BETTER TOGETHER

A SMALL GROUP DISCERNMENT EXPERIENCE FOR PARISHES

Discerning how our community, as a center of charity and mercy, practices stewardship and co-responsibility to help inform the pastoral plans of our parishes and diocese.
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“The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be ‘the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters.’

“This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration.

“In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.

“We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.”

*EVANGELII GAUDIUM*
*THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL*
*NO. 28*
BEING A “CHURCH LIVING IN THE MIDST” OF HER PEOPLE

As I enter my third year as your bishop, I find myself grateful every day for the opportunity to be the shepherd for God’s people here in central and northern Missouri. Your dedication to living as disciples of Christ has been edifying and consoling to me!

At the same time, I read these sentences from Pope Francis’ exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium ("The Joy of the Gospel"),

“The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach” (No. 28).

and I ask, have we fulfilled this vision?

While much good work is happening, we must be responsible stewards and consider what else needs to be done. There are some indicators to suggest we can do more:

- Sacramental practice in our diocese has declined in the past 20 years, most precipitously in weekly Mass attendance. Since 2001, we have seen a 29% decline in Mass attendance, despite our general Catholic population remaining relatively flat.
- The social health index of our communities points to many unmet needs in our communities: single parent families; new arrivals, including refugees fleeing persecution; the workers in our prisons, the incarcerated and their families; the rise in suicides and bankruptcies for farmers.
- There is an unprecedented rise in the number of young people (and even the not-so-young) who claim no affinity to any organized religion.
- Our Church is often characterized as inward-focused, irrelevant and staid, and/or racked by abusive leaders and corruption.

Allowing this status quo to continue not only means we could be responsible for the demise of our Church, but also that we are refusing to embrace our baptismal call to be salt of the earth, a light to the world!

Following up on our Advent series, “A Steward’s Way,” I am inviting every parish and every Catholic in our diocese to join in my pastoral planning process, “Better Together.” By breaking open the Church’s teachings, especially those of the Second Vatican Council and Pope Francis, we want each parish in the diocese to be known as a place of charity and mercy, accomplished by clergy and laity working together, and by being grounded in a spirituality of stewardship.

What does that mean, on a concrete level?
In the weeks leading up to Lent, I met with pastors and parish pastoral council presidents and other parish representatives to explore the pastoral planning process with themes that expand my vision of a diocese, Better Together. The three pillars of that vision are:

- Parishes as centers of mercy and charity,
- The co-responsibility of laity and clergy, and
- A stewardship spirituality rooted in gratitude for God’s blessings.

How that vision is enabled in each parish will be discerned by each of you.

In the discernment process you enter now, your pastor and parish pastoral council will collect your insights to develop a three-year pastoral plan for your parish. We are asking that the plan have two or three goals or activities, to make it attainable.

All parish pastoral plans will be provided to the diocese by July 1, 2020. You pastor and parish pastoral council will continue working on strategic and business planning to answer the details of “who, what, where, when and how” to implement your plan.

By Advent 2020, each parish will be able to answer the question: What two or three activities happening in the parish will show people that your parish is the kind of parish described in “Evangelii Gaudium”?

Using insight gathered from yours and other parishes, the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Diocesan Presbyteral Council will then develop a diocesan pastoral plan. The diocesan pastoral plan will focus on how the diocese, through its Chancery, can build the capacity of the parishes to accomplish their parish goals.

Along with discernment materials, your parish will have access to data specific to you and your communities, including social health statistics and sacramental participation trends. We know the old saying, “there is nothing more stubborn than facts,” and this is true for our parishes as well. The rural nature of our diocese, the presence of major state universities, the graying of those in our pews, and other realities will inform our plans.

This discernment process is built to be focused outward, not inward; and may differ from any previous small group experiences you’ve had before. I encourage those who have been engaged in weekly reflections on the Scriptures to realize that this work, of discerning God’s will for His people here in our diocese, is essential to your role as a baptized Catholic. Therefore, please consider suspending your regular programming so you can fully participate in this process.

As we enter this discernment, let us continue to ask our patroness, under the title of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, to intercede for us. As Pope Francis wrote in “Evangelii Gaudium”, she is our model for evangelization:

“She is the woman of prayer and work in Nazareth, and she is also Our Lady of Help, who sets out from her town ‘with haste’ to be of service to others. This interplay of justice and tenderness, of contemplation and concern for others” gives us confidence as “we implore her maternal intercession that the Church may become a home for many peoples, a mother for all peoples, and that the way may be opened to the birth of a new world” (No. 288).
GROUP LEARNING AND FAITH SHARING AGREEMENT

Many Catholics meet regularly in their parishes. These groups are known by a variety of names and come under various lay and ecclesial organizations: small Christian communities, Cursillo, Knights of Columbus, ladies’ groups, men’s groups, RENEW, CRHP, TEC, prayer groups, etc. Whatever the name, usually they share five attributes: the members engage in prayer, faith sharing, learning, support and faith-directed action.

The sessions in this booklet include these five attributes. To encourage a healthy and Spirit-filled activity, group members are encouraged to agree to abide by the following:

WELCOMING

- An atmosphere of welcome and hospitality sets a tone. Make sure the setting is comfortable (including the chairs) and the group will not be interrupted by other activities or individuals.
- Encourage people to share something about themselves, if they do not know one another.
- Keep the social and refreshment aspects to a minimum.
- Start and end on time. Each session should take between 60 and 90 minutes.

SHARING

- Commit to coming prepared and being present at all sessions, except for emergencies. The group is lessened when a member is missing.
- Understand this is a “safe place,” for people to share matters of the heart and soul. Respect others’ need for confidentiality.
- Share honestly.
- Listen to others without “correcting,” judging or attempting to preach at them. Ask questions to help you understand better another person’s beliefs, opinions or knowledge.
- Help to ensure everyone who wants to speak has an opportunity to do so by not interrupting others, and by allowing silence so those who are more hesitant may have the time to gather their thoughts.
- Help the group stay on topic.
- Pray for one another and the diocese between sessions.
HOW TO USE THIS PROGRAM

STARTING & ENDING EACH MEETING

- Plan for some “collection” time at the start of each meeting; allowing 5-10 minutes for all of your members to arrive, greet one another and settle in.
- Welcome members promptly (don’t let members visit too long, gently remind them they could visit after the meeting if anyone is causing a delay), open your meeting in prayer, you can use the “Opening Prayer” provided on page 6.
- At the end of each meeting, close with the “Closing Prayer” on page 6.

ROLES AT EACH MEETING

- Ask people at the beginning of the session to serve as readers, prayer leaders, discussion leaders and reporters. These roles can be rotated each week. Be sure the reporter understands his/her role is to complete the Discernment Report at the end of the session and submit it to your pastor.
- Consider making assignments for the next week’s readings at the conclusion of the session.

USING YOUR TIME TOGETHER WELL

- In some cases, additional reading materials, videos or resources are provided alongside your session. In the interest of time, you might consider sending these items out to group members before your meeting.
- While together, ask readers to read their parts to the group. Then, using the discussion questions, open the group up to share thoughts and feelings about the week’s content. Prompt members as needed; while sharing, one voice should not dominate your meeting, and you might consider calling on folks on the edges of the conversation to share their thoughts. Keep in mind, that personalities within small groups differ, some members will need more time to think than others, or may need to be asked directly to share thoughts. Try not to be the “teacher” but help the discussion flow, so that all voices are heard.
- Your reporter should take diligent, relevant notes. While every comment may not fit into the discussion recap, you’ll want to be sure that you capture all of the group’s perspectives and thoughts to prepare your Discernment Report.

SUBMITTING YOUR DISCERNMENT REPORT

After each meeting, you’ll want to submit the Discernment Report included at the end of each session to your pastor. Please use either the printed form in this booklet, or the online form at www.diojeffcity.org/better-together.

- Please submit your report within five days of your meeting, as pastors and parish pastoral councils are collecting these promptly for their own review.
- Be sure to fill out the front and back and to follow all instructions provided on the sheet.
OPENING AND CLOSING PRAYERS

OPENING PRAYER FOR EACH SESSION

A prayer used before every session of the Second Vatican Council

Leader or All:
We stand before You, Holy Spirit, conscious of our sinfulness, but aware that we gather in Your name. Come to us, remain with us, and enlighten our hearts. Give us light and strength to know Your will, to make it our own, and to live it in our lives. Guide us by Your wisdom, support us by Your power, for You are God, sharing the glory of Father and Son. You desire justice for all: enable us to uphold the rights of others; do not allow us to be misled by ignorance or corrupted by fear or favor. Unite us to Yourself in the bond of love and keep us faithful to all that is true. As we gather in Your name may we temper justice with love, so that all our decisions may be pleasing to You, and earn the reward promised to good and faithful servants. You live and reign with the Father and the Son, one God, for ever and ever.

R. Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER FOR EACH SESSION

Leader: Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your faithful.
R. And kindle in them the fire of Your love.
Leader: Send forth Your Spirit and they shall be created.
R. And You will renew the face of the earth.
Leader: Let us pray.
(After a brief pause for silent prayer, the leader continues:)
Lord, by the light of the Holy Spirit You have taught the hearts of Your faithful. In the same Spirit help us to discern Your desire for us to be united with one another and with You, and always rejoice in Your consolation. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

R. Amen.
NOTE TO LEADERS
If you choose to use Bishop Robert Barron’s video, “To Be A Christian Steward,” in this session, it is approximately 25 minutes in length. Other options could be to ask participants to review the video in advance. Open and close your meeting in prayer, using the prayers on page six.

SCRIPTURE

1 PETER 4:10
As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God’s varied grace.

ROMANS 13:8-10
Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this saying, [namely] “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.

1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-2
Thus should one regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Now it is of course required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

JAMES 2:15-17
If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.
FROM THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

“Gaudium et Spes” (“On the Church in the Modern World”), Nos. 34-35

34. Throughout the course of the centuries, men have labored to better the circumstances of their lives through a monumental amount of individual and collective effort. To believers, this point is settled: considered in itself, this human activity accords with God’s will. For man, created to God’s image, received a mandate to subject to himself the earth and all it contains, and to govern the world with justice and holiness; a mandate to relate himself and the totality of things to Him Who was to be acknowledged as the Lord and Creator of all. Thus, by the subjection of all things to man, the name of God would be wonderful in all the earth.

This mandate concerns the whole of everyday activity as well. For while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, men and women are performing their activities in a way which appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator’s work, consulting the advantages of their brother men, and are contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan.

Thus, far from thinking that works produced by man’s own talent and energy are in opposition to God’s power, and that the rational creature exists as a kind of rival to the Creator, Christians are convinced that the triumphs of the human race are a sign of God’s grace and the flowering of His own mysterious design. For the greater man’s power becomes, the farther his individual and community responsibility extends. Hence it is clear that men are not deterred by the Christian message from building up the world, or impelled to neglect the welfare of their fellows, but that they are rather more stringently bound to do these very things.

35. Human activity, to be sure, takes its significance from its relationship to man. Just as it proceeds from man, so it is ordered toward man. For when a man works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself. Rightly understood this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered. A man is more precious for what he is than for what he has. Similarly, all that men do to obtain greater justice, wider brotherhood, a more humane disposition of social relationships has greater worth than technical advances. For these advances can supply the material for human progress, but of themselves alone they can never actually bring it about.

Hence, the norm of human activity is this: that in accord with the divine plan and will, it harmonize with the genuine good of the human race, and that it allow men as individuals and as members of society to pursue their total vocation and fulfill it.
FROM POPE FRANCIS

“Evangeli Gaudium” (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Nos. 120-121

120. In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries,” but rather that we are always “missionary disciples.” If we are not convinced, let us look at those first disciples, who, immediately after encountering the gaze of Jesus, went forth to proclaim him joyfully: “We have found the Messiah!” (Jn 1:41). The Samaritan woman became a missionary immediately after speaking with Jesus and many Samaritans come to believe in him “because of the woman’s testimony” (Jn 4:39). So too, Saint Paul, after his encounter with Jesus Christ, “immediately proclaimed Jesus” (Acts 9:20; cf. 22:6-21). So what are we waiting for?

121. Of course, all of us are called to mature in our work as evangelizers. We want to have better training, a deepening love and a clearer witness to the Gospel. In this sense, we ought to let others be constantly evangelizing us. But this does not mean that we should postpone the evangelizing mission; rather, each of us should find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are. All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and his strength, and gives meaning to our lives. In your heart you know that it is not the same to live without him; what you have come to realize, what has helped you to live and given you hope, is what you also need to communicate to others. Our falling short of perfection should be no excuse; on the contrary, mission is a constant stimulus not to remain mired in mediocrity but to continue growing. The witness of faith that each Christian is called to offer leads us to say with Saint Paul: “Not that I have already obtained this, or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil 3:12-13).
FROM BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

“To Be A Christian Steward,” Five Ways to Reach out to Religiously Unaffiliated

Bishop Robert Barron, chair of the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops’ Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, has offered a five-step plan to address the growing number of people (especially those under age 40) who do not affiliate with organized religion. He presented this plan to the U.S. bishops during their General Assembly in November 2019. His recommendations are:

1. Get young people involved in the works of justice
2. Use the “Via Pulchritudinis” (“The Ways of Beauty”)
3. Stop dumbing down the faith
4. Turn every parish into a missionary society
5. Creatively use the new media

These five recommendations align well with the four pillars of Stewardship as expressed by the U.S. bishops in their Pastoral Letter on Stewardship: hospitality, prayer, formation and service.

Participants may want to consider reviewing his recommendations and discuss prior to the first week, or incorporate this into the session on “To Be a Christian Steward.” To watch the video, see minutes 0:00-23:30, linked here: bit.ly/DJC-BARRON.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The U.S. bishops wrote in their Pastoral Letter on Stewardship (2002) that Jesus’ disciples and Christian stewards recognize God as the origin of life, giver of freedom, and source of all things, and that we are grateful for the gifts we have received and are eager to use them to show our love for God and for one another. How do you show your gratitude for God’s gifts? How does your parish show that same gratitude?

2. What is God asking of us, here and now, at this moment, to live as His stewards?

3. How do you react to the idea of “being our brother’s keeper,” of being involved in efforts to curtail selfishness so that God’s good things will benefit not only some but all people?

4. Why do you think people often only associate “stewardship” with giving money? How can your parish work to overcome that misperception?
- WEEK ONE -

TO BE A CHRISTIAN STEWARD

DISCERNMENT REPORT

What are we as a parish doing really well in being grateful stewards of God’s generosity?

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What are some areas of growth for our parish to form people in a spirituality of stewardship?

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What recommendations would your small group offer to our pastor and parish pastoral council to make positive change happen in this area?

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SUBMITTING YOUR DISCERNMENT REPORT

Please submit your discernment report to your parish within five days of your meeting. Reports are collected as they are submitted, and will be reviewed by parish pastors and parish pastoral councils. There are two ways to submit your discernment report:

- You can fill in the previous page, and the information below, then clip this page out of your booklet, and deliver it to your parish office addressed to your pastor, or
- Submit your report online at: www.diojeffcity.org/better-together

In both cases, it is important to fill out the information below, identifying your group and parish. If you have any questions, you may ask your small group leader, consult your parish office or email communication@diojeffcity.org.

PARISH NAME + CITY:

__________________________________________________________

PASTOR OR PARISH LIFE COLLABORATOR’S NAME:

__________________________________________________________

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR YOUR SMALL GROUP:

This contact information could refer to your small group leader or this week’s reporter. We only collect this information in the case that your pastor desires to expand on or clarify your small group’s feedback.

NAME: ____________________________

EMAIL AND/OR PHONE: ____________________________

DOES YOUR GROUP HAVE ANY ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

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- WEEK TWO -
CO-RESPONSIBILITY OF CLERGY AND LAITY

Open and close your meeting in prayer, using the prayers on page six.

SCRIPTURE

ROMANS 12:4-5
For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another.

In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.

EVANGELII GAUDIUM
THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL
NO. 28
FROM THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

“Lumen Gentium” (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”), On the Laity, Nos. 37-38

37. The laity have the right, as do all Christians, to receive in abundance from their spiritual shepherds the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the assistance of the word of God and of the sacraments. They should openly reveal to them their needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which is fitting for children of God and brothers in Christ. They are, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church. When occasions arise, let this be done through the organs erected by the Church for this purpose. Let it always be done in truth, in courage and in prudence, with reverence and charity toward those who by reason of their sacred office represent the person of Christ.

The laity should, as all Christians, promptly accept in Christian obedience decisions of their spiritual shepherds, since they are representatives of Christ as well as teachers and rulers in the Church. Let them follow the example of Christ, who by His obedience even unto death, opened to all men the blessed way of the liberty of the children of God. Nor should they omit to pray for those placed over them, for they keep watch as having to render an account of their souls, so that they may do this with joy and not with grief.

Let the spiritual shepherds recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church. Let them willingly employ their prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action. Further, let them encourage lay people so that they may undertake tasks on their own initiative. Attentively in Christ, let them consider with fatherly love the projects, suggestions and desires proposed by the laity. However, let the shepherds respectfully acknowledge that just freedom which belongs to everyone in this earthly city. A great many wonderful things are to be hoped for from this familiar dialogue between the laity and their spiritual leaders: in the laity a strengthened sense of personal responsibility; a renewed enthusiasm; a more ready application of their talents to the projects of their spiritual leaders. The latter, on the other hand, aided by the experience of the laity, can more clearly and more incisively come to decisions regarding both spiritual and temporal matters. In this way, the whole Church, strengthened by each one of its members, may more effectively fulfill its mission for the life of the world.

38. Each individual layman must stand before the world as a witness to the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus and a symbol of the living God. All the laity as a community and each one according to his ability must nourish the world with spiritual fruits. They must diffuse in the world that spirit which animates the poor, the meek, the peace makers—whom the Lord in the Gospel proclaimed as blessed. In a word, “Christians must be to the world what the soul is to the body.”

For further reflection, see “Lumen Gentium” Chapter IV, On the Laity, Nos. 30-38.
102. Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God. The minority – ordained ministers – are at their service. There has been a growing awareness of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church. We can count on many lay persons, although still not nearly enough, who have a deeply-rooted sense of community and great fidelity to the tasks of charity, catechesis and the celebration of the faith. At the same time, a clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making. Even if many are now involved in the lay ministries, this involvement is not reflected in a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political and economic sectors. It often remains tied to tasks within the Church, without a real commitment to applying the Gospel to the transformation of society. The formation of the laity and the evangelization of professional and intellectual life represent a significant pastoral challenge.

103. The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution which women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess. I think, for example, of the special concern which women show to others, which finds a particular, even if not exclusive, expression in motherhood. I readily acknowledge that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection. But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because “the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace” and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures.

131. Differences between persons and communities can sometimes prove uncomfortable, yet from all this diversity the Holy Spirit can bring unity and an attractive means of evangelization.
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In reflecting on these passages, are we where we want to be as a parish in terms of exercising appropriate roles as clergy and laity? If so, what are we doing to ensure we stay on track? If not, what is impeding us?

2. Four in 10 millennials (between the ages of 23 and 38) do not claim a religious affiliation (Pew Research Center). In our own diocese, Mass attendance has declined dramatically, by 27% since 2001. Do these numbers surprise you? Do you think this is true in your community? Why or why not?

3. According to research, including that by Bishop Robert Barron, people are most attracted to a church with a meaningful liturgy and active charity. How would people inside and outside of our parish know we have a meaningful liturgy and are active in charitable work?

4. If the liturgy is the heart of our faith, then that heart must be strong not just for itself, but so that the Body of Christ can have strong hands and feet to accomplish the work of the Church. How do our Sunday liturgies give us the strength to be the Body of Christ throughout the week?
What are we as a parish doing really well in being co-responsible for our parish life, as clergy and laity?

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What are some areas of growth for our parish in this area of co-responsibility?

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What recommendations would your small group offer to our pastor and parish pastoral council to make positive change happen in this area?

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Open and close your meeting in prayer, using the prayers on page six.

SCRIPTURE

MATTHEW 25:40
And the king will say to them in reply, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”

JOHN 13:35
This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

[The parish] is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.

EVANGELII GAUDIUM
THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL
NO. 28
FROM THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

“Gaudium et Spes” (“On the Church in the Modern World”), Nos. 1, 4, 30

1. The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.

4. Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world’s citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. Never before has man had so keen an understanding of freedom, yet at the same time new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance. Although the world of today has a very vivid awareness of its unity and of how one man depends on another in needful solidarity, it is most grievously torn into opposing camps by conflicting forces. For political, social, economic, racial and ideological disputes still continue bitterly, and with them the peril of a war which would reduce everything to ashes. True, there is a growing exchange of ideas, but the very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in diverse ideological systems. Finally, man painstakingly searches for a better world, without a corresponding spiritual advancement.

30. The best way to fulfil one’s obligations of justice and love is to contribute to the common good according to one’s means and the needs of others, and also to promote and help public and private organizations devoted to bettering the conditions of life.

“Apostolicam Actuositatem” (“Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity”), No. 8

8. While every exercise of the apostolate should be motivated by charity, some works by their very nature can become specially vivid expressions of this charity. (cf. Mt 11:4-5)

The greatest commandment in the law is to love God with one’s whole heart and one’s neighbor as oneself (cf. Mt 22:37-40). Christ made this commandment of love of neighbor His own and enriched it with a new meaning. For He wanted to equate Himself with His brethren as the object of this love when He said, “As long as you did it for one of these, the least of My brethren, you did it for Me” (Mt 25:40). Assuming human nature, He bound the whole human race to Himself as a family through a certain supernatural solidarity and established charity as the mark of His disciples, saying, “By this will all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).

In her very early days, the holy Church added the agape to the eucharistic supper and thus showed itself to be wholly united around Christ by the bond of charity. So, too, in every era it is recognized by this sign of love, and while it rejoices in the undertakings of others, it claims works of charity as its own inalienable duty and right. For this reason, pity for the needy and the sick and works of charity and mutual aid intended to relieve human needs of every kind are held in highest honor by the Church.

At the present time, with the development of more rapid facilities for communication, with the barrier of distance separating men greatly reduced, with the inhabitants of the entire globe
“Apostolic Am Actuositatem” (Continued)

becoming one great family, these charitable activities and works have become more urgent and universal. These charitable enterprises can and should reach out to all persons and all needs. Wherever there are people in need of food and drink, clothing, housing, medicine, employment, education; wherever men lack the facilities necessary for living a truly human life or are afflicted with serious distress or illness or suffer exile or imprisonment, there Christian charity should seek them out and find them, console them with great solicitude, and help them with appropriate relief. This obligation is imposed above all upon every prosperous nation and person.

In order that the exercise of charity on this scale may be unexceptionable in appearance as well as in fact, it is altogether necessary that one should consider in one’s neighbor the image of God in which he has been created, and also Christ the Lord to Whom is really offered whatever is given to a needy person. It is imperative also that the freedom and dignity of the person being helped be respected with the utmost consideration, that the purity of one’s charitable intentions be not stained by seeking one’s own advantage or by striving for domination, and especially that the demands of justice be satisfied lest the giving of what is due in justice be represented as the offering of a charitable gift. Not only the effects but also the causes of these ills must be removed, and the help be given in such a way that the recipients may gradually be freed from dependence on outsiders and become self-sufficient.

Therefore, the laity should hold in high esteem and, according to their ability, aid the works of charity and projects for social assistance, whether public or private, including international programs whereby effective help is given to needy individuals and peoples. In so doing, they should cooperate with all men of good will.

FROM POPE FRANCIS

“Apostolic Actuositatem” (Continued)

24. ... An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.

197. God’s heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself “became poor” (2 Cor 8:9). The entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor. Salvation came to us from the “yes” uttered by a lowly maiden from a small town on the fringes of a great empire.

198. ... Inspired by this, the Church has made an option for the poor which is understood as a “special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness.” ... This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the sensus fidei, but in their difficulties, they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the center of the Church’s pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voices to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. God gives of Himself fully in the Eucharist. In our charity, how can we also give of ourselves? How do we express this charity both during our liturgies and outside of the liturgies?

2. What is God calling you to sell in order to follow Him? This question is not limited to material possessions. In other words, what worldly treasures or pleasures or dreams (or even comforts and securities) is God calling you to lose for His sake? Seeing as we live in a very prosperous culture, it is important to be able to know when a legitimate pleasure is crossing the line to becoming an idol. The difference can be subtle and very difficult to recognize.

3. When Jesus tells the rich young man in Matthew 19:16-30 about the “one thing” he still lacks, He tells him to sell everything, give the proceeds away to the poor and then to come and follow Him. Do you think the “one thing” is more related to the selling, giving or following? Why do you think so?

4. What is the social health index of your county? What is your parish doing to improve that index? Find your index online at: www.diojeffcity.org/better-together

5. The Corporal Works of Mercy are found in the teachings of Jesus and give us a model for how we should treat all others, as if they were Christ in disguise. They “are charitable actions by which we help our neighbors in their bodily needs.” They respond to the basic needs of humanity as we journey together through this life. Many of our parishes provide these corporal works of mercy. Are there ways to amplify or accentuate these efforts in your parish?
   • Feed the hungry
   • Give drink to the thirsty
   • Shelter the homeless
   • Visit the sick
   • Visit the prisoner
   • Bury the dead
   • Give alms to the poor
- WEEK THREE -
PARISHES AS CENTERS OF CHARITY
DISCERNMENT REPORT

What are we as a parish doing really well in being a center of charity?

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What are some areas of growth for our parish in being known as a charitable community?

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What recommendations would your small group offer to our pastor and parish pastoral council to make positive change happen in this area?

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SUBMITTING YOUR DISCERNMENT REPORT

Please submit your discernment report to your parish within five days of your meeting. Reports are collected as they are submitted, and will be reviewed by parish pastors and parish pastoral councils. There are two ways to submit your discernment report:

- You can fill in the previous page, and the information below, then clip this page out of your booklet, and deliver it to your parish office addressed to your pastor, or
- Submit your report online at: www.diojeffcity.org/better-together

In both cases, it is important to fill out the information below, identifying your group and parish. If you have any questions, you may ask your small group leader, consult your parish office or email communication@diojeffcity.org.

PARISH NAME + CITY:

______________________________

PASTOR OR PARISH LIFE COLLABORATOR’S NAME:

______________________________

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR YOUR SMALL GROUP:

This contact information could refer to your small group leader or this week’s reporter. We only collect this information in the case that your pastor desires to expand on or clarify your small group’s feedback.

NAME: __________________________

EMAIL AND/OR PHONE: ________________________________

DOES YOUR GROUP HAVE ANY ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

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Open and close your meeting in prayer, using the prayers on page six. Leaders, please note that the vision of parishes as centers of charity and mercy build upon one another. Relying on your group to have read and discussed last week’s readings, this week’s reading sections are shorter, and you’ll find more discussion questions in their place.

**SCRIPTURE**

**MATTHEW 22:36-40**
“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

**JAMES 2:12-13**
So speak and so act as people who will be judged by the law of freedom. For the judgment is merciless to one who has not shown mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.
FROM THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL
“Gaudium et Spes” (“On the Church in the Modern World”), No. 27

27. ... this Council lays stress on reverence for man; everyone must consider his every neighbor without exception as another self, taking into account, first of all, His life and the means necessary to living it with dignity, so as not to imitate the rich man who had no concern for the poor man Lazarus.

FROM POPE FRANCIS
“Evangelii Gaudium” (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Nos. 47, 49 and 66

47. Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.

49. I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.

66. In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on their faith to their children.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Scripture tells us repeatedly God is committed to pursuing the lost. Who are the “lost” in our community? How can we, representing the Church, seek out and welcome back the “lost son”?

2. What barriers in our parish could we remove so more people can celebrate weddings, baptisms and funerals in our parish?

3. What is the difference between justice and mercy? Can they go hand-in-hand? When should mercy be given before justice is served?

4. What does a “bruised, hurting and dirty” Church look like?

5. What is it about allowing “outsiders” into our Church which creates a sense of fear?

6. What are some of the situations within your own life or within your family in which forgiveness and reconciliation are necessary?

7. What are some of the factors which keep us as individuals and as a parish community from choosing reconciliation and forgiveness?

8. Below are the traditional spiritual works of mercy. How does your parish support people in each of these areas? Parish initiatives such as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, adult and child faith formation, training in parenting skills, providing funeral services as a ministry (no fees), creating a “prayer chain” or other means to share prayer needs, and providing support to those grieving or in pain are ways your parish can encourage these spiritual works of mercy.
   - counseling the doubtful
   - instructing the ignorant
   - admonishing the sinner
   - comforting the sorrowful
   - forgiving injuries
   - bearing wrongs patiently
   - praying for the living and the dead
What are we as a parish doing well in being a center of mercy?

What are some areas of growth for our parish in being known as merciful?

What recommendations would your small group offer to our pastor and parish pastoral council to make positive change happen in this area?
SUBMITTING YOUR DISCERNMENT REPORT

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“The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.”

**EVANGELII GAUDIUM (THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL) NO. 28**

**RESOURCES**

Bishop Robert Barron: Five Ways to Reach out to the Religiously Unaffiliated:
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUmg-DLBaIE


Second Vatican Council: “Apostolicam Actuositatem” (“Apostolate of the Laity”)

Second Vatican Council: “Gaudium et Spes” (“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”)

Second Vatican Council: “Lumen Gentium” (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”)


**CREDITS**

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Tips on small faith sharing gathered from material provided by the National Pastoral Life Center (closed in 2009).