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JESUS CHRIST

AT THE HEART OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

Study topic drawn up by the satellite team for “Research and Reflection” and reviewed by the International Leading Team

**TEAMS OF OUR LADY
United States Super Region**

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First meeting

JESUS THE MAN

"Like us in all things but sin" (Hebrews 4:15)

GOSPEL READING

"Now it happened that at this time Caesar August issued a decree that a census should be made of the whole inhabited world. This census - the first - took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to be registered, each to his own town. So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee for Judaea, to David's town called Bethlehem, since he was of David's House and line, in order to be registered, together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Now it happened that, while they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn." (Luke 2:1-7)

"When the eighth day came and the child was to be circumcised, they gave him the name of Jesus, the name the angel had given him before his conception." (Luke 2:21)

A man called Jesus lived in Palestine in the reigns of the Roman emperors Augustus and Tiberius. We know this on the evidence of the Gospels, as well as from the testimony of pagan writers such as Tacitus, Pliny, Flavius Josephus and others.

We believe that this man was also God: the Son, the second person of the Blessed Trinity. We shall begin our meditation on "Jesus at the Heart of Christian life" by looking at his humanity, because it is as a man that the apostles and disciples first knew him. They were led by this experience, and by reflecting on what he said, to recognize that he was also God. This is the faith that they have handed down to us, from generation to generation, in the beliefs of the Church and above all through the words of the Gospels.

WHAT DO THE GOSPELS TELL US ABOUT THE HUMANITY OF JESUS?

Although there are other witnesses to the historical Jesus, it is primarily through the Gospels that we can discover his essential humanity.

They tell us that Jesus was born of a woman (Luke 2:4-7), that he grew up in a family like any other little boy (Luke 2:51-52), that he worked in his father's workshop (Matthew 13:54-56), that he lived a full life in his mature years and that finally he died a tragic death (Mark 15:33-37).

They also reveal to us the riches and depth of his personality. Jesus maintained close friendships with delicacy and tenderness - he was concerned over of the apostles' fatigue when they came

back from their mission (Mark 6:30-31); he experienced an outpouring of love for the rich young man, who however let him down (Mark 10:17-22); he wept over the tomb of his friend Lazarus (John 11:32-36); he "longed" to share the Passover meal with his disciples before his Passion (Luke 22:15-16).

At the same time the Gospels show us that Jesus never let himself be constrained by cultural or religious norms, but that he went straight to the heart of problems, and grasped the essence of personalities. He was attentive to, ready to enter into dialogue with, and helpful towards people whose cultural or religious backgrounds were very different from his - children (Mark 10:13-16), the Samaritan woman (John 4:6-27), the Samaritan leper (Luke 17:11-16), the Canaanite woman (Mark 7:25-30), the Roman centurion (Luke 7:2-10), the prostitute condemned to death by the Pharisees (John 8:5-11), and the one who threw herself at his feet to anoint them with perfume (Luke 7:36-48).

We also see how Jesus gladly dined with his friends (John 2:1-2; 12:1-2) and with very different people whom he wanted to approach - Pharisees, tax collectors and "sinners"(Mark 2:15-16; Luke 19:1-5 etc), so much so that he was accused of being "a glutton and a drunkard" (Luke 7:34).

The Gospels also show us that Jesus lived in harmony with nature from which he borrowed many examples for his teaching: trees which produce fruit (John 15:1-6; Luke 21:29-31), seeds which slowly change into plants and flowers of the field (Matthew 13:24-30; Luke 13:18-19; Mark 4:26-29), the birds of the air (Matthew 6:47-49), the fish which the fishermen catch in their nets (Matthew 13:47-49), the docile sheep which follow their shepherd (Matthew 18:12-14), the appearance of the sky which foretells the weather (Luke 12:54-57) etc.

But the gospels also demonstrate that Jesus was susceptible to fits of indignation in the face of behaviors which threaten the balance of relations with God and with one's neighbor - think of his attitude towards the merchants in the Temple (John 2:13-16), towards the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:13-31), towards the rich (Luke 6:24-25), and towards unfaithful Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37-39). Above all they show us Jesus taking an interest in human suffering, compassionately and with the power of a miracle worker, as demonstrated by the long list of the cures that he effected (Matthew 9:23-25 etc).

They also show us that Jesus always had complete confidence and filial submission in his relationship with the Father (Mark 14:35-36; John 17:1), and in his prayer life, as is often mentioned (Matthew 14:23; Luke 6:12; 9:18-28) etc.

Finally they show us that Jesus felt fatigue (John 4:6), that he experienced the lack of a settled home (Luke 9:58) and that, more dramatically, he suffered the agony of his approaching death at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-38), and the silence of God on the cross (Matthew 27:45-46). But he willingly accepted his death, without ever losing his faith in the Father (Matthew 26:39-42).

SOME INITIAL REFLECTIONS

What we have just uncovered could seem to some of us a long way from our usual understanding of Christ. Rightly we see and celebrate in Jesus the risen Lord, the second person of the Blessed Trinity, present in the glory of heaven. All the same we must reflect that if our understanding of Christ is focused exclusively on the divinity of Jesus, we run the risk, even if unconsciously, of minimizing the importance of his humanity. In such a case our very image of God would be to some extent distorted.

In God's plan the incarnation of the Son, his taking on human nature in the person of Jesus, was not intended as a temporary phase that ended with the end of Our Lord's life on earth. On the contrary, the incarnation took place once and for all, and was intended to do so. The human nature of the incarnate Son remains forever united with his divine nature. The Gospels bear striking witness to this when they tell us how the risen Jesus behaved; when he appeared to his disciples, he made them touch the wounds of his Passion, and he shared a meal with them (cf. Luke 24:28-30; John 20:19-20, 26-27; John 21:9-14)

Out of his infinite love for us, who are unable to discover him fully by the use of our intelligence and our will, God wished to come closer to us, to become more accessible. It is for this reason (the Church reminds us) that God revealed himself to humanity through his incarnation.

We can turn to Jesus, who is both God and man, with confidence that he has shared our experiences and our feelings, and our hopes and our disappointments.

Jesus, who is not only human, but an exemplary human being, remains a model of how we should live our life; he inspires our relationships with ourselves, with nature, with other people, and with God. Jesus, who is God and saviour, wants to be a brotherly companion on our journey and a guide through our earthly life.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEDITATION ALONE AND AS A COUPLE

Prayer

When we pray, do we meditate on what Jesus said and did during his life on earth? Does this have a practical effect on the choices we make as we go through the day?

Are we grateful for his coming and for the way he shares our human condition like a brother?

Rule of Life

In choosing a 'Rule of Life' as recommended by the Charter, can we each decide how we are to become closer to Jesus, our brother and Master?

Sit-down

Consider whether the words and deeds of Jesus can be an inspiration for our relationship as a couple. We have in mind particularly the way in which Jesus is aware of the person before him - is concerned for his problems and for his real well-being. (Use passages from the Gospels that have struck us when reflecting on these matters).

NB It is a great help to write down the main outcomes of our individual reflections and of our discussions as a couple. It makes it easier to come back to them at a later date. This will also promote a better discussion at the team meeting.

QUESTIONS FOR THE TEAM MEETING

Following on from these reflections, let us share with each other the things that have confirmed our way of talking about the person of Jesus, and the things that have been new for us.

1. In our words and prayers, do we really think of Jesus in his humanity? How do we speak about him to our children?
2. Does a reading of the Gospels which concentrates on Jesus' humanity constitute a danger to our faith or an advantage?
3. Are we led to emphasize the humanity of Jesus to the point where we forget his divine nature? Or do we tend to see nothing but his divine nature?

NB Please write your answers, exchange them with your spouse, and after your discussion as a couple, forward them to the Discussion Couple. Please remove any material which is too personal, or that you do not wish to share.

Team Meeting Format

SIMPLE MEAL WITH LIGHT SHARING

- Each person shares highs and lows of the month
- Others listen without comment, or passing of food.

TIME FOR SCRIPTURE

(Choose one of the following texts.)

Mark 6, 2-3

With the coming of the Sabbath he began teaching in the synagogue, and most of them were astonished when they heard him. They said, 'Where did the man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been granted him, and these miracles that are worked through him? This is the carpenter, surely, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joset and Jude and Simon? His sisters, too, are they not here with us?' And they would not accept him.

Mark 10:17-22

He was setting out on a journey when a man ran up, knelt before him and put this question to him, 'Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: *You shall not kill; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not give false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.*' And he said to him, 'Master, I have kept all these since my earliest days.' Jesus looked steadily at him and he was filled with love for him, and he said, 'You need to do one thing more. Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me'. But his face fell at these words and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.

John 11:1, 5, 32-33

There was a man named Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha, and he was ill.

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ...

Mary went to Jesus, and as soon as she saw him she threw herself at his feet, saying, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' At the sight of her tears, and those of the Jews who had come with her, Jesus was greatly distressed, ...

Galatians 4:4

When the completion of the time came, God sent his son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law, so that we could receive adoption as sons.

Hebrews 4:14-16

Since in Jesus, the Son of God, we have the supreme high priest who has gone through to the highest heaven, we must hold firm to our profession of faith. For the high priest we have is not incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us, but has been put to the test in exactly the same way

as ourselves, apart from sin. Let us, then, have no fear in approaching the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace when we are in need of help.

TIME OF MEDITATION.

The intent is reflection, not discussion.

PRAYER INTENTIONS

- Pass card or cross, so people can pass gracefully and the team knows when the prayer is complete
- The team should respond at the end of each person's turn.

PSALM 1

Response: Yahweh watches over the path of the upright, but the path of the wicked is doomed.

How blessed is anyone who rejects the advice of the wicked
and does not take a stand in the path that sinners tread,
nor a seat in company with cynics,
but who delights in the law of Yahweh
and murmurs his law day and night.

Response: Yahweh watches over the path of the upright, but the path of the wicked is doomed.

Such a one is like a tree planted near streams;
it bears fruit in season
and its leaves never wither,
and every project succeeds.

Response: Yahweh watches over the path of the upright, but the path of the wicked is doomed.

How different the wicked, how different!

Response: Yahweh watches over the path of the upright, but the path of the wicked is doomed.

Just like chaff blown around by the wind
the wicked will not stand firm at the Judgement
nor sinners in the gathering of the upright, but the path of the wicked is doomed.

Response: Yahweh watches over the path of the upright, but the path of the wicked is doomed.

DEEP POOLING

SHARING ON ENDEAVORS

- Regular reading of the Word of God.
- Daily period of Meditation.
- Daily Conjugal and Family Prayer.

- Monthly Sit-Down.
- Rule of Life.
- Yearly Retreat

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY TOPIC Discussion Leaders

- Written responses are returned to the couples prior to discussion.
- Introduce the topic and have two or three open-ended questions ready to use during the discussion.
- Try to include EVERYONE in the discussion, directing comments away from those who tend to dominate the discussion.
- Be prepared to bring discussion back to central theme when inappropriate tangents arise.
- Don't let discussion run over allotted time unless it is important to continue.
- Let people finish their comments; don't cut them short.

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

MAGNIFICAT TO CLOSE THE MEETING

Second Meeting

JESUS CHRIST

“The Word was God The Word was made flesh” (John 1:1,14)

GOSPEL READING

*In the beginning was the Word:
the Word was with God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things came into being,
not one thing came into being except through him.
What has come into being in him was life,
life that was the light of men;*

*The Word became flesh,
he lived among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-5, 14)*

At our first meeting we thought about the humanity of Jesus as presented to us by the gospels. Like the first disciples we must cultivate a deeper experience of him. Led by the Spirit who Jesus promised them, the apostles became increasingly aware of his divinity. As time went on they discovered in the man they knew the divine aspects of his being, his mission and his destiny.

Clearly the gospels and other books of the New Testament are the most reliable documents in our search for Christ, the Son of God made man. At the end of the era in which they were written the fathers of the Church took on this meditation, followed by the theologians and spiritual writers of subsequent epochs. This is how the body of knowledge and insights which we call "Christology" was put together, which feeds and defines the faith of Christians of all times and of all cultures.

WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE TELL US ABOUT THE DIVINITY OF JESUS?

All the information necessary for a theological understanding of the person of our Lord Jesus Christ is contained in the books of the New Testament. These texts set out what was later codified in the Creed which we recite every Sunday.

- Jesus Christ is the Word, the only Son of God the Father (John 1:18), first-born of all creation (John 1:1-2; Colossians 1:15), full of all perfection (Colossians 1:19), close to the father's heart (John 1:18), and himself God (John 1:1; Philippians 2:6).
- Through him and for him all things in heaven and on earth were made (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16-17), he who is the true light (John 1:9).

- The mystery of the divinity of Jesus is already apparent in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) from the way in which those who heard him reacted to what he said (Matthew 13:54), from what he did (Luke 6:19), from his power of healing (Matthew 14:33), from his command over the elements (Luke 8:25) and particularly from his awareness of his intimate relationship with his father in heaven (Mark 14:36).
- Christ, the word of God, has stripped himself; he became flesh, taking the form of a slave, and came to live among us (John 1:14; Ph 2:7), to show us that he is the son of the unseen God, and to reveal to us the mystery of his purpose (Ephesians 1:9), to teach us that we were chosen to be his adopted children before the world was made (Ephesians 1:4-5); and that when the times have run their course, he will bring everything together under Christ as head (Ephesians 1:10).
- But the world did not recognise him, and did not accept him (John 1:5,10-11). Nevertheless "he was humbler yet, even accepting death, death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8); "and for this God raised him high and gave him a name which is above all other names", making him the Lord of all time (Philippians 2:9-11).
- Through Christ we have received the forgiveness of our sins (Ephesians 1:7). If we believe in him, he gives us the power to become children of God, not of human desire or of human will, but from God himself (John 1:12-13). For God wanted to reconcile all things to himself, everything in heaven and everything on earth, by making peace through his death on the cross (Colossians 1:20).
- Christ is also "the Head of the Body, that is, the Church".

These are the fundamental truths that the theologians have explored over the course of the centuries. At the same time these truths have fed the faith of ordinary believers from all walks of life and in every age and they continue to challenge us today.

Let us reflect on these words, from the pastoral constitution "Gaudium et Spes" from the Second Vatican Council:

"He who is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians. 1:15), is Himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam He restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin. (Hebrews 4:15)"

SOME INITIAL REFLECTIONS

Jesus' humanity opens the way for us to enter into an intimate relationship with him and to take him as a role model in our life. But it is his divinity that brings us face-to-face with the profound mystery of God.

Jesus shows us that God is a father and that God is love. This love is the essential reason for the divine presence at the heart of humanity in the person of the Son; God will not abandon us; he will not leave us to our own devices. Faithful to the plan which he worked out for us from the beginning, God the Father risks his Son, who was part of the beginning of creation, entrusting him with the task of redeeming humanity and bringing us back to the fullness of life for which we were created.

The presence of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, among humankind, incorporates our lives within a cosmic framework; from now on our destiny will overcome the boundaries of time and space and take on the fullness of God's eternity.

Human and divine nature come together in the Son; the fact that Christ is the head of the body of which we are the members emphasises that we humans are also part of God's plan. We are not merely passive beneficiaries of his plan; careful for our dignity as free agents, God invites our active participation in it. Thus we can understand how it was that St Ireneus could say:

"For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God. For if the manifestation of God which is made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth, much more does that revelation of the Father which comes through the Word, give life to those who see God." (Contra Haereses, IV, 20:7)

We see God in the Person of Jesus Christ; through him we have been given the gift of living for all eternity as children of God.

SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR DISCUSSION AS A COUPLE

Prayer

Do we make a real effort to think about the mystery of God's presence in the person of Christ, and to adore him? Do we really try to recognize this hidden but active presence in our daily life?

Let us ask for God's help to acquire the attitude of the shepherds at Bethlehem and of the wise men (Luke 2:15-20; Matthew 2:9-11) that knew how to hear the invitation to come and adore Christ the Lord in the humble humanity of a child.

Rule of Life

Let each of us choose a Rule of Life by remembering the people, the times, the places, and the things that we have read or seen and which are signs of the presence of the Son of God, and of his invitation to recognize him.

Sit-down

Let us try to become aware of the fact that our spouse (and we as a couple united by the sacrament of marriage) is inhabited by the mysterious but decisive presence of the Lord, source of all love. Let us ask ourselves whether we make our plans and take our decisions in the light of God's plan as revealed by the person of Christ.

NB It is very useful to make a written note of the outcome of our personal reflections and of our discussions as a couple. This will help us to pick up on these ideas at a later stage. The notes will also make for a better team discussion.

QUESTIONS FOR THE TEAM MEETING

1. Share with each other the points that struck us in this chapter - both those that were new to us and those that confirmed what we already thought. Do we find it difficult to recognize the Son of God in Jesus?
2. Explore together the extent to which belief in the divinity of Christ is important for prayer and for celebrating the liturgy and the sacraments.
3. What similarities can we see between Christ the Word taking on human nature, and our union through the sacrament of marriage?

NB Please write your answers, exchange them with your spouse, and after your discussion as a couple forward them to the Discussion Couple. Please remove any material which is too personal, or that you do not wish to share.

Team Meeting Format

SIMPLE MEAL WITH LIGHT SHARING

- Each person shares highs and lows of the month
- Others listen without comment, or passing of food.

TIME FOR SCRIPTURE

You may choose from the texts below.

Mark 2:5-12

[*At Capernaum, the people bring a sick man to Jesus*] Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, 'My child, your sins are forgiven.' Now some scribes were sitting there, and they thought to themselves, 'How can this man talk like that? He is being blasphemous. Who but God can forgive sins?' And at once, Jesus, inwardly aware that this is what they were thinking, said to them, 'Why do you have these thoughts in your hearts? Which of these is easier to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven" or to say, "Get up, pick up your stretcher and walk"? But to prove to you that the Son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth' — he said to the paralytic — 'I order you: get up, pick up your stretcher, and go off home.' And the man got up, and at once picked up his stretcher and walked out in front of everyone, so that they were all astonished and praised God saying, 'We have never seen anything like this.'

John 8:43-58

[*At the end of an argument with hostile Jews, they say to him:*] 'Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? The prophets are dead too. Who are you claiming to be?' Jesus answered:

'If I were to seek my own glory my glory would be worth nothing. In fact, my glory is conferred by the Father, by the one of whom you say, 'He is our God,' although you do not know him. But I know him, and if I were to say, 'I do not know him,' I should be a liar, as you yourselves are. But I do know him, and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to think that he would see my Day; he saw it and was glad.'

The Jews then said, 'You are not fifty yet, and you have seen Abraham!'

Jesus replied: 'In all truth I tell you, before Abraham ever was, I am.'

First letter of John 4:9-10, 14-15

This is the revelation of God's love for us,
that God sent his only Son into the world
that we might have life through him.

Love consists in this:

it is not we who loved God,
but God who loved us and sent his Son
to expiate our sins.

We ourselves have seen and testify
that the Father sent his Son
as Saviour of the world.

Anyone who acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God,
God remains in him and he in God.

TIME OF MEDITATION.

The intent is reflection, not discussion.

PRAYER INTENTIONS

- Pass card or cross, so people can pass gracefully and the team knows when the prayer is complete
- Team should respond at the end of each person's turn.

PSALM 2:7-12

Response: How blessed are all who take refuge in him!

I will proclaim the degree of Yahweh:
He said to me, ' You are my son,
today have I fathered you.

Response: How blessed are all who take refuge in him!

Ask of me, and I shall give you the nations as your birthright,
the whole wide world as your possession.
With an iron sceptre you will break them,
shatter them like so many pots.'

Response: How blessed are all who take refuge in him!

So now, you kings, come to your senses,
you earthly rulers, learn your lesson!

Response: How blessed are all who take refuge in him!

In fear be submissive to Yahweh;
with trembling kiss his feet,
lest he be angry and your way come to nothing,
for his fury flares up in a moment.

Response: How blessed are all who take refuge in him!

DEEP POOLING

SHARING ON ENDEAVORS

- Regular reading of the Word of God.
- Daily period of Meditation.
- Daily Conjugal and Family Prayer.
- Monthly Sit-Down.
- Rule of Life.
- Yearly Retreat

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY TOPIC Discussion Leaders

- Written responses are returned to the couples prior to discussion.
- Introduce the topic and have two or three open-ended questions ready to use during the discussion.
- Try to include EVERYONE in the discussion, directing comments away from those who tend to dominate the discussion.
- Be prepared to bring discussion back to central theme when inappropriate tangents arise.
- Don't let discussion run over allotted time unless it is important to continue.
- Let people finish their comments; don't cut them short

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

MAGNIFICAT TO CLOSE THE MEETING

Third Meeting

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS (1)

"To bring the Good News to the poor" (Luke 4:16-21)

GOSPEL READING

"He came to Nazara, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day as he usually did. He stood up to read, and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written:

*The spirit of the Lord is on me,
for he has anointed me
to bring the good news to the afflicted.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives,
sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim a year a favor from the Lord.*

He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to speak to them, "This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening."" (Luke 4:16-21)

In the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth Jesus announces for the first time that he has come to bring good news to the poor. He does so by quoting from the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2) - by basing himself on the traditions of the chosen people that he is to continue and to bring to fruition. He will repeat the same message a little later when he answers the disciples of John the Baptist who have been sent to question him. (Luke 7:18-22)

WHAT DOES OUR LORD WANT TO TELL US?

Question number one: what kind of poor did Jesus have in mind when he said that he was bringing them "good news"? Was it those who were poor in material goods, or the "poor in spirit"? The point is debatable, but it is clear that Jesus was thinking about both kinds of poverty.

Indeed the Gospels show that Jesus often came to the help of the poor in tangible ways, especially those suffering from physical or mental illnesses. Think of his miracles, and of the way he praises the poor widow who contributes her mite to the temple (Mark 12:41-44). By contrast he is critical of the rich, isolated in their selfishness (Luke 6:24-26). He asks that we welcome the poor first of all (Luke 14: 12-14). He solemnly declares the critical importance of what we have done for the poor, when the Day of Judgment comes (Matthew 25:31-40).

At the same time the Gospels speak to us of the affection that Jesus had for little children who, in their weakness, put their trust in those who welcome them (Matthew 18:3-4). The publican who recognizes his spiritual poverty will be justified (Luke 18:

9-14). When he speaks to his disciples, or to the rich young man who he loved, he asks them not to rely on the security conferred by possessions, but to give them up so as to surrender themselves unconditionally to God's love (Matthew 19:29; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 12:22-31).

From this we may conclude that Jesus' idea of poverty encompassed many different but related aspects.

The second question that comes to mind is this: what kind of "good news" was Jesus bringing to the poor?

The good news is that God is alive to the effects of the various kinds of poverty that so deeply mark the human condition. He does not abandon the poor to their fate, but instead he is close to them and is sorry for them (Matthew 9:35-36). He submits himself to all the limitations and needs which are inherent in the human condition.

At the same time the good news that Jesus brings to the poor opens the way to an ultimate redemption for them; he promises that they shall take precedence in entering the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you who are weeping now: you shall laugh" (Luke 6:21). Those who are the last on earth will be the first to enter into full communion with God (Matthew 19:30). After this life, redemption becomes a reality. Jesus preaches the equality and brotherhood of all people before God: "You are all brothers" (Matthew 19:30). These ideas have become part of the way we think, even though people have forgotten where they originally came from.

Finally Jesus gave a third promise to those who make themselves poor for the love of God. To those who, in a spirit of trusting surrender, give up all that seems to guarantee security and independence, Jesus promised not only glory in heaven but also the happiness of a fulfilled life on this earth (Mark 10:29-30).

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEDITATION ALONE AND AS A COUPLE

Prayer

Do I try to achieve an attitude of trust and humility in my relationship with the Lord? Am I aware of my shortcomings when I consider that I am the object of God's infinite love?

When we pray, do we bring before the Lord, in sympathy of the spirit, the many disasters of poverty, whether material or spiritual, local or on a global scale? Does our faith enable us to think about God's redeeming love as it is shown to those who are in need, at all times and in all places?

Rule of Life

What practical steps can we take in our daily life, as part of our Rule of Life, and taking account of our different circumstances, to put into practice the good news brought by the Lord towards the poor in our neighborhood?

What kinds of abstinence and purification should we decide on in order to achieve the "poverty of spirit" which is needed in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven?

Do we each consider it our duty to do something towards the improvement of life in our cities, by participating in a responsible and considered manner in the life of society and of institutions?

Sit-down

When we come up against each other's limitations or weaknesses, be they moral or physical, can we agree not to blame each other? Can we accept that they are the signs of that "poverty" which is in so many ways a characteristic of the human condition, and that it is in spite of these defects that Jesus loves us?

When confronted by the poverty of other people, do we allow ourselves to walk away, or to judge uncharitably? Or on the contrary do we try to achieve that attitude of benevolent compassion that Jesus displayed in relation to the poor?

QUESTIONS FOR THE TEAM MEETING

1. Does Jesus' teaching on the subject of poverty make us more aware of our "un-poverty" - our belief that we can be self-sufficient, and our urge to own things, of whatever kind? Is this linked to our sense of sin?
2. Does the Gospel call on us to live more simply? Does it motivate us to share what we have with our fellows?
3. How can we bring "the good news to the poor"?

NB Please write your answers, exchange them with your spouse, and after your discussion as a couple forward them to the Discussion Couple. Please remove any material which is too personal, or that you do not wish to share.

Team Meeting Format

SIMPLE MEAL WITH LIGHT SHARING

- Each person shares highs and lows of the month
- Others listen without comment, or passing of food.

TIME FOR SCRIPTURE

You may choose one of the following texts.

Mark 10, 28-31

Peter said to Jesus "Look, we have left everything and followed you". Jesus said, "In truth I tell you, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not received a hundred times as much, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land - and persecutions too - now in this present time and, in the world to come, eternal life. Many who are first will be last, and the last, first".

Luke 10, 21-22

Just at this time, filled with joy by the Holy Spirit, he said, "I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children. Yes, Father, for that is what it has pleased you to do. Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him".

TIME OF MEDITATION.

The intent is reflection, not discussion

PRAYER INTENTIONS

- Pass a card or cross, so people can pass gracefully and the team knows when the prayer is complete
- Team should respond at the end of each person's turn.

PSALM 34, 1-9, 16-23

Response: I will bless Yahweh at all times

I will bless Yahweh at all times,
his praise continually on my lips.
I will praise Yahweh from my heart;
let the humble hear and rejoice.

Response: I will bless Yahweh at all times

Proclaim with me the greatness of Yahweh,
let us acclaim his name together.
I seek Yahweh and he answers me,
frees me from all my fears.

Response: I will bless Yahweh at all times

Fix your gaze on Yahweh and your face will grow bright,
you will never hang your head in shame.
A pauper calls out and Yahweh hears,
saves him from all his troubles.

Response: I will bless Yahweh at all times

The angel of Yahweh encamps
around those who fear him, and rescues them.
Taste and see that Yahweh is good.
How blessed are those who take refuge in him.

Response: I will bless Yahweh at all times

The eyes of Yahweh are on the upright,
his ear turned to their cry.
But Yahweh's face is set against those who do evil,
to cut off the memory of them from the earth.

Response: I will bless Yahweh at all times

They cry in anguish and Yahweh hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.
Yahweh is near to the broken hearted,
he helps those whose spirit is crushed.

Response: I will bless Yahweh at all times

Though hardships without number beset the upright,
Yahweh brings rescue from them all.
Yahweh takes care of all their bones,
not one of them will be broken.

Response: I will bless Yahweh at all times

But to the wicked evil brings death,
those who hate the upright will pay the penalty.
Yahweh ransoms the lives of those who serve him,
and there will be no penalty for those who take refuge in him.

Response: I will bless Yahweh at all times

DEEP POOLING

SHARING ON ENDEAVORS

- Regular reading of the Word of God.
- Daily period of Meditation.
- Daily Conjugal and Family Prayer.
- Monthly Sit-Down.
- Rule of Life.
- Yearly Retreat

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY TOPIC Discussion Leaders

- Written responses are returned to the couples prior to discussion.
- Introduce the topic and have two or three open-ended questions ready to use during the discussion.
- Try to include EVERYONE in the discussion, directing comments away from those who tend to dominate the discussion.
- Be prepared to bring discussion back to central theme when inappropriate tangents arise.
- Don't let discussion run over allotted time unless it is important to continue.
- Let people finish their comments; don't cut them short

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

MAGNIFICAT TO CLOSE THE MEETING

Fourth Meeting

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS (2)

"Here I am among you as one who serves". (Luke 22:27)

GOSPEL READING

[James and John have asked Jesus to give them the seats on his right and left hand in heaven. Jesus then speaks to the Apostles in these words:]

"Jesus called them to him and said to them, 'You know that among the gentiles those they call their rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. Among you this is not to happen. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all. For the Son of man himself came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'." (Mark 10:42-45)

'Here I am among you as one who serves' (Luke 22:27). It was near the end of his life, at the Last Supper, that Jesus spoke these words by way of an answer to the question which the apostles were debating: they wanted to know who among them was the most important.

WHAT DOES OUR LORD WANT TO TELL US?

In Jesus' preaching his teaching about "service" becomes increasingly explicit, most notably when he speaks about the good and faithful servant. This servant is the clever and faithful steward who takes the initiative for the good of his master's house (Matthew 24:45-47), who is active even when his master is away (Luke 12:42-44), who deals intelligently with the talents given him for safe keeping (Matthew 25:14-23), who watches continually for his master's return (Mark 13:34-36), and who, after all his duties have been done, remains humble and unpretentious (Luke 17:7-10).

In addition, the way Jesus himself acts is an object lesson on the subject of "service" and a practical demonstration of what it means to serve. Think of his compassion towards the sick, which he often cures, and of the dramatic gesture of washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper (John 13:2-6).

The mystery of Jesus, in describing himself as "servant" has a depth that goes beyond the norms of the moral and social order.

We become aware of it when we think about how Jesus resisted the temptations in the desert, refusing to use his divine power to achieve his goals (Matthew 4:8-10). More pointedly, he says, *"The world must recognise that I love the Father and that I act just as the Father commanded"* (John 14:31). As we have seen, he answers the disciples jockeying for the best places by saying *"The Son of Man himself came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"*. In these words the Father's plan for the salvation of humanity is plainly shown, and the part that the Son is to play in the project is unveiled. In Jesus, the second person of the Blessed Trinity,

has humbled himself to take on the condition of a man. In this guise the Son has devoted himself without reservation to the service of mankind, through love: "*Having loved those who were his in the world, he loved them to the end*" (John 13:1). He is the Saviour because he has completely taken on the human condition, even to its most tragic consequences on the Cross.

What is the deepest inspiration for Jesus' conduct? It is nothing less than this: Jesus' mission comes about because "*God is love. This is the revelation of God's love for us, that God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him*" (1 John 4:8-9). Jesus lives and acts in the perfect communion of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit: "*Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make a home in him*". (John 14:23; cf. 1, 18; 3, 35; 17, 24)

Creation was the fruit of God's love; God did not discard it when he saw sinful man turn away from him. On the contrary, you could say that he went on with his plan with increased determination, even to the point as involving himself completely in the salvation of human kind through the life death and resurrection of the Son.

We must never forget that God's plan, the mystery of the redemption, remains present in our lives today. At the Last Supper, before Our Lord accomplished his sacrifice, he obviously wanted to leave us a memorial in the Eucharist, through which he makes himself present to us through all ages. In the Eucharist our Lord, who is the one who serves, is at the same time wholly dedicated to the Father and wholly dedicated to his human brothers. Vatican II instructs us and shows us the link between our taking part, as lay people, in the liturgy, and our daily life:

"The supreme and eternal Priest, Christ Jesus, since he wills to continue his witness and service also through the laity, vivifies them in this Spirit and increasingly urges them on to every good and perfect work. For besides intimately linking them to His life and His mission, He also gives them a sharing in His priestly function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God and the salvation of men. For this reason the laity, dedicated to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvellously called and wonderfully prepared so that ever more abundant fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne - all these become "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ". (1 Peter 2:5) Together with the offering of the Lord's body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God." (Constitution on the Church 34).

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEDITATION ALONE AND AS A COUPLE

Prayer

When we meditate on the person of Jesus, and when we pray to him, which aspects of his personality touch us most? The miracle-worker, the master of life, or the servant who puts himself at our disposal even to the point of risking his life?

Rule of Life

We all have an influence over the people who are close to us, some more and some less. What use do we make of it? What does it mean to each of us to put ourselves at the service of others - of those who, directly or indirectly, serve us in our daily lives?

By contrast, how does this idea of service affect our relationship with those on whom we depend in our daily lives? Do we submit grudgingly or do we live out this relationship in a spirit of loving openness?

The Sit-Down

What part does the spirit of service play in our relationship as a couple? Are we each committed to the human and spiritual development of our spouses? Or do we give in to the temptation to insist on our rights and to demand to be served.

NB It is a great help to write down the main outcomes of our individual reflections and of our discussions as a couple. It makes it easier to come back to them at a later date. These notes will also promote a better discussion at the team meeting.

QUESTIONS FOR THE TEAM MEETING

1. Share with each other the outcome of your reflections on the meaning of service in the New Testament and on the person of Jesus the servant.
2. Do you think that the inversion of "the first" and "the last", which we find in the Gospels, has any meaning in real life?
3. What do you think of these words of Jesus, which St Paul quotes: "It is better to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35)?

NB Please write your answers, exchange them with your spouse, and after your discussion as a couple, forward them to the Discussion Couple. Please remove any material which is too personal, or that you do not wish to share.

Team Meeting Format

SIMPLE MEAL WITH LIGHT SHARING

- Each person shares highs and lows of the month
- Others listen without comment, or passing of food.

TIME FOR SCRIPTURE

You may choose one of the following texts.

John 13:1-5, 12-15

Before the festival of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were his in the world, loved them to the end.

They were at supper, and the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot son of Simon, to betray him. Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God, and he got up from table, removed his outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.' 'Never!' said Peter, 'You shall never wash my feet.' Jesus replied, 'If I do not wash you, you can have no share with me.' Simon Peter said, 'Well then, Lord, not only my feet. but my hands and my head as well!' Jesus said, 'No one who has had a bath needs washing, such a person is clean all over. You too are clean, though not all of you are.' He knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said 'though not all of you are'. When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments again he went back to the table. 'Do you understand', he said, 'what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you. In all truth I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, no messenger is greater than the one who sent him'.

Luke 12:35-40

Jesus said to his disciples 'See that you have your belts done up and your lamps lit. Be like people waiting for their master to return from the wedding feast, ready to open the door as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. In truth I tell you, he will do up his belt, sit down at table and wait on them. It may be in the second watch that he comes, or in the third, but blessed are those servants if he finds them ready. You may be quite sure of this that if the householder had known at what time the burglar would come, he would not have let anyone break through the wall of his house. You too must stand ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.'

TIME OF MEDITATION.

Shared voluntary prayerful reflection. Intent is reflection, not discussion

PRAYER INTENTIONS

PSALM 100

Response: Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth.

Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth,
serve Yahweh with gladness,
come into his presence with songs of joy.

Response: Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth.

Be sure that Yahweh is God,
he made us, we belong to him,
his people, the flock of his sheep fold.

Response: Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth.

Come within his gates giving thanks,
to his courts singing praise,
give thanks to him and bless his name!

Response: Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth.

For Yahweh is good,
his faithful love is everlasting,
his constancy from age to age.

Response: Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth.

DEEP POOLING

SHARING ON ENDEAVORS

- Regular reading of the Word of God.
- Daily period of Meditation.
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- Monthly Sit-Down.
- Rule of Life.
- Yearly Retreat

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY TOPIC Discussion Leaders

- Written responses are returned to the couples prior to discussion.
- Introduce the topic and have two or three open-ended questions ready to use during the discussion.
- Be prepared to bring discussion back to central theme when inappropriate tangents arise.
- Don't let discussion run over allotted time unless it is important to continue.
- Let people finish their comments; do not cut them short.

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

MAGNIFICAT TO CLOSE THE MEETING

Fifth Meeting

JESUS' MESSAGE (3)

'You should pray like this ...' Matthew 6:9

GOSPEL READING

And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at the street corners for people to see them. In truth I tell you, they have had their reward. But when you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.

In your prayers do not babble as the gentiles do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard. Do not be like them; your Father knows what you need before you ask him. So you should pray like this:

*Our Father in heaven,
may your name be held holy,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we have forgiven those who are in debt to us.
And do not put us to the test,
but save us from the Evil One. (Matthew 6:5-13)*

As early as the first Christian generations the *Our Father* was adopted as the pre-eminent prayer. Since that time 'urged by our Savior's bidding, and following his commandment, we make bold to say ...'

In the *Our Father*, Jesus teaches us a new way of addressing God by calling him *Abba!* Father! From the start this puts us confidently on the footing of children of God. As Christians, we alone know clearly that God is our Father. This is something that was not revealed either to Moses or to the Prophets, but we have had it revealed to us by the Son of God. God says 'my child' to each of us individually.

WHAT DOES JESUS SAY TO US ABOUT PRAYER?

Why should we pray?

Jesus himself sets us an example of the importance of prayer. The four evangelists tell us that Jesus often prayed, especially at critical moments. Mark mentions three specific occasions: at the beginning of his public ministry (1:35); after the feeding of the five thousand (4:46); and at the beginning of the Passion in the garden of Gethsemane (14:32).

Moreover Jesus teaches us the correct attitude for Christians to have in daily life: to remain in a permanent relationship with God in all our activities, whether at work, in society or in family life, in order to give meaning to the whole of our life. Listen to these words of Jesus: '*Cut off from me you can do nothing*' (John 15:5). Prayer is like a bridge thrown across the gap between God and man in order to establish a meaningful dialogue that will transform the whole of our life.

As believers, we pray because we are aware of our dependence on God. We acknowledge, in all humility, the One who gave us life out of his love for us.

As disciples of Jesus, we believe that the Son of God made man is present in us and among us. The Christian believes that his prayer is that of Jesus within him: Jesus prays with us and in us.

As we are fragile and sinful, prayer is vital for us to keep our faith and charity, to remain holy and generous. If prayer is a duty, it is also a joy, as it enables us to enter into a dialogue with God through Jesus Christ.

The catechism of the Catholic Church tells us "Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God, or the requesting of good things from God" (n. 2559). And also: "Contemplative prayer is a gift, a grace ... a covenant relationship established by God within our hearts" (n. 2713) "It is the action of God and of man" (n. 2564)

How should we pray?

Jesus teaches us to pray and listens to our prayer. He asks us to make it:

- **Personal and intimate.** Our individual personal prayer, as a heart to heart with God our Father, needs to take place in silence and from within ourselves. As we have seen, Jesus tells us clearly: "*When you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you*" (Matthew 6:6).

The evangelists tell us that Jesus often went aside to pray: "*He would go off to some deserted place and pray*" (Luke 5, 16). "*After sending the crowds away he went up into the hills by himself to pray*" (Matthew 14:23). "*In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house and went off to a lonely place and prayed there*" (Mark 1:35).

While it is true that communal prayer is both necessary and advisable, it should never replace Jesus' command to pray to the Father in the privacy of our own room. This is what the Second Vatican Council tells us: "Spiritual life is not confined to the limitations of a single holy liturgy. As the Christian is called to communal prayer, he/she has also to enter into his/her room to pray to God secretly and must also, according to the teaching of the Apostle, pray without ceasing." (Constitution on the Liturgy, no. 12).

- **Humble.** Our prayer must be as simple as that of a child speaking to his/her father. It should be humble, as Jesus told us in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14), or following the example of the leper who pleaded: *"Sir, if you want to, you can cure me"* (Matthew 6:2). The centurion, conscious of not belonging to the chosen people, asks most humbly for his servant to be cured. When Jesus drew near to his house, he *"sent word to him by some friends, to say to him 'Sir, do not put yourself to any trouble; because I am not worthy to have you under my roof; and that is why I did not presume to come to you myself'"* (Luke 7:6-7).
- **Persevering.** Jesus teaches us the power of persistent prayer in several parables. Luke writes: *"He told them a parable about the need to pray continually and never lose heart"* (this is the parable of the unscrupulous judge and the importunate widow: Luke 18:1-8). In the gospels there is no shortage of examples of cases where persistence has born fruit. The Canaanite woman followed Jesus with this cry: *"Lord, son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil."* When she reached the feet of Jesus, she implored him: *'Lord, help me!'*" And Jesus, praising her faith, grants her wish. (Matthew 15:21-28) The two blind men from Jericho also redouble their cries of: *'Lord, have pity on us, son of David!'* (Matthew 20:29-34). How often do we forget that Jesus is close to us and that we can call on his pity?
- **Confident.** Relying on the Savior's goodness, the centurion finishes by saying: *"Only say a word and my child will be healed"* (Luke 7:7). We repeat these words at Mass before communion. Jesus asks us to have confidence: *"So I say to you: Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you"* (Luke 11:9). *"And if you have faith, everything you ask for in prayer you will receive"* (Matthew 21:22; Mark 11:20-27). As an example of confident prayer, surrendering everything into the Lord's hands, Saint Augustine chooses the story of Martha when Jesus arrived in Bethany after Lazarus' death: *"If you had been here, my brother would not have died, but even now I know that God will grant whatever you ask of him"* (John 11:21-22).

Petition prayers are those that come from us spontaneously when, aware of our limitations and confident that God is our father, we turn to him to ask him for what we need. In Gethsemane, Jesus made a petition prayer to the Father on his own behalf: *"Abba, Father! For you everything is possible. Take this cup away from me"*, but he continues: *"But let it be as you, not I, would have it."* (Mark 14:36). Here he gives us the golden rule of petition prayer: when it comes down to it, to trust in God's will, to seek God's will and not our own.

Some advice which may be useful for prayer

The primary objective of our prayer is to meet God. If we need reassurance we may get it, but it is not the first thing we should look for.

In order to pray we need to create silence, both internally and externally. The right environment for prayer also depends on our relationships with others – our awareness

of those around us, our gratitude and generosity towards them, and any needful forgiveness.

We must not be downhearted if it seems that 'God does not listen to us' and that our petition prayers go unanswered. We may have asked for something that in actual fact is not good for us, even if from our human point of view we cannot see it. These 'apparent silences' from God are never an absence of God.

We must not be discouraged by an apparently fruitless period when peaceful prayer seems really difficult. Our perseverance in the presence of God and his grace will do the rest.

Have we understood that Jesus continuously felt the need to be alone with his Father? What did they say to one another? The gospels are silent. What is clear is that the exchange between the Son and the Father takes place in a circle of love sealed by the Holy Spirit.

In fact, our prayer could come down to our saying to God: "Father!" and even "Daddy!" and at the same time being aware that he says to us: "my child!" and that he invites us to share in the infinite love lived in the unity of the Trinity.

Annex

NOTES ON THE OUR FATHER

We pause here to examine the petitions that make up the Lord's Prayer, found in the Sermon on the Mount, where the Gospels report Jesus' teaching on many aspects of Christian life, starting with the Beatitudes. He goes on to propose an even stricter observance of the Law, demanding the highest standards of justice in brotherly relationships, almsgiving, fasting and prayer.

Our Father. By beginning with this invocation Jesus teaches us this fundamental attitude: to place ourselves in our relationship with God in the position of children towards their father, in an attitude of respect, veneration, gratitude and love. Jesus himself, during his life on earth, spoke to the Father in a spirit of filial affection. But note that we pray "our" Father, and immediately the prayer is expressed in the plural: "us". In this way Jesus, while inviting us to withdraw to pray in secret, reminds us that prayer, although personal, is never that of an individual in isolation. Other people are in some sort present in our prayers, which join together the prayers of all the just. The two words of the opening invocation indicate that we pray for all people, even those who do not pray themselves, whether because they do not want to or do not know how to. On their behalf as well we give thanks for all the good things that have been given to humanity and we intercede for those in the greatest need, and particularly for those who are close to us. Through the unifying power of the communion of saints, we are each in our turn linked to the prayers of all those who turn towards our Father.

May your name be held holy. We pray that God may be known, loved and honored by everyone, and by us in particular. We can serve God's glory if we turn to him with our whole being, with our thoughts, our love and our deeds.

Your kingdom come. We pray that God may reign in us through his gift of holiness, that he will keep us united with him through faith hope and charity, and that he will permeate

our hearts and our wills. We pray that the Church may become the manifestation of the Kingdom of God for the whole of humanity. We pray that we shall all be reunited at the end of the ages in eternal happiness.

Your will be done on earth as in heaven. We express our wish to accept fully God's will, trusting in his merciful love. At the same time we show our desire to do his will in our world just as the angels and saints do in heaven. In this we follow the example of the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation: "*You see before you the Lord's servant; let it happen to me as you have said*" (Luke 1:38).

Give us today our daily bread. This prayer is the first to be directed towards our own needs. We do not expect riches, but our everyday necessities. We receive our livelihood by God's gift, without anxiety for tomorrow (Matthew 6:25-34). Many of us will think of the Bread of Life, the life-giving gift of the Eucharist, particularly when this prayer is said in the Mass.

Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven those who are in debt to us. When we pray we cannot but recognize that we are sinners, and ask for God's forgiveness. But how could we do so without practicing forgiveness ourselves? Remember how Jesus instructed us to forgive our brother before bringing our offering to the altar (Matthew 5:23-24). We know how he answered Peter when asked how many times one should forgive: "Seventy-seven times"! The parable of the unforgiving servant that follows also illustrates the point (Matthew 18:21-35).

And do not put us to the test. We are aware of our weakness: we are vulnerable in the face of the many temptations that exist in our lives. We ask for God's help to have the courage to remain true to his will in the choices of our daily life.

But save us from evil. To sum it all up, we here express our hope that with God's help we shall be freed from all bad things, both those within us and those affecting us, so that we may become worthy of our status as God's children.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEDITATION ALONE AND AS A COUPLE

Let us begin by saying that this chapter of the study topic brings up more questions than usual, and ones that will retain their interest over the interval between one team meeting and the next. We could usefully come back to these reflections from time to time in order to take our bearings, both individually and as a couple.

Prayer

Do we understand what conditions are necessary for personal prayer, namely to find somewhere peaceful, to be unhurried, and to seek inner silence? It is not a question of carrying out a task, but of meeting God.

In our conjugal prayer we naturally pray for our children and for those who are near to us and for their hopes and fears. Our love as parents leads us to put our children first in our prayers. Perhaps we sometimes forget to pray for ourselves...

Do we have the courage to be silent - to say less and to listen to the Lord through his Word and his Spirit? To unite our prayers with the prayers of the whole Church?

Rule of Life

Using the opportunity provided by this study topic, we could adjust our Rule of Life to include a daily time of prayer, perhaps as the first action of our day. In this prayer we could:

- thank our Lord for the new day.
- offer up the things we are to do in the day.
- pray to be able to show charity, in thought, word and deed, to all those we meet.
- pray for the grace to know how to bear witness to faith and hope.

Would it be a good idea to devote a time of prayer to an "examination of conscience"? This would consist of a prayer to the Lord as much as or more than our looking at ourselves. To achieve this we could:

- give thanks for the gifts we have received, and pray for enlightenment.
- reflect on what we have done, and on what we want to do, and on our plans for the future.
- ask forgiveness.
- make resolutions and pray for the grace to keep them.

Sit-down.

What stage are we at in our personal and conjugal prayer? How can we help each other? Do our children know that we pray - that we talk to God our Father together? Do we pray as a family and, if so, how?

NB It is a great help to write down the main outcomes of our individual reflections and of our discussions as a couple. It makes it easier to come back to them at a later date. These notes will also promote a better discussion at the team meeting.

QUESTIONS FOR THE MEETING

1. What can we tell each other about our experience of prayer and the part it plays in our life as a couple and as a family?
2. What place does the word of God have in our prayers? Do we, like Jesus, use the Psalms in our prayers? How do we go about meditating on a passage from the Gospels?
3. We might tell each other how we try to live each day without forgetting God's presence. Do we, for example, use repetitive prayers such as the rosary when we are travelling? Do we think for a moment, when passing a Church, that the Real Presence is there? Do we make short invocations, repeated several times over the course of a day? Do we recall a particular passage from the Gospels, such as those where people ask Jesus to help them (the blind men of Jericho, etc).

NB Please write your answers, exchange them with your spouse, and after your discussion as a couple forward them to the Discussion Couple. Please remove any material which is too personal, or that you do not wish to share

Team Meeting Format

SIMPLE MEAL WITH LIGHT SHARING

- Each person shares highs and lows of the month
- Others listen without comment, or passing of food.

TIME FOR SCRIPTURE

John 17, 17 - 26.

Consecrate them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world I have sent them into the world, and for their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in truth. I pray not only for these but also for those who through their teaching will come to believe in me. May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me. I have given them the glory you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one. With me in them and you in me, may they be so perfected in unity that all the world will recognise that it was you who sent me and that you have loved them as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they may always see my glory which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Father, upright one, the world has not known you, but I have known you, and these have known that you have sent me. I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them and so that I may be in them.

TIME OF MEDITATION

The intent is reflection, not discussion.

PRAYER INTENTIONS

- Pass card or cross, so people can pass gracefully and the team knows when the prayer is complete. Team member can pray out loud, pray silently or pass
- Team should respond at the end of each person's turn.

PSALM 23

Response: Yahweh is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.

Yahweh is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.
in grassy meadows he lets me lie,
by tranquil streams he leads me
to restore my spirit.

Response: Yahweh is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.

He guides me in paths of saving justice
as befits his name.
Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death
I should fear no danger, for you are at my side.

Response: Yahweh is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.

Your staff and your crook are there to soothe me
you prepare a table for me under the eyes of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup brims over.

Response: Yahweh is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.

Kindness and faithful love pursue me
every day of my life.
I make my home in the House of Yahweh
for all time to come.

Response: Yahweh is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.

DEEP POOLING

SHARING ON ENDEAVORS

- Regular reading of the Word of God.
- Daily period of Meditation.
- Daily Conjugal and Family Prayer.
- Monthly Sit-Down.
- Rule of Life.
- Yearly Retreat

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY TOPIC Discussion Leaders

- Written responses are returned to the couples prior to discussion.
- Introduce the topic and have two or three open-ended questions ready to use during the discussion.
- Try to include EVERYONE in the discussion, directing comments away from those who tend to dominate the discussion.
- Be prepared to bring discussion back to central theme when inappropriate tangents arise.
- Don't let discussion run over allotted time unless it is important to continue.
- Let people finish their comments; don't cut them short.

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

MAGNIFICAT TO CLOSE THE MEETING

Sixth Meeting

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS (4)

"Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice" (Matthew 12:7).

GOSPEL READING

As Jesus was walking on from there he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, "follow me". And he got up and followed him.

Now while he was at table in the house it happened that a number of tax collectors and sinners came to sit at the table with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When he heard this he replied, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Go and learn the meaning of the words: mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice. And indeed I came to call not the upright, but sinners." (Matthew 9:9 - 11)

At that time Jesus went through the cornfields one Sabbath day. His disciples were hungry and began to pick ears of corn and eat them. The Pharisees noticed it and said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing something that is forbidden on the Sabbath." But he said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his followers were hungry - how he went into the house of God and they ate the loaves of the offering although neither he nor his followers were permitted to eat them, but only the priests? Or again, have you not read in the Law that on the Sabbath day at the Temple, priests break the Sabbath without committing any fault? Now here, I tell you, is something greater than the Temple. And if you had understood the meaning of the words: mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the blameless. For the Son of man is master of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:1-8)

Jesus was well versed in the Jewish law, the scriptures, and in the human heart. He twice quotes a text from the prophet Hosea (6:6) in the passages you have just read. In the first of these passages, Jesus replies to his critics by referring to them to the words of the prophet "*Go and learn*". In the second passage Jesus debates with the Pharisees using their own methods; he invokes the example of what David did, which they cannot criticise. In this way he exposes their formalism, their following of the letter of the law but not its spirit.

INITIAL COMMENTS

When we study this part of Christ's message it is important to fully understand the meaning of these important words, namely "*mercy*" and "*sacrifice*".

Mercy

If you look up the Book of Hosea, you may see the verse that is quoted in the Gospel translated, as "*It is love not sacrifice which is pleasing to me*". Do not be surprised: for God, love is that faithful and kindly tenderness which can also be expressed by the word "*mercy*". According to God, mercy is a quality of the heart. It is also a deliberate

and conscious benevolence which he shows to his chosen people, as in these words from the book of Exodus "*Yahweh, Yahweh, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy, maintaining his faithful love to thousands, forgiving faults, crime and sin*" (34:6-7). God does not overlook sin, but his tender mercy is ready to forgive. We read in the book of Deuteronomy: "*For Yahweh your God is a merciful God and will not desert or destroy you or forget the covenant which he made on oath with your ancestors.*" (4:31).

In short, mercy is one of the attributes of God.

Needless to say human beings, who benefit from the divine mercy, are called to live in brotherly love.

These references to the Old Testament will help us to understand Jesus' message. For him, mercy reaches its full extent in melting compassion for the sick and sinners. He proclaims the width of divine mercy that ends in forgiveness - think of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15).

Sacrifice

This word appears infrequently in the New Testament (with the exception of the Epistle to the Hebrews), probably because it bore too many connotations with the rituals criticized so often by the prophets as being merely an exterior show, lacking any real piety or true generosity, as in the passage from Hosea quoted above. It is too easy to give things up out of self-interest - I give, in order to obtain what I want in return.

The word "sacrifice" is derived from the Latin "sacrum facere", to make something sacred or holy. Different things may be made holy - sacrificial offerings (as for instance animals, or the first fruits of the harvest), material goods, or pleasures foregone - but also our actions, such as those inspired by brotherly love. The love of our souls lies at the heart of every such offering - a love that surrenders itself to God, which glorifies God, which rejoices in the beauty and greatness of God, which thanks him for the gift of life itself, and which humbly accept his forgiveness for sin. So St Augustine could define sacrifice in these words: "True sacrifice is everything which helps to unite us to God in Holy Fellowship" (The City of God, Book X, VI).

WHAT DOES OUR LORD WANT TO TELL US?

When, on the Mount, Jesus taught a new way of interpreting the Law, namely its fulfilment, he began with the Beatitudes: "*Blessed are the merciful, they shall have mercy shown them*" (Matthew 5:7). He makes exacting demands, such as the injunction to love our enemies. And he ends by saying "*You too, therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48); or in St Luke's Gospel, "*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful*" (Luke 6:36).

But as always the message of the gospels is not conveyed in words alone. Jesus embodies and demonstrates by his actions the message of mercy. From the very beginning of his public ministry, in the synagogue at Nazareth, he returns to the promises of Isaiah: "*The spirit of the Lord is on me to bring the good news to the*

afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives..... This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening" (Luke 4:18-22).

Throughout his life Jesus shows his compassion for the sick, for outcasts and the despised; he heals and consoles them. He demonstrates God's patience, as in the parable of the dandelion in the wheat (Matthew 13:24-38). He shows the power of divine mercy in the forgiveness of sins, a deeper power than the healing of physical ailments of the paralytic at Capernaum, (Mark 2:1 - 12), or the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11). On the cross Jesus not only forgives the good thief (Luke 23:43) but he also prays for those who sentenced him: "*Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:43)

Mercy attains its most concrete manifestation in Jesus through the total giving of himself in the sacrifice consummated on the cross. As mentioned earlier, the word sacrifice is scarcely used in this context. But it is a real sacrifice because Jesus gives himself to the Father, for the benefit of his brothers, in a premeditated act of love. He is the good shepherd: "*I lay down my life for my sheep and there will be only one flock*" (John 10:15-16). As his passion draws nearer, he prays in these words "*I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us. For their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in truth.*" (John 17:11,19). And as his sacrifice is completed, Jesus says "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*" (Luke 23:46).

His sacrifice is a gift to the Father and an offering for his brothers. When he instituted the Eucharist Jesus demonstrated that his sacrifice was the supreme expression of mercy towards the whole human race, for whose good he gave himself: "*This is my body given for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you*" (Luke 22:19-20).

Jesus goes before us and he performs that of which he speaks to his disciples when he says "*No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13). We are intimately linked to Christ in baptism, and he has laid down his life for us. St Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, stated forcefully: "*If we have been joined to him by dying a death like his, so we shall be by a resurrection like his*" (Romans 6:5).

So St Paul can call upon us to make our own offering: "*I urge you, then, brothers, remembering the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God*" (Romans 12:1). "*Disciple is not superior to teacher*" (Luke 6:40). We cannot think about the gift of Jesus, nor profit from it, without being moved in our turn to offer ourselves with him and through him, "*To offer the spiritual sacrifices made acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*" (1 Peter 2:5). The deacon Stephen followed Jesus to the very end of his martyrdom: "*As they were stoning him, Stephen said in invocation 'Lord Jesus receive my spirit'. Then he knelt down and said aloud 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'. And with these words he fell asleep*" (Acts 7:59-60).

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEDITATION ALONE AND AS A COUPLE

The foregoing essay is deliberately in skeleton form. Each reader may flesh it out from their own reading of the gospels, and responds to the following suggestions:

Prayer

Conscious of our weakness, let us ask Our Lord to help us to practise mercy, in the form of a sincere and loving acceptance of other people – spouse, child, relative or neighbor - as a brother in Christ.

How can our prayers consist in the offering of ourselves to God, following Jesus' example?

Rule of Life

Have I offered up to our Lord all I do, my joys and sufferings, without reservation? Do I dare to take as my rule of life the words of St Paul: "... *whatever you say or do, let it be in the name of the Lord Jesus, in thanksgiving to God the Father through him!*" (Colossians 3:17).

What have I done today, or this week, for other people, with no taint of self-interest?

Sit-down

Thinking of the example set by Christ the merciful, who gives himself completely through love, how can we give practical effect to mercy and to sacrificial offering in our life as a couple? Can we agree to remind each other about these examples from the Gospels?

Let us reflect on the sacrament of our own marriage, this gift of each other, and on the gifts that Christ in his mercy has given us at every stage of our life together.

NB It is a great help to write down the main outcomes of our individual reflections and of our discussions as a couple. It makes it easier to come back to them at a later date. Your notes will also promote a better discussion at the team meeting.

QUESTIONS FOR THE MEETING

1. How do we react to the attitude of the father in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-2)? Or to the parable of the workers in the vineyard, who were all paid the same amount?
2. Does mercy have its place in family life, in the workplace or in public life? Can we mention things done without hope of reward in this context?
3. In the context of what the Gospels show us about Christ, what is the significance of sacrifice in the spiritual life and in daily life?

NB Please write your answers, exchange them with your spouse, and after you discussion them as a couple forward them to the Discussion Couple. Please remove any material which is too personal, or that you do not wish to share.

Team Meeting Format

SIMPLE MEAL WITH LIGHT SHARING

- Each person shares highs and lows of the month
- Others listen without comment, or passing of food.

TIME FOR SCRIPTURE

You may choose one of the following texts.

Luke 10:30-37

To the lawyer who asked who is his neighbor, Jesus said: "A man was once on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of bandits; they stripped him, beat him and then made off, leaving him half dead. Now a priest happened to be travelling down the same road, but when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite came to the place, saw him, and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan traveller who came on him was moved with compassion when he saw him. He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him on to his own mount and took him to an inn and looked after him. Next day, he took out two denarii and handed them to the innkeeper and said, "Look after him, and on my way back I will make good any extra expense you have." Which of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbor to the man who fell into the bandits' hands? He replied "The one who showed pity towards him." Jesus said to him, "Go, and do the same yourself."

Matthew 18:21-22.

Then Peter went up to him and said, and "Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?" Jesus answered, "Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times."

1 John 3:16-20

This is the proof of love, that he laid down his life for us, and we too ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone is well off in worldly possessions and sees his brother in need but closes his heart to him, how can the love of God be remaining in him? Children, our love must not be just words or mere talk, but something active and genuine. This will be the proof that we belong to the truth, and it will convince us in his presence, even if our own feelings condemn us, that God is greater than our feelings and knows all things.

TIME OF MEDITATION

The intent is reflection, not discussion

PRAYER INTENTIONS

- Pass card or cross, so people can pass gracefully and the team knows when the prayer is complete. Team member can pray out loud, pray silently or pass.
- Team should respond at the end of each person's turn.

Psalm 50: 1-3, 5-6, 14-15, 23

Response: "Gather to me my faithful, who sealed my covenant by sacrifice."

The God of gods, Yahweh, is speaking,
from east to west he summons the earth.
From Zion, perfection of beauty, he shines forth;
he is coming, our God, and will not be silent.

Response: "Gather to me my faithful, who sealed my covenant by sacrifice."

‘Gather to me my faithful,
who sealed my covenant by sacrifice.’
The heavens proclaim his saving justice,
‘God himself is judge.’

Response: "Gather to me my faithful, who sealed my covenant by sacrifice."

"Let thanksgiving be your sacrifice to God,
fulfil the vows you made to the Most High;
then if you call to me in time of trouble
I will rescue you and you will honor me."

Response: "Gather to me my faithful, who sealed my covenant by sacrifice."

"Honor to me is a sacrifice of thanksgiving;
to the upright I will show God's salvation."

Response: "Gather to me my faithful, who sealed my covenant by sacrifice."

DEEP POOLING

SHARING ON ENDEAVORS

- Regular reading of the Word of God.
- Daily period of Meditation.
- Daily Conjugal and Family Prayer.
- Monthly Sit-Down.
- Rule of Life.
- Yearly Retreat

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY TOPIC Discussion Leaders

- Written responses are returned to the couples prior to discussion.
- Introduce the topic and have two or three open-ended questions ready to use during the discussion.
- Try to include EVERYONE in the discussion, directing comments away from those who tend to dominate the discussion.
- Be prepared to bring discussion back to central theme when inappropriate tangents arise.
- Don't let discussion run over allotted time unless it is important to continue.
- Let people finish their comments; don't cut them short.

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

MAGNIFICAT TO CLOSE THE MEETING

Seventh Meeting

JESUS AND EASTER

*"Crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again" (From the Nicene Creed)*

GOSPEL READING

When they reached the place called The Skull, there they crucified him and the two criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.' Then they cast lots to share out his clothing.

It was now about the sixth hour and the sun's light failed, so that darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. The veil of the Sanctuary was torn right down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice saying, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' With these words he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he gave praise to God and said, 'Truly, this was an upright man.' [...] All his friends stood at a distance; so also did the women who had accompanied him from Galilee and saw all this happen. [Joseph of Arimathaea] went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. He then took it down, wrapped it in a shroud and put it in a tomb which was hewn in stone and which had never held a body. It was Preparation day and the Sabbath was beginning to grow light.

Meanwhile the women who had come from Galilee with Jesus were following behind. They took note of the tomb and how the body had been laid.

On the first day of the week, at the first sign of dawn, they went to the tomb with the spices they had prepared. They found that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb, but on entering they could not find the body of the Lord Jesus. As they stood there puzzled about this, two men in brilliant clothes suddenly appeared at their side. Terrified, the women bowed their heads to the ground. But the two said to them, 'Why look among the dead for someone who is alive? He is not here; he has risen. Remember what he told you when he was still in Galilee: that the Son of man was destined to be handed over into the power of sinful men and be crucified, and rise again on the third day.' And they remembered his words. (Luke 23:33-55; 24:1-8)

INITIAL COMMENTS

Clearly Jesus' death and resurrection are the pinnacle of his life and mission. He became man, died on the cross and rose from the dead for love of us.

Jesus was sentenced by the religious authorities because he claimed to be the son of God (Luke 22:70-71), and by the Roman authorities for political reasons: he was accused of claiming to be King and Messiah. Jesus' sufferings were both on the spiritual and the physical plane: he was misunderstood, rejected by his people, and given up to the pagans, in the company of criminals, two of whom would be crucified with him. He was abandoned by his friends, with the exception of a small group: John

and the faithful women with his mother. He was mocked. Add to this the intense physical suffering of his dying, when the agony overcomes him.

Jesus, who is the victim of an unjust judgment, remains entirely motivated by love of the Father and love of mankind: his words of pardon and forgiveness towards those who put him to death are evidence of this. He surrenders himself totally into the hands of the Father even when he is experiencing the agony of abandonment: *my God my God why have you forsaken me?*

Jesus, truly man, shares our condition to the very end, but as one who is innocent: "He has been put to the test in exactly the same way as ourselves, apart from sin". (Hebrews 4:15).

It is the resurrection that gives full meaning to Jesus' passion. It is as witnesses to the resurrection that the apostles are first moved to begin preaching. Go back and read Peter's speeches in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul in his turn confirms it when he writes to the Corinthians (towards 54 AD): "The tradition I handed on to you in the first place, a tradition which I had myself received, was that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried; and that on the third day he was raised to life, in accordance with the scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas". (1 Colossians 15:3-5).

We must not forget that Jesus' resurrection is not of the same nature as the raising to life of Jairus' daughter or of Lazarus. They returned to an ordinary earthly life. Jesus goes towards the Father (John 14, 12). Jesus' glorious resurrection propels him into the new and eternal life of the Kingdom; his human nature is freed from the temporal limits of our history, and from the confines of our environment; it is transformed. "At Jesus' resurrection his body is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit: he shares the divine life in his glorious state, so that St Paul can say that Christ is "the man of heaven". (Catechism of the Catholic Church, ¶ 646).

It is true that the disciples themselves did not at first admit the reality of the resurrection and that it is often greeted with scepticism today. The Gospel tells us of the doubts of the first disciples. Jesus had to give them clear evidence of who he was. His appearances are not going to explain the resurrection, nor to describe it. The resurrection is a matter of faith, at the heart of the Easter mystery.

Jesus keeps faith with us and prepares for the reunion with his brothers in the communion of the 'house of the Father'. "After I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you to myself, so that you may be with me where I am." (John 14:3)

WHAT DOES OUR LORD WANT TO TELL US?

Jesus' passion shows us the infinite love of God. Jesus himself, according to St John, tells us the meaning of this saving love: "For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3, 16). Jesus has proclaimed the fruitfulness of the supreme trial of death through the image of the grain of wheat in the earth - "If it dies, it yields a rich harvest". (John 12:24)

Christ's total gift of himself calls on us to give ourselves in our turn, especially in married love. Father Caffarel summed it up in these words:

"The act by which Christ offered himself once and for all on Calvary expressed the deepest state of his soul, the essence of his interior life, his gift to the Father, joyous and permanent, ever present. If Christ renews this act in the Mass, if he invites you to participate in it, it is because he wants his sacrifice to penetrate into the deepest physical and spiritual depths of your marriage, in order to create in you to a state of the soul that is to be a permanent offering to the Father. Or rather, it is so that you may allow him to re-live his sacrifice in your marriage. So you see, Christ's sacrifice is not to remain something outside you but must enter into your being; the offering which you make of it must not be a passing gesture but a habitual disposition, a life." (*L'Anneau d'Or, Marriage as a path towards God*, 1964, page 261)

Jesus' passion prompts us to think about the meaning of suffering, which so often afflicts the innocent. John Paul II has shown that the passion of Christ is the most important example of the suffering of the innocent, something which was prophesied in the book of Job: "Revelation, which is the word of God himself, with complete frankness presents the problem of the suffering of an innocent man: suffering without guilt. Job has not been punished, there was no reason for inflicting a punishment on him, even if he has been subjected to a grievous trial." (*Salvifici doloris*, ¶11)

As from the moment of Jesus' passion, human suffering undergoes a radical change of meaning. Not only did Jesus achieve the redemption of humanity through the gift of himself in his suffering on the cross, but human suffering no longer has the same negative meaning, and it becomes possible to link it with the suffering of Christ. St Paul emphasises this when he says: "It makes me happy to be suffering for you now, and in my own body to make up all the hardships that have still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church" (Colossians 1:24). Needless to say, there is no shortfall in what Christ has given to us that we need to make up: what is missing is the solidarity of the whole human family in the offering of total love. We are not required to seek out suffering, but when we have to experience it, we can thereby participate in the mystery of the redemption.

We must not divorce our reflections on Jesus' death and on human suffering from the vision of life that it opens for us. Chiara Lubich put it well when she said:

"By the carrying of our cross every day and by uniting ourselves with the crucified and forsaken Jesus, we can participate, in this life, in the life of the risen Christ. Enriched by this experience, we can more readily help our brothers to find the joy on the other side of tears".

There are certain key points in the appearances of the risen Christ: he confers on his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the power to forgive sins (John 20:19-23); he sends them out as missionaries to proclaim the good news of salvation (Matthew 28:19-20); he asks Peter to repeat the fact that he loves him, and then calls on him to "feed his sheep", and to lead his Church (John 21:15-17). Running over these events in our minds, we are prompted to meditate on our relationship with the risen Christ,

conscious of his promise: "And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Matthew 28:20).

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEDITATION ALONE AND AS A COUPLE

Prayer

We give thanks for the love of Jesus, who loved us to the very end.

We ask him to make us ever more generous in the gift of ourselves. We pray for the grace to love with all our hearts, to love others as he loves us, and to demonstrate it by the way in which we live.

We pray for the strength to accept trials, whether great or small, and to offer our sufferings in union with Jesus. We ask him to help us to carry the "cross" of our spouse, of our children and of those who are near to us, and that we may not be a "cross" for others.

Are we aware, when we pray, that we are in the presence of the risen Christ, living and present for all generations?

Let us reflect on the place that the Eucharist has in our prayer life. Is the real presence somewhere where we meet the living Christ, who loves us even to the extent of giving us his own life as food?

Rule of life

Do we have to make an effort to forgive, as Christ forgives?

Think about making a regular examination of conscience, in the presence of Christ, who gave up his life for the forgiveness of sin. Do we do it confidently, giving thanks for the merciful love of the Lord? Should we renew our practice of the sacrament of penitence and reconciliation?

The risen Christ gave his disciples the task of proclaiming the Gospel. How do we bear witness to it?

Sit-down

We have meditated and prayed in union with the risen Christ. Can we make this an opportunity to work out where we are in our conjugal prayer and on the way in which we receive the word of the living Christ?

When we encounter trials in our life as a couple and as a family, do we truly find support in Christ, who died and rose for us?

The sacrament of marriage consecrates our gift of ourselves to each other. Is this gift still as fresh as it used to be? Do we feel that we find in Christ one who leads us on the path of life and who enriches our love?

NB It is a great help to write down the main outcomes of our individual reflections and of our discussions as a couple. It makes it easier to come back to them at a later date. Your notes will also promote a better discussion at the team meeting.

QUESTIONS FOR THE TEAM MEETING

1. Share with the team the fruits of your prayer and your discussions as a couple, so far as you can do so without disclosing anything too private.
2. Let us think about the ways in which we can show solidarity with suffering and with the difficulties that we see around us, including those of the wider world.
3. How can we be witnesses of the living Christ to those around us, in the society which we are living in?

Please write your answers, exchange them with your spouse, and after your discussion as a couple forward them to the Discussion Couple. Please remove any material which is too personal, or that you do not wish to share.

Team Meeting Format

SIMPLE MEAL WITH LIGHT SHARING

- Each person shares highs and lows of the month
- Others listen without comment, or passing of food.

TIME FOR SCRIPTURE

You may choose one of the following texts.

John 20:24-29.

It was very early on the first day of the week and still dark, when Mary of Magdala came to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been moved away from the tomb and came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, she said, and we don't know where they have put him'.

So Peter set out with the other disciple to go to the tomb. They ran together, but the other disciple, running faster than Peter, reached the tomb first; he bent down and saw the linen cloths lying on the ground, but did not go in. Simon Peter, following him, also came up and went into the tomb, saw the linen cloths lying on the ground and also the cloth that had been over his head; this was not with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in; he saw and he believed. Till this moment they had still not understood the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. The disciples then went back home.

Colossians 1:12-23

Give thanks with joy to the Father who has made you able to share the lot of God's holy people and with them to inherit the light. Because that is what he has done. It is he who has rescued us from the ruling force of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son that he loves, and in him we enjoy our freedom, the forgiveness of sin.

He is the image of the unseen God,
the first born of all creation,
for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth:
all things were created through him and for him.
He exists before all things
and in him all things hold together,
and he is the Head of the Body,
that is, the Church.
He is the Beginning,
the first-born from the dead,
so that he should be supreme in every way;
because God wanted all fullness to be found in him
and through him to reconcile all things to him,
everything in heaven and everything on earth,
by making peace through his death on the cross.

You were once estranged and of hostile intent through your evil behaviour; now he has reconciled you, by his death and in that mortal body, to bring you before himself

holy, faultless and irreproachable - as long as you persevere and stand firm on the solid base of the faith, never letting yourselves drift away from the hope promised by the Gospel, which you have heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become the servant.

TIME OF MEDITATION.

The intent is reflection, not discussion.

PRAYER INTENTIONS

- Pass card or cross, so people can pass gracefully and the team knows when the prayer is complete
- Team should respond at the end of each person's turn.

PSALM 22

Response: You who fear Yahweh, praise him!

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
The words of my groaning do nothing to save me.
My God, I call by day but you do not answer,
at night, but I find no respite.
In you our ancestors put their trust,
they trusted and you set them free.

Response: You who fear Yahweh, praise him!

But I am a worm, not a man,
scorn of mankind, contempt of the people;
all who see me jeer at me,
they sneer and wag their heads,
'He trusted himself to Yahweh, let Yahweh set him free!
Let him deliver him, as he took such delight in him.'

Response: You who fear Yahweh, praise him!

Do not hold aloof, for trouble is upon me,
and no one to help me!
My strength is trickling away,
my bones are all disjointed,
my heart has turned to wax,
melting inside me.

Response: You who fear Yahweh, praise him!

Yahweh, do not hold aloof!
My strength, come quickly to my help,
I shall proclaim your name to my brothers,
praise you in full assembly:

Response: You who fear Yahweh, praise him!

You who fear Yahweh, praise him!
All the race of Jacob, honour him!
Revere him, all the race of Israel!
For he has not despised
nor disregarded the poverty of the poor,
has not turned away his face,
but has listened to the cry for help.

Response: You who fear Yahweh, praise him!

And those who are dead, their descendants will serve him
will proclaim his name to generations still to come;
and these will tell of his saving justice to a people yet unborn:
he has fulfilled it.

Response: You who fear Yahweh, praise him!

DEEP POOLING

SHARING ON ENDEAVORS

- Regular reading of the Word of God.
- Daily period of Meditation.
- Daily Conjugal and Family Prayer.
- Monthly Sit-Down.
- Rule of Life.
- Yearly Retreat

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY TOPIC Discussion Leaders

- Written responses are returned to the couples prior to discussion.
- Introduce the topic and have two or three open-ended questions ready to use during the discussion.
- Try to include EVERYONE in the discussion, directing comments away from those who tend to dominate the discussion.
- Be prepared to bring discussion back to central theme when inappropriate tangents arise.
- Don't let discussion run over allotted time unless it is important to continue.
- Let people finish their comments; don't cut them short.

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

MAGNIFICAT TO CLOSE THE MEETING

Eighth meeting

JESUS PRESENT IN HIS CHURCH

*"For where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them."
(Matthew 1:20)*

GOSPEL READING

Meanwhile the eleven disciples set out for Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them. When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated. Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time." (Matthew 28:16-20)

The blessing cup, which we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ; and the loaf of bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? And as there is one loaf, so we, although there are many of us, are one single body, for we all share in the one loaf. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

INITIAL REMARKS

The risen Jesus reassures his disciples: he will continue to be present in their midst even to the end of time. St Paul, founder of many communities, reminds us of the basis of their unity: communion in the same body of Christ.

The promise of the presence of the Risen One is linked to the command to baptise all nations, or to put it another way, to bring to birth the Church. As a result of this we can see that it is the Lord's will that his presence in the world and in time should be primarily embodied in the Church.

For believers and non-believers alike, the modern meaning of the word "Church" describes the numerous local groups (parishes, communities and groups of other kinds) in which millions of men and women share the same religious practices and recognize the authority of their bishops and of the sovereign pontiff of Rome. But if that is the visible and institutional shape of the Church, the believer is also aware that there is a spiritual dimension hidden at a deep level, which gives the Church its true identity. It is on this deeper level that the presence of the Lord becomes the history of men and a concrete reality, a body that is animated by its head, the living Christ.

WHAT DO THE GOSPELS TELL US ABOUT THE PRESENCE OF JESUS IN THE CHURCH?

During his earthly life - as we read in the Gospels - Jesus announced that when two or three are gathered together in his name, he would be there among them (Matthew 18:20). He would be united with them as he in his turn is united with the Father (John 14:20), because he and the Father will come and live in those who love him and who keep his word (John 14:23).

When recounting the conversations that Jesus had with his disciples on the eve of his passion, the Gospel of St John reports other words of Jesus, which deepen the intimate nature of the relationship between him and the faithful. He takes the image of the vine and its branches: in the same way as the branches are intimately linked to the vine and receive from it the sap which enables them to produce fruit, so the faithful are intimately linked to the Lord, from whom they continually receive life and the ability to bear good fruit (John 15:1-8).

After the resurrection of the Lord the apostles, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, began to gather together those who believed and to share the Eucharist with them (Acts 2:42-47). They remembered Jesus' promise: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him" (John 6:56).

The Church then consists of many communities, within which the profound nature of the Church and the place of the Lord at its centre are explored more deeply.

The apostle Paul was a leading player in this deepening awareness. In his epistles he often returns to the topic of the intimate union of Christ with the Church. All mankind is called to belong to the Church (Ephesians 3:6) that calls to the whole world. The Church is the body of Christ in its fullest sense (Ephesians 1:22-23). This is why Christians called into communion with the Son (1 Corinthians 1:9) form a single body (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). "All of us, though there are so many of the us, make up one body in Christ, and as different parts we are all joined to one another" (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:27).

Christ is the head of this body (Colossians 1:18). He takes care of each of its members (Ephesians 5:29-30). "It is by him that the whole body is fitted and joined together, every joint adding its own strength, for each individual part to work according to its function. So the body grows until it has built itself up in love." (Ephesians 4:16).

Through Jesus Christ, who reveals that God is father of all mankind, God calls us all (the word church means a gathering of those who have been called). He calls us all to live as children of God. Those who knowingly accept him become the visible Church and live their faith by participating in the sacraments. Those who do not hear the appeal but who live in the spirit of the Gospel, at least implicitly, are linked to the Church by the Holy Spirit, "related to the people of God" (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church, 15-16). For St. Paul, the Eucharist is, so to speak, the event of which makes this mystery concrete and visible: the shared cup of wine is in fact communion with the blood of Christ and the broken bread, communion with the body of Christ. So the faithful, although many and diverse, make up one single body (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

The book of the Apocalypse contains a dazzling vision of the permanent and intimate union between Christ and his Church: it uses the poetic image of a wedding to demonstrate how the Lord takes possession of his kingdom: the bridegroom is the Lamb of God, the Lord, and the bride dressed in shining white linen is the Church (Apocalypse 19:6-9).

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEDITATION

Prayer

When I pray, am I conscious of belonging to the Church, which is the body of Christ? Can I see it as an image of how grace works?

When I pray for other people, do I think of my fellow human beings as members of the same body, or as people called to be a part of that body? Do I take account of the intentions of the Church?

In my personal prayer, do I take inspiration from the prayer of the Church, from the prayer of the liturgy (prayers from the Mass or from the canonical prayers such as morning or evening prayer) or from other forms of devotion which I can take up on my own account (Way of the Cross, rosary, litanies, etc.)?

Rule of Life

As baptized people, let us think about what we do to participate actively in the life of the Church. Are we as active as we could be? Do we respond to our parishes, our dioceses, the TOOL Movement, when they seek our help?

One rule of life could be to choose to do something in order better to serve Christ, living in the Church. In particular, let us ask ourselves what our attitude is to the least important and the poorest, in whom we see Christ (Matthew 25:31-46).

The Sit-down

Let us continue to discuss the points suggested above for prayer and for the rule life as a couple.

We could also take stock of the quality of the little church, which is our marriage and our family. The sacrament of marriage reflects in us and through us the marriage of Christ to the human family: let us think about what that involves for our life as a couple and a family. What part do we play in the mission that Christ gave to his disciples? To what extent do we consider ourselves responsible as one of the cells that make up the Church?

NB It is a great help to write down the main outcomes of our individual reflections and of our discussions as a couple. It makes it easier to come back to them at a later date. These notes will also promote a better discussion at the team meeting.

QUESTIONS FOR THE DISCUSSION

1. Has our image of the Church, or how we think about it, been confirmed or altered by the reflections contained in this chapter?
2. Do we keep a more or less critical distance from the Church, or do we remember the article of our creed: "I believe in one Holy Church "?
3. How can we see the presence of Christ in the Church, particularly in the Eucharistic gathering, through his Word, through the community, and through the bread of life?
4. Do we recognize that services and missions of charity and apostleship are concrete expressions of our fidelity to Jesus, who is present in the community of the baptized?

NB Please write your answers, exchange them with your spouse, and after couple discussion forward them to the Discussion Couple. Please remove any material which is too personal, or that you do not wish to share

Team Meeting Format

SIMPLE MEAL WITH LIGHT SHARING

- Each person shares highs and lows of the month
- Others listen without comment, or passing of food.

TIME FOR SCRIPTURE

You may choose one of the following texts.

John 15:1-8

I am the true vine,
and my father is the vinedresser.
Every branch in me that bears no fruit
he cuts away,
and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes
to make it bear even more.
You are clean already,
by means of the word that I have spoken to you.
Remain in me, as I in you.
As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself,
unless it remains part of the vine,
neither can you unless you remain in me.
I am the vine,
you are the branches.
Whoever remains in me, with me in him,
bears fruit in plenty;
for cut off from me you can do nothing.
Anyone who does not remain in me
is thrown away like a branch –
and withers;
these branches are collected and thrown on the fire
and are burnt.
If you remain in me
and my words remain in you,
you may ask for whatever you please
and you will get it.
It is to the glory of my Father that you should bear much fruit
and be my disciples.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27-28

For as with the human body, which is a unity although it has many parts - all the parts of the body, though many, still making up one single body - so it is with Christ. We were baptized into one body in a single spirit, Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as free men, and were all given the same Spirit to drink.

Now Christ's body is you, each of you with a part to play in the whole. And those whom God has appointed in the Church are, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers....

TIME OF MEDITATION.

The intent is reflection, not discussion

PRAYER INTENTIONS

- Pass card or cross, so people can pass gracefully and the team knows when the prayer is complete. Team member can pray out loud, pray silently or pass
- Team should respond at the end of each person's turn.

PSALM 37:3-11

Response: Put your trust in Yahweh and do right.

Put your trust in Yahweh and do right,
make your home in the land and live secure.
Make Yahweh your joy
And he will give you your heart's desires.

Response: Put your trust in Yahweh and do right.

Commit your destiny to Yahweh,
be confident in him, and he will act,
making your uprightness clear as daylight,
and the justice of your cause as the noon.

Response: Put your trust in Yahweh and do right.

Stay quiet before Yahweh,
wait longing for him,
do not get heated over someone who is making a fortune,
succeeding by devious means,

Response: Put your trust in Yahweh and do right.

Refrain from anger, leave rage aside,
do not get heated – it can do no good;
for evil-doers will be annihilated,
while those who hope in Yahweh shall
have the land for their own.

Response: Put your trust in Yahweh and do right.

A little while and the wicked will be no more,
however well you search for the place, the
wicked will not be there;
but the poor will have the land for their won,
to enjoy untroubled peace.

Response: Put your trust in Yahweh and do right.

DEEP POOLING

SHARING ON ENDEAVORS

- Regular reading of the Word of God.
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- Monthly Sit-Down.
- Rule of Life.
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DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY TOPIC Discussion Leaders

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- Let people finish their comments; don't cut them short.

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

MAGNIFICAT TO CLOSE THE MEETING

The Magnificat

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
and my spirit exalts in God my Savior,
because He has looked upon His lowly handmaid.

Yes, from this day forward
all generations will call me blessed,
for the Almighty has done great things for me,
Holy is His name,
and His mercy reaches from age to age
for those who fear Him.

He has shown the power of His arm,
He has routed the proud of heart.
He has pulled down princes from their thrones
and exalted the lowly.

The hungry He has filled with good things,
the rich sent empty away.
He has come to the help of Israel His servant,
mindful of His mercy –
according to the promise He made to our
ancestors –
of His mercy to Abraham
and to His descendants forever.

Our Lady, Queen of Teams, Pray For US

**TEAMS OF OUR LADY
United States Super Region**

August 2007

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