Lenten 2017 Series – Encounter Lent (#encounterlent)

Session 5 – Celebrating the Joy of Being Missionary Disciples

Objectives:

* Share the wisdom learned from the missionary experience during the previous week.
* Celebrate an important event in the life of each member of the small group.
* Reflect on the importance of celebrating great and small events in life with gratitude and joy.
* Prepare for missionary action with emphasis on celebrating Holy Week and Easter

Symbol(s) of the session (optional):

* Large Crucifix

Preparing the Session:

* Before the start of the session, prepare the place where the group will meet. Arrange chairs in a circle and place on a table a crucifix and near it a candle and open Bible. Also have on hand small paper crosses and pens, one for each participant.

Song for Prayer:

* Suggested song: *Servant Song* or *In the Breaking of the Bread* or *The Eyes and Hands of Christ*

Introduction:

* Welcome to this 5th and final session as we journey with Jesus this Lent and prepare to celebrate Holy Week and Easter.
* We have walked together as a small group and now have become a small missionary community.
* Our focus today is to celebrate with gratitude and joy the achievements and worthy moments of our lives, big and small.
* In this session, we are sent once again to reach out to those who are most in need.

Sacred Scripture:

A Reading from the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke (Luke 24:32-35)

*“Then they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!” Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”*

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**After a few moments of reflection in silence, a person from the group shares the following reflection on the reading:**

The last thing Jesus does in this passage is to vanish from the sight of the disciples shortly after they recognized him. However, the passage shows the disciples excited and ready to be missionary disciples once again. The disciples are full of joy because they recognize Jesus. Their eyes and hearts are open to the truth of the Resurrection. The certainty that Jesus is alive leads them to realize that Jesus has been with them practically the entire day, and they are not surprised or disturbed when he vanishes. On the contrary, the disciples remain joyful and share with one another how they felt along the way while the stranger was interpreting the Scriptures. With astonishment, they exclaim: ‘*Were not our hearts burning*…?’ This confirms that their faith was rekindled by first hearing the Word of God. This experience of conversion touches the minds and hearts of the disciples and prepares them to recognize the Risen Jesus in the breaking of the bread. It especially prepares them to understand that they, with the entire community of disciples, constitute, from this moment, the Body of Christ, the Church in the world.

Jesus has been with them practically the entire afternoon. It took about two or three hours to walk the distance between Jerusalem and Emmaus. What else could Jesus do to give example and to teach his disciples everything they need to know and do in order to carry out their mission? Jesus vanishes from their sight at the exact moment when his disciples no longer need to see him to believe that he is risen. He does not need to explain the Scriptures again or tell them how to resume their mission of announcing the Good News, or what to do at that moment. By the enduring grace of the presence of the Risen Christ in their midst, they are entrusted with making decisions in the future, starting with their immediate return to Jerusalem. Jesus knows that this encounter, this intimate moment in which they recognize him, will lead them to conversion, to build the community of disciples, to live in solidarity with one another, and to embrace permanently the mission of proclaiming the Good News to all nations, moved by their burning hearts.

This urgent call to be missionaries is what leads the disciples to immediately rise from table and set out on their journey back to Jerusalem. Imagine the difficulties of walking for several hours in the darkness of night on a solitary and potentially dangerous road. The urgency to meet the rest of the disciples to share with them the great news about the Risen Jesus cannot wait until the following day. Their burning hearts light up the road from within them and their faith in Jesus frees them from fear and any fatigue they may have felt. Any dangers they may face, including the possibility of dying on the way, are now perceived from a very different perspective in light of the promise of the Resurrection.

The lives of these disciples have acquired a new meaning in light of the recent events. The fear, disbelief, doubt, and sadness with which they left Jerusalem only a few hours before have now completely disappeared from their minds and hearts. As they return to Jerusalem, they see with their eyes wide open and are moved by joy (what a great joy!) and hope, overflowing with faith and love for Jesus, for the other disciples, and for the life that has conquered death. The disciples know that they are now the eyes, the feet, and the hands of Jesus in the world. They are now the strangers reaching out to those without hope on the journey of life, whom they must accompany with closeness and tenderness, sharing the Scriptures with them, accepting their invitation to stay with them, and sharing the bread of love in the Risen Christ.

The return of the disciples to Jerusalem is a great inspiration for our missionary commitment. At the end of the celebration of the Eucharist, we are sent to encounter others on their own life journeys to accompany them. We do this just as Jesus did it with the disciples of Emmaus and countless Christian disciples have been doing from generation to generation for nearly two thousand years. The missionary activity implies making a decision to go forth and reach out to others, to accompany them as the missionary disciples of today. It implies to live and understand the mission of the Church as a community that goes forth inspired by the pastoral commitment to encounter and accompany. This is the vision of Church that Pope Francis lives and proposes to us in each action, gesture, and message of his life. His secret consists in the deep and free conviction that he, and all the baptized, are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world.

The last scene in this passage shows the disciples of Emmaus sharing with other disciples in Jerusalem the Good News that they have seen the Risen Jesus. Other disciples have also seen Jesus, and there is great joy among all of them. It is important to highlight that the disciples who just arrived from Emmaus, most likely exhausted after a long journey, share specifically that Jesus interpreted the Scriptures for them and that they recognized him in the breaking of the bread. These two realities, Word and Sacrament, are inseparable in the encounter with the Living Jesus Christ that leads to conversation, communion, and solidarity within the community of missionary disciples gathered in Jerusalem.

**SEE**

**Facilitator invites sharing in pairs, and begins with this or another introduction:** As missionary disciples, we recognize that we have received many blessings and now are called to share about these with others through our witness. Let us share with enthusiasm the importance of celebrating the wonders that God has done in our lives.

* Share one or two reasons that you are grateful to God at this moment in your life?
* How do you celebrate important moments with your family and friends?
* How would you describe the joy you feel when you celebrate an important moment in your life or in the life of someone you love?
* What elements of our Christian faith invite us to celebrate?
* Do you know someone who is experiencing difficulties or sadness? What can you do to share the joy that God has brought to your life with that person and thus to accompany him or her?

**JUDGE**

To participate in a party is to celebrate what is important to us as individuals and as a community. It is a profoundly human expression that demands that we be present to one another. It is interesting that the first miraculous sign in Jesus’ public ministry took place at a wedding, an event that normally involves music, food and drink, dancing, and much joy. Pope Francis affirms that *“an evangelizing community is filled with joy; it knows how to rejoice always. It celebrates every small victory, every step forward in the work of evangelization. Evangelization with joy becomes beauty in the liturgy, as part of our daily concern to spread goodness. The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving”* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, # 24).

Our liturgy, as well as the rituals of popular Catholic devotion, recognize the Risen Christ. They also affirm the new life we have received through his death and resurrection. Along with the celebration of the Eucharist, Baptism, Matrimony, and the rest of the sacraments, there are many other religious expressions that help us celebrate that God walks with us and has done great things in our lives. These include religious images of Jesus, Mary and the saints, special celebrations within the liturgical year, such as Advent, Christmas, All Saints, All Souls Day, Epiphany, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Lent, Easter, etc.

A Christian disciple is grateful for all the good that comes from God, and he or she celebrates. Today we are invited in a special way to be grateful for creation. To celebrate is to recognize that we need God and that we need to give thanks through our encounter with others in a festive way, in our achievements as well as in our failures. God walks with us. A Church that goes forth is a Church that celebrates that the Lord accompanies it, and because of that presence, it yields many fruits.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus received grace and strength from the mysterious gifts of the Risen Christ among them, and he manifested himself fully at the breaking of the bread. The parish Sunday Eucharist is exactly where we as disciples from many cultures and backgrounds receive the grace and strength to go forth to be missionary disciples. In the Sunday Eucharist Jesus the Lord himself teaches us the Scriptures, enlightens us to recognize his presence, nourishes us by his sacrifice, and sends us forth. It is at the Eucharist that we are formed into the gift we receive, the Body of Christ. The mission he gives us depends at every turn on his grace accompanying us as we move forward.

* In what way can my celebration and respect for my neighbor help me to be a Christian witness and bear fruit in our society?
* Do I recognize that Jesus is the reason for which I celebrate?
* Do I remember those who poor and most in need when I celebrate?
* Did I seek reconciliation with someone with whom I had a difficulty before I celebrate?

**ACT**

In this last session, we reflect on our experience as missionary disciples reaching out to our brothers and sisters. We ask the Holy Spirit to inscribe the Word of God in our minds, our hearts, and our whole being. We also ask to be deeply rooted in the Church, walking in faith, love, and hope with our Holy Father, our bishops, our pastors, and all the saints as we take to heart the great command: *“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. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age”* (Mt 28: 18-20).

We are never alone as we go forth into the mission as a community! Christ is always present in an evangelizing community. He does not say *“Go”* individually, but *“Go as a community!”* Go without fear and without doubts for Christ will be with us until the end of time!

Doubts may linger in the heart of some lay leaders: Do I have the talents and the capacity to carry out the mission? Should this not be something I need to leave in the hands of people better prepared than me? Should I just share my faith with people from my own parish or family? No! This is the vocation of everyone who is part of the Church of Christ!

The Spirit moves us to be protagonists in the work of the Church in the United States and beyond. All Catholics have a responsibility to know and sustain, to the best of our ability, the local faith community: parish, movement, etc. At the same time, we are all called to live in solidarity making a preferential option for the poor and most vulnerable in the world and to support the evangelizing mission of the Church in all nations.

One way to bring our lives into action is by celebrating in simple ways, in the rhythm of our daily routines, the fact that God calls us to be missionary disciples. This week…

* + Plan a special celebration with your family by preparing a special dinner, going out together, toasting with your loved ones to acknowledge the blessings from God during the past year, or an Agape Meal (a Love Feast, as the early Christians called it, where the love of God which dwells in each of us is recognized and celebrated.)
	+ Invite your relatives to go to Holy Week or Easter Liturgy together.
	+ Invite the individual or the group of people in the periphery with whom you shared in your missionary action the past four weeks out for coffee, tea or snacks, or to share a meal. Invite them to an activity or a celebration in the parish – it could be Holy Week or Easter Liturgy.
	+ Offer to help in the preparation and celebration of the Holy Week or Easter Liturgies.
	+ Use some of the missionary actions proposed in Session 4 that you might not have taken yet.
	+ Discern, list, and prioritize the things that we can do as a parish to grow in being missionary disciples and identify areas of priority that need to be addressed at the diocesan level.

**CELEBRATE**

* Suggested song: one of the two that you did not use above or another song of your choice.

**In advance of the session, two leaders are chosen from the group. Leader 1 takes the crucifix from the center of the room, while Leader 2 shares one smaller, paper crosses and a pen with each participant.**

**Leader 1: Holding up the crucifix, states,**

Brothers and sisters: As we conclude our 5th session together in this Lenten journey, we are called to contemplate the cross. The Church invites us to venerate the cross not as an object or as a decoration, but as a symbol of life. The cross is the greatest proof of Jesus’ love, his ultimate ‘yes’ to the Father, his seal of love for his people. The crucified Jesus is a bridge between God and humanity that invites us to follow the true way. The Cross leads to life.

**Leader 2:**

We all participate in the mystery of Jesus Christ’s Death and Resurrection. Saint Paul repeatedly taught that the Cross sums up the saving work of Christ. The Cross is the Tree of Life that bears fruit of new life through the Resurrection.

Let us write some of the signs of life and resurrection we have discovered as part of our journey together during the past five weeks.

**Brief silence to write on the paper crosses.**

Let us now place our crosses on the Cross of Jesus to share in its mystery.

**Pieces of tape are provided, and participants tape their cross to the larger crucifix.**

**Leader 1:**

The first Christian communities reflected on the Cross as the Tree of Life. Adam had lost God’s friendship because of the fruit of a tree, but Jesus restores that friendship, bringing us salvation by the forgiveness of our sins through the tree of the Cross. One of the most ancient Christian hymns invites us to contemplate the tree of the cross as the best tree, a tree for which the nails and blood of our Savior were its leaves, flowers, and fruit: *‘Sweet tree where life begins!’*

I invite you to turn your eyes toward this tree in awe. The Cross must fill us with awe. The tenderness and love of God for us was so great. Let us contemplate also the fruits of the efforts of those who have dedicated their lives to proclaiming the Good News. Their prophetic voices and commitments are a true sign that the Cross of Christ continues to give life.

Let us pray, together!

**Leader 2: “Please respond to each with – ‘Stay with us Lord, and fill us with your light.’”**

* Lord, we bring to you the life of our families, communities, and friends; let us share with them the fruits of your Cross.

*Stay with us Lord, and fill us with your light*.

* Lord, we have shared along the way the fire in our hearts with those we have met. May we continue to be witnesses of the mystery of your Cross.

*Stay with us Lord, and fill us with your light.*

* Lord, you saved us by giving your life for us; by uniting our lives to your Cross, may we be instruments of your salvation in the world.

*Stay with us Lord, and fill us with your light.*

* Lord, you broke open Scriptures for the disciples on the road to Emmaus to explain the mystery of your Passion; may your Word be our light on the journey.

*Stay with us Lord, and fill us with your light.*

* Lord, walking with you has filled our hearts with joy; may your Cross give us the determination to share that joy with others.

*Stay with us Lord, and fill us with your light.*

* Lord, you turn death and suffering into victory and life; may we be filled with hope and strength as we go into the world to announce the Good News.

*Stay with us Lord, and fill us with your light.*

**Leader 1**

Brothers and sisters, before we conclude, let us make the Sign of the Cross on one another’s foreheads, as many generations of Catholics have done, wishing for all the blessings of God.

*Participants make the Sign of the Cross on each other’s forehead.*

We ask you, God, to strengthen us as we go forward. Grant that we may grow in your friendship to be true missionary disciples and thus proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ with the fire of the Spirit in our hearts. May our commitments reflect the fruits of the Cross and the Resurrection, and may each of our missionary actions glorify you. Listen to our prayer and the prayer of your Church, through Jesus Christ, your Son, through whom you sent the Holy Spirit to guide our way to you, and who lives and reigns with you forever and ever. Amen.

Concluding Song: *Go Forth* or another song of your choice



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