

WITH JESUS TO THE CROSS

A LENTEN GUIDE ON THE SUNDAY MASS READINGS

YEAR A

The Evangelical Catholic

LEADER/INDIVIDUAL

the **WORD**
among us®
press

Copyright © 2020 by The Evangelical Catholic
All rights reserved.

Published by The Word Among Us Press
7115 Guilford Drive, Suite 100
Frederick, Maryland 21704
www.wau.org

24 23 22 21 20 1 2 3 4 5

Nihil obstat: The Reverend Monsignor Michael Morgan, JD, JCL
Censor Librorum
October 26, 2016

Imprimatur: Most Reverend Felipe J. Estévez, S.T.D.
Bishop of St. Augustine
October 26, 2016

ISBN: 978-1-59325-393-6
eISBN: 978-1-59325-394-3

Scripture texts are taken from the Catholic Edition of the Revised Standard Version Bible, © 1965, 1966 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used with permission.
All rights reserved.

Excerpts from the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for use in the United States of America ©1994, United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used with Permission.

Cover design by Andrea Alvarez
Cover image: *Compassion!*, 1897
William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905)
Location: Musee d'Orsay, Paris, France
Photo Credit: © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the author and publisher.

Made and printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019917675

CONTENTS

Introduction	5
How to Use This Guide	8
1st Sunday of Lent: Step into the Desert	13
2nd Sunday of Lent: Strength for the Journey	25
3rd Sunday of Lent: Experience Living Water	35
4th Sunday of Lent: Live in the Light	45
5th Sunday of Lent: A Matter of Life and Death	57
Palm Sunday: The Passion of the Lord	69
Easter Sunday: Go to Galilee	81
Appendices for Participants	95
Appendix A: Small Group Discussion Guide	96
Appendix B: A Guide to Seeking God in Prayer and Scripture	99
Appendix C: A Guide to the Sacrament of Reconciliation	108

Appendices for Facilitators. 111

 Appendix D: The Role of a Facilitator 112

 Appendix E: Leading Prayer and
 “Connection to the Cross This Week” 118

 Appendix F: A Guide for Each Session
 of *With Jesus to the Cross, Year A* 124

Introduction

*“Yet even now,” says the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments.”
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and repents of evil.*

—Joel 2:12-13

The moment has come! The time is now! The hour is upon you regardless of your past mistakes or the difficulty of your current circumstances—or even if your spirit feels distant from God or if your heart feels hardened. “Even now,” the Lord calls, “return to me with all your heart” (verse 12).

God’s plea is straightforward and simple: he wants you close to him. He yearns for you as a father or mother longs for a lost child. God is asking you to stop what you normally do and take the time this Lent to discover what he means in your life and what he could mean.

The inner turbulence so many people experience today tells us that the promises of the world do not satisfy the deepest hunger of our hearts. We all repeat the same questions: “Why am I striving so hard? What am I searching for? How can I find true life, purpose, and fulfillment?” These thoughts persist because they cannot be answered without God or a relationship with Jesus that allows us to hear God’s voice in his.

Jesus wants that relationship with you. This book will help you seek him as he is seeking you, by reflecting on the Lenten Sunday Mass readings, either alone or in a small group. If you enter in “with all your heart” (verse 12), you will be able to respond to Jesus’ call to conversion. “This time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Those were the first words of Jesus as he began his public ministry. The biblical Greek word for “repent” is *metanoia*, which means “change your mind and your heart.” Conversion of heart is the core of the gospel.

Encountering Jesus makes that change possible. He can transform our hearts, if we let him in. The kingdom of God broke into the physical world through him in a completely new and unprecedented way. In Jesus the fullness of God became present, tangible, and accessible to you and the whole human family. And he is still with you: “And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:20). If you’re part of a small group, he will be there: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (18:20).

If we believe this is true, that the Lord has come, that the kingdom of God is at hand because Jesus is truly with us, then what else would we want to do but know him and grow close to him?

Reflecting on the Scriptures opens to us the reality of who Jesus is. Once we come to know his love—a love so great that he forgave the people who were crucifying him while they were doing it—we want to surrender our whole lives to him. He extends to us the love that forgave even those who crucified him on the cross. Seeking him, we find the mercy we crave and the grace to forgive others. Jesus heals not only our own hearts but, through us, sometimes even those who are our enemies, our families, and our friends. He is our way to peace.

Jesus is also the corrective to any erroneous impressions we may have about God the Father: that God wants to punish or belittle us for wandering or that he is a cold, distant superpower rather than a person who loves us. Through Jesus' relationship with his Father, we see that God is not a heavenly scorekeeper, tallying our mistakes and weighing them against our merits. Lent is not a time when God wants to chasten us for our guilt but a time when he wants to welcome us home, like the Father in the story of the prodigal son (see Luke 15:11-32).

Coming home requires figuring out what it is that gets in our way from enjoying a loving relationship with God. The self-examination that Lent encourages breaks down the barriers that we don't even know are there in our hearts and minds. Then true communion becomes possible.

That's why a spiritually fruitful Lent requires more than giving up chocolate or caffeine. Outward signs and rituals play a role: they help our inward transformation to happen and manifest that change in our lives. But the Lord says through Joel, "Rend your hearts and not your garments" (verse 13). That means dying to the tyranny of self and all that stymies our spiritual journey or undermines or inhibits full communion with our loving God.

We pray with the Church that the Liturgy of the Word will penetrate your heart in a new way this year, bearing fruit that will endure forever in the kingdom of God. The time is now. Return to the Lord with all your heart through Lenten penance, almsgiving, and prayer so that you can fully experience the joy of the resurrection this Easter.

How to Use This Guide

Welcome to *With Jesus to the Cross: Year A*, a guide to help you know Jesus of Nazareth more deeply and understand more fully what his death and resurrection mean in your life.

Weekly Sessions

The weekly sessions use the Sunday Mass readings for Lent to help you enter into the mystery of Christ's life, suffering, and resurrection, the source of our salvation.

Each session includes written opening and closing prayers, the Scripture passages to be discussed that week, questions for discussion, ideas for action, and prayer prompts to carry you through the week. Sometimes excerpts from saints, popes, or other great teachers are included that shed light on the message of the gospel.

The sessions in this guide are self-contained. If you or a friend attends for the first time during the third session, there will be no need to "catch up." Anyone can just dive right in with the rest of the group. As with Lent, instead of building sequentially, the sessions deepen thematically, helping you engage more with Jesus and the cross little by little.

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 sessions of previous weeks, the more God has the opportunity to speak to you through the discussion and the ideas he places in your heart. As with any endeavor, 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 "Connection to the Cross This Week" section. These

prayer prompts will allow Jesus to enlighten your heart and mind on both the challenges of Lent and the joy of the resurrection. If you're discussing the readings with a small group, the facilitator will give you the chance to share experiences from the previous week and talk about the recommendations for the upcoming week during each session.

Each weekly session includes Scripture passages for meditation on the theme of the Sunday readings for that week, as well as the daily Mass readings for the coming week. You can find these in your Bible or online (biblegateway.com, usccb.org, the YouVersion Bible App, and others), or you can use any of the popular free apps that feature the daily Mass readings, such as Laudate or iBreviary. The entire New American Bible is available at the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' website, usccb.org, as well as the daily readings, including an audio version (<http://usccb.org/bible/readings-audio.cfm>).

Appendices

Helpful appendices for both participants and facilitators supplement the weekly materials. Appendices A through C are for participants, and appendices D through F 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 praying with Scripture. It introduces *lectio divina*, the ancient art of listening to God's voice in his word, and also includes additional methods and tips for building habits of prayer and Scripture meditation.

In appendix C, 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. The Church encourages Catholics to receive this sacrament each Lent, but it is tremendously helpful to receive it even more frequently. 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. It also gives suggestions for online resources that will provide questions for a fruitful examination of conscience.

While appendices A through C are important for small group participants and facilitators alike, Appendices D through F support 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 D 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 encouraging participation in natural ways.

Facilitators should read appendix E well in advance of the first meeting. It has the guidance you need to lead prayer and encourage participation in 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 E will help the facilitator make 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 is an extremely valuable way to seal the time you have spent together by offering up the discoveries, questions, and joys of your conversation. Appendix E will help you guide your group from awkward beginnings to a deepening experience of talking to God.

Appendix E will also help the facilitator bring the “Connection to the Cross This Week” section into the discussion for each session. 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.

Appendix F provides detailed leader notes for each session of *With Jesus to the Cross, Year A*. Read these 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.

Enjoy the adventure!





Step into the Desert

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness.

—Matthew 4:1

Opening Prayer

Have one person read the prayer aloud while others pray along silently.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All-powerful God,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
by water and the Holy Spirit,
you freed us from sin
and gave us new life.

During this season of Lent,
send your Holy Spirit once again
to guide us into solitude and reflection.
Be with us through the desolation of the desert,

strengthen us against the evil one,
and renew us in the living waters of Jesus.

Give us a courageous and resolute spirit,
a spirit of sobriety and humility,
that we might have eyes to see
the painful reality of our sins.

Wash us clean again, O Spirit,
And fill us with wonder and awe in your presence.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Opening Discussion

1. Has anyone ever made a trip into a desert or other harsh or challenging environment? What did you do to prepare for the trip? Describe your experience. How was it different than other journeys? How did the landscape make you feel?
2. How are you preparing for the season of Lent?

Scripture & Tradition

Ask one person to read the following Scripture passage aloud.

Reading

Matthew 4:1-11

¹Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²And he fasted forty

days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry.
³And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written,

‘Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that proceeds from the mouth
of God.’”

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will give his angels charge of you,’

and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”

⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’” ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Then Jesus said to him, “Begone, Satan! for it is written,

‘You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve.’”

¹¹Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.

1. What caught your attention in this passage?
2. According to verse 1, why did Jesus go to the desert?
3. Have you ever been in a “desert place” in which you were subject to temptations? What was that like?
4. The temptations Jesus faces can seem remote to our own lives. How could these temptations be relevant to your life today, especially when you find yourself in a “desert place”?
5. How would you put into your own words what Jesus says to the devil in response to the first temptation (verse 4)?
6. How could you use the Scriptures to expose and overcome temptation? Has any particular Scripture verse been helpful in that regard?
7. After Jesus resists the devil the third time, what happens? What does this tell us about the journey of Lent?

Reading

Romans 5:12-19

¹²Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned—¹³sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. ¹⁶And the free gift is not like the effect of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

¹⁸Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. ¹⁹For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.

8. How would you say you've experienced the "abundance of grace" given through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection (verse 17)?
9. If you don't feel you've received that grace, how could you seek and claim what St. Paul says has been abundantly given in Christ?

If you have time, read the next passage on the following page by Henri Nouwen, and reflect together on the questions. Ask one person to read the passage aloud. Otherwise, read it on your own, and think about the questions before the next session. Review the "Connection to the Cross This Week" recommendations, and close with prayer.

Connection to the Cross this Week

O Lord, . . . how often have I lived through these weeks [of Lent] without paying much attention to penance, fasting, and prayer? How often have I missed the spiritual fruits of this season without even being aware of it? But how can I ever really celebrate Easter without observing Lent? How can I rejoice fully in your resurrection when I have avoided participating in your death?

Yes, Lord, I have to die—with you, through you and in you—and thus become ready to recognize you when you appear to me in your resurrection. There is so much in me that needs to die: false attachments, greed and anger, impatience and stinginess. O Lord, I am self-centered, concerned about myself, my career, my future, my name and fame. Often I even feel that I use you for my own advantage. How preposterous, how sacrilegious, how sad! But yes, Lord, I know it is true. . . . I see clearly now how little I have died with you, really gone your way and been faithful to it. O Lord, make this Lenten season different from the other ones. Let me find you again. Amen.

—Henri Nouwen¹

1. What struck you from this passage?
2. Do any of Nouwen's sentiments feel familiar to you: things that are also true in some way in your life? How?

¹Henri Nouwen, *A Cry for Mercy: Prayers from the Genesee* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 24-25.

Take a few minutes of silence at home to privately reflect on the ways in which you are tempted or need to let go of any attachments to self-will, sin, or anything that is not of God. You may not recognize these at first. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal them to you. Write them down in a journal or in another private place.

Lent is a time when we can honestly assess our lives. The primary way we do this is in prayer. Time with the Lord allows God to help us examine our hearts and minds. He shows us where he wants us to grow, how he wants us to change, and the parts of ourselves we keep from him.

The question for Lent is not “What shall I do to improve myself?” but, rather, “God, how do you want to make me more like you? I know I was made in your image and can grow into your likeness through Jesus, but I also know that I don’t always live as Jesus did. Help me see what needs to change, inside and out. I want to let the Holy Spirit into every part of my life.” As St. Paul reminds us, “We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Only God knows the true condition of our hearts. Only God can help us see what we must overcome. The psalmist wisely prays, “Who can discern his errors? / Clear thou me from hidden faults” (Psalm 19:12). If, by God’s grace, we recognize our weaknesses, we still desperately need the power of God in order to change. Ultimately, only God, not even our best efforts, can triumph.

This week, commit to spending time in prayer. Find time slots in your calendar when you can spend fifteen to twenty minutes on at least two or, even better, three or four days. Then “close the door” of your room (see Matthew 6:6) and talk to God. Ask him to sow “truth in the inward being,” the secret

place where God can “teach [you] wisdom” (Psalm 51:6). Ask God to make you aware of the hidden faults in your life and to direct you toward the Lenten sacrifices that will truly lead you back to him.

Ask the Blessed Mother, Mary, to intercede for you, that you may be given the courage to see yourself clearly. Use the following Scripture passages to help you reflect on your life, or use the daily Mass readings.

In prayer, make a commitment to the ways in which you will live the three pillars of Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Creating time and space for prayer will itself require a little “fasting” from some other activity. Be open to the ways in which the Holy Spirit leads you to fast and give alms. Each week of this discussion guide will provide specific suggestions and Scripture passages for prayer. See appendix B for guidance on praying with Scripture.

Scripture Passages for Meditation

- Psalm 51
- Romans 7:15-25
- Deuteronomy 7:25–8:5
- James 4:1-10
- 1 John 1:5-10
- John 20:19-23

This Week's Mass Readings

Monday

- Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18
- Psalm 19:8-10, 15
- Matthew 25:31-46

Tuesday

- Isaiah 55:10-11
- Psalm 34:4-7, 16-19
- Matthew 6:7-15

Wednesday

- Jonah 3:1-10
- Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 18-19
- Luke 11:29-32

Thursday

- Esther C:12, 14-16, 23-25
- Psalm 138:1-3, 7-8
- Matthew 7:7-12

Friday

- Ezekiel 18:21-28
- Psalm 130:1-8
- Matthew 5:20-26

Saturday

- Deuteronomy 26:16-19
- Psalm 119:1-2, 4-5, 7-8
- Matthew 5:43-48

Closing Prayer

Spend some time in spontaneous prayer as a group. To close the prayer time, have one person read the following prayer aloud while the others pray along silently.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Lord of infinite compassion and steadfast love, we stand before you in humility and trust.

Look with compassion on us as we acknowledge our sinfulness.

Stretch out your hand to save us, and raise us up in your goodness.

Do not allow the power of darkness to triumph over us,
but cleanse us from our faults.

As members of Christ's body,
we long to be sheep of your own flock.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ,
your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.