

SMALL GROUP CONTENT

SEASON FOUR



# AN EASTER PEOPLE

DIocese of Dallas Young Adults



## *Why Small Groups?*

Welcome to Season Four of Young Adult Small Groups for the Diocese of Dallas! Small Groups are an accessible avenue to what we hope will be a truly live-giving, Christian community on your faith journey.

Your small group commitment most likely consists of several hours over the next couple weeks, but there is an opportunity to not just make a commitment to the time of gathering, but to the people with whom you gather. The decision whether or not to make that commitment will determine if your small group experience develops beyond a calendar event.

## *About Our Content*

Easter is celebrated as a season- from Easter Sunday until Pentecost Sunday. When you're at church, participating in Mass, you'll be able to see signs that we are in the Easter season by the white/gold altar cloths and stole worn by the priest which symbolize new life. We are, once again, proud to be able to offer you content that was developed by Joel Stepanek in conjunction with the Dallas Advisory Group, which offered feedback on the content during the writing process. Joel works as the Vice President of Parish Services for Lifeteen, has written and developed content for Lifeteen, and has also authored several books. Thanks to the team that put together the content and the support of your parish ministry leaders, we are able to bring this content to the young adults of the diocese.

The small group content is scriptural, liturgical, and relevant to the realities of a "Dallas young adult". The content follows the liturgical calendar, meaning that the Scripture passages are taken from the lectionary of Sunday readings and that the reflections encourage us to delve into the liturgical seasons of the Church, in this case, Easter. We are praying for your relationship with Jesus as you delve into this content and own the story- our story- that makes us an Easter People.



**YOUNG ADULT  
SMALL GROUPS**  
— DIOCESE OF DALLAS —

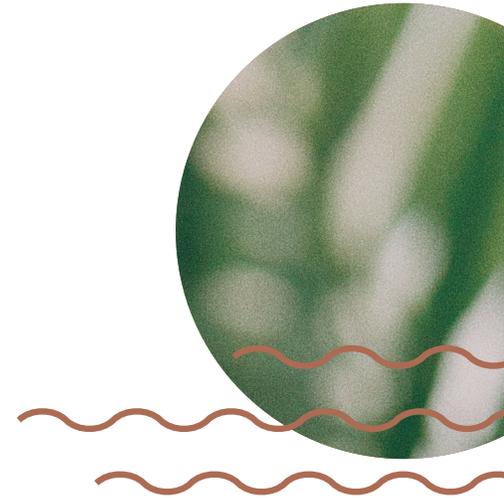
## *How to Use the Content*

Each week provides you with the same layout:

- Opening Prayer
- Introductory Thoughts
- Modern Connection
- Weekly Scripture Readings
- Spiritual Reading
- Group Discussion Questions
- Individual Prayer and Journal Prompt
- Closing Prayer Suggestion
- Weekly Challenge

There is most likely more content than you can comfortably cover in your time together with your small group. That is intentional! This allows the facilitator, in his or her preparations for the gathering, to consider which parts would be most fruitful for the group.

Know that the Diocese of Dallas is praying for each and every one of you!



# *SESSION 0 INTRODUCTIONS*

## *Overview*

This session is a relaxed, optional gathering that allows your group to get together before the start of the season. If your small group has been together already, you can still host this session as a “kickoff” to the Easter series.

The most important aspect of this session is for the group to get comfortable with each other. If you want to host a time of questions, you can use the following to do so:

- Give a brief introduction about yourself – family, job, interests, the reason for joining a small group, etc.
- Do you have any Easter traditions? What are they and why are they important to you?
- When you think of “community,” what comes to mind? What communities have been significant to you, and how have they shaped you?
- When you hear the word “tension” what do you think of? Is tension a good or bad thing? Why do you think that?
- What do you think it means to “live a great life?” Who are examples in your life who have exemplified this “call to greatness”?

## *Season Introduction*

At some point before or after the discussion questions, offer a brief introduction to this season using the following:

There is a quote that is often attributed to Pope Benedict XVI, the pope that preceded our current pope, Pope Francis. You may have heard it, or some variation of it. The quote is, “You were not made for comfort, you were made for greatness.” It’s a pretty good quote. It is inspiring, motivating, and challenging all in just the right amount. It is a call for us to step out of comfort so we can achieve great things. It isn’t difficult to envision that quote on a Nike commercial or at your local gym. Of course, there are some issues that come up with it. What do we mean when we say “greatness”? Is that living our best life, making a lot of money, winning at a sport or being in great shape? And is being comfortable a bad thing? If so, why? Beyond those questions, there is one other major issue with the quote - Pope Benedict never said it. The actual quote is this, “Man was made for greatness - for God Himself, but his heart is too small for the greatness to which it is destined. It must be stretched.” That one doesn’t fit as well into a commercial, but there is a lot of substance, there. It also answers our questions. What is greatness? To be in relationship with God. Why discomfort? Because to receive the infinite love that God offers, our hearts need to be stretched. The real quote never uses the word “comfort” or “discomfort” but that is certainly the implication. It is difficult to imagine one’s heart being stretched and that being a pleasant process.

But we know that there is beauty in this process. Our heart is stretched in any relationship to make room for another person. We are stretched as we grow patient with the shortcomings of someone we love and we are stretched when they challenge us to become a better version of ourselves. As we fall in love with someone, our selfishness is pushed aside so our heart can make room for another.

While stretching may seem challenging, it is something we do in all of our relationships if we want them to grow.

The Easter season brings a lot of hopeful imagery with it. It is a season of joy, and it should be, Christ is risen! Alleluia! The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the hinge point of the Christian faith. Without it, we simply follow a dead philosopher. With it, we follow a savior. This is why the Church does not simply dedicate a day to Easter, but an entire season of 50 days, ending at the celebration of Pentecost. The Resurrection is an event that needs a lot of unpacking, celebration, and prayer.

The Resurrection presents a tension for us, though, and an invitation for our heart to be stretched. The Resurrection validates and amplifies what Jesus taught and did. It is hard to argue with the claims or the words of a man who rose from the dead. Embracing this tension is difficult and requires work; many people chose to avoid it. It is the work of “heart stretching,” which is not work we do alone but a work that is supported and initiated by God’s grace. We chose to work with that grace or to ignore it.

Over the next few weeks we are going to dive into the tension and do the work of stretching our hearts. This isn’t done to simply be uncomfortable; there is a promise and reward in the process. Just as the Resurrection makes the cross a symbol of hope, entering into the tensions of our faith is a pathway to “greatness” - to God, Himself. If we want to more deeply embrace and experience God’s love, then our small hearts need to be stretched to make room for infinity. That is a worthy cause and, when done in a community that supports the difficult work of heart-stretching, it becomes a profoundly joyful journey.

APRIL 11, 2021

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

## *Opening Prayer*

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples to use.

## *Introductory Thoughts*

There is a war movie called, "Saving Private Ryan," from the late 1990s that won a lot of awards and was very popular. It told the story of a group of soldiers sent to rescue one person, the last living son in a family. The movie tells the story of how this group of soldiers rescue this young man. In one of the film's more poignant moments, the captain of the soldiers is sitting with Private Ryan (the man they are saving). The two are sharing stories from back home and, at one point, Private Ryan asks the captain to share a story about his wife gardening. The captain thinks for a moment and responds, "No, that one I save just for me."

There are deeply personal moments we share with people that are "just for us." Sometimes the moments are intimate and deep, other times they are so unique to our relationships that other people might not understand them. Sharing those moments - whether in conversation, over social media, or with too broad of a group - can cheapen them and rob them of their value. Yet, as we become more digitally connected, the temptation to overshare about the quiet, private moments of our lives grows. It can be hard to discern what we should share and what is sharing too much.

In the Gospel, the disciples share a deeply profound and personal moment and Thomas misses it, and as a result we forever refer to him with the negative adjective, "doubting." If we put ourselves in this spot though, we can empathize with Thomas - not in his doubt, but in his hurt. He has stepped away and Jesus chooses this precise moment to show up. Imagine being Thomas and showing back up to the excitement of your friends as they tell you Jesus is alive, he brings peace, he is raised from the dead and they have seen him. Perhaps you would respond the same way, masking your hurt and frustration with claims that you don't fully believe it. After all, believing in this miracle means that you need to accept Jesus didn't allow you to be a part of it.

Our faith can be like that. We see the work that God does in the lives of others and wonder about us. We hear "glory stories" about how God "showed up" for someone and we think about all the times it felt like God left us waiting. It is the friend who got the job promotion the day you lost yours. It is the couple that got pregnant shortly after their wedding as you've been trying for years. It is the story about the miraculous cancer cure as your parent slowly fades away. We can wonder why we missed the miraculous moments and find ourselves doubting, not for lack of faith, but out of hurt.

Jesus does return to Thomas and His invitation for Thomas to place his hands into the glorious wounds on His body is not a rebuke, but an invitation for Thomas to lay his hurt into the broken, yet resurrected, body of Christ. A chance for intimacy that Thomas feared he missed.

There are moments that Jesus wants to share with you, but when we get hung up on the ways Jesus is moving in the lives of others, we can easily miss the places He is inviting us to intimacy - quiet moments that are not meant for public consumption but for our benefit, alone. These “just for me” moments of intimacy are something that we should seek out from Jesus, we should ask for them. Many view Thomas’ statement, “unless I... put my finger into the nail marks,” as indignant, but isn’t it really a request for a profound moment of intimacy with Christ?

Perhaps this is why John makes note in the Gospel reading that Jesus did many other signs for the disciples, but that these few that he recounts are given for us, the people who weren’t in the room. There are moments that we have with Jesus that are meant to be shared for the good of other people, but we must be prudent about how much and what we do share. It appears that Jesus wanted the disciples to have private moments, as well, not meant for writing or broadcast but for their faith. Jesus wants the same for us; moments, that when we are asked about them, we stop and respond simply, “No, that one is just for me.”

## *Modern Connection*

Social media has come under fire as the use of the many social media platforms has skyrocketed. Documentaries like, “The Social Dilemma,” highlighted the many pitfalls that exist in the digital realm and how social media may do more harm than good. While Jesus never spoke directly about social media (since the invention of it was some 2,000 years away), it isn’t unreasonable that He would urge some prudence in what we share. It can be a great tool for connecting and sharing our faith as a witness to others. In what other time would we be able to so easily share the good work that God has done in our lives? At the same time, we need to be cautious. Are we sharing moments within our faith, family, and friendships that are “just for us?” The risk of being able to share anything, from

anywhere, at any time is that real intimacy can be violated. Perhaps a good rule comes from the Gospel today; if we ask, “Is what I’m about to share for the good of others or is it to make me look good?” We may find an answer to what to share and what to keep “just for me.”

## *Weekly Scripture Readings*

Acts 4:32-35 | “With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection.”

Psalms 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24 | “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love is everlasting.”

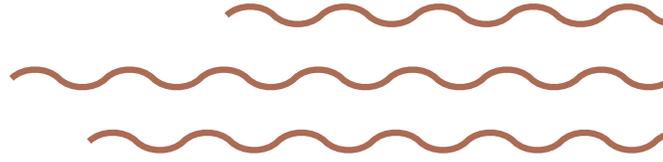
1 John 5:1-6 | “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God...”

John 20:19-31 | “These are written that you may come to believe...”

## *Spiritual Reading*

St. Therese of Lisieux had a profound spiritual life and intimate relationship with Jesus. As she neared her death, the superior of her order asked her to write her autobiography in order to inspire others. Therese was reluctant and felt the tension of what to share with others for their benefit and what to keep between her and Jesus. That tension is expressed in this excerpt from her autobiography, “Story of a Soul,” which is a spiritual classic and the reason for her being named a Doctor of the Church.

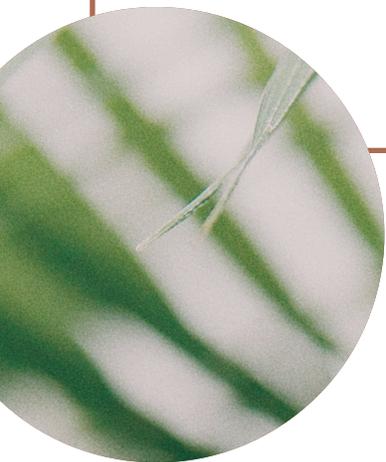
“How fortunate we are, dear Sister, to understand the intimate secrets of our Spouse. Ah! If you wished to write all you know about these secrets we would have beautiful pages to read, but I know you prefer to keep ‘the King’s secrets’ in the bottom of your heart. And yet you say to me, ‘it is honorable to publish the works of the Most High.’ I find you are very right to maintain silence, and it is only to please you that I write these lines. I feel how powerless I am to express in human language the secrets of heaven, and after writing page upon page I find that I have not yet begun.”



## *Group Discussion Questions*

These questions are designed to start a conversation; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- Are you a person who “overshares” or “under-shares” good news with other people?
- How do you determine what moments are for the sharing with other people and what moments are “just for you”?
- What stood out to you from the Gospel reading this week?
- If you were in the position of Thomas, how would you have responded?
- When do you think something is “oversharing” rather than seeking support from others? What boundaries do you have in place that help you know what to share vs. what not to share with others?
- Are there spiritual experiences in your life that would help build up the faith of others? Do you share them? Why or why not?
- Is it easier for you to recognize God’s work in the lives of others or in your own life? Why?





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

## *Opening Prayer*

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples to use.

## *Introductory Thoughts*

We use stories to understand our world. When we lack a story for something, we create it. We wonder why our boss suddenly is so cold toward us at work when we can't think of anything we've done to cause the behavior, so we tell ourselves a story that we are about to be fired. We start to develop some strange symptoms and wonder about our health, but are unsure what may be happening, so we go online and do research until we self-diagnose (perhaps wrongly) what is happening. Ambiguity in our brain sends it searching for clarity and sometimes it sends us in the wrong direction, but our brain will always look for a story.

After Jesus' Death and Resurrection, He appears to two disciples that are walking back home from Jerusalem. The two are distraught that Jesus, their teacher, has died. Jesus meets them on the way, but the two disciples are so blinded by their grief they don't recognize Jesus. The three talk and walk. Jesus teaches. They go to share a meal and when Jesus breaks bread, He vanishes. The two disciples then realize this was Jesus and run back to the rest of the group to share the news. The Gospel this week tells us what happens next, and it is a story of people trying to wrestle with stories they tell about

Jesus and how those stories help them understand.

When Jesus appears, the group is "startled and terrified," which makes sense for most of them... except for the two that saw Jesus already. After the experience those two had of Jesus on the journey, it is reasonable that they should have been elated. This is proof to their story! But we are given no reason to believe they reacted differently. They are still surprised - even terrified - that Jesus has shown up in this new way.

We tell stories about Jesus that often keep Jesus "safe" by removing ambiguity and mystery from Him. We create a version of Jesus that makes us comfortable and gives Him rules and guidelines and then breathe a sigh of relief. We tell Jesus where He is and is not allowed in our life. We tell Jesus what His political views are and are not. We explain to Jesus the places He is allowed to "show up" and the people He is allowed to be with. We craft a comfortable image of Jesus that makes us feel good. We like clarity when it comes to Jesus.

There is a deeper challenge here for us, as disciples, as well. While there is mystery in Jesus, there are also realities that Jesus has revealed that allow us to enter into the mystery. There are stories that Jesus tells us about himself which help us understand who He is and our relationship with Him. Those stories - the truth about Jesus - are often what make us feel like we need to craft a new story to Jesus. Our Lord says, "love your enemy," and we change the story to, "love your enemy... but not your real enemies. You know, the people you just are annoyed by. Love them."

Many people have tried to craft Christ in their own image and likeness for the sake of comfort, validation of beliefs, and clarity. The paradox is this, the safest Jesus can be for us is when we remove the expectations we put around Him and embrace the story He is telling us and the mystery into which that story invites us. Our stories don't limit Jesus, they only limit our ability to enter into the mystery.

The disciples are afraid because they thought they had a new "container" for Jesus (again) as a vision or a ghost, but now Jesus is with them in flesh and blood, eating food and speaking salvation. We must be willing to let go of our boundaries of expectations and embrace the mystery of the risen Lord in order to truly embrace the peace He promises. Jesus is not who we expect Him to be - He is more.

## *Modern Connection*

The containers we use to make sense of our world include political ideologies, personal philosophies, and our history. Sometimes those containers are faulty or flawed for any number of reasons and they prevent us from seeing Jesus in other people. Our personal biases may cause us to unconsciously judge or discriminate against other people. Bad experiences we've had in our life may color how we approach others in the present time. It is important to constantly evaluate the containers we use for other people against the two great commandments and ask, "Is this preventing me from loving God and my neighbor, or is this causing me to distrust, hate, or discriminate against my neighbor, thus impairing my ability to see God?" Many people are being ripped apart because of the containers they are using to categorize other people - even close friends and family. As Christians, we cannot make this same mistake, but instead can bring healing by seeing Christ in all, rather than just a few.

## *Weekly Scripture Readings*

Acts 3:13-15, 17-19 | "The God of our fathers has glorified his servant Jesus..."

Psalms 4:2, 4, 7-8, 9 | "Lord, let your face shine on us."

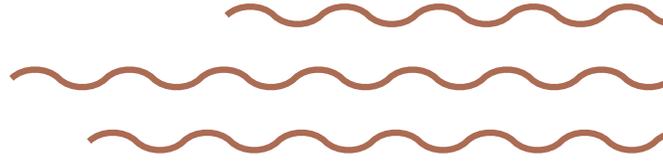
1 John 2:1-5a | "Whoever keeps his word, the love of God is truly perfected in him."

Luke 24:35-48 | "You are witnesses of these things."

## *Spiritual Reading*

Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska was a Polish religious sister who had visions of Jesus. Her diary records various encounters with Christ, His words to her about divine mercy, and her reflections on her spiritual life. The passage chosen from her diary, below, offers insight into Saint Faustina's deepening understanding that an awareness of God's presence leads to a removal of boundaries from where God can and cannot be:

"My life at present flows on in peaceful awareness of God. My silent soul lives on Him, and this conscious life of God in my soul oils for me a source of happiness and strength. I do not look for happiness outside the depths of my soul in which God dwells; of this I am aware. I feel a certain need to share myself with others, I have discovered a fountain of happiness in my soul, and it is God. O my God, I see that everything that surrounds me is filled with God, and most of all my own soul, which is adorned with the grace of God. Already now, I will begin to live on that on which I shall live for all eternity."



## *Group Discussion Questions*

These questions are designed to start a conversation; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- Have you ever had an experience where a person showed up “out of context” (e.g. running into a co-worker at the grocery store or your child’s preschool teacher out at a bar)? What was that like?
- Are there places you expect to find Jesus? What are they?
- What stood out to you from the Gospel reading this week?
- Do you put “containers” on your understanding of Jesus? What are they and how do they impact your faith?
- How do you balance the tension that exists between our desire to know Jesus with clarity and the inherent mystery of Christ? What makes this tension difficult and when is it the most difficult?
- Have you ever had an experience where Jesus showed up some place you did not expect?





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

## *Opening Prayer*

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples or options to use.

## *Introductory Thoughts*

Us and them. The history of human civilization is built around this simple dichotomy. It is ingrained as a very matter of survival. We have created “in groups” and “out groups” so that we could know who was a threat and who was a friend. We needed protection and community, so we told stories about our group that made us feel proud and stories about the “other” group that made us feel fear, anger, judgment, or condemnation.

The “us” and “them” are written deeply on our psychology. Friend and enemy. Chosen and worthless. Human and inhuman. The root of every sin against our neighbor begins with “us” and “them.”

Jesus came for “us” - but there is no “them.” Jesus came so that all of us might know the love of God. One of the writers of the New Testament summarizes this by saying the old “us” and “them” distinctions like Jew or Greek, slave or free, woman or man, no longer matter in Jesus. Jesus is for us.

But we don’t always like that. We like to keep “them” around so we can compare ourselves. Sometimes “them” can make us feel pretty good about “us”, especially when we are the ones who are

saved and have the truth, and “them” stand outside of it.

This is the context in which Jesus is speaking in the Gospel reading this week. He is using an analogy everyone understood and the people are probably nodding along. They are thinking, “Yes, Jesus as a teacher is like a good shepherd. He cares for us, leads us to truth, shows us the path toward fulfillment and points us to God.” Us. Us. Us. But for this crowd, there is a “them”, too. Jesus senses it and sneaks in a subtle, but earth shattering line, “I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold...” Some people might have missed it. It may have passed by so fast they thought they misheard Jesus, but the line probably lingered in the air heavily. There are other people that Jesus is here to lead, not just “us”, but “them”.

Sit with this thought: Jesus desires to save your worst enemy. The person who hurt you. The one who broke your heart. The boss that treated you unfairly and cost you your job. The parent who left you. The friends that abandoned you. Jesus wants to save the people you disagree with politically and the people who hate Him. Jesus wants to save every sinner - and before you think the sinner group only includes, “them” remember that this group of sinners is very much “us.”

We can nod along with that in theory, but our actions don’t always reflect it. We can say, “Yes, Jesus wants to save those people - I get it, and then Jesus will make them like ‘us’” but what if Jesus doesn’t? What if those people never get there? What if where we are, right now, isn’t where

we should be, either? What if all of “us” are really heading toward someplace completely different in this mixed up, diverse flock that Jesus is leading?

Maybe the most poignant, unsettling image to reflect on is this:

You die and walk into heaven and the first person to greet you is your enemy. Is your first thought, “Thank God this person is here with us,” or is it, “There is a mistake, you should be somewhere else with ‘them’.”

## *Modern Connection*

A priest was asked a question by a parishioner. She said, “Father, if Jesus says we need to love our enemies, and also tells us there is no greater love than to lay down our life for a friend, does this mean that we need to die for our enemies?” The priest thought for a moment and responded, “If you really loved them, they wouldn’t be your enemies.” If we think about it, in our modern world we have very few “true enemies.” Chances are very good that no one is actively seeking your life or deliberately intending your harm. If you step back to think about it, the coworker that you don’t get along with isn’t your enemy. Your boss is not your enemy. The barista that always messes up your coffee order is not your enemy. People with opposing political views or ideologies are not your enemy. Therein lies the tragedy; there are many voices that want to convince us that “them” is our enemy. So we extend our enemy tag to not only be the political party establishment we disagree with, but all those who follow it. We attack people in righteous anger online who disagree with our views. We talk about them with our “us” group and vilify their actions. Nothing mobilizes people around a cause faster than a common enemy. When we encounter this kind of “enemy making” on the news, online, or with other people, we should remember the call to love of neighbor first before we call someone “enemy.”

## *Weekly Scripture Readings*

Acts 4:8-12 | “There is no salvation through anyone else...”

Psalms 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28-29 | “The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.”

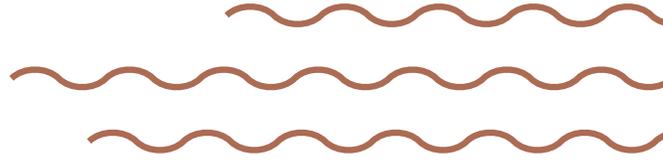
1 John 3:1-2 | “We are God’s children now.”

John 10:11-18 | “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold...”

## *Spiritual Reading*

Sister Thea Bowman was a religious sister in the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration at which time she was the only African-American member of the order. Sister Thea was the granddaughter of slaves and in her ministry included teaching at all levels and speaking out against the evil of racism. The excerpt below is from the end of an address she gave to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops calling them to action against the toxic “us” and “them” dichotomy at the heart of racism - whether personal or systemic. Her cause for canonization is currently under consideration.

“Today we’re called to walk together in a new way toward that Land of Promise and to celebrate who we are and whose we aren’t. If we, as a Church, walk together – don’t let nobody separate you – that’s one thing black folk can teach you – don’t let folks divide you up – you know, put the lay folk over here and the clergy over here – put the bishops in one room and the clergy in the other room – put the women over here and the men over here – The Church teaches us that the Church is a family of families and the family got to stay together and we know, that if we do stay together, come here brother – we know that if we do stay together – if we walk and talk and work and play and stand together in Jesus’ name – we’ll be who we say we are – truly Catholic and we shall overcome – overcome the poverty – overcome the loneliness – overcome the alienation and build together a Holy city, a new Jerusalem, a city set apart where they’ll know that we are here because we love one another.”



## *Group Discussion Questions*

These questions are designed to start a conversation; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- Who is your favorite sports team and who is their rival? Describe the experience of those rivalry games. What makes them fun? What can make them challenging?
- Have you ever had an experience of learning more about a group of people that you previously didn't understand - a group that was "them" for you? What was that like? Did it change your perception of that group?
- What stood out to you from the Gospel reading? Why?
- What do you believe drives people to create "us" and "them" groups? How do you do this in your life?
- Reflect on the idea that God desires that your worst enemy arrives in heaven. What feelings does this evoke in you? Is this easy for you to imagine or difficult? Why?
- What does "mercy" mean to you? How can you offer mercy to others?





# 5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

## *Opening Prayer*

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples or options to use.

## *Introductory Thoughts*

The quality of the soil impacts the quality of the produce. If you've ever tried to garden, or even just raise a potted plant, you've experienced this first hand. While putting seeds in the ground, adding water, and waiting for flowers, window ledge herbs, or a garden of fruits or vegetables seems to be an easy process, there are challenges we don't realize. The placement of the garden matters for sunlight. The soil temperature and pH balance matter. Even the nutrients in the soil will determine how much (and how good) the produce is going to be. Growing a plant seems simple, but it isn't simple.

The soil is so critical because a plant pulls nutrients from it. If the soil is lacking in something, then the plant will be lacking. Where the plant is rooted matters.

We have roots, too. All of us are connected to something, someone, or maybe many "somethings" and "someones". There is a soil from which we draw our strength and energy. It is the context that defines us. Jesus used an analogy to describe this reality and spoke about vines and how they are connected. He tells His followers that if they are connected to Him they are going to produce good things.

The Gospel this week is dangerous because, like gardening, it seems simple but isn't simple. We are at risk of hearing but not understanding. We can easily dismiss Jesus' words with, "Of course I am connected to Jesus." We might point to things in our life that are evidence of that. There is an opportunity this week to look deeper, though, and ask if our life is bearing spiritual fruit. One of the early apostles, Paul, writes a letter to a community where he describes some of these spiritual fruits. They are things like joy, peace, love, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These fruits are what Jesus is talking about and if we aren't seeing them we need a gut check. What are you connected to... or what is connecting itself to you?

This takes some digging because we can get connected to all kinds of things that impact us. Some of those things aren't bad things, but, in excess amounts, become harmful. Some of those things are not life giving, and so they drain us. We are connected to devices - what of content goes through those devices? We are connected to people - are they toxic? Even our jobs - are they helping us grow?

Imagine disconnecting from those vines and you may feel anxious. What is the root cause of that? As we dig and follow the vines we may end up back in the soil and be surprised to find our roots are not in Christ. We don't leave the job that is toxic because the soil we are rooted in is either a fear of or a love of money. We are on our device all of the time because the soil we are rooted in is a desire

for affirmation or a fear of missing out. We are connected to people we should not be because we fear being alone. If you are rooted in those things, just clipping the vines isn't enough. You need to be transplanted to bear good fruit. You need good soil.

The task on its own seems daunting because it involves death; but that is why Easter is the time to make this change as we live in the hope of resurrection and the promise of the peace it brings. New soil is waiting.

## *Modern Connection*

When we think of connections, our mind probably turns to our digital connections. It is important to take inventory of our social connections, what we follow, and what we consume. As the old proverb states, "you are what you eat," we become what we consume online. If Jesus were giving this parable today, He would likely invite listeners to look at their digital connections and ask if who they follow or what they consume causes them anxiety, frustration, anger, or even feelings of hatred and jealousy. If that is the case, then it is better to disconnect altogether than to risk falling into sin from what we follow. He would probably say something along the lines of, "If your Twitter causes you to sin, deactivate your account - for it is better for you to go into heaven without any likes than to burn in Gehenna with thousands of followers," or, at least, something like that.

## *Weekly Scripture Readings*

Acts 9:26-31 | "The church... was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord."

Psalms 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32 | "I will praise you in the assembly of the people."

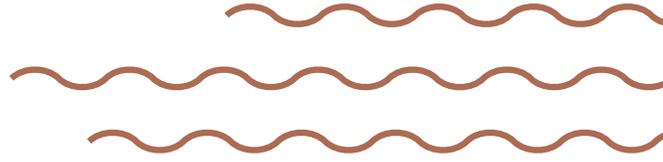
1 John 3:18-24 | "Let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth."

John 15:1-8 | "Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit."

## *Spiritual Reading*

Saint Teresa of Avila was a mystic, founder of the order of Discalced Carmelites, reformer, and Doctor of the Church. Her spiritual classic, "Interior Castle" is the result of a mystical vision granted by God of what a soul in a state of grace looks like as it journeys through various "mansions" en route to a more perfect communion with God. The excerpt below is from this work, reflecting on the reality of our soul when we separate ourselves from the vine of Christ.

"We must continually ask God in our prayers to keep us in his hand and bear constantly in mind that, if he leaves us, we shall at once be down in the depths, as indeed we shall. So we must never have any confidence in ourselves - that would simply be folly. But most of all we must walk with special care and attention, and watch what progress we make in the virtues, and discover if, in any way, we are either improving or going back, especially in our love for each other..."



## *Group Discussion Questions*

These questions are designed to start a conversation; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- What things in your day bring you the most life? What things do you find the most draining?
- When have you needed to disconnect from a situation or person? What prompted the change?
- What stood out to you from the Gospel today?
- Where do you find yourself rooted? What circumstances in your life are impacting the kind of results (fruit) you are experiencing?
- Are there things you are connected to currently that are causing you stress, anxiety, or frustration? What might it take for you to disconnect from those things?
- What does a connection to Jesus look like for you? How do you know when that connection is starting to fray and what do you do to restore the relationship?
- Which fruit of the Holy Spirit do you most need in your life right now? Why?





# 6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

## *Opening Prayer*

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples or options to use.

## *Introductory Thoughts*

Think of the first time you said, “I love you,” to someone and really meant it. Put yourself back in that place and mindset. Allow yourself to feel the anxiety, the adrenaline, the excitement, and the pressure. There is great risk in saying, “I love you,” because we don’t know how the other will respond. We hope for reciprocity, but know we could be met with silence or, worse, rejection. Once we get that response, “I love you, too,” we realize that the journey is not over. Love requires daily risk and reciprocity. It is not a choice to be made once but a call and response to daily life. To be “in love” is to step out into the unknown and risk rejection, hurt, but also to experience joy and companionship.

God takes great risk in loving us because God loves us first; God makes the first move toward us saying, “I love you,” and then waits for our response. We don’t often think of God as taking risks in love. God, all-powerful, seems to be beyond risk. But if humanity is made in God’s image and likeness and our hearts can break, then what does this say about the heart of God? Can we break God’s heart? Jesus speaks to his disciples before He dies and tells them that they didn’t choose Him, but He chose them.

It’s a line that should put us on our heels, especially for those of us who grew up being asked to “give our life to Christ,” or to “make a choice for Christ,” or perhaps sang at our Confirmation, “I will choose Christ.” We cannot choose Christ. He has made the first move toward us in love, so we can only respond. Jesus, the lover, looks at us the beloved, and says, “I love you,” and then waits.

But He doesn’t do this as a love-struck teenager at the prom. He does this hanging from a cross, the brutal reality of the Crucifixion revealing the lengths and risk to which love will go for us. Jesus chose us and in doing so, chose His death.

This is perhaps then the challenging paradox of love and the risk love takes. Love makes risks even unto death. The stark reality of lover and beloved is that the beloved can cause the lover pain, and not simply by rejection but simply by their life. To love another is to take on their hurt, their wounds, their struggles. If you wish to escape pain, then reject love. But to reject love is to do more than avoid suffering, it is to avoid finding life. That is the paradox. To love is to risk even to suffering and death, but beyond suffering and death is hope and new life. The parent of a newborn child feels the paradox as they look at a child full of possibility and hope, but recognize that the world will also bring challenges for the child. Yet, the parent chooses the child before the child can respond.

God has chosen us and invites us to take great risk in loving Him back. Jesus, from the cross, pours out his love and asks us to join Him, crucified on the

cross of love of God and neighbor so that we could rise in the new life that love brings. I love you is an invitation to die, but if we stop then we miss the point completely. The invitation is not to death as an end, but as a means - a means to new life, new hope, and greater love. Our invitation to that dying and rising in love is made and the lover waits for our response.

## *Modern Connection*

The feeling of being “preferred” or “chosen” is a wonderful feeling. Unfortunately, the feeling of being left out or “second-choice” feels awful. For many of us, we’ve endured ranking systems and being picked or not picked for most of our life. We know our standing in class, our rank in test scores, and our current employer may even rank us in our company. We judge worth by follower counts, income brackets, and what we own. We “level up” hoping that we can be a first choice. In that desire, there is a longing because we always wonder if we are enough. Jesus’ affirmation that He has chosen us first is a remedy to this thinking; we didn’t need to do anything to be Jesus’ choice. We didn’t need to have a certain rank or income, we didn’t need to finish in a particular spot. Being who we are is enough.

## *Weekly Scripture Readings*

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48 | “God shows no partiality.”

Psalms 98:1, 2-3, 3-4 | “The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power.”

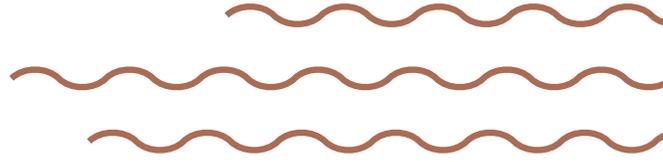
1 John 4:7-10 | “Let us love one another because love is of God.”

John 15:9-17 | “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you”

## *Spiritual Reading*

Saint Paul Miki was a Jesuit living in Japan in the 17th century during a persecution of Christians. He was captured, along with several other Christians, and sentenced to death by crucifixion. As he hung on the cross, he preached a final sermon in which he affirmed his faith, encouraged those listening to convert to Christianity, and prayed for the generations of Christians to come in Japan. The excerpt below is from the homily attributed to St. Paul Miki on the cross and is an example of the risks that love will take and the lengths to which it will go for God and neighbor.

“The sentence of judgment says these men came to Japan from the Philippines, but I did not come from any other country. I am a true Japanese. The only reason for my being killed is that I have taught the doctrine of Christ. I certainly did teach the doctrine of Christ. I thank God it is for this reason I die. I believe that I am telling only the truth before I die. I know you believe me and I want to say to you all once again: Ask Christ to help you to become happy. I obey Christ. After Christ’s example I forgive my persecutors. I do not hate them. I ask God to have pity on all, and I hope my blood will fall on my fellow men as a fruitful rain.”



## *Group Discussion Questions*

These questions are designed to start a conversation; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- When was the first time you remember saying, “I love you” and really meaning it? What was that experience like?
- When was the first time someone told you they loved you, and really meant it? Or, alternatively, when do you remember being aware of your parents’ love for you? Describe that experience.
- What stood out to you from the Gospel reading this week?
- “Love requires risk and sacrifice.” What are your thoughts about this statement? How is it true? What about it do you disagree with?
- We cannot choose Christ but can only respond to His invitation to a relationship; how do you respond to this continued invitation? What makes it easier to respond and when is it challenging to respond?
- Where are you in your relationship with Jesus right now? What does it look like? Where does it need work?





# ASCENSION OF THE LORD

## *Opening Prayer*

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples or options to use.

## *Introductory Thoughts*

Do you believe in the Resurrection and saving reality that it offers to us? Put another way - do you believe Jesus makes a difference in the lives of those who encounter and follow Him?

Sit with that question for a moment because you probably know what the “right answer” is - the answer you are supposed to give as a person who may be following Jesus already. But do you believe that answer?

If we truly believe that Jesus Christ changes who we are, fundamentally and spiritually, and that to encounter Christ and follow Him is a sure path to fulfillment (and heaven), then we need to confront our lukewarm attitude toward sharing that message. Many people believe... just not enough to share. We rationalize our silence citing “civility” or workplace policy. We justify our avoidance of the topic of Jesus with our non-Christian friends because we don’t want to seem rude. We call our faith “personal” and separate it from who we are publicly.

There is a word for this kind of behavior - hypocrisy. We often associate hypocrisy with serious sin committed by people who claim to be righteous,

and that certainly is part of it, but the bigger and more ordinary scandal of hypocrisy comes from Christians who live a faith that refuses to share the Gospel message.

The early Church witnessed the resurrected Lord and, in witnessing this great sign, were sent out, empowered. As more people believed, more signs were demonstrated. While it likely wasn’t picking up serpents and drinking poison (as we hear metaphorically in the Gospel today) it was the fundamental change that was most radical. There were people who persecuted Christians who suddenly were followers of Christ. There were people who were pagan and the next week were dying in the Colosseum rather than renouncing their faith.

The message of hope that the Gospel brought was too much for these people to contain. We need to ask, as a post-Easter people, do we believe it that strongly, as well?

The examination of our faith isn’t meant to shame us, but to check our attitude. Every person has a different call in how we share the Gospel; not everyone is meant to be a full-time evangelist or theologian. Too often, though, we miss the ordinary moments where we can share about Jesus and our faith and we do so out of fear. We fear judgment. We fear condemnation. We fear retribution. But we forget that we should fear how our silence may impact someone who needs Jesus. There is a comfortable place where good Christians become hypocrites and we can justify remaining there for a long time.

But what would the world look like if we began taking the Resurrection seriously and the saving message of Jesus as life-changing rather than life-enhancing? This Easter season we have an opportunity to recapture that zeal and live into the tension of how we “proclaim the Gospel to every creature” in our own context and world and the pull to simply be silent, comfortable, but ultimately, hypocritical.

## *Modern Connection*

One of the top words that millennial non-Christians used to describe Christians was “hypocritical.” Many of the pop-culture images of Christians are of hyper-prudish individuals that hide some kind of dark side or, at the very least, just aren’t a lot of fun to be around. Unfortunately, there are many real life examples of Christians that have caused grave scandal to the church by harming other people. The recent wave of priest scandals were horrific in that priests committed evil actions and these actions not only hurt those people, but hurt the faith of many Catholics and injured the reputation of the Church, making it difficult to invite people into the Catholic community. This hypocritical perception can make it challenging to outwardly identify with our faith, choosing instead to keep it private. We don’t want to be associated with the evil actions of a few very troubled and hypocritical individuals. Our world needs good examples of Catholics, though, to help counteract the tragic examples that many people hear about. There are incredible people of faith who avoid evil and work to fight it, but if the only images that our world has is that of hypocritical and even evil Christians, then they will most certainly refuse to listen to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We can be those witnesses by refusing to hide our faith, remaining vigilant against sin, and constantly striving toward virtue in our world.

## *Weekly Scripture Readings*

Acts 1:1-11 | “Why are you standing there looking at the sky?”

Psalms 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9 | “God mounts his throne to shouts of joy; a blare of trumpets for the Lord.”

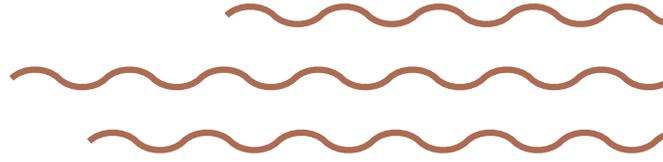
Ephesians 1:17-23 | “May you know what is the hope that belongs to his call...”

Mark 16:15-20 | “Proclaim the gospel to every creature.”

## *Spiritual Reading*

Venerable Fulton Sheen was an archbishop in the United States and a prolific communicator. His messages were inspiring, challenging, and thought provoking. He sought to use modern means (at the time) to proclaim the Gospel. The excerpt below is taken from one of his books, “Peace of Soul,” and is taken from a section that addresses the question, “Is God Hard to Find?” In it, he addresses the hypocrisy we face as people who want to be saved, but not from the thing we really need saving from.

“We want to be saved, but not from our sins. The great fear that many souls have of our Divine Lord is for fear He will do just what his name, ‘Jesus’ implies - be “He Who saves us from our sins.” We are willing to be saved from poverty, from war, from ignorance, from disease, from economic insecurity; such types of salvation leave our individual whims and passions and concupiscence as untouched... The reason we are not as happy as saints is because we do not wish to be saints.”



## *Group Discussion Questions*

These questions are designed to start a conversation; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- What kinds of things (other than your faith) do you get most excited to share with other people?
- What is something (other than your faith) that was “life changing” for you and that you had to share with other people?
- What stood out to you from the Gospel today?
- Read the quote from Venerable Fulton Sheen. What are your thoughts about this quote? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- What makes the tension of hypocrisy difficult to balance? Are all people hypocrites? How do we live in the reality of being sinners, but also people who follow Christ?
- What holds you back from sharing your faith with others?





MAY 23, 2021

# PENTECOST

## *Opening Prayer*

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples or options to use.

## *Introductory Thoughts*

Peace is not the absence of conflict. That statement has preceded quotes by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Ronald Reagan. All followed it up with continued explanations of what “peace” was and how we applied it to our world.

What is peace for you?

As much as we may recognize that peace is more than the absence of conflict, this is what we want peace to be. Peace is the escape from anxiety and depression. Peace is freedom from debt. Peace is the improvement of health. Peace is no longer fighting with a spouse. Peace is being able to rest. We want peace to be the absence of conflict, and sometimes it is, but if peace is only the absence of conflict then we will find ourselves tossed about on the waves of our lived experience.

The Easter season ends with a section of the Gospel with which we began the season. Jesus appears to the disciples where the disciples are staying, scared. The doors are locked and yet Jesus is with them. The first words Jesus speaks to them are “Peace be with you.” The second words that Jesus speaks to them are, “Peace be with you.” What is happening

in between? Are the disciples terrified and scared? Are they anxious and hopeless? No - when Jesus appears to them and speaks they are rejoicing.

Jesus is about to resolve this conflict and make things right. They don't need to be scared, anymore. They can walk out of the room with Jesus and show him the Jewish authorities, the Roman authorities, and claim victory. You can't kill Jesus - he is King and Lord. Now is the time of fulfillment!

And Jesus speaks peace, again. The disciples are hoping Jesus is bringing a quick solution, but instead Jesus is inviting them into the tension of what peace really means. Peace is an interior disposition that comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit. It exists in conflict and in the absence of conflict. It works for justice and pursues peaceful means in times of trial. It gives us courage to enter into the tension, the challenge, and the persecution that come with being a witness to our faith. “Peace be with you,” Jesus says. This is about more than a single victory in a moment in history; this is about salvation.

This is the final tension that the Resurrection leaves us with; the last way our heart must be stressed. In our world we will never claim definitive victory. As much as we want to believe following Jesus wins the day in a worldly sense, it just isn't true. We will lose, sometimes. We may lose often. We will suffer. We will be hypocrites. We will speak when we should be silent and silent when we should speak. We will sin and we will find ourselves in bad soil. We will need forgiveness. But in all of that - in the

tension we face in our walk of faith - we can have peace knowing that Christ has won the ultimate victory. We can have peace knowing that Jesus has chosen us. We can have peace knowing that we are never a “them” to Christ, but are a part of His body.

This final day of the Easter season celebrates the peace of Christ that is given by the Holy Spirit - the only reason why we can maintain an interior peace. God gives Himself to us so that we can embrace the tension of discipleship and walk the journey to our heavenly home, while rejoicing, proclaiming, and living in the love of Christ as we share it with others along the way.

## *Modern Connection*

Peace as a disposition is important, but it shouldn't diminish our need to work for peace in our homes, communities, countries, and world. We must never let the seeming impossible task of ending conflict deter us from doing so. Working for peace means working for justice; the two go hand-in-hand. Justice, as a virtue, is the restoration of a right order of relationships. As Christians, we are called to be “peace-makers” which means we work for justice and for the good of all, whether it is seeking restoration for harm that has been done or whether it is seeking the kind of social justice that recognizes and works for the dignity and care of every human person. We can do this in a profound way by invoking the Holy Spirit to give us knowledge and wisdom, courage and understanding as we confront worldly injustice and work for peace.

## *Weekly Scripture Readings*

Acts 2:1-11 | “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Psalms 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34 | “Lord, send out your spirit and renew the face of the earth.”

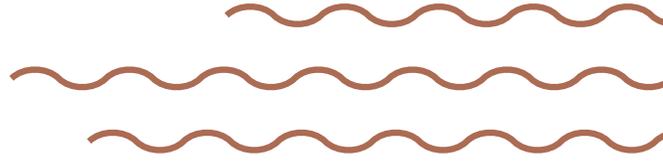
1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13 | “To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.”

John 20:19-23 | “Peace be with you.”

## *Spiritual Reading*

Father Jacques Philippe is a French priest who regularly preaches retreats and writes. His small work, “Searching for and Maintaining Peace,” is a popular book study and devotional, especially admits the reality of discord and anxiety that our world is plagued with. The excerpt below is taken from that book.

“A necessary condition for interior peace, then, is what we might call ‘goodwill.’ We could also call it purity of heart. It is the stable and constant disposition of a person who is determined more than anything to love God, who desires sincerely to prefer in all circumstances the will of God to his own, who does not wish to consciously refuse anything to God. Maybe (and even certainly) in everyday life, his behavior will not be in perfect harmony with this desire, this intention. There would undoubtedly be many imperfections in his effort to accomplish this desire. But he will suffer, he will ask the Lord's pardon for this and seek to correct himself. Following moments of eventual failure, he will strive to come back to his usual disposition of wanting to say ‘yes’ to God in all things, without exceptions.”



## *Group Discussion Questions*

These questions are designed to start a conversation; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- When you hear the word “peace” what do you think of? What images, people, or realities come to mind?
- Do you consider yourself a peaceful person? Why or why not?
- What stood out to you from the Gospel this week?
- What kind of peace do you think Christ promises to us? What is our role in realizing that peace in our world?
- What is your current interior disposition of peace? Why?
- As the group comes to a close, what stood out to you from the past several weeks? How do you feel you’ve grown in our relationship with Christ? What work still needs to be done?





# APPENDIX

## PRAYERS & SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

### Opening Prayers

Each session begins with a simple, opening prayer. Use the following for examples to utilize in creating your opening prayer, or use these directly. In any session, you may also open with a spontaneous prayer and, depending on the group's comfort, as a group member to pray.

- Jesus, you are good and are with us at all times, circumstances, and seasons. Send the Holy Spirit to be with us during our group and help us see how you are speaking to us through the Gospel and our conversation. Amen.
- God, our Father, you sent Jesus to show us how to live, to die and rise for the forgiveness of our sins, and to give us the ability to have a relationship with you. Thank you for the gift of our faith and for the way you continually care for us, provide for us, and draw us closer to you. Amen.
- Holy Spirit, come to be with us in this group. Inspire our conversation, help us see how you will speak to us through the scripture readings today, and empower us to dive deeply into your relationship with Jesus Christ. Amen.

### Instructions for Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is an ancient prayer that uses the text of the Bible to engage in a back and forth prayer with God. This is not “back and forth” in the traditional sense of a conversation we have with another person. Rather, the prayer involves moments when we “actively” pray (i.e. we are doing

something) and moments when we “passively” pray (i.e. moments we are listening or meditating). Sometimes this prayer can yield insight, as though God is speaking to us, and other times it is a quiet time of rest with the Lord. There are four movements to the prayer and they do not have a set time for any; you can remain in each as long as you like. For beginners or when done in a group, take about five minutes for each. The four movements are:

**Lectio (Reading)** - Read the chosen scripture passage. The passage should not be too long; usually the Gospel of the day is the right length. Read the passage slowly and intentionally at least three times. If you are in a group, one person will do this. Pay attention to any words or short phrases that stand out to you from the text.

**Meditatio (Meditation)** - During this phase of the prayer, meditate on the word or phrase that stood out to you from the Lectio. Repeat this word or phrase in your mind, turning it over and returning to it when you get distracted. If you are in a group, at the end of this time you may choose to share the word or phrase out loud.

**Oratio (Prayer)** - Offer your meditation to God by speaking to Him as though God were a person sitting in front of you. Allow your mind to freely associate thoughts in your conversation. Journaling can be helpful in this phase, as it is an “active” phase of Lectio Divina. If you are in a group, you may choose to enter into a brief discussion with each other during this time after some journaling.

**Contemplatio (Contemplation)** - Whether we realize it or not, this entire prayer is an encounter with the living God. This final phase is passive; we simply sit and contemplate the reality that “God is” and listen. Sometimes we may feel God inspire us, other times we may just be silent. If you are in a group, allow each person to silently reflect, then close in prayer.

## *Litany of Humility*

A copy of the Litany of Humility can be found on <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/devotions/litany-of-humility-245>

## *Glorious Mysteries of the Rosary with Prayers*

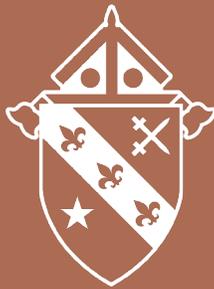
The glorious mysteries reflect on Jesus’ Resurrection and the events thereafter. They are:

- The Resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ
- The Ascension of Jesus Christ into Heaven
- The Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost
- The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven
- The Coronation of Mary as Queen of Heaven

Each mystery is prayed in a “decade,” which is a series of prayers consisting of an “Our Father,” ten “Hail Marys,” one “Glory Be,” and many people choose to end the decade with the “Fatima Prayer.”

## *Pentecost Sequence (Veni, Sancte Spiritus)*

Come, Holy Spirit, come!  
And from your celestial home  
    Shed a ray of light divine!  
Come, Father of the poor!  
Come, source of all our store!  
    Come, within our bosoms shine.  
You, of comforters the best;  
You, the soul’s most welcome guest;  
    Sweet refreshment here below;  
In our labor, rest most sweet;  
Grateful coolness in the heat;  
    Solace in the midst of woe.  
O most blessed Light divine,  
Shine within these hearts of yours,  
    And our inmost being fill!  
Where you are not, we have naught,  
Nothing good in deed or thought,  
    Nothing free from taint of ill.  
Heal our wounds, our strength renew;  
On our dryness pour your dew;  
    Wash the stains of guilt away:  
Bend the stubborn heart and will;  
Melt the frozen, warm the chill;  
    Guide the steps that go astray.  
On the faithful, who adore  
And confess you, evermore  
    In your sevenfold gift descend;  
Give them virtue’s sure reward;  
Give them your salvation, Lord;  
    Give them joys that never end. Amen.  
Alleluia.



**YOUNG ADULT  
SMALL GROUPS**  
— DIOCESE OF DALLAS —