

Who Is My Neighbor?

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A Resource for Small Group Faith Sharing

The Discipleship Series

Novo Millennio Press

Foreword

In the summer of 2006, Christopher Ruff, director of the Office of Ministries and Social Concerns for our diocese, came to me with a proposal. He wanted to develop a diocesan small group faith-sharing program that would take the typical “Bible study” ingredients of prayer, reflective study and fellowship, and add one more—loving service.

Chris felt too many Catholics saw ministry to the suffering and needy as belonging only to Church social justice committees and institutions like Catholic Charities, with their own role reduced to giving these groups financial support. Of course, it is true that Jesus tells the story of a Samaritan who gave money to an innkeeper for the care of a beaten man—but not before compassion had moved the Samaritan personally to clean the man’s wounds with oil and wine and to lift him onto his own animal to bring him to that inn.

With this kind of love of neighbor in mind, Chris looked for a faith-sharing resource that would combine a prayerful, contemplative spirit with the universal call to serve Christ in “the least of his brethren.” He wanted to

find something that penetrated to the heart of the Gospel but that was concise, readable and workable for people with busy lives. Even the vital service component had to be manageable and broad enough to include various kinds of service. In the end, Chris decided to write his own resource, on his own time so he could publish it. He then wrote a second and a third book, and continues to develop more.

The response in the Diocese of La Crosse has been extraordinary. In what was supposed to be a small pilot phase in Lent of 2007, over one thousand people in more than thirty parishes took part (in our modest Wisconsin diocese of 165 parishes). Concluding surveys reflected great enthusiasm and more than 95% said they wished to continue with the next resource. As the program was made available to the entire diocese with the second book, nearly two thousand people joined groups in close to one hundred parishes. This enthusiastic response has continued year by year as the program has become firmly rooted and indeed spread to other dioceses.

This expanding set of faith-sharing resources is aptly named the Discipleship Series. I am seeing it form disciples in our diocese—integral and authentic disciples

growing in love of God and love of neighbor. It is my hope that in the planting and nurturing brought about through this Discipleship Series, we will look forward to a harvest of apostolic works. I recommend it wholeheartedly to individuals, groups, parishes and other dioceses that wish to foster a deeper discipleship in Christ.

Most Rev. Jerome E. Listecki
Bishop of La Crosse

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Bishop Jerome Listecki for his enthusiastic support of this project at every phase, both within and beyond the Diocese of La Crosse.

I would like to acknowledge Deacon Stephen Najarian, who first awakened me to the idea that faith-sharing groups should have a component of service, and Deacon Richard Sage, whose witness of care for the poor and the marginalized as Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of La Crosse has been an inspiration.

I also want to thank Alice Andersen for her skilled editing and design.

Finally, I voice my deepest gratitude to my wife Clare for her continued patience with my late nights at the keyboard.

Christopher Ruff

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Introduction

Welcome to *Who Is My Neighbor*, part of the Discipleship Series of faith-sharing resources.

As with other books in this series, the focus is different from “Bible studies” that take a more linear and academic approach.

Our focus in this book is to:

- Soak deeply and prayerfully in a small, select number of Gospel passages;
- See the meaning of those passages come alive in human stories that inspire;
- Reflect as a small group on discussion questions that apply to daily living;
- Foster a modest commitment to love of neighbor through service;
- Experience in our hearts the fullness of joy that only Christ can give!

In over twenty years of organizing and writing materials for faith-sharing groups, these are the fruits I have come to see and expect. The component of active love of neighbor comes from the conviction that true discipleship must take seriously Jesus’ words, “Whatever you did for the least of my brethren, you did for me” (Mt 25:40). And truly the fruit of love is joy—a warm, inspired joy that I

have seen blossom over and over again as a result of this faith-sharing experience.

As support for this approach, consider Jesus’ allegory of the Vine and the branches (John 15:1-17). We have all heard it many times, with its image of Jesus as the Vine, to whom we as branches must be joined if we are to bear fruit. I encourage you to read it again and to reflect on some key phrases:

“Abide in me...abide in my love.”

Let “...my words abide in you.”

“...that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.”

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

“...that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

(see verses 4-12)

I believe we can find in these forty-six words of Jesus the very essence of his Gospel, his call to us. And the faith-sharing approach of the Discipleship Series is an attempt to respond actively and enthusiastically to that call. “*Abiding*” bears fruit in love, whose nectar is joy.

A word about the icon on the cover of this book. It is the work of artist Kathleen Bausch and was donated to

Catholic Charities of the Diocese of La Crosse for use on materials for its Good Samaritan Affiliates. The affiliates unite their daily prayers, sacrifices and acts of love with the work of Catholic Charities, seen as an expression of the compassion of Christ. Deacon Richard Sage, Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of La Crosse, gave kind permission for the image to be used on the cover of this book. The icon beautifully conveys the spirit and goals of the Discipleship Series by showing that it is first of all Christ who is the Good Samaritan, the one who ministers to us in our weak and fallen condition so that we may then, in union with him, touch the lives of our brothers and sisters in need.

Let us, then, listen and abide. And may the fruit of our abiding be a fuller, more charitable, more joyful discipleship that moves the world to marvel, as the ancient pagans did: “See how they love one another!”

Christopher Ruff

How to Use This Book

The Discipleship Series of faith-sharing materials aims to be simple and flexible. What follows is everything you need to know to move forward:

Establishing and Running One or More Groups

- Form one or more small groups (5-12 people each) through personal invitation or parish announcements. For customizable bulletin inserts/flyers, visit www.novomill.com and click on “Parish Launch Kit.”
- If established for Lent, the groups should meet weekly. Otherwise, once a month tends to be more workable for most people’s schedules. Typical length for a session is about 90 minutes. Whatever time frame is established, it should be rigorously respected.
- Each group should have a facilitator. It can be the same person at each meeting, or the facilitator role can rotate.
- The job of the facilitator is not to be an expert in the material or to do a lot of talking. Rather, it is to start and end the meeting on time, to help keep things moving and on topic, and to foster a friendly, supportive environment in which everyone feels invited to contribute.

- The group members decide where they would like to meet. It is ideal to hold the sessions in each other's homes since a key goal is to bring faith into daily life. If this is not workable, a room on church grounds is fine, or some combination of the two.
- Each member is expected to read the material prayerfully ahead of the session, jotting a few notes in response to the "Questions for Discussion."
- The session begins with the Prayer to the Holy Spirit or some other appropriate prayer so that hearts may be opened to God's presence.
- It is strongly recommended that the group members then read aloud the material for that session, taking turns reading a few paragraphs or a small section. This pattern should continue all the way through the discussion questions. Experience has shown this reading aloud to be not only do-able (within a 90-minute time frame), but quite fruitful, making the material fresh and alive.
- When there are about ten minutes left in the allotted schedule, it is time to proceed to the "Group Prayers of Intercession," even if the group has not finished all the discussion questions.

- The prayers of intercession are intended to be spontaneous prayer intentions. They direct the power of prayer to various needs and simultaneously deepen the spirit of fellowship in the group. Conclude with the "Closing Prayer."
- The session should end on time, even if members are eager to keep going. This is vital for the health and longevity of the group. It is good to follow with fifteen or twenty minutes of social time for those who are able to stay. Simple refreshments are a nice touch, with emphasis on the word simple; otherwise, people feel pressure to keep up with high expectations.

The Service Component

- The Service Component distinguishes this program from many other faith-sharing approaches. It is anticipated that group members will devote an hour or two to some form of service between sessions (if meetings are weekly, this could be an hour or two each month). The service may be carried out individually or together with others.

- Service can take many forms, but it should come from the heart. Certainly service to the poor, the sick, the elderly, the homebound, the homeless, etc., has always had a privileged place for Christ's followers.
- Some may already be devoting a great deal of time to service. In that case, it is enough to consciously "dedicate" some portion of that service to the group's communal effort and spirit.
- Each set of "Questions for Discussion" includes at least one that touches on the component of service. This is to keep alive the awareness of the importance of the service aspect, which however is done on the "honor system" (with no one watching over anyone else's shoulder).

Group Etiquette

- Pray for the members of your group between sessions.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Be a good listener and encourage everyone to contribute to the discussion, without anyone monopolizing. Members that are more talkative should allow everyone a chance to respond before they speak a second time.
- Love your neighbor by speaking charitably and refraining from any kind of gossip.
- Be on time, come prepared, and actively take part in discussion and prayer.
- Take seriously the service component so that you may be a loving (and always humble) witness to the others in your group.
- Be open and expect God's action in your life and prayer—expect to be changed!

Recommended prayer to start each session:

Prayer to the Holy Spirit

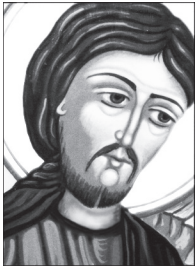
**Come Holy Spirit,
Fill our hearts with the fire of your love.**

**Draw us near to Jesus,
so that we may witness to his presence
in every moment of our lives.**

**Renew us, so that our homes, parishes,
neighborhoods and world
may be transformed into the heavenly
Father's kingdom on earth,
where love and mercy reign.**

Amen.

Session 1



Who Is My Neighbor?

The Lord in His Scriptures

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.”

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped

him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”

He said, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Luke 10:25-37.

Soak in the Word

Two Minutes of Silence

Reflect...

This would have been a shocking parable to Jewish ears, for the Jews detested the Samaritans and regarded them as heretics. Samaritans felt the same about the Jews. This mutual hatred stemmed from Old Testament times, when the Assyrians captured the district of Samaria and deported most of the Israelites, leaving the remaining Jews to intermarry with non-Jewish peoples. The result was a mixed race with mixed religious beliefs that differed from the Jewish faith in a number of ways. The most notable difference was the chief place of worship, which for the Jews was Jerusalem with its Temple, but for the Samaritans was Mt. Gerizim, where Moses commanded the blessings of the law to be proclaimed (see Deuteronomy 11:23; 27:12-13).

Fully aware of this legacy of mutual hatred, Jesus tells this parable in which a Jewish man beaten and left for dead by robbers receives no mercy from a priest and a Levite who share his Jewish faith, but is shown tremendous compassion by a passing Samaritan.

Why do the priest and the Levite pass by? Their roles involved sacred functions associated with worship and the Temple, and to touch a dead body was to be rendered “unclean” or unholy (see Leviticus 21:1-4). A good priest could not even take the risk of investigating to see whether the “half dead” man was still alive or not.

Jesus is showing that such an attachment to externals and to ritual purity ends up being an obstacle to the practice of love of neighbor. It is the Samaritan who steps in and shows a superabundance of love, cleaning the victim’s wounds with oil and wine, lifting him onto his animal (leaving himself to walk), and paying for his care at an inn.

Jesus’ message is that there are no special criteria that make other people my neighbors. No, it is I who must make *myself* neighbor to *them*, to anyone and everyone, especially if they are in need. And it is not just a matter of sweet sentiments—no, it must engage me in actions of love on their behalf.

Pope John Paul II

Everyone who stops beside the suffering of another person, whatever form it may take, is a Good Samaritan. This stopping does not mean curiosity but availability. It is like the opening of a certain interior disposition of the heart, which also has an emotional expression of its own. The name “Good Samaritan” fits every individual who is sensitive to the sufferings of others, who “is moved” by the misfortune of another.

Nevertheless, the Good Samaritan of Christ’s parable does not stop at sympathy and compassion alone. They become for him an incentive to actions aimed at bringing help to the injured man. In a word, then, a Good Samaritan is one who brings help in suffering, whatever its nature may be. Help which is, as far as possible, effective. He puts his whole heart into it, nor does he spare material means.

Following the parable of the Gospel, we could say that suffering, which is present under so many different forms in our human world, is also present in order to unleash love in the human person, that unselfish gift of one’s “I” on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer. The world of human suffering unceasingly calls for, so to speak, another world: the world of human love; and in a certain sense man owes to suffering that unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions.

(On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, nn. 28-29)

Catechism of the Catholic Church

1932 - The duty of making oneself a neighbor to others and actively serving them becomes even more urgent when it involves the disadvantaged, in whatever area this may be. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”¹

¹Mt 25:40.

The Lord in the Life of His People

“A Light is Shining in the Poor”

If one asks who has embodied the spirit of the Good Samaritan in our day, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta comes immediately to mind, and for good reason. But another figure, though not as universally known, has also given an extraordinary witness in this way. He is Jean Vanier, and what follows is a glimpse into a life dedicated to love.

It is a crisp October day on the wooded campus of St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota. Inside a packed auditorium, a tall, thin, slightly stooped man stands at the podium. At seventy-two years of age, Jean Vanier has a full head of white hair and deep-set eyes that exude warmth and wisdom. He is about to give his acceptance speech for the 2000 *Dignitas Humana* award, which each year honors individuals who serve the disadvantaged and marginalized in this world. Instead of the coat and tie one would expect at such an event, he is wearing a dark blue zippered jacket that looks like it came from the racks of a Goodwill thrift store. But somehow it seems just right as he begins to address his captivated audience in a simple and peaceful voice.

Finding a Life Path

Jean Vanier was born in Geneva, Switzerland, on Sept. 10, 1928, the son of the 19th Governor-General of Canada, George Phillas Vanier, and his wife, Pauline Archer Vanier. Both were devout Catholics, and sainthood causes for each have been launched in Canada. His father was also the Canadian ambassador to France at the end of World War II, where young Jean visited him in 1945 and saw men and women who had been liberated from the concentration camps. He later remembered, “They were skeletons. That vision has remained with me—what human beings can do to other human beings, how we can hurt and kill each other.”

After a stint in the Royal Navy as a young man, Vanier joined a small community, *L’Eau Vive* (Living Water), made up mostly of students, in a poor area near Paris. Their goal was to foster prayer and reflection and they were directed by Father Thomas Philippe, a French Dominican.

Fr. Philippe went on to become chaplain of a small institution for men with developmental disabilities in the village of Trosly-Breuil, near Paris. His example inspired Vanier, who in 1964 decided to move to the same village and to buy a little, run-down house. He planned to form a kind of small family in the house with men who would otherwise languish in institutions.

A Heart and Home for the Broken

In preparing for this new “vocation,” Vanier visited a number of institutions, asylums and psychiatric hospitals. He became keenly aware of the human tendency to shun people with odd behaviors or disabilities, to put them away and out of sight. He would later write:

So many of us flee from people crying out in pain, people who are broken. We hide in a world of distraction and pleasure or in ‘things to do.’ We can even hide in various groups of prayer and spiritual exercises, not knowing that a light is shining in the poor, the weak, the lonely and the oppressed (*The Broken Body*, p. 1).

One easily finds reasons to “pass by on the opposite side” of the road when faced with people who are broken or in some way unattractive. Vanier did not do that. He took two mentally handicapped men into his home on Aug. 4, 1964. He called the home *l’Arche*, the Ark—after Noah’s Ark—and this humble step marked the beginning of a movement that today encompasses a network of more than 130 homes around the world in which people with developmental disabilities live in a home with those who assist them. Together they share meals, household tasks, prayer, celebrations and sorrows, forming a family bond.

L’Arche’s charter states that, in the Roman Catholic tradition, it “seeks to respond to the distress of those

who are too often rejected, and to give them a valid place in society.” The charter goes on to say that “everyone is of unique and sacred value” with a “right to friendship, to communion and to a spiritual life.”

Friendship, the Deepest Need

In a world of great complexity, the vision of l’Arche is magnificent and touching in its simplicity. Reflecting on it now in his *Dignitas Humana* acceptance speech, Vanier says:

In L’Arche we live a sort of double mystery. There’s the whole presence of Mary in Bethlehem and Nazareth, and Mary’s standing at the foot of the cross. That has a lot of meaning for us, to stand and to be present and just to say “I’m with you, I’m with you.”

In my own home there’s a man named Patrick who, technically speaking, has a psychosis. And there’s a lot of pain and a lot of anguish, in particular at some moments. But when I reflect about Patrick, he has everything he needs. He has good medication, good doctors. He has work, he works in the workshop. He has food, he has a home. But what does he need over and above that? He needs a friend. What is essential is somebody who believes in him, who trusts him, who sees in him a presence of God.

In 1983, a beautiful documentary titled “The Heart Has its Reasons” was filmed at the l’Arche home in Trosly-Breuil, featuring extensive footage of daily life in the home along with interviews with Vanier and the assistants. In one interview Vanier observes that there is a deep wound in the residents with developmental disabilities, a wound born of the feeling that they have failed their parents, disappointed their parents. The path toward healing lies in stable community and genuine friendship, rooted in the spirit of Christ and the Beatitudes.

Facing Our Poverty

Careful not to romanticize this experience, Jean Vanier recounts in his acceptance speech a sobering episode from community life in l’Arche.

I remember when a man [an assistant] in one of our homes had been kept awake by one of the people who had screamed all night. He came to see me the next morning and he said, “You know, I wept all morning. I was in the chapel. I thought I could have killed him.” We were talking about it, and I said to him, “You know, I think this is probably one of the most important days of your life. You came to L’Arche thinking you could do good to the poor, and you have. You’ve done a lot of good. But today you are discovering that you are poor. We all need help, and it’s only as we discover that “I have

a handicap,” that “I am broken,” that “We’re all broken,” that we can begin to work at it.

At the conclusion of his speech, Jean Vanier receives a resounding ovation. There is applause that comes to speakers or performers because they are hugely entertaining. Then there is *this* applause, the kind that wells up from the depths of one’s spirit, moved by the witness of a love that touches and transforms.

Postscript:

It is not surprising to learn that Jean Vanier became especially close to Pope John Paul II, who praised l’Arche as “a dynamic and providential sign of the civilization of love” and who chose Vanier to introduce the mysteries of the Rosary during his Papal pilgrimage to Lourdes in 2004. Less than two months before John Paul died in 2005, Vanier spoke lovingly of the ailing Pontiff in an interview on Vatican Radio:

The Pope is a man who suffers. He suffers physically, but I also think he suffers enormously in his heart. And, at the same time, there is in him something that is extraordinarily luminous and limpid. The Pope is the sign of what Christianity is.... Today the Pope, more than with any encyclical, or any other writing, is a sign of holiness with his presence.

Pope Benedict XVI

[I]f in my life I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be “devout” and to perform my “religious duties,” then my relationship with God will also grow arid. It becomes merely “proper,” but loveless. Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me.

(Encyclical *God is Love*, n. 18)

Love—*caritas*—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbor is indispensable. The State which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person—every person—needs: namely, loving personal concern....

(*ibid.*, n. 28)

The one who serves does not consider himself superior to the one served, however miserable his situation at the moment may be....Those who are in a position to help others will realize that in doing so they themselves receive help; being able to help others is no merit or achievement of their own. This duty is a grace....

(*ibid.*, n. 35)

Questions for Discussion

1. Who stands out in your mind as a Good Samaritan in modern times? Feel free to mention famous people, but try also to think of examples closer to home.

2. In their quotes above, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI indicate the personal qualities, the attitude and the approach of a true Good Samaritan. Discuss what those are.

5. In the last paragraph of his quote, Pope John Paul II points out one particular purpose of suffering in this world. Can you think of specific examples of human suffering that help demonstrate that he is right?

6. What most impacted you from reading the account of Jean Vanier and l'Arche? Why?

Group Prayers of Intercession

8 to 10 minutes

Closing Prayer

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred,

Let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is error, truth;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

And where there is sadness, Joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to
be consoled, as to console;

To be understood, as to understand;

To be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

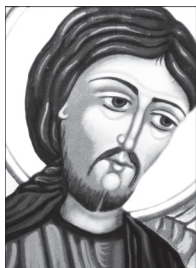
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

(Found written on a St. Francis of Assisi holy card in 1915 and piously but
incorrectly attributed to him—author unknown)

Session 2



I Am the Vine, You Are the Branches

The Lord in His Scriptures

Jesus Reveals the Meaning of True Discipleship

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not

abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

John 15:1-11.

Soak in the Word

Two Minutes of Silence

Reflect...

These words are spoken to the Apostles by Jesus at the Last Supper. It is his “farewell discourse,” and he takes them deeper than ever before in their understanding of the intimate meaning of discipleship.

When he refers to himself as the “true vine,” Jesus is drawing on familiar imagery. Grapevines were cultivated throughout Palestine, so their characteristics were well known. They required much pruning so that the plant’s energies would go into producing grapes. When overgrown or barren branches were cut back, the discarded wood, too soft to be of any use, was gathered and thrown into a bonfire.

Many times the Old Testament prophets had referred to Israel, the Chosen People, as the vine or the vineyard of the Lord (see Isaiah 5:1-2; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 19:10; Hosea 10:1). Psalm 80 speaks of this in beautiful terms:

Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt;
thou didst drive out the nations and plant it.
Thou didst clear the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches;
it sent out its branches to the sea,
and its shoots to the River (vv. 8-11).

And yet the prophets had been compelled to warn Israel that in her repeated violations of the Covenant she had become a wild and degenerate vine, fruitless and deserving of destruction (e.g., Isaiah 5:1-7). What would be the remedy for this desperate situation? It would be the coming of a “true” vine, Jesus Christ, source of the abundant life and fruit of a New Covenant.

But there is an even deeper layer of meaning in this imagery. Consider that Jesus’ presentation of himself as the vine comes nine chapters after he has presented himself as the Bread of Life (John 6:35-69). These images will explode with meaning when at the Last Supper he holds up the Passover *bread* and *wine* (“fruit of the vine”) and proclaims, “This is my body....This is my blood” (Mark 14:22,24).

The imagery takes us still further, since there is no bread without the grinding of wheat, nor wine without the crushing of grapes. And so it is that Jesus allows himself to be ground and crushed in order to become for us the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. His life is totally given, offered in fruitful sacrifice.

It is only by abiding in Christ the Vine that we too can bear real fruit of love of God and neighbor. Jesus is perfectly joined to the Father and offers himself on behalf of all those the Father has sent him to save. *If we abide in him he will prune and transform us so that our lives, too, become an offering of love.* This is what we as disciples

must embrace and live. But on our own, without God's grace, we are incapable of it.

This is a challenging message, because the tendency of our fallen nature is to pride ourselves on personal achievement. We idolize the "self-made man." It is the American way. This is the exact opposite of the truth Jesus is calling us to recognize, the truth that without his grace we are barren and useless—but joined to him we are filled with his life, his love, his joy.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

787 - From the beginning, Jesus associated his disciples with his own life, revealed the mystery of the Kingdom to them, and gave them a share in his mission, joy, and sufferings.¹ Jesus spoke of a still more intimate communion between him and those who would follow him: "Abide in me, and I in you. . . . I am the vine, you are the branches."² And he proclaimed a mysterious and real communion between his own body and ours: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him."³

¹Cf. Mk 1:16-20; 3:13-19; Mt 13:10-17; Lk 10:17-20; 22:28-30.

²Jn 15:4-5.

³Jn 6:56.

Pope John Paul II

There cannot be two parallel lives in [the lay faithful's] existence: on the one hand, the so-called "spiritual" life, with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called "secular" life, that is, life in a family, at work, in social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture. The branch, engrafted to the vine which is Christ, bears its fruit in every sphere of existence and activity. In fact, every area of the lay faithful's lives, as different as they are, enters into the plan of God, who desires that these very areas be the "places in time" where the love of Christ is revealed and realized for both the glory of the Father and service of others.

(The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People, n. 59)

The Lord in the Life of His People

From Withered to Fruitful Branch: the Dorothy Day Story

Few figures have impacted the Catholic Church in America as powerfully as Dorothy Day. Founder of the Catholic Worker movement in 1933, she is remembered especially for her houses of hospitality for the poor and her social advocacy on their behalf. On Day's seventy-fifth birthday, Mother Teresa of Calcutta told her: "You have been such a beautiful branch on the Vine, Jesus, and allowed his Father, the Vinedresser, to prune you so often and so much. You have accepted all with great love." What follows is a brief look at that "pruning" and the fruit it bore.

Raised in a family in which "the name of God was never mentioned," Dorothy Day nonetheless felt "haunted by God" her whole life (Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*, p. 11). She recalled that even in childhood that Divine haunting had a Catholic tinge:

It was Mrs. Barrett who gave me my first impulse toward Catholicism. It was around ten o'clock in the morning that I went up to Kathryn's to call for her to come out and play. There was no one on the porch or in the kitchen...and thinking the children must be in the front room, I burst in and ran through the bedrooms.

In the front bedroom Mrs. Barrett was on her knees, saying her prayers. She turned to tell me that Kathryn and the children had all gone to the store and went on with her praying. And I felt a warm burst of love toward Mrs. Barrett that I have never forgotten, a feeling of gratitude and happiness that still warms my heart when I remember her. She had God, and there was beauty and joy in her life (Dorothy Day, *From Union Square to Rome*, p. 26).

A Radical Departure

A precocious girl with a great talent for writing (her father, John Day, was a journalist), Dorothy Day went off to college at the age of sixteen. She carried with her a keen social consciousness that had been shaped by long walks through the poor neighborhoods of South Chicago. An avid reader, she had also been drawn in a special way to books that shed light on the unjust conditions afflicting the poor.

Dorothy was a radical at heart, and as a college student being groomed by “progressive” professors with little regard for religion, she drifted away from her instinctive enthusiasm for God and became persuaded that Christianity just wasn’t radical enough. “I felt that religion was something that I must ruthlessly cut out of my life.... For me Christ no longer walked the streets of this world. He

was two thousand years dead and new prophets had risen to take his place” (*The Long Loneliness*, pp. 43, 46).

Dorothy moved to New York City at the age of 18, working as a journalist for socialist newspapers and cheering the Communist Revolution of 1917. She protested and picketed and went to jail in the interest of various causes: opposition to the draft, support for labor unions, support for women’s right to vote. She socialized with radical poets and playwrights and artists. She went through failed love affairs, a marriage that lasted a year, and an abortion she would regret for the rest of her life. A friend committed suicide. Some biographers say Dorothy herself attempted suicide when a man she had been living with left her. Bright and talented as she was, her life was a wreck.

Had God abandoned Dorothy? Left her in her confusion and sin? No, even in those darkest hours she felt the prodding of his Spirit. She wrote:

Many a morning after sitting all night in taverns...I went to an early morning Mass at St. Joseph’s Church on Sixth Avenue and knelt in the back of the church, not knowing what was going on at the altar, but warmed and comforted by the lights and silence, the kneeling people and the atmosphere of worship (*ibid.*, p. 84).

“The Happiest Moment of My Life”

And so Dorothy continued in a swirl of contradictions. A turning point for her occurred when she became pregnant in the course of a common-law marriage to British atheist Forster Batterham. Because she had feared the earlier abortion had left her sterile, this pregnancy, illicit though it was, seemed to her a sign of grace and hope. The birth of little Tamar Teresa flooded her with renewed religious feeling. “No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy as I often felt after the birth of my child” she wrote. “With this came the need to worship, to adore” (*The Long Loneliness*, p. 139).

Dorothy resolved that Tamar would be baptized Catholic, though she knew this would drive Forster away (it did). Ultimately, she herself was received into the Church in December of 1927 and confirmed the following Pentecost. In an article in 1975 she recalled that Pentecost as “the happiest moment of my life.”

Dorothy’s love of Christ and the Church deepened day by day, but she wrestled with how the struggle for justice that ran so deep in her heart fit with her new life as a Catholic. She loved the saints (with a special devotion to St. Thérèse of Lisieux) and saw how much they had done to minister to the poor, the sick and the downtrodden. “But there was another question in my mind,” she wrote.

“Why was so much done in remedying the evil instead of avoiding it in the first place? ...Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves but to do away with slavery?” (*From Union Square to Rome*, p. 50).

The Catholic Worker Is Born

And so in 1932, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, Dorothy poured out her heart to God at the National Shrine in Washington, D.C. She prayed that “some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor” (*The Long Loneliness*, p. 166).

Her prayer was answered the very next day, when she met Peter Maurin, an immigrant from France and former Christian Brother, who shared with her a vision for joining Christian charity and holiness with the struggle for justice. Together they founded the *Catholic Worker* newspaper, aimed at changing society through the Church’s social teachings, and in less than a year 100,000 copies were being printed each month. The newspaper spawned a movement attracting idealistic young men and women and leading to the establishment of houses of hospitality for the homeless and the hungry. Here at last was a radical Christian alternative to the Marxist agenda for the poor and the working class. It embraced charity and

pacifism, focusing on a revolution of hearts in the spirit of the Beatitudes rather than armed class warfare. Today there are close to 200 Catholic Worker houses throughout the world. They have always operated independently, without officers or boards of directors, joined only by their common vision rooted in the Gospel.

A Life Rooted in the Eucharist

Dorothy was an active contemplative. She understood that she and those working with her could bear fruit only if they were united as branches to Christ the Vine, and that it would be better for the Catholic Worker movement to dissolve than for it to lose sight of that truth. The center of her life was daily Mass and the Eucharist. Many times she insisted to those who would join her in the movement that the Mass was “the greatest work of the day” and that all other works must flow from worship. Her daily spiritual regimen included praying the Office and the Rosary, meditating on Scripture and doing spiritual reading. She even considered leaving the Catholic Worker movement for a more contemplative life in the 1940’s, but ultimately decided against it.

Cause for Canonization Opens

Dorothy Day died on November 29, 1980. Just twenty years later, on March 16, 2000, Cardinal John O’Connor of New York announced with great joy that the opening

of her cause for canonization had been approved by the Vatican. This was especially fitting in that she had insisted often that every Christian is called to be a saint.

Let us conclude with one last quote from this great woman. It comes from a Christmas reflection on Mary and Joseph finding “no room” at the inn in Bethlehem:

It is no use to say that we are born two thousand years too late to give room to Christ. Nor will those who live at the end of the world have been born too late. Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts.

But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that He speaks, with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers and children that He gazes; with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers and suburban housewives that He gives. It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that He walks, and with the heart of anyone in need that He longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving it to Christ (*Catholic Worker*, December, 1945).

Questions for Discussion

1. Jesus tells us we must abide in him and in his love in order to bear fruit. What are some of the keys to abiding in him? What have holy men and women like Dorothy Day done to deepen their abiding union with Christ?

2. Jesus talks about our need for “pruning” by the Father. How do you think that happens in our lives? How did it happen in the life of Dorothy Day?

5. One of Dorothy Day’s favorite quotations was spoken by the saintly Fr. Zossima in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*:

“Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.”

What do you think this means?

6. In the quotation from Pope John Paul II, he talks about the danger of separating our lives into two parallel dimensions—our “spiritual” life and our “secular” life.

- What might be some examples of this?
- Why do you think it happens so easily?
- What can we do to avoid it?

Group Prayers of Intercession

8 to 10 minutes

Closing Prayer

Dorothy Day's Prayer for Love

Pray with me...

That men be joined together in love,
so strong a love in their march Godwards,
that they will draw all with them,
that all suspicion, anger, contention, bitterness
and violence
be burnt away in the fire of this love.

And may it open their eyes,
the brightness of this love,
to the works we can all perform together
in building up a new society,
in our work for food, clothing, shelter, education
and health for all men.

For these are the works of mercy,
of love and not of hate,
the works of good, not evil,
of God, not the Devil,
and where there is no love, put love and we will
find love;
because love is the measure by which we shall
be judged.

Amen.

(Catholic Worker, January 1963)