

Community Group Sessions

WHY THE CHURCH?

Discover the Nature and
Mission of the Church

COMMUNITY GROUPS

GOAL:

This five-week series will help everyone understand their role in the Church and the Church's role in God's plan of salvation for the world. From personal prayer to parish life and beyond, each member of the small group will see how they belong and contribute to the great *Missio Dei*, the Mission of God in the world.

OVERVIEW:

In the concluding moments of Christ's life on Earth, Matthew records Jesus declaring that "All authority... has been given to me" and then he says "therefore go and make disciples." In giving his disciples this mission Jesus formed the Church. Thus, the Church of God does not have a mission, but the mission of God has a Church. From the first days of Christ's public life to his resurrection he never ceased gathering to himself men and women to be his disciples.

These five sessions, each one on a different and important biblical image of the Church, will help you to know where you belong and how you can contribute to the mission of the Church. Each image gives us a key insight into the beauty of the Kingdom of God and the Father's plan to restore our relationship with Him.

SESSIONS:

- 1- The Assembly: God builds his Church
- 2- The New Israel: God's family throughout salvation history
- 3- The Body of Christ: The structure of God's family
- 4- The People of God: When God's mission becomes my mission
- 5- The Bride of Christ: Holiness as the Crown of the Church

WHY THE CHURCH?

SESSION ONE: THE ASSEMBLED

Our English word "church" comes from the German "Kirche", meaning "what belongs to the lord." It generally refers to the property and possessions, AKA, the Church building. But the Latin and Greek speak not about buildings, but about movement, the movement of God calling His people out of the world and assembling them together into something new. God's mission becomes our identity.

SESSION TWO: THE NEW ISRAEL

God's work in human history is redemptive. Many Catholics tend to see a discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments, but they unite in a concept that formed both ancient Israel and the Church: *covenant*. God swore six covenants with humanity, each building upon the last, growing and spreading the Kingdom of Heaven, culminating with the Word of God himself making the covenant with all humanity through his Cross and Resurrection.

SESSION THREE: THE BODY OF CHRIST

The Church is not a loose connection of light-minded believers, but is a real thing, with definite shape and form. It is the Body of Christ, visible and also hierarchical. Jesus built his Church on the foundation stones of the Apostles, and above all on the Apostle Peter. We will examine the role of the clergy in the Catholic Church and why, despite their bad behavior and poor example down through the ages, Jesus gave them to us and invested these fallible men with profound spiritual authority.

SESSION FOUR: THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The clergy safeguard the Deposit of Faith, administer to us the Sacraments, and to govern the Church, but they only comprise less than 1% of the total Church population. The Lay Faithful are over 99%, yet for many of us, we know neither our role nor our mission. This session explores the vocation of all Christ's faithful to holiness, mission, and community.

SESSION FIVE: THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

The Church is the universal sacrament of salvation because she is the Bride of Christ. His righteousness is given to us, poured out into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit. The Sacraments, established by Christ and his Apostles, communicate to us his divine life. Far from leading us away from faith, these seven privileged channels of divine grace give us greater intimacy with Jesus by making us holy.

SCRIPTURE TO MEMORIZE

Each week commit these Scripture verses to memory. Memorizing Scripture in a thematic way can greatly improve your prayer life, as you draw on the Word of God in your own personal prayers and devotions.

SESSION ONE: MATTHEW 28:18-20

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

SESSION TWO: JEREMIAH 31:31

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

SESSION THREE: 2 TIMOTHY 2:1-2

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

SESSION FOUR: REVELATION 21:3

And I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them

SESSION FIVE: LUKE 1:49

For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

SESSION ONE

LUMEN GENTIUM

“The eternal Father, by a free and hidden plan of His own wisdom and goodness, created the whole world. His plan was to raise men to a participation of the divine life. Fallen in Adam, God the Father did not leave men to themselves, but ceaselessly offered helps to salvation, in view of Christ, the Redeemer ‘who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature’.”

HOST SHEET SESSION ONE

The Kick Off!

This is the first session of Community Groups, so we like to focus on WELCOMING and HOSPITALITY over everything else. Take your time getting to know the people in your house, if you don't know them already, and make sure you are connecting people to one another.

For this session we have two goals: 1– the people feel welcomed, 2– that they know God has called them each by name into His Assembly. The Fellowship Question in the beginning helps to build community, so touch upon it when you are eating and/or drinking. The talk places the emphasis on the Church as Mission or Movement, and it is God who is the primary agent here.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

All sessions are divided into four parts: Welcome, Proclaim, Discuss, and Pursue.

- In the beginning there's more time for the *Welcome* and less time in the *Pursue*
- The *Proclaim* is always 15 minutes, keeping it short and direct
- The *Discuss* section is always the longest part of the four
- We frame everything around a minimum of 90 minutes, but your group can go as long as you need
- In the end of the six weeks together, we will spend more time in *Prayer* and less time in the *Introduction* portion of the sessions.

Bring your bible! You will read Matthew 28: 18-19, which is called "The Great Commission".

Print out the "Scripture Verse to Memorize" sheet for the series

Make sure you write down and share with the group the prayer intentions for the week

TALKING POINTS

The gospel is the great and final movement of God to call his people out of the world and into the Church. Because Jesus is the definitive Word spoken by the Father there will be no other covenant that comes after the age of the Church except what is revealed in the Book of Revelation at the end of history.

Jesus said, "I will build my Church." It is His Church, not our Church, and so we do not have the ability to re-make it in our image and likeness. It belongs to Christ and Him alone.

The Church is on mission. Pope Paul VI said in his famous encyclical on evangelization, "[The Church] exists in order to evangelize." This is the movement and mission dynamics of the Church.

SESSION ONE: THE ASSEMBLED

WELCOME (40 minutes to 1 hour for opening)

- Refreshments and/or Food served
- Light-hearted and Social atmosphere
- Questions: Name? Birth order with siblings? Share something significant that happened in your childhood that shapes who you are today.

PROCLAIM (20 minutes)

- Host lead opening prayer
- Watch the video

DISCUSS (40 minutes to 1 hour)

- Has the Church ever failed to meet your expectations? If so, how did it affect your faith in God?
- When you think of the Church, do you think more in terms of a Museum or a Field Hospital? What experiences have shaped that view?
- The Church belongs to Jesus Christ, not to us to remake. What implications does this have for the way we view the Church and her teachings?
- How would you describe the role of the Church in the world? As a member of the Church, what is stopping you or helping you live this role out?
- Was there a time that the Church really helped for you when you needed it?

PURSUE

- Verse to Memorize: Matthew 28:18-20
- Have everyone offer one intention that they need prayers for during the upcoming week and have everyone write them down so that we can continually pray for the next seven days.
- Closing Prayer led by Host or a volunteer

SESSION TWO

LUMEN GENTIUM

All the elect, before time began, the Father "foreknew and pre-destined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that he should be the firstborn among many brethren". He planned to assemble in the holy Church all those who would believe in Christ. Already from the beginning of the world the foreshadowing of the Church took place. It was prepared in a remarkable way throughout the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant.

HOST SHEET

SESSION TWO

This second session moves to a new image of the Church: “The New Israel”. Through this image we can see the historical continuity and fulfillment of the Church with the Old Testament in what Bishop Barron calls the Great Themes of Scripture and what Dr. Scott Hahn calls the Covenants in Salvation History.

The two goals of this night are: 1– To attend a Sunday Mass together, and 2– to know that God is still working in human history. These two goals reinforce one another, for how could we pray and intercede for one another if God no longer works in our lives?

Salvation History is important because, unlike all of the pagan religions and their holy books, the Bible– a collection of books– is distinctly different. The books of the bible detail man’s encounter with God throughout history, and are not merely collections of wise proverbs. The historical and the wisdom literature blend into one another throughout Israel’s history, giving us a maturing and progressing understanding of God.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

Bring your bible! You will read Hebrews 8 for the closing prayer and for Jeremiah 31:33.

Print out the “Covenants of Salvation History” as a take home for your group members.

TALKING POINTS

There are not two gods in the Bible, the mean OT God and the loving NT God. There is continuity and many great themes that pass through both testaments. The difference is the progressive nature of Divine Revelation and how God’s Word changed his people.

“History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” The relationship between the Old and the New is one of preparation and realization. The Old is a type and shadow of the “good things to come” in Christ. That’s why we can detect the New Testament themes hidden in the Old Testament.

God remains the same. Just because Jesus preached on love does not mean that God is no longer concerned with justice, obedience, and right living. We tend today to minimize those traits of God we do not like (like justice) and double down on those we do like (like mercy), but God never changes.

SESSION TWO: THE NEW ISRAEL

WELCOME (20 - 40 minutes)

- Refreshments and/or Food served
- Light-hearted and Social atmosphere
- Accountability: How was your week of praying for one another? Did you remember to pray? What made it easy/hard to pray?

PROCLAIM (20 minutes)

- Host lead opening prayer
- Watch the video
- Pass out "Covenants in Salvation History"

DISCUSS (40 minutes to 1 hour)

- Do you believe that God is still working in the world like He did in biblical times? Explain.
- What is an experience you've had of God working in your life?
- The Catholic Church is Sacramental and Liturgical. How might this hinder one's personal relationship with Jesus? How can salvation history and this covenantal view of the Sacraments help one's relationship with God grow even more?
- How do you view the Bible and why? (Devotional, Study, Neglected, Confused by it, etc.)

PURSUE

- Verse to Memorize: Jeremiah 31:33
- Continue the Prayer Intention Sheet for the week.
- Read The Book of Hebrews chapter 8 as a prayer
- Take Away: Pick a Sunday Mass to attend as a group with your families.

COVENANTS OF SALVATION HISTORY

From Dr. Scott Hahn's www.SalvationHistory.com

By His covenants, God is taking the "creatures" He made and raising them to the status of divine offspring, divine children. By His covenants, the Creator is fathering a family. The human race is being transformed from something physical and natural into something spiritual and supernatural. Humans are being changed from merely a species sharing common traits and characteristics into a divine brotherhood and sisterhood, a family of God...

The Covenant with Adam (Genesis 1:26-2:3)

The word "covenant" isn't used, but as we'll see in detail in our next lesson, the story of Adam and Eve is told in "covenantal" language. Adam is the covenant mediator in his role as husband. God promises blessings - that their union will be fruitful and their offspring will fill the earth and rule over it. God establishes a sign by which the covenant will be remembered and celebrated - the Sabbath, the seventh day of rest. And God imposes one condition that they must keep to fulfill their obligation under the covenant - that they not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And God attaches a curse for disobedience - that they will surely die. By this covenant, God's family assumes the form of the marriage bond between husband and wife.

The Covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17)

The word "covenant" is used in the case of Noah, as God promises never again to destroy the world by flood. The covenant is made with all humanity, through the mediator, Noah, in his role as the father of his family. The covenant includes blessings to Noah and his family (that they will be fruitful and fill the earth) and conditions that must be obeyed (not to drink the blood of any animals, not to shed human blood). The sign of the covenant is the rainbow in the sky. By this covenant, God's people assumes the form of a domestic household, an extended family.

The Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-14; 22:16-18)

God swears to give Abraham a great land and to bless his descendants, who will become a great nation. God makes the covenant with the mediator Abraham in his representative role as chieftain. God promises the blessings of land and great nationhood for his descendants, and through them to bless all the nations of the earth. The sign of the covenant is the mark of circumcision. Circumcision is also the condition that Abraham and his descendants must obey in order to keep the covenant. By this covenant, God's family is takes a "tribal" form.

COVENANTS OF SALVATION HISTORY

The Covenant with Moses (Exodus 19:5-6; 3:4-10; 6:7)

By this covenant, made with the mediator Moses in his representative role as the judge and liberator of Israel, God swears to be Israel's God and Israel swears to worship no other but the Lord God alone. The blessings promised are that they will be God's precious and chosen people. The conditions of the covenant are that they must keep God's Law and commandments.. The covenant sign is the Passover, which each year commemorates Israel's birth as a nation. By this covenant, God's family assumes the form of a "holy nation, a kingdom of priests."

The Covenant with David (2 Samuel 7:8-19)

God promises to establish the mediator David's "house" or kingdom forever, through David's heir, who will also build a temple to God's name. To David in his role as king, God promises to make David's son His son, to punish him if he does wrong but never take away his royal throne. "Your house and you kingdom shall endure forever" and through the blessings of this kingdom God promises to give wisdom to all the nations. The sign of the covenant will be the throne and Temple to be built by David's son, Solomon. By this covenant, God's family grows to take the form of a royal empire, a national kingdom.

The New Covenant of Jesus (Matthew 26:28; 16:17-19)

The sixth covenant is made by the mediator Jesus, who by His Cross and Resurrection assumes the role of royal high priest and fulfills all the promises God made in the previous covenants. The prophets, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah, had taught Israel to hope for a Messiah who would bring "a new covenant," through which God's law would be written on men's and women's hearts (see Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:8-12). The conditions of the covenant are that men and women believe in Jesus, be baptized, eat and drink His flesh and blood in the Eucharist, and live by all that He taught. The Eucharist is the sign of the New Covenant. By this covenant, God establishes His family in its final form as a universal (katholikos or 'catholic' in Greek) worldwide kingdom, which Jesus calls His Church.

The Seventh and Final Covenant (Revelation 20)

This covenant is made with the Elect at the end of time, when God rolls up the universe and removes every veil from every eye. This is eternal life. This is for keeps. This is when God shall be in all and for all. This is the covenant that we ask for whenever we say, "Thy Kingdom come."

SESSION THREE

LUMEN GENTIUM

For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body.

HOST SHEET

SESSION THREE

This third session draws on the New Testament view of the Church as “The Body of Christ.” The primary use of this image is to denote the unity of the Church amidst her diverse members and gifts. Also useful is to see the hierarchy of the Church within the context of his Body: though some might possess spiritual authority and headship, we are all a part of the one Body of Christ.

The two goals of this session are: 1– To make sure each person commits to praying for the group at church in the presence of the Eucharist one day in the week, and 2– that Christ instituted the hierarchy, not to be a master over the laity, nor to be the “real” church, but to fulfill their ecclesial ministry by governing and nourishing the faithful.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

Bring your bible! You will read Luke 5:1-11 for closing prayer and 2 Timothy 2:1-2.
Remember to pick a day for prayer for our clergy in front of the Blessed Sacrament

TALKING POINTS

Jesus is given all authority in Heaven and on Earth, and through a participation in his Headship, he gave his authority to the apostles, who then in turn shared some of their spiritual authority with Deacons and Priests.

The clergy’s role is what we call the ecclesial vocation– they search the Church. The laity’s role is called the secular vocation– we live out our faith in the world. These are not mutually exclusive, but complimentary to one another. We are governed, instructed and nourished by the Word and Sacrament, then we take our transformed lives out into the world.

God’s power and authority is exercised as service. “The Son of Man came to the world to serve and not to be served.” The power of the Church is to be exercised in the same manner. Historically, when the Church exceeded her biblical mandate, that is when the worst of the abuses occurred.

SESSION THREE: BODY OF CHRIST

WELCOME (20 MINUTES - 40 MINUTES)

- Refreshments and/or Food served
- Personal Atmosphere
- Group Question: Where did you see God working this past week?

PROCLAIM (20 minutes)

- Volunteer from the group to lead opening prayer
- Watch the video

DISCUSS (40 minutes to 1 hour)

- Pope Benedict said that “the human dimension” of the Church is always in need of reform. Why do you think that is?
- There is no such thing as “a perfect church.” What makes a parish a “good” or “great” church?
- Is your first impulse to accept or resist authority? How can that affect your relationship with God?
- Judas betrayed Jesus. Peter denied him. Scandal has always been in the Church. How do you personally process these bad examples, especially of the clergy? Have they damaged your faith?
- In discussing the benefits of an Institutional Church, Cardinal Avery Dulles says that “it is no small asset for the Church to be able to provide a zone of stability in a world that gyrates madly from extreme to extreme.” In what ways has the “stability” or slowness of the Church helped you?

PURSUE

- Verse to Memorize: 2 Timothy 2:1-2
- Continue the Prayer Intention Sheet for the week.
- Read Luke 5:1-11 as a prayer, and then conclude with the Our Father
- Take Away: Pick a day to pray in front of the Eucharist for 15 minutes this week for our clergy

SESSION FOUR

LUMEN GENTIUM

At all times and in every race God has given welcome to whosoever fears Him and does what is right. God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness. He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto Himself. With it He set up a covenant.

HOST SHEET

SESSION FOUR

This fourth session draws on the biblical notion of the People of God, the favorite biblical image at the Fathers at the Second Vatican Council drew upon in their document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. This notion of the “Chosen People” and the Church throughout the Bible shows how, though we do have a hierarchy and the roles are different for clergy and laity, we are all ultimately constituted as one People. And yet, so often the role and place of the laity is misunderstood or downright neglected today in the Church.

The two goals of this session are: 1– To pray out loud for each person, one at a time, for an increase in the virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love; and 2– that we understand our mission as Christ’s lay faithful is central to the nature and mission of the Church.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Bring your bible! You will read 1 Peter 2:9-11 for the prayer before the talk.
- Make sure you are checking in with your group on how their prayer time is going each week.
- Pick a time and share it with the group to hold you accountable for a rosary walk around your neighborhood.

TALKING POINTS

The laity are not less dignified because they are not ordained. Clericalism is where we view the clerics alone as called to holiness of life and spiritual growth; whereas we laity are merely called to “pray, pay and obey.”

Our vocation is seek the kingdom of God “in temporal affairs”. That is, we serve the Kingdom in the world- our families, our jobs, our political, social and economic realities that we live in. We are “the front line of Church life”.

In the words of St John Paul II, “All the laity are missionaries by baptism”. In the Code of Canon Law, 211, it guarantees to every baptized person: “The right to evangelize the nations.”

SESSION FOUR: PEOPLE OF GOD

WELCOME (20 MINUTES - 40 MINUTES)

- Refreshments and/or Food served
- Personal Atmosphere
- Group Question: Where did you see God working in your own life this past week?

PROCLAIM (20 minutes)

- Volunteer from the group to read 1 Peter 2:9-12
- Watch the video

DISCUSS (40 minutes to 1 hour)

- Have you ever united your own sacrifices and struggles in life in union with the priestly sacrifice of the Eucharist? How can this active offering change the way you participate in the Mass?
- What would you need to feel equipped by our parish as a "Missionary Disciple"?
- How can we be a blessing to those around us, especially those who do not have a significant relationship with God?
- Why do we neglect the Domestic Church and overemphasize in the local parish? Is it because I'm defaulting to the priest what should be my responsibilities?

PURSUE

- Verse to Memorize: Revelation 21:3
- Continue the Prayer Intention Sheet for the week.
- Pray for each individual person at a time as a group for an increase in faith, hope and charity
- Take Away: Walk your block and pray the Rosary for your neighbors

SESSION FIVE

LUMEN GENTIUM

Indeed Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is praised as "uniquely holy," loved the Church as His bride, delivering Himself up for her. He did this that He might sanctify her. He united her to Himself as His own body and brought it to perfection by the gift of the Holy Spirit for God's glory. Therefore in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness.

HOST SHEET SESSION FIVE

This final session speaks specifically to the Universal Call to Holiness, the Marian Dimension of the Church. We are all called to be holy as Jesus Christ is holy, to be united to him and conformed to him. And yet, our lives are often characterized by the exact opposite: bad habits, big time hang-ups, and spiritual stagnation. In this session we are going to talk about what holiness is, why it isn't just about being moral, and how you too can grow in holiness and become a saint.

The two goals of this session are: 1– To pray in front of the Eucharist so that I can grow in union with Christ; and 2– that we know that I am called to holiness in my vocation, not in spite of it.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Bring your bible! You will read John 2:1-11 as the closing prayer.
- You can have each person pick a day to spend in front of the Blessed Sacrament in prayer, or have a time when the group all goes together for prayer (outside of the Mass)

TALKING POINTS

Holiness is closeness to Christ. It is not mere good behavior.

Heaven is not a pleasure banquet, but the ineffable beauty of eternal union with God and others. This blessed life will never grow old or stale or repetitive. And it is begun now in your life through the grace of faith and the Sacraments.

SESSION FIVE: BRIDE OF CHRIST

WELCOME (20 MINUTES - 40 MINUTES)

- Refreshments and/or Food served
- Personal Atmosphere
- Group Question: How has your personal prayer time been this week?

PROCLAIM (20 minutes)

- Volunteer from the group to lead opening prayer
- Watch the video

DISCUSS (40 minutes to 1 hour)

- Have you ever thought about being a saint before? What images does that conjure up for you?
- Christ said he came "not to be served, but to serve." What does it mean to be a Servant Church? What or who is the Church serving? How does it serve others?
- Holiness is not just being a "good person", but is nearness to God. How near to God are you right now? What can help you get closer?
- Think of one person whose burdens you can help carry. What is one thing you can do to help that person this week? How can this group support you?

PURSUE

- Verse to Memorize: Luke 1:49 - "For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name."
- Read John 2:1-11 as a prayer, and then conclude with the Our Father
- Take Away: Pick a day to pray in front of the Eucharist for 15 minutes this week