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Introduction

“Come, follow me.” Matthew 4:19

Jesus spoke these simple words to his disciples so long ago. Jesus speaks the same words to us today. We can hear it in the restlessness of our hearts amidst the frantic pace of modern life. We can sense it in our most honest yearnings for purpose in a world so inundated with distraction. In a way, this introductory CONNECTIONS series is designed to beckon this same call, “Come, follow me.” All of us are called to pursue “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6) that is not a *something*, but a *someone*, the Word made flesh, God incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ.

In his first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), our Holy Father Benedict XVI reminds us that “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice,

or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person.” This person is of course Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of our faith and the centerpiece of our hope. Pope John Paul II proclaimed Christ as

“Christ is the foundation and center of history; He is its meaning and ultimate goal.”

Pope John Paul II
Novo Millennio Ineunte, 5

“the foundation and center of history, its meaning and ultimate goal” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte, 5*). This person — Jesus Christ, the center and ultimate goal of human history — is the foundation and focal point for all studies in the CONNECTIONS series.

Our purpose here is to stimulate an actual encounter with the living God, with Jesus Christ risen from the dead. In communion with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, we hope that the following reflections will help people “consciously grow in the life of Christ through experience, reflection, prayer and study” (USCCB, *Our Hearts Were*

*"So that all parishes
may be truly
communities of
Christians, local
ecclesial authorities
ought to foster...
small, basic or
so-called 'living'
communities, where
the faithful can
communicate the
word of God and
express it in service
and love to one
another; these
communities are
true expressions
of ecclesial
communion
and centers of
evangelization, in
communion with
their pastors"*

Pope John Paul II,
The Lay Members of
Christ's Faithful People

Burning Within Us). In addition to a presentation of truths regarding Our Lord and his Church, CONNECTIONS seeks to facilitate a deeply personal, yet at the same time communal encounter with God.

We all long for deep friendship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. These types of friendships form when we can gather together to express and solidify that which bonds us together for eternity — our faith and hope in God through Jesus Christ. Our common baptism binds the Church together and makes the way for Christian community. It is hoped that for each participant, CONNECTIONS might truly become an avenue for intentional Christian community — one that reflects the manifold gifts of the body of Christ, one that nourishes real growth in each disciple of Jesus, one that responds to the call of Christ to be a light unto the world (Mt 5:13).

John Paul II promoted small Christian communities as a means of evangelization, an instrument for effectively sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in

the world. Being a part of an effective small group promotes substantial spiritual growth and even conversion, and this sort of holy vitality quite naturally spills over into the lives of others. As Pope John Paul II noted, "Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves, they must proclaim him" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 40).

Matter of fact, mature disciples who are continually enlivened by their encounters with Christ are positively brilliant when it comes to sharing the Gospel. There is perhaps no one who is more excited to share the beauty of Jesus than one who has just met him. In the same way we are compelled to share good news or fortune with those around us, there is nothing more natural after having received the ultimate “good news” (or Gospel) of Jesus Christ than to burst forth and share this great gift with the world. This is the heart of Catholic evangelization.

It is our strong belief that effective small groups can facilitate deep, personal encounters with God which will bear the fruit of evangelization for years to come. Small groups can help re-awaken the evangelical impulse of our tradition and reposition evangelization as the “center of the Church’s mission and her deepest identity” (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14). After a personal and life-changing encounter with Christ, we cannot help but share with others the Good News. *Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.* Matthew 12:34

Furthermore, effective small groups facilitate a deeper and more penetrating experience of the principle means by which we celebrate intimate union with Christ – the liturgy. CONNECTIONS can and should be understood in light of its ultimate connection to the Church’s worship, belief, and activity. By

digging into the sacred sources of Scripture and Tradition, we are better able to unearth the profound mystery of Emmanuel – “God-with-us.” By engaging in this Christian mystery through small group prayer, study, and discussion, we are better able to embrace and appropriate



“These communities are a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization, and a solid starting point for a new society based on ‘civilization of love.’”

**Pope John Paul II,
Mission of the Redeemer, 51**

God's ultimate gift to us through the Eucharist, "the source and summit of the Christian life" (*Sacramentum Concilium*, 47).

In this way, CONNECTIONS strengthens for all of us the relationship between worship and belief. The same process of reading and prayer that we use in each week's CONNECTIONS group can be used in our personal prayer at home. This personal time, set aside to focus on God, opens our eyes to realize how amazingly close he is to us in every moment of our days. Christ's presence at Mass comes alive to us with this realization. As we learn to see him in our daily lives, we will see him better at Mass, especially as we receive him in the Eucharist.

While the celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy is the principal place

"Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves, they must proclaim him."

**Pope John Paul II,
Novo Millennio Ineunte, 40**

we encounter God, grow strong in faith, and are equipped for mission in the kingdom of God, a small Christian community is a natural complement and enhancement of these ends in our lives. We hope that

this introductory series will help you further encounter Jesus Christ, the center and cornerstone of our faith, giving your life "a new horizon and decisive direction." We pray that these studies will inspire you to place Christ at the center of your lives and help you to grow in the likeness of the One we call both friend and savior.

All in all, our hope through CONNECTIONS is none other than to help you to discover and rediscover that "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16). We follow the pastoral principle which frames the whole life of the Church and all her endeavors — "Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at

love” (Roman Catechism, Preface, 10). Our prayer is that your love may “abound more and more” (Phil 1:9) and your witness to Jesus Christ might plant the seeds for the “new springtime of evangelization” (JPII) in the Church and throughout the world. Hear the words of Jesus today, “Come, follow me,” and experience the truth that will set you free (Jn 8:32).

“One way of renewing parishes, especially for parishes in large cities, might be to consider the parish as a community of communities.

“It seems timely therefore to form ecclesial communities and groups of a size that allows for true human relationships. This will make it possible to live communion more intensely, ensuring that it is fostered not only ad intra, but also with the parish communities to which such groups belong and with the entire diocesan and universal Church.

“In such a human context it will be easier to gather to hear the word of God, to reflect on the range of human problems in the light of this word and gradually to make responsible decisions inspired by the all-embracing love of Christ.”

**Pope John Paul II,
The Church in America**

Session I: Friendship with Christ

*“I no longer call you servants...
Instead I call you friends.” John 15:15*

Opening Prayer



Invite all participants to pray aloud the following prayer by Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033 A.D. -1109 A.D).

O Lord, our God, teach our hearts this day where and how to see you, where and how to find you.

You have made us and remade us, and you have bestowed on us all the good things we possess, and still we do not know you.

We have not yet done that for which we were made.
Teach us to seek you, for we cannot seek you unless you teach us, or find you unless you show yourself to us.
Let us seek you in our desire; let us desire you in our seeking.

Let us find you by loving you; let us love you when we find you. We pray through Jesus Christ, Our Lord.

Amen.

Sharing Our Experience



Take a couple minutes to turn to a partner and tell them about your best friend. Use the following questions as loose guidelines for your conversation.

- What is your best friend like?
- What first attracted you to your best friend?
- How do you spend time together?
- Talk about your conversations — why are they so good/interesting?
- What makes your friendship solid?
- What habits do you need in order to cultivate your friendship?
- How have you changed since you met your friend?
- What could endanger your friendship?

Group discussion to summarize together.

- What stood out to you during your conversation?
- What then are the key elements to a good friendship?
- What are some things that get in the way of good friendship?
- Have you ever considered God to be a friend? Why or why not?
- Compare the key elements of a good friendship to your relationship with God. On a scale of 1-10, how would you assess your “friendship” with God (1 being “don’t even know him” and 10 being “best friends”)? Explain.

Scripture and Tradition



Please invite a participant to read the following passage aloud.

Reading: No matter where you may be with God, he calls each of us into deeper communion, a closer relationship, and yes, even an intimate friendship with him. Yet many of us find it challenging to think about God as our friend. It somehow feels too familiar, too irreverent or even childish. We are more comfortable with a loftier God, a more cosmic Christ, a God marked more by transcendence than familiarity. Reflecting upon the divinity of Christ, St. Paul wrote to the community of believers in Colossae:

Reading: Colossians I:15-20

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent.

*“Christ is the foundation
and center of history;*

*He is its meaning and
ultimate goal.”*

**Pope John Paul II,
Novo Millennio Ineunte, 40**

¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

- **How do you think about or understand God? Is God more distant for you or is he close? Familiar or removed? Personable or inaccessible? Explain.**
- **What are some of the fears we all share in opening ourselves up to a friendship with Christ?**

Please invite a participant to read the following aloud.

Reading: You might find that Paul's image of Christ in this passage reflects the way you feel about God. This majestic portrait of Jesus Christ is wondrous, awe-inspiring, and absolutely true. Yet it would fall short of revealing the fuller nature of God if it did not also disclose the thoroughly personal, familiar, and human side of the Lord. While most of us are very comfortable with God as Creator, many of us don't know what to do with God who calls us into intimate friendship with him.

Reading: Pope Benedict XVI, Inaugural Homily

“Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom?”

*“Do not be afraid!
Throw open the doors to Christ!”*

**Pope John Paul II,
Inaugural Address, 1978**

“And once again the Pope (John Paul II) said: No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation.

“And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life. Amen.”

- What spoke to you from this passage?
- **What challenged you from this passage?**
- **What fears might you have or have you had about an intimate friendship with Christ? Explain.**
- **What does Pope Benedict XVI say will result if we open ourselves to the Lord?**

Reading: John 15:I-II

“¹I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.

²Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide

“I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. . .”

I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him. . .”

Philippians 3:8

in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

“⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will,

and it shall be done for you. ⁸By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

- What is the main message of the passage?
- What are some of the recurring phrases?
- What is the relationship between the vine and the branches? How does this metaphor help us to understand what Jesus is saying to us here?
- So, what does it mean to "abide in" or "remain in" Christ? Does the passage give any practical guidance for ways to remain in Christ? What from your conversation about your closest friend might also apply here?
- In Jn 6:56, Jesus said, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." How does Jesus' teaching in John 6:56 compliment this passage?
- How would you explain pruning from God's (the vinedresser's/gardener's) perspective? How would you explain pruning from your perspective (a branch)?
- What kind of pruning have you experienced in your spiritual life? Describe what it was like to go through the pruning. What was the result?
- Did the pruning and the results of the pruning have an impact on your friendship with Christ?
- Where do you see yourself in this passage? You may want to include elements regarding your connection to the vine of Christ, pruning, and fruitfulness.