

THE
WAY
PART 2



THE EVANGELICAL CATHOLIC
SMALL GROUP USER GUIDE

the **WORD**
among us[®]
press

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Introduction

Follow me.
Matthew 4:19

Long ago, Jesus spoke these simple words to his disciples. Jesus speaks the same words to us today. We can hear it in the restlessness of our hearts amidst the frantic pace of modern life. We can sense it in our most honest yearnings for purpose in a world inundated with distraction. This introductory small group guide aims to echo this call: “Follow me.” All of us are called to pursue “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), which are not *some things* but rather *Someone*—the Word made flesh, God incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ.

In his first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that “being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person” (1). This person is, of course, Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of our faith and the reason for our hope. St. John Paul II proclaimed Christ “the foundation and center of history, . . . its meaning and ultimate goal” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 5). This person—Jesus Christ, the center and ultimate goal of human history—is the foundation and focal point for this *The Way* study.

Our purpose throughout *The Way*, Parts 1 and 2 is to prompt an actual encounter with the living God—with Jesus Christ risen from the dead. In communion with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, we hope that the following small group sessions will help participants “consciously grow in the life of Christ through experience, reflection, prayer, and study” (USCCB, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, 5).¹ In addition to a presentation of truths regarding Our Lord and his Church,

The Way seeks to facilitate a deeply personal, yet at the same time communal, encounter with God.

We all long for deep friendship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. These types of friendships form when we can gather together to express and solidify that which bonds us for eternity—our faith and hope in God through Jesus Christ. Our common Baptism binds the Church together and makes the way for Christian community. We hope that for each reader, each participant in this exploration, *The Way* might become an avenue for truly intentional Christian community—one that reflects the manifold gifts of the body of Christ, one that nourishes real growth in each disciple of Jesus, one that responds to the call of Christ to be a light unto the world (see Matthew 5:14).

St. John Paul II promoted small Christian communities as a means of evangelization, as instruments for effectively sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in the world. Being a part of a thriving small group promotes substantial spiritual growth and even conversion, and this sort of holy vitality quite naturally spills over into the lives of others. As St. John Paul II noted, “Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves; they must proclaim him” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 40).

Mature disciples, who are continually enlivened by their encounters with Christ, often serve as strong witnesses when it comes to sharing the gospel. Perhaps no one stands readier, with more excitement, to share the beauty of Jesus than one who continues to meet him daily. In the same way that we are compelled to share good news with those around us, there is nothing more natural, after having received the ultimate “good news” (or gospel) of Jesus Christ, than to burst forth and share this great gift with the world. This sharing sits at the heart of Catholic evangelization.

It is in our continually confirmed experience that effective small groups can facilitate deep, personal encounters with God—encounters that will bear the fruit of evangelization for years to come. Small groups can help reawaken the evangelical impulse of our tradition and reposition evangelization as the “essential mission of the Church” and “her deepest identity” (Pope St. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14). After a personal and life-changing encounter with Christ, we cannot help but share with others the good news.

Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.
Matthew 12:34

The content of *The Way* leads individuals and groups to reflect upon the heart and habits of discipleship. As Catholic disciples of Jesus, who find our principal encounter with the Lord in the Eucharist, “the source and summit of the Christian life” (*Catechism*, 1324), we mature to the extent that we allow the heart and habits of Jesus and his people to become ever more our own. The heart and habits of Catholic discipleship include the following fundamentals (see General Directory for Catechesis, 88-92):

- A life centered upon God—the Trinity—as revealed in and through Jesus and his Church
- A committed and spiritually formative sacramental and liturgical life
- A life of consistent, deep, personal, and communal prayer
- A life steeped in Scripture

- A shared communal life in the Church—the body of Christ
- A life on mission—sharing the good news of Jesus with others in word and deed
- A life of ongoing conversion and growth in freedom as we conform to Christ in our character and in the particulars of our vocations

Both parts of *The Way* reinforce all these elements of discipleship, but they each emphasize different topics to foster sequential growth and new habits. Part 1 looks at friendship with Jesus, personal prayer, and devotion to Scripture, while Part 2 delves into the Eucharist, community, ongoing conversion (including the Sacrament of Reconciliation), and mission.

We hope that this small group guide will help you further encounter Jesus Christ, the center and cornerstone of our faith, giving your life “a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1). We pray that these studies will inspire you to place Jesus at the center of your life and help you to grow in the likeness of the One we call both Friend and Savior.

All in all, our goal through *The Way* is none other than to help you discover and rediscover that “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16). We follow the pastoral principle that frames the whole life of the Church and all her endeavors—“Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love” (*Catechism*, 25). Our prayer is “that your love may abound more and more” (Philippians 1:9) and that your witness to Jesus Christ might plant the seeds for a “new springtime” of evangelization (St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 2) in the Church and

throughout the world. Hear the words of Jesus today, “Follow me” (Matthew 4:19) and experience the truth that will set you free (see John 8:32).

How to Use This Guide

Welcome to *The Way*, a small group guide to help people follow Jesus of Nazareth and to help those who already follow Jesus to take the next step in their discipleship journey.

Weekly Sessions

The weekly session material includes opening and closing prayer suggestions; the Scripture and Tradition passages to be discussed that week; questions to prompt discussion, ideas, or action; and suggestions to help you continue following Jesus through the week.

Unlike some small group Scripture discussion guides that progress consecutively through a book of the Bible, each session in this guide is self-contained. That way, if you or a friend attends a small group for the first time during session 3, there won't be a need to "catch up." Anyone can just dive right in with the rest of the group. Instead of building sequentially, the sessions deepen thematically, helping you follow Jesus more and more closely.

The more you take notes, jot down ideas or questions, underline verses in your Bible (if you bring one to your small group, which we recommend!), and refer back to the previous sessions, the more God has the opportunity to speak to you through the discussion and the ideas he places in your heart. As with anything, the more you put in, the more you get back.

The best way to take advantage of each week's discussion is to carry the theme into your life by following the suggestions in the "Encountering Christ This Week" sections. Your small group facilitator will talk about the recommendations during each session. You will have a chance to ask questions and share experiences from previous weeks.

If you're not in a small group, *The Way* can help you follow Jesus on your own. Consider the questions asked of each Scripture passage and follow up with the suggestions in "Encountering Christ This Week."

Appendices

Helpful appendices supplement the weekly materials. Appendices A through D are for participants, and appendices E through G are for group facilitators.

Appendix A, "Small Group Discussion Guide," contains guidelines to help every person in the group set a respectful tone that creates the space for encountering Christ together. This small group will differ from other discussion groups you may have experienced. Is it a lecture? No. A book club? No. Appendix A will help you understand what this small group is and how you can help seek a Spirit-led discussion. Every member is responsible for the quality of the group dynamics. This appendix will help you fulfill your role of being a supportive and involved group member.

Appendix B contains a guide to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, commonly known as Confession. This sacrament bridges the distance we might feel from God that results from a variety of causes, including unrepented sin. If you want to grow closer to Jesus and experience great peace, the Sacrament of Reconciliation provides a fast track. This appendix will help alleviate any anxiety by leading you through the steps of preparing for and going to Confession.

Appendix C contains the EC Discipleship Wheel diagram that outlines the Catholic Church's basic categories of a holistic life in Christ. The Discipleship Wheel is the broad organizing principle behind the twelve sessions in *The Way*.

Appendix D, “A Discipleship Plan,” offers a more practical planning outline of nine essential habits of Catholic discipleship. Most of these habits have been introduced and encouraged throughout the course of *The Way*, especially in the “Encountering Christ This Week” sections. Use this tool to help you and others create a spiritual game plan for daily life.

Enjoy the adventure!

7 SESSION

Initial and Ongoing Conversion

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Opening Prayer

Leader: Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created.

All: And you shall renew the face of the earth.

Leader: O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant us in the same Spirit to be truly wise and ever to rejoice in His consolation. Through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen.

Scripture & Tradition

Reading

The parable of the prodigal son comes at the end of a string of three parables that all end with celebration and parties. The opening verses of chapter 15 provide a helpful context.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

¹Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable: . . .

¹¹And he said, “There was a man who had two sons; ¹²and the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.’ And he divided his living between them. ¹³Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. ¹⁴And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. ¹⁵So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven

and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.”

²⁰And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; ²³and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; ²⁴for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to make merry.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. ²⁷And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.’ ²⁸But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹but he answered his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!’ ³¹And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Reading

The parable of the prodigal son illustrates different stages of conversion. The younger son's interest in the gospel began when he had nothing left and he began to hunger (see verses 16-17). His initial conversion followed when he took a step of faith and chose to return to his father. His repentance accompanied this return. The elder brother, on the other hand, never left his father's house. Though faithful to his father, he fell short when he failed to rejoice in his brother's return and spoke bitterly about his father's generosity. The elder brother needed ongoing conversion, the endless task of the whole Church (see *Catechism*, 1428).

*My son was dead, and is alive again;
he was lost, and is found.*

Luke 15:24

Reading

Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States, by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002, paragraphs 12–14.

Conversion is the change of our lives that comes about through the power of the Holy Spirit. All who accept the Gospel undergo change as we continually put on the mind of Christ by rejecting sin and becoming more faithful disciples in his Church. Unless we undergo conversion, we have not truly accepted the Gospel.

We know that people experience conversion in many ways. Some experience a sudden, shattering insight that brings rapid transformation. Some experience a gradual growth over many years. Others undergo conversion as they take part in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults—the normal way adults become members of the Church today. Many experience conversion through the ordinary relationships of family and friends. Others have experienced it through the formation received from Catholic schools and religious education programs. Still others have experienced ongoing conversion in renewals, ecumenical encounters, retreats, parish missions, or through some of the great spiritual movements that have blessed Church life today.

This is crucial: we must be converted—and we must continue to be converted! We must let the Holy Spirit change our lives! We must respond to Jesus Christ. And we must be open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, who will continue to convert us as we follow Christ. If our faith is alive, it will be aroused again and again as we mature as disciples.

A new heart I will give you.
Ezekiel 36:26

Encountering Christ This Week

This week, we invite you to seek ongoing conversion through two powerful practices that lead to growth in freedom: a night-

ly general examination, and sacramental Reconciliation. Make every effort to incorporate both of them into your week, especially the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession).

1. Try Nightly General Examination

As a helpful practice for experiencing ongoing growth and conversion, Christians throughout the centuries have done a nightly general examination of conscience before going to bed. Take two to three minutes before bed each night this week to examine your day in God's presence. Ask the Holy Spirit and your guardian angel for help.

Step 1: Gratitude. Thank God for one or two graces from your day: things that went particularly well, times you felt his grace working in you, times you persevered in something difficult, a great conversation you had, or other similar experiences.

Step 2: Contrition. Recall a few times you failed to respond to God's promptings for the day. If you need help, you can use 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. Substitute your name for "love." Was I patient today? Was I kind? Was I jealous?

Consider taking notes from this examination of conscience to help you identify patterns and better prepare for the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

2. Receive Sacramental Reconciliation This Week

Make arrangements to go to Confession this week or as soon as possible.

The graces of the Sacrament of Reconciliation wipe away every mortal and venial sin. "The whole power of the sacrament . . . consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship" (*Catechism*, 1468).

Frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation is for the faithful what physical training is for champion athletes—a primary source of strength and excellence. As stated in the *Catechism*:

Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church.² Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father’s mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful.³(1458)

Take advantage of the opportunity to be restored to intimate friendship with God, further healed, and strengthened through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Find the local Confession times, and put one of these times in your schedule. Perhaps go with a friend, your spouse, or one of your children. Then go out for a coffee or something similarly nice afterward.

At Confession, telling the priest a little about your personal situation will help him lead you through the sacrament and set you at ease. See appendix D for more guidance.

Closing Reflection & Prayer

Spend time together thanking God for the ways he has drawn you to himself. Close with a prayer by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556).

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will,
All I have and call my own.

You have given all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.

Everything is yours; do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace,
that is enough for me.⁴

Amen.