of our life is about preparation and planning: we schedule events on our calendar; we buy groceries in advance; we dress differently for different activities. Being prepared for life is an essential component of life. Jesus, however, will point us beyond our day-to-day preparations to emphasize how prepared we should be for that final meeting, when he returns as the bridegroom-king. Jesus teaches us with the parable of the ten virgins—attendants waiting for the wedding feast to begin. After much delay and napping, the bridegroom finally arrives on the scene. Sadly, half of the virgins are caught unawares. They have run out of oil for their lamps. These foolish virgins represent Christians who are not prepared for the Lord’s return. Some scholars see the oil as symbolizing the righteous deeds of believers, which the foolish virgins have failed to do. On the other hand, the wise virgins have been “keeping vigil” for Wisdom (see Wisdom 6:15) and are ready for his arrival. They are invited into the wedding while the others are stranded outside. The interpretation is simple: we want to be ready, awake, and vigilant for the return of Jesus in order that we might enter into the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb. The finality of eternal punishment is terrifying, but the irrevocability of eternal life is tantalizing. Our hope is in the Lord, not in ourselves, yet we participate in our own redemption and spiritual growth by our moral action. If we neglect the “oil” of doing good, we will fall into the “sleepiness” of sin.

# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying a prayer adapted from a traditional wedding prayer.**

We thank you, O God,  
for the Love You have implanted in our hearts.  
May it always inspire us to be kind in our words,  
considerate of feeling,  
and concerned for each other's needs and wishes.  
Help us to be understanding and forgiving  
of human weaknesses and failings.  
Increase our faith and trust in You  
and may Your Prudence guide our life and love.  
Bless us, O God,  
with Peace and Happiness,  
and make our love fruitful for Your glory  
and our Joy both here and in eternity.

# STEP #2

## INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**This week we read about 10 Virgins who are waiting on the arrival of the bridegroom to lead the procession to the bride's house as part of the traditional marriage ceremony. What are some traditional marriage customs in our culture?**

*(Answers may depend a bit on ethnic backgrounds.*

*Some could include a unity candle; asking parents for a blessing; wearing "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue," playing the Wedding March, throwing rice or birdseed, bride wearing white etc.)*

# STEP #3

## LECTIO DIVINA – SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**The parable of the 10 virgins can sometimes be a bit confusing for us. Let's hear what the presenter has to tell us about this lesson.**



(Play the video for 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately five minutes)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DEVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journals to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**What does the oil in this story symbolize, according to the presenter?**

*(The oil symbolizes the light or faith, and it applies to our good works and charity, which we can't really share or give away.)*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**What are some of the things we can do to “increase our oil,” i.e. grow in faith?**

*(We can read the Scriptures, go to Mass, perform works of charity, offer up our daily sacrifices and perfect our spiritual disciplines as ways of “increasing our oil.”)*

### DIGGING DEEPER WEDDING CUSTOMS



Knowing a bit about ancient Jewish wedding customs is key to understanding some of the imagery in Jesus' teaching. In that time, a young man would pay a bride's father a sum of money and sign a betrothal contract. From that point on, the union can be dissolved only by divorce, but the couple does not live together. This is the state Mary and Joseph were in at the time of the Annunciation. During the time of betrothal, the groom prepares a place for his bride, often by adding a room onto his father's house. This may take up to seven years, during which time the bride must be ever ready for his return, which always takes place at night. He will then come with great fanfare, accompanied by his family and friends to take his bride to their new residence.



# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA – PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today's parable offers us a chance to place ourselves into the story in a particular way since all of us are like the virgins waiting for the groom.**

### **PRAYER:**

Imagine that you are one of the wise virgins who has brought extra oil. One of the foolish virgins comes up to you and asks that you share your oil with her. How does this request make you feel? Do you want to share your oil, or are you annoyed that she didn't plan ahead? You tell her that you can't share and send her to the merchant to buy some. How do you feel as you watch her leave? Is she angry with you? Do you feel guilty or vindicated? What do you resolve to do after this experience?

### **RESOLUTION:**

This week, redo the Lectio Divina exercise, only this time, put yourself in the place of the foolish virgin.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### ***LEADER TIPS:***

- *Help your participants understand the connection the presenter was making between the oil in the parable and the things we can do to increase the "oil" of our faith.*
- *This week could provide a good opportunity to mention some traditional Catholic disciplines like the Stations of the Cross, the rosary, novenas, etc.*

# STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP – CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue.*

**Let's close our time together with a prayer for patience, since this week's Gospel reminds us that we wait in patience hope for our bridegroom.**

Teach me, my Lord, to be sweet and gentle in all the events of my life, in disappointments, in the thoughtlessness of others, in the insincerity of those I trusted, in the unfaithfulness of those on whom I relied. Let me forget myself so that I may enjoy the happiness of others. Let me always hide my little pains and heartaches so that I may be the only one to suffer from them. Teach me to profit by the suffering that comes across my path. Let me so use it that it may mellow me, not harden or embitter me; that it may make me patient, not irritable; that it may make me broad in my forgiveness, not narrow or proud or overbearing. May no one be less good for having come within my influence; no one less pure, less true, less kind, less noble, for having been a fellow traveler with me on our journey towards eternal life. As I meet with one cross after another, let me whisper a word of love to You. May my life be lived in the supernatural, full of power for good, and strong in its purpose of sanctity.

Amen.

(<http://www.ourcatholicprayers.com/prayers-for-patience.html>)

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## 33<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

✧ YEAR A ✧



## USING OUR TALENTS

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### Leader Preparation Overview



**As we approach the final weeks of the Church year,** we read the last parable Jesus taught. It's not only the final parable, but it is also one of the longest and most detailed. In it, Jesus tells the story of a wealthy man who gave each of his servants a substantial sum of money to take care of in his absence. When he returns, he is pleased at the two servants who have doubled his investment, but he is angry at the one who simply hid the money out of fear of losing it.

We can interpret this story on a purely financial level, talking about the need to shrewdly use our money, but the parable goes deeper than that. It also addresses the wise stewardship of the gifts and talents God has given us.

Clearly Jesus is telling us that we must put our abilities at the service of the Master, God our Father. But before we can do that, we have to discern what our gifts are. We all have been given special abilities by God. It's up to us to figure out what those abilities are and how we can best put them into practice so that at the end of our lives we will hear the words of the Master telling us, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

**LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

# REFLECTIONS FOR THE THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## FIRST READING

~Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31~

## REFLECTION

**T**his first reading picks up where our Gospel last week left off. Then, we saw the Groom entering into the eschatological wedding feast; that is, the eternal marriage between God and his creatures in heaven. This reading from Proverbs on the virtues of a “worthy wife” can be read in a very straightforward, literal fashion, as a description of the ideal spouse. But it can also be read as a description of the Bride of Christ, the Church at her best. This makes for an especially cogent reading when our first reading is read in the light of the parable of the talents in our Gospel this week. The worthy wife is one who uses what comes to hand to enrich the family and yet has enough left over to see to the needs of the poor. Read in this way, we get perhaps a clearer picture of what it means for the Church to render a return of double to her Groom in this passage from Proverbs than we do in our Gospel.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5~

## SECOND READING

~1 Thessalonians 5:1-6~

## REFLECTION

**T**his passage indicates to the Thessalonians the need for vigilance in regard to Christ's coming again. It indicates the same to us, but it also indicates to us the coming end of the liturgical year. We always read these sorts of passages as we come close to the season of Advent—the end of the old, and the advent of the new year.

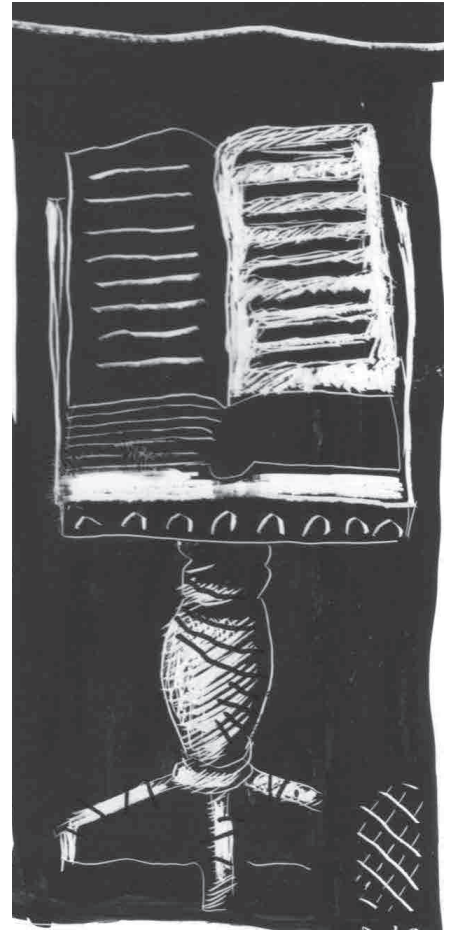
There's often a tension in these eschatological passages between knowing and not knowing the time of his coming. Those who live in the dark can't see the signs of his coming. Those who live in the day or in the light have some idea, but still don't know the exact time of his coming. The Lord's coming is *the* day—it's a determined time—and to recognize it for what it is, we must live in the day. Our liturgical recollection of his Second Coming each year is one of the ways we do that. The light we receive from the Scriptures proclaimed in the liturgy is a way of accustoming our eyes to the light of the day of the Lord.

## GOSPEL

~Matthew 25:14-30~

### REFLECTION

**V**iewed as an expression of the workings of grace, we can distinguish two levels in the parable that Jesus tells. The initial sums of money given to the servants could be actual grace—that grace given to all, Christian or not, to encourage good actions. God rains these graces down on us incessantly. However, he doesn't expect us to simply behave well. Even under the influence of actual grace, our works won't win us salvation. It's only when actual grace leads us to sanctifying grace, the grace we receive in the sacraments, that we can be said to be living in a state of grace. That's so because the grace of the sacraments unites us to Christ, who also opens the gates of heaven to us and makes us capable of living there. We must invest the actual graces he gives. It isn't enough to simply return them in the amount we received. His actual grace should prompt us to also receive the sacraments as acts of perfect worship and transformation. Having received the sacraments, having invested his actual grace there, we receive a tremendous return in the reception of sanctifying grace. That sacramental grace moves us in turn to real, supernatural repentance and charity.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let's open our time together by praying the Stewardship Prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola.**

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,  
My memory, my understanding and my entire will,  
all I have and call my own.  
You have given all to me.  
To you, Lord, I return it.  
Everything is yours;  
do with it what you will.  
Give me only your love and your grace;  
that is enough for me.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**We hear a lot in the Church about stewardship. What does that word mean to you?**

*(Be prepared for a wide range of answers, from taking care of the environment to doing good deeds to responsible financial policies. One response may be that we are to give of our “time, talents and treasure,” which is a traditional definition of stewardship.)*



## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA — SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**As we near the end of the Church year, we hear one last parable from Jesus—the parable of the talents. Let’s see what new insights we might get from the presenter about this story.**



(Play the video for the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. This will play for approximately four minutes.)

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## STEP #4

### LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journals to find these questions.*

#### **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1**

**The parable of the talents can be read on two levels; one is financial responsibility and a possible lesson in investing. What is the other?**

**What does this parable tell us God expects us to do with our talents?**

*(While Jesus' audience would have thought first of the monetary aspect, we must also think of talents as the gifts and skills that God has given us. God expects us to use our talents, be they monetary or otherwise, not simply hide and hoard them for ourselves.)*

## **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2**

**What are some of the talents the presenter talks about that you may possess?**

*(A talent may be any gift or ability that we have, such as hospitality, teaching, exhortation, service, etc.)*

*Refer participants to 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 for a list of gifts of the Spirit. Be sure to point out that these aren't the only possible gifts, but they are a starting point.)*

### **DIGGING DEEPER TALENTED MONEY**



A talent was a standard sum of money in the ancient world. While its exact value is difficult to calculate, one way is by looking at what members of the military received. During the Peloponnesian war in Ancient Greece, a talent was the amount of silver needed to pay the crew of a trireme for one month. Each crew member was commonly paid one drachma for every day of service, and 6,000 drachma made a talent. If we assume that a Greek rower was paid about the same as a junior enlisted member (E-2) of the US armed forces, a talent would be about \$300,000 in today's money.

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**This week, let's enter ourselves in the parable of the talents and see what God might have to reveal to us.**

### **PRAYER:**

Think of yourself as one of the servants in the parable. Consider that a talent would be worth about \$300,000 in today's money. How many "talents" has the master given you? Look at them and then, honestly, decide what you would do if you were given responsibility for \$300,000, \$900,000 or \$3,000,000. Would you be excited about investing it, or would you be afraid to lose it? What would you do with that much money? Now focus on your own gifts and abilities. How are you using them? Are you afraid to "invest" them for fearing of losing them?

### **RESOLUTION:**

Take a few minutes to write down some of the talents and gifts you possess. Make a decision to take at least one small step in implementing a neglected or undeveloped talent that you can put in the service of others this week.

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

### ***LEADER TIP:***

- *Participants may be surprised at just how much money was involved in this story. You may want to explain a bit more about talents using some of the information found in the "Digging Deeper" section.*

## STEP #6

## STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today with prayer:**

## STEWARDSHIP PRAYER

Loving God, I come to you in thanksgiving,  
knowing that all I am and all that I have is a gift from you.  
In faith and love, help me to do your will.

I am listening, Lord God.

Speak your words into the depth of my soul,  
that I may hear you clearly.

I offer to you this day all the facets of my life,  
Whether it be at home, at work, or at school—

to be patient, to be merciful, to be generous, to be holy.

Give me the wisdom and insight to understand your will for me  
and the fervor to fulfill my good intentions.

I offer my gifts of time, talent and possessions to you  
as a true act of faith,

to reflect my love for you and my neighbor.

Help me to reach out to others as you, my God,  
have reached out to me.

([www.archchicago.org](http://www.archchicago.org))

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*

# LEADER GUIDE

## 34<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST,  
THE KING OF THE UNIVERSE

✧ YEAR A ✧



# YOU DID IT TO ME

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## Leader Preparation Overview



**The end of time both scares and fascinates us**, so it's little wonder that movies about the end of the world are a Hollywood staple. While many of them are quite creative, none talk about what is actually going to happen, as described in today's Gospel.

When the world ends, we are told that God is going to focus on one thing: How did we care for the poor, the sick, the suffering? Nothing else will matter. Just how we treated who Jesus called “the least” among us.

The world at large has the final judgment wrong, but so do many Christians. Sometimes we tend to think that God will ask us how much we prayed, how much we read about the faith, how often we had fellowship and community with others, how often we received the sacraments. All of those things are important— that's true—but the bottom line for God is going to be how we treated others because, as Jesus says, the way we treat others is ultimately the way we treat him.

As we reach the end of the Church year, we are reminded of the great responsibility God has entrusted to us to care for the people in our lives...until the end of our lives, for the extent that we serve others is the extent that we serve Christ, the King.

**LEADER TIPS:**

- *We've provided reflections for each reading on the following pages. Read these in advance; they'll give you additional insights for understanding and discussion.*
- *Depending on when your group meets and how much time you have, you may want to read through each reading from the Prayer Journal together before beginning lectio divina.*

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE THIRTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### FIRST READING

~Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17~

### REFLECTION

**T**his passage is filled with words of comfort. God himself promises to be Shepherd to his sheep. Both shepherds and sheep come in for some sobering prophetic affliction in the verses before and after our reading. “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been pasturing themselves,” we read in verse 2. In verse 18 the prophet says to the sheep, “Was it not enough for you to graze on the best pasture, that you had to trample the rest of your pastures with your feet?” As is often the case with the prophets, Ezekiel is an equal opportunity afflictor.

We in the Church read both the comfort passages and the affliction passages in the prophets as addressed to ourselves. Jesus’ solemn warning to beware when others speak well of us has been taken seriously by the Church as she expresses herself

in her liturgy. We're always warning ourselves not to get too comfortable. The comfort we draw from the image of God coming to shepherd us himself in the first verses of this reading is tempered by the last ones in which the Lord warns, "The sleek and the strong I will destroy, shepherding them rightly. As for you, my sheep, says the Lord, I will judge between one sheep and another, between rams and goats."

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

~Psalm 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6~

## SECOND READING

~1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28~

## REFLECTION

**T**his passage can help us shake off our worldly, temporal thinking. We so often think of time as the enemy of life. We moderns struggle fiercely to fend off the ravages of time in the illusion that we can hold death at bay. St. Paul reminds us that time isn't the enemy of life. In fact, time is the environment of death, the atmosphere that death breathes. When time ends, death will end with it, having no place to live and nothing left to breathe.

It can be a wonderful exercise to try to live as though we believed what Paul says. How differently we treat others when we look at them as creatures made to live in the eternity of God, as deathless persons. Strictly speaking, we're not eternal, since we have had a beginning in time. Only God is eternal. None that we know or have known will die. Some will rise to punishment, others to reward. Those in the latter category will be those who have struggled to subject themselves to Christ. Having been subjected to Christ, they'll be part of the whole gift of the harvest of time, which he will offer to the Father in his eternity. What a glorious end we have and, in fact, no end at all!



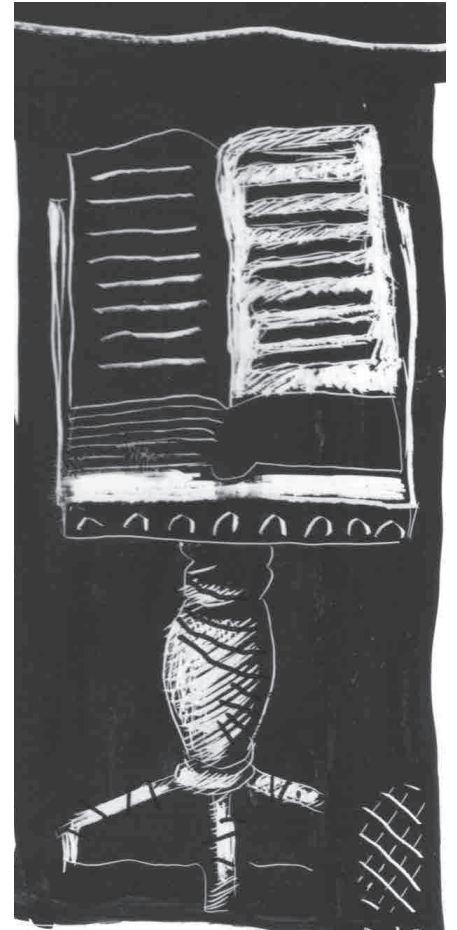
## GOSPEL

~Matthew 25:31-46~

### REFLECTION

**O**ne of the most usual facets of Christianity is its identification with the poor. Other faiths have counseled compassion toward the poor, but Christianity identifies with the poor in a way that the others don't. The source of that identification is in our Gospel passage this week. Jesus invites us to identify with the poor by identifying himself with them. One of the salient features of this identification with the poor is that those who seek Christ among the poor find it too little to see him in the poor; they invariably long to become poor. The whole impetus behind Franciscan minority is this desire, not only to serve the poor as one of them, but to be identifiable as another Christ by virtue of becoming one of "the least," about whom Jesus speaks in this passage.

Buddhism scorns wealth as an accommodation to desire, based on illusion. Hinduism sees poverty as the result of bad karma or as an aid to righting karma. Only in Christianity does poverty take on a human face, indeed, a divine face.



# SCRIPTURE STUDY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

## STEP #1

### OPENING PRAYER



**Welcome to our study of *Opening the Word* for the Feast of Christ the King.**

**Let's open our time together by saying this prayer to Christus Rex—Christ the King.**

Almighty and everlasting God,  
who in thy beloved Son,  
the King of the whole world,  
hast willed to restore all things,  
mercifully grant that all the kindreds of the nations that are  
divided by the wound of sin, may be brought under the sweet yoke  
of his rule.

Who liveth and reigneth with God the Father in the unity of the  
Holy Ghost,  
one God,  
world without end. Amen.

## STEP #2

### INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

**There have been a lot of books and movies out recently about the “end of the world.” What are some of the things that the popular culture thinks will happen at the end of time?**

*(Possible answers might include a meteor hitting the earth, nuclear war, a mass plague, world war, and invasion by aliens.)*

## STEP #3

### LECTIO DIVINA —

### SACRED READING OF SCRIPTURE

**This is the last Sunday of the Church year, and our readings today appropriately focus on the Final Judgment. Let’s listen to what Dr. Sri has to tell us about that event.**



(Play the video for the Feast of Christ the King. This will play for approximately seven minutes.)

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# STEP #4

## LECTIO DIVINA — MEDITATION

*Have participants turn to their Prayer Journals to find these questions.*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #1

**What is Jesus going to ask us when we appear before him at the Final Judgment?**

*(Jesus will ask us: How did we care for the poor, the sick, the suffering? He will want to know if we fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the imprisoned.)*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #2

**What, according to the presenter, is the culture of death based on?**

*(The culture of death is based on a radical individualism—a self-centeredness that shuns responsibility toward others, especially those in need.)*

### SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS #3

**How does modern individualism lead us to neglect and hurt other people?**

*(The individualistic modern world believes that each man is free to do whatever he wants with his life—each man is an island and his choices have no effect on others. John Paul II taught that it leads to a self-centered lifestyle that gets us to fail in our responsibilities, like Cain, who said, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”*

*On the other hand, the Gospel tells us that we are all interconnected in the Body of Christ and that we have an essential responsibility to all people, starting first with our families and then moving out into the world.)*

# STEP #5

## LECTIO DIVINA — PRAYER & RESOLUTION



**Today's Gospel is one of the most challenging of the entire Bible because the answers to the questions Jesus asks will determine our eternal destiny.**

### PRAYER:

Picture yourself standing before the throne of God. Jesus asks you the following questions that are based on today's Gospel readings. As you hear them, answer them honestly in your heart.

Did you give me food when I was hungry?  
Did you give me drink when I was thirsty?  
When I was a stranger, did you welcome me?  
When I was naked, did you clothe me?  
When I was sick, did you care for me?  
Did you visit me when I was imprisoned?  
What did you do for the least  
of those in your life?

### RESOLUTION:

As we approach the beginning of a new church year, make a resolution to live out the Church commands of Matthew 25 to the best of your ability next year. Choose one of the commands to focus on particularly in the next month.

#### DIGGING DEEPER

##### JUDGMENT DAY



*"Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ. The New Testament speaks of judgment primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in his second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, as well as other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul—a destiny which can be different for some and for others.*

*"Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through a purification or immediately, —or immediate and everlasting damnation." (CCC 1021-1022)*

**Use your journal to write down your thoughts and reflections and your resolutions.**

**LEADER TIP:**

- *Help participants realize that the Final Judgment isn't just at the end of time, but that each of us will experience our own Final Judgment at the end of our lives. How we live now will determine how we will live in the next life.*

## STEP #6

### STUDY WRAP-UP — CLOSING PRAYER

**I hope you take time each day to read and reread this week's Scripture Readings, meditating and reflecting on the passages that speak to you. Your journals will give you prompts if you need some guidance.**

*Starting with the person on your right;*

**I'd like each of us to share one take-away from today's session. In other words, share something that touched your heart as a truth to live by or even something you didn't know before.**

*Give everyone time to share, and then continue*

**Let's close our time together today with a prayer from the Roman Missal.**

O Lord Jesus Christ, King of glory,  
 deliver the souls of all the faithful departed  
 from the pains of hell and from the bottomless pit;  
 deliver them out of the lion's mouth,  
 lest hell should swallow them up,  
 lest they fall into the outer darkness;  
 but let thy standard-bearer, Saint Michael,  
 bring them back into thy holy light,  
 which thou didst promise of old to Abraham and to his seed.  
 Amen.

*(Insert any personal needs that may have come to light this week.)*