

THE
WAY
PART 1



THE EVANGELICAL CATHOLIC
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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 here 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

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1999), 5.

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 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 principle 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” (*Cate-*

chism, 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.

Although each session in *The Way* may stand alone, however, the topics are arranged in two-week sets. The first week introduces a theme, and the second week continues and deepens the discussion on that theme. The three sets are

- (a) sessions 1 and 2 on friendship with Jesus,
- (b) sessions 3 and 4 on prayer, and
- (c) sessions 5 and 6 on Scripture.

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

Prior to your first group meeting, please read appendix A, "Small Group Discussion Guide." These guidelines will 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 is a resource to enhance and deepen your relationship with Jesus through developing a daily habit of praying with Scripture. This appendix also includes a simple outline of the prayer method *lectio divina*, or "divine reading," in which one listens to God through Scripture and enters into prayerful

dialogue with the Lord. We recommend using the *lectio divina* method of prayer with each week's suggested Scripture passages found in "Encountering Christ This Week."

In appendix C, you will find a guide to ACTS, an acronym for a simple way to pray every day. Spending as little as two minutes a day on each letter of ACTS is one of the simplest ways to grow in prayer.

In appendix D, you will find 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.

While appendices A through D are for small group participants and facilitators alike, appendices E through G assist the facilitators in their role. A facilitator is not a teacher. His or her role is to buoy the conversation, encourage fruitful group discussion, and tend to the group dynamics.

Appendix E provides guidance and best practices for facilitating a small group successfully and includes recommendations for any difficult group dynamics that could arise. You will find guidelines on what makes a group work: building genuine friendships, calling for the Holy Spirit to be the group's true facilitator, and seeking joy together.

Appendix F takes the facilitator from the general to the specific, providing detailed leader notes for each session of *The Way*. Read those notes four or five days before each group meeting. The notes will help you prepare each session by providing a "heads up" on the content and issues that pertain to discussing these particular Scripture passages.

Facilitators should read appendix G well in advance of the first meeting. It has the guidance you need to lead prayer and encourage prayer by group members. While the material in each session includes a suggested prayer, this is only support material. It's far better spiritually for the group to pray in their own words. Appendix F guides the facilitator on how to help that happen.

Learning this skill is important. It will model for the group members how to talk to Jesus in their own words. Closing with extemporaneous prayer seals the time you have spent together by offering up the discoveries, questions, and joys of your conversation. Appendix G will help you guide your group from awkward beginnings to a deepening experience of talking to God.

Appendix G will also help the facilitator bring the “Encountering Christ This Week” section into the weekly discussion. It provides concrete suggestions on how to encourage and support group members in their personal engagement with the topics discussed. The facilitator plays a key role in helping participants allow Jesus to become more and more the center of their lives.

Enjoy the adventure!

1 SESSION

Friendship with Jesus

I have called you friends.
John 15:15

Opening Prayer

Read the following prayer by St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109):

O Lord, our God,
teach our hearts this day where and how to see you,
where and how to find you.

You have made us and remade us,
and you have bestowed on us
all the good things we possess,
and still we do not know you.

We have not yet done that
for which we were made.

Teach us to seek you,
for we cannot seek you

unless you teach us,
or find you
unless you show yourself to us.

Let us seek you in our desire;
Let us desire you in our seeking.
Let us find you by loving you;
Let us love you when we find you.²

We pray through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

Sharing Our Experience

Take a couple of minutes to turn to a partner and tell them about a close friend. Use the following questions as loose guidelines for your conversation.

1. What is your friend like?
2. What first attracted you to your friend?
3. How do you spend time together?
4. Talk about your conversations—why are they so good/interesting?
5. What makes your friendship solid?
6. What habits do you need in order to cultivate your friendship?
7. How have you changed since you met your friend?
8. What could endanger your friendship?

²Adapted into plural from Jacquelyn Lindsey, ed., *Catholic Prayers for All Occasions* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2017), 78.

Group Discussion

1. What stood out to you during your conversation?
2. Given our discussion here, what are some key elements to a good friendship?
3. What can get in the way of good friendships?
4. Have you ever considered God to be a friend? How is friendship with God similar and dissimilar to the friendships you just reflected on?
5. How would you assess your friendship with God?

Scripture & Tradition

Please invite a participant to read the following passage aloud.

Reading

No matter where you may be with God, he calls each of us into deeper communion, a closer relationship, and, yes, even an intimate friendship with him. Yet many of us find it challenging to think about God as our friend. It somehow feels too familiar, too irreverent, or even childish. We are more comfortable with a loftier God, a more cosmic Christ, a God marked more by majesty and mystery than familiarity. Reflecting upon the divinity of Christ, St. Paul wrote to the community of believers in Colossae:

Reading

Colossians 1:15-20

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

1. How do you think about or understand God? Is God more distant for you or is he close? Familiar or removed? Personable or inaccessible? Explain.
2. What are some of the fears we all share in opening ourselves up to a friendship with Jesus?

*Christ is the foundation and center of history;
he is its meaning and ultimate goal.*

—Pope St. John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 5

Please invite two participants to read the following selections aloud.

Reading

You might find that Paul's image of Christ in the passage from his letter to the Colossians reflects the way you feel about God. This majestic portrait of Jesus Christ is wondrous, awe inspiring, and absolutely true. Yet it would fall short of revealing the fuller nature of God if it did not also disclose the thoroughly personal, familiar, and human side of the Lord. While most of us are very comfortable with God as Creator, many of us don't know what to do with a God who calls us into intimate friendship with him.

Reading

Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that he might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom? And once again the pope [St. John Paul II] said: No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful, and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give

ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ—and you will find true life. Amen.³

1. What spoke to you in this passage?
2. What challenged you in this passage?
3. Whether now or in your past, can you identify with the fear Pope Benedict XVI describes here? Explain.
4. What does Pope Benedict XVI say will result if we open ourselves to the Lord?
5. How have you experienced some of the “beauty and liberation” of friendship with Jesus? Or in what way do you long for more of this?

Encountering Christ This Week

St. Augustine understood the human condition as restless until finding eternal peace in God, our Creator, when he wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”⁴ To this restlessness, Jesus speaks, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Take some time this week to come to Jesus with your anxieties, your weariness, and your burdens. Call out to the One who knows your need and who longs to bring you fulfillment and eternal joy in him.

³Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at the Mass for the Inauguration of the Pontificate, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html.

⁴Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (New York, NY: Oxford World’s Classics, 1998), 3.

Look up and pray with the following “Readings for Prayerful Reflection This Week,” spending time with one passage each day.

Prioritize spending some unstructured time reading, reflecting on, and praying with the passages. If you desire more structure and guidance for praying with Scripture, see appendix B. You will also be directed to appendix B in future weeks, so you need not digest it in this first week.

Readings for Prayerful Reflection This Week

- Psalm 139
- John 14:1-14
- Matthew 11:25-30
- John 8:28-32
- Isaiah 55:1-3
- Proverbs 3:5-6

Closing Reflection & Prayer

The following is a reflection by the Missionaries of Charity Fathers, written as God speaking to us. Invite a participant to read it aloud. Then take time for any spontaneous prayers of petition, praise, and thanksgiving before closing with a traditional prayer such as the Lord’s Prayer.

I Thirst for You⁵

It is true. I stand at the door of your heart, day and night. Even when you are not listening, even when you doubt it could be Me, I am there. I await even the smallest sign of your response, even the least whispered invitation that will allow Me to enter.

And I want you to know that whenever you invite Me, I do come—always, without fail. Silent and unseen I come, but with infinite power and love, and bringing the many gifts of My Spirit. I come with My mercy, with My desire to forgive and heal you, and with a love for you beyond your comprehension—a love every bit as great as the love I have received from the Father. . . . I come—longing to console you and give you strength, to lift you up and bind all your wounds. . . .

Come to Me with your . . . troubles and needs, and with all your longing to be loved. . . . Open to Me, for I THIRST FOR YOU.

⁵Missionaries of Charity Fathers, “*I Thirst for You*,” <http://www.mcfathers.org/i-thirst-for-you.html>.

SESSION 2

Jesus: True Source of Life

Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Philippians 3:8

Opening Prayer

Read the following prayer by St. John Vianney (1786–1859):

Sweet it is when we set our hearts on loving you, my God. It sometimes happens that the more we know our neighbors, the less we love them; but with you, O God, it is never so. The more we know, the more we love you.

My Jesus, how sweet it is to love you. Let me be like the disciples on Mount Tabor, seeing nothing else but you,