

S H A R P E N E D B Y

IRON

A GUIDE TO BUILDING AUTHENTIC BROTHERHOOD

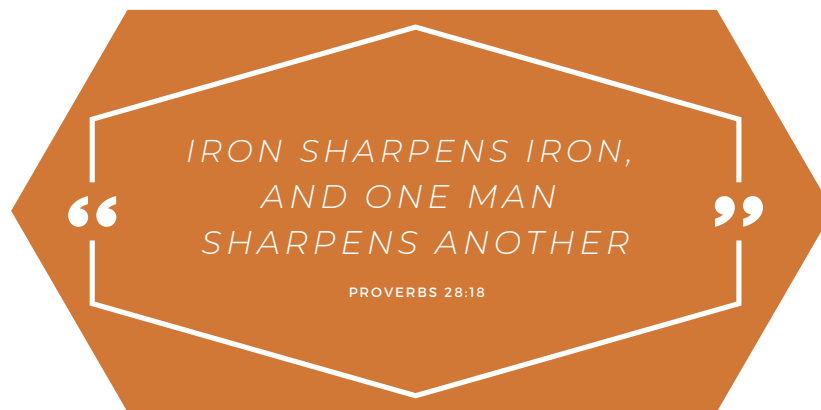


DIOCESE OF ARLINGTON
YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY

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INTRODUCTION



What does it mean to be a man? Have you ever asked that question? Many men have, but especially in this time and culture, it is difficult to find a satisfactory answer let alone the truth. Even within church communities, false ideas and narratives infiltrate the minds of men. Discovering your authentic, masculine identity is a difficult task, but it is necessary to find fulfillment and to give the world your best you. Two things are necessary to begin this undertaking: 1) the Lord and 2) a band of brothers. God speaks to us through King Solomon when he says "iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another" (Pro 28:18). Men are made strong, but need to be strengthened by others. Find a group of men who are ready to go through the gauntlet with you and proceed.

Are you ready to be sharpened?

USING THIS RESOURCE

This guide is a tool to build a parish-based community of men who challenge and support one another. Each session contains the following parts which can be adapted for each participants' needs:

OPENING PRAYER

Each session starts with the group practicing lectio divina together with a Scripture passage. For information on how to pray lectio divina, see the resource in the Appendix.

READING & DISCUSSION

Read and discuss these with your brothers to inspire and renew your mind.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Ask and answer these questions (or others you come up with) together. Do not feel the need to get through every question. For best results, select or create questions that are appropriate for your group ahead of time.

CHALLENGE

End each session with a challenge that each man will strive to live out in the coming week. Accountability and honest effort are vital for making this a transformative community and experience.

WHO IS THIS FOR?

This guide is for any man who is seeking community, fulfillment, and a life of excellence. It is not for the perfect, but those striving to understand and live their vocation. Together, men in this group will better understand their identity in Christ and develop as full and vital members of the Church.





WEEK 1

Called By Jesus

"God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Gen 1: 27

Opening Prayer

While the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. He saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, he asked him to put out a short distance from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch."

Simon said in reply, "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets."

When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their nets were tearing. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come to help them. They came and filled both boats so that they were in danger of sinking. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him and all those with him, and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon. Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men."

When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything* and followed him.

Luke 5:1-11

Reading

Excerpt From *Confessions*

By St. Augustine of Hippo

Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we men, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you – we also carry our mortality about with us, carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud. You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

Grant me to know and understand, Lord, which comes first. To call upon you or to praise you? To know you or to call upon you? Must we know you before we can call upon you? Anyone who invokes what is still unknown may be making a mistake. Or should you be invoked first, so that we may then come to know you? But how can people call upon someone in whom they do not yet believe? And how can they believe without a preacher?

But scripture tells us that those who seek the Lord will praise him, for as they seek they find him, and on finding him they will praise him. Let me seek you then, Lord, even while I am calling upon you, and call upon you even as I believe in you; for to us you have indeed been preached. My faith calls upon you, Lord, this faith which is your gift to me, which you have breathed into me through the humanity of your Son and the ministry of your preacher.

How shall I call upon my God, my God and my Lord, when by the very act of calling upon him I would be calling him into myself? Is there any place within me into which my God might come? How should the God who made heaven and earth come into me? Is there any room in me for you, Lord, my God? Even heaven and earth, which you have made and in which you have made me – can even they contain you? Since nothing that exists would exist without you, does it follow that whatever exists does in some way contain you?

But if this is so, how can I, who am one of these existing things, ask you to come into me, when I would not exist at all unless you were already in me? Not yet am I in hell, after all but even if I were, you would be there too; for if I descend into the underworld, you are there. No, my God, I would not exist, I would not be at all, if you were not in me. Or should I say, rather, that I should not exist if I were not in you, from whom are all things, through whom are all things, in whom are all things? Yes, Lord, that is the truth, that is indeed the truth. To what place can I invite you, then, since I am in you?

Reading cont.

Or where could you come from, in order to come into me? To what place outside heaven and earth could I travel, so that my God could come to me there, the God who said, I fill heaven and earth?

Who will grant it to me to find peace in you? Who will grant me this grace, that you should come into my heart and inebriate it, enabling me to forget the evils that beset me and embrace you, my only good? What are you to me? Have mercy on me, so that I may tell. What indeed am I to you, that you should command me to love you, and grow angry with me if I do not, and threaten me with enormous woes? Is not the failure to love you woe enough in itself?

Alas for me! Through your own merciful dealings with me, O Lord my God, tell me what you are to me. Say to my soul, I am your salvation. Say it so that I can hear it. My heart is listening, Lord; open the ears of my heart and say to my soul, I am your salvation. Let me run towards this voice and seize hold of you. Do not hide your face from me: let me die so that I may see it, for not to see it would be death to me indeed.

DISCUSSION

God knows us intimately and calls us to Himself. As we learn to follow His voice, with complete surrender, we can watch our lives be transformed to be truly great. Men are made for more than mediocrity. Let us heed the words found in the book of Revelation, “Because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” Rev. 3:15-16. Have you risen to God's call to greatness or do you settle for mediocrity? He is calling you, and the only way to become a great warrior for Christ is by first learning to love the Master and follow Him as disciples in the school of His divine love. He knows your weaknesses, He understands your faults and still loves you. He calls you to overcome the effects of sin in your life. If we want to follow Jesus, then we should seek to imitate Him always and in all things.

Discussion Questions

1. What stood out to you from the prayer or reading?
2. How do the disciples interact with Jesus, at first and after catching the fish?
3. What can we say about how quickly the disciples respond to Jesus having seen this sign of the Kingdom of God?
4. What does it mean to have a “personal” relationship with Jesus? Are we willing to implicate ourselves in his work? To answer His call?

Discussion Questions

5. God calls us to relationship with Him. Have you ever experienced being called by God? What did that look like? Take this as an opportunity to share in vulnerable faith, your conversion stories with your brothers, or that which has brought you closer to God.
6. Do you believe that you have a relationship with God? How has your relationship changed with time?
7. What are the barriers or obstacles that tend to break your relationship with God?
8. How can I grow in intimacy with God and form a personal relationship with him?
9. What does it mean to call myself a son of God and a brother to Christ and consequently brother to my fellow Christians?

CHALLENGE

Pray every day for at least 15 minutes this week. (Try 5 minutes examining your conscience and 10 minutes praying with Scripture)

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, bless this brotherhood: all these men that have come here to work for the Kingdom and to grow in love of You. Give us the grace that we may recognize that which You have ordered for our lives as Christian men, created in Your image, and conscripted to Your service. We ask this in the name of Your Divine Son, Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be

Further Reading

Sacred Scripture: John 1:35-39; John 4:4-26; Luke 5:1-11; Isaiah 1:17; 1 Cor 7:17; 1 Peter 2:9-10

Magisterium: Deus Caritas Est (2005) Evangelii Gaudium (2013), Gaudete et Exsultate (2018)



WEEK 2

Brothers & Friends In Jesus

"A loyal friend is like a safe shelter; find one, and you have found a treasure. Nothing else is as valuable; there is no way of putting a price on it. A loyal friend is like a medicine that keeps you in good health. Only those who fear the Lord can find such a friend. A person who fears the Lord can make real friendships, because he will treat his friends as he does himself." Sirach 6:14-17

Opening Prayer

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him.

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-22

Reading

On Real Friendships From *Introduction to the Devout Life*
By St. Francis de Sales

Do you, my child, love everyone with the pure love of charity, but have no friendship save with those whose intercourse is good and true, and the purer the bond which

Reading cont.

unites you so much higher will your friendship be. If your intercourse is based on science, it is praiseworthy, still more if it arises from a participation in goodness, prudence, justice, and the like; but if the bond of your mutual liking be charity, devotion and Christian perfection, God knows how very precious a friendship it is! Precious because it comes from God, because it tends to God, because God is the link that binds you, because it will last forever in Him. Truly it is a blessed thing to love on earth as we hope to love in Heaven, and to begin that friendship here which is to endure for ever there. I am not now speaking of simple charity, a love due to all mankind, but of that spiritual friendship which binds souls together, leading them to share devotions and spiritual interests, so as to have but one mind between them. Such as these may well cry out, "Behold, how good and joyful a thing it is, brethren, to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 123) Even so, for the "precious ointment" of devotion trickles continually from one heart to the other, so that truly we may say that to such friendship the Lord promises His Blessing and life for evermore. To my mind all other friendship is but as a shadow with respect to this, its links mere fragile glass compared to the golden bond of true devotion. Do you form no other friendships? I say "form," because you have no right to cast aside or neglect the natural bonds which draw you to relations, connections, benefactors, or neighbors. My rules apply to those you deliberately choose to make. There are some who will tell you that you should avoid all special affection or friendship, as likely to engross the heart, distract the mind, excite jealousy, and what not. But they are confusing things. They have read in the works of saintly and devout writers that individual friendships and special intimacies are a great hindrance in the religious life, and therefore they suppose it to be the same with all the world, which is not at all the case. Whereas in a well-regulated community every one's aim is true devotion, there is no need for individual intercourse, which might exceed due limits; —in the world those who aim at a devout life require to be united one with another by a holy friendship, which excites, stimulates, and encourages them in well-doing. Just as men traversing a plain have no need to hold one another up, as they have who are amid slippery mountain paths, so religious do not need the stay of individual friendships; but those who are living in the world require such for strength and comfort amid the difficulties which beset them. In the world all have not one aim, one mind, and therefore we must take to us congenial friends, nor is there any undue partiality in such attachments, which are but as the separation of good from evil, the sheep from the goats, the bee from the drone—a necessary separation.

DISCUSSION

How have we gone about developing friendships? Many times, we do not intentionally choose the people that occupy the most important and influential roles in our lives though we allow them into the intimacy of our hearts. At times this can be a problem.

Reading cont.

If the people in our inner-most circle are not driven to seek a higher purpose or live in a manner that brings goodness, truth and beauty into the world, we can find ourselves unfulfilled or lacking a vision for excellence. Who are the people closest to us? Are they people who settle for vice over virtue or do they challenge you to become more than you are? In the reading, St. Francis de Sales points out that it is possible to love on earth as we will love in Heaven through friendship. In order to do this, we need friendships that challenge us to live and love with righteousness. These friendships consist of people who see each other as windows to God's divine image. When that image is distorted by the stains or cracks of human sin and frailty, true friends do not turn away or resign themselves to the muck. Instead, they aid the restoration process so that God may be reflected with ever greater clarity; making Him visible from the inside out and outside in. In his letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul shows us what the restoration process looks like. He asks us to fight for each other, a fight not won not by violence, but by perseverance and trust in God. If our friendships are not like this, it is important to examine them. Jesus may not demand that we end these relationships outright because we can be a force of truth and love in their lives. However, the question remains: where will we go to be restored and rejuvenated? As this community starts, let us not use it as a spiritual gas station, where we come only when we are near empty. Rather, let us be filled to the top each and every day, so that we bring God to the world in high resolution.

Discussion Questions

1. What stood out to you from the prayer or reading?
2. What are the practical things St. Paul asks the brethren of the Thessalonian community to do?
3. What does it mean to admonish the idle and encourage the fainthearted?
4. St. Paul encourages the community to "Rejoice always, pray constantly, [and] give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Have you ever been a part of a community that lived this? What was it like? If not, do you think it is possible?
5. How do you think St. Paul's recommendations for the community apply to your family, friendships, and community?

Discussion Questions

6. In the reading, how does St. Francis de Sales distinguish between charity and spiritual friendship?
7. What are some key characteristics of spiritual friendship as cited by St. Francis de Sales?
8. What does St. Francis de Sales say to those who are “in the world” and “aim at a devout life?”
9. What have been your experiences of Christian community?
10. What do you seek in a community of Faith? Have you allowed yourself to be open to the benefits and graces of a Christian community, or have you tried to simply take advantage, filling up your spiritual gas tank when you are running low?
11. Have you experienced a community that could admonish the fainthearted and encourage the idle well? What does it take for this group to do it?
12. Do I trust my brothers in the faith to correct me? Am I afraid to correct my brothers?
13. What are my hopes for this group?

CHALLENGE

Meet one time as a group for fellowship outside of this context (ie. dinner, drinks, sports, etc).

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, bless this brotherhood: all these men that have come here to work for the Kingdom and to grow in love of You. Give us the grace that we may recognize that which You have ordered for our lives as Christian men, created in Your image, and conscripted to Your service. We ask this in the name of Your Divine Son, Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be

Further Reading

Sacred Scripture: Romans 12:5; 1 John 4:20; Galatians 3:28; John 13: 34-35, 15:1-17.

Magisterium: Deus Caritas Est (2005) Evangelii Gaudium (2013), Gaudete et Exsultate (2018)

WEEK 3

Commitment

"If we wish to serve God and love our neighbor well, we must manifest our joy in the service we render to Him and them. Let us open wide our hearts. It is joy which invites us. Press forward and fear nothing." St. Katherine Drexel

Opening Prayer

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2: 36-47



Reading

Excerpt from the *“Audi Filia” “Forget your Father’s House”*, Chapter 100

By St. John of Avila

But just as it is most beneficial to deny your own will, so it is the most difficult thing to do. Even if we work hard at it, we will not be successful unless the same Lord who commanded that the stone be removed from the sepulcher of Lazarus (cf. John 11:39) removes the hardness that crushes those underneath it, and unless he kills this mighty Goliath, who can be vanquished by no one except by the invincible One. Yet, even though we are unable to free our neck from these chains, we must not cease trying, in accord with the strength the Lord gives us. From our heart, we must call on Him. We should also consider the evils that come upon us through following our own will and the benefits that come from not following it. Reflect also on the sublime example of Christ, who said of himself, “I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him that sent me.” (John 6:38) He did not do this only in matters of little importance, as some do, but also in matters of great dishonor, which, as they say, reach to the very soul. Such was the passion that Christ suffered for us. But in that he conformed himself to the Father’s will and cast aside the will of his flesh to avoid suffering. By so doing, he gave us an example that we must love nothing so much that we would not cast it aside at God’s command, and that nothing is so painful that we would not embrace it for him.

DISCUSSION

There is no shortage of ways to spend your time in the modern age. There are multiple things that vie for our time and attention. If we are to grow in faith and brotherhood, we need to grow in the practice of saying no to the things that do not edify us and saying yes to the things that do. We know that the faith is firmly built on four pillars of Christian Life. These pillars are the teaching of the apostles; celebration of the Christian sacramental mysteries (breaking of the bread); the communal life; and prayer. In order to live out these fundamental aspects of our faith we, just like the early Church, must commit ourselves to them intentionally. Are you open to this group becoming a community that commits to the four pillars through mutual support and encouragement? To help you consider how this group can do this, before the night is over, read the “Small Communities of Faith” document by Rev. Donald J. Planty and go through the community covenant agreement in the appendix. As a group, brainstorm and fill out the community covenant together. This is about cultivating a firm resolution to do what God asks of us as men and as Christians.

Discussion Questions

1. What stood out to you from the prayer?
2. Upon hearing that Jesus is the crucified Lord and Messiah, what is the reaction of the men?
3. What does it mean to be cut to the heart? Why do you think this happened?
4. What commitments do you see the men of the Church make in this passage? What are the results of these commitments?
5. Have you committed to the teachings of the apostles, fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and prayer? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. How easy is it for you to make and hold to commitments? If it is difficult, why do you think that is the case?
7. What stood out to you from the reading?
8. In the reading, what does St. John of Avila say about denying our will? What needs to happen for us to be successful at it?
9. What are the results of following our own will versus denying it according to St. John?
10. Is it always bad to follow your will? When could it be good?
11. St. John says: “we must love nothing so much that we would not cast it aside at God’s command, and that nothing is so painful that we would not embrace it for him.” How close are you to living this out? What needs to change to get there?
12. What commitments do you need to make to be more faithful to the Lord?
13. In the moral life, have you ever promised to stop doing something and have found it impossible to amend that action? Have you reached out to friends or other trusted men to help me?

As a group, go through the “Small Communities of Faith” article on pages 43-45 in the Appendix. Together, fill out a community covenant (pg 46) to make a commitment to the Lord together.

CHALLENGE

Develop an initial community agreement/covenant that will form the basis for commitment to the group.

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, bless this brotherhood: all these men that have come here to work for the Kingdom and to grow in love of You. Give us the grace that we may recognize that which You have ordered for our lives as Christian men, created in Your image, and conscripted to Your service. We ask this in the name of Your Divine Son, Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be

Further Reading

Sacred Scripture: Numbers 30:2; Psalm 37:5; 1 Kings 8:61; 2 Timothy 1:12, 4:7; John 14:15; Matthew 22:37

Magisterium: Deus Caritas Est (2005) Evangelii Gaudium (2013), Gaudete et Exsultate (2018)

WEEK 4

Habits of a Christian Man

"The art of living well, is of all the arts the greatest." Cicero

Opening Prayer

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

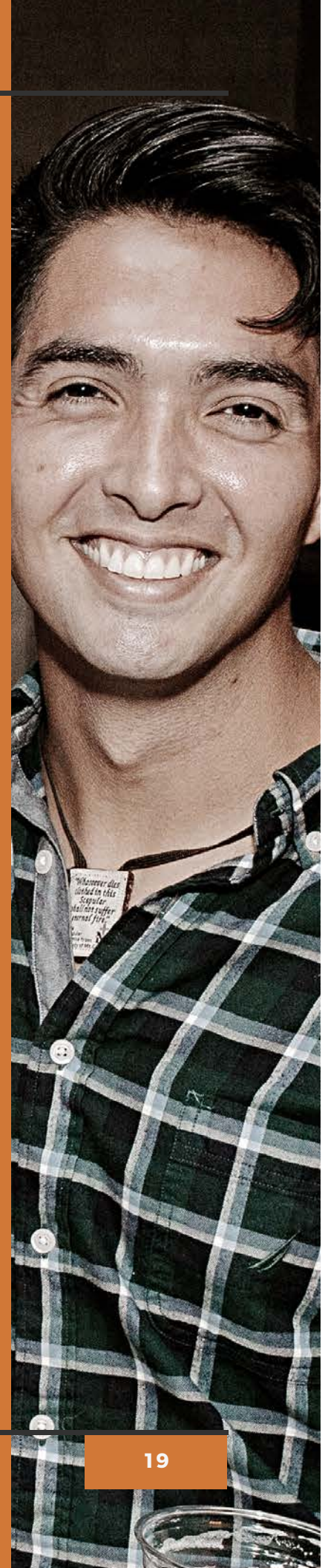
Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4: 4-9

Reading

Excerpt of a letter from St. Louis to his son Philip
By St. Louis IX, King of France

To his dear first-born son, Philip, greeting, and his father's love. Dear son, since I desire with all my heart that you be well "instructed in all things, it is in my thought to give you some advice this writing. For I have heard you say, several times, that you remember my words better than those of any one else. Therefore, dear son, the first thing I advise is that you fix your whole heart upon God, and love Him with all your strength, for without this no one can be saved or be of any worth. You should, with all your strength, shun everything which you believe to be displeasing to Him. And



Reading cont.

you ought especially to be resolved not to commit mortal sin, no matter what may happen and should permit all your limbs to be hewn off, and suffer every manner of torment, rather than fall knowingly into mortal sin. If our Lord send you any adversity, whether illness or other in good patience, and thank Him for it, thing, you should receive it in good patience and be thankful for it, for you ought to believe that He will cause everything to turn out for your good; and likewise you should think that you have well merited it, and more also, should He will it, because you have loved Him but little, and served Him but little, and have done many things contrary to His will. If our Lord send you any prosperity, either health of body or other thing you ought to thank Him humbly for it, and you ought to be careful that you are not the worse for it, either through pride or anything else, for it is a very great sin to fight against our Lord with His gifts. Dear son, I advise you that you accustom yourself to frequent confession, and that you choose always, as your confessors, men who are upright and sufficiently learned, and who can teach you what you should do and what you should avoid. You should so carry yourself that your confessors and other friends may dare confidently to reprove you and show you your faults. Dear son, I advise you that you listen willingly and devoutly the services of Holy Church, and, when you are in church, avoid to frivolity and trifling, and do not look here and there; but pray to God with lips and heart alike, while entertaining sweet thoughts about Him, and especially at the mass, when the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ are consecrated, and for a little time before. Dear son, have a tender pitiful heart for the poor, and for all those whom you believe to be in misery of heart or body, and, according to your ability, comfort and aid them with some alms. Maintain the good customs of your realm, and put down the bad ones. Do not oppress your people and do not burden them with tolls or tailles, except under very great necessity. If you have any unrest of heart, of such a nature that it may be told, tell it to your confessor, or to some upright man who can keep your secret; you will be able to carry more easily the thought of your heart. See to it that those of your household are upright and loyal, and remember the Scripture, which says: "Elige viros timentes Deum in quibus sit justitia et qui oderint avariciam"; that is to say, "Love those who serve God and who render strict justice and hate covetousness"; and you will profit, and will govern your kingdom well. Dear son, see to it that all your associates are upright, whether clerics or laymen, and have frequent good converse with them; and flee the society of the bad. And listen willingly to the word of God, both in open and in secret; and purchase freely prayers and pardons. Love all good, and hate all evil, in whomsoever it may be. Let no one be so bold as to say, in your presence, words which attract and lead to sin, and do not permit words of detraction to be spoken of another behind his back. Suffer it not that any ill be spoken of God or His saints in your presence, without taking prompt vengeance. But if the offender be a clerk or so great a person that you ought not to try him, report the matter to him who is entitled to judge it...

Reading cont.

DISCUSSION

“Virtue” is simply defined as a good habit while vice is a bad habit. More expansively, “a virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good” (CCC 1803). Virtues and vices form a person’s character. “Why should I be good?” The question is simple and profound and requires a similar response. Personal virtue is the key to improving the world, finding happiness, and helping other people to be good and happy too; yet the ultimate end of virtue is even greater than these great goals: “the goal of a virtuous life is to become like God” (CCC 1803). No secular answer to the question of the goal of virtue can rival this one. From ancient times (Plato, Aristotle) and in various cultures, four virtues have traditionally been recognized as the indispensable foundation of all the others, as the “hinges” (cardines in Latin) on which all others turn. These cardinal virtues are: prudence [or wisdom], justice [or fairness], fortitude [or courage], and temperance [or self-control]” (CCC 1805). The four cardinal virtues have opposite vices: folly, injustice, cowardice, and intemperance. In addition to the cardinal virtues, there are three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. St. Paul calls us to exercise the virtues, and to praise in others the correct practice of these Christian acts such as that which is pure, lovely, gracious, and honorable. We are called to praise and imitate these virtues that can be found in our friends and neighbors. St. Louis, as a good and holy father, exhorts his son to keep the faith and to rule with a virtuous scepter, and not to be tempted by the passions and powers of the world. That having everything, he should care for nothing more than justice, truth, and love. Below are a list of virtues and vices in order to discuss how these habits lead us to God and fellowship or drives us away from them.

The Seven Contrary Virtues

Human virtues are firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtuous man is he who freely practices the good.

The Seven Deadly Sins

Tradition highlights seven sins as especially dangerous, or “deadly.” They are the soul-deadening opposites to the soul enlivening virtues commended in the Beatitudes.

Reading cont.

The Seven Contrary Virtues

Humility against pride

Liberality against greed

Kindness against envy

Patience against anger

Diligence against sloth.

Chastity against lust

Abstinence against gluttony

The Seven Deadly Sins

Pride is self-assertion and selfishness;
poverty of spirit is humility and selflessness.

Avarice is greed, the selfish reach to grab
and keep for oneself; mercy is the reach to
give, to share with others, even the
undeserving.

Envy resents another's happiness;
mourning shares another's unhappiness.

Wrath wills harm and destruction;
meekness refuses to harm and
peacemaking prevents destruction.

Sloth refuses to exert the will toward the
good, even when it is present; hunger and
thirst for righteousness are the passionate
desire for good even when it is absent.

Lust dissipates and divides the soul,
desiring every attractive body; purity of
heart centers and unifies the soul, desiring
the one God alone.

Gluttony wants to consume an inordinate
amount of worldly goods; being
persecuted is being deprived of even
ordinate necessities.

Discussion Questions

1. What stood out to you from the prayer or reading?
2. What do you think of the excerpt of the letter of King Louis to his son? Could you imagine a President or other person of power writing a letter like this to his son about governance?

Discussion Questions cont.

3. What are the things that we should praise in our friends and neighbors according to St. Paul?
4. What role do our habits play in our identity? Have I ever felt that my habits were disconnected from that identity?
5. Have you ever made an intentional effort to overcome vice? How did it go? Were the changes lasting or did the bad habits come back?
6. How can these seven virtues among others, help me be a better Christian? Or even just a better man, humanly speaking?
Which virtues come naturally to you?
Which ones are more difficult?
7. What are the barriers or obstacles that tend to break your plan to overcome sin?
8. Can I trust my community of brothers to correct me and help me live a virtuous life?
9. How is the virtuous life associated with the good life?

CHALLENGE

Prepare a plan to grow in the practice of one virtue this week (or over the next several weeks) in order to overcome one particular vice you may regularly fall into.

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, bless this brotherhood: all these men that have come here to work for the Kingdom and to grow in love of You. Give us the grace that we may recognize that which You have ordered for our lives as Christian men, created in Your image, and conscripted to Your service. We ask this in the name of Your Divine Son, Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be

Further Reading:

Sacred Scripture: Wisdom 8:7; Proverbs 10:9; Matthew 18:15-17, 22:36-39; Ephesians 4:2; 2 Peter 1:5-8.

Magisterium: Deus Caritas Est (2005) Evangelii Gaudium (2013), Gaudete et Exsultate (2018)

WEEK 5

To Lay Down One's Life

"Let us remember that love lives through sacrifice and is nourished by giving. Let's remember that not everything which is good and beautiful pertains to genuine, essential love, because even without those other things love can be present, indeed a perfected love. Without sacrifice there is no love. Sacrifice the senses, taste, hearing, and above all, the mind and the will in holy obedience. I wish for you and for myself the best appreciation of sacrifice which is the unconditional willingness to sacrifice." St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe

Opening Prayer

"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.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is



Opening Prayer cont.

doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another.

John 15: 1-17

Reading

Excerpt from the Encyclical Letter of Pp. Benedict XVI (2005)

DEUS CARITAS EST

By their own inner logic, these initial, somewhat philosophical reflections on the essence of love have now brought us to the threshold of biblical faith. We began by asking whether the different, or even opposed, meanings of the word “love” point to some profound underlying unity, or whether on the contrary they must remain unconnected, one alongside the other. More significantly, though, we questioned whether the message of love proclaimed to us by the Bible and the Church's Tradition has some points of contact with the common human experience of love, or whether it is opposed to that experience. This in turn led us to consider two fundamental words: eros, as a term to indicate “worldly” love and agape, referring to love grounded in and shaped by faith. The two notions are often contrasted as “ascending” love and “descending” love. There are other, similar classifications, such as the distinction between possessive love and oblation love (*amor concupiscentiae* – *amor benevolentiae*), to which is sometimes also added love that seeks its own advantage. In philosophical and theological debate, these distinctions have often been radicalized to the point of establishing a clear antithesis between them: descending, oblation love—agape—would be typically Christian, while on the other hand ascending, possessive or covetous love—eros—would be typical of non-Christian, and particularly Greek culture. Were this antithesis to be taken to extremes, the essence of Christianity would be detached from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life. Yet eros and agape—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized. Even if eros is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to “be there for” the other. The element of agape thus enters into this love, for otherwise eros is impoverished and even loses its

Reading cont.

own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. Jn 7:37-38). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. Jn 19:34).

In the account of Jacob's ladder, the Fathers of the Church saw this inseparable connection between ascending and descending love, between eros which seeks God and agape which passes on the gift received, symbolized in various ways. In that biblical passage we read how the Patriarch Jacob saw in a dream, above the stone which was his pillow, a ladder reaching up to heaven, on which the angels of God were ascending and descending (cf. Gen 28:12; Jn 1:51). A particularly striking interpretation of this vision is presented by Pope Gregory the Great in his Pastoral Rule. He tells us that the good pastor must be rooted in contemplation. Only in this way will he be able to take upon himself the needs of others and make them his own: "per pietatis viscera in se infirmitatem caeterorum transferat".[4] Saint Gregory speaks in this context of Saint Paul, who was borne aloft to the most exalted mysteries of God, and hence, having descended once more, he was able to become all things to all men (cf. 2 Cor 12:2-4; 1 Cor 9:22). He also points to the example of Moses, who entered the tabernacle time and again, remaining in dialogue with God, so that when he emerged he could be at the service of his people. "Within [the tent] he is borne aloft through contemplation, while without he is completely engaged in helping those who suffer: intus in contemplationem rapitur, foris infirmantium negotiis urgetur."

DISCUSSION

What does it truly mean to lay down one's life for another? There is the rare chance that one day you may be called by God to give up your life for His sake or that of another. It would be the ultimate life-giving sacrifice, that of which Jesus says, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13) Yet this refers to something far more consequential in the lives of all Christians, even those that will not end up offering that ultimate gift. That which makes us dead in life, and living in death, true charity. That is, to lay down your life is to offer through the supreme exercise of Christian virtue, the humble gift of will and desire. This means, that we should not manipulate others for our own benefit, in fact the opposite, to live our lives for others. We should not be prone to stubborn bickering and being set in our ways, but instead be open to listening and being considerate of others' needs at the expense of our own will and pride. In order to serve others, we need to give up our self-love, need to be right, and need to use others. Are we capable of surrendering this? If not, we shall certainly be blind men seeking to lead the blind. This laying down of one's life must be in imitation of the Cross, where Jesus gave His life so that we may be saved.

Discussion Questions cont.

1. What stood out to you from the prayer or reading?
2. What does Jesus call Himself? Why is it important that we abide in Him?
3. What are the two types of love that Benedict XVI refers to in DEUS CARITAS EST? Which type of love is the life giving one?
4. What does it mean that Jesus calls his disciples friends and no longer servants?
5. What stops us from making sacrifices?
6. What are the models of sacrifice we have encountered in our lives? Try to think of a person that has shown us great sacrifice, testimonies of heroic virtue.
7. What helps or encourages us to sacrifice? Have you ever offered a friend to make a sacrifice alongside them for some cause?
8. Do we see sacrifice as an extension of God's love? Have you ever offered to sacrifice something alongside a friend?
9. Do we see sacrifice as merely our own fortitude to do this or that, or do we see it as something that God's grace has allowed us to do?

CHALLENGE

Select one way to sacrifice in the coming week, whether it be an act of charity or piety. Try to do something for your spouse (if you have one), a friend or a loved one that may need you to give up your life for them that day or moment. If you cannot think of anything, try to abstain from meat on Friday in remembrance of the Lord's passion and death.

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, bless this brotherhood: all these men that have come here to work for the Kingdom and to grow in love of You. Give us the grace that we may recognize that which You have ordered for our lives as Christian men, created in Your image, and conscripted to Your service. We ask this in the name of Your Divine Son, Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be

Further Reading:

Sacred Scripture: Psalm 100:3; Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34, 10:45; John 15:13; Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 5:1-2; 1 John 3:16

Magisterium: Deus Caritas Est (2005) Evangelii Gaudium (2013), Gaudete et Exsultate (2018)



WEEK 6

For Freedom Christ Set Us Free

"Foolish is he who follows the pleasures of this world, because these are always fleeting and bring much pain. The only true pleasure is that which comes to us through faith." Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati

Opening Prayer

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to any one. How is it that you say, 'You will be made free'?"

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not continue in the house for ever; the son continues for ever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."

John 8: 31-38

Reading

Excerpt from the Encyclical Letter of Pp. John Paul II (1993)
VERITAS ET SPLENDOR

Perfection demands that maturity in self-giving to which human freedom is called. Jesus points out to the young man that the commandments are the first and indispensable condition for having eternal life; on the other hand, for the young man to give up all he possesses and to follow the Lord is presented as an invitation: "If you wish...". These words of Jesus reveal the particular dynamic of freedom's growth towards maturity, and at the same time they bear witness to the fundamental relationship between

Reading cont.

freedom and divine law. Human freedom and God's law are not in opposition; on the contrary, they appeal one to the other. The follower of Christ knows that his vocation is to freedom. "You were called to freedom, brethren" (Gal 5:13), proclaims the Apostle Paul with joy and pride. But he immediately adds: "only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another" (ibid.). The firmness with which the Apostle opposes those who believe that they are justified by the Law has nothing to do with man's "liberation" from precepts. On the contrary, the latter are at the service of the practice of love: "For he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Rom 13:8-9). Saint Augustine, after speaking of the observance of the commandments as being a kind of incipient, imperfect freedom, goes on to say: "Why, someone will ask, is it not yet perfect? Because 'I see in my members another law at war with the law of my reason'... In part freedom, in part slavery: not yet complete freedom, not yet pure, not yet whole, because we are not yet in eternity. In part we retain our weakness and in part we have attained freedom. All our sins were destroyed in Baptism, but does it follow that no weakness remained after iniquity was destroyed? Had none remained, we would live without sin in this life. But who would dare to say this except someone who is proud, someone unworthy of the mercy of our deliverer?... Therefore, since some weakness has remained in us, I dare to say that to the extent to which we serve God we are free, while to the extent that we follow the law of sin, we are still slaves"

DISCUSSION

Sin is truly a slave master. It drives us away from the love of God. In this way, it is directly debilitating to our spiritual life but also isolates us physically from our brothers and sisters in the faith. The sins that enslave us are idols that we settle for over the immenseness of God's love and mercy. As we search for the Lord, these idols invade our line of sight and pull us toward themselves rather than Him. In doing so, they become false gods that claim our worship. It is often difficult to give up their fleeting pleasures for a loving relationship that frees us from the bonds of sin and death. However, if we do not fight against them, we can easily allow them to control our schedules, desires and relationships. Idols take many forms and are rampant in our culture. Common idols are food, alcohol, pornography, sex, drugs, television, social media, video games, or even things like control, personal preference, and our own ego. Truly, there are thousands of different idols. Our disordered pursuit of their pleasures separate us from the love of God, and prevent us from becoming the men we are meant to be. Some are grave sins that are easy to be understood as slave masters, but

ultimately, anything in our lives that we cannot easily surrender to the Lord has claimed some stake in our freedom. Do not be disheartened, for the Lord desires to restore your freedom in full. He is a warrior who fights for us, but also alongside us. This is the moment to become an example of Christian perfection, that we all strive for, “be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect.” (Matt 5:4) We must stand for truth and freedom from sin, that these idols may not rule us. Freedom means living as God wills us to live, as true sons of His. Are we ready to start?

Discussion Questions

1. What stood out to you from the prayer or reading?
2. What is the definition that Jesus gives of the sinner?
3. Can we live with true freedom here on earth?
4. Who is the truth that will set us free? What does it mean that truth is a person?
5. Is freedom in contradiction to the divine law? What is the difference between freedom and free will?
6. What can I do to live in freedom, as a true child of God?
7. What are the areas in our lives where we lack true freedom?

DISCUSSION

For the rest of the night, we are going to take time to create a freedom plan. To do this, use the Freedom Plan resource (found on page 47 within in the Appendix). Start by identifying something that you do without the full exercise of your freedom. If you habitually struggle with a particular sin, we recommend starting there. If not, put anything that you struggle to hand over entirely to God. Write this down in the center (red-level). Next, think about the times that you have found yourself committing this action and ask what actions typically precede the act? These are leading behaviors that you should write down in the next level of the circle (yellow-level). Finally, think of the good habits that uplift you and keep you from succumbing to the pressures of the red and yellow-level actions. These may include things like prayer, eating healthy, working out, getting a good night's rest or talking to a friend/loved one. Write these behaviors down in the final level of the circle (green-level).

Once you have completed your freedom plan, we encourage you to find a brother that you trust and share it with them. Preferably, you will both share your freedom plans with each other. If your group is small and has developed sufficient trust, you may even consider sharing your freedom plans together. With at least one other person, hold each other to doing the green-level behaviors and avoiding the yellow/red-level ones. If one of you falls, support each other in re-committing to getting “back in the green.”

Discussion Questions

8. What behavior/sin most keeps us away from God and being who calls us to be? (red level)
9. What are the things that tend to lead us into this red-level behavior? (yellow level)
10. What are the habits/actions/behaviors that tend to prevent us from yellow and red level actions? (green level)

CHALLENGE

Create and practice your freedom plan this week. Find an accountability partner to check in with on holding the plan.

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, bless this brotherhood: all these men that have come here to work for the Kingdom and to grow in love of You. Give us the grace that we may recognize that which You have ordered for our lives as Christian men, created in Your image, and conscripted to Your service. We ask this in the name of Your Divine Son, Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be

Further Reading:

Sacred Scripture: Isaiah 58:6-7; Galatians 5:1; 1 Corinthians 6:12.

Magisterium: Deus Caritas Est (2005) Evangelii Gaudium (2013), Gaudete et Exsultate (2018)

WEEK 7

For One's Friends

"Do what God Wills, and Love that which God does."

"Haz lo que Dios Quiere, y Querer lo que Dios hace" Saint José María Rubio y Peralta, SJ

Opening Prayer

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

John 13: 31-35

Reading

Excerpt from the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pp. Francis (2019) CHRISTUS VIVIT

31. Jesus does not teach you, young people, from afar or from without, but from within your very youth, a youth he shares with you. It is very important for you to contemplate the young Jesus as presented in the Gospels, for he was truly one of you, and shares many of the features of your young hearts. We see this for example in the following: "Jesus had unconditional trust in the Father; he maintained friendship with his disciples, and even in moments of crisis he remained faithful to them. He showed profound compassion for the weakest, especially the poor, the sick, sinners and the excluded. He had the courage to confront



Reading cont.

the religious and political authorities of his time; he knew what it was to feel misunderstood and rejected; he experienced the fear of suffering and he knew the frailty of the Passion. He turned his gaze to the future, entrusting himself into the Father's safe hands in the strength of the Spirit. In Jesus, all the young can see themselves".

32. On the other hand, Jesus is risen, and he wants to make us sharers in the new life of the resurrection. He is the true youthfulness of a world grown old, the youthfulness of a universe waiting "in travail" (Rom 8:22) to be clothed with his light and to live his life. With him at our side, we can drink from the true wellspring that keeps alive all our dreams, our projects, our great ideals, while impelling us to proclaim what makes life truly worthwhile. Two curious details in the Gospel of Mark show how those risen with Christ are called to authentic youth. In the Lord's passion we see a young man who wanted to follow Jesus, but in fear ran away naked (cf. 14:51-52); he lacked the strength to stake everything on following the Lord. Yet at the empty tomb, we see another young person, "dressed in a white tunic" (16:5), who tells the women not to be afraid and proclaims the joy of the resurrection (cf. 16:6-7).

33. The Lord is calling us to enkindle stars in the night of other young people. He asks you to look to the true stars, all those varied signs he gives us to guide our way, and to imitate the farmer who watches the stars before going out to plough his field. God lights up stars to help us keep walking: "The stars shine in their watches, and are glad; he calls them and they say: 'Here we are!'" (Bar 3:34-35). Christ himself is our great light of hope and our guide in the night, for he is the "bright morning star" (Rev 22:16).

DISCUSSION

Jesus calls us friends and lays down His life for us: His Church. In doing so, He asks us to do the same – to lay down our lives for each other. In our consumerist culture, it is easy to reduce our faith into a place that we go on Sunday to get what we need and check off a box. This is far from the model of "Church" that Christ intended. Christ's Church is a community that is alive, active, all-pervasive and moving. Our church has always thrived on this model because, in Her wisdom she knows that we desire, psychologically speaking, community that helps us grow in faith and make it to heaven. Do you view your parish as a place to receive spiritual goods and services or a place where you belong and are needed to enact Christ's mission in your life and the lives of everyone in your region? Each of us is called to bear fruit and serve one another through His Holy Church in a unique way, whether that be with our time, treasure, or talents.

We must be willing to give our time to collaborate in the life of the parish: actively participating (or leading) in its endeavors for our own spiritual growth and that of others. Our time is truly invested when we promulgate the mission of the Church in our local parish. This could be helping prepare for liturgy, volunteering, serving, and helping the poorest of the poor. We also give our time in recognizing that we are called to evangelize at every moment: in our homes, workplaces, and in the world through Christian example and missionary zeal.

We are invited and obligated, as Catholics, to invest some part of our treasure to support the material needs of the Church. This is the last of the five precepts of the Church. Just as the widow's mite (cf. Luke 21: 1-4), what matters most is our generosity and desire to give Jesus our first fruits.

Lastly, God gives each of us talents which we are called not to bury, but to share (cf. Matthew 25: 14-30). Our wide array of gifts, skills, and knowledge can be used in the ministries in our parishes. We should try to get to know our local priests and ask them how we can best be of service to the community. Jesus calls us to lay down our lives for our friends: let us serve Him and His Church with all that we have!

Discussion Questions

1. What stood out to you from the prayer or reading?
2. What do you think it meant for the apostles to love one another?
3. What are the two examples of youthfulness that Pope Francis provides us?
4. According to Pope Francis, what is our role in evangelizing other young people? What does that analogy mean?
5. How can I participate in my parish Community?
6. If I already give economically to my parish, is that enough for me to say that I have done my part?
7. What are some other ways for me to use my unique talents to help my Church?
8. Do I consider prayer as a vital part of my ministry service? It is easy to turn service into something we do, not something we do for others.

CHALLENGE

Make a plan of how to give of time, talent and treasure to your work, family/friends, and parish using "Personal Investment Chart" on page 48 in the Appendix.

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, bless this brotherhood: all these men that have come here to work for the Kingdom and to grow in love of You. Give us the grace that we may recognize that which You have ordered for our lives as Christian men, created in Your image, and conscripted to Your service. We ask this in the name of Your Divine Son, Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be

Further Reading:

Sacred Scripture: Psalm 37:21; Matthew 25: 14-30; 2 Cor 9:7; Luke 6:38; Hebrews 13:16; Acts 20:35

Magisterium: Deus Caritas Est (2005) Evangelii Gaudium (2013), Gaudete et Exsultate (2018)

SAINTLY INSPIRATIONS

SAINTS WHO EXEMPLIFY THE ART OF MASCULINITY



SAINT JOSEPH



**BL. PIER GIORGIO
FRASSATI**



**POPE ST. JOHN
PAUL II**

FURTHER READING

- Deus Caritas Est (2005)
- Evangelii Gaudium (2013),
- Gaudete et Exsultate (2018)
- The Spiritual Exercises (Ignatius of Loyola),
- Revelations of Divine Love (Julian of Norwich),
- Introduction to the Devout Life (St. Francis de Sales),
- The Confessions of St. Augustine (Augustine of Hippo),
- Imitation of Christ (Tomas à Kempis)

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LECTIO DIVINA, A GUIDE: WHAT IT IS & HOW IT HELPS PRAYER LIFE

By Dan Burke

In the 11th century, a Carthusian prior named Guigo formalized Lectio Divina, describing the practice in a letter written to a fellow religious. This letter has become known as The Ladder of Monks and describes a four-runged ladder to Heaven, each rung being one of the four steps in his method of prayerful scripture reading. These steps are provided below along with a short definition of each and brief quotes from Guigo's letter:

Lectio (reading): An attentive, slow, repetitious recitation of a short passage of scripture.
"looking on Holy Scripture with all one's will and wit"

Meditatio (meditation): An effort to understand the passage and apply it to my own life.
"a studious searching with the mind to know what was before concealed"

Oratio (prayer): Engaging or talking with God about the passage.
"a devout desiring of the heart to get what is good and avoid what is evil"

Contemplatio (contemplation): Allowing oneself to be absorbed in the words of God as the Holy Spirit draws us into His presence through scripture.
"the lifting up of the heart to God tasting somewhat of the heavenly sweetness"

Lectio Divina Step by Step

As with any serious attempt to progress in the spiritual life, the practice of Lectio Divina will require deliberate patience. To be deliberate we will need to commit to at least ten minutes every day. The best way to do this is to schedule our prayer times at the beginning of each week before we schedule anything else. Trying to squeeze prayer into our schedules after they are already full almost always results in our busy-ness squeezing prayer out of our schedules.

With respect to the process of Lectio Divina, it may feel mechanical until we find a natural rhythm. As well, we will naturally struggle with distractions. This is where patience comes in. It's important to keep things as simple as is possible. There will be no Lectio Divina police looking over our shoulders to be sure that we exercise perfection in our practice. No need to worry about the details. Simply seek the Lord in the scriptures. He is waiting for you there and will be delighted to lead you into a more profound relationship with Him. With that in mind, let's talk about how to prepare for our time with Him.

Preparation

First, we should arrange a place to pray that is restful and devoid of any distractions or things that might distract us (i.e. computers, TV, etc.). This may involve lighting candles, burning incense or creating whatever atmosphere fosters calm and peace. The presence of icons and other visual aids to meditation can be of great benefit here as well. It is best if the place chosen for Lectio Divina (or any kind of prayer) is a comfortable area set aside just for this activity.

Once our environment is properly prepared, we should then assume a bodily posture that is conducive to prayer and reading. As we consider our posture, we should do so with the recognition that we are entering into the presence of God. Our posture should reflect one that would be the same as if we were with Christ in the flesh or before him in Eucharistic adoration. Again, simplicity is important. We need not over-emphasize posture.

We then turn our hearts to God, begin to breathe slowly and deeply, focusing on simple attentiveness to the Lord until we are relaxed and able to focus our attention on scripture. If our minds wander, we should avoid any frustration or self-condemnation and gently bring our attention back to our Lord and the text, breathing in and out in a purposeful and relaxed manner. It is important to note that unlike in non-Christian forms of Eastern prayer which seek to empty the mind, Christian prayer seeks to fill our minds with an attentiveness to God. This gentle but purposeful effort will yield a constant aiming and re-aiming of our hearts and minds toward Him and His Word.

Once we are as calm and peaceful as is possible, we simply acknowledge that Christ is with us and we pray in this or some similar way:

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

Lord, I know you are with me. Thank you for allowing me to recognize your presence. Thank you for being here with me now.

Then, we might offer a prayer to the Holy Spirit like the following:

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of Your love.

Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created and you shall renew the face of the earth.

O God, by the light of the Holy Spirit you have taught the hearts of your faithful. In the same Spirit, help us to know what is it truly right and always to rejoice in your consolation. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lectio – An attentive slow repetitious recitation of a short passage of scripture

It is always advisable to meditate on the scripture from the mass of the day, particularly the Gospel passage. However, any text of scripture will do. The key is not to rush. The goal is not to finish any particular portion of scripture but to purposefully delve into the depths of any passage that will lift our hearts to God. Just before we begin reading, we trace the sign of the cross on the scriptures, kiss the cross we traced, and then begin to read very slowly, vocally, and gently, coming to an understanding of the words themselves along with the related ideas and images that surface.

When a particular passage or word strikes us we pause to consider it more fully. At the first pause, we will then naturally move into meditatio. If you don't seem to progress in this way, simply stay at each phase until you do. Don't worry if you don't progress. The goal is not to fulfill the method, but to honor and seek God.

Meditatio – An effort to understand the passage and apply it to my own life

Now we meditate on what we have read, visualizing it and listening for His prompting or His guiding. We seek the deeper spiritual meanings of the words as we place ourselves in a gospel scene as one of the participants or simply hear God speaking directly to us as we read the words. We don't strain or exert extreme effort here, we simply allow the words to penetrate our hearts and minds and follow where God leads us through the text. Sometimes it is helpful to slowly repeat the passage or word over and over again until the captivation and conversation with God on the passage subsides. It can also be helpful to read each word and to briefly pause before we read the next. As we do this, we allow for silence and careful listening. We break the normal frantic pace and cycle of life to be attentive to the Beloved. As we begin to respond or converse with God about our encounter with Him, we then move into oratio.

Oratio – Engaging or talking with God about the passage

As we are drawn into the passage we begin to converse with God about what we are reading. Oratio is simply the response of the heart to God. It is important here to remember that God has revealed Himself as a person. When we talk with Him, it is sometimes helpful call this to mind. Our conversation should be as natural as with someone whom we deeply love and desire to know. In whatever manner we are led, we ask for forgiveness, we thank Him, we praise Him, we ask Him to for the grace to be changed by what we have read. We ask Him to help us more fully realize what He wants us to be and to help us apply His moral, spiritual, or practical guidance to our lives. As we engage with Him, He may choose to call us deeper, to become lost in this heavenly dialogue with Him. For those who tend to be very talkative in life and prayer, it might be important here to slow down our own words and to be attentive to Him rather than to what we desire to say. We will eventually find ourselves moving into contemplatio.

Contemplatio – Allowing oneself to become absorbed in the words of God and the presence of God as he calls us into deeper prayer

Here God satisfies our ultimate thirst and needs as the Holy Spirit prays with us, in us, and through us. Sometimes we recognize this work in our hearts; sometimes it is merely a matter of faith that He is with us and imparting His life-changing grace to us. Always we can know that He is changing us because he has promised that the “word of God never returns void” and that as St. Paul says, “faith comes from hearing the word of God.” It is important here to note that this phase of prayer is not always sensual. In fact, for those who are more advanced in the interior life, it may be a time of dryness and a dark silence. Regardless, we know by faith that he is true to His word. If we seek Him, we will find Him, even if He is found in ways that are difficult, or very different than we had anticipated.

To sum up Guigo's thoughts on the four elements; reading seeks, meditation finds, prayer asks, and contemplation tastes.

ARTICLE SOURCE: <https://spiritualdirection.com/2012/04/21/what-is-lectio-divina-and-will-it-help-my-prayer-life-a-guide-to-lectio-divina>

SMALL COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

by Rev. Donald J. Planty

REFLECTIONS

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life¹, 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.

¹ 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

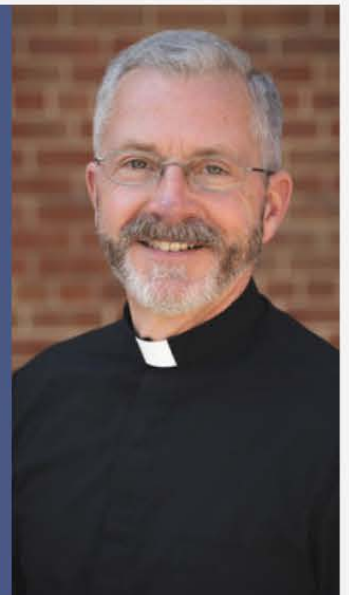
- SCF's incorporate communal prayer into their meetings, involving both an objective element (the inspired Word of God in Sacred Scripture) and a subjective element (personal prayers of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, contrition and supplication/intercession)
- Communal prayer may involve song, which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

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS


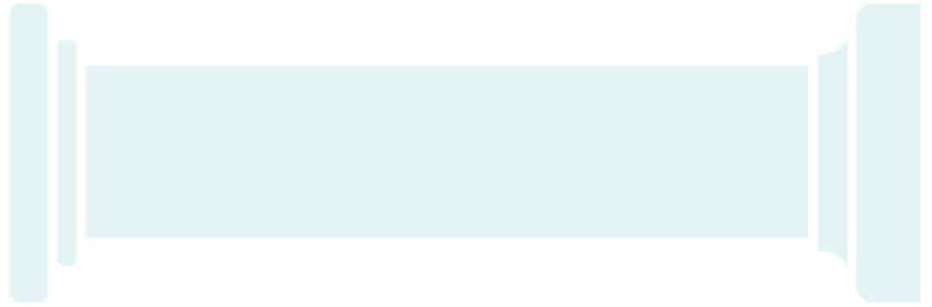
- **Covenant.** It is helpful to draw up a community “covenant” which explains the community. This may include a name, charism, and goals for living the four pillars explained above. See our Community Covenant Template for help.
- **Name.** The SCF may have its own name, ideally a biblical word or a 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.


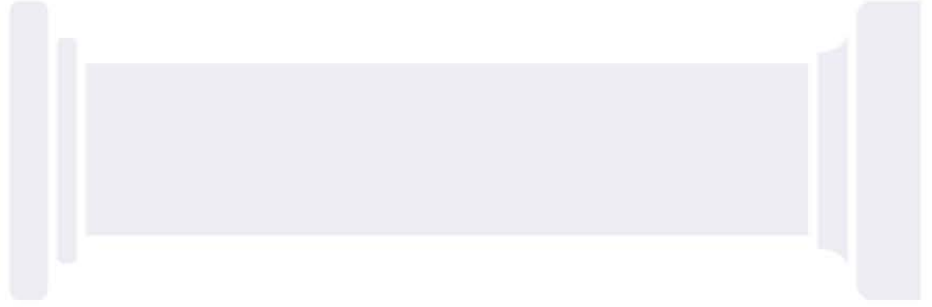
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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.

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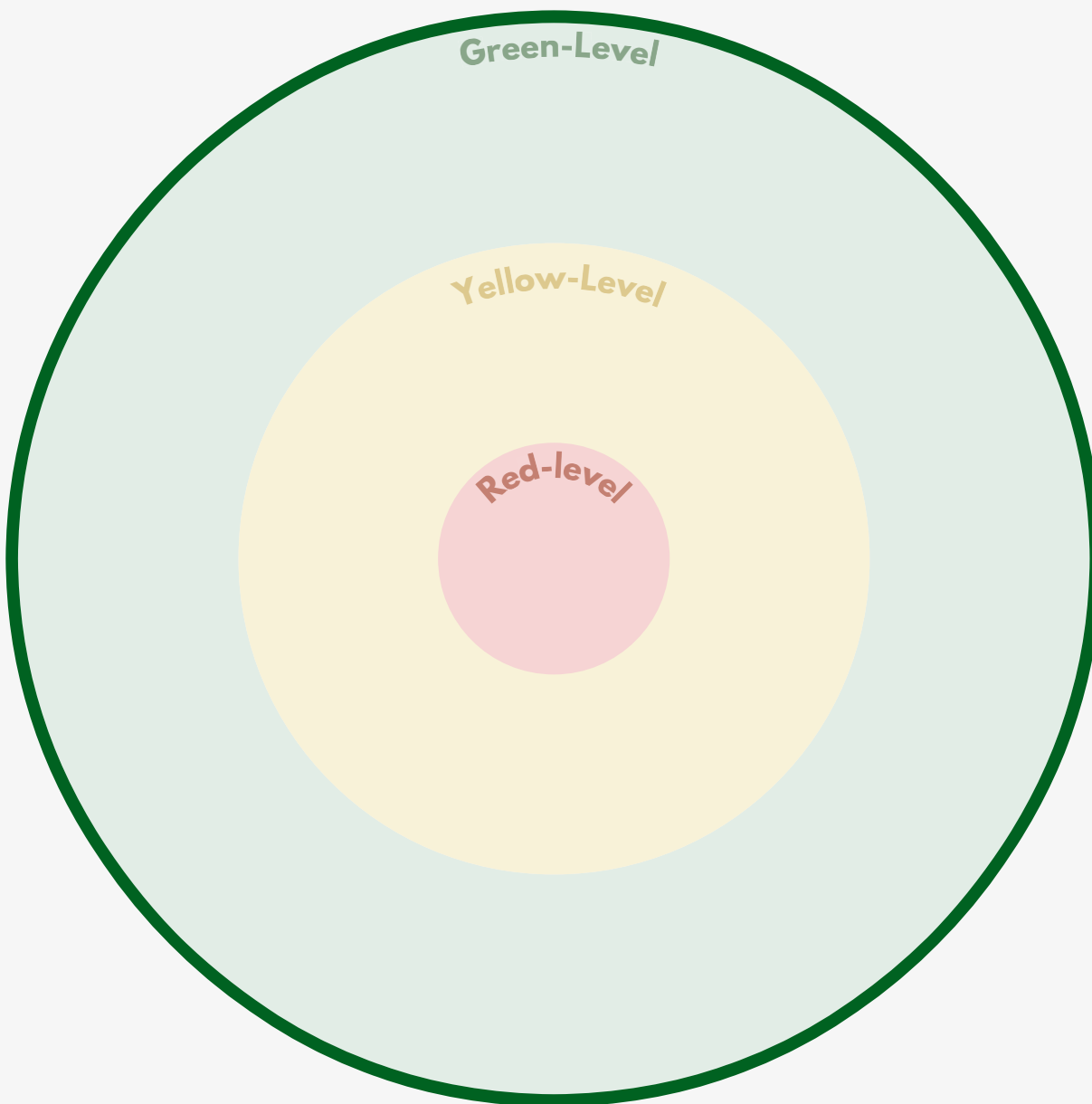
FREEDOM PLAN

Use the chart below to create a freedom plan. Write in your behaviors based on the descriptions below.

Red-Level Behavior: A single behavior/action/habit we lack freedom to choose against that keeps us from living as God intends.










Yellow-Level Behaviors: The morally neutral or negative behaviors, actions, habits, circumstances, and situations which typically occur shortly before we engage in the red-level behavior.

Green-Level Behaviors: The good behaviors, actions, habits, circumstances, and situations which tend to prevent us from succumbing to yellow or red-level behaviors.



PERSONAL INVESTMENT CHART

Use this chart to assess how you invest your life currently and plan for how you would ideally like to invest it.

<div>  <div> TIME </div> </div> <div>INVESTMENT</div> <div> <div>DESIRED</div> <div>CURRENT</div> </div>	FAMILY/FRIENDS		WORK		CHURCH	
						
<div>  <div> TALENT </div> </div> <div>INVESTMENT</div> <div> <div>DESIRED</div> <div>CURRENT</div> </div>	FAMILY/FRIENDS		WORK		CHURCH	
						
<div>  <div> TREASURE </div> </div> <div>INVESTMENT</div> <div> <div>DESIRED</div> <div>CURRENT</div> </div>	FAMILY/FRIENDS		WORK		CHURCH	
	