

The Discipleship Revolution: How Everyday Catholics are Living as Disciples of Jesus and Transforming the Church

FATHER ROB STALEY, D.Min., Ed.D.
and
THE PARISHIONERS OF SAINT LUKE THE EVANGELIST CHURCH
RALEIGH, NC

2020 Like the Dewfall Press and DolphinsAndChimps Press Raleigh, NC

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my parents, Jim Staley, who is living and a wonderful father, and Nora Staley, who is deceased and who loved me like no other human person ever has or ever will. Also, to my three wonderful sisters, Judy, Leila, and Elle, and to all of my extended family.

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I am also inspired by the homilies and the compassion of Christ displayed by Bishop Luis Rafael Zarama, Bishop of Raleigh, and my brother priests in the Diocese of Raleigh.

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome. Thank you for your interest in this book. It is a most unusual book about the Catholic Faith. First of all, the book was written as a joint effort of a whole parish. Saint Luke the Evangelist Catholic Church in Raleigh, North Carolina is a small but very special parish. It is blessed with so many people who are filled with the Holy Spirit and committed to being disciples of Jesus Christ. I asked some of these parishioners to write a reflection for me on an aspect of discipleship. In order to give everyone a chance to write at least something, I invited all parishioners to write one sentence on the Faith. Many took me up on it, and some wrote more than one sentence.

There is not a lot of theory in this book. We leave that to smarter people than ourselves. Of course, we believe all the Catholic Church teaches. This book is not about the theoretical idea of discipleship. Rather, it is about what does living as a disciple of Jesus look like today.

In these pages you will get a glimpse into the journeys of faithful Catholics who are striving to be disciples. Just going to church to punch their ticket of required attendance is not enough for them. They want to celebrate the Eucharist with all their hearts. They truly believe they are receiving the real presence of Jesus. After Mass, they go into the world trying to follow Jesus in all things and striving to bring the loving presence of Jesus to others.

In this book, you will hear the story of a former Air Force chaplain who encountered Christ in crisis ministry and who later sought the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. You will also meet a Catholic man whose desire to follow Jesus led him to take up prison ministry. You will hear from a Catholic woman whose middle-age husband suffered a major stroke and see how that impacted her journey of discipleship.

Discipleship is not easy. Jesus never said it was. The Lord took up his cross and teaches us to do the same. Witnessing a person living as a disciple, though, is a beautiful and uplifting thing. May your heart be transformed through these stories of lived discipleship.

PART I:
AN INVITATION TO DISCIPLESHIP

A FUNDAMENTAL SPIRITUAL NEED

Middle-aged men and women in the Catholic Church today have a tremendous, fundamental spiritual need. Seniors in the Catholic Church today also have a tremendous, fundamental spiritual need. Young adults in the Catholic Church today have a tremendous, fundamental spiritual need. And teenagers in the Catholic Church today have a tremendous, fundamental spiritual need.

See if you can identify these four tremendous, fundamental spiritual needs in the Catholic Church today - among middle-aged men and women, among seniors, among young adults, and among teenagers.

I will give you a hint. It is not four different needs but the same need for all Catholics today, young, old, or in between. All need to have a deeply personal, loving relationship with Jesus Christ that is the guiding force in their lives each and every day. Notice that the biggest need is not another class. It is not another Faith Formation Session. It is not another Bible study. It is not another fundraiser. It is not another fellowship gathering. It is not another program. It is not another new Christian book or movie nor another Christian motivational speaker.

The biggest need in people's lives today is not a ministry. It is not a retreat. It is not an increase in their theological knowledge.

All of these things are good, but they can never replace knowing Jesus, being in a loving relationship with Him, and striving to live every day under His direction. In other words, they can't replace true discipleship.

Our personal relationship with Jesus Christ will help us translate Scripture, sacraments, and the teachings of the Church into living every moment as a Christian. Faith, then, becomes not something that we just have - we have lots of things. Faith becomes the basis of everything we are and everything we do.

Do you see the difference I am talking about? Somebody could say that they have faith because they were raised Catholic and go to church on Sundays. Then they will do what they want in selected areas of their lives the other six days of the week. For example, they treat someone unjustly in a business transaction. They gossip. They enter into a sexual relationship before marriage.

Someone with a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ strives to follow his example and his teaching every day. Of course, that begins with Mass on Sunday. But it also means that on all seven days of the week they strive, like Jesus, to treat people fairly in business transactions, to avoid gossip, to wait until marriage for sexual relations, and so forth.

Perhaps the Church in the past has relied too much on the argument that "The Church says you can't do that." And it just doesn't work, especially on many young people. We are losing our young people at an alarming rate.

What I propose is that the Church continues to explain why some things are contrary to faith and make more of an effort to lead the young people into discipleship at an earlier age. They will then be on a journey where they can also start hearing these things from Jesus Himself. And it will mean a lot more to them.

This needs to be done here in the States and all over the world. When I become pope, I am going to get right on that!

I use young people as an example, but this is for all of us. Do you regularly go to Mass but still wonder why your life outside of the church building is sometimes empty, frustrating, stressful, or mundane? Are you hoping for change, transformation, and healing?

In the Gospels, Jesus reveals Himself to be not just a friend and teacher but also Lord of all. He wants to be Lord of our hearts. When we enter into an intimate relationship with Him, and listen to Him, our lives are radically transformed. We are released from the power of sin and rooted in the freedom of God's kingdom.

Don't settle for less. Don't settle for just being considered by others to be a good Catholic because you go to church regularly. Perhaps you participate in, or even head, a ministry. You might have the most impressive “church-stuff” resume in the world. That is not all there is to it. Reach for more. Grow in your personal relationship with Jesus, and strive to live a discipleship life, a holy life, every day.

THE DISCIPLESHIP REVOLUTION

Discipleship is not new in the Catholic Church. From the very beginning and all through the centuries, people have heard the divine call to follow Jesus. I do think, though, that at various times the concept of “discipleship” has been more emphasized in the Church than at others. From what I have seen (and, I admit, it is a limited view) we are now in a period in which discipleship is being emphasized.

I remember when I was a young priest, I would regularly give homilies whose themes were related to the idea that Catholicism was not just a “me and Jesus” religion. God calls us as a people, into communion with one another as well as with Himself. These homilies served as a defense of the Mass, the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, and an encouragement to prioritize Mass. It seemed like a lot of priests were giving similar sermons.

Today, I would say there was nothing wrong with these homilies. They spoke the truth. I would, though, now say that perhaps I should have balanced them with more sermons about the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus. The ideas of God calling us as a people and our having a personal relationship with God are not mutually exclusive. More than that, they work together, and we need both.

It is my contention that the Church need not fear Catholics developing strong loving, personal relationships with Jesus. These people are not going to decide that it is just “me and Jesus” and that they don’t need the Church. I think it is just the opposite. When people develop a personal relationship with Jesus, they want to actively participate in His Church. The fundamental way to create a vibrant parish is not through some new program but through encouraging people into a loving, personal relationship with the Lord.

I think that is what is happening in the Catholic Church today. Through homilies, Bible studies, prayer, and in other ways, Catholics are getting the discipleship message. They are striving to live like Jesus in their everyday lives. This is the discipleship revolution.

One very important thing to stress is that the discipleship revolution changes nothing about actual traditional Catholic belief. We remained centered in the Most Holy Eucharist. All Catholic beliefs are fully embraced. The revolution is about enhancing all these things through a renewed emphasis on discipleship.

TEN ASPECTS OF DISCIPLESHIP

There are many aspects to discipleship. One could relate discipleship to just about any Catholic theme. I selected ten aspects because it just seemed like the right number. Which ten? I selected ten aspects that my years of working as a priest told me are particularly important. I recognize that I have left out many important aspects of discipleship. These ten,

though, will take Catholics a long way in their discipleship.

1. Disciples follow Jesus through living with faith.
2. Disciples follow Jesus through living with hope.
3. Disciples follow Jesus through living with love.
4. Disciples follow Jesus through Scripture.
5. Disciples follow Jesus through sacraments.
6. Disciples follow Jesus through prayer.
7. Disciples follow Jesus through service.
8. Disciples follow Jesus through devotion to Our Blessed Mother.
9. Disciples follow Jesus through living with joy.
10. Disciples follow Jesus through living with humility.

Each chapter is written by one or more persons who I believe exemplify following Jesus in that particular way. I was very glad that 100% of the people that I asked to write on a particular aspect of discipleship agreed. Their enthusiastic responses reinforced my belief that this is a book that needed to be written. I also asked one individual to write a little on all 10 aspects of discipleship. This was a lot to ask of someone, but I felt it was important to emphasize that we are called to live all the aspects of discipleship, not just one of them.

MEETING OBSTACLES TO DISCIPLESHIP WITH AN EASTER FAITH

Living as a disciple is the best way to live. It gives us a peace and a joy found nowhere else. Discipleship, though, is not without its challenges. There are many obstacles to living as a disciple, starting with our own sinfulness. We sometimes don't get much support from our culture and those around us. Satan is there to tempt us. We are called to keep striving for holiness and to keep trusting God, even when the odds seem overwhelmingly stacked against us.

One year in high school, my friends and I thought our gym teacher was crazy. One day, he said he had a new game for us.

Half of us were assigned to stand before one end of the gym. A player from the other team would be trying to throw a ball past us, and we had to block it. The goal was the entire wall behind us. Same for the other half of us on the other side. Each team counted off one to fifteen. Then a ball was placed in the middle of the gym.

The gym teacher called out numbers 2, 5, and 11. Those players on each team raced to the ball. The one who got there first could race toward the other goal with it and throw a shot to try and score.

The catch, however, was that the players on the other team could do whatever they wanted to stop you. No holds barred. This was a cage match before there were cage matches. This was almost the Hunger Games before there were Hunger Games.

After five minutes or so, the first group of players would go back, and other players would be called out, always in groups of two or three. People were passing the ball off to avoid getting clobbered, as you can imagine.

But then, the teacher gleefully called out “Sevens!” *Just* sevens. I was a seven. The seven on the other team was Chris, the biggest, strongest, fastest, meanest beast of a man-child in the school. He was a linebacker and the star of our football team.

So it was me and Chris, mano a mano. Time to pray. This was near the end of class and the next class had already arrived. Some of my friends started chanting my name very loudly. Others joined in, perhaps just to encourage me to fight so they could see maximum damage.

Something inside of me went off, and I decided I was going to be a beast in this thing. No avoidance. But as we raced out, I could see how huge and fierce this guy was. My mind raced for a strategy. This was like David and Goliath. He, like Goliath, was a giant, and I, like David, obviously, was “a

youth, handsome to behold.” But I didn’t have a slingshot. I let him pick up the ball first, and as he did so I jumped on his back. You will know what this is like if you have ever jumped on the back of a grizzly bear.

We went through a series of episodes where Chris would go after the ball, and I would go after Chris. Finally, with about twenty seconds left, Chris had taken all he was going to take. The next time I jumped on him, he dropped the ball and grabbed a hold of me. He lifted me up. He got ready to throw me. You could hear a collective intake of breath from the crowd. All of Chris’s muscles were tense, ready to exert maximum effort. We were near one sideline of the gym, and his eyes were on the opposite sideline. That was his target for me. But I made one desperate last move for escape. I tried to wiggle free. His vice grip only tightened further. Like an experienced shot-putter. He bent his knees, twisted his hips, and then threw me into the air. I remember thinking when I was gliding through space ... My thought wasn’t, “I hope I don’t break any bones.” My thought was, “oh no, he might score!”

I landed only about half way across the floor, and I was alright. Chris had taken the ball and raced down towards the goal. Time was just about ready to expire. Being an intelligent athlete, Chris quickly identified the weakest link in the chain of students standing in front of the line. With two seconds left he heaved a mighty rocket of a throw. I was still getting up and watching this as it happened, thinking “Please don’t score! Please don’t score!”

The throw came whistling into the line of students, and someone blocked it. No good. Time expired. I had won. Zero to zero. Ok, that’s a tie. But I had survived the battle.

Crowd reaction? About half congratulated me on a job well done. About half were disappointed that they didn’t get to see the blood they were expecting.

This episode speaks to me about the need for depending on God during our entire journey of discipleship. If we battle the devil on our own, Satan has all the advantages. We alone are no match for the evil one. He can play on our desires, our fears, our weakness, and our pride. The best we can do is fend

him off for a while, like I did with Chris. In the end, though, our lives will lack meaning, and we will lack peace.

Chris, by the way, was actually a very nice guy. Competitive in sports, but, in general, very friendly. The devil is not nice. He wants to steal your soul. He tempts you with the ways of the world. For some, that means lust or greed or consumerism. For others, the temptation is pride or anger or judging. Others want to avoid the ways of the world, but sin out of weakness.

On our own, we can't save ourselves from the snares of Satan. Because of our sins, we would all be headed for the fires of Gehenna.

The resurrection of Christ, though, changes all of that. When we say at Easter, "Alleluia, He is risen," we also mean, "Alleluia, He is risen, and therefore, we, too, can be raised to heaven."

Christ won the victory for us. He overcame the power of death. The tomb is empty. The great power of death did not stand a chance against Christ. His victory gives us new life. We need only to place our faith in Jesus and strive to live that faith every day.

So we can live in hope. We can have peace that evil does not have a permanent hold on us. We can live in the joy that our Lord Jesus is risen, present among us, and bringing us His grace.

Regardless of the date on the calendar, the faith of discipleship is always an Easter faith. Alleluia, He is risen! We share in His victory. We live in His joy.

EASTER FAITH IS MEANT TO BE SHARED

You may know that I received a Master's degree in Economics from Duke University. But you may not know that I served as chaplain of the basketball team. This put me right in the midst of some intense court action.

One day many years ago, back when I was the chaplain, something so incredible happened that you may find it difficult to believe. My Duke team was in a very tight game against an excellent UNC team.

With seven seconds left in the game, Duke had a two point lead, and we were inbounding the ball under our own basket. Michael Jordan, the star player from UNC, stole the inbounds pass, started to drive to the bucket and was immediately fouled.

That was the last of many Duke players to foul out that day, so we only had four eligible players left.

There was a rule at that time that you had to have five eligible players on the court or you forfeited the game. The referees were about to call the game when Coach K ran over and reminded the referees that the chaplain could dress and serve as an eligible player if need be. This is not true anymore, but it was true at that time.

So I quickly dressed and ran onto the court. Coach K yelled after me: "Just stay out of the way!"

Michael Jordan hit both free throws, so it was now a tie game. Four seconds remained. Jordan again stole the inbounds pass, dodged a Duke player who tried to foul him, and drove to the basket. Michael went up for the dunk. It was a shot he hit 100 out of 100 times.

I was watching as he stole another inbounds pass, and as he started to move towards the basket so did I. When he went up, I went up. We met at the top, far above the basket. I was a good jumper in those days.

There were two seconds left, and Jordan was ready to hammer it home. The UNC bench had already started to celebrate. I grabbed the ball right out of his hands and, as my head narrowly missed the backboard I spun around and heaved the ball up into the air.

Now the Duke bench was celebrating, even though they could not believe what had just happened. They were happy to go to overtime. The ball was still traveling through the air. The scoreboard clock now read all zeros. The ball was still traveling through the air. The UNC bench started to prepare for overtime. The ball was still traveling through the air. People in the stands were thinking about getting a drink before overtime started. The ball was still traveling through the air.

Then, there was a loud ripping sound. Only a few people in the stadium saw its source. They were the smart ones who had been following the flight of the ball. The ball was no longer traveling through the air. It had travelled the entire length of the court and gone through the net. Somehow I had accomplished the greatest feat in college basketball history.

There might be a few skeptics reading this, though, who find this story hard to believe. The point of all this is that as hard as this story is to believe, the resurrection, without faith, is a billion times harder to believe. Infinitely harder to believe. Miraculous basketball shots can occur. Wild coincidences happen. Someone sick or dying suddenly recovers. We can mentally grasp that. But someone dead. Fully dead. Buried. Our minds know that dead is dead, and the body can't resurrect out of the grave. This is death we are talking about.

And yet, this is exactly what Easter Faith proclaims. The tomb is empty. Jesus is risen. Alleluia! Death has been defeated. Death is the consequence of sin. God is life, so turning from him is fatal. It is because humanity turned away from God in sin that death exists.

Jesus took the weight of our sins upon himself on the cross. He died for us. And he rose for us, to give us new life. The resurrection means that death no longer has a hold on us. It means that when we die, it's not the end of the story. It's simply a doorway to a new kind of life with God. Think about how wonderful that is. Don't take it for granted. Truly behold the magnitude of the miracle.

Alleluia, the tomb is empty. Alleluia, Jesus is risen. We sing the joyful song of alleluia. Death is no longer our final destination but a gateway to perfect, endless life with God in heaven. All praise to our Risen Lord, alleluia.

If I had really accomplished a sports miracle like the one I described, think about how happy we would be. To everyone we met we would say, “Hey, you wouldn’t believe what this priest did!”

Infinitely more so should we be with the resurrection of Jesus. “Hey, you wouldn’t believe what my Savior did! - but you should believe, and I invite you to believe.” Disciples are evangelizers. Part of our Faith is the call to spread the Faith, to tell the Good News. This book is part of that. I want to share the Good News that many Catholics today are following Jesus as disciples in many beautiful ways.

AN INVITATION TO COME, SEE FOR YOURSELF

“Philip sought out Nathanael and told him, ‘we have found the one that Moses spoke of in the law - the prophets, too - Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.’ Nathanael’s response to that was, ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’ and Philip replied, ‘Come, see for yourself.’” (John 1:45-46.)

I love Philip’s response. Instead of being defensive or argumentative, he issues an invitation. I see this book in the same way. If you are skeptical that Jesus makes any real difference in the lives of believers, or if you are skeptical that Catholics today are living as disciples, I issue you an invitation: “Come, see for yourself.” This book will provide you with many glimpses into the discipleship lives of the people in the pews at Catholic Mass. When I reflect on their stories, I am filled with the peace and joy that come only from following Jesus. I am inspired to grow in my own journey of discipleship. Will you be, too? Come, see for yourself.

PART II:
REFLECTIONS ON TEN ASPECTS OF DISCIPLESHIP

FAITH AND DISCIPLESHIP

Hold on to faith in God to give you the strength to endure whatever you are going through. - Jane Dickens

My faith is strengthened in prayer because I feel peace with God while facing hardship in life. - May Phan

In our family, faith sets the rhythm of our life, informs all of our decision making, and feeds the health of our marriage. - Stephanie Jones

As a college student, faith is important to me because it gives me the strength and courage I need to accomplish my goals; by putting my trust in God, I know that I can become the best version of myself. - Casey Turro

My faith comforts me when I feel the overwhelming loss of my parents. - Julie King

My faith, anchors, sustains and moves me to live in the Word. - Michael Benigno

Faith helps me to have the desire to someday experience the words of the Hymn " I Can Only Imagine". - David Berkowitz

My faith is my foundation and guiding star in life. Father, I couldn't of asked for a more perfect sentence starter that expresses how I try to live my life. Clearly this is not accidental. - Denise DeAppolonio

My faith is a treasure that was diligently planted by my parents, faithfully nourished by the sacramental life of the Church and Catholic education,

fiercely tested by the trials and sufferings of life, powerfully enriched by the joys and blessings, and passionately forged in the love and fidelity of Christ. It is the stronghold of my heart and mind. - Celina Manville

My life has been a journey of faith. I will lift my eyes up to the Lord many times in my life. From a Baptist family, I remember riding to the daily revival in a Model T, singing “Bless Be The Tie that Binds” in Christian Love, the Baptism in Mulberry Creek (Wilkes Co, NC). I recall the first time I attended a Catholic Mass (in Detroit during WW2), bringing up my family as Methodist, joining Presbyterian then Methodist and finally St Luke here in Raleigh. The Lord has been a constant companion, in happiness, grief, disappointment, and love. I am blessed with a good family, friends and St Luke. – Molly Dunn

A Journey To Jesus

I had never seen my mother cry. It seemed she was crying all the time now. In the span of just a few weeks, my grandmother died, my mother’s cousin died, and my aunt died. I don’t recall asking a lot of questions. I watched. I listened.

My sisters and I visited my grandmother in the hospital as she lay dying. Being the youngest, and a toddler when we lived in the same town, I spent loads of time with “GanGan.” A patriotic mother of four military servicemen, it was said she taught me to march before I could walk. She talked about God a lot and taught me to sing hymns with gusto.

I didn’t know my mother’s cousin. I heard the stories, though, about how he and she were born the same year and about the matching cribs and baby chairs my great-grandfather made for them. Growing up in the NC mountains, they did everything together. I heard family members say that now his three children would have to go live with their mother.

My aunt I knew well. Every summer we spent two weeks together with my cousins. Thirteen of us crammed in a two-bedroom, one-bathroom garage

apartment, we kids played in the Neuse River all day and played board games all night; only to do the same all over again the next day. Among the nine cousins, we had plenty of older kids to manage the activity. So, my mom and aunt probably got a break and a chance to relax those two weeks each year. I heard my mom say my aunt was like the sister she never had. I was told that my aunt's heart "stopped beating." I figured if death took my cousin's mom, it could take my mom, too. Death made my vulnerability real. Life is fragile and uncertain.

Looking back now, at my first experience of death at the age of eleven, I see that it set me on a life-long dogged pursuit of One I could trust in all times and all circumstances. I could never know what dangers or losses lay ahead in life, but I believed God was with me in all circumstances, listening and loving. This was a gift of faith.

"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." (Heb 1:11)

Although I did trust God, He was a mystery to me. I sought to connect with God in creation, in the study of art, and in world travel. Perhaps to make and appreciate art and creation was a way to participate in the mystery of God. I also studied the world's religions. Who is this One who created me and knows me better than I know myself?

"You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?" (Psalm 56:8)

By the time I finished a degree in fine art and a minor in religious studies, I knew the One in whom I trusted in all times and all circumstances to be Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God. He is real, present, listening and loving. I longed to know everything about Him. I also longed to know what Jesus wanted of me.

With no end game, I pursued a Master's degree in theology. It was thrilling to study Scripture, Church history, theology, pastoral care and counseling.

As much as I loved the classes, it bothered me that I didn't know where this was going. It bothered me that my classmates belonged to a church and I did not. What was the Lord asking of me?

My family was military. Our church was the Protestant chapel. Until I was grown, I didn't know this was not a church! When the USAF Chaplain Service came to my graduate school to recruit Chaplain Candidates, the pieces of a plan for my life came together.

With invigorated purpose, I completed my degree and pursued active duty with the U.S. Air Force Chaplain Service. The encounter with death in my childhood that helped me come to faith was reflected in the work the Lord called me to do in the military.

During my first assignment, I was called to respond when two HH-60 helicopters collided during a desert mission – killing all twelve service members. The squadron commander and I delivered the news to the twelve families. I am still in contact with some among those families today.

As God would have it, traumatic loss and death, suicide, homicide, and bereavement ministry were central to the work wherever I was sent. I recall being at the bedside of a young man who had been shot. Although conscious, he couldn't talk as the bullet had lodged in his face and the swelling prevented him from speaking. He held a pen and a notepad on which he scribbled, "I'm afraid."

A friend of mine once asked, "how could you *like* crisis ministry? So much suffering." I'd never really considered the question. I realized that Jesus was clearly present to me in such situations. I *encountered* Christ in those moments.

"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."
(Psalm 34:18)

Over the decades, my inner drive to truly know the One in whom I trust, the One who does not disappoint, never diminished; it became more intense. I wanted intimacy with God. Earning a Master of Divinity degree, commissioning as an officer in the USAF, and even serving as a Chaplain did not satisfy my longing for intimacy with God.

The gift of faith in my childhood compelled me to follow Jesus – to seek Him with all my being. In the course of life through the working of the Holy Spirit, through the witness of many Catholics, I discovered that intimacy with God is physically possible – in the Eucharist - the greatest gift of God! In time, I entered the Church as a convert and received the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus.

The journey as a disciple of Jesus continues. Death made my vulnerability real. Life is fragile and uncertain. However, death is not the last word. Jesus overcame sin and death. Jesus is real. He is present in the flesh. Listening. Loving. Forgiving. Making all things new.

Amy and I met over twenty-five years ago in the Chaplain Candidate Training School of the United States Air Force, and we have been friends ever since. It is a delight to see her family in the parish. Amy is doing great work to spread discipleship throughout our diocese. Are you willing to follow her example of surrendering her life to the Lord?

Reflection and Discussion Questions for Faith and Discipleship:

1. How has your experience of grief led you to deeper faith?
2. How has the Eucharist helped you develop an intimate relationship with God?

HOPE AND DISCIPLESHIP

I know God is giving me hope when I see all the people who prayed for me during my surgery and recovery from my hip replacement. - Joe Blando

Through the eyes of my patients, I see the light of hope and, holding their hand, I feel the Holy Spirit, the One, who inspires me to go beyond skin and bones, connecting to their heart with warmth and love. - Juliana Galioto

We always have hope because nothing will be impossible for God. This makes hope endless. - Gary Loebach

My family, which is a gift from God, gives me hope and shows the love of Jesus in the world. - Jim Probst

God gives me many signs of hope, such as: the goodness of so many individuals who are selflessly serving their fellow man in so many meaningful ways, the gift of His creation manifested in the beauty of springtime, and the love and support of family and friends to stay positive about the future and know that God is with us and sustains us always! - Tom Koch

Hope, like a beacon in the night, comes to us from Him and shows us that- though physically separated- the bounds of God's love doesn't exist solely through church walls. - Aubrey (age 16)

Hope In Any Circumstances

One of the first definitions of hope in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit." Quite honestly, neither that definition or, more generally, hope as a follower of Jesus Christ, is something that I've reflected on much

in my life until more recent times. Sure, I've hoped for many things. As a boy, I hoped for certain toys or for the coming of Christmas or my birthday (mainly because I saw those events to be opportunities to get those toys!) As I grew, the hope evolved to other things such as a win for my favorite team, my first car, a girlfriend, a certain job, and the list goes on.

As life grew more complex with marriage and then raising our four kids, whose ages range from twenty-two to fourteen, I was prompted (although quite honestly it often felt like "forced") to reflect more deeply on this thing called hope. I am not one who can claim to have had many powerful spiritual experiences. However, about seven years ago, I had an extremely powerful spiritual experience that redefined what hope as a follower of Jesus looked like for me. Prior to this, I thought of and "felt" hope as this generally positive feeling that was interchangeable with optimism. Hope was an elated feeling about something "wished for." However, what I experienced in 2013 transformed how I think about hope.

In June 2013, my wife and I made what was the most difficult decision of our sixteen years of parenting. Actually, it may have been the most difficult decision of our twenty-six years together to that point. This decision involved our older son, Ben, who was then thirteen years old. At the age of three, Ben had been diagnosed with autism, or more specifically, Asperger's Syndrome.

What started as the terrible twos in 2001/2002, evolved into progressively more difficult times as Ben entered adolescence. His oppositional behaviors and uncontrolled fits of rage, would send him into sometimes physical, but more often, verbal tirades of the most venomous nature. His fits were not only directed at my wife and me but at his siblings and pretty much anyone that crossed his path and either made him angry or was an easy target for him. We often joked that Ben was an equal opportunity offender!

Ben had a knack for figuring out what someone was most sensitive about and verbally assaulting them in a caustic way if he grew angry with that person. For example, Ben knew that our Catholic faith was very important to my wife and me. So, when he would grow angry with either of us, his anger

would lead him to all sorts of ugly talk about our faith or the Church or anything related to Catholicism. He would do this with all of us under the slightest trigger, and needless to say, the stress level in our house was very high for many years. This impacted not only my wife and me but also Ben's older sister and his younger brother and sister. Family life was often lived on edge as none of us was ever quite sure what the next trigger might be to set Ben off on another frantic rage.

The decision about what to do with Ben would have been easier if these negative behaviors defined him entirely. The reality was that when Ben was not in a rage, he was a sweet, caring, intelligent, affectionate little boy. He was reading complex sentences at four years old and knew all the capitals of all the countries in the world by the time he was eight. He could be funny in his antics and stories and we loved him very much.

However, in 2013, after many promptings by his psychiatrists and therapists, my wife and I made the extremely difficult decision to place Ben in a Level IV residential psychiatric treatment facility that was specifically suited to provide the high level of structure, therapy, and medication management that Ben needed. Not only did we struggle with the guilt associated with thoughts that we were abandoning and betraying our son, but we also wrestled with thoughts of how horrible we must be as parents to not be able to help our own son without sending him away. To further exacerbate the difficulty of the decision, after considerable research, the best place that we could find for Ben was in South Carolina approximately five hours drive from our home. Not that we had many choices, but the couple of places closer to home that we investigated just did not seem like a good fit for Ben.

Despite all of these difficulties, deep inside, we felt like we had no choice but to make this move so that Ben would have the structure and therapy he needed to be able to have the best chance in life and also, so that our other children and my wife and I could experience healing after so many years of living under the constantly high stress level in our home. The years of living under this stress had not only made life incredibly difficult for our other children, but it had taken a heavy toll on our marriage as well.

And so, the decision was made. Upon the strong advice of the counselors and intake professionals at the facility, arrangements were made to have their staff members come and pick Ben up from our home on a date and time that were unknown to Ben. The concern was that Ben would run away or even cause an accident if we tried to drive him.

One night, a few days before they were to come and get Ben, I was struggling to sleep. The stress and sadness were overwhelming and I lay there in bed with my mind reeling and completely unable to sleep. I finally rolled out of bed about 2:00 am and knelt at the foot of our bed and began to pray. I was so distraught that I do not recall even having words to say; I just knelt there, hurting, and wanting desperately for God to make this all go away.

Somewhat suddenly, I began to feel an incredible peace come over me. I want to be clear here that I was not sleeping, I did not “forget” all that was about to happen in a couple of days, I was very much aware of being in my room, on my knees, and that in a few days, some strangers were going to arrive at our house and take my boy away. I was simultaneously aware of the deep sadness within me and an overwhelming peace. I can’t even say that I had thoughts like, “oh, this will be good for him” or “I know this will all work out for the best.” It really was just a powerful sense that God was in this with us. Yes, right there in the midst of our decision, pain, confusion, and doubt, God just simply was....

I can’t say for sure how long this lasted. It was certainly more than a few seconds but I’m not sure if it was a few minutes or an hour. Eventually, I felt compelled to crawl back into bed and under the covers, after which I slept peacefully the rest of the night.

I have not had such a powerful spiritual experience since that incredible night in July 2013, but having reflected on that night many times since then, my experience transformed or elevated what hope as a disciple of Jesus means to me. Hope is no longer about wishful thoughts for better times defined by gaining something I desire. Hope is not a fanciful or wistful feeling of positive thoughts. Rather, hope for me now is a deep and profound awareness of

God's Presence, regardless of the circumstances. Looking back, I realize that not only was He present, but He strengthened me to move regardless of the outcome.

While my experience of hope was in the midst of extremely trying circumstances that stretched my wife and me to the limits of our ability to process and cope, I don't think those circumstances are a prerequisite to experience hope in that way. It is experienced in a deep knowledge of His Being right there whether the circumstances are negative, positive, or neutral. Yes, there is a "future" concept to hope. In other words, hope experienced as I have described does impact my outlook and perspective looking forward, but I have come to believe that it can be experienced in the now of whatever palace, slum, mountaintop, or valley through which we may be travelling at that moment.

One of the key fruits of hope that I experienced was a freedom from thoughts that limited my ability to act and serve. Going back to that incredible night, the hope I experienced, resulted in a dissipation of the doubts about our decision, the feelings of being a rotten parent, and the anxiety about what would come next. Being less imprisoned by those negative feelings, I was able to be for Ben the best Dad I could as this new life circumstance took shape. I was able to be the support and partner that my wife and our other kids needed as well as they struggled with conflicting feelings of sadness that Ben was gone and relief from walking on eggshells for so long.

Recently, I read a book called *Getting Your Life Back* that has helped me move further along in capturing hope as an awareness of God's Presence. This book was written by John Eldredge, who is an author, counselor, teacher, and president of Ransomed Heart, a ministry devoted to helping people discover the heart of God. In this book, he emphasizes how important it is to pause briefly at various times throughout the day to reconnect with God. He offers ideas for a one minute and up to five-minute pauses. Each one starts with the phrase "God, I give everything and everyone to you" and this phrase is repeated several times and sometimes interspersed throughout the pause. This phrase has become very important to me as it

helps draw me into that awareness of God's Presence even when I don't necessarily feel it. Through that phrase, I am reminded that I am not alone with the crosses that come with life – be they related to family life, work, or friendships. God is with me and sustaining me. The repetition of that phrase helps me to let go of the “shoulds” and “should haves” and begin to experience the peace of God's Presence despite whatever circumstances surround me or emotions are clouding my perspective.

I began this essay on hope by acknowledging that I have not spent much time in my life reflecting on the Catechism definition of hope as “...a theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.”

I would like to end with this thought. Following my experience in 2013, I can say with gratitude that God has given me a personal insight into what it means to let go of a reliance on my own strength and trust in Christ's promise of His Presence. Like most spiritual progress in my life, the ascent is not always steady and continual. Regardless of the virtue, I find I go through unpredictable periods of progress, intermixed with periods of backsliding, and sometimes long periods of plateauing. The virtue of hope has been no exception. While I perceive hope differently now than I did before 2013, it doesn't necessarily mean that I am always able to live it the way I did right after that experience. Sometimes, I still get caught up in whimsical thoughts about the future and confuse that with hope. At other times, I am not able to feel God's Presence in the moment and I slip into reliance on my own strength rather than remembering His Presence in past times of darkness. But those moments where I am aware of His Presence do come, usually during difficult times that trigger my anxieties and frustrations, doubts and fears, and proclivity towards relying on myself. When those moments of being aware of God's Presence do captivate me, the negative feelings take backstage and I know that He has not left me alone. In those moments, I don't need to know the outcome in order to feel the peace of His Being there. He is allowing me the grace to grow in that awareness so that as time goes on, I am better able to live in hope as His disciple.

When other priests ask me how the deacon in my parish is, I always say that Deacon Mike is the greatest deacon in the world, that he preaches excellent homilies, and that he is a really great human being. Mike is the kind of person who makes me think that I am glad to be alive just because I know that people like him are in the world. Will his courageous sharing inspire you to trust in the Lord no matter what life is throwing at you?

Reflection and Discussion Questions for Hope and Discipleship:

1. What signs of hope has God made present to you?
2. What signs of hope has God made present through you?

LOVE AND DISCIPLESHIP

God helps me to love everyone and everything when he shares beauty with me. - Harriet Johnson

My parish is a community of love that helps me recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit! - Mary Ellen Berkowitz

Getting to know people around me at Mass and bringing people together for fellowship are two ways I show people that God loves them. - Michelle Wolf

I know God loves me because He died on the cross for me and for all the offenses I committed against Him. I do love the Lord And His Blessed Mother. I'm blessed beyond my wildest dreams. What a gift He has given to me to have His bountiful LOVE. - John Kupec

Love is a wonderful gift from God who offers us His perfect love. On a human level, Love is a miraculous combining of head and heart into a beautiful feeling that sustains us and those we Love with comfort, courage, and grace. - Bob and Karen Kneipp

God's love completes me. - Mike Ament

One of my most powerful experience of God's love was: when my company was closing operations and I was very anxious about my future ... but I was presented the opportunity to relocate to Raleigh ... that was one option I thought would never happen ... we were blessed to come back here, and it was God orchestrating my future perfectly!! - Mike Rodriguez

Love is not always easy, but it is always worth the effort. - Michele Wallace

The Things We Do For Love

God is love. The three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit are givers and receivers. Love is interactive and reciprocal by the very nature of the Holy Trinity...love in its fullness. That is what I think of when I think of love. Since we are created in God's image, we have the potential for that. It seems to me we are given free will because love must be freely given and freely received by its very nature. God freely and fully loves us, and He wants a free and full response from us.

Many years ago, in the 8th Grade, I entered and won a poetry contest at school. It was sponsored by a Catholic women's group in our parish. It sums up a lot of my feelings about God as love and as my Creator.

The Love

The Love that burns within my soul,

The Love that fills my heart,

The love that makes my life complete,

The Love, the Art of Arts.

The Love that has all meaning,

And which is ever new,
The Love that lets me live today,
This Love, Oh God, is you.

By Marilyn Hogan (1964)

Despite that perspective, when I was growing up, I was given more of a message of a judgmental God, a God who kept a “Good and Bad” list, a little like Santa Claus. My father made a statement once that if you are good, and are lovable, you will get love. If you do wrong, you will get punishment. It took years – many of them – for me to internalize that God loves me, unconditionally, and is a merciful God who is ready to forgive.

I have found comfort in Bible verses such as John 8: 10-11 when the woman caught in adultery was about to be stoned, but she was eventually alone with Jesus after He intervened. He said, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.”

As we begin to mature, many of us hope to “fall in love.” Society tends to romanticize love as a feeling. And, of course, that is part of it. That love is often one-way. We love someone, or someone loves us. The pearl in relationships is when you love someone, and they feel the same way towards you. They love you, flaws and all. I have read many books on near-death experiences, and almost all of them describe being in the presence of pure, unconditional love, God, and share the feeling of what that is like. Finding someone to love, who also loves you, a person you want to spend your life with is probably as close as you get to that on Earth.

In the Sacrament of Marriage, a man and woman vow to love one. And yet we are imperfect and practicing that love is hard. Marriage is a daily conscious choice to honor your marriage vows. But what does love even mean in a marriage or any relationship? In 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, St. Paul is very specific: “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or

resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Wow! It is great to know what love looks like, but it is so difficult to do! We are approaching our 49th wedding anniversary soon, but we are still working towards St. Paul’s definition of love. Relationships are always a work in progress.

Married love naturally produces children. Becoming a parent was transforming for me. Parenthood awakens an overwhelming sense of love for the creator, for your spouse, and most of all for the beautiful, helpless, and totally dependent human being for whom you are responsible. Being a parent gives you a sharper perspective of God as our Father and you more fully understand why He sent His son to die for us. Because you would do anything, even die, to protect your child.

My husband and I have been blessed with four children. A British band, 10cc, had a song titled “The Things We Do for Love,” and when I reflect on our family life, one memory in particular stands out where our love was really tested. We were living across the state from all family and friends when our fourth child was born. The baby was fine, and I had been home from the hospital for two days when I started to hemorrhage and had to return to the hospital. My husband had four children ages 9, 6, 5, and 2 days old to care for with me in the hospital. We had no support system except for a couple of neighbors. Adding to that were the milk runs to the hospital to bring back milk for our baby. Although I was released later the next day, I was on bed rest for a week, so my husband had all five of us to take care of: meals, baths, cleaning, laundry, shopping, and getting kids to school. We both came out of that experience with a deeper appreciation for each other.

But being a parent is also a new kind of challenge for love. When you have children, you also risk their rejection, their disobedience, lack of appreciation, and you also watch the consequences of their poor decisions. Those have been some of the biggest challenges in my own family. I have had to measure my response in difficult situations and walk the fine line of loving them, but not loving behaviors and choices my children have made. God the Father understands this better than any of us ever could for we, in our sinfulness, disappoint Him over, and over again.

Whether or not we get married or have a family, love is still the directive from Jesus. In Matthew 22: 34-40, when the Pharisees questioned Jesus and asked Him what the greatest commandment was, He quoted Hebrew Scripture and said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus’ life on Earth reflected all of it. He showed love for the Father by doing the Father’s will and by spending much time in prayer with the Father. His love for others was expressed in His preaching, teaching, forgiving, healing. He engaged with others, made the first move toward those who needed to change their lives. Jesus showed love by what He did and how He lived. Love is a verb, an action. Love is other-directed. When we love others, and do for others, we should do it without expecting to get anything in return.

Our love for others must also be compassionate because all people are in different places in their spiritual journeys. Love accepts people where they are while encouraging them to improve or progress.

Love is also generous in its response. I have always loved the gospel examples of Jesus’ response in situations. At the wedding at Cana, He didn’t just change water into wine, He made the finest wine! When feeding the crowds, Jesus’ miracles always produced enough and there were leftovers. He provided what was needed... and more! He tells us to do the same. “From him who takes away your cloak do not withhold your coat as well. Give to everyone who begs from you.” (Luke 6:29-30)

Discipleship is by nature, spreading the Good News of Jesus as Savior, the ultimate gift of love from the Father. The Kingdom of God is where justice and love reside, so our discipleship begins with our relationship with God which is reflected in the way we are in the world. Our behavior and relationships should show God’s love, justice, and mercy.

I recently reached a significant birthday, and my family compiled a book of comments from family and friends as a gift. It was gratifying to see words

like “strong faith,” “compassionate,” and “unconditional love” in their remarks because I always hope Jesus is working through me.

As Saint Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13:13: “So faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

Through my friendship with Marilyn, I have learned much about love. Her life reflects both love of God and love of neighbor in generous measure. Her love springs from a heart that is steady and faithful. Her compassionate approach to life is something so needed in today’s world. Disciples are called to bring the love of Jesus to the world. The cross teaches us we are called to this great mission not just when it is easy but especially when it is very challenging. Are you ready to love even your enemies?

Reflection and Discussion Questions for Love and Discipleship:

1. How have you encountered God's love for you through the Sacrament of Reconciliation?
2. What are some of the things you have done for love?

SCRIPTURE AND DISCIPLESHIP

I like to hear God’s Word proclaimed at Mass because when we read the sacred Scriptures God Himself is speaking to us and Christ is present in His Word in the Gospel. - Val Rodriguez

Scripture helps me put the events of my life into perspective. Whether it be a personal test, a joyful event, or challenging times, there is always a book, chapter, story, or quote that offers an opportunity for understanding and seeing the bigger picture. - Nicolle Morock

Reading Scripture, or listening to the proclamation of Scripture helps me to remember God's promise to never leave us, no matter what we have done. He is always pursuing us for our own betterment even though we push Him away, yet He still continues to love us, especially when we don't even love ourselves. Pazzo Amore. - Garrett Smith

Reading Scripture helps me know that God loves me. - Bill Wolf

When I was a child, my father read from and explained to me the beginning of the book of Genesis, and I have spent my whole life appreciating the world God created. - Laurel Davis

Turning To Scripture When Life Is Challenging

I grew up in a very Catholic family. Mom and Daddy met at church, fell in love, survived my father's World War II service in Europe and Japan, and married upon his return in 1946. They did what many did during that time—had lots of children—six from 1947 to 1959. My four brothers came first—in five very quick years. Then five years later my sister made her appearance and bringing up the rear three years later came me. The cornerstone of our lives was the Catholic Church and the love of family.

My parents were very strong in their commitment to their Catholic faith and they made it the center of our lives. Daddy's faith was very practical. One day I asked him why we went to Mass every Sunday, and he stated, "Because we are sinners." Mom, no less dedicated than my father, was rigid about her faith during those years and was not very open to Protestantism, which surrounded us in the 1960's in eastern North Carolina. Going to church was an obligation and very rule driven. Despite their different approaches, they were completely dedicated to Jesus, the Church, each other, and our family.

During this time, I learned about Jesus through Scripture readings at Mass, the children's Bible we had at home, Stations of the Cross, and of course religion classes at school. I had an early and lasting fascination with the

Bible my parents had and now belongs to me. It is a huge Bible, with lots of pictures, and a place to record all of the important events of my parent's lives—marriage, births, baptisms, first communions, confirmation, Holy Orders, Military Service and Last Rights (as it was known then). I loved the pictures, the stories, and the history it outlined of my family.

Like most of my generation, Vatican II greatly impacted our faith and learning. New Bibles came out, and *The Way Living Bible* made its way into our home. I began to rebel against the rigidity of my mother's approach to my Catholic obligations and the "us against them" mentality of Catholics versus Protestants. I knew lots of really good Protestants. Let me be clear, Mom wasn't prejudiced in the sense that she didn't like Protestants—she just thought it was easier for Catholics to get to heaven because we had the sacraments. Daddy never seemed to have that same feeling—being much more open to entering conversations with Protestants about their beliefs and our shared love of Jesus and God. Eventually, Mom embraced this as well.

My life began to change greatly when we began to move a great deal. We moved when I was 9, 11, 13 and again at 16. We lived in New York, Texas, Indiana and finally back to North Carolina. These were traumatic moves for my sister and me—the only two left at home by this time. Daddy was having trouble holding down a job. Mom had to go back to work after being out of the workforce for 25 years. Somewhere around 1971, Daddy's brother was diagnosed with Huntington's disease (HD), a genetic, incurable disease that is often said to be like having Alzheimer's, ALS, and Parkinson's all rolled up into one. Daddy's mother had HD, and to our dismay, Daddy was showing symptoms of it during this time. Little was known about it at the time, and there was a lot of misinformation floating around the family. We now know that the disease is caused by a dominant gene and each child of a person with HD has a 50% chance of inheriting the gene. People with HD have psychiatric symptoms, cognitive decline, and involuntary movements. It's a long disease and currently there is no cure or treatment (although there is a real possibility of a treatment on the horizon!). If you get the gene, you get the disease—and you can pass it down to your children. So, each of the six of us had a 50% chance of having HD. I was eleven when my father started

getting sick. At the time, there was no way to tell you had the disease until you started having symptoms, and even then, there wasn't anything you could do about it.

My parents coped the best they could. They loved God, each other and us. They relied on their faith to help them. My mother often asked me to pray to Saint Jude for her special intention (that Daddy would get well). Mom loved Daddy despite the challenges of his disease. Daddy loved Mom deeply. Jesus, God, and their Catholic faith sustained them.

All six of us grew up, went to college, fell in love, got married, and based on our hope that God would take care of us, we had children. I married the best guy in the world, Ralph, and he was Methodist. We'd had our two children. We moved from North Carolina to South Dakota. I started getting together with a group of neighborhood women to study the Bible. It helped me to focus my energy on learning more about Jesus without boundaries. I could study the Word of God and interpret for myself what it meant. I could embrace my Catholic faith and appreciate the faith of Protestants at the same time. It didn't draw me away from my Catholic faith—in fact it brought me closer to it. I don't remember much of what we studied during that time, just that it brought me closer to God, Jesus and my faith.

In 1995, my mother had been sick too—and I wondered who I would lose first—my mother or my father. Daddy passed away on All Souls Day, November 2. It was a beautiful Funeral Mass—I was surprised by the intensity of my emotions and how much I missed him. I knew though that his suffering was over, and he was in the presence of God.

After Daddy's death, I came to admit that I was embarrassed and ashamed that I had HD in my family. People would stare at my father and his movements. He said some weird things. He would obsess about some things and have outbursts that were not typical of him. Then, there was an article in the newspaper about a man who had HD that had killed another person. I was frantic...could I lose my faith and what I knew about God if I had HD? Could I lose my ability to tell right from wrong? In essence, *could I lose my soul?* Many families with HD are broken due to the nature of the

disease and divorce is rampant. Would my family leave me? Would my husband stop loving me? Would my children be embarrassed by me and wish I'd never had them? Would I end up completely humiliated and abandoned over a disease I would have no control over or wasn't even my fault? These are the essential questions of right to life—every human being, while all of us are flawed, have value and are loved by God.

I turned to Scripture to help me cope. I read a lot on my own during that time, not in groups, which is what I often do. I think I needed my own time with God and Jesus. I needed that skill I learned in my early Scripture studies that gave me permission to read Scripture for myself and open my ears to what Jesus was telling me through it. The Bible stories were familiar—it was the message that Jesus was telling me that was changing.

One day, when I was particularly distressed, I started to read about Jesus' passion, beginning with the Agony in the Garden. "He advanced a little and fell to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass Him; He said 'Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will (Mark 14:35-36).'" As I read about the trials Jesus underwent, the scourging, the carrying of His own cross, I realized that in the Garden, Jesus knew what was coming, like I knew what could happen to me if I had HD. He totally understood what it felt like to be embarrassed, humiliated, degraded by something that wasn't His fault. And like me, He was human and asked for it to be taken from Him. I immediately felt comforted. I knew then that Jesus understood and would be there for me, even if all my loved ones left me. He would not. He would take care of me—and my relief would come when I came into the next life when I was with Jesus. Jesus loves us no matter what we do. But He was scared, just like I was. And that made it ok.

I am fortunate—I don't have the HD. This Scripture sticks with me even still. I know I will fail or do something wrong. I know that if I am sorry for the things I do wrong—my sins—that Jesus will forgive me, just as He did the criminal who said, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied to him, 'Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise (Luke 23: 42-43).'"

Through Scripture, I've learned that God loves us unconditionally and completely and He wants us to be with Him, always. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Like most Catholics, the readings at Mass are my weekly dose of Scripture. I'm learning they are connected, but to be honest, I've not read the Bible from cover to cover. My Bible studies are beginning to coalesce into something deeper. My personal studies and reflections, my understanding of God's love can't stop there. God is calling me to do more with this revelation of His love. He wants me to be a disciple. Sometimes I forget, and God sends Scripture to remind me.

As my husband joined the Catholic Church in 2002, we discussed what true discipleship entailed. Scripture spoke to me as to what Jesus was calling Ralph to do as a willing convert and reminded me of what I'd been taught all my life, but often didn't think about. Jesus speaks to this in Luke 9: 1-2, "He summoned the Twelve and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and He sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and heal (the sick)." Now I am not able to cure diseases, but I can certainly proclaim the kingdom of God and help heal the broken heart! Doing God's work will change us for the better, if we just come and follow Jesus.

One of my favorite Scripture verses is the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-16). It brings joy and knowledge that though we experience trials and tribulations, the result will be gladness and joy!

"The Beatitudes

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they who mourn,
For they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
For they will inherit the land.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful,
For they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the clean of heart,
For they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
For they will be called children of God.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

In my family, God has asked us to follow Him despite having the challenge of Huntington’s disease. We didn’t get a pass just because we had a disease that could affect our abilities, behavior, and movement. We are called to share our challenges and the gift of love that God gives us unconditionally. And to the best extent we can, be disciples of God. Jesus’ words through Scripture tell us how.

Ann is a seasoned veteran of many Bible studies. More importantly, her life shows that she has truly been transformed by the Word of God. The Scriptures are a guiding force in Ann’s life, gently leading her to more fully embrace discipleship. Those who encounter her encounter the gentle and loving presence of Jesus. Do you turn to Scripture for guidance?

Reflection and Discussion Questions for Scripture and Discipleship:

1. At what point in your life did you begin reading the Bible or focusing more on the Scripture readings at Mass?
2. What parts of the Bible do you relate to the call to discipleship?

THE SACRAMENTS AND DISCIPLESHIP

The Sacrament Of Baptism

I strive to live out my baptismal promises by praying to be a better person to all and placing my life in His hands. - Sandra Shackelford

One way I live out my baptismal commitment is carrying my rosary and praying in all aspects of my life, including my duties as a nurse. Jennifer McKinney

As baptized Catholics, we seek to live without fear; we know the Lord is our shepherd and we shall not lack for anything, but sometimes it's scary. - Erin and Dyer Bennet

For me, being baptized means: A seed planted deep within my soul. "Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move from here to there, and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:20) - Jeanne Rodriguez

Living Out My Baptism

I don't remember my Baptism. In fact, I don't even know the exact date I was baptized but I know it happened within a few weeks of my birth. The event itself doesn't bring any real life memories to mind. But I know with certainty that on that day, at that moment, everything changed. The life of God was poured into me and I became a member of His family, an adopted child of God. His Holy Spirit came to dwell within me.

How is it that something I can't even recall can have an effect on my life? I've often felt like the grace received from the sacraments, and, even more particularly, the grace received at Baptism, is like an imaginary storehouse created by God so that I will always have access to the tools He has freely given me to work out my salvation and participate in the work of His kingdom. It's like a font dwelling within me to which I can return, and dip in over and over in order to be nourished and strengthened in my relationship with God. At my Baptism, when the love of God poured into my heart through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), I was enabled to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

There are so many situations in my life when I need this baptismal grace. When I am struggling with repeated sin, I go back to that font of God's life which was poured into me, and draw upon that grace in order to strengthen me to reject sin and turn back to Him. I know that I am not alone in my struggle. Rather, He is present in me and His life gives me hope that I can be free of the sinful behavior.

When I am struggling with my identity and confused about my value or seeking my worth in what other people think of me, I go back to that font of life that was poured into me and claimed me as a beloved child of God. And I am reminded of who I am and Whose I am – the beloved daughter of God, perfectly and completely loved. And I reorient myself in the truth of my identity. This strengthens me and encourages me on my journey.

When I am called to share the good news of Jesus through teaching or speaking, inviting others to share spiritual journeys, or praying with those who are hurting – it is only through the grace of my Baptism that I am able to say “yes” and respond to these calls. It is only because the Holy Spirit dwells in me through my Baptism that any of these things bear fruit. I am totally incapable on my own and so, I again turn to that font, reach in and remind myself that the power of the Holy Spirit is in me and that while I cannot do these things on my own, God who dwells in me can do them through me.

When the lonely person who will talk my ear off sees me and begins to walk towards me, or the young person, whose mode of dress makes me feel

uncomfortable, or the homeless person, approaches me in a parking lot, or the beggar at the intersection stands with a sign requesting help, I have to step out of my comfort zone in order to acknowledge or speak to them. It is only by pausing and reaching once more into that font of divine life dwelling in me that I am able to take a breath, remember that all of these people were created in the image of God, see them through His eyes and then address them with the love and attention that they deserve.

There are many other circumstances in which it is not easy for me to live the way Jesus asks me to. But, by my Baptism, I am equipped and called to live as a disciple of Jesus. Living as a disciple can be hard. It often feels contrary to the way the majority of people live and so at times it can be lonely and a struggle to live the way Jesus asks us to live. But by my Baptism, I have been adopted into the family of God and I join all those who have been baptized before me, and after me and I know I am not alone. I am encouraged and strengthened by the witness of fellow Christians who show me what it looks like to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. And once again, I draw upon the font of graces received and the power of the Holy Spirit given to me and I am able to say “yes” to following Jesus. If I look back on my life as a road map that I’ve been following in order to live as His disciple, I see that it has not been straight, but rather a path scattered with bumps and detours along with a few straight lines. When I’ve veered from the path, the life of the Holy Spirit poured out to me in Baptism constantly calls me back towards my goal – Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life.

Mary is truly focused on living her baptismal commitment. We could all learn a lot from her in terms of keeping baptism at the forefront of our spiritual lives for all of our lives. Mary is someone who strives to live each day and each moment as a disciple of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit. Does the grace of your baptism encourage you to say yes to everything God is asking of you?

The Sacrament Of Confirmation

The Sacrament of Confirmation has given me courage from the Holy Spirit to be able to sit with others in the sacred space of illness, death and sadness. The grace flowing from this sacrament has also provided me with strength and the perseverance of faith in the face of very difficult times throughout my life. - Ruth Harris

The grace I received in the Sacrament of Confirmation helps me live as a conscientious, responsible Catholic with focus on the Gifts and Fruits of the Holy Spirit. - Joe Langenderfer

Because I am confirmed... the Holy Spirit is within me, can use me when I listen, and guide me in my life when I reach out. - Tim Nichols

I see the Sacrament of Confirmation as an opportunity to take personal responsibility as a young Catholic. - Liz Amend

My Journey With The Holy Spirit

In the Sacrament of Confirmation, we are strengthened in the Holy Spirit. The best way I can talk about Confirmation is by sharing my journey with the Holy Spirit. Recognizing the Holy Spirit's grace from a life-threatening illness has given me a lasting spiritual change, allowing me to be more intent in discipleship. Putting my trust in the Lord has given me a thirst and dependence that is truly freeing. It continues to be an amazing journey that came from allowing myself to recognize the Holy Spirit working within me. Recently, in Mark 2:1-12, the healing of body and soul of the paralytic rang in my ears, as a connection was made to an impactful part of my journey. Confession, repentance, and contemplative prayer with continual praising of the Lord, has opened many opportunities for spiritual growth while I acknowledge the Holy Spirit's promptings to lead me and others to everlasting hope in our Lord.

Being diagnosed with having Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, in 2011, was shocking news. The prognosis was kidney failure, heart failure, and death. Having lost a significant amount of weight and muscle, my kidneys started to fail.

Turning to prayer and sharing my faith with my family and friends, I was challenged for not taking the medicine which had the possible side effects as bad as the illness itself. My sister who lives outside the state, told me that I should not eat sweet potatoes and broccoli together. I thought this was interesting in that there was no way she would know that I ate these together. Knowing God works in mysterious ways, I checked into why one should not eat these together. Realizing that my sister was God's vessel telling me that all the "healthy", colorful fruits and vegetables and other foods were making me sick. Reverting to just bland white food, my lower abdominal pain went away, but I was not on the road to recovery. I have learned, God is my light and shining armor and I trust in Him, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, / on your own intelligence do not rely; / in all your ways be mindful of Him, / and He will make straight your path". Proverbs 3:1-6

A friend, another vessel of hope, came and invited me to a praise, worship, and healing session. Agreeing to check it out, I attended with two of my friends and many others in a prayerful adventure that proved to be deeply moving. After peaceful moments of singing and reading biblical passages, while observing the beautiful projected pictures of God's creation; the lapping of the ocean water on the shore and the light beaming through the trees in the forest and the colorful wild flowers and then Jesus hanging on the cross, I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. Being selected, out of the attendees, for prayer, two prayer warriors prayed over me. This amazing, stronger than human love poured into me. Tears of joy flowed down my face for what was a peaceful life changing moment of hope. My physical healing started, immediately, at lunch that day and into the next.

The following week I went back thirsting even stronger for the Lord. In a quiet moment, prior to going into the prayer session, my hardened heart was

awakened. As I stood beside a mirror, I realized that I had a wood beam in my eye toward two of my siblings and I was remorseful. It was revealed to me, that in the session the week before, that all I could think about was my broken relationship with my siblings and not my physical illness. It was an enlightening moment as depicted in Mathew 7:4-5; how can you say to your brother, "Let me remove the splinter from your eye, while the wooden beam is in your eye?" My soul was led to humble, repentance and the healing of body and soul and a journey springing forward. God is so good, "If we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance" (Romans 8:25). With a newly found willingness to do God's will, the Holy Spirit led more deeply into prayer and how to pray. All of a sudden, I kept finding myself doing the sign of the cross, even when I was driving down the road; "In this same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the spirit itself intercedes" (Romans 8:26). The Prayer of Peace by St. Francis of Assisi kept showing up, as I was pondering the words, I memorized the prayer and was guided along in my heart, leading me to a fresh start with my two siblings and a new purposeful discipleship. Giving myself to the Lord to do His will has opened up a strength that comes from above: giving people hope and light when there is despair or darkness as well as pardoning, consoling and loving others in a way that is, now, I recognize is guided by the Holy Spirit.

Also, saying "yes" to reading Scripture, as well, has led to one Catholic Bible study after another. My husband, Dave and I have done this together along with doing daily Scripture readings. Those "log in the eye" provoking thoughts that were revealed to me, are clearly written in Scripture, "Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). Both this verse and the next, (Luke 6:38), have been opportunities for spiritual growth as I follow the Lord's promptings, "Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, an overflowing, will be poured into your lap".

Being a leader in Confirmation and sponsor in RCIA, I have spoken about the many blessings that have come out of my suffering. Only after being

prompted to speak about my faith journey did I understand how important it is to give others hope. My heart is on fire from the suffering I have endured and the hope it has given me. It took the suffering, repenting, healing, praising, and thirsting of the Lord, for me to be a witness of the joyful surrender of my cross or crosses. I put them at the foot of the cross of Jesus. "We must share His suffering, if we are to share His glory (inheritance)" (Romans 8:17). Whatever the suffering is, it can be full of hope. "The sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us" (Romans 8:18).

As taught in Catholic Church tradition, in Confirmation classes, I am sharing the Fruits that continue to be formed in me from the Gifts of the Holy Spirit: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity. The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit; wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, fear of the Lord has strengthened me. As I allow the resulting fruits to be developed in me, to do God's will, it is with dependence on the Lord.

I find that a simple smile or hand gesture acknowledging residents in assisted living or a nursing home can make a huge difference in a person's life that day. Playing church music on Sundays, loud enough for the residents to hear, has remarkable effects with individuals, residents, or staff alike. Perhaps feeling closer to God, they join in, singing or tapping on the table or their laps.

Asking for the Holy Spirit to guide me as I do the hospital ministry, I put myself in God's hands to be His feet on the ground. With a chance of providing a peaceful reflection of God's light and a hope in time of need, I proceed. As I make my rounds to meet the patients, the Eucharist, rosary, or prayer cards are offered as well as an attentive ear and prayers.

Today, my relationship with my siblings is a loving one. I changed, which in turn gave the relationships a chance. Over time, my kidneys have healed, and I have been able to eat more and more without feeling pain. Dave and I had a desire to go to the Holy Land, but my restrictive diet was a concern. Olive Oil, one of the foods I had not been able to tolerate, is a staple in the

Mediterranean Cuisine. After prayerful consideration, we went. Miraculously, I was able to eat not just the olive oil, but everything else while we were there. Now, with visual reflections, we continue to be blessed with the Bible coming alive for us.

Clearly evident to me, is the benefits of sharing the Lord's suffering and being willing to do God's will with a discipleship of love and hope, "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5).

My prayer for you is, "May the God of hope, fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit "(Romans 15:13)

Kathleen is a person of great spiritual grace and a living witness to the power of the cross and the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Her reflection challenges all of us. Are we still running from the cross or do we embrace it? Discipleship calls us to the bold step of welcoming our crosses as a means through which Christ redeems us. Kathleen's words also cause us to ask whether we are still making decisions just by human means. Disciples plug into the power of the Holy Spirit!

The Sacrament Of The Holy Eucharist

For me, receiving the Eucharist the best sacrament of all to receive. - Donald Reece and family

When I receive Holy Communion next, I hope I never take for granted again the privilege of partaking of Jesus Christ's body through this sacrament! - Pam Phillips

Receiving the Holy Eucharist at Mass enables me to feel closer to God and remember His sacrifice on the Cross. - Meredith Culp

My faith is recharged when I participate in celebration of Mass and the Eucharist in a way that is hard to describe. We are blessed as Catholic Christians to follow Christ's words in this way. - Jim Rispoli

Our family enjoys Mass because we love how Father Rob can transform the Word of Christ into our everyday lives with his heartfelt relatable homilies. - Patience family (aka Team P) - Tom, Lisa, Will, and Hannah

Celebrating Mass is important to us as a family because there is nothing more important than seeking God and receiving Jesus in the Eucharist together. - Luke and Diane Masinick and family

One of the many things I like about being Catholic is the moment at Mass when the priest raises the host during the consecration. I always envision Rays spreading out in every direction you can imagine, pouring out all of His Love, Mercy, and Protection on all who are in need. - Ed Manville

Like Sunday Family Dinner

First of all, the importance of having a church to attend, and St. Luke in particular, has been highlighted here recently with the Corona virus and the social distancing that has been mandated. How lucky we are, as Catholics, to encounter the real presence of Jesus at every Mass! Weekly, sometimes daily, for those who are able. It is incredible how many people, and how many Catholics, are missing out on this. What a blessing we have in the Eucharist! We look forward to being able to attend Mass in person again as soon as this madness is over.

I find myself relating the Last Supper to our family dinners every Sunday. Both refresh me, strengthen me, give me purpose and prepare me for the week to come.

Jesus chose His disciples, so, like some of our friends, they kind of become your extended family.

Our family dinners are a time for our immediate family, and as often as possible, extended family and friends, to get together. We share a meal, reflect on our week, laugh, sometimes cry, debate topics and remember family members who have passed away, or cannot be with us.

By gathering in this way, we hope to pass on our traditions and our history. We want them to understand the importance of family, connecting with others, sharing what is important with others, and lending a hand to those in need. We hope they will carry on this legacy just as Jesus' disciples carried His Word, His Legacy, forward.

The Mass experience has always been very personal for me. I love being a part of our Church community, but I try to personalize the experience, as if I was actually there when Jesus was being scourged and crucified. I don't want the whitewashed version of what He experienced. That doesn't connect me with His suffering the way I feel it should. When father holds up the host and says "Behold the Lamb of God" I envision Christ, bloodied on the cross. An image from The Passion of the Christ is what I see.

When father is recounting the Last Supper, I envision Christ looking directly at me, our eyes connecting, His words piercing my soul as He offers me the body and the blood. I feel like this is what He did with His disciples to show them the importance of what He was offering them.

We have a picture of the Last Supper in our dining room to remind us of what He went through, and how He wants to connect with us through the

Eucharist. It helps us remember all that we have to be thankful for as we say grace before our meals.

Barbara and Bobby are treasures in the Saint Luke parish community. They love Jesus and His gift of the Mass and bring joy, kindness, and reverence to us. Before Mass starts, I am likely to see Bobby in the vestibule greeting people as they enter the church and to see Barbara in the church saying extra prayers. They both, each in their own way, give great glory to God. I feel greatly privileged to know them as friends. Is the celebration of the Holy Eucharist at Mass at the center of your life?

The Sacrament Of Reconciliation

Jesus is my strength. He gives me all the grace I need to overcome any temptations through the Sacraments. - Susan Plato

After the Sacrament of Reconciliation I feel grateful, renewed, restored, and refreshed. - Karen Perritt

Going to Confession is how I can be truly honest with God and myself of failures and sins. Confessing gives me a renewed spirit to live the way Jesus taught all of us to be. - Pat Cuda

We think confession is a beautiful sacrament because it forces you to examine your conscience, which leads to a closer relationship with God. A relationship that enables you to see more clearly the path He has for you in becoming the best version of yourself. - Tom and Jeannie Gerding

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is important to me because it is a reality of God's love for my humanness. It requires me to reflect on my thoughts and actions in a very real way and to identify what faults need to be peeled away and traits that need polishing - to be forgiven for all. Forgiving my sins makes

room for the next graces (adventures) that God offers me to be the person He created me to be. - Camille McCabe

Feel Like A Superhero

Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away, and that the Lord may grant you times of refreshment and send you the Messiah already appointed for you, Jesus (Acts 3:19-22.)

My Catholic journey began when I went through the RCIA process and was baptized at St. Luke's at the Easter Vigil in 2002. Certainly, having come from a Protestant faith tradition, I had never experienced the Sacrament of reconciliation until I was preparing to enter the Church.

I remember thinking at that time that my only experience with confession, was seeing it on TV or in movies. I really had no idea how to make a good confession, what that really meant, or how I would feel before, during or (especially) after. Scared, unsure, embarrassed by my sins, I was not really sure what I was getting myself into.

As I look back now, I am sure that my first confession (or many thereafter) was not really very good, but it was the act of going, verbalizing my sins to the priest, and the amazing feeling after absolution, that kept me coming back. Eventually, you get better at it....you do a better job of examining your conscience, recognizing your sins, cutting through the things that don't matter, verbalizing exactly what you should to the priest.

Now, I go to reconciliation several times per year. I would like to get to a more regular schedule (like monthly), but I haven't quite gotten there, (but God knows I am trying!) However, if you are not a big fan of reconciliation, you may be wondering why I would subject myself to that more often!

When our son was preparing for his first Communion and had his first experience with reconciliation, he said afterward that confessing his sins,

“made me feel like a Super Hero!” I tend to agree with that. While we all dread talking to someone about how we messed up, I think the feeling afterward is amazing. To know that God has forgiven ME, has absolved me of my sins, and wants me to live in communion with Him, is an amazing feeling. It makes you wonder why we wouldn’t want to do that all the time. Now, I can honestly say that I love reconciliation. It has taken time, practice, and a change in mindset to get there. I think we all can dread confession, but I would challenge that our biggest dread is facing up to the idea that we are, in fact, sinners! While we know this intellectually, it is much harder to admit it about ourselves. This is exactly what God wants from us. Admit that we are sinners, seek His grace and love, and be absolved so that we can live in His Holiness.

Here’s my three keys to making the Sacrament of Penance more “enjoyable.” OK, maybe enjoyable is not the right word. How about we strive to make reconciliation more effective?

1. Know that you are talking to Christ. Remember that the priest is there *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. When you verbalize your sins to the priest, you are telling them to Jesus. However, Jesus already knows your sins because He knows everything. Why would we be embarrassed to tell Jesus something He already knows? Jesus, with his boundless love for us, is there to heal us in the confessional. Let Him love you!

2. I have heard people say they are embarrassed to tell the priest *that* sin. You have probably heard it said that there is nothing new under the sun. I believe that at the heart of it, there are no new sins under the sun either. Every sin is a variation of things that were also sins in Jesus’s time. The priest has heard them all before. Don’t be embarrassed; be grateful that you have the opportunity to receive absolution and God’s love.

3. The more you do it, the easier and more enjoyable it gets. Now, I look forward to knowing that I can receive God’s grace, just by going to confession and verbalizing my sins. Wow, how great is our faith that we can receive this gift? This is why I am attempting to go to confession more often. Jesus wants us to come to Him more often in prayer and in the Sacrament of

penance. In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church has this to say about the more regular confession:

Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father's mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as He is merciful. (CCC 1458)

So, to build on our personal relationship with Jesus, we have to talk with Him. Yes, we talk to Him in prayer, but we also talk to Him in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. What friend do we have that we do not talk about the good stuff and the bad? Talking to Jesus about the “bad” in the confessional, is a great way to continue to build our relationship with Him. He wants to talk with you. He wants to hear you talk about the times you have messed up. Take advantage of that opportunity and seek out the confessional!

Jeff is such a great guy and is living proof that a man can be a man's man, interested in things like sports that capture the imagination of many men, and also be a person of deep faith. Jeff understands that the sacraments are not just “Church things that we are supposed to do” but also encounters with the living Christ. They are concrete, meaningful, and beautiful ways we can deepen our relationship with Jesus. Have you been putting off meeting Jesus in the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

The Sacrament Of Anointing Of The Sick

On Pentecost Sunday 2002, I was confirmed and admitted to the Sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. Part of the rite was to be anointed by my pastor. Although I was a lifelong Christian (I was christened in the Methodist Church and grew up in the Baptist Church), the anointing during the Mass was particularly meaningful to me. After I was anointed, I had the true sense that I was a child of God and marked as Christ's own forever. If ever or whenever I become gravely ill, I look forward to the

Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick to hopefully help heal me and make me whole. - John Hart

The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick provides me with hope for physical healing, and brings me peace in knowing that our Father is always with us, especially at our most vulnerable. - May DeHaven

The Sacrament of Anointing is a gift from God who bestows His mercy on me, forgives my sins, relieves my fears and brings me comfort as I venture towards everlasting life with God. - Mary Carter

The Lord Will Give All Of Us Healing

My husband and I have always had a very strong faith in knowing the tremendous importance of receiving the Holy Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. We have had illnesses, surgeries, and other necessary medical procedures, and we have always had an enormous awareness of the compassion God has for us. Receiving this sacrament also reminds us that we won't live on Earth forever. We are aware that this may be the last holy sacrament we received before dying, which could happen at any given moment.

Our loving God is with us through this sacrament to strengthen us when our minds and bodies become weak as we age. We are presently in the octogenarian era with our unexpected medical problems, and this holy sacrament is greatly important to us.

Unfortunately for some, illness can lead to the loss of hope and turning away from God asking, "Why me Lord?" Receiving this holy sacrament relieves us of these feelings, for there is always hope. The Lord will never abandon us.

As disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are called to share with our family, friends, and those we encounter the importance of Anointing of the

Sick. With God's grace, and through faith, He will give all of us healing, comfort, peace, and the courage to endure.

Bill and Jeanette are a wonderful couple and a witness of faith to many. Although somewhat advanced in years, they are a shining light of vitality and hope. They follow Jesus every hour of every day. Do you find hope in the healing power of Christ?

The Sacrament Of Holy Matrimony

We keep love strong in our marriage by:

1. Placing each other's needs before our own
2. Sharing our faith in our daily life
3. Remembering that God has extended grace to us and we must extend God's grace to each other
4. Striving to keep a balance between "couple's time" and time to pursue our individual interests.
5. Renewing our marriage vows before God, family, and friends.

- John and Joann Efthemis

The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony helps us to join two lives together with God's blessing, make a lifelong commitment to each other, and establish a holy foundation for the family. - Diana Sisson

I like to hold hands with my wife because it expresses our covenant of love with each other and with God. - Andy Ziemniak

My wife and I believe that raising a family allows us to experience and pass along the innocence and joy of God's love in the world. - Chris Bagin

As we prepare to renew our marriage vows, we think back thirty years ago when we made them to each other. It was June 9th, 1990, in Northern

Virginia. I asked Pat what she was thinking about in preparation for our vows. She said we both decided to remarry. She was not sure about another relationship, since she took her vows seriously, and they didn't work out. What would it take, she wondered, to remarry?

We had seen the play "Phantom of The Opera" She loved the song "All I Ask of You" and thought about the words. She really thought that the words were really what she was searching for. She wanted to be loved for her and be with someone that she could love all the time. Someone who is truthful. Someone who I could share her love and life with. That's all I ask of you. So now, looking back over these 30 years, we both have our love for each other. We have had our ups and downs; however, we have been blessed by God, and, both of us given a second chance. - Pat and Larry Domonkos

To me, marriage is a sacrament because it is the outpouring of God's Love upon a man and a woman transforming them by the sanctifying Grace of the Holy Spirit into one with God's Plan of Natural Law striving for good against evil. - Glennie Phelps

The kindness, generosity, patience, compassion and forgiveness of Christ's love has absolutely blessed our marriage and brought us closer to each other and Him over our 32 years together. - Dave and Tracy Knudson

My discipleship is connected to my family life through shared prayer, sacraments, and encouragement to embrace and grow in our relationships with Jesus. - Jani Turro

Always Has, Is, Always Will

We met in college back in 1980 and had a pretty typical courtship experience. We were brought up Catholics by good families with similar values, and while we didn't talk about it specifically or know it, God was a

part of our relationship from the very beginning. We did go to Mass together occasionally while at school and it was important to us both to get married in the Catholic Church, but it seemed like we thought it was just the right thing to do (checking off the right boxes.) We didn't really understand what it meant to be married in God's eyes and what the Sacrament of Marriage really meant for us and our relationship.

As we continued throughout our married lives - raising a family, managing our respective careers, and dealing with all that family life brings - we continued to make sure we met the basics – going to Mass as a family, saying Grace at mealtimes, making sure the kids received the sacraments, and trying to live good Christian lives. We thought we were setting a good example for our children. Upon reflection, it's clear that we loved each other deeply, but not very obvious that we put God in the center of marriage nor lived for each other the way God intends for us to do. Fortunately, the grace of God has always been with us.

There are many virtues that lead to a good marriage. Open and good communication, strong and binding trust, and real and authentic forgiveness are just a few. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are told to die to ourselves and do God's will over our own. With respect to marriage, we are to be ready to lay down our own lives for each other. This sounds very straightforward, but, then, daily life happens. Both of us have strong wills fueled by pride, which at times adversely impacted our communication, trust, and forgiveness during our married life. That makes it extremely difficult for us to live as the married couple God wants us to be. Our pride has no use or place in our marriage.

Over the years, we have handled the big issues (child rearing, family loss, finances, etc.) extremely well, but our weak moments test our ability to truly live for each other – getting annoyed when you are told by your spouse do something a different way than how you would do it, sulking at dinner when you “settle” for the restaurant choice of your spouse, or responding sarcastically when you don't share your spouse's perspective – all these examples are a result of putting your pride before your spouse. And when

pride is not curbed, the accumulated hurt felt when putting one's self before the other can strain a marriage, which leaves one feeling empty and distant from God. We have learned that pride has no place in our marriage and that we must have complete trust in God and keep Him in the center of our lives.

It seems unthinkable that after thirty-five years of marriage we are still discovering and understanding what God wants for us as husband and wife. But, amazingly, God continues to be patient with us and His Presence has always been there during our journey together. We know how truly blessed we are. We need to continue to ask for His help, which He loves to give us unconditionally. While it's not something that comes easily to us and is a work-in-progress, we must step up our efforts together as a couple to seek true love for the sake of each other. Not too long ago, we devoted ourselves to the Blessed Mother. By giving our hearts to Mary, we feel the peace needed during times of struggle. Although we have the support of each other during life's crossroads and disappointments, seeking comfort from Mary and emulating her humility has enhanced our relationship with Jesus. The only way for us to get through life and have the marriage that God intends is through constant prayer as a couple to our loving God, who makes all things possible. When we do this, we will receive the fruits of God's love and grace now and forever.

Mike and Doreen understand that the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony is not a covenant that is just between the two of them but also with God. Both of them have a deep relationship with the Lord and that very much helps in their relationship with each other. The fruits of their sacramental marriage are many and include two beautiful children, important ministry roles in their parish, a strong friendship with their priest, and service to their community. Do you continue to ask for God's help in your marriage?

The Sacrament Of Holy Orders

Being friends with our priest has most definitely added another level of joy and gratitude to Mass and Saint Luke events! - Don and Laurel Davis

I love Mass because I feel so at home in God's house and close to Jesus with the words from my priest. - Susan Legen

Being friends with priests and seminarians has enriched my life by giving the hope that the Eucharist will perpetuate. - Maria Isley

Our priest is a priest who sacrifices himself every day to make sure he lives the way Jesus would live on earth today by giving of himself for the sake of others he serves. He is a human example living the life of Jesus on earth by guiding, leading, laughing, praying, teaching and staying completely true to the teachings of the Catholic faith. Our priest reminds us that we need to be friends with Jesus and gives us examples of that every day by being a servant leader. - Mike Perriccio

Tend My Flock, Feed My Lambs

When Jesus first began His mission here on earth, He did not seek the “priests” of the time. They were the Sadducees who didn’t even believe that God would send the Messiah. He did not seek the Pharisees, or “rabbis” of the time either.

These men thought that their knowledge of the Torah and following the written and oral laws that God had given through the prophets was all they needed to do. Their eyes and ears were closed to any thing or person outside of their circle of righteousness.

When Jesus first called to the twelve, He knew they were not the wealthiest, most learned, holiest, or most popular men. He sought men who were “common” men: hardworking, diligent, loyal, and honest. He knew they were not perfect and that each of them had “pasts”, but He sensed in them a desire for something more than this world could offer.

They had dreams, hopes, aspirations. They faced the hardships of their daily lives and all the temptations of their world. They could be joyful as well as

angry, patient as well as annoyed, satisfied as well as frustrated. They were not of the upper class - they lived hard lives.

But Jesus sensed in them a restlessness of spirit - a desire to know what lies behind their lives and what awaits them after their death. They desired to know something “more”, but they just didn’t know what “more” was.

As a popular Christian song states:

“You picked twelve outsiders nobody would have chosen, and You changed the world.” (from Nobody by Casting Crowns)

Jesus came to them in gentleness, kindness, and pure love. They had never been a part of something like this before. Why else would they have walked away from their lives? Why deny themselves the possibility of wealth, security or the comfort of a home and family?

Jesus’ first chosen priest, Peter, was known to be impatient at times, demanding and hot-headed. By keeping him at His right hand, Jesus saw that Peter was also a natural leader. Even though he denied Jesus, his desire for the Kingdom was greater than anything he had ever experienced before.

Jesus told Peter that he was to be the ROCK, and it was his job to “Tend My sheep and feed My lambs”.

My mother was a sacristan in two different churches for over 50 years. Priests came to our home on a regular basis to enjoy Mama Mersino’s delicious spaghetti and gracious home. Pastors, missionaries, deacons all came at different times during those years.

I was blessed to know these men as priests. I also learned to love them as they were - joyful, angry, patient, annoyed, satisfied, frustrated. All the things that make us human! They did not hold themselves above our very middle-class family. They did not expect to be treated lavishly. They ate, they visited, they laughed, and they prayed with us.

I can't imagine what goes into the decision to seek the priestly way of life. I'm sure it is God-driven but very confusing - a decision of life-long commitment.

The challenges of taking God's Word and interpreting it to fit our world has to be one of the most difficult things. They are faced with teaching the gentle forgiveness of Jesus in a world that is so often not gentle. They are faced with the moral realities of our time (abortion, suicide, genocide, greed, and the list goes on and on). Each priest has to make the DAILY decision to confront these realities and find a way to "Tend My flock, feed My lambs".

While I may not be able to understand what goes into the decision to seek the priesthood, I do know that the lessons of the Gospel would have no meaning in my world today if the priests in my life had not made this decision.

Remember as you attend Mass, seek counsel, or just visit with your priest: they are special people who have chosen this way of life in order to share the gentleness and love of our God.

They are human.

They are hardworking.

They are dedicated.

They are loyal.

Their mission is: "Tend My flock, feed My lambs"

Ginny is a joyful disciple who inspires everyone around her. In a world full of sarcasm and bitterness, she is a radiant light of love and hope. Her joy comes from a deep, loving relationship with the Lord. Her faith gives her a beautiful attitude toward life, seeing life as a gift. Ginny looks for the best in people, whether it be her priest or anyone else she encounters. Do you pray every day for priests and for vocations to the priesthood?

Reflection and Discussion Questions for Sacraments and Discipleship

1. What are some of the ways I strive to live out my baptismal commitment?
2. How does receiving the Holy Eucharist give me peace, transform my heart, and empower me to seek justice for the poor?

PRAYER AND DISCIPLESHIP

Personal Prayer

If we are to have a relationship with God and share in His will for us we must pray always. - The Preskenis family

When I pray, I feel closest to God when I'm outdoors talking to Him and enjoying His nature. - Marjorie Smith

I pray . . . when I work, asking God to help me use the gifts He gave me to do good for others, as my hands are His hands. (1 Peter 4:10) - Dottie Szypulski

I often pray to find new projects at work so that our employees can take care of their families. - Al King

Prayer is everyone's invitation to join God in a personal dialogue. - Anthony and Miranda Scalabrino

I ask Jesus to help me say yes to the things that truly matter. Saying yes to people all the time will not make me a Wonder Woman , it will make me a worn out woman with no time for daily prayer. I want and need this special prayer time, making time for Jesus. - Pat McClary

Without prayer daily life is incomplete. - Keith Isley

Prayer helps us to serve and thank God. and helps us stay connected to Him and each other. - Renee and Rick Burrus

Growing up in a secular Jewish family, I was taught that prayer was a formal activity, practiced only rarely, at specific times and usually in a language that none of us understood. It was beautiful and special, but it was not a conversation. There was never any sense that we were speaking with a real Person.

Oddly, as a little girl, I developed the secret bedtime habit of talking to God about my day. This had nothing to do with our family rituals. I don't know where I got the idea that God was listening, but I always knew, without being told, that He was real and cared about me.

When I became Catholic in my thirties, I was blown away by the idea that God came to earth as a human being and opened new channels of communication for us. Suddenly, I could talk, not just to God the Father, but to Jesus, His Blessed Mother, and all the saints.

I received an answer to my prayers in the Sacrament of Penance. The incredible gift of the Eucharist can still evoke tears of joy. Praying the rosary comforts me with a message of love when I am sick or scared or sleepless. The Liturgy of the Hours begins and ends my days on a note of transcendence. Grace before and after meals helps me control my abiding sin of gluttony.

Sometimes, as with any relationship, I change things up a bit. Instead of the usual prayers, I'll say Saint Patrick's Lorica or an Eastern Orthodox morning prayer that begins: "Oh Lord, grant me to greet the coming day in peace." Before driving, which always terrifies me, I ask God to keep me safe on the road, causing no harm to myself or anyone else.

My hope of Heaven involves an endless conversation with my favorite saints as well as with friends and family members who have died before me.

Whatever may happen, I need never feel alone. How awesome it is to know a God who listens! - Linda Esler

One of my favorite ways to pray is to tune into a psalm. That's it, my only way. I seriously lack whatever it is that my contemporaries have, those that are naturals at this intimate communication with our Lord. I know I'm missing something. Maybe it is courage, or focus or simply a dearth of imagination. I grope with finding the right Barbara words to communicate with God. I sit in adoration and I try. I beg. Please God tell me how to do this... then nothing. And I leave without a coherent communication or message conveyed or returned. But I can tell you the exact names of those in attendance or the number of hair strands stuck to my neighbor's sweater. And I leave certain of one thing- that an earthquake would not alter the trance of those black belts in front of me.

I was raised on the rosary and do feel comfort in its consistency and cadence. I am lulled by familiarity and autopilot. I get lost in it, yet feel little. But I persist and continue in this prayer perseveration hoping that Mary is not disappointed in me.

However, all is not lost! The psalms have created a chink in whatever armor was blocking me from prayer. These words put to song are like a sucker punch into my soul. When I first heard the sweet music and psalm "My soul is thirsting for you My God" - I thought I would take my last breath. It hit me that I am not the only one that is dry. (Maybe David would have had the same problem at adoration.)

It drew me into something that was more than words. It stirred my full attention to the true simplicity of God's love. I remember meditating on how this was more communion with God than any other time I could recall. I now use the psalms as a springboard for prayer. It is still a work in progress, but I know it is not accidental that God wants me to communicate with Him this way. For I was made this way by Him! - Barbara Smith

My Life Is A Prayer

Prayer is my most valuable possession. It is my connection with God, the saints, and holy people who are among us. There is no greater tool in my life that I use in praise, thanksgiving or in times of crisis. In my opinion, prayer is the only way to cleanse the world of evil. One of my favorite methods of prayer is to unite with my Church family at Mass. My personal quiet prayer time includes novenas and the Holy Rosary.

I have been reflecting on what prayer means to me. Prayer is the foundation and backbone of my life. I can remember how important prayer has been to me ever since I was very young. I thank my parents for taking me to church and keeping faith alive in our home. I attended Catholic school and I thank the nuns and teachers who inspired me. My mother taught me the meaning of intercessory prayer. Praying the Rosary was one of my favorite times of prayer growing up. When I became an adult, I experienced the power of prayer through novenas and conversational prayer with the Blessed Mother, St. Therese of Lisieux and St. Joseph.

I have a remarkable account that demonstrates the power of intercessory prayer. The specific story I will discuss is about a teenage boy I refer to as "Sam." I knew his mother here in Raleigh. Sam did not grow up with the teachings of the Catholic Church. He considered himself an atheist. This young man had an injury that left him with a near death experience. When we heard about Sam's injury, our group of friends prayed the Rosary continually for him and his family. I was blessed to meet him many months later. Sam told me that when he was in a coma he remembers the doctor telling his mother that he was dying. He recalls seeing a beautiful woman. Later he was shown a holy card of the Blessed Mother and he said this woman was even more beautiful than the picture. The magnificent woman told Sam he was going to meet her Son. He remembers meeting a Man with an amazing light around His head. He said it was Jesus. Jesus told Sam he would have some injuries but he would recover. I felt God spoke to me through Sam's story. This was an incredible sign of intercessory prayer. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, brings her Son to us all, especially through praying the Rosary.

I have prayed novenas to St. Therese of Lisieux and have felt her send me signs that had a direct impact on events happening in my life at that time. I saw people actually have a change of heart which improved relationships in our family. Through my prayers and the intercession of St. Therese, God blessed us with peace and unity during a difficult time.

My prayer life mostly consists of formal prayers and novenas. I am trying to grow my prayer life to include more conversations directly with Jesus. In blocking out the world around me, I let my thoughts quiet down and let God in. I have an example of a time in my life where the Grace of God was so very alive within my soul. It was a very rough and difficult plane landing. Everyone around me was upset and nervous. I closed my eyes and asked God to be by my side. I had such an overwhelming feeling of calm. I let my human weakness go. I let God take control over my emotions. I pray novenas to St. Joseph with whom I feel a special connection. Since my name is Josephine, I have chosen St. Joseph as a role model. His sense of faith and responsibility inspires me to lead a life full of caring and love for the people around me. Through my prayers to St. Joseph, I feel his presence in my family. He protects and guides my husband and me as we raise our children in the Catholic faith. As the earthly father who raised Jesus, St. Joseph leads me to have a closer relationship with Him through prayer.

Most of the time when I pray, the conversation seems one-sided. I don't have a story or a tangible response. I do have a more focused day when I let God in. When I ask the holy saints for help and prayers, I feel their faith-filled strength. I feel a special connection to Jesus through the Blessed Mother, St. Therese of Lisieux and St. Joseph. Their spiritual lives inspire me. Through prayer I feel the guidance of these holy people. Their love of Jesus encourages me to connect more with Him.

Another important part of my life is prayers of thanksgiving. It is normal for me to reach out to Jesus in trying times. He has carried me through many difficult life events. I know it is so very important to remember how blessed I am. I have a tremendous gift of faith. I have an amazing family. I have wonderful friends. It is imperative that I demonstrate my thankfulness through my prayer life. I also demonstrate my faith and thanks through my

actions. My prayer life and the way I live among others can be an inspiration for people to connect with Jesus.

My life is a prayer. I continue to grow in my ability to communicate with Jesus and learn to respond to His guidance.

Jo is the kind of disciple so needed in the Church and world today - a discipleship life that begins with a deep relationship with Jesus, nurtured by prayer, and joyfully overflows into loving relationships with others. Jo's actions definitely flow from her prayer life and that is a pattern we should all aim to follow. Do you make time for prayer every day?

Adoration Of The Blessed Sacrament

When I am in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament I am in awe that Jesus died for me and loves me with all my faults. - Mary Alice Colucci

Adoration gives me a spiritual lift because seeing Jesus there in the Monstrance helps me to realize Jesus' great love for me and that He died for me and left this beautiful reminder of that love. My weekly adoration hour is an opportunity to adore and praise Him for all blessings He has given me. - Tamah Sminkey

My "Lunch Date" With Jesus

I am a cradle Catholic but must admit that I did not know anything about Adoration until I was in my mid-30s, and right after joining a new parish.

The Pastor held frequent Adoration opportunities, and the Deacon highly encouraged it, referring to Adoration as "Radiation Therapy for the Soul", so I started attending.

Adoration for me is many things. Sometimes it is a time for prayer and saying the Rosary. Sometimes I read my Bible. Sometimes I am in tears as I totally

pour out my heart and soul to God. Sometimes I meditate upon Jesus' life, and sometimes if nobody else is around, I'll sing. More and more these days though, it's been a time of just sitting and talking with Jesus as humbly, honestly, and plainly as possible. This is by far my favorite time at Adoration. It wasn't like that in the beginning, I didn't know how to talk with Jesus so easily. When I first began going to Adoration, I had an agenda. I felt that I needed to pray formally or petition God for some need.

I'm learning to turn the time over to Jesus because it is a two-way street. Not a transaction. I'm there and so is He and I've learned to let Him guide our time together. I would always have my Adoration "carry on" bag, which contained my Bible, rosary, Catholic books, and prayer books, etc. My Catholic "carry on" always helps to inspire me, but as time goes by, there are many times now I never open my bag. Each time I attend Adoration, I'm never quite sure what will happen. I may spend the entire time reading the Bible or saying several Rosaries, or I might just sit and talk with Jesus. I've grown so much more comfortable at Adoration no matter where, or what church I am attending. It always feels like coming home.

I still use my Adoration carry on, but it is also so awesome to just be there and to be quiet in His presence. I feel such consolation, such Love. There's a blessing that happens to all of us attending Adoration. God's presence extends far, far into every aspect of our lives. I'm so much more aware of Jesus everywhere I go and, in every creature, and person I encounter. Adoration, and being in Jesus presence, has reminded me over and over again how much God Loves all of us.

When I think about it all, it's really quite hard to really fathom that our Creator, Our Father the God of the Universe, King of Kings, our Lord Jesus Christ allows himself to be so present to us in the Eucharist and at Adoration. Our lifetimes aren't anywhere long enough to begin to grasp this but I'm so happy that He gives us the opportunity to try. What a very meek and humble of heart, and mighty and awesome God we have!

As time goes by and as I continue to attend Adoration, I really look forward to my Adoration time, it is my "Lunch Date" with Jesus. Adoration attendees

usually sign up for an hour or so, but I find myself very often wanting to stay longer so I do.

I have made it a habit when leaving Adoration and saying Goodbye to Jesus, to look long and hard upon the altar and to remember that beautiful image of the monstrance and Our Lord Jesus there. When I am elsewhere, and praying, I can still see the image clearly and I enjoy meditating on it. All praise and glory to Him!

Ginny has been blessed with a spirit that has a great love for the Lord. You can see His love radiating through her smile. Ginny makes consistent and intentional efforts to grow her relationship with Jesus. Adoration is a big part of that. Is the Lord calling you to visit Him in Adoration and give Him praise? Those who adore Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament often say that it strengthens their faith and transforms their lives.

The Holy Rosary

The rosary goes with me everywhere, and I feel my life is entwined in the rosary. The gentle love of Mary constantly soothes my soul especially in hard times no matter how stressed I feel. It is a gracious gift from Mother Mary. - Peggy Kearney

I pray the Rosary because I love our Blessed Mother; she has God's ear. - Joe Jacobs

The rosary is important as the beginning of Christian prayer. Our Blessed Mother came from Heaven and asked us to unite ourselves, with her Son Jesus, through the prayers of the rosary each day. - Sharon Matthews

A Most Powerful Prayer

My very first rosary was presented to me at my First Communion by my Godfather, who had recently returned from the Korean War. The rosary he gave me was unlike any the other children had at that time. Theirs were made of colorful glass, crystal or pearl beads, with beautiful crucifixes in silver and gold. I cannot explain how disappointed I was when I opened the small fabric sack which contained a weathered metal rosary. The beads were tarnished with a dull silver wash. The decades were connected with what looked like a chain from a lamp pull. I complained to my mother, who only encouraged me to pray the rosary daily. I had been taught in my Catholic school how to say the rosary, and so I began this lifelong prayer on the worn silver beads.

I learned years later that the rosary given to me by my Godfather was one he carried throughout his years in military service. It was known as a "Combat Rosary" and was issued to servicemen during both world wars by the US government. Undoubtedly, this rosary was precious to him as he invoked the powerful intercession of Our Lady through the horrors of war. He was spared during the attack on Pearl Harbor and returned to the US with a renewed devotion to Our Lady and her rosary.

I understood only then what an incredible gift this had been. This rosary took on an entirely different meaning for me. As I prayed with a renewed spirit, the mysteries taught me virtues. The Joyous taught patience, perseverance and faith, the Glorious, gratitude, wonder and hope, and the Sorrowful, courage, deep love, and reverence.

During those young years, the rosary became my prayer of comfort and consolation. It was my time with Mother Mary. And yet, there was so much more to come. I had no idea.

Here I must interject that my mother was a "rosary warrior." After she had prepared our nightly dinner, and before my father arrived home, she would

say three rosaries. Daily, I watched her and knew I was not to disturb this ritual. It was a private matter for her. She never asked me to join her but seemed to need this time to regenerate and focus on her role as mother and wife.

She shared with me one day, years later, that this was the prayer ritual she learned from her mother, my Nana, ... daily Mass, then the entire fifteen decades of the rosary. Later, when my Grandmother died unexpectedly, as she walked to church, her ancient rosary beads were given to me. They were made of darkened, smooth beads and at the end of each decade, she had attached a medal representing one of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin. There was Lourdes, Fatima, LaSalette, the Holy House of Loreto and the Miraculous Medal. I continued to pray my rosary...but now on Nana's beads.

As I reflect on my long journey with the prayers of Our Lady's rosary, these two very special rosaries played an undeniable role in the formation of my spiritual life. My Nana's rosary has become my most precious sacramental. As the beads slip through my fingers, I ask Nana to pray with me. I wonder, as she contemplated the life of Jesus with these same beads, who did she pray for? How did she meditate on the life of Jesus and Mary within the vignettes of these decades? Was she ever transported into a contemplative meditation which took her directly into the heart of Mary herself? Did she pray for me and for all generations to follow her as I do sometimes?

It is as if Nana has become my prayer partner and together, we have found a powerful Spiritual weapon to confront the evils of the world. We both have agreed, in different times and from different generations, that the rosary is a most powerful prayer. And we have found comfort and strength in the life and Passion of Our Lord. For me, the rosary has defined the paths I choose to follow.

Nana, I concluded, was indeed holy. Each rosary caused me to reflect...how can I be holy? What must I do to completely follow God's will? I looked to

the Rosary, and the stories of Our Lady's fiat...her eternal yes, her works of compassion as illustrated in the Visitation and at the wedding feast at Cana, her total acceptance of poverty at the birth of her Son....her obedience to the Jewish law to offer her firstborn to God. This was the road to holiness.

I realize today that the rosary and its mysteries have become my roadmap to attain what I hope will be a holy life. This journey can only be accomplished by developing an interior life of prayer and then turning outward to service, to discipleship. The images that the rosary evokes of the Life, the Passion, the Resurrection of Christ, explode, and become alive within the deep meditations on each decade. We have always been encouraged to know Jesus on a personal level, to speak with Him daily, as one would with an old friend. Praying the rosary, pausing and considering the details of each decade....and placing yourself in the very scene of the event is life changing.

As I grew spiritually, I knew I must now set out to minister to God's people. I began to search for places to serve, and I found a small group in Florida called Birthline. This emergent pro-life group was founded by a lady who was another rosary warrior. Together, with a small group of young ladies, we were able to open Pregnancy Centers that offer counseling and support for women who found themselves in difficult situations. We often opened our own homes to pregnant women who had no other housing during their confinement. Daily, we said the rosary.

We partnered with other religious groups to add the opportunity for some of these women to obtain a GED. We offered daycare for the babies after birth. We provided clothes, baby furnishings, diapers, formula, counseling, and most of all, an atmosphere of prayer.

It was at this time, when, in prayer, I felt led to earn a Master's degree so that I could continue to counsel the women under the licensure of the State. I can't express enough how terrified I was to continue my education. I had never been a good student. I was in fact, a dismal student. But Our Lady needed a legitimate counselor, so I enrolled. Three years later, I graduated

with honors. It's hard to believe such an amazing outcome. God was working miracles!

Of course, Our Lady was not quite finished with my education. Within a year, at the request of my Pastor, I was enrolled in a program to become a Lay Minister and work within the Diocese as a Counselor/Spiritual Director. The combination of Secular Counseling and Spiritual Direction was a new concept for the Church. I set out with a Deacon and a Priest to begin a House of Prayer. There were mini-retreats, group sessions, spiritual direction, and prayer...always prayer.

Today as I reach the autumn of my life, I continue to say the rosary with the Legion of Mary. This beautiful, apostolic group ministers to the elderly, sick and suffering confined in nursing homes. There is much opportunity to pray with the residents who are always so grateful for visitors and for prayer.

Our Lady's Rosary has been the perfect prayer for me for many years. Combining the Angelic Salutation of the Angel Gabriel along with the Lord's Prayer, it embodies the simplicity of few words. It reminds us that God knows all our needs and will provide if we trust in His Providence. It calls upon Our Lady as the angel did, acknowledges she is "filled with Grace," and begs her prayers for us NOW and at the hour when we meet Our Lord in death. It directs us to meditate on the Life and Passion of Jesus and brings us deep into the timeless presence of Jesus two thousand years ago. For me the rosary has been transforming, bringing hope, peace and abundance of joy. No ministry would have been possible without an inner life of prayer. And no prayer would have been possible without the Holy Spirit who calls us all to an intimate relationship with Our Loving Father and with His most Holy Spouse, the Blessed Virgin.

CWH teaches us so well that the rosary is not just a prayer that some Catholics do. It is a beautiful gift from God that has the power to continually re-create all of us anew in God's grace. CWH's life witnesses to the rosary being a divine instrument for calling us into service to God's people. How long has it been since you have asked someone to pray the rosary with you?

Reflection and Discussion Questions for Prayer and Discipleship:

1. How has your prayer life grown over the years?
2. What opportunities can you take advantage of for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and for praying the rosary?

SERVICE AND DISCIPLESHIP

I believe that when I serve people in need I am serving God because we are all God's people no matter what our status is or what race or color we are. - Jim Hoyle

My joy comes from service to others. From the Stewardship I learned from my Mother... giving freely of my time, talent and treasure. "Paying forward the many blessings our Lord has bestowed on me and my family" - Jack Werder

Taking care of the environment is a form of service because.... it will ensure that our children and future generations will have a place to live. Rooftop solar is a good thing because it produces clean energy, and costs less than burning fossil fuels. Pope Francis, in his encyclical, Laudato Si, encourages us to..... dramatically reduce carbon dioxide emissions by developing clean sources of renewable energy. (Paragraph 21). Rooftop solar is like having a wealthy benefactor who writes a check every day the sun shines. - Dave Abell

Our service to each other in our family helps us to serve others in God's image - The Gragg family

Our Faith is that when we help the poor we grow in grace, love of Our Lord and gratitude for all He has given us. - Joe Rothengast

Beautiful Nursing Home Ministry

I never would have imagined that I would be visiting nursing homes on a regular basis, let alone bringing Communion with me. Most people don't even want to think of going into a nursing home or visiting with people who are ill or who they are unfamiliar with. Here are some of the reasons I am honored to be in this beautiful ministry.

My Mom & Dad were homebound for quite a few years due to health issues. There was a beautiful nun from their parish who visited them every week to bring Communion. Occasionally she would bring a visiting priest and they would have a prayer service and Communion. My parents looked forward to these visits every week and made sure they were prepared for them. They could no longer attend Mass, but Sister bringing prayers and Communion to them made their day, and week. This had such a strong impact on me; making me realize how fragile life is, and the importance of receiving Jesus in our lives regularly.

After my Dad passed away, my Mom could no longer take care of herself and was moved to a local nursing home in the town where she lived. Sister continued to visit weekly with Communion, and my Mom was so pleased! There was a time when I was visiting my Mom and Sister was there. I told her that I was contemplating joining a ministry at my parish that visited Catholic residents in our local nursing homes. She held my hands and prayed with me that God would guide me as I did His work. What a blessing!! I carry Sister's words and my Mom's memory with me every time I step in the front door of the facility I am visiting.

I have been a visiting minister for over 11 years. There has never been a time when I have visited that has not impacted me for the whole day. Visiting and bringing Communion to the residents fills me with a joy that is very difficult to explain. There are times when speaking to a resident that comforting words for them come to me! I know that God is speaking through me; giving me the words He wants to pass along to His children.

One of the joys of this ministry is “teaching” new people that are interested in possibly becoming a visiting minister. It is amazing to see when they “get it”; when they realize the beauty of being a visiting minister and bringing joy to another person. Even the people who can no longer receive; the people we only can say a prayer to touch your heart. Like I said before – indescribable joy!

It is comforting to know that you may be the only person this resident sees today, except for staff working there. They are so thankful that you have brought them Communion. They are so thankful that you have visited them, brought them a bulletin, brought them rosary beads or prayer cards or a lap blanket made by our GIFTS ministry. The residents are thankful for everything and let us know they appreciate our visits!

There are so many moments that are very touching to me and residents I will never forget. I had been visiting a man who was unable to get out of bed or even feed himself; I had never seen him move at all. One Sunday morning when I was visiting him, I was saying the Sign of the Cross in preparation for praying for him. He moved his right hand to his forehead as if to make the Sign himself. I was so touched and thought to myself that this man may not have been mobile, but his mind was still functioning and he recognized the Sign of the Cross.

Another time a young woman in a wheelchair approached me as I was going from one room to another. She asked me what I was “giving out”. I told her I was bringing Communion to the Catholic residents and she asked if she could have some. I asked if she was Catholic and she said no, but could I pray with her because we all need prayers. I suggested the Lord’s Prayer because it is universal. She held my hand and we prayed together. She still enjoys someone praying with her and has started asking questions about our Catholic faith. God puts us where we need to be.

There are also times when one of the ministers in this group will reach out to me with special things that happen to them when they are serving a resident. One situation that comes to mind is of a person who hadn’t wanted

to receive because they didn't feel it was doing any good, and then had a change of heart because the minister took the time to converse and pray with them. This brought the minister to tears because she felt God was talking through her, and I felt her joy too.

I feel by participating in this ministry that I have become closer to God in many ways. I start every day with prayer. It has made me more tolerant of people and less judgmental. We are all God's children and that's the attitude I try to carry with me every day. I feel a peace inside that wasn't always there and I am more thankful for every person in my life.

There may come a time when I will not be able to visit due to health issues or age. I have some wonderful visiting ministers that I am honored to have with me in this ministry and I know they could take over coordinating very easily. This ministry only works because of the wonderful ministers who serve with me. Hopefully, with God's grace, I can continue in this ministry for quite a while. I love this ministry and am so thankful that I am qualified to visit the nursing homes and the Catholic residents and bring them Jesus.

Cheryl loves the Lord and that helps her love others. She is warm, wonderful, and joyful with her friends. Especially to those she serves, Cheryl is very compassionate and caring. She brings the love of Jesus to the nursing homes.

Now Let Us Go Forward To Serve God Through One Another

Do you remember when your mother said, "It is better to give than to receive"? Hearing this, perhaps you rolled your eyes or told your mother, "But I want to keep the toy fire truck that you purchased for Johnny's birthday." Serving others was the last thing on your mind. It is not until we were much older that we realized how true those words are and perhaps we said these same words to our own children.

When I was a young adult and into my first years of marriage, God and my spiritual life was always important, but it was not at the forefront. I'm certain that like many of my peers I was so focused on having a happy marriage, being a good father to our children, and building a successful career that I ignored the many opportunities to help others. Yes, I was always active in my Church serving as a Eucharist Minister, taking communion to a nursing home, and serving on several pastoral teams but I gradually learned this was not enough to satisfy my inner desires. As I matured in age and wisdom, my relationship with the community took on an increased importance. I now know that in those early years I was taking the contributions of others for granted while I sat in the shadows. They were active participants in community life, volunteering at schools, the PTA, leading girl or boy scout troops.

A year after my wife passed, I retired from the company I had worked for over 25 years. After much prayer and discernment, I knew that I was being called to make a real contribution not only to our Church, but to the community as well. I telephoned a local hospital and asked about volunteer opportunities. The volunteer services director met with me and we talked about the importance of serving others. Knowing that my wife died from cancer, she asked to volunteer in the cancer center, explaining I could relate to the patients undergoing radiation and chemotherapy because of my personal experience. In retrospect, I cannot begin to describe how rewarding this opportunity was. Not only did I receive a feeling of personal satisfaction, but I was able to relate to God's sisters and brothers who were facing a life-changing battle. Simply treating each person with dignity and compassion meant the world to them and their families.

A few years later, God asked me to add yet another volunteer challenge to my schedule--volunteering at Transitions (Hospice) of Wake County. I cannot explain why I said yes, but I sincerely believe I was called by our Lord. Fifteen years later, I still meet with patients. Each person has taught me so much about life's experiences. They shared their joys, innermost thoughts and hopes for their families. Each individual knew they were approaching the end of life as we know it, and yet not one individual

expressed a fear of dying. Instead each seemed to look forward to meeting their God. I remember each individual and their story. I would like to tell you two stories in particular.

The first story is about a person that was home bound and had requested an individual who would debate and even argue with her about current events, politics and the actions of our government. Despite her illness, she was not content to give up and wanted to be challenged intellectually. This lady was highly educated, traveled the world, even bungee jumped! But she did not have an expressed faith and had declined meeting with a Spiritual Advisor from Transitions. During our weekly meetings we talked about history, her travels and over time she asked about my faith because she knew I was widowed, had met a lady at church, and we were going to marry. She surprised me one week when she told me that she had asked the Transitions Spiritual Minister to visit her! She explained that during their visit the Minister asked her to draw a picture of what she thought God looked like. This patient said that since God was not flesh but a spirit, she had drawn a picture that expressed that feeling and she shared it with me. I firmly believe that our Lord used me to reignite her spiritual life.

The second story I would like to tell you is about a group of individuals, each one a patriot who served our nation in combat – WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. Transitions conducts a Veterans Ceremony for each veteran. When asked, each veteran would tell tales of the childhood, family, jobs they held when they “came home” and where they were stationed. They would also tell stories about the humorous events that took place while serving in the military but not one individual ever described the horrors or hard time experienced. They were simply proud of having served.

Twenty years ago, if you had told me that I would actually enjoy meeting with those who had an incurable illness, I would have told you that you were “out of your mind.” I am certainly not the “Good Samaritan.”

The parishes within our city take communion to the patients in the local hospitals. Many times, I wonder if I am wasting my time because so many

Catholics in the hospital decline the Eucharist. Perhaps they have not been to church in several years or feel they need to go to confession before receiving. Then I would visit the next patient who “makes your day” when they tell you that they have been hoping a Eucharistic Minister would visit. I had heart bypass surgery several years ago and I truly look forward to visiting patients in the cardiac ward. In many instances they underwent surgery within the past couple days. I can sit and talk, describe their recovery and tell them that as a result of my surgery I have no limitations and am able to do anything I want to do. I want them to believe their recovery will be as successful as mine has been.

At the end of every Mass I attend, I pray, “Now let us go forward to serve God through one another”. I cannot help but to think what a wonderful world this would be if everybody would put this simple prayer into everyday practice.

Reginald is a rock-solid kind of guy who is also very caring. He has a friendly way of making people feel right at home. Reginald is very strong in his faith and is trustworthy and a man of his word. Do you strive to serve God by serving those around you?

Rookie In The Jail

It was my first visit as a member of a jail ministry team to the Durham County Detention Facility. On this night I was shadowing one of the more experienced Immaculate Conception parish team members. I was very nervous, not knowing what to expect or how we would be received by these men. We entered through a few automated steel gate checkpoints; the gates slammed shut behind us and we took the elevator up to one of the pods. In each pod is a small glass-walled room with chairs. What the inmates and guards call “church” is a small gathering to listen to the Word and share what the Scripture passages are saying to them. On this night there were about fifteen inmates. During the entire fifty minutes I mostly listened and

observed. I said almost nothing. In my mind I felt I added no measurable value to the discussion.

When the session ended one of the older inmates closed the meeting with one of the most sincere prayers of gratitude I have ever heard. It was genuine and vulnerable; it spoke of his sin, our sin, the outpouring of the Father's mercy and the need to rely on Jesus, and how thankful they were that we had volunteered our free time to be with them in their brokenness, loneliness and daily struggles. It was real and from his heart. I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit in this place. I honestly did not expect a prayer like this to come from inside a jail. When we were packing up one of the older inmates came up to me and asked me my name and: "When are you coming back?" I thought he meant the Immaculate Conception team so I said: "this group comes here twice a month - so in two weeks." He looked at me directly and said "No, when are **you** coming back?" I had said little, offered nothing and this man wanted to know when I would be coming back to bring the Word to him. I could hear Christ's voice in this man's words, and I prayed on this all the way home. On this night the "them" became to me each man, a baptized man, a man claimed by God, a face with a soul and a name, a person loved by Christ, a sinner needing the healing and forgiveness of Jesus, a soul that might be in risk of missing out on the promise of eternity with the Father, a soul that had wandered from the fold and was lost, a sinner with infinite worth in the eyes of Jesus, not that much different than me. The Lord hadn't called me to judge or even to rehabilitate: He had simply asked me to be with them and pray with them. That was three years ago.

For me, answering a clear invitation to discipleship began with an inwardly focused path centered on questions such as: *what kind of daily prayer life do I have? Do I truly desire a relationship with Jesus above all things? Do I acknowledge that there is an invitation to encounter His face in all my experiences, in all things, and in all circumstances? Do I really believe this? What am I attached to that is getting in the way of me being closer to Christ?* The Lord led me to desire and embrace an interior life of daily prayer and I became a sponge for soaking up the treasures in Catholic spiritual

reading. This phase of my spiritual journey brought me joy and peace and also brought me clarity to see what was lacking in my commitment to this relationship.

Slowly the Lord began to move me to look more externally, outside of myself, outside of my closest relationships, outside of our parish community. *What was I doing for others (complete strangers, those who might not be Catholic, people who didn't look like me)? How was I helping the forgotten and lost souls? Who is it that needs to hear the gospel message that no one wants to spend time with?* I prayed for the grace to overcome my natural tendency to seek comfort and an openness to the thought of being led to something that was not my own "spiritual project" within my own agenda. I was particularly struck by what the laity are called to do in ***Lumen Gentium***, when we studied this document with our priest. In this document, in the chapter "The Laity," it outlines all that we are called to do. I was really bothered to realize how little I was doing for the Body of Christ, how I was not actively responding to the Lord's mission for us, which for the laity is to be a witness to the resurrection of Jesus before the world.

Around this same time I was finding myself both moved and disturbed by Matthew, chapter 25, especially verses 35-45: "He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.'" I saw these least ones included the imprisoned. I discerned and I prayed "*Lord will I ever see your face in an inmate? This might be too difficult - maybe I cannot do it. What about one of these others who need us?*" The Lord kept bringing me back to the words "*in prison and you visited me...*" I desired to be a disciple actively following His will, but Christ needed to prepare my heart further. In verse 36 it does **not** say: "I was in prison, **unjustly imprisoned**, and you came to me." My prayer of discipleship became: "*Lord, if you really want me to do this, crush my spirit of judgment and give me a zeal for these lost souls. Give me with courage and whatever gift you desire me to have in this ministry. And finally, make me decrease so you can increase.*" That was three years ago and I can still say I recognize this is where He wants me to serve Him for now. He has affirmed it.

I think that is how He works with some who are ready to surrender to Him and begin down a path of discipleship. He moves you to look inside of your own weakness, hard-heartedness, sinfulness and shows you how much you need Him, how you can do nothing without Him. The Holy Spirit convicts you where you are lacking in virtue, fills the dark voids with grace and recreates you, giving you a new and heightened awareness of where you were and where you need to move toward. The Lord allows you to experience this continuous conversion, building you up in that and slowly increasing your desire for His will. I think a large part of discipleship is just allowing Him to recreate you, to empty you so you can see your own helplessness. When you are ready, He will show you where He wants you to go. For me, He wanted to lead me out of the shallows, out of my comfortable surroundings and all the things that made me feel safe, to serve Him in uncomfortable settings. This is the place where the Lord will help us to participate with great zeal in the saving action of Christ, which He continues in His Church.

**Just Love God And Follow Jesus Christ: Our Path To Working With
Catholic Teens**

Our names are Charles and Kathy Butler and we would like to share our story with you as to why we chose to be involved with the Youth Program. Kathy and I have been married for over 30 years and have 4 children - 3 boys and 1 girl. We currently live in Wake Forest, NC and have been members of St. Luke Catholic Church since the Fall of 2002. Kathy was born and raised as a Catholic Christian and I became a Catholic Christian at the age of 36. The following is a short story of how and why we each became involved in the Youth Program.

I (Charles) grew up in a small mill town in Roanoke Rapids, NC and am the youngest of 4 children. My mother "Kitty" raised four children alone while working in the local cotton mills. I was baptized at the age of 12 in the First Baptist Church but only attended church sparingly. My family was poor and

relied on public assistance as well as help from the local church charities. I was the first and only child to graduate from high school, where I played football and baseball. I earned an athletic scholarship to play baseball at East Carolina University. I attribute my athletic success to several teachers/coaches that provided positive role model experiences to me from the age of 10 to the age of 22. There was a consistent theme that work, and determination will allow you to succeed in life and to “be somebody”.

After college, this theme of “be somebody” was a driving force in my life. I carried this with me during my career as a Special Agent in the federal government. With many of life’s joys and frustration during this time, I kept seeking internal peace and happiness. Around the age of 34, we started to attend the Catholic Church on a regular basis with our 3 children at the time (the 4th child was born later). This is when I met a wise and very faith-filled priest that had a very profound influence on me to convert to Catholicism. I immediately started working with the Youth Program and was greatly moved by the Holy Spirit to coach and teach the kids the story of Jesus Christ. I was literally put into a classroom with 12-15 kids alone and had very little knowledge of Catholic Church history or teaching. As my confidence in my ability to teach the Jesus story to the youth was lacking, my wise old priest gave me the simplest advice. He said, “Charles, just show them that you love God and follow Jesus Christ!”. From that point on, I focused my work efforts and determination on doing just that. As the Holy Scriptures tell us in Genesis 1:27, “God created man in His own image...”. As a young boy, I wish an adult had coached/taught me about this absolute truth. Once a person learns and believes this truth, you can then know that you “are somebody” in Gods image regardless of what the world tries to say about who you are.

I have learned to love God and be a follower of Jesus Christ by teaching within Catholic Youth ministries for about a total of eight years now. With the influence of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of a wise old priest, I enjoy teaching/coaching the youth to “just love God and follow Jesus Christ”.

This is my (Kathy’s) story: As mentioned, I grew up Catholic. I am the youngest of 8 and was raised in a loving, faith filled family in Westfield, New Jersey. We were active members of our parish. Our faith and Church played

a big role in my life. As I moved through life, it remained important to me to “go to church”. I fell away for a time while I was in college, but I always knew that the Church was there for me.

My belief in my faith truly became authentic when we began to attend our church in Oklahoma. Unlike New Jersey, there were very few Catholics at the time in Owasso, Oklahoma. It felt so different from how I grew up. It was vibrant, energetic, apologetic. As I grew in faith, I realized and appreciated how much other faiths had to offer. We met many wonderful people from evangelical faiths that helped us realize that value of learning from people of different beliefs. We would attend events at their churches, and they would be guests at Mass with us as well. I became hungry to learn what I believed. As a “cradle Catholic” I realized that I did things out of habit, not understanding. Charles was learning more about the faith while going through RCIA than I had learned in 30 years. This is where He and I started to walk together in faith. It became important for us to expose our children to the vibrancy of Catholicism.

After moving to North Carolina and joining St. Luke, we were catapulted into a faithful family of fellow Catholics that helped make our walk straight and strong. Our children felt connected because of the seeds that were planted in them by caring, holy priests and Godly catechists. Knowing that we all have our own path that creates our journey, I realized that I could be a part of a young person’s journey. I felt blessed that our children had other adults in their lives to strengthen their faith and to trust. I wanted to be that person for someone else’s child. Being a part of Vita Nova has challenged and fed me. Initially, I felt insecure in my knowledge. What if I was asked a question that I did not know the answer to? A teenager can spot a phony person a mile away. I let the Holy Spirit guide me in my interactions with them and we often end up learning together. I let the gifts that God has given me be my strength when I spend time with them. Like a wise old priest said, “Just love God and follow Jesus Christ.”

Serving In Haiti, Transformed By Love And Joy

Our time in Haiti with Haiti Missions has been an eye opening and faith-filled experience. Traveling to a remote village near the town of Jeremie, we anticipated that we'd be bringing some hope and relief to the poor and desperate. For sure, some of that came true as we were able to distribute clothing, food, money, candy and of course smiles and love...certainly an easy environment to feel like a disciple. But to our amazement we came away with much more than we gave.

The Haitians we met and interacted with were joyful beyond belief. Here they have nothing compared to our standards and yet they always have a smile and joyful outlook. It gave us a totally different lens through which we view life and a new outlook on sharing not only our treasure but also our lives. Everything we spend money on in our everyday life is measured now in how many houses that money could build in Haiti.

It is hard to ignore the fact that the faith of Haitian families is present, evident, and interwoven in the fabric of who they are despite their extreme poverty. Their faith was evident despite their everyday struggles for water, food, and adequate shelter in a culture where voodoo practice is present. Being part of Haiti Mission has allowed us to experience in a real way that the love and relationships with the people we encounter is to what Jesus calls us. It is in those new friends that we recognize our call to discipleship in a new way. We see the gift that it is to serve by helping people out of misery and poverty. We carry with us the love and joy we experienced and are transformed by it.

Bob and Betsy are disciples who love the Mass. They truly celebrate the Eucharist. They also seek to share the presence of the Lord with others once they exit the church doors. Bob and Betsy serve others in many ways, including being a caring friend to many and helping the poor. They are great examples of disciples who serve with joy.

Retired To Say Yes For A Glorious Purpose

It is impossible to know God's plans, but a disciple must be ready when called. A tragic fire and death turned out to be my signpost.

Thanks to God's blessings, I was able to leave my career in 2013. With only a few vague ideas about what I would do next, I sampled various charitable service opportunities and other activities but had not yet found my path. Within months, God placed my task before me.

In January 2014, my parish community suffered a terrible tragedy. Our church was attacked and set on fire. A young man, the perpetrator, also took his life in front of the church that he had set out to destroy. This was a sorrowful loss for his family and our parish.

To sustain our parish community, the decision was taken to build a new church. I was asked by our pastor to help with the design and building process. Having only recently retired, I felt that God was showing me the path He had prepared for me.

Being invited to join with other parishioners for this important process made me understand with more clarity than ever how the Holy Spirit helps guide us in our daily life. It is not possible to tell all the instances where I felt His hand at work as we built our new church, but I will describe three such moments.

One: Aware of the financial position of many of our parishioners, we were uncertain as to how we could afford a new church. We set the original fundraising expectation at a low level with this perceived limitation well known. We should not have been surprised that through God's grace, the hearts of our parishioners were opened wide and we nearly doubled our original expected donations.

Two: We knew we needed a special architect of church buildings to help us in the design of our church. We interviewed several architects in the area. We were satisfied with one or two of the architect backgrounds, but we

prayed for the Holy Spirit to lead us. The Spirit led us to an architect with a passion for Romanesque architecture. He would be the one to help us build a beautiful church for the praise and glory of God.

Three: Four of our original stained-glass windows, depicting gospel passages found only in the Gospel of Saint Luke, were destroyed or damaged. They were very important to our faith community, and we very much wanted to open the church with four new stain-glass windows depicting these same gospel scenes. Money was tight, and we were not sure we would be able to initially afford them. Our pastor kept saying his dream was not only to do those four windows but others as well. We kept praying and working. Parishioners continued to open their hearts with their generosity. After we researched many stained-glass studios throughout the country, the Holy Spirit guided us to a local studio. Using his God-given gift, their primary artist works with a vision disability. Even so, he not only recreated the original four windows in a vivid and impactful way, he designed and painted all the new windows. The generosity of our parishioners allowed us to fill the whole church with stained-glass windows. Like in cathedrals of old, the gospels of Saint Luke are brought to life in a traditionally artistic and beautiful way. Viewers can see the gospel message unfold before them.

When asked, I always share with people my belief that God allowed me to take early retirement so that I had time to help build His church. Since the new church has been completed, I have moved on to other ways to serve. Today, I also pray more and try to listen to the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit as He guides me.

Keith has excellent leadership and project management skills. He did an outstanding job leading the core committee who helped plan our new church. His greatest gift, though, is a burning desire to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Keith puts people at ease because he follows Jesus Christ in a very humble manner. People see his humility, integrity, sincerity, and desire to serve and often turn to him as a Christian leader.

To Know Him, To Love Him, And To Serve Him ... And To Sing

I serve my parish as a member of the choir, but let me start here: As Catholic youth in the 1950's, we learned our faith using the brown Baltimore Catechism. In the first lesson, we are asked the question:

Q. Why did God make you?

A. God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in heaven.

This is the story of my life and my efforts (or lack, thereof) to live up to the purpose for which God made me.

TO KNOW HIM...

It started feebly in the 1950's in the basement of a Catholic Church in Indianola, Pennsylvania, where Father Ambrose taught us the faith using the Baltimore Catechism. I still remember many of the answers, even if I really didn't begin to understand them until my sixtieth year. My younger brother, Ed, and I attended Sunday Mass with our mother, but Church and faith were rarely mentioned in our home except during Christmas and Easter. Despite what I remember as a mostly combative home life, Mother's love for her two boys was a sanctuary for my brother and me. Her love of music stands out in my most memorable thoughts of her. She listened to the radio, sang along with it, and could pick up and play a tune on almost any instrument. My Dad was a fallen away Catholic with not much interest in the Church. He ruled our lives with a loud and angry voice. Despite this judgment of him for most of my life, my faith in my later years has caused me to take another, more realistic, look at my father and his relationship with us. I now see him as a product of his own stern family existence during the time of the Great Depression. I ask the Lord for forgiveness for his soul and I harbor no hard feelings. Dad took me to a local music store in 1953, at the age of nine, to sign up for accordion lessons. I learned to read music during that time and my accordion lessons turned out to be a good basis for the music ministry which began much later in my life. I reluctantly endured my accordion lessons until I started high school and then, with a sigh of relief, gladly put the accordion away to focus on school work.

After high school, I strayed from the Church and I spent a long time wandering in the sin-filled wilderness. During that time in the wilderness, a thread of faith remained because I married a Catholic woman within the Catholic Church. There were two children born of this union who were enrolled in a Catholic elementary school. Regardless, our faith was weak and after several years, divorce and annulment proceedings were started. I was angry with the whole situation and uncooperative in the annulment process (a sign of my real distance from Jesus and His Church.) Ultimately, an annulment of our marriage was given.

In an attempt to escape and distance myself from the mess in which I was involved, I agreed to go to Raleigh on a temporary work assignment. Two years later at the age of thirty-three, I met and married a young woman raised in the Mormon faith. She was a non-practicing Mormon and eventually she severed all ties to the Mormon Church. After a time of little contact with my faith, especially on Sunday mornings, I began to feel a certain emptiness and a need to return to the Church. I followed this urge and started going back to Mass regularly. Interestingly, my wife, Randi, felt compelled to attend Mass with me even though I put no pressure on her to do so. Our regular attendance at Mass soon moved me to follow another calling.

I hesitantly stepped up and asked to join the choir and was subsequently placed in the back row as a tenor. Our choir was not all that great. I remember one time when we had held an ecumenical service and invited a local evangelical church to join us. Our small choir sang our songs first. Then the visiting choir came in, regal in red robes. They had impeccable musical ability and performed with energy and uplifting spirit which just blew us out of the water. I understood that this was not a musical contest, but I could not help feeling like I wanted to crawl under my seat and hide. What a humbling experience for a new choir member!

In 1984, Randi entered RCIA and was baptized Catholic in 1985. She served as the first and only female minister of hospitality (usher) in our church at the time. After these first few years of moving forward in our faith, several years

of stagnation followed. Something was still missing. Over the years we transferred to two other churches in Raleigh, but, again, there was no forward movement in our faith.

Finally, in search of more, I suggested we try St. Luke. During the first Mass we attended, I knew I was home. I felt it in my soul. I was now sixty years old. Randi and I started attending Bible study classes at St. Luke. "The Timeline of the Bible - The Story of Salvation" was offered. It was a twenty-four-week class, but this was the rocket booster for my faith. After this class many things started falling into place, especially at Mass. The Old Testament readings began to make sense when read alongside the New Testament readings. The entire Mass took on a new dimension of meaning. I was hungry to know more. I was beginning "to know Him". Another eye-opening class was "The History of the Church." It built upon "The Story of Salvation" and now I really began to value the beauty of my faith. In fact, I began to love being a Catholic. My prayers were now being enhanced by this new knowledge of the Catholic Church. Follow-up classes over the next fifteen years increased my appreciation of being a Catholic as I gained knowledge and understanding of my faith. During this time, I also attended many Ignatian retreats at the Avila Retreat Center. The silence and beautiful bucolic environment helped to enliven my spirituality.

I had an amazing spiritual experience while at Avila. I was struggling with my relationship with my daughter at the time. It was very heavy on my heart. While walking at Avila and examining my conscience and praying, a very clear message came to me. I had to swallow my pride and call my daughter and sincerely apologize to her and promise not to interfere in her life again. I phoned her immediately. She was stunned with relief and happiness. Our relationship has not faltered since. To me, this was a miracle.

A couple of years ago, Randi and I went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This amazing trip led to a quantum leap in my understanding of all the Holy Scriptures by bringing them alive in my mind as I read and heard

them. When I pray the Rosary, it is enriched by images of the holy sites we visited.

TO LOVE HIM...

Through all this, I was learning to pray more meaningfully as I learned more and more about Jesus, the Bible and the Gospels. As I prayed, though, I stumbled over the “loving Jesus” notion. After all, He was a man and God, but a man nevertheless. There was no doubt in my mind about how much I appreciated Jesus, the Word of God, and His effect on my life, but for some reason saying “Jesus, I love you” was difficult for me because I felt little emotional love. After some time struggling with this, the concept of “deciding to love” came to mind from something I had read. I remembered that love is a decision rather than an emotion. I decided to add “Jesus, I love you, Jesus, I adore you” to all my prayers. Over time, this changed everything. Just saying these words, allowed me to hear them and ponder the meaning of what I was saying. I had finally decided “to love Him.”

TO SERVE HIM...

Serving God is the result of knowing and loving Him. He calls you and you answer the call. For me, among others, the music ministry had called my name. I had been singing in various church choirs for about thirty years before I came to St. Luke where I continued my ministry. Prior to joining the St. Luke choir, however, my personal choir participation was not tightly connected to my spirituality. It was more like a good thing to do that I enjoyed and performed willingly. My thirty years of singing had been just a training period where I learned to connect the reading of music scores (my accordion lessons) with voice training and working to harmonize my tenor part with the sopranos, altos, and basses. My understanding of the history of the Catholic Church, salvation history, the Holy Liturgy and the Gospels began to meld into my music ministry. The beauty and meaning of the ancient chants, the Psalms, the Old and New Testaments put to music, along with the large collections of more recent and spiritually inspiring works, lifted my ministry to new levels. Furthermore, I have the opportunity to focus and meditate on the words and meaning of Holy Scripture as I repetitively learn new music

with my fellow musicians as we strive to lead and inspire our parishioners in worship to raise the spiritual environment Heavenward.

I'm at the point in my life where once I had to will myself to love the Lord; now I feel what I hadn't felt before. Although I love Jesus and I love being Catholic, I know that I'm still a sinner. I'm far from being perfect, as is our earthly objective, and I know I need to be reconciled to Christ. I am being constantly perfected through the Sacrament of Confession and fortified by the Eucharist "to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in heaven."

Walt is an enthusiastic member of our choir and a friend to many in our parish. A quote attributed to Saint Augustine is "Those who sing pray twice." At our parish, we believe that those who sing pray thrice! We say this humorously but with a point: Singing at Mass is a beautiful and powerful way to praise God.

New Spaces In My Heart

It was almost 8 years ago when I decided to get orthodontic braces. I was 48 years old. I had no idea that this seemingly insignificant decision would launch me into ministry.

I remember sitting in the orthodontist chair, listening to my doctor telling me about the faith-based school (Hope Academy) his wife had started. He began to tell me stories about elementary and middle school-aged kids who had no running water in their homes, lived in cars, bounced from house to house to hotel, had empty refrigerators, kids who lived in places where gunshots were typical background noise. Many had no dads, had family members in prison and cemeteries and experienced violence in their homes on a regular basis. Many had no clean clothes and they didn't know where their next meal would come from. Hope Academy was borne out of love for these children and their families, in an attempt to break the cycle of poverty and teach them the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The stories cut to my heart. I lived (and still do) in a privileged world, where I don't think twice about running water or flicking a switch to turn on the gas fireplace. My refrigerator has never been empty. My heart ached for these kids. I wept for them even though I had not met a single one of them. I prayed for them every day. I felt that I was being called to respond to their needs, so I did the easiest and quickest thing possible – I logged onto the Hope Academy website and made a financial contribution. But there was still a longing in my heart to do something on a personal level. I wanted to meet these kids, I wanted to hug them, to shower them with love, and pray with them face to face. I wrestled with these desires for several months, as my human intellect told me that I needed to offer something more tangible and significant.

On May 8, 2013, I went to Hope Academy for the first time. On the one-and-a-half-hour drive to Greensboro, I made a mental list of my professional skills, wondering how they might fit in with the needs of Hope Academy. My ideation of what I could 'offer' was soon shattered when the Head of School and Executive Director asked me, "What do you think the Lord has brought you here to do? What are your spiritual gifts?" I shared what had been bottled up in my heart for months. I told them that I had the gift of healing and how I desired to pray with these kids. I watched their mouths drop as they told me they knew exactly why the Lord had brought me to Hope Academy. These kids were in dire need of emotional healing and desperately needed to experience the love of Jesus. As I listened to their response, I experienced a moment of personal revelation. I finally understood that the Lord had placed these desires on my heart to prompt me into action – to bring me to Hope Academy. I had resisted these desires for months, thinking that I needed to do something big and more important to make a meaningful impact.

For the next 4 school years, I drove to Hope Academy every Friday. It was the highlight of my week. I fell in love with the students and staff. I hugged them, gave them my undivided attention, listened to their stories, and prayed with them. I read the Bible with them, chaperoned them in ISS (in-school suspension), helped with their science experiments, and taught some of

them how to use a pair of scissors. I learned that poverty has a face and a name. I learned that hardness of heart can set in at a very early age. I learned that the inability to express emotion is a self-protective response to emotional pain and trauma. I also learned first-hand from these kids that just waking up in the morning is a gift.

As I reflect on my time at Hope Academy, I can see how the Lord was working in me. He had given me a piece of His heart. I recall making the prayer “Lord, break my heart for what breaks Yours” as part of my daily prayer. And He had done just that using the kids from Hope Academy. My capacity to love increased. He created new spaces in my heart that did not previously exist and filled them with compassion and mercy. He opened my eyes to see His face in each one of these young, underprivileged children. And perhaps the most important thing I learned was that I had the wrong idea of what it meant to serve the Lord. I thought I had to do something that was ‘grandiose and significant’, but He was simply asking me to acknowledge and love each person He placed before me.

People can heal in different ways, and people can experience healing in different ways. I have experienced Betty’s gift of healing through her humility, joy, open and affirming spirit, and her great love for Jesus. To whom is the Lord calling you to be an agent of healing? Your love, compassion, kindness, and friendship in Christ to someone can bring healing.

Christ Will Multiply Our Daily Efforts

Every Mass, we say a prayer called the Confiteor that always challenges and humbles me. *I confess to almighty God...*

Although the entire prayer is humbling, the phrase that gives me deepest contrition is acknowledging sin “...in what I have failed to do.” This phrase reinforces Christ’s teaching that failure to consider others - those in front of me and those 8,000 miles away - in the myriad daily and routine decisions is

a sin. It reminds me that following Christ is much more than attending Mass, praying, tithing and volunteering as it fits into my schedule. I can check those things off my list, and “feel” that I am following Christ, but my discipleship is lukewarm because it offers no real self-examination of what I have failed to do.

I have sinned each time that I fail to consider others in my decisions. Because I have attended Mass at least once each week since I was a child, I have heard the gospel many, many times. I know the answer to “Who is our neighbor?” Our neighbor includes those who live far away from us, those who are a different religion than us, those who want to cross our border, and those who are in a different political party.

The COVID-19 pandemic shows me that failure to take an action can have a significant impact on our neighbors. If I ignore social distancing, an innocent bystander may be harmed by carelessness because I could be an asymptomatic carrier of the COVID-19 virus.

Being a disciple means that I consider others in routine decisions, such as what to eat for dinner. If I don’t waste food and eat less meat because I care about the impact of my environmental footprint, even though my personal impact is small, it matters. Like the widow’s mite, Christ sees the intention of that sacrifice, not the fact that my contribution is very small. Christ will multiply it, not me.

Being a disciple means that my purchasing decisions must consider whether throw-away plastic packaging will end up clogging the ocean or the fumes from burning that plastic will fill the lungs of poor Indonesian children. It also requires me to consider the importance of buying the more expensive Fairtrade certified chocolate.

Conversely, I fail to be a disciple when I don’t learn about others’ problems, or acknowledge that problems exist, but don’t take some action to help. The help can be as small as writing to a member of Congress about issues that are important to the poor but do not affect me personally. It is easy for me to find other good things to occupy my time but failing to make time in my

schedule to advocate for a person less fortunate is a sin of omission. Like the neglect of the Levite and the priest who passed by a man who had been attacked by robbers as he traveled from Jerusalem to Jericho, it is a failure to act.

Discipleship is a series of sacrifices for the good of others. It is expending the energy to see a man walking from Jerusalem to Jericho and taking action. We ask blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray to the Lord our God that our lives will be filled with thousands of routine decisions made considering others.

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)

Rosemary has been blessed with great intelligence, a caring heart, and a passion for justice. I find her to be one of the most inspirational parishioners I have ever known. Do you advocate for those less fortunate than you?

Ministry Of Hospitality: Servant Spirit

I serve as a Minister of Hospitality, commonly referred to as an usher, for my parish. "Usher" does not fully capture the servant spirit of this ministry. As the name implies, we act as the welcoming committee for visitors and parishioners coming to attend Mass. Our Ministers of Hospitality provide the first impression for visitors. It's important that we welcome everyone with open arms filled with the spirit of Christ. Catholic visitors to our parish should feel as welcome and at home as if they were in their home parish.

We greet everyone entering the church with a smile, the international sign of welcome. You never know what someone may be going through when coming to Mass. A smile and a greeting can help brighten someone's day and lift their spirit. This simple gesture may help put the person in a better frame of mind and set the tone for Mass worship. We are reminded that as

we greet each person, we're seeing Jesus in them as a fellow child of God. The Gospel of Mark describes the importance of service: "As our Lord served us, we must serve one another and be joyous in our service." (Mark 9:35.) Stewardship helps us demonstrate gratitude for all that God has given us. Serving in this ministry has helped me to more fully understand and follow Christ's teaching to love one another by treating others with kindness. It has deepened and reinforced my Catholic faith. You learn to serve with humility, just as Jesus did.

Small acts of kindness shown to others during Mass often are acknowledged and appreciated. This could be helping seat someone requiring assistance. Other times, it's ensuring that Communion is brought to a person in the pew. So many folks are genuinely grateful for our assistance. Oftentimes, the parishioner and family make a point of coming up to us after Mass to thank us again for 'taking care of them.'

The spirit of hospitality is not lost on our younger parishioners as they graciously volunteer to help us greet everyone and hold open doors. It's very satisfying to see Christ's servant spirit alive in our youth. We like to refer to them as ministers of hospitality in-training and we encourage their participation. Many of these youngsters now serve along with me as fellow Ministers of Hospitality. Several families serve together as Minister of Hospitality teams at our parish. It's a wonderful way to practice family stewardship.

My wife, Kim, and I serve together in this capacity. We agree that serving in this ministry has helped strengthen our Catholic faith and has given us a greater appreciation for what it means to serve as disciples of Jesus. It is an opportunity to become His instruments.

Serving as a Minister of Hospitality for a funeral Mass is a solemn, moving experience. It is important to comfort grieving relatives and friends of the deceased as best we can. Also, we do try to accommodate relatives' requests, such as displaying photos. The finality of a funeral is a difficult thing for someone to experience. Some people that we greet engage us in

conversation. I think it helps them cope with the circumstances. There are times when a relative speaks so eloquently and paints such a vivid picture of the deceased, that I feel a connection to them, even if I had never met them. It is a gratifying experience.

When my wife and I attended Mass at our parish the very first time five years ago, we were immediately struck by the welcoming spirit of so many parishioners. We recognized that this was a different environment, one that embraced visitors and made them feel part of their Catholic community. We had found our new Catholic home. Soon we noticed that the servant spirit of Jesus was alive and well in the parish. It drew us in closer.

I've gotten to know so many wonderful people in our parish by serving as a Minister of Hospitality. It has been a truly rewarding experience that continues to deepen my bond in the parish community, my Catholic faith, and my love for Jesus.

Celebrating Holy Mass and serving fellow parishioners carries over into my attitude and actions in the community. Stewardship and self-giving increasingly become a way of life.

Each Mass I serve as a Minister of Hospitality helps me make a small deposit in my journey to grow closer to Jesus and enrich my life. I am a sinner and there is much work yet to be done. This is a life-long spiritual journey...

Bill is a humble disciple of Jesus. He and Kim, his wife, serve joyfully, compassionately, and with excellence. They also inspire our other Ministers of Hospitality to serve in the same way. What Bill talks about in terms of the servant spirit of Jesus must be lived, in some way, by everyone who seeks to follow Christ. The meaning of our lives is discovered through serving others in the name of Jesus. When was the last time that you prayed the Lord would reveal to you to what service He is calling you?

Reflection and Discussion Questions for Service and Discipleship:

1. How do you practice service in your everyday life with family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and people you encounter?
2. If you participate in a ministerial form of service, how has that ministry affected your life?

DISCIPLESHIP AND DEVOTION TO OUR BLESSED MOTHER

The role our Blessed Mother plays in my life is setting an example of selflessness, sacrifice and trust in Jesus her son. - Nancy Beale

When my husband was doing poorly, I turned to the Blessed Mother, asking for her intercession. God soon gave us peace. - Cathy Rinn

The Mother of God is the testament of what love, faith and devotion truly are. - Susan La Perriere

I ask for Our Blessed Mother's intercession for all those in nursing homes during this Pandemic, who are unable to receive visitors, that they may feel the gentle love of Christ during their isolation. - Mary Beth Carpenter

I love our Blessed Mother because she is the greatest honor God has given to the human race - choosing her as His Mother. - Connie and Jorge Esguerra

Mother Mary Must Be Amazing

It all began with my mother Marlene. She is the mother of eight. Each summer the ten of us would pack into a nine-seater station wagon with my

dad's homemade luggage carrier on top. We would ride from New Jersey to St Louis, Missouri to visit family. Needless to say, the trip required much patience, with which my mother was abundantly blessed. Inevitably there would be some issue, be it car trouble, low gas, luggage flying off the roof of the car or yes, sometimes even the flashing lights of a police car. My mother would always instruct us to pray three Hail Marys. My mother's love of the Lord and her practice of requesting Our Lady's intercession has been a true inspiration to me.

If my mother, whom I look up to and would love to be like, looks up to Our Lady then wow, Mother Mary must be amazing! So, I tried to get to know her better.

As I grew up, I fell away from weekly attendance at Mass. I stupidly thought staying in bed and sleeping late was a better idea. I did however still say my prayers and when in trouble I recited three Hail Marys. I just knew that she would always be there for me.

I, like so many others asked the question "Why not pray directly to Jesus?" I do pray to Jesus, but I feel a closeness to Our Lady. I feel Jesus appointed her as our mother for a reason. If she could say yes, perhaps she can help me to say yes. If God gave us Jesus through Mary, can't I reach Jesus through her?

What better prayer partner can one have? Mary is a woman to emulate, to venerate. What a difficult job she had, and she did it with love, grace and dignity. I ask for her intercession daily, I lean on her as a mother and as a grandmother.

When my sister Carol was dying, I gave her a small figurine of Our Lady. Carol held it in her hand and looked at it in a way I can't explain. It was like she understood, she knew that Our Lady was right there with her.

With Our Mother's intercession I know that my prayers are being heard and I am blessed with so much love. So, my suggestion is to look to her, venerate her, ask for her intercession. And don't forget... three Hail Marys.

Ann has a deep devotion to our Blessed Mother that bears much fruit in her life. When you meet Ann, you instantly see that she is a humble person filled with the joy of living in Christ. If you want to grow in your relationship with Jesus, get to know Mary. Venerate her as Queen of Heaven and Earth. Seek her powerful intercession. She will always bring you to her Divine Son.

Reflection and Discussion Questions for Devotion to Our Blessed Mother:

1. What are some of the ways you venerate the Mother of God?
2. Has Mary interceded for you in a powerful way on a particular occasion?

DISCIPLESHIP AND JOY

Joy is a word and feeling that descends to us from the Lord and makes everything around us become wonderful and good. - Joe Lanzilli

I finally understand that instead of searching for happiness, I simply need to open my eyes and ears to God's wonders happening around me every day. The newly hatched birds chirping outside the laundry room; my husband actually finding what he wanted in the refrigerator; my five-year-old kneeling in front of our Mary statue praying...these are the things that fill me with joy!
- Beth Murphy

I make coffee for my wife every morning as a way of serving her, showing her my love and God's love, and bringing her joy. - Don Davis

When I run, I find joy in God's creation - the trees, the lake, the ducks, and the sunshine. - Dave Olechovsky

I find joy in every day God gives me, in my family and in many of the everyday things that I do. - Carol Rispoli

I feel Joy especially in these uncertain times when I see all of God's creations when I go outside. The blue sky, the blooming trees, the blossoming flowers. This beauty tells me God is always with us. - Gloria and Rich Hansen

My joy comes from my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! I believe in His true presence in the Holy Eucharist and I am filled with joy each time I receive Him at Mass. I know God loves me as if I am the only person on earth, and I know He feels that way about each and every person. This is true love which brings true joy. - Liz Caldwell

Joy Through Discipleship: For Me It Is A Process

As a child I had a lot of fear. I was afraid of the dark, afraid of being separated from my parents, afraid of being alone. Truth be told I probably was never in an unsafe situation, and yet, there was underlying fear, anxiety and uncertainty throughout my childhood that carried into my adult life.

People who know me today would probably be surprised to learn this about me. I think family, friends, and colleagues would characterize me as a glass half full type of person. I am often cited for my infectious laugh, my warm smile, and my ability to see things in a positive light. Of course, there are times when these descriptors are not true of me, but more often than not they are accurate.

So, how did a frightened child find the gift of peace as an adult?

I didn't. It wasn't me who found peace. It was God who granted it.

God poured and continues to pour His grace into my heart. Sometimes slowly and sometimes swiftly He heals the wounded parts of my heart and draws me more closely to Him. It has been a comforting, unsettling, eye-opening, exhilarating, and ultimately peace-filled, joyous journey so far. Let me back up a bit and explain.

Faith was a part of our family and my life, but I did not understand or truly appreciate how the seeds of faith planted within me by my parents, grandparents, teachers, and catechists would grow. I did not know how my grandmothers' devotion to Mary or my grandfather's connection to St. Jude would shape my own path to discipleship. I did not know how my mother's commitment to daily Mass would influence my own choices to receive the Eucharist more frequently.

I did not know that overcoming fear and finding peace would only be possible through the literal grace of God.

I always attended Mass and although there were times, I did not feel like going, I always left glad that I did. I did not realize that through my attendance at Mass and reception of the Eucharist, I allowed my heart to receive God's grace. It was a small crack, but God was at work.

When I was 16 my grandmother Martha was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was very close to her and I was terrified by the diagnosis. Feeling helpless, afraid, and uncertain where to turn I prayed the Hail Mary. It was the first time that I really remember turning to our Blessed Mother for help and comfort. It was the start of a very important relationship. From that point on when I was paralyzed by fear or overcome with anxiety, I turned to Mary.

At this stage of my journey of discipleship I knew God the Father and Mary the Mother of Jesus. I prayed the Our Father, of course the Hail Mary and maybe a few other prayers along the way. I started hearing about the importance of a relationship with Jesus, but I did not have one. Honestly, I wasn't sure that I wanted one. I was often confused by His words in Scripture.

His responses to His disciples and even His Mother seemed curt, calling her, “Woman,” instead of mother. I simply did not understand who He really was or why I should be in relationship with Him.

With a graciousness that I did not deserve or expect, Jesus directed me to His mother. He encouraged me to spend more time with her, telling me that she would bring me to Him. I never saw that coming, but I always found such comfort with Mary that I thought it couldn’t be bad to spend more time with her. So, I did. I started talking with her and asking for her intercession regularly until it became daily. Eventually, many years later I would consecrate myself to her. What a gift.

And so, Mary began to draw me slowly closer to Jesus in a way that only a mother can. She knew my weaknesses and my uncertainty, and she was patient, very, very patient. Around this time Mary started leading me to the Sacrament of Reconciliation—a sacrament that I did not recall seeking since my childhood. At first it was scary, drawing up those childhood anxieties, but in the sacrament I found an overwhelming peace. Many years later when my youngest son received the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the first time he left saying, “Wow! I feel like a superhero.” How true. The gift of the sacrament does make you feel just that way. It was through the Sacrament of Reconciliation that I started to believe, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” I still did not really know Jesus, but my heart was opening more and more to Him.

Parallel to the messages about the importance of a relationship with Jesus was the encouragement to invite Jesus into my own brokenness. I had no idea what that meant. I did not feel broken. Sure, I understood that Eve had screwed things up in the garden and because of her actions I was born with original sin. But I was baptized as an infant, attended Mass almost every Sunday and I was even going to reconciliation a couple of times per year. I wasn’t broken. I am the glass half full person with the infectious laugh. Sure, I get anxious sometimes, but broken? Nah.

Enter the Holy Spirit.

I was on my first-ever spiritual retreat. After twenty-four hours of meaningful discussion, prayer, Mass, and reconciliation, our retreat leader, a Franciscan Friar began talking about being baptized in the Spirit. I was totally confused. He described it as an opportunity to invite the Holy Spirit and His transforming grace into your life. Wait a minute. I was baptized. I was confirmed. I had received the Holy Spirit (whatever that means—I really wasn't sure.) I attended Mass and adult faith formation. Why had I never heard of Baptism in the Spirit? In fact, why did I know virtually nothing about the Holy Spirit? I was angry. Why didn't someone ever tell me? It did not dawn on me that maybe I wasn't listening or maybe I wasn't ready.

Later that evening in the midst of an amazing Eucharistic Adoration experience I received an experience of the Spirit.

It changed my life.

I started to see examples of the Holy Spirit working in many ways in my life. I am certain that the Holy Spirit had been at work all along, but I did not recognize it. I did not even know to look for it, but He was everywhere. It was like buying a new car and then seeing the same model at every red light.

The realization that God in the form of the Holy Spirit was truly my Advocate, my guide, and my counselor had a life-changing impact on me. I wanted everyone to know about Him—my children, my parents, my friends. My recognition of the Holy Spirit in my life brought me peace and joy. It created within me a longing for time in prayer and for reading the Scriptures daily.

Now, with the Holy Spirit rekindled within me and united to my growing relationship with Mary, I started to see Jesus. Mary and the Holy Spirit led me to Jesus—to the beautiful light of His face. Instead of seeing Him as unapproachable or arrogant, I saw Him waiting for me in a beautiful glow inviting me to sit with Him or offering me a hug. I began a relationship with Jesus.

I started to receive the Eucharist with joy. I cannot approach His Body and Blood without smiling. It is an amazing gift to receive Him—to be strengthened with His Grace through the Eucharist and to be truly united to Him and the Communion of Saints. I wish I had appreciated this gift earlier in my life.

I have been blessed to hear Him call my name. Often when I talk with Him, Mary and the Holy Spirit are nearby. I see them. He definitely speaks to me through the Scriptures, offering me guidance. I know that Mary and the Holy Spirit continue to work for me and with me, helping me to unite my heart to His. It is very much still a process, but in the process there is joy. SO much joy!

Not every day is a perfect day. Jesus gives me crosses to carry—some that I recognize—but I know I am not carrying any burden alone. Jesus blesses me through His Mother—through her intercessions for me and through her listening ear anytime I call upon her. He blesses me through the Holy Spirit, reminding me of Him when I see a cardinal flying through my yard or when one of my sons accomplishes a goal, or my mother shares an example of the Holy Spirit moving in her life. All of this brings me peace and joy. I know that Jesus is drawing me closer to Him.

Jesus has brought me great joy in the ways that He has worked in my husband's life and in our marriage. He has reordered things that we did not know needed adjustment. Working through some of these things was difficult in the moment but have led to unimaginable outcomes. Our marriage is stronger. Our covenant with Him is stronger. We are united in a trust in God's plan for our lives and our family. In this trust comes great peace and joy. Again, not every day or every moment is perfect, but overall there is a peace that comes only from God.

I wish I had known Mary, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus earlier in my life. I want my sons to know them and I think they do - much more than I did at their ages, but I have come to realize that the journey of discipleship is very, very personal. I don't mean that it should be pursued in isolation because I absolutely could not have come to know Jesus without the power of

community, but I know that our hearts can only be ready to receive Him when they are ready. The timetable is unique for each of us.

I know that God is still at work in my heart and that there is much work to be done. Honestly, I can't wait to see what He has planned for the rest of the journey. Where there was once fear and anxiety over the dark, the unknown, and the future, there is now peace. And, when there are moments of uncertainty, I know that I can call on God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - and our beautiful Mother Mary to help.

I am busy by nature - a doer who doesn't sit still well. I never imagined that I had the time to read Scripture and pray for an hour or so each day. Now, I feel unsettled if a day passes and that is not possible. I am trying every day to open more and more of my wounded heart to the Lord. I still don't know all the ways that I am broken, but I know that I am. I know that He has healed some of my wounds and looks to penetrate more deeply into my heart. Jesus has definitely pursued me, and now, He is asking me to pursue Him. I am trying.

I depend more and more on His grace, and I am asking Him to align my will to His; giving Him and His Mother permission to do just that. My ultimate desire—joyful obedience to His will. I don't know what that really looks like, but I am excited by the possibility. I never imagined that my story would unfold the way it has so far. There is so much I could not see in the moment. So much I did not and still do not understand.

I do know now that God is who He says He is. Unlike man, God always does what He says He will do. In that is peace and joy, and I am grateful beyond measure.

Shannon is one of the most joyful people I have ever known. I think she gets it from her mothers. I am speaking both of her mother, Karen, and her heavenly mother, Mary. The power of the Holy Spirit has led Shannon to a

personal relationship with Christ that is grounded in the sacramental life of the Church. Do you strive to be always joyfully obedient to the will of God?

Reflection and Discussion Questions for Joy:

1. When do you experience the most joy?
2. Have you experienced a relationship with Christ so deep that even when circumstances are rough you can still be joyful?

DISCIPLESHIP AND HUMILITY

When I get on Facebook and start bragging or boasting about my boys' accomplishments or the vacation I just came back from I'm reminded of Jesus's humility and know I need to be more humble. - Jean Olofson

My life has been humbled by the acts of others who live and believe in the teachings of our Savior Jesus Christ. - Victor Mandrillo

Saint Therese of Lisieux is a model of humility for me. Bye Janet Probst

Practicing humility, patience, and forgiveness helps me grow in my faith -
Melanie Ziemniak

One can be humble and exude confidence at the same time by having the courage to make difficult decisions with a sense of shared purpose rather than self-interest. - Mary Reilly

Humbled By The Depths Of His Love For Me

St. Peter gives me so much hope in my own journey with Jesus. Time and time again, Peter made bold statements of faith, both in word and deed, that were unrivaled by the other Apostles. Yet, with his next breath he earned another rebuke from our Lord. I want to begin with Peter's last conversation with Jesus in the Gospel of John (John 21:15-22). Jesus tenderly offers Peter a second chance around a charcoal fire, a chance to be free of the guilt of his denial on Good Friday and to affirm his devotion to Jesus. Peter tells the Lord, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you," and Jesus, after shedding light on Peter's death, simply says, "Follow me" (John 21:17, 19).

Here we see Peter encouraged in his journey with our Lord. His denial did not define him. It did not separate him from the unconditional love of God. All Peter must do, as Jesus' disciple, is follow Him. It sounds simple, straightforward, a major step for Peter on his way of discipleship. Yet what does Peter do next? He turns around. He looks away from Jesus to John and asks the Lord about him. Now comes Jesus' rebuke: "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" (John 21:22) Peter, after declaring his love for Jesus, takes his eyes off Christ to compare his journey with John's. He takes one step forward, two steps back.

I cannot fault Peter because I know that I would respond just like him. In fact, I do respond just like him almost every day of my life. How many times have I looked at my elder brother and younger sister and wondered why our journeys are so different? As they both begin families and thrive in their chosen careers, I find myself asking God why my life is so different. Why am I unfailingly single? Why do I struggle to find meaning in my chosen career as a chemical engineer? Why can I not have what they have? This is where I have learned to think about humility in a new way. Several authors stress two points about humility. One, it does not mean putting yourself down or not loving yourself. Two, it calls us to take our focus off ourselves most of the time.

That line of questioning - of comparing my life to my siblings, to my dearest friends, even to people I have never wanted to be like - leads me all the way down the slippery slope from thinking poorly of myself to self-pity, to a fantasy world of false humility and mulling over the life I deserve from God but which He refuses to give me. In this fantasy, my prayer becomes more “give me” and “I desire,” and I refuse to keep walking behind Jesus. Since He isn’t answering my prayers, He obviously does not love me.

The hope lies in the second point about humility and in Jesus’ rebuke. Humility is focusing on yourself less often, not making yourself your routine focus. Instead of putting myself down and losing sight of my identity through comparison, the thief of all joy, I simply need to not focus on myself so much. Easier said than done, as all I do is think about myself. Here is where Jesus’ rebuke is so key. “So what,” He says, “about anyone else?” He is not asking me to follow them, to be them. All Jesus wants is for me to follow Him. To keep my eyes fixed on Him.

With my gaze focused on Jesus, I see in Jesus’ eyes, who is Love Himself, my identity as His beloved with whom He is well pleased. I see how Jesus walks, how He remains unfazed by the changing seasons and the obstacles in the road, how He treats those we encounter. With my eyes on Jesus, my mind follows suit, pondering His life and not my own. For now, these experiences are brief because I am not yet disciplined enough to walk all day with Him. I still complain about the seasons and obstacles, and I continue to get too caught up by those with whom I cross paths. St. Peter’s life, though, brings me so much hope because he was once as distracted as I am, yet look at how deeply he loved the Lord at his death.

As I said, though, all I do is think about myself. I am my own focus. More specifically, I am in a mental war over my identity. I swing from pride, believing I am God’s gift to mankind, to self-pity, believing that I am a fraud whom no one can or will ever love. I spend most of my time living as though the latter is true. My perception of who I am is broken. How I see myself does not line up with how God sees me. I do not trust God my Father when He tells me that I am precious in His eyes, and honored, and He loves me.

(Isaiah 43:4) I do not see how God can love this broken woman, so this is where my struggle with humility truly lies.

How can I think of myself less when I cannot help but think so little of myself? How can I see myself with God's eyes so that I no longer need to see myself at all? Confidence. Such an unlikely solution, yet as I reflect on my life, I know it to be true. How does this confidence help me to not think so little of myself? Instead of encouraging myself by boasting of my strengths, accomplishments, or status, thereby feeding pride, I am learning to place my confidence in my God and who my God says that I am. He calls me His beloved, beautiful, chosen, precious, ransomed. God lovingly says, "I will allure [you], and bring [you] into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to [you].... I will espouse you forever; I will espouse you in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will espouse you in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord." (Hosea 2:14,19-20) What language He uses when He caresses my heart! How can I reject such a fervent promise?

In 2017, I had the privilege of making a pilgrimage to Fatima for the hundredth anniversary of the apparitions of our Lady. I did not have a strong devotion to our Lady, and I still struggle to honor her well to this day. Yet, in the instant of gazing upon the beautiful basilica adorned with a crown, she gifted me an insight of who I truly am to her and Jesus. Jesus is King and reigns in heaven with her, Mary, the Queen Mother. By virtue of my baptism, I am a beloved daughter of the King. As daughter of the King and heir to the joys of heaven, I first must serve my King and my Queen with my life. Whatever the King and Queen ask of me, I must obey. But "I must obey" truly becomes "it is my joy to obey" when I remember who my King and Queen are. My King is Jesus who is God and Love. Mary is Jesus' mother, the spouse of the Holy Spirit. Any decision they make for me or desire for me is made in love, for God's glory and my good. The timing of their requests is also made in love, for God's glory and my good.

With this revelation, my future is clear but not in the sense that everything is laid out before me. I have the confidence that my future is in the hands of the one who loves me unconditionally and unceasingly. He loves me as His daughter, His heiress, His bride, and everything He has is mine, just as

everything I have is His. My Lord Jesus desires only good for me. All of this, my identity, is mine; I have only to say yes and receive.

The way to humility is clear if I dare to claim my identity in Christ. Yet, I hesitate. The yes catches on my lips as I struggle to accept both the responsibility and gifts of identity. I wrestle with Jesus as we journey, blinded by the enemy's lies that I am unworthy, unlovable, not worth dying for. The enemy tells me that my future only holds more pain and suffering, that Jesus will demand that I give until I have nothing left, that I will miss out on the joys my siblings, friends, and others experience on a daily basis. As much as I detest these lies and wish to be rid of them once and for all, I have begun to thank God for them. Every single lie whispered to me is an opportunity to grow in humility, an opportunity to see myself as God sees me, and an opportunity to see God as He truly is. By reading Scripture more intentionally, I learn my Shepherd's voice, and I can respond to the lies with His truth. I do not have to be strong. I do not have to have all the right answers. I only have to cling to my confidence in Him and who He says I am.

I cannot emphasize enough that these reflections are more "do as I say, not as I do." I struggle every minute with responding as I know I ought, with trusting my God who is all good. It is with gratitude that I am able to reflect on my life and recognize moments when Jesus teaches me to be humble as He is humble. These moments show me a glimpse of Jesus' heart for me, and I would like to share a few of them with you.

We are all created with a deep desire to love and be loved. It is who we are as children, made in the image and likeness of a Father who is love. During the night, when I am vulnerable, the enemy brings to mind people and situations where my deep desire for love has been rejected. I think of friends in the towns I have left behind whom I love very dearly but never speak to. Friends who have stopped reaching out and have slowly stopped responding. The separation cut deeply as I make a dedicated effort to visit my friends several times a year, no matter where they are. Since they do not reciprocate my effort, they do not love me as much as I love them, whispers the enemy in my head.

Then bursts forth the moment of clarity, of humility. Are not these relationships just a shadow of my relationship with Jesus? Does He not pour forth unending streams of love upon me, only to have the door of my heart slammed in His face? Or how many times do I treat Jesus as if He is far away and not part of my everyday life? How humbling to realize these slights from others are simply my pride bruising as I seek love away from its source. How humbling to understand that my flow of love sometimes runs backwards: receiving love from others in order to love God instead of receiving love from God in order to love others.

A more tangible example is the November when my brother and his wife asked me to be their firstborn son's godmother. They spoke of the connection they saw between their child and me, the second time I held him. The first time I held that precious life in my hands was almost the end; I was very uncomfortable holding him, and with my parents and his parents watching, I thought I would never be allowed to again. I returned the next day, and the two hours I held that baby moved my heart and soul in a way so meaningful that I cannot put it into words. My joy at them recognizing that moment became tears. Those tears continued as I thought of the other gift from God. To be godparents, Catholics must be free to receive the Eucharist. The Saturday before they called me was the first time I had embraced the Sacrament of Reconciliation since July and the Sacrament of Holy Communion since August. I had been stubbornly living in a state of mortal sin and had just returned home as the prodigal daughter. Had I not reconciled with God, I would not have been free to joyfully accept being my nephew's godmother. How humbling to see God's timing is perfect. How humbling to be newly freed to embrace the role Jesus placed before me.

The most eye-opening time is right now, as I write this during the Coronavirus Pandemic. This time is truly serious, and I do not wish to make light of the situation or negate the suffering throughout the world; Yet, this has been a fruitful season in my relationship with the Lord. The virus came at a time when I was desperately praying for rest, and the Lord has provided rest in abundance. How humbling to witness such a profound rest throughout the

world. Ten years ago, when I was deciding my college major, I wanted to be a videographer and create TV commercials. The Lord since turned my bitterness, from being talked out of that, to joy as I am editing videos for our parish and discovering that I am grateful to have not made this my career. How humbling to recognize that God actually answered that prayer by telling me no all those years ago.

I moved in with my parents the Saturday after public Masses were prohibited. We have had a difficult relationship since I left for college, and I saw this as a golden opportunity to work on that. The Lord continues to open my eyes to lies I have believed for nine years and to how twisted my identity has become. How humbling to be shown that so many of my wounds resulted from my brokenness and inability to receive the love they offered me. How humbling to relearn my identity as their beloved daughter and to relearn how our different ways of giving and receiving love are expressed.

I am humbled by God's faithfulness and how His actions affirm what He promises me. I am humbled by the depths of His love, not for the world, but for me. My God and King loves me, a sinful, broken woman, with an everlasting love. Looking at His presence in my life, I see that He truly knows me, longs for me, and longs to give me the desires of my heart, just like He promises me in Scripture. When Jesus thinks of me, He thinks of me lovingly. I pray that instead of thinking less of myself, I, too, may think of myself with His love. As my confidence in God and in who He says I am grows, I pray that like St. Peter my eyes spend less time comparing myself to those around me and become resolutely focused on Jesus. When Jesus invites, "Follow me," I pray that I may think only of Him as I joyfully follow wherever he desires to lead me.

Rebecca is a spiritually courageous young woman who loves Jesus and who clearly seeks to live a holy life. She has a definite focus on discipleship. Rebecca has come to know the Lord deeply through the sacraments and prayer. She shares the love of God in a fun way with her friends and with the teenagers to whom she ministers. Are you willing to

Speak to Jesus about the aches in your heart and soul so you can receive His healing grace?

Reflection and Discussion Questions for Humility:

1. How do you actively strive to grow in humility?
2. When was the last time you intensely prayed for humility?

PART III: A DISCIPLE PRACTICES ALL TEN ASPECTS OF DISCIPLESHIP

In Part II, many different people discussed some aspect of discipleship in the context of their personal journeys. A critical question remains: would it be possible for one person to incorporate all these aspects of discipleship in their journey? Absolutely! In Part III, one disciple of Jesus explores all ten aspects of discipleship in her life.

Striving To Stay Close To Christ In All Things

Faith

Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has

been conceived in her.” When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. (Matthew 1:20,24.)

Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your Word” (Luke 1:38.)

I chose these Scripture quotes because I believe they represent perfect examples of faith. My faith life has been greatly influenced by both Joseph and Mary.

I was taught early on in school and at home about the importance of faith. Faith in God, faith in family, faith when the unexpected happens, faith in God’s plan for me and for those I love, faith through prayer, and faith in the Holy Trinity. Numerous people throughout my life have helped to deepen my faith: my parents, my grandparents, my godmother, some of my teachers and professors, certain friends and family members and some religious brothers, sisters and priests.

My parents sacrificed so my three brothers and I could attend Catholic elementary, middle, high school and even college. They recognized and appreciated the importance of a solid Catholic education. At home, my parents embodied the “domestic church” by praying together, encouraging sacrament participation, going to Mass as a family, having conversations rooted in faith, and welcoming religious into our home for meals. I am so grateful for my parents and all those individuals who have participated in my faith formation and for those who continue to shape my faith today.

For me, it is difficult to think about faith without also thinking about trust. In my mind, in order to trust, you have to have faith and in order to be faithful, you must trust. Understanding and accepting this connection has been an on-going part of my faith journey. I have tried to be a faithful disciple and follower of Christ for the majority of my life. I have never experienced a time when I did not have my faith; I have always felt grounded in it. Actually, my faith helps me remain grounded. Sure, there have been times when I was more faithful and trusting than other times. Certainly, there have been instances when it was very difficult for me to completely trust, times when I experienced true doubt. Even in the midst of those struggles and times of

doubt, I have held tightly to my faith. Some of these times of doubt have become more prevalent in the last few years due to family health issues and major life changes. But the truth is, the Lord has used these times of struggle and real doubt to strengthen my faith; it has been humbling for me to experience and recognize this fact.

During this past year, I have been working especially hard on trying to incorporate these two aspects into my life: surrender and acceptance. I have come to realize, if I *surrender* to God's Will, then my faith will be strengthened and if I *accept* God's Will, then my trust will be deepened.

My faith in God and trust in His plan have allowed me to strive to be an obedient disciple and an example for others. I pray I can continue to walk this path with Our Lord and pray my faith continues to deepen along the way.

Hope

For you are my hope, O Lord; my trust, O God from my youth. On you I depend from birth; from my mother's womb you are my strength; constant has been my hope in you. Psalm 71: 5-6

Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come. Psalm 23: 5

I called upon your name, O Lord, from the bottom of the pit; you heard me call, "Let not your ear be deaf to my cry for help!" You came to my aid when I called to you; you said, "Have no fear!" Lamentations 3: 55-57

Let us hold unswervingly to our profession which gives us hope, for He who made the promise deserves our trust. Hebrews 10: 23

The favors of the Lord are not exhausted, His mercies are not spent; they are renewed each morning, so great is His faithfulness. My portion is the Lord, says my soul; therefore, will I hope in Him. Lamentations 3: 22-24

Hope has definitely been a crucial part of my discipleship journey. I believe remaining a hopeful person will carry me through the rest of my life. In order

for this to happen, I must continue to strengthen my relationship with the Lord. Good thing I consider myself a life-long learner and even better, I am certainly coachable.

Our God is a God of hope. I can recite Bible verses to reinforce this concept and I can share numerous examples from my own life to substantiate this fact. I have clung fiercely to the fact that God represents hope, mercy, love, kindness, goodness, and forgiveness. He has attended closely to me all the days of my life, not just during times of desperation. I find the fact that God is always with me beyond comforting and this provides hope for me and my loved ones. I know He will give me the grace I need to deal with any situation and I am certain my prayer life has contributed to the trust I place in God, and the hope I experience as a result. I want to be a person of hope; I continue to need the Lord's help to attain this goal.

In some of the reflections I have written on the other aspects of discipleship, I have shared a number of personal experiences when I have relied heavily on the Lord. In all these experiences, there has been a common thread, and that is hope. I continue to place my trust in the Lord, and He, in turn, gives me hope. Hope that my husband Bill will continue to get stronger every day and regain feeling and sensation on the left side of his body, hope that my grown children will understand and embrace the importance of receiving the Eucharist, hope that my loved ones who have died are now with Him in heaven, hope that our twin grandchildren will be brought into this world safely, hope that my aging Mom will remain healthy and strong, hope that I will figure out what God is calling me to do right now, hope that Bill and I will grow stronger in our marriage given the new direction our lives have taken, hope that my cousin who is struggling with an aggressive form of breast cancer will experience healing and comfort, and hope that God continues to be patient with me as I stumble along the road of life.

I am writing this reflection on Divine Mercy Sunday. I believe today is a perfect day to write a reflection about hope. I know God's mercy is endless for me. If I trust in His divine mercy, hope will continue to be my reward. I pray the Chaplet often and I find it comforting to believe I can obtain

everything by praying this beautiful prayer. I hope to receive great mercy at the hour of my death, whenever that may be. I pray for my loved ones to receive the same reward. I cling to the hope that I and the ones I love will eventually find our way to heaven; Jesus is my hope.

Also, during these unprecedented times of the COVID-19 virus, I have found I have needed to spend more time in prayer with Our Lord. These conversations and prayers have provided some peace during a scary and uncertain time. By placing my trust in the Lord, I have hope. Lord, have mercy on us and the whole world. Jesus, I place my hope and trust in you.

Love

There are in the end three things that last: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

I am blessed; I have always felt loved. I cannot remember a time in my life when I did not experience love or feel loved. As far back as I can remember, I have known that God loves me. There have been times throughout my life when I have needed to be reassured of His love, and these reassurances have presented themselves in a myriad of ways, most times through other people.

A quick and simple example: when I was a freshman in college about four hours from home, I experienced profound homesickness when I returned to school after Christmas break. I felt alone, sad and confused. My mother would send me uplifting notes from home, call me often and my brother, who was a senior at the same college, would spend time with me. Okay, maybe my mother had to persuade him to let me, his freshman sister, hang out with him and his friends. Through these small acts of love, I was able to get myself back on track and I never experienced homesickness again. This is just one example from about forty years ago; I could give countless examples of how God has reassured me of His love. Actually, when I stop to think about it, I could write for a very long time about God's love for me. Instead, I will choose

certain people in my life who love me and share how they demonstrate God's love. As I stated earlier, God continues to reassure me of His love through the people He places in my life.

My parents were the perfect example of love. My loving dad died on his eighty-seventh birthday two and a half years ago and my beautiful mom is still alive. They taught me love - how to love God, love others and myself. They modeled love by the way they lived their lives. My brothers and I have always said my parents made marriage look easy. They were an example of a Christ-centered marriage for our family. I have always felt loved unconditionally by my parents. What a wonderful gift they have given me! My dad was, and my mom still is, a constant reminder of God's love for me.

My husband, Bill, has loved me for almost thirty-eight years. He always says he knew he loved me from the first time we met. Could this have been from his beer consumption at the pool party where we met? Maybe, but after almost thirty-two years of marriage and having experienced much joy and also crisis during those years - our love has endured. I feel loved by Bill in the way he looks at me, touches me, consoles me and accepts me. Bill is a daily reminder of God's love for me.

My children, Kathleen and Billy, have provided an opportunity for me to feel loved and to demonstrate love. From the moment they were each born, I have been acutely aware of how much they depended upon me - not just for physical needs but for emotional and spiritual growth. Almost thirty years ago when Kathleen was born, I knew for sure I was meant to be a mom. Probably a good thing I realized this, because there was no turning back. God has given me the opportunity to share His love with both my children throughout their lives and for me to feel loved by them. Kathleen and Billy are both constant reminders of God's love for me.

Strangers - God has shown His love for me by the people He places in my life at the exact time it is most needed. My husband had a massive hemorrhagic stroke two and a half years ago while we were temporarily living with my parents at their home in New York. At the same time, my father was dying. He had been diagnosed with an inoperable glioblastoma brain tumor

about ten days prior to Bill's stroke and my dad's health was declining rapidly. My life was turned upside down in an instant. At Albany Medical Center, where Bill was taken to undergo a craniotomy to stop the bleeding, I was feeling alone and distraught. The two men I loved most on this earth were both facing death at the same time.

The first day at the hospital, two strangers rescued me. God placed these people in my path to remind me of His love and reassure me of His presence. At a time when I felt completely overwhelmed with worry and fear, a stranger in the form of a nurse rescued me. She worked in the research side for the neurosurgeon who operated on Bill. Linda was not only a knowledgeable neuro-trained nurse, but she was a kind person and a calming force. She remained with our family the entire time Bill was at Albany Medical Center. We still keep in touch today and we try to get together with Linda when we are in New York; I will be forever grateful to her. This reassurance, in the form of a stranger, was clearly a sign of God's love for me.

The other person God sent to me the day Bill was undergoing brain surgery, was a priest. Yes, as Bill was being rushed into surgery, I frantically asked if there was a priest at the hospital who could administer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Father went out of his way to come find me in the waiting area. When he told me he was not able to anoint Bill prior to surgery, I completely fell apart. He reassured me he would anoint Bill as soon as he was in recovery in the Neuro-ICU. Father sat with me, prayed with me, comforted me (I was an emotional wreck), held my hands, tried to calm my fears (not an easy task) and stayed with me for quite awhile. God sent this holy man to me when I needed to feel loved and comforted. Both of these strangers I met the first day at the hospital were a sign of God's love for me.

Sometimes, I get completely overwhelmed trying to process how much God loves me. At times, it is somewhat difficult to fully appreciate and comprehend the magnitude of His love. This is a fact I know; I am loved by God and He continually places people in my life to demonstrate His love for me. I am comforted by this fact. Feeling loved by God, validated by God and accepted by God has allowed me to be His disciple.

My hope is that I have also been God's love to others; I pray they have experienced the love of Christ through me.

Scripture

For whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Romans 15:4)

My first recollection of reading Scripture, spending time understanding the written words, and reflecting on what a passage meant for my life, occurred in seventh or eighth grade. My religion teacher at Saint Joseph Catholic School in Oradell, New Jersey took the time to start a small evening Bible group with about six of my female friends and classmates. Sister Virginelle (yes, that was her name) held these sessions at the convent. I remember thinking how cool it was to be inside the convent with my friends. I still have and use the Bible I purchased (okay, my mom purchased it) for these gatherings. There we were, gathered together in the living room of the convent wearing normal clothes, no uniforms to be found, eating snacks and feeling special to be part of this small group.

Sister Virginelle helped me feel less intimidated by this huge book. I still keep the same paper I filled out over forty years ago, an alphabetical list of the books of the Bible with the corresponding page location and whether the book is found in the Old Testament or New Testament. Not only did Sister Virginelle introduce us to how the Bible was set up but she also chose specific readings which we could relate to based upon what we were experiencing as middle school girls. I am grateful for her guidance, knowledge, and love of Scripture which she shared with my friends and me. Thinking about this experience now, I have come to realize what a gift these small gatherings were at a time in my life when I was open to learning about more God and Jesus through the Bible. Sister Virginelle was ahead of her time setting up these sessions and the Holy Spirit made it possible for me to participate in these wonderful gatherings.

My Bible still contains some of the notes I took during those sessions so many years ago. I find it comforting to read from this very Bible. Truthfully though, I do not pick up my Bible as often as I should. Throughout my life, I have always listened to Scripture at Mass, but it wasn't until about three years ago that I started to read the daily readings from "Magnificat" on a more consistent basis. During these past three years, I have learned to read and reflect on the daily readings and it has become an important and special time of day for me. For many years, when my dad was alive, he read everyday from his "Magnificat." My mom has now made reading Scripture part of her daily routine. They both have provided a wonderful example of the importance of reading Scripture and how this practice can help to deepen your relationship with the Lord.

There was a time, maybe about seven or eight years ago, when I wanted to read each of the four gospels from start to finish. I began with the gospel of Matthew and wrote notes, questions, and comments as I read along. Honestly, I was not able to get very far; life got in the way. My hope is to pick up this project again soon. I know I will benefit from spending time with Jesus through the four gospels.

When I now read daily readings from "Magnificat," I make a point of paying close attention to the words and trying to find a word or phrase to latch on to during this prayer time. My goal is to figure out what God is trying to say to me at that given moment. My daughter gave me a journal type book this past Christmas and it is set up for five years and allows for a daily comment. After reading the daily Scripture, I usually write a short prayer or thought and I know I will benefit from looking back on these prayers during the next five years and for years to come.

I can attest firsthand, reading Scripture has brought me closer to Our Lord. I never thought those small meetings held at the convent almost forty-five years ago would have such an impact on my spiritual life. My hope is I will continue to read Scripture daily so I can persist in learning how to be the best disciple the Lord has called me to be.

Sacraments

Suddenly from up in the sky there came a noise like a strong, driving wind which was heard all through the house where they were seated. Tongues as of fire appeared, which parted and came to rest on each of them. All were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to express themselves in foreign tongues and make bold proclamation as the Spirit prompted them. (Acts 2:2-4.)

When all the people were baptized, and Jesus was at prayer after likewise being baptized, the skies opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in visible form like a dove. A voice from heaven was heard to say: "You are my beloved Son. On you my favor rests." (Luke 3:21-22.)

When I was in elementary school, the definition I had to memorize for the word sacrament was: an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace. I am sure I did not understand what this definition meant, but I was pretty good at memorizing when I was in elementary school. I am unclear as to when I began to expand my understanding of this definition but I am almost certain by the time I received the Sacrament of Confirmation in sixth grade, I had a clearer picture of what the word sacrament meant. I knew receiving the sacraments were important. I clearly understood the importance of both going to Mass often to receive Communion and staying close to Christ by partaking of penance throughout the year. I guess, growing up in a family where you never missed Mass, and attending a Catholic school, both helped to reinforce the importance of these two early sacraments: Holy Communion and penance. But, for this reflection, I would like to focus on the Sacrament of Confirmation. Throughout my life, I have relied on the Holy Spirit to guide me, protect me, heal me, and help me. The Holy Spirit continually strengthens me and shows me how to live like a good person, a good disciple. Even as I am writing this reflection, I am praying to the Holy Spirit to inspire and fill me with the words I want to share.

I can distinctly remember preparing for the Sacrament of Confirmation. I had more memorizing to do: the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit, and the symbols associated with the Holy Spirit: fire, water,

wind and a dove. I am pretty sure I was most excited about choosing a Confirmation name. I choose, Kathleen, in honor of my paternal grandmother. My godmother, my Aunt Bobbie, was my sponsor. In those days, it was recommended you have your godparent as your sponsor. Whether it was recommended or not, hands down I still would have chosen my Aunt Bobbie. She was married to my mom's brother and they had seven children together. They lived about fifteen minutes away from our house in New Jersey and I spent a lot of time with my cousins. I had three brothers so I enjoyed being around my girl cousins; five out of the seven kids were girls. Their house was always crazy busy and I loved hanging out with my aunt and all my cousins; I have wonderful memories of our times together. We still laugh about some of the fun stuff we did during our visits to each other's houses. My Aunt Bobbie was always the driving force in their home. She was a fantastic role model for me during my elementary, middle and high school years.

See, the Holy Spirit had a hand in all of this. My aunt was one of my mom's friends at Academy of Holy Angels, a Catholic high school in New Jersey. My uncle met my aunt through my mom and the Holy Spirit certainly helped foster a friendship, romantic relationship, marriage, seven children, lots of grandchildren and now great grandchildren. My uncle died about five years ago but my aunt continues to provide a strong foundation for her amazing family. The Holy Spirit continues to work in and through her.

So, reflecting back to sixth grade when I received the beautiful Sacrament of Confirmation, I was surrounded and supported by people who were outward signs of Christ's love for me: my loving parents, my wonderful godmother, my brothers, my grandparents, and my cousins. The grace I received during this important sacrament has sustained me throughout my life. Many times, especially when I am having difficulty sleeping, I pray one of the prayers to the Holy Spirit: *Come, Holy Spirit, come, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created and you shall renew the face of the earth.*

May the Holy Spirit continue to guide me, inspire me and protect me as I strive to be the disciple and witness the Lord has called me to be.

Prayer

Whenever you pray, go to your room, close your door, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees what no man sees, will repay you. In your prayer do not rattle on like the pagans. They think they will win a hearing by the sheer multiplication of words. Do not imitate them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. (Matthew 6:6-8.)

I have always been comforted by the fact that God knows what I need before I even ask Him. He knows what is in my heart. He understands my gratitude, worries, fears, conflicts, needs, concerns for others, and my desires. But yet, the Lord wants me to spend time with Him, in prayer. He wants me to open my heart to Him. Prayer gives me a chance to grow closer to Him and prayer provides a chance for God to respond to me. I just need to listen. Yes, I've come to realize, listening is an important component to prayer. Listening, waiting for a response, has not always been easy for me to embrace. I am a talker, I guess, even a babbler at times. I also lack a bit of patience when it comes to prayer. So, I guess sometimes, I need to just shut up (not a phrase we were allowed to use in our home growing up) and listen intently and patiently for His response.

My prayer life has taken on many different forms over the years. I have always made time for prayer; this is a fact. The type of prayer, length of prayer time, and quality of prayer has varied during my fifty-nine years. When I think about my life, I can recollect that when I was a child, probably through my high school years, my prayer life was centered around rote prayers. Sure, there were times, especially in late middle and high school, I had teachers who taught and modeled more in-depth prayer practices. At home, we always said grace before meals and there were times when we prayed as a family for specific needs. I remember when I was a senior in high school that my English teacher required us to keep a daily journal. The journal was not a prayer journal specifically but when I read through it (yes, I still have it) I do see I used it as a prayer journal at times. When I was in college, I did attend weekly Mass and daily Masses during Lent. I had wonderful professors, both lay professionals and Dominican priests, who fostered the importance of prayer. Honestly, though, I think my prayer life was a bit limited to my own

needs and for those who were in my own little “world” during my college years.

Recently, I found the journals/notebooks my husband, Bill, and I kept during the Engagement Encounter Weekend we attended a few months before we were married, almost thirty-three years ago. I took the time to read through some of the entries and I can see praying was important to me during that time. I guess I knew I needed the Lord to help us as we prepared to participate in one of the most important sacraments, the Sacrament of Marriage. Somehow, I understood the importance of relying on Him through prayer. Fast forward through about twenty years... Bill and I always participated in Mass with our children, took the time to pray before meals and prayed as a family for specific people/needs. Then, when I taught at Saint Raphael Catholic School, I was able to include prayer throughout the day and I know for sure I grew closer to Our Lord during those eight years in the classroom.

During the last ten or so years of my life, I have tried to make more time for quality prayer. I have become a better listener over the past ten years and I know for certain, the Lord not only hears my prayers, but answers them. My prayer life has been strengthened through my participation in different ministries: The Legion of Mary, Women of Grace, Hospital Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion and by going to Adoration.

When Bill had his stroke a few years ago, I was blown away by the number of people praying for him, for me and our family. I saw firsthand the power of prayer. My cousin sent me a text when Bill was undergoing craniotomy surgery and she said, “I hope you are feeling the blanket of love and prayers surrounding Albany Medical Center. That’s how I picture it.” She was right; we did feel all the prayers and love being sent our way. Those prayers from afar carried our family through a very difficult and challenging time; they were truly a blanket of comfort. Every evening, before we would leave Bill in the ICU, I would initiate prayer over him. My children and I would hold hands and we would pray for Bill, our family and for those at Albany Medical Center who didn’t have anyone to pray for them. For the next sixty days while Bill was in two different rehabilitation facilities I would pray with him and for him

throughout the day. During Bill's hospital and rehab stays, I would send out an evening or weekly update to our friends and family, and I always ended the update with a short prayer. Yes, prayer was now a lifeline for me.

For the past two years, I started the practice of beginning my day with prayer. I get up early, make a cup of coffee, and sit on our living room couch and pray. My prayer time includes: reading daily Scripture and reflections, reciting specific written prayers, conversing with Our Lord about what's in my heart, checking different Catholic links I receive, and trying to still myself to listen for His response. I now cherish this hour of my day.

I have come to appreciate the link between prayer and being a disciple of Christ. I believe a successful prayer life has a "snowball effect." As I spend time with God in prayer, while I try to commit myself to His will and listen for His voice, He strengthens me and makes me more like Him. I am then able to be a better disciple because I have placed my trust in Him through prayer.

May I continue to grow in my prayer life and may God continue to shower me with His blessings. Amen.

Service

As for you, be steady and self-possessed; put up with hardship, perform your work as an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Timothy 4: 5)

When I consider what the word service primarily means to me, what first comes to mind is reaching out to help others. Serving God, by helping those who are in need. I realize service can come in many forms and can mean different things to people, but I'm going to concentrate on a few ways in my own life when I have served those who were in need. During these times of service, I have encountered Christ.

A few years back, I volunteered weekly at a refugee community in Raleigh, North Carolina. Each week, I would arrive at the community center where children would gather after school for what was called "homework help." Yes,

I did assist children with their homework and helped some with reading or learning sound associations with letters, but what I realized the first day I arrived was the Holy Spirit definitely had a hand in leading me to this community.

I had stopped teaching full-time at Saint Raphael Catholic School about a year earlier and at that time I was working one-on-one with children at a private office three days a week. Most of my private clients had diagnosed learning disabilities, while others were not yet diagnosed but struggling to keep up academically. I believe the Lord had prepared me through working with my own clients so I could better assist the children from the refugee community. Each week, the refugee children brought a smile to my face as soon as they entered the building. I never knew which child or children I would be helping on a particular day, but what I did witness was a willingness to learn. For most all the children, English was a second language and living in a new country and community, going to school where their primary language was not spoken, learning new procedures at school, trying to keep up with their academics, forming new friendships, and attempting to understand life in America was certainly a challenge for all of them. But here's the thing, I knew I was there to help these children, but yet they were teaching me. They taught me acceptance, perseverance, humility, patience, and openness. The Lord sent me to serve those children and they, even though a number of them were not of the Christian faith, helped me to see Christ in each one of them.

Another service I believe the Lord directly called me to participate in was being a hospital Eucharistic minister. The first day I shadowed the person who coordinated this program for my parish, I have to say, I was not convinced the ministry was for me. Honestly, I have never been a fan of hospitals. Even though I have an undergraduate degree in Health Service Administration, when I worked in the hospital industry, I always held positions in the finance arena. I enjoy working with numbers; my gift was not working in patient care. My anxiety would always ramp up when I walked through the doors of a hospital. This discomfort in the hospital setting was there even before these past few years when I have been in different hospitals with both my husband and father who faced major health crises. So, that first day when

I shadowed our parish coordinator, I thought, God, is this what you are really asking me to do? Are you nudging me to overcome my fear and anxiety of hospitals so I can bring You to these patients? Do you want me to push through my comfort zone in order to help others? How can I do this ministry with confidence and calmness when I'm feeling far from confident and calm?

I have always found it amazing how the Lord doesn't give up on me. He is relentless in His pursuit. God kept sending me clear signs; He wanted me to be part of this important ministry. So, for a couple of years while I participated in this ministry, I would put my fears, discomfort, and anxiety aside. God provided the grace I needed to bring the Eucharist to those who were ill. I made it a routine to attend Mass at Saint Luke in the morning before I headed to the hospital. Once I was at the hospital, I would meet my fellow hospital Eucharistic minister and we would venture to the chapel where we would begin our ministry with a beautiful prayer. The first time I read this prayer aloud in the hospital chapel, I was struck by these words: "God of compassion, fill me with the power of your Word and the love of your Holy Spirit as I visit your suffering sons and daughters. Help me so I may worthily and gracefully share your sacred presence with those who await your coming to them."

Yes, it was clear, the Lord had personally called me to be a member of this beautiful ministry. Little did I know at the time, my father, husband and our family would receive the Eucharist from hospital and home Eucharistic ministers during times of illness. I continue to be in awe with how the Lord works in my life.

Service, helping those who are in need, is a fundamental principle of being a good disciple. May I continue to find Christ in those I help during my lifetime and may the people I serve, see Christ in me.

Devotion to our Blessed Mother

A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars. (Revelation 12:1.)

The Blessed Mother has always held an important place in my heart and in my life. My paternal grandmother, who I loved dearly, passed on her love of the Queen of Saints to me. She had a special devotion to the Blessed Mother and I witnessed this devotion when I would visit her, especially during our summer vacations.

As a child, I had two statues of Our Lady in my bedroom and I also remember celebrating the Marian feasts by attending Mass with my family. I know one of the statues was a gift from my godmother and I think the other was a gift from my parents. I still have one of these statues, Our Lady holding an infant Jesus, on my bedside table. I find it extremely comforting to have this statue near me. I cannot say for sure that I have always put this statue in a place of prominence in our home, but when I think about it, I probably have had it near me for the last twenty years. I guess, for the years in between, the statue was safely tucked away in a box; now, I will always keep her close to me because I have come to realize I need the Blessed Mother beside me at all times.

My grandmother gave me a set of beautiful pewter rosary beads when I was around eleven or twelve years old. These beads were given to her as a gift when she retired from teaching. My grandmother, who early on taught in a one room school house, retired from a public school system in a rural town in upstate New York. I find it refreshing that a public school system gave her rosary beads as a retirement gift because they knew my grandmother had a special devotion to and relationship with the Blessed Mother. These beads are probably one of the most important gifts I have ever received.

I have recited the rosary countless times on these beads. These very beads have been with me during times of great joy and profound sadness. I carried these beads in my hand the day Bill and I were married. I held these beads when our children were born, baptized, and when they received the other sacraments. I held them in my hands when our daughter was married on the Feast of the Assumption at Sacred Heart Cathedral. There was a time when I experienced great anxiety traveling by plane, so I would grip these beads during flight. I held tightly to these beads when Bill was undergoing brain surgery and clasped them when I sat by his bedside in the ICU. The night

my father died, I had these beads in my hand when I arrived to find my mother reciting the Chaplet of the Divine Mercy over his body. These beads were in my pocket during my father's wake and I held firmly to them during his funeral and burial. When I think about all the times I have held these beads, I am kind of amazed they are still in one piece! I guess you can say these special rosary beads have been my security blanket.

One small gift from my grandmother turned into one large gift for me. She gave me an understanding of the importance of saying the rosary for my own needs and for those who need my prayers and her intercession. I have come to rely on Our Lady to intervene for me; she brings my needs and my petitions to her Son. How beautiful and comforting is this fact! I've come to appreciate how much the Blessed Mother loves me and wants me to have a deeper relationship with her Son, Jesus.

I pray to the Blessed Mother on a daily basis. I may not say the rosary daily, but I do turn to her every day; sometimes, using a formal Marian prayer or prayers but many times, just using my own words. Recently, I purchased a beautiful statue of Our Lady for our daughter who is expecting twins. I was looking for a statue Kathleen could keep near her bed and I found this beautiful statue of the Blessed Mother when she was pregnant with Our Lord. I had never seen this particular statue of Mary before and I was so excited to give this gift to our daughter. Maybe this small gift from me will turn into an important one for her, too.

O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary, pray for me O Holy Mother of God that I may be worthy of the promises of Christ. May the Queen of Heaven continue to guide me, comfort me, and help me on my journey of discipleship and may I always share Her love with those I meet.

Joy

This is the day the Lord has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it. (Psalms 117:24.)

So may God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that through the power of the Holy Spirit you may have hope in abundance (Romans 15:13.)

Children are one of the first things that comes to mind when I contemplate the word “joy.” Another thing I think about related to joy is a sign we had in our family room when I was growing up. It said, “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.” I am pretty sure I did not truly understand what this quote meant when I was little or even when I was a young adult, for that matter. But, as an adult now, I certainly understand and appreciate this beautiful quote. So, I guess when I put the two together - children and the presence of God – they make a wonderful definition for the word “joy!”

I have been blessed to experience true joy during my life. When I was little, I wanted to be a teacher. I even had a classroom set up in my basement. My father was a high school math and computer teacher; when they were buying new items for his school, he brought home desks and a chalkboard for me. I loved my classroom! I would even decorate it for the various religious and secular holidays during the year. I spent hours teaching my pretend students math, social studies, religion, and all the other subjects. I do not remember exactly when I stopped using my classroom but I think it was around fifth grade.

Fast forward to when I was graduating from high school and trying to determine what major to choose in college. I wanted to pursue a degree in Elementary Education but my parents wanted me to choose another path. They shared their reservations about the teaching field and reminded me that I could always get a degree in education later in life. So, I decided to combine two of my interests at the time, math and science, by majoring in Health Service Administration as an undergraduate at Providence College (Go Friars!) and later pursued an MBA in finance. I worked in the hospital finance administration field for a number of years and yes, I did find this field challenging and financially rewarding. Did I experience joy in my professional career during these years? I guess so, but when we started to move around for Bill’s career and after my second child, I found I did not miss my job. I know for a fact, I experienced true joy being home and spending time with

our children so I chose this path for a few years; I have never regretted the decision to be at home with my children.

This is turning into a long story, but the bottom line is I knew I still had a strong desire to be a teacher and I did not give up on my dream. There were many people along the way who helped me realize this dream, but the Lord had the dominant hand in my education journey. I went back to school and pursued a degree and license in Elementary Education. When I started teaching third grade full time at Saint Raphael Catholic School, I knew I had found my true profession. My students brought me so much joy! Teaching was the most personally rewarding job I had ever held and no boss in the professional world had ever said the things children would say or write to me. I have saved so many of the letters, cards and notes my students wrote to me during my eight years as a third grade teacher at Saint Raphael Catholic School.

Jesus was certainly present in my students and every day I walked into my classroom I felt at peace. Joy came in lots of different forms: the sound of their voices as we prayed together, the sound of their laughter during lessons, witnessing acts of kindness between students, hearing from parents how happy their children were in my classroom, seeing empathy displayed between students, watching them grow closer to God, praying the rosary together, going to Adoration as a class, partaking in the Eucharistic celebration together, reading their journal entries, witnessing their academic achievements, and knowing for sure God was present in our classroom. My students were a true source of joy for me.

As a disciple of Christ, we are called to be joyful. I believe I have been able to share joy because I have experienced and witnessed true joy during my life. My deep faith has allowed me to be a joyful person. I pray I will continue to be an instrument of joy to people, especially to the children, the Lord places in my life.

Humility

You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God. (*Micah 6:8.*)

One of my favorite hymns to sing at church is “We are Called.” I love all the words of this song, but I particularly love the refrain:

“We are called to act with justice.

We are called to love tenderly.

We are called to serve one another, to walk humbly with God.”

The bottom line is the Lord has called **me** to walk humbly with Him. Jesus, the ultimate model of a humble servant, has asked **me** to follow Him by embracing humility. Sounds kind of easy, walk humbly with God, but unfortunately, this is not an easy task. I pray often for humility: *please Lord, make me humble like you. Help me to see this person who is causing me pain and frustration as you want me to see them. Help me to accept people’s limitations, including my own, with grace and patience. Help me to share your mercy with others. Help me to pray for those who have hurt me. Help me to love and value those around me, even when they have different values or beliefs. Help me to not judge others. Again, Lord, make me humble like you.*

There have been many people who have modeled humility for me: Jesus, Mary, Joseph, many of the saints, and my own father. Again, Jesus was the ultimate model of how to be a humble servant. I am always reminded of His humility when I participate in the Stations of the Cross. I have come to appreciate the true definition of humility when I contemplate and meditate on the Stations. Jesus listened to His Father and humbly followed God throughout all His earthly humiliations and sufferings. I think about Joseph and his act of humility; he stayed with Mary and didn’t question God. Mary demonstrated humility throughout her life; I think about when she referred to herself as the “handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38.) Mary truly embraced the

virtue of humility, and as the first and most perfect disciple of Christ, modeled this important virtue at all times.

My own father was a humble servant. He had his priorities in order: love God, love your spouse, love your children, love your grandchildren, love your extended family and love your neighbor. My dad lived a quiet life but he had a “loud” impact. My mom loved him with her whole heart, his children loved, respected and learned from him, his grandchildren adored him and they were taught valuable life lessons observing him, his students loved his teaching style, his compassionate and caring attitude, and his neighbors looked to him for advice and learned about humility by watching how he lived his life.

I have come to believe, in order to embrace humility, I need to turn away from what I may want or think I need, and turn my attention to God. Focus on Him, His love, His mercy, His kindness and then the outcome for me may be I will become a better disciple, His instrument of grace to others. Then, hopefully, I can walk humbly with God.

Ann has so generously shared with us her discipleship journey as it relates to all ten aspects of discipleship. Clearly, she is a special person. What drives everything is Ann’s personal love relationship with Jesus.

CONCLUSION

I hope you have been inspired by the real-life stories of how Catholics today are living discipleship. Perhaps you were moved by their great faith, their love, their joy, and, most importantly, their total commitment to following Jesus Christ. It is not enough, though, to admire how someone else is living discipleship.

The question I have for you is whether you will commit, or renew and enhance your commitment, to be a disciple of Jesus. Use the inspiration you gained from the stories of the disciples in this book to motivate yourself to

grow in discipleship. It isn't something that just happens. Discipleship needs to be worked on. More than that, discipleship needs to be our top priority in life, our focus in everything we do.

How, you may ask, do you grow in discipleship? Let this book be a guide for you. What from the reflection on faith can help you grow as a disciple filled with faith? The same with hope and love. Scripture will play an important role in your discipleship journey.

As a Catholic disciple of Jesus, you will be rooted in the sacraments. At Mass, we receive the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist. This is absolutely indispensable. Frequent confessions are very important for any disciple.

Prayer, including adoration and the rosary, are critical for living a life of discipleship. Pray everyday, without exception. Make it a priority. We must spend time with Jesus to really know Him and to love Him.

Disciples do not spend all of their time at church. We are called to go forth from the celebration of the Eucharist (most especially) and from our rosaries, adoration, and other times of prayer into our communities. Our mission is to bring Christ to the world - in our homes, schools, places of work, and everywhere we go. We are called to be servants to the world. You have to discern your service. If you are a mother of seven kids, just serving your children may fill all your time. If you are retired, maybe there is a soup kitchen at which you could volunteer. Whoever you are, whatever your circumstances, God is calling you to serve His people. There are almost endless opportunities. Take it to prayer. A disciple serves in the name of Jesus.

Cultivating a deeper devotion to our Blessed Mother will help you grow in discipleship. Mary always points us to Jesus. Why are disciples joyful? Because they aren't concerned only with happiness levels that fluctuate as the circumstances around us change. You get a flat tire, and you are unhappy. Your spouse changes the tire for you and takes you out to your favorite restaurant, and you are happy. No, all of that is real, but it

doesn't define a disciples' life. You will have constant joy through all the ups and downs of this life because your joy is rooted in the eternal God. You are trusting the Lord, surrendering to Him, and continually singing His praises.

In my view, you will get nowhere with your discipleship journey if you do not strive to grow in humility. You will never be able to surrender to our dear Lord if you don't cultivate a spirit of humility. Put others before yourself. Put the ideas of others before your own ideas. It will not be easy. True transformation rarely is. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, though, is always there for you.

Remember the heart of discipleship: Being in a personal, loving relationship with Jesus Christ and following Him. A person could be part of a faith community, have hope, be loving, read Scripture, receive all the sacraments, say their prayers, serve others, show devotion to Mary, be joyful, and be humble ... and yet - without being in a personal, loving relationship with Jesus Christ and following Him - that person would not be a disciple. This is the one thing essential in all the other things. Get to Know Jesus in a personal relationship. Love Him. Follow Him in everything.

I also note that a person could claim to have a loving, personal relationship with Jesus but not embrace the totality of the Faith, not live with hope and love, not be rooted in Scripture or the sacraments, not be faithful to prayer, not serve, not be devoted to our Blessed Mother, and not live with joy or humility. That person, too, would not be walking the road of a disciple. True discipleship involves a total surrendering of self to Jesus, entering into a personal relationship with Him while striving for all the aspects of discipleship.

Now is the time to get serious about following Jesus. The devil knows that you love the Lord, but he tempts you to think, "I will get more serious about discipleship when I have more time or when things calm down." No, now is the time. Discipleship is definitely not just another thing on your to-do list. It is your life, your identity, and your mission from God. Discipleship is your top priority. It informs everything else you do. Discipleship is waiting for you. Blessings are about to be poured out upon you in great abundance. Jesus

Christ is ready to embrace you in His love. I pray that the Lord will richly bless you on your journey of discipleship. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

