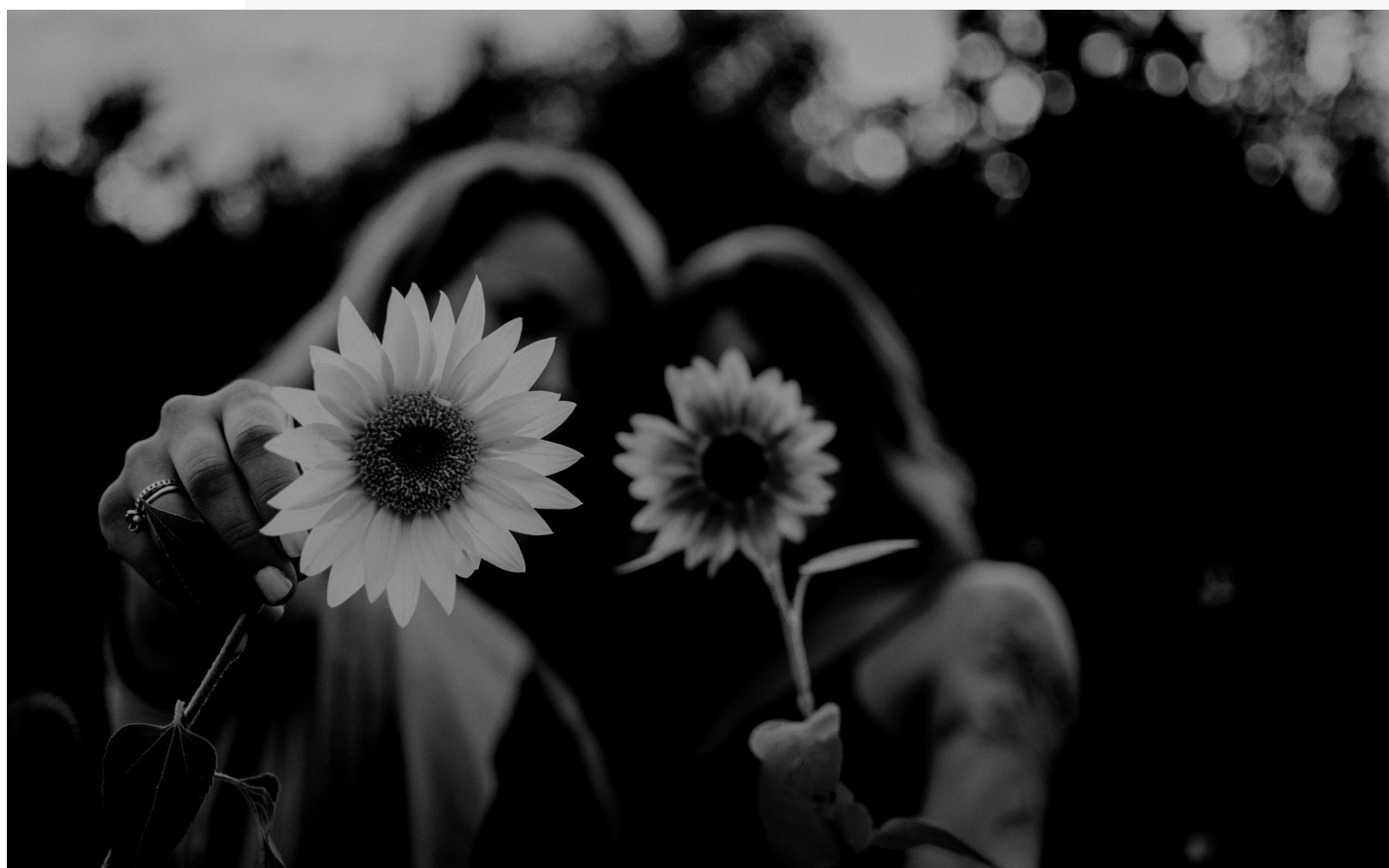


DIOCESE OF ARLINGTON

# Belong

YOUNG ADULT STUDY:  
CATHOLIC WOMEN AND THE FEMININE GENIUS IN THE CHURCH



STUDY GUIDE

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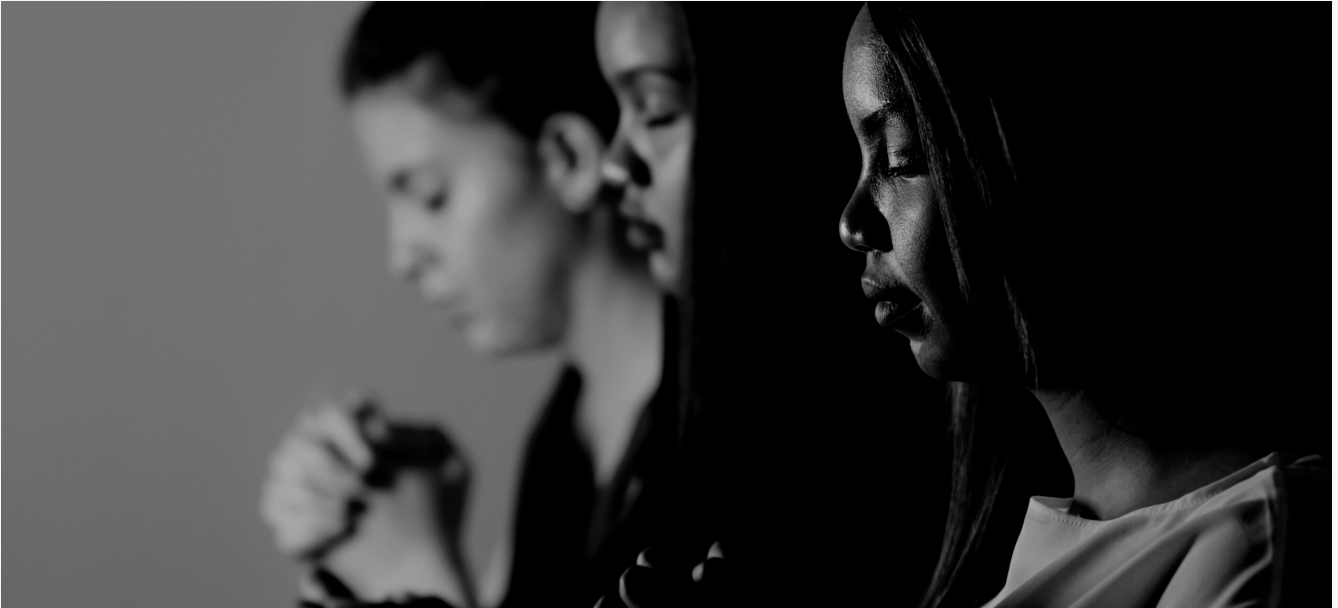
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# FOREWORD



**"THANK YOU,  
EVERY WOMAN,  
FOR THE SIMPLE  
FACT OF BEING A  
WOMAN! THROUGH  
THE INSIGHT  
WHICH IS SO MUCH  
A PART OF YOUR  
WOMANHOOD YOU  
ENRICH THE  
WORLD'S  
UNDERSTANDING  
AND HELP TO MAKE  
HUMAN RELATIONS  
MORE HONEST AND  
AUTHENTIC."**

**SAINT JOHN PAUL  
II, LETTER TO  
WOMEN 2**

The world tries to heavily influence the way women see themselves and identify their role in the world, whether that is based on the way they look, their professional accomplishments, or the different roles imposed on them. Yet, as proclaimed by Saint John Paul II in his *Letter to Women and Mulieris Dignitatem*, by being made in the Image and Likeness of God, women have a vital and special influence in the world through their feminine genius.

Within their various vocations in the world and their calling as sisters and daughters, women above all belong in the Church. By understanding their identity focused in Christ, women can learn how God sees them, His everlasting love for them, and His plan for their life. Through prayerful reading of scripture, reflection on the words of Saint John Paul II, and discussion, they will come to understand the world around them, their God-given genius, and how they *belong*.

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# USING THIS RESOURCE

This study is a tool to build community among women within the young adult community of their parish. It should be used as a starting point for creating a welcoming and Christ-centered small group. Each session contains the following parts which can be adapted for each participant's needs.

## **OPENING PRAYER & CLOSING PRAY**

Each session starts and ends with a prayer to help participants to be centered in the discussion for the session.

## **READINGS & REFLECTION**

Each session offers readings from Saint John Paul II's *Letter to Women* and/or *Mulieris Dignitatem*, as well as additional Scripture reading.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Each session offers discussion questions for the group to help understand what was read, as well as what God might be calling each participant to.

## WHO IS THIS FOR?

This Bible study aims at bringing women together in friendship and fellowship, to better understand their identity in Christ and as full and vital members of the Church. It is intended for those seeking community and taking the next steps in their relationship with God.



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# WEEK 1

## Our Identity

### Opening Prayer

"God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

*Gen 1:27*

### Reading

"7. Dear sisters, together let us reflect anew on the magnificent passage in Scripture which describes the creation of the human race and which has so much to say about your dignity and mission in the world.

The Book of Genesis speaks of creation in summary fashion, in language which is poetic and symbolic, yet profoundly true: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). The creative act of God takes place according to a precise plan. First of all, we are told that the human being is created "in the image and likeness of God" (cf. Gen 1:26). This expression immediately makes clear what is distinct about the human being with regard to the rest of creation. We are then told that, from the very beginning, man has been created "male and female" (Gen 1:27). Scripture itself provides the interpretation of this fact: even though man is surrounded by the innumerable creatures of the created world, he realizes that he is alone (cf. Gen 2:20). God intervenes in order to help him escape from this situation of solitude: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen 2:18). The creation of woman is thus marked from the outset by the principle of help: a help which is not one-sided but mutual. Woman complements man, just as man complements woman: men and women are complementary. Womanhood expresses the "human" as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way. When the Book of Genesis speaks of "help", it is not referring merely to acting, but also to being. Womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological. It is only through the duality of the "masculine" and the "feminine" that the "human" finds full realization."

*Letter to Women*

*Suggested Reading: Mulieris Dignitatem 6-8*



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# WEEK 1

## Our Identity

### Discussion Questions

1. Read Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:18-23. What stood out to you about the two passages?

*Allow for sharing.*

2. What do these passages highlight about our identity as human beings? What do they highlight about our womanhood?

3. In his Letter to Women, why do you believe Saint John Paul II discusses the creation narrative?

4. How should we read the women's role as "helpers"?

5. How do you see this complementarity of women and men in your life?

6. What do you base your identity on? Is it centered in Christ?

7. How can we live our identity as "made in the image and likeness of God" in our lives?

### Final Prayer

Lord, I pray that You would unlock my heart that I might be fully alive to my true identity in You. Give me clear revelation to see myself the way You see me. Help me to stand in Your truth against all enemy attacks and guard my heart with all vigilance. I thank You for my uniqueness and that I am made in Your image and likeness and I choose to believe the truth about how You see me. Help me to live a fruitful life now and overflow with Your love to others.

In Christ, Our Lord, Amen.



# WEEK 2

## Our vocation in the world

### Opening Prayer

"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

*Luke 1:38*

### Reading

"1. [...] I would now like to speak directly to every woman, to reflect with her on the problems and the prospects of what it means to be a woman in our time. In particular I wish to consider the essential issue of the dignity and rights of women, as seen in the light of the word of God.

This "dialogue" really needs to begin with a word of thanks. As I wrote in my Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Church "desires to give thanks to the Most Holy Trinity for the 'mystery of woman' and for every woman-for all that constitutes the eternal measure of her feminine dignity, for the 'great works of God', which throughout human history have been accomplished in and through her" (No. 31).

2. This word of thanks to the Lord for his mysterious plan regarding the vocation and mission of women in the world is at the same time a concrete and direct word of thanks to women, to every woman, for all that they represent in the life of humanity.

Thank you, women who are mothers! You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God's own smile upon the newborn child, the one who guides your child's first steps, who helps it to grow, and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life.

Thank you, women who are wives! You irrevocably join your future to that of your husbands, in a relationship of mutual giving, at the service of love and life.

Thank you, women who are daughters and women who are sisters! Into the heart of the family, and then of all society, you bring the richness of your sensitivity, your intuitiveness, your generosity and fidelity.



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# WEEK 2

## *Our vocation in the world*

Thank you, women who work! You are present and active in every area of life-social, economic, cultural, artistic and political. In this way you make an indispensable contribution to the growth of a culture which unites reason and feeling, to a model of life ever open to the sense of "mystery", to the establishment of economic and political structures ever more worthy of humanity.

Thank you, consecrated women! Following the example of the greatest of women, the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, you open yourselves with obedience and fidelity to the gift of God's love. You help the Church and all mankind to experience a "spousal" relationship to God, one which magnificently expresses the fellowship which God wishes to establish with his creatures.

Thank you, every woman, for the simple fact of being a woman! Through the insight which is so much a part of your womanhood you enrich the world's understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic."

*Letter to Women*

*Suggested Reading: Mulieris Dignitatem 1; 12-16*

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What stood out to you from this particular passage from Saint John Paul II's Letter to Women?
2. Do you see yourself as fitting in one of those categories that he mentioned? How?
3. How do you see a women's impact in the world? How do you see your own impact?
4. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, tells us that "Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being" (2392). How does this definition relate to the passage above?
5. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Saint John Paul II says "Every vocation has a profoundly personal and prophetic meaning. In "vocation" understood in this way, what is personally feminine reaches a new dimension: the dimension of the "mighty works of God", of which the woman becomes the living subject and an irreplaceable witness." What does he mean by that? How is this significant?



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# WEEK 2

## *Our vocation in the world*

6. Based on these definitions of vocation, and various paths they can lead as highlighted by Saint John Paul II, how do you understand your own vocation? What are some obstacles of living our vocations?

7. How can we help the women around us to live out their vocations and to be witness of Love?

8. What role do you believe integral formation, that is spiritual, intellectual, psychological, social, and physical, play in our lives, our vocations, and our support of one another?

### **Final Prayer**

O Mary, Mother of God and Our Spiritual Mother, the Mediatrix of All Graces and the Mother of the Church, you love us with your Immaculate Heart, and we love you with our fragile hearts. Hear our prayer for all women. We pray for devout and lax women, for strong and weak women, for married and single women, for mothers and virgins, for consecrated women, for housewives and women who work outside the home, for women who are students, for women in the military, for women who are Catholics and women who are non-practicing Catholics, for women who are not Catholics, for women who have abandoned the Catholic Church, for virtuous and sinful women, for women who are particularly tempted, for faithful and unfaithful women, for generous and ungenerous women, for women who have accepted the Gift of Life, for women who have aborted and women who have prevented conception, for women who dress modestly and those who do not, for wealthy and poor women, for young and old women, for women who are addicted, for healthy, sick and dying women, and for the souls of all women in Purgatory. O Woman, you who are the Model of women, keep all women close to your Immaculate Heart, and present them to the Most Sacred Heart of your Divine Son Jesus Christ, Who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is always Our Hope and the Source of our strength forever. Amen.

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# WEEK 3

## Sisterhood

### Opening Prayer

"Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge.  
Your people shall be my people and your God, my God."

*Ruth 1:16*

### Reading

"Thank you, ... women who are sisters! Into the heart of the family, and then of all society, you bring the richness of your sensitivity, your intuitiveness, your generosity and fidelity."

*Letter to Women*

Ruth 1:16-17

Luke 1:36-56

*Suggested Reading: Mulieris Dignitatem 11*

### Discussion Questions

1. What stood out to you from the passage from the Book of Ruth?
2. What stood out to you from the passage from the Gospel of Luke?
3. How do you see these two passages relating to one another? How do they connect to the "thank you" from St. John Paul II?
4. How do you see this richness of sensitivity, intuitiveness, generosity and fidelity manifest in women around you? Do you believe these are qualities you foster in your own life?
5. Do you believe women are called to womanhood with one another? Why or why not?
6. What are the biggest obstacles for women in seeking out friendships? How do we overcome this obstacles and build holy friendships?
7. What are the role of friendships within a parish community? Why are they important?
8. How does the role of fraternal charity, which includes time together, communal works of charity, and support of one another, connects to the reading and discussions of this week?





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# WEEK 3

## Sisterhood

### Final Prayer

"Mother Mary, I long for authentic, holy relationships with other women. I seek to receive mercy from your Son for the times I allow darkness to seep into my relationships:

For the times I judge women on appearances or material possessions . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

For the times I compare myself to other women instead of looking to You, Lord, for my worth . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

For the times I expect other women to validate or fill me in ways that belong to You alone . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

For the times I avoid friendship with women because of fear, jealousy, or judgement . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

For the times I envy another woman's gifts, talents, possessions, or relationships . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

For the times I do not listen well when another woman is being vulnerable with me . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

For the times I lack compassion for another woman in her pain, suffering, or hardship . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

For the times I destroy another woman's dignity through gossip . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

For the times I diminish another woman in order to feel better about myself . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

For the times I indulge in suspicion and choose to assume the worst of another woman rather than seek out Christ living within her . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

For the times I harbor anger, hatred, or resentment towards another woman . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

For the times I choose unforgiveness over reconciliation in my broken relationships with women . . . Jesus, have mercy on me.

Mother Mary, along with St. Elizabeth and through the example of your holy friendship, show me how to reverence others as you did. Teach me how to bring Christ to others and to receive the miracle of Christ other women bring me. Walk with me as I grow in vulnerability with other women, being honest about who I am and receiving other women as they are.

May I seek to be an instrument of authentic love towards my sisters in Christ, always remembering that each are made in God's image and likeness. Help us all work together to restore one another, our Church, and our world. Amen."

\*Blessed Is She's Litany for Female Friendships



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# WEEK 4

## Daughters of the King

### Opening Prayer

"As proof that you are children,\* God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God."

*Galatians 4:6-7*

### Reading

"Each person's fundamental vocation is revealed in this "reigning", for each person has been created in the "image" of the One who is Lord of heaven and earth and called to be his adopted son or daughter in Christ. Man is the only creature on earth "which God willed for its own sake", as the Second Vatican Council teaches; it significantly adds that man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self" (Gaudium et Spes, 24)."

*Letter to Women*

*Suggested Reading: Mulieris Dignitatem 17-22*

### Discussion Questions

1. Read Jeremiah 29:11-13 and Romans 8:28-30. What stood out to you about the two passages?

*Allow for sharing.*

2. What do these passages highlight about our identity as daughters of God?

3. Again, Saint John Paul II reminds us that we are made in the "image" of God. How do we see this play out in these passages from scripture?

4. What does it mean to be called an "adopted daughter in Christ"?

5. What's the relationship between being daughters of God and our vocations in the world?



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# WEEK 4

## *Daughters of the King*

6. How are we called to give of ourselves as daughters?
7. What is the role of personal prayer in this identity as daughters?  
How can praying with others take part in it?
8. How can we seek to live out this role through our liturgical celebrations?

### **Final Prayer**

Father in Heaven,  
when the Spirit came down upon Jesus  
at His Baptism in the Jordan,  
You revealed Him as Your own Beloved Son.  
Keep me, Your child,  
born of water and the Spirit,  
faithful to my calling.  
May I, who share in Your Life  
as Your child through Baptism,  
follow in Christ's path of service to people.  
Let me become one in His Sacrifice  
and hear His Word with faith.  
May I live as Your child,  
following the example of Jesus.  
Amen.



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# WEEK 5

## Our Feminine Genius pt. 1

### Opening Prayer

"And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

*Luke 1:45*

### Reading

"The Church sees in Mary the highest expression of the "feminine genius" and she finds in her a source of constant inspiration. Mary called herself the "handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38). Through obedience to the Word of God she accepted her lofty yet not easy vocation as wife and mother in the family of Nazareth. Putting herself at God's service, she also put herself at the service of others: a service of love. Precisely through this service Mary was able to experience in her life a mysterious, but authentic "reign". It is not by chance that she is invoked as "Queen of heaven and earth". The entire community of believers thus invokes her; many nations and peoples call upon her as their "Queen". For her, "to reign" is to serve! Her service is "to reign"!

[...]

The maternal "reign" of Mary consists in this. She who was, in all her being, a gift for her Son, has also become a gift for the sons and daughters of the whole human race, awakening profound trust in those who seek her guidance along the difficult paths of life on the way to their definitive and transcendent destiny. Each one reaches this final goal by fidelity to his or her own vocation; this goal provides meaning and direction for the earthly labours of men and women alike."

*Letter to Women*

*Suggested Reading: Mulieris Dignitatem 2-5*

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# WEEK 5

## Our Feminine Genius pt. 1

### Discussion Questions

1. How does Mary's example of feminine genius impact your life?
2. When thinking about the feminine genius do you think of Mary or another saint?
3. How can we follow in Mary's example? What are the obstacles?
4. How can we look up to Mary and her feminine genius, while avoiding unhealthy comparison?
5. How does Mary's example of feminine genius calls us to fraternal charity?
6. How does her example relate to the celebration of the liturgy?

### Final Prayer

Remember,  
O most gracious Virgin Mary,  
that never was it known that anyone  
who fled to thy protection,  
implored thy help,  
or sought thine intercession was left unaided.  
Inspired by this confidence,  
I fly unto thee,  
O Virgin of virgins, my mother;  
to thee do I come,  
before thee I stand,  
sinful and sorrowful.  
O Mother of the Word Incarnate,  
despise not my petitions,  
but in thy mercy hear and answer me.  
Amen.





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# WEEK 6

## Our Feminine Genius pt.2

### Opening Prayer

"Charm is deceitful and beauty fades; but a woman who fears the Lord will be praised. Reward her for her work let her actions result in public praise."

*Proverbs 31:30-31*

### Reading

"Thank you, every woman, for the simple fact of being a woman! Through the insight which is so much a part of your womanhood you enrich the world's understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic.

[...]

It is thus my hope, dear sisters, that you will reflect carefully on what it means to speak of the "genius of women", not only in order to be able to see in this phrase a specific part of God's plan which needs to be accepted and appreciated, but also in order to let this genius be more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole, as well as in the life of the Church.

[...]

In this vast domain of service, the Church's two-thousand-year history, for all its historical conditioning, has truly experienced the "genius of woman"; from the heart of the Church there have emerged women of the highest calibre who have left an impressive and beneficial mark in history. I think of the great line of woman martyrs, saints and famous mystics. In a particular way I think of Saint Catherine of Siena and of Saint Teresa of Avila, whom Pope Paul VI of happy memory granted the title of Doctors of the Church. And how can we overlook the many women, inspired by faith, who were responsible for initiatives of extraordinary social importance, especially in serving the poorest of the poor? The life of the Church in the Third Millennium will certainly not be lacking in new and surprising manifestations of "the feminine genius".

*Letter to Women*

*Suggested Reading: Mulieris Dignitatem 28-31*



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# WEEK 6

## Our Feminine Genius pt. 2

### Discussion Questions

1. Saint John Paul II and St. Theresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) tells us that some of the key aspects of the feminine genius are sensitivity, reciprocity, and generosity. How do you see these attributes in your life or relating to yourself?
2. How do you see women impacting human relations? How can they make it more honest and authentic?
3. How can we see the feminine genius in the world?
4. Pope Francis said that "The feminine genius is needed wherever we make important decisions." Why?
5. How are the attributes of the feminine genius important to decision making and in the world?
6. What are some saints who embodied the feminine genius? What about their lives particularly stand out to you?
7. How can you follow in the example of the saints and live out your genius?

### Final Prayer

O God, Father of all Mercies,  
Provider of a bountiful Harvest,  
send Your Graces upon those  
You have called to gather the fruits of Your labor;  
preserve and strengthen them in their lifelong service of you.  
Open the hearts of Your children  
that they may discern Your Holy Will;  
inspire in them a love and desire to surrender themselves  
to serving others in the name of Your son, Jesus Christ.  
Teach all Your faithful to follow their respective paths in life  
guided by Your Divine Word and Truth.  
Through the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary,  
all the Angels, and Saints, humbly hear our prayers  
and grant Your Church's needs, through Christ, our Lord.  
Amen.

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# WEEK 7

## Living Out Our Genius

### Opening Prayer

"They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers."

*Acts 2:42*

### Reading

At the beginning of the Church, when it was still small, Christians gathered in intimate communities in homes to live the new Way (Acts 22:4), founded on four pillars: the prophetic proclamation of truth of the faith ("the teaching of the apostles"); the priestly celebration of the beauty of grace in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist ("the breaking of the bread"); the service of shepherding one another in the goodness of charity ("the communal life"); and, fostering union with God and with one another in prayer ("the prayers").

Indeed, Christianity is essentially a communal faith: the faith is taught, passed on in community; the faith is celebrated in the communal liturgy; the faith is lived in communal charity; and, prayers are offered in communion. In fact, we come to know the truth, beauty and goodness of God in communion with others. This is because the communion of love of the Three Persons of the Most Blessed Trinity is shared with each human person through his or her communion of love with Jesus through the Church, in which all are united in communion with one another—in which many distinct persons are united by the same Spirit of Jesus which they have received; they are distinct members but one Mystical Body of Christ.

The basic unit of communion in the Church is the family, the intimate "domestic Church." Families are then united in communion with other families through parishes (modern descendants of the early home churches) established by the Church to bring Christians together in faith, in worship, in charity and in prayer. (To avoid insularity and separation, parishes are united with other parishes in dioceses in communion with their bishops, and dioceses are united with the universal Church in communion with the Bishop of Rome.)



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# WEEK 7

## Living Out Our Genius

With the growth of the Church and the current, large size of parishes (and of other, similar faith communities, like college campus ministries, etc.) a sense of intimacy in the faith community—of truly knowing one another, sharing the foundations of the faith, and being mutually supported on the pilgrimage of faith—is easily lost; and, on some level, unity is weakened as well.

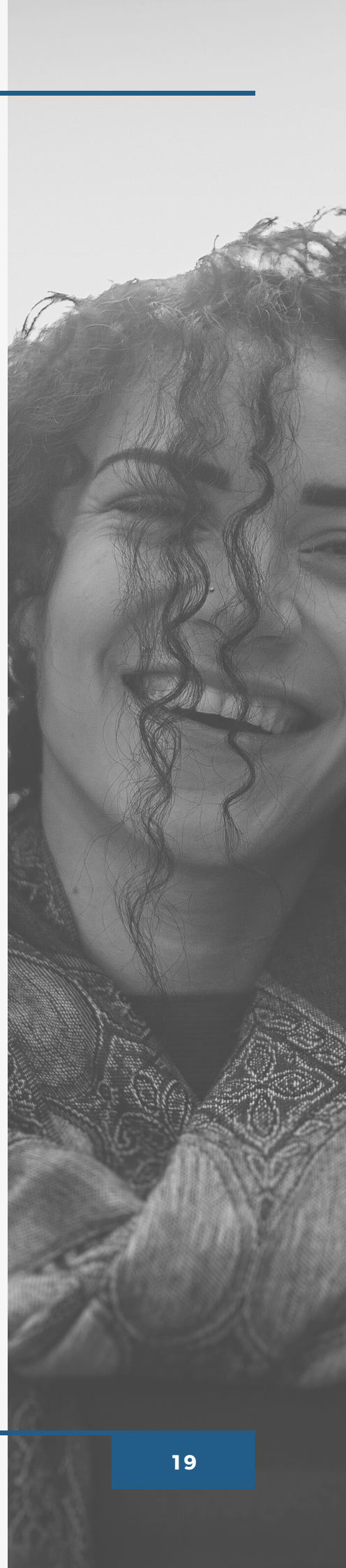
That intimate unity can be strengthened through small faith communities bound by faith, worship, charity and prayer. The experience of communal life in a small faith community formed by the four pillars constitutive of any Christian community—that is, the experience of making the Christian journey in intimate communion with others—better enables each member to grow in faith, hope and love. Small faith communities may have particular charisms which they wish to live and in which they wish to grow. Small faith communities avoid insularity and become leaven in the larger community through an openness to formation, worship, charity and prayer with other small faith communities and with the larger community.

*Rev. Donald J. Planty, Jr.*

*Suggested Reading: Mulieris Dignitatem 23-27*

### Discussion Questions

1. What stood out to you from the reflection by Fr. Planty?
2. How do you see the role of the small catholic communities in the life of the faithful? What about your own life?
3. What are the connections between the writings of St. Paul II and Fr. Planty's reflection?
4. Look at the four pillars of the catholic communities at the end of this study. What stood out to you? How does it relate to the previous sessions?
5. What do you see are the benefits of pursuing this? What about the challenges?
6. Is the idea of pursuing a small community of faith something that is attractive to you? Why or why not?



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# WEEK 7

## Living Out Our Genius

*Since this is the last session of this study, consider discussing long terms take-aways as women who belong in the church and the possibility of moving forward as a small catholic community. All are invited to further discuss the four pillars and its practical considerations, as well as, fill out the community covenant found at the end of this study.*

### Final Prayer

Embracing Father,  
You grace each of us with  
equal measure in your love.  
Let us learn to love  
our neighbors more deeply,  
so that we can create  
peaceful and just communities.  
Inspire us to use our creative energies  
to build the structures we need  
to overcome the obstacles  
of intolerance and indifference.  
May Jesus provide us the example needed  
and send the Spirit to  
warm our hearts for the journey.  
Amen

*"We have all known the long loneliness  
and we have learned that the only solution is love  
and that love comes with community."  
Servant of God Dorothy Day*



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# SAINTLY INSPIRATIONS

SAINTS WHO EXEMPLIFY THE FEMININE GENIUS AND WITNESS OF CHRIST'S LOVE



**SAINT GIANNA  
BERETTA MOLLA**



**SAINT TERESA  
BENEDICTA OF THE  
CROSS**

*EDITH STEIN*



**BLESSED CHIARA  
BADANO**

Saint Gianna understood the realities of being a wife, doctor, and working mother. She believed deeply in the holiness of the family and in the sanctity of human life. It was this deep belief that gave her the courage to entrust herself and her family to God's loving hands.

The youngest daughter of a devout Jewish family with eleven children, nothing about Edith's earliest experiences suggested that she would one day die a Catholic martyr. A German Jewish philosopher and Discalced Carmelite nun., St. Theresa understood the dignity of women and in a special way the feminine genius.

A popular Italian teenager, from a loving family, Chiara "Luce" Badano had a rock solid faith that was nurtured by retreats and youth ministry programs. Chiara loved to hang out in coffee shops, and she was great at tennis, swimming, and mountain climbing. Chiara understood the importance of prayer and joy in ones life.

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# SAINTLY INSPIRATIONS

SAINTS WHO EXEMPLIFY THE FEMININE GENIUS AND WITNESS OF CHRIST'S LOVE



**BLESSED MARIA  
CORSINI**



**SAINT KATHERINE  
DREXEL**



**SAINT BERNADETTE  
SOUBIROUS**

Blessed Maria Corsini, born in Italy in 1884, "lived an ordinary life in an extraordinary way" according to St. John Paul II. She and her husband were a model of married love and religious commitment, while fostering to serve those around them. Their feast day is celebrated on their wedding day, November 25th.

Born in Philadelphia in 1858, she had an excellent education and traveled widely. While being a rich girl, Katherine turned away from much of it and had been interested in the plight of the Indians and those less fortunate. In all, she established 50 missions for Indians in 16 states.

Bernadette Soubirous was an impoverished, malnourished, asthmatic, uneducated, possibly learning disabled 14-year-old when she accompanied her sister and a friend on a firewood-gathering mission to the grotto of Massabielle. Despite much disbelief from those around her, her visions of Our Lady led to the shrine in Lourdes.

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# FURTHER READING RECOMMENDATIONS

## Articles

- FOCUS, "**the Feminine Genius**"  
<https://focusoncampus.org/content/the-feminine-genius>
- The Catholic Women, "**Finding Friends Wherever God Has You**"  
<https://thecatholicwoman.co/letterstowomen/finding-friends-wherever-god-has-you>
- Blessed is She, "**Relational Prayer: Listening in the silence of our hearts:**"  
<https://blessedishe.net/blog/relational-prayer-listening-silence-hearts/>
- Letters to Women, "**11 Quotes From the Saints on the Beauty of Female Friendship**"  
<https://letterstowomenpodcast.com/blog/friendship-saint-quotes>
- Blessed is She, "**How to Write a Personal Litany of Saints**"  
<https://blessedishe.net/blog/write-personal-litany-saints/>

## Books

- *Essays on Women* by St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross
- *Interior Castle* by St. Teresa of Avila
- *My Badass Book of Saints: Courageous Women Who Showed Me How to Live* by Maria Morera Johnson
- *Real Women, Real Saints: Friends for Your Spiritual Journey* by Gina Loehr
- *The World's First Love: Mary, Mother of God* by Fulton J. Sheen
- *The Four Loves* by C.S. Lewis
- *The Way of Trust and Love: A Retreat Guided by St. Therese of Lisieux* by Father Jacques Philippe
- *A Witness to Joy* by Cristiana Paccini and Simone Troisi
- *To Quell the Terror* by William Bush
- *Behold Your Mother* by Tim Staples:
- *Walking with Mary* by Edward Sri:
- *The Lazy Liturgical* by Jenna Hines
- *Lovely: How I Learned to Embrace the Body God Gave Me* by Amanda Martinez Beck
- *Girl, Arise!* by Claire Swinarski
- *Be Brave in the Scared* by Mary Lenaburg



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"THEREFORE THE CHURCH GIVES THANKS FOR EACH AND EVERY WOMAN: FOR MOTHERS, FOR SISTERS, FOR WIVES; FOR WOMEN CONSECRATED TO GOD IN VIRGINITY; FOR WOMEN DEDICATED TO THE MANY HUMAN BEINGS WHO AWAIT THE GRATUITOUS LOVE OF ANOTHER PERSON; FOR WOMEN WHO WATCH OVER THE HUMAN PERSONS IN THE FAMILY, WHICH IS THE FUNDAMENTAL SIGN OF THE HUMAN COMMUNITY; FOR WOMEN WHO WORK PROFESSIONALLY, AND WHO AT TIMES ARE BURDENED BY A GREAT SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY; FOR "PERFECT" WOMEN AND FOR "WEAK" WOMEN - FOR ALL WOMEN AS THEY HAVE COME FORTH FROM THE HEART OF GOD IN ALL THE BEAUTY AND RICHNESS OF THEIR FEMININITY; AS THEY HAVE BEEN EMBRACED BY HIS ETERNAL LOVE; AS, TOGETHER WITH MEN, THEY ARE PILGRIMS ON THIS EARTH, WHICH IS THE TEMPORAL "HOMELAND" OF ALL PEOPLE AND IS TRANSFORMED SOMETIMES INTO A "VALLEY OF TEARS"; AS THEY ASSUME, TOGETHER WITH MEN, A COMMON RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE DESTINY OF HUMANITY ACCORDING TO DAILY NECESSITIES AND ACCORDING TO THAT DEFINITIVE DESTINY WHICH THE HUMAN FAMILY HAS IN GOD HIMSELF, IN THE BOSOM OF THE INEFFABLE TRINITY.

THE CHURCH GIVES THANKS FOR ALL THE MANIFESTATIONS OF THE FEMININE "GENIUS" WHICH HAVE APPEARED IN THE COURSE OF HISTORY, IN THE MIDST OF ALL PEOPLES AND NATIONS; SHE GIVES THANKS FOR ALL THE CHARISMS WHICH THE HOLY SPIRIT DISTRIBUTES TO WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD, FOR ALL THE VICTORIES WHICH SHE OWES TO THEIR FAITH, HOPE AND CHARITY: SHE GIVES THANKS FOR ALL THE FRUITS OF FEMININE HOLINESS.

THE CHURCH ASKS AT THE SAME TIME THAT THESE INVALUABLE "MANIFESTATIONS OF THE SPIRIT" (CF. 1 COR 12:4FF.), WHICH WITH GREAT GENEROSITY ARE POURED FORTH UPON THE "DAUGHTERS" OF THE ETERNAL JERUSALEM, MAY BE ATTENTIVELY RECOGNIZED AND APPRECIATED SO THAT THEY MAY RETURN FOR THE COMMON GOOD OF THE CHURCH AND OF HUMANITY, ESPECIALLY IN OUR TIMES. MEDITATING ON THE BIBLICAL MYSTERY OF THE "WOMAN", THE CHURCH PRAYS THAT IN THIS MYSTERY ALL WOMEN MAY DISCOVER THEMSELVES AND THEIR "SUPREME VOCATION".

MAY MARY, WHO "IS A MODEL OF THE CHURCH IN THE MATTER OF FAITH, CHARITY, AND PERFECT UNION WITH CHRIST", [63] OBTAIN FOR ALL OF US THIS SAME "GRACE", IN THE YEAR WHICH WE HAVE DEDICATED TO HER AS WE APPROACH THE THIRD MILLENNIUM FROM THE COMING OF CHRIST."

*Mulieris Dignitatem*



# SMALL COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

*by Rev. Donald J. Planty*

## REFLECTIONS

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life<sup>1</sup>, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Acts 2:42

At the beginning of the Church, when it was still small, Christians gathered in intimate communities in homes to live the new Way (Acts 22:4), founded on four pillars: the prophetic proclamation of truth of the faith (“the teaching of the apostles”); the priestly celebration of the beauty of grace in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist (“the breaking of the bread”); the service of shepherding one another in the goodness of charity (“the communal life”); and, fostering union with God and with one another in prayer (“the prayers”).

Indeed, Christianity is essentially a communal faith: the faith is taught, passed on in community; the faith is celebrated in the communal liturgy; the faith is lived in communal charity; and, prayers are offered in communion. In fact, we come to know the truth, beauty and goodness of God in communion with others. This is because the communion of love of the Three Persons of the Most Blessed Trinity is shared with each human person through his or her communion of love with Jesus through the Church, in which all are united in communion with one another—in which many distinct persons are united by the same Spirit of Jesus which they have received; they are distinct members but one Mystical Body of Christ.

The basic unit of communion in the Church is the family, the intimate “domestic Church.” Families are then united in communion with other families through parishes (modern descendants of the early home churches) established by the Church to bring Christians together in faith, in worship, in charity and in prayer. (To avoid insularity and separation, parishes are united with other parishes in dioceses in communion with their bishops, and dioceses are united with the universal Church in communion with the Bishop of Rome.) With the growth of the Church and the current, large size of parishes (and of other, similar faith communities, like college campus ministries, etc.) a sense of intimacy in the faith community—of truly knowing one another, sharing the foundations of the faith, and being mutually supported on the pilgrimage of faith—is easily lost; and, on some level, unity is weakened as well.

That intimate unity can be strengthened through a small community of faith (SCF) bound by faith, worship, charity and prayer. These groups are typically single-sex though with regular opportunities for members of various groups to meet. The experience of communal life in a small community of faith formed by the four pillars constitutive of any Christian community—that is, the experience of making the Christian journey in intimate communion with others—better enables each member to grow in faith, hope and love. Small communities of faith may have particular charisms which they wish to live and in which they wish to grow. Small communities of faith avoid insularity and become leaven in the larger community through an openness to formation, worship, charity and prayer with other small communities of faith and with the larger community.


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<sup>1</sup> Communal life: koinonia (Greek); communio (Latin)

# THE FOUR PILLARS

The authenticity of any small community of faith depends on the four pillars or essential elements of Christian community, of the Church, being present. Following are some concrete recommendations for constituting such communities. Small communities of faith (SCF's) live:

**TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES**



**INTEGRAL FORMATION**

- Regular formation in the faith in general (e.g. a Bible or other book study, an online course, etc.)
- Regular formation in “faith communion,” in fraternal charity, in particular
- Regular integral formation (spiritual, intellectual, psychological, social, physical)

**BREAKING OF THE BREAD**



**LITURGICAL CELEBRATION**

- Members of SCF's regularly celebrate the Eucharist together
  - Attend Mass on the Lord's Day and/or on another day
  - Communal adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament
- Members are committed to the regular practice of the Sacrament of Penance
- Consider inaugurating the community with a blessing/dedication that could be renewed annually

**COMMUNAL LIFE**



**FRATERNAL CHARITY**

- SCF's generally gather weekly for their basic group meetings.
- Members regularly share fraternal meals, and enjoy other community recreation
- Members regularly do some communal work of charity, or volunteering
- Members may have “accountability partners” for mutual support outside the group

**PRAYER**



**UNITY IN PRAYERS**

- SCF's incorporate communal prayer into their meetings, involving both an objective element (the inspired Word of God in Sacred Scripture) and a subjective element (personal prayers of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, contrition and supplication/intercession)
- Communal prayer may involve song, which is “praying twice”
- Members may go an annual retreat or day(s) of recollection together

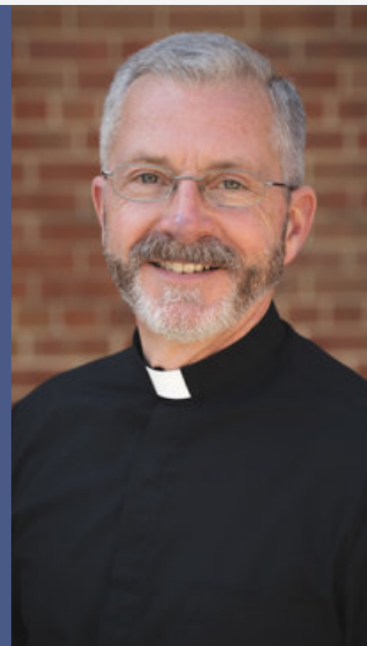


## PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS


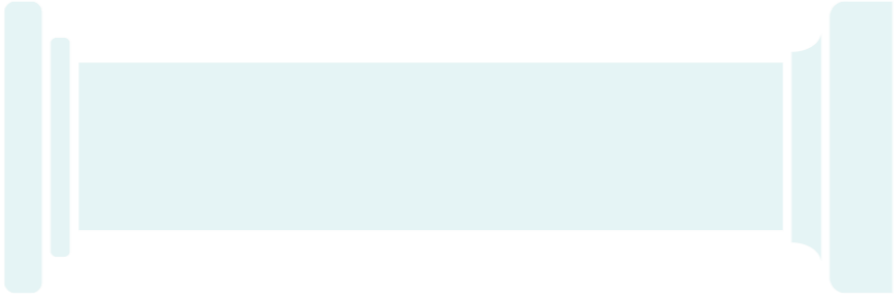
- **Covenant.** It is helpful to draw up a community “covenant” which explains the community. This may include a name, charism, and goals for living the four pillars explained above. See our Community Covenant Template for help.
- **Name.** The SCF may have its own name, ideally a biblical word or a term from Christian tradition.
- **Leadership.** Every community should have a leader or co-leaders, approved by the pastor or his representative. The group may also choose a mentor who helps shepherd the community (e.g. a priest).
- **Openness.** While intimate unity within SCF’s is encouraged, any semblance of exclusivity is to be avoided; rather, the group should be leaven in their parish and community, and foster communion and activities with other SCF’s, with their parish, with their diocese, and with the universal Church.
- **Size.** It is recommended that communities have no more than thirteen members in order to foster unity, mutual knowledge and intimate friendship.
- **Growth.** Groups grow through the invitation of new members, but then split when reaching more than thirteen members. Community members ought to be developed and called upon by the appropriate authority to lead or to help establish new communities.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR


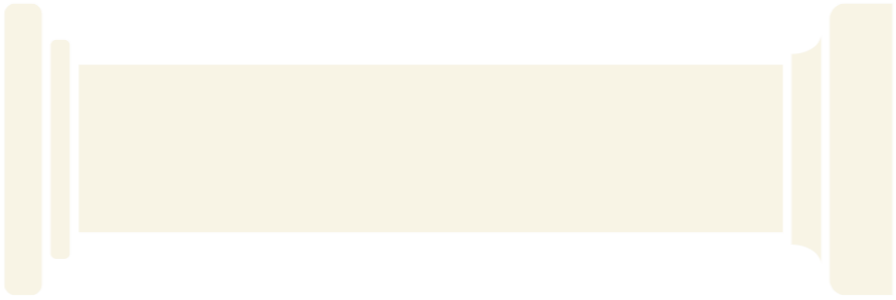
Father Planty has served as Pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Arlington, Virginia since 2014. While there, he has helped to build and promote a vibrant and fruitful small-group ministry for hundreds of young adults and other faithful. Prior to his time at St. Charles, Father Planty studied for and received a J.C.D. (Doctor of Canon Law) degree from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, writing his dissertation on "The Law of the Church and the Building of Churches: Canon 1216 and Sacred Architecture." He served in the diplomatic service of the Holy See at the Secretariat of State in Vatican City, and at the Apostolic Nunciatures in Cairo, Egypt, and in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In addition, for four years was Head Chaplain of Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia.



Fill out the Community Covenant below. Use the St. Charles Small Communities of Faith document for further explanation of each pillar.

 <b>TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES</b>	<b>INTEGRAL FORMATION</b>	How will our group grow in faith formation (spiritual, intellectual, psychological, social, physical)?	
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 <b>BREAKING OF THE BREAD</b>	<b>LITURGICAL CELEBRATION</b>	How will our group commit to celebration of the Sacraments?	
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 <b>COMMUNAL LIFE</b>	<b>FRATERNAL CHARITY</b>	How will our group commit to building authentic friendship?	
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 <b>PRAYER</b>	<b>UNITY IN PRAYERS</b>	How will our group commit to establishing a thriving prayer life?	
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