

Advent 2006



Small Faith Sharing Group Reflection Guide *Cycle C*



Developed by
The Office For
Evangelization
& the Advisory
Committee on
Evangelization

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Introduction

This Advent 2006 Small Faith-Sharing Group Reflection Guide is prepared for small faith-sharing group members in Catholic parishes and communities. The Reflection Guide combines Cycle C readings of the Sunday Lectionary with meditations, reflection questions and the Objectives from the Personal Mandate of Spreading the Holy Fire: A Plan for Catholics Evangelizing in the Archdiocese of Chicago (available on-line at www.goingforth.org)

This Season of Advent marks the beginning of a new liturgical year. This Season and new year “begin with the end in mind:” God is coming. Our responsibility is to be awake, ready and alert to both God’s ongoing presence and God’s new arrival in our lives.

Each week of Advent offers the grace to gather with other disciples of Christ. As we encounter Jesus in a new way, we grow to *believe* more deeply in Him. Our shared experience and belief empower us to *share* our faith with others. Together, we take our deepened belief into personal relationships in family, friends, the workplace, our parish, neighborhoods and nation to *transform* the world into God’s Reign: a kinder, better, more loving place. Believe, share, transform: this is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, to be a Catholic, and to evangelize.

As a member of a small faith-sharing group, you will gather weekly with others to grow in faith. Be open to the process of growth that comes from sharing. Be open to the gift of holiness. Take responsibility for your own participation and encourage others to take part. The entire group benefits and grows together. As a small group member, please follow these guidelines:

- Prepare** Get ready for the meetings by reading the Scriptures and reflection material before the meeting.
- Participate** Pray. Read the Scriptures when asked. Respond aloud to the reflection questions. However, you may choose to "pass" at any time without explanation.
- Pray** Pray for the group leader, the other members of the group, and for yourself between meeting times.
- Be Present** Attend all meetings unless pressing circumstances prevent it.
- Be Personal** Talk about your own experience and share your own thoughts about how God speaks to you through the Scripture. Listen to the stories of others in the group and refrain from giving advice.
- Be Confidential** What is shared in the group stays in the group. Realize that some areas may be too sensitive for people to respond to the faith-sharing questions or share an insight.
- Be Gentle** If differences of opinion arise, respect those differences. There are as many ways to experience God’s presence as there are people. We are all growing and on the journey together. Make the effort to understand another’s viewpoint by being tender and kind. (Ephesians 4:15).

May this Advent be a rich experience of God’s love that so fills you with joy and peace so that you can easily share God’s love with others.

Cycle C

The Gospel of Luke

Insights on Evangelization

The Scripture readings for the 2006-2007 Liturgical Year are from Cycle C of the Sunday Lectionary. In Cycle C, Sunday liturgies draw their Gospel readings from Luke.

Author/Audience

The Gospel of Luke is believed to be the latest of the three Synoptic Gospels to be written (The Gospels of Mark and Matthew appeared earlier.) The authorship of the Gospel is uncertain. Modern research proposes that the author was a third-generation Christian, who compiled narratives of Mark and Matthew, along with other sources, to write his account. The tone of Luke's Gospel suggests that the good news of salvation and the story of Jesus are for everyone.

Message and Themes

Luke's Gospel is the only one of the four Gospels that has a second volume, the Book of Acts. Luke's writing style and use of Greek suggest a highly educated author who blended the entire Gospel into a compelling story of Jesus' universal mission to all people. The Gospel provides extensive infancy narratives, each carefully told to include Old Testament references that allude to God's intention to provide salvation to all people.

Luke's Gospel includes much detailed information about Jesus, including his long journey to Jerusalem with his disciples. Jesus' disciples play an important role and identity in proclaiming the Reign of God. After Jesus' resurrection, Luke includes significant interaction between Jesus and his disciples (appearances in Emmaus, Jerusalem and account of Jesus' ascension.)

Some of Luke's main themes include celebration and joy (the Magnificat, the lost coin, the prodigal son, the banquet of Zaccaeus.) Jesus is a healer and teacher who offers many parables about the Reign of God. Jesus offers salvation to all and invites all to serve with him (the Good Samaritan, the role of women, Martha and Mary, and more.) Luke's Gospel pays particular attention to the compassion of Jesus toward the poor and suffering. Luke's Gospel lays the foundation for Mary as the first disciple of Jesus and her devotion to God.

How the Gospel of Luke Relates to Evangelizing

As in Luke's Gospel, we are disciples of Jesus, who calls us to an important role in announcing the gospel in our times. Consider these key insights from Luke's Gospel for evangelizing:

- Believe:** In Chapter 2, verse 29, Simeon took the infant Jesus into his arms and blessed God, "...For my eyes have seen your salvation which you prepared in sight of all the peoples..." How do I bless God for Jesus' presence in my life?
- Share:** In Chapter 10, verses 1-12, Jesus sends 72 disciples ahead of him to cure the sick and announce the kingdom of God. They went and did what Jesus commanded. Where do I go to prepare the way for Jesus' visit to other people?
- Transform:** In Chapter 19, verse 5, Jesus addressed Zaccaeus to come down from his tree so that Jesus could stay at his house that day. How do I reach out to the unwelcome, the unpleasant, and the unloved to bring about restoration and redemption?

Source: Fr. Donald Senior, C.P. and PHEME PERKINS, *Gospel of Luke, Reading Guide, The Catholic Study Bible, New American Bible, Oxford Press, pages RG417-RG437, pages 95-96.* See these articles for more detail about the Gospel of Luke.

Introduction to All Small Faith Sharing Sessions

PREPARE THE ENVIRONMENT

Optional: Prepare a small table and set up an Advent wreath with four candles for the Season of Advent. Put a small basket or bowl in the center of the wreath. Light a candle each week. You may select another symbol and choose to enthrone a Bible. Have small note cards and pens available. Use this or another centerpiece that symbolizes celebrating God's coming into our lives in a deeper and new way during this Season.

BECOME ACQUAINTED

Go around the group with each person sharing his or her hopes for the meeting.

GATHER TOGETHER IN THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST

Leader: As we gather together, we recall how God has come into our lives this past week and how God is present in our midst now.

After a moment of silence, ask the Holy Spirit to empower you and the group:

*Come Holy Spirit,
Fill the hearts of all people with the fire of Your Love.
May all accept Your invitation to know and love Jesus as Lord and Savior.*

*Fill this Archdiocese with people who welcome
and invite others to share in the Catholic faith.
Fill our Cardinal, our bishops and priests, deacons and lay ministers
with wisdom and courage to live and
preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
Fill all parish and agency staff with Your power to
evangelize those whom they serve.*

*Fill all consecrated men and women and all lay people with the grace
to become and make disciples of Jesus through
prayer, work, and daily living.
May the holy fire of Your love transform our society according to the Gospel.*

*Come Holy Spirit! With the Father and the Son,
You are worshiped and glorified forever and ever. Amen.*

EXTEND GOD'S INVITATION

On a notecard, write the name(s) of those whose lives may need the hope of a new Advent, a new coming of God's Reign of love, peace, and justice. Place the cards in the bowl or basket in the middle of the Advent wreath.

REFLECT AND SHARE

For Advent, the Gospel readings in Cycle C are from the Gospel of Luke. Reflect on each question below in turn or use your own questions. Allow group members, if they wish, to answer that question before the group moves on to the next question.

READ THE SCRIPTURES

Read the Sunday Scriptures out loud together. Afterward, mention which Scripture passage touched you and why. What does the passage mean to you at this stage of your personal spiritual journey?

1st Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16
2nd Reading: 1 Thessalonians: 3:12-4:2
Gospel: Luke 21: 25-28,34-36

Reflection on the Gospel Reading

The First Sunday of Advent sets the tone for the season: Be vigilant at all times, the Son of Man is coming. In today's Gospel passage, Jesus is talking to His disciples. His words are filled with apocalyptic images, dramatic signs that point to the end of time. Jesus warned His disciples not to be lulled to sleep ("beware that your hearts do not become drowsy"), but to be awake. The day of His coming will be a complete surprise.

Reflection Questions:

- Believe: As I begin this Advent season, what areas of my life does the Holy Spirit need to wake up so I can experience Jesus' deeper presence?*
- Share: As the Church begins the Advent season, where do our family, parish or community life need to rub sleep from their eyes to see God's Reign unfolding in their midst?*
- Transform: As the world enters the Advent season, what are some areas that are drowsy from the effects of sin and ignorance?*

PRAY FOR EACH OTHER

Pray together for any petitions and any needs that you might have. Stand in a circle together and say the Our Father. Pray daily this week for the person on your right.

LEAVE TO EVANGELIZE YOUR WORLD

Reflect on your mission to grow deeper in your relationship with God. Be welcoming, offer hospitality and work for transformation in your daily life. Suggestions for this coming week:

- Believe:** At least one day this week, stay up late or get up early. Light a candle and keep a vigil. Ask Jesus to come more fully into your life.
- Share:** Ask a friend, family member, parishioner to keep a vigil with you to pray for the inactive Catholics in your community who will return on Christmas day.
- Transform:** Contribute something to counteract the drowsiness of materialism during the Christmas season (give to a food pantry, a Christmas collection, or other person or organization in need) to witness God's love working through you.

READ THE SCRIPTURES

Read the Sunday Scriptures out loud together. Afterward, mention which Scripture passage touched you and why. What does the passage mean to you at this stage of your personal spiritual journey?

1st Reading: Baruch 5:1-9

2nd Reading: Philippians 1:4-6,8-11

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

Reflection on the Gospel Reading

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” These words of John the Baptizer were proclaimed within the historical context of the Jewish people under the rule of the Roman Empire. The dramatic narrative reveals God’s intentions - God will provide a smooth way for His people to walk - no crawling through valleys nor extreme exertion in climbing mountains. All flesh will see God’s salvation. These are great words of comfort for the Hebrew people of God under the domination of Roman rule.

Reflection Questions:

Believe: *What straight paths and rough ways need to be made smooth in my life? What does the salvation of God look like to me?*

Share: *What are the valleys and mountains that separate or divide my relationships with family and neighbors? How can I cooperate with God in leveling those obstacles?*

Transform: *What rough ways need to be made smooth in society and what can I do to dig in and help?*

PRAY FOR EACH OTHER

Pray together for any petitions and any needs that you might have. Stand in a circle together and say the Our Father. Pray daily this week for the person on your right.

LEAVE TO EVANGELIZE YOUR WORLD

Reflect on your mission to grow deeper in your relationship with God. Be welcoming, offer hospitality and work for transformation in your daily life. Suggestions for this coming week:

Believe: *As you walk along while you are shopping at a mall or other busy stores this week, pray for yourself and the other people you pass. Ask Jesus to make the ways straight to Him during this season.*

Share: *Fill in a valley in a relationship that has been distant. Lower the mountain of resistance with a family member or friend where a division has occurred. Make phone calls, visits, apologies and loving connections.*

Transform: *Prepare the way of the Lord by taking action to help the homeless or poor at this time of year.*

READ THE SCRIPTURES

Read the Sunday Scriptures out loud together. Afterward, mention which Scripture passage touched you and why. What does the passage mean to you at this stage of your personal spiritual journey?

1st Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-18a

2nd Reading: Philippians 4:4-7

Gospel: Luke 3:10-18

Reflection on the Gospel Reading

Today's Gospel follows last Sunday's passage. John the Baptizer called the people to prepare the Lord's way. In today's account, various groups of people asked John what to do. To the crowds, John advised sharing personal surplus. To the tax collectors, John charged them to stop dishonest collections. To the soldiers, John told them to avoid extortion, false accusations and greed. To all of the people, John gave witness to "One mightier than me" who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and bring about justice. As the passage ends, the text credits John preaching the good news (the Gospel) to the people.

Reflection Questions:

Believe: Who has spoken like "John the Baptizer" to advise me on how to live justly?

Share: How do I act like John the Baptizer in the context of my relationships?

Transform: If John the Baptizer were alive today, whom would he address? What would he say?

PRAY FOR EACH OTHER

Pray together for any petitions and any needs that you might have. Stand in a circle together and say the Our Father. Pray daily this week for the person on your right.

LEAVE TO EVANGELIZE YOUR WORLD

Reflect on your mission to grow deeper in your relationship with God. Be welcoming, offer hospitality and work for transformation in your daily life. Suggestions for this coming week:

Believe: Each day this week, in prayer, recommit yourself by renewing your baptismal vows. (See page 8 of this Guide.)

Share: Share your faith with a neighbor or acquaintance. Start by asking about the meaning of Christmas this year and listening. Let the Spirit lead you.

Transform: What should you do? Each day this week, ask the Holy Spirit for inspiration to do just deeds as a witness to the Jesus, the One Mightier than you.

READ THE SCRIPTURES

Read the Sunday Scriptures out loud together. Afterward, mention which Scripture passage touched you and why. What does the passage mean to you at this stage of your personal spiritual journey?

1st Reading: Micah 5:1-4a
2nd Reading: Hebrews 10:5-10
Gospel: Luke 1:39-45

Reflection on the Gospel Reading

The Fourth Week of Advent is the shortest on record - one day, since December 25 is Christmas Day. Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke recalls the account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth and Elizabeth's prophetic greeting. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth called Mary, blessed among women and the mother of her Lord. Elizabeth witnessed to her own unborn child's joy at Mary's presence and the presence of Mary's unborn child. The account ends with Elizabeth affirming that Mary was indeed blessed for believing that God's promise would be fulfilled.

Reflection Questions:

- Believe:* As this Season of Advent closes, what joy is "leaping in my heart" from believing in what God has promised to me?
- Share:* As this Season of Advent closes, what signs of joy have I witnessed from those with whom I am sharing my faith?
- Transform:* As this Season of Advent closes, what am I resolved to do to act so that our society and community experience God's Reign this Christmas?

PRAY FOR EACH OTHER

Pray together for any petitions and any needs that you might have. Stand in a circle together and say the Our Father. Pray daily this week for the person on your right.

LEAVE TO EVANGELIZE YOUR WORLD

Reflect on your mission to grow deeper in your relationship with God. Be welcoming, offer hospitality and work for transformation in your daily life. Suggestions for this coming week:

- Believe:* As Christmas Day unfolds, pray with Elizabeth and Mary. Celebrate the joy of the day and God's promises to you.
- Share:* Make a special effort to reach out in joy, love and generosity to your family as you visit them this week and on Christmas day.
- Transform:* As you travel the "hill country," make Christmas Day the most transforming day that you can for your family, friends, neighbors, and yes - even those who are "enemies." Be joyful and strive to help others experience God's joy.

Afterword

Renewal of Baptismal Vows/ Profession of Faith

I reject sin so as to live in the freedom of God's children.

I reject the glamour of evil and refuse to be mastered by sin.

I reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, His Only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died and was buried, rose from the dead and is now seated with the Father.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead

Comments are Welcome

Thank you for participating in these small faith-sharing group sessions, reflecting on Scripture in the light of evangelization. By virtue of baptism, everyone is called to evangelize. If you are interested in working in evangelization in a greater way, ask your pastor about joining a Parish Evangelization Team or participating in an outreach ministry at your parish.

The Office for Evangelization would appreciate your comments, experiences, thoughts and ideas on what you or your group has learned through the small-faith sharing process. You may write, call, fax or e-mail comments to:

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About the Author

Dave Pipitone is an active Roman Catholic who is husband to Cheryl, father to Emily, parishioner at Holy Family Parish in Inverness, IL. He has participated in and led small-faith sharing groups, authored faith-sharing materials for the Archdiocese of Chicago, wrote the reflection questions for *Spreading the Holy Fire: A Plan for Catholics Evangelizing in the Archdiocese of Chicago* and has contributed to *Disciples in Prayer* (Oregon Catholic Press.) Dave serves as an ad hoc member of the Advisory Committee for the Office for Evangelization of the Archdiocese. He is a 2003 graduate of the Chicago Catholic Scripture School offered through the Office of Catechesis of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

THE PERSONAL MANDATE:

Becoming a Disciple

PERSONAL OBJECTIVE ONE: COMMITMENT

Each Catholic will recommit her/himself to Jesus Christ as a disciple by embracing evangelization as their personal mission.

Strategies

- Accept God's invitation to personal conversion, to know and love Jesus as Lord and Savior.
- Pray daily for the grace and power of the Holy Spirit to be more of a disciple of Jesus Christ by growing in faith, hope, and love.
- Pray daily for the spread of the Gospel and for all of the disciples of Jesus, especially the Church's official ministers and our Cardinal Archbishop.
- Develop a mindset of "being sent" to share the Good News with everyone.
- Write a personal mission statement in light of evangelization and discipleship.
- Renew your Baptismal Promises on a regular basis (daily if possible) as a sign of your commitment to discipleship and evangelization.
- Take a personal inventory on a regular basis (daily) by examining your conscience, your intentions, and your actions.
- Create a daily plan to evangelize by being "intentional" in what you say and do.
- Witness to the Gospel and to Jesus Christ by living as a faithful, practicing Catholic.
- Support the Church by exercising Gospel stewardship of personal time, talent, and treasure.

Visible Signs

- Individual Catholics have a sense of personal mission and of "being sent."
- Individual Catholics are volunteering for church programs, ministries, and outreach.
- The witness of individual Catholics is noticed at home, in the parish, and in the neighborhood.

PERSONAL OBJECTIVE TWO: BELIEVE

Each Catholic will respond to God's grace to grow in personal holiness by deepening his/her personal relationship with Jesus and His Church.

Strategies

- Actively participate in the Sunday Eucharist on a regular basis.
- Try to share in the Eucharist more often than Sunday.
- Cultivate a daily practice of personal prayer and conversation with God.
- Actively celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a part of your spiritual life.
- Encourage family members to participate in celebrating the Sacramental Life of the Church, especially the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation.
- Develop a deeper appreciation for the Sacred Scriptures by reading and reflecting upon them on a regular basis, especially the readings of the liturgical day.

- Participate in faith-sharing prayer and other spiritual formation events like retreats, parish missions, days of reflection, and the like.
- Join in a small faith-sharing group or small Christian community to share prayer, faith, and Scripture.
- Study and reflect upon the rich heritage and teachings of the Catholic Church as expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or other such documents and share them with others.
- Develop a daily, personal spiritual regimen; e.g., morning and evening prayers, prayer before meals, examination of conscience, Scripture reading, personal devotions, Mass, etc.

Visible Signs

- Catholics actively and regularly participate in the celebration of the sacramental life of the Church, especially the Holy Eucharist.
- Individual Catholics are enthusiastic about being Catholic.
- Individual Catholics are alive with an informed faith, a vibrant hope for the coming of God's Reign, and a joyful love of God. God's presence is experienced and witnessed.

PERSONAL OBJECTIVE THREE: SHARE

Each Catholic will reach out to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with everyone and especially newcomers, inactive Catholics, the marginalized, and the unchurched.

Strategies

- Become a sharing person who freely witnesses to the Catholic Faith and recount personal experiences openly with others.
- Invite a new parishioner, neighbor, or friend to dinner or a social event to build a friendship based on Christ's love.
- Visit a new parishioner or neighbor in his or her home to build community and communion.
- Become a minister of care and bring Holy Communion to the homebound and hospitalized.
- Practice hospitality in the parish, in the neighborhood, in the workplace by listening, encouraging, affirming, and celebrating others.
- Develop a welcoming atmosphere at home by being present for family meals and other family celebrations and special occasions.
- Celebrate the diversity and faith of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds by sharing stories and entering into conversation and dialogue. (Resources: The pastoral letter of Francis Cardinal George *Dwell in My Love* (April 2001) and the U.S. Catholic Bishops' statement entitled *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*)

- Reach out and welcome Catholics who have become inactive in the practice of their faith by listening to their stories and inviting them, when ready, to return to active participation in the Church. (Resource: *A Time to Listen...A Time to Heal: A Resource Directory for Reaching Out to Inactive Catholics*, U.S. Catholic Bishops Handbook, November 1998)
- Know the outreach ministries of the parish and invite fellow parishioners, friends and family members to enroll in outreach sessions.
- Witness the Gospel to the unchurched and to those who have never heard of Christ and His Church by word and deed so that they may come to know of God's love for them.

Visible Signs

- Inactive Catholics are being invited to return to the practice of their faith.
- Individual Catholics express a joyful spirit of hospitality.
- Individual Catholics live out the paradigm shift of the Second Vatican Council by being focused on outreach to all and not just to practicing Catholics.



PERSONAL OBJECTIVE FOUR: TRANSFORM

Each Catholic will participate in the transformation of society and culture by living and proclaiming the Gospel of Life.

Strategies

- Develop a deeper gratitude and practice of sacrificial love in families to mirror the love of Christ and strengthen the domestic church. (Resource: *Follow the Way of Love: A Pastoral Message of the U.S. Catholic Bishops to Families*)
- Seek out opportunities to witness to Christ through social programs and church-sponsored outreach ministries. (Resources: *Everyday Christianity: To Hunger and Thirst for Justice* and *In All Things Charity: A Pastoral Challenge for the New Millennium*, U.S. Catholic Bishops)
- Exercise political rights in accord with Gospel and Catholic values by voting, campaigning, and becoming involved in the political process to shape a political environment based on Gospel values of respect for the dignity of the human person. (Resources: *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to America's Catholics and Faithful Citizenship* by the U.S. Catholic Bishops)
- Discern and practice the wise use of those contemporary media which affirm human life and Gospel values, including reading materials and viewing programs that are in accord with Catholic values and beliefs. (Resources: *Family Guide for Using the Media, Your Family and Cyberspace*, *Civility in Media*, *Renewing the Mind of the Media*, *Family Guide for Using the Media*, U.S. Catholic Bishops)
- Develop an appreciation of the arts and their messages in order to hear the signs of the times and discern the Holy Spirit's voice calling for transformation.
- Develop and practice a spirituality of work so that all employers and employees are transformed by just labor relationships.
- Practice faith by witnessing to the Gospel in all areas of your daily life including family, neighborhood, workplace, politics, the arts, the sciences, media, and other areas.
- Work in your neighborhood, parish, and home to foster cultural diversity and racial justice.
- Be involved in parish and local service groups in your neighborhood which serve the needs of the neighborhood.
- Study and reflect upon the social teachings of the Church.

Visible Signs

- Individual Catholics are involved in putting into practice the social teachings of the Church.
- Persons are transformed in their personal lives as they are affected by the power of the Gospel.
- People everywhere recognize the transforming presence of Jesus in the workplace, neighborhood, parish, and home in the quality of human relationships.

1. *Of what importance is the Personal Mandate?*

To whom does it apply?

2. *Where and how do individuals achieve the strategies to commit, believe, share, and transform society? What resources do they need?*

3. *What visible signs appeal the most to you? Why?*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS