

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Lord God, you provided food from heaven for the grumbling Israelites and you give us Jesus to nourish our souls. May our sharing of your Word today bless us and nourish our relationship with you and each other. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: (Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.) *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings speak of God's providential care for his people. The God who sent manna from heaven to feed the Israelites in the desert, also sent his Son as the "true bread from heaven to give life to the world." The only way to receive this bread is to "believe in the One he sent." In the second reading, Paul speaks to new believers about their new life in Christ.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15

The whole Israelite community grumbles against Moses and Aaron, saying that they were better off in Egypt than they are now, starving in the desert; that at least in Egypt they had something to eat. Their grumbling shows their lack of faith in God to provide for them. What's really sad is not their clamoring for food, which is understandable, but their preference for their former life of oppression in Egypt. Their complaint is a slap in the face of the God who liberated them. But despite their lack of faith in God and their desire for their old way of life, God comes to their rescue and gives them lots of bread. The people are only to gather enough food for each day so that they will learn to trust in the God who gives us "this day our daily bread". God also provided quail (meat) for an evening meal. All of this is intended to show the people God's care for them. The reading ends with a reminder that the bread and meat are from heaven.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 78

This Psalm sings of God's greatness in providing food from heaven for his pilgrim people.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 4:17, 20-24

In the ritual of baptism, those to be baptized put aside their old clothes, symbolizing their decision to put behind them their old sinful way of life. After they come forth from the waters of baptism, they clothe themselves with a new white garment symbolizing their decision to put on Christ and his values as their new way of life. It seems Paul is using this baptismal ritual to exhort his readers to put aside the way of sin and darkness and to put on the new life of Christ. The pre-baptismal way of living is futile. The post-baptismal way leads to life and truth. As a small aside: notice that this reading is one sentence.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace.

You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: John 6:24-35

This scene in today's gospel follows immediately after the multiplication of the loaves (last Sunday's gospel). Jesus had withdrawn to a quiet place with his disciples because the people wanted to make him king. But the crowd went after him. Jesus tells them that they are following him because he filled their bellies with perishable food. He then tells them to seek after food that "endures for eternal life", a reference to the Eucharist.

When the crowd asks: "What can we do to accomplish the works of God", Jesus tells them that they must believe in him. Then the people ask Jesus for a sign which shows how slow they are to believe. After all, they had witnessed Jesus heal the sick and feed thousands with a few loaves.

Then the crowds refer back to the manna which Moses gave their ancestors, Jesus says that it was *not* Moses who gave the bread, but his Father. Then Jesus says that he *is* bread from heaven. John wants his contemporaries to see Jesus as heavenly food that feeds their deepest spiritual needs.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. "Grateful people are happy people. Grumbling people are never happy." Comment. Which do you tend to be?
3. In your relationship with God, do you tend to talk to him more about your physical/material needs than about your spiritual needs?
4. In the readings today, both Moses and Jesus were trying to help the people to see the deeper significance of the feeding event. Try to name an event in your life in which you initially only saw a superficial meaning, and later, upon reflection, saw a deeper significance.

5. We often behave as if we are physical beings with a spiritual life rather than as we should behave – we are spiritual beings with a physical life. How do you need to reorient your priorities?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed/act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Dear Jesus, I so frequently fail to put my relationship with you before all my worldly wants and needs, please help me to put you first – and then all the rest will follow.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Try to replace any tendency to grumble and complain with an attitude of gratitude. Work on looking at the cup as half-full rather than half-empty. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see the deeper significance in the events and encounters of your daily life.

CONCLUDING WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION, THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we need to pray? Suggestion: Pray especially for the grace to see the deeper significance in the events and encounters of your daily life.

CLOSING PRAYER (TOGETHER)

Protection from Negative Attitudes

God, keep me from grumbling.
I know that there are few people harder
to put up with than
those who are always complaining.
Don't let me become like that.
Don't let me have discontent written
all over my face.
If I can't get my own way,
don't let me sulk about it.
If I can't get what I want, help me
to make the best of what I have.
Don't let me take offense easily,
getting into a huff,
even when no harm is intended.
Help me all day and every day
to see the best in people.
Help me, too, to live in the certainty
that you are working all things
together for good.
May I have the patience to wait for
your purposes to work out.
This I ask for your love's sake.
Amen.

William Barclay

From *Treasury of Prayers*
by Father Eamon Tobin

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Blessed are you, O God, who has given us the bread of your Word to nourish our minds, and the bread of your Eucharist to nourish our souls. Be with us as we break open your Word. May your Spirit enlighten our minds and help us not only to be hearers of your Word, but also doers of your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: (Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.) *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings and the Psalm highlight God feeding his people with the bread of life. The second reading contains two exhortations from Paul: *"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit"* and *"Be imitators of God."*

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: 1Kings 19:4-8

King Ahab and his wicked queen Jezebel have banished Elijah from his homeland. To escape their wrath, Elijah journeys out into the desert, not to pray for strength to continue his journey but to pray for death. *"This is enough, O Lord! Take my life."* Then an angel of the Lord visits the discouraged prophet— not once but twice. Strengthened by "food from heaven," Elijah gets up and walks forty days and forty nights to the mountain of Horeb (another name for Sinai) where Moses encountered God. There he will be blessed with another intimate experience of God and re-commissioned as a prophet to his people.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 34

This is a Psalm of praise and thanksgiving. The invitation to *"Taste and see that the Lord is good"* is a perfect tie-in with our first reading and Gospel.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 4:30-5:2

Paul continues to speak to the Ephesians about living their new life in Christ. He exhorts them to *"not grieve the Holy Spirit"* by engaging in *"bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling, or any kind of malice."* Then Paul points out attitudes

and behaviors that will gladden the Holy Spirit, namely, compassion, forgiveness, and following the way of love!

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear

GOSPEL: John 6:41-51

Last week's Gospel ended with Jesus saying: *"I am the Bread of Life come down from heaven."* This week's Gospel opens with the people's response to Jesus' claim. Just like their ancestors in the desert, they engage in murmuring. They reason, *"How could this man be from heaven when we know his parents?"* Commenting on this Gospel, Patricia Sanchez writes:

Ironies abound in the fourth Gospel and John 6 is no exception. As we saw in last week's Gospel, there was irony in the fact that the people were seeking Jesus but did not want to follow him. They called him Rabbi, but they were not willing to be taught by him. They clamored after bread, but they did not want to be filled or fed by him.

Perhaps the saddest irony of all is the fact of the full-bellied crowds, staring at their toothpicks, idly asking Jesus for some sign that would validate his claims (to be that Bread of Life) and then dismissing both Jesus and his teaching because they thought they knew him. Even the sign of the loaves and their fully-satisfied physical hunger wasn't sufficient to quell their murmuring. We know who he is, they reasoned, so how can he claim to have come down from heaven?!

(Used with permission, *Preaching Resources*, August 3, 2003.)

In his response, Jesus states that no one can believe in him unless *drawn* by the Father. Being drawn to Jesus by God means allowing the gift of faith within oneself to grow and to respond to the One who gave it. Those who resist coming to faith in Jesus are in effect refusing the promptings of God. Jesus stresses his unique relationship with the Father. When Jesus speaks of himself as “bread from heaven,” he is not only speaking about the Eucharist but also the bread of his teaching. Jesus is the wisdom and revelation of God in their midst. If they open their hearts to him, they will have the experience of “being taught by God.”

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Who or what can cause you to feel really down? What “food” helps you to get up in such times? Who or what are “ministering angels” in your life?
3. Name ways parishes or you can “grieve the Holy Spirit.”

4. What feeds you spiritually?

5. How truly do you believe in Christ in the Eucharist and what can you do to deepen that faith?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed/act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, my actions and words frequently belie my belief in you in the Eucharist and in me, please help me to become more like you.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Look at Paul's *NO* list (no bitterness, no malice, etc.) and his *YES* list (compassion, forgiveness, love, etc.). Try to remove one vice from his *NO* list and add a virtue to his *YES* list, remembering that every true *conversion* to Jesus and his ways must be accompanied by an *aversion* to sin and all ungodly thinking and behavior.

CONCLUDING WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION, THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom to we need to pray? Suggestion: Pray for people who suffer from depression and for Catholics who no longer come to the Eucharist.

CLOSING PRAYER (TOGETHER)

To Be Filled with God

O Divine One,
To thee I raise my whole being,
a vessel emptied of self.
O Accept, gracious God,
This my emptiness,
and so fill me with thyself,
thy light, thy love, thy life,
That these precious gifts may radiate
through me and overflow the chalice
of my heart into the hearts of all those
with whom I come in contact this day.
Revealing unto them the beauty of thy joy
and wholeness and the serenity of thy peace,
which nothing can destroy.
Amen.

From *Treasury of Prayers*
by Father Eamon Tobin

THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY B

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Loving Father, thank you for gathering us together to prepare for the special feast of Mary. In your divine plan, she who bore your Son in her womb was raised body and soul in glory to be with him in heaven. May we follow Mary's example of obedient love and one day find ourselves joining her in heaven. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: (Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.) *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: When the feast of the Assumption of Mary into heaven falls on a Sunday, it replaces the Sunday in Ordinary Time that we normally celebrate on that day. The belief about Mary's Assumption has no direct witness in Sacred Scripture, but it has a long and strong claim in Christian tradition. The doctrine of the Assumption was defined as a dogma of the church in 1950. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes Mary's Assumption as "a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians" (#966). Mary has gone to where we hope to go and intercedes for us before the throne of God. Our Church would say that it was fitting that the body of her, who was free of all sin, including original sin, should not suffer decay. Hence, "when Mary's life here on earth was finished, she was taken body and soul into heavenly glory and exalted by the Lord, as the Queen of all things so that she might be more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of Lords and conqueror of sin and death" (Pope Pius XII, 1950).

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Revelation 11:19, 12:1-6, 10

The Book of Revelation was written to bring hope and consolation to a Christian community experiencing persecution for their faith in Jesus. "Its exotic language and imagery were a deliberate attempt to hide from the uninitiated the full meaning of its teaching. The section read today starts with a vision of the Ark of the Covenant in heaven, and then shifts immediately to a woman "clothed with the sun." The ark, kept in the holy of holies of the Temple, had been lost when Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 BC. As a symbol of God's abiding presence, it is replaced here by the woman, who gives birth to a child who is acclaimed God's "Anointed One." The imagery of a dragon attempting to snatch the child at its birth is borrowed from the Greek myth of Apollo, pursued by Python but rescued by Zeus. For the Roman authorities

persecuting the Christian community, these visions are no more remarkable than their own myths of the gods. For the Christian reader, this was a coded tale of God's ultimate triumph over the demonic forces at work in the world, especially the forces of the Roman state that were persecuting the Christian community. The woman in labor may be Israel, giving birth to the Messiah, or perhaps Mary, the Messiah's physical mother, or even Holy Mother Church, giving birth to offspring that form the Body of Christ. (Foundations in the Faith, Cycle C)

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 45

The responsorial psalm, originally composed for a royal wedding, becomes in the context of today's liturgy, a song about the royal nuptials between Christ and his bride, the Church.

SECOND READING: 1Corinthians 15:20-27

In this portion of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he proclaims his faith in resurrection; something this fledgling community had difficulty accepting. He calls the Risen Lord "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." Produce gathered first in the harvest is assurance of the rich bounty yet to come. Paul applies this symbolism to Jesus. His Resurrection from the dead is assurance that "all those who belong to him" will also rise from the dead.

Paul also makes a connection between Jesus and Adam. The first man was the ancestor of all mortals in the world of time. But through Jesus, all are reborn to eternal life. At the conclusion of the reading, Paul assures the Corinthians of their ultimate victory in Christ. In the present age, the kingdom that Jesus initiated must contend with the kingdoms of the world that resist the message of the Gospel. But at the end of time, the kingdom of heaven will prevail and Jesus will hand it over to the Father.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Luke 1:39-56

Today's Gospel tells us the story of Mary's visit to her cousin, Elizabeth, and her hymn of thanksgiving to God, *The Magnificat*.

When Mary greets Elizabeth, the New Age greets the Old Age. John the Baptist, the last prophet of the Old Testament, leaps for joy at the arrival of Jesus, who will transform the world with his proclamation of the Gospel. Elizabeth speaks in "a

loud voice" because she speaks for all who have waited for this day.

Mary's hymn of thanksgiving celebrates what God does for her and what God does for the world. Mary is so graced by God that the world will always address her as "blessed." The world will be transformed by the presence of Jesus within it. The kingdoms of the world, with their self-serving interests, will ultimately yield to the kingdom of heaven. Humanity, free from the illusions of the powerful, will be able to embrace the truth of the Gospel.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Do you have a devotion to Mary? If so, what form does it take?
3. What message does Mary have for women today?
4. Do beliefs like the Assumption of Mary (not mentioned in the bible) ever cause you problems with your Protestant friends and co-workers who do not share most of our beliefs about Mary?
5. Pray *The Magnificat* out loud together then reflect what you can do to help all pregnancies be met with such joy.
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed/act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, help me to witness to the profound joy of all pregnancies - especially the unplanned, inconvenient and/or unwanted – all are your miracle and mighty work.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Pray a decade of the rosary for all who are dying at this time. Pray the second Joyful Mystery, the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, for all pregnant women. Send a donation to a local Crisis Pregnancy Center. If there is an abortion clinic in your area, pray for its closure.

CONCLUDING WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION, THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom to we need to pray? Suggestion: Pray for some of the above-mentioned intercessions.

CLOSING PRAYER (TOGETHER)

Prayer to our Blessed Mother

Mary, Mother of Jesus and
Mother of Mercy,
since Jesus from the Cross gave you to me,
I take you as my own.

And since Jesus gave me to you,
take me as your own.

Make me docile like Jesus on the Cross,
Obedient to the Father, trusting in humility
and in love.

Mary, my Mother, in imitation of the
Father who gave his Son to you,

I too give my all to you;
to you I entrust all that I am,
All that I have and all that I do.

Help me to surrender ever more
fully to the Spirit.

Lead me deeper into the
Mystery of the Cross,
and the fullness of Church.

As you formed the heart of
Jesus by the Spirit,
form my heart to be the throne of
Jesus in his glorious coming.

Amen.

From *Treasury of Prayers*
by Father Eamon Tobin

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask Him to help us to hear the Word He wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God, source of life, you have gifted us with the Bread of Life, your Son, Jesus Christ. May Lady Wisdom advance our understanding and appreciation of this wonderful gift. And may we, like Jesus, grow in our willingness and ability to share our lives with others, thus becoming bread for a hungry world. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: (Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.) *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first reading speaks about the sumptuous banquet that Lady Wisdom offers its devotees. It is a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. The Gospel shifts from God *sending* bread from heaven to Jesus *giving* bread (his Flesh and Blood) "for the life of the world." Jesus' self-giving is fulfilled on the cross and made present now in the Eucharist. Our eating his flesh and drinking his blood draw us into this same mystery of self-giving. In the second reading, Paul contrasts a life of wisdom with a life of foolishness.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is He wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Proverbs 9:1-6

We are introduced to the personified wisdom of God, sometimes called Lady Wisdom. She has built herself a perfect house with seven columns, seven being the biblical symbol for perfection. In her home, she prepares a lavish banquet of great foods and wines, and invites all to come and partake. All who come are guaranteed to "*advance in the way of under-standing.*"

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 34

In selecting this wisdom Psalm (same as last week), the Church underlines the connection between this week's reading and last week's. The response "*Taste and see*" exhorts us to feast on the Lord and to advance in our understanding of his presence in our midst.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 5:15-20

Our second reading harmonizes well with the wisdom theme found in the first reading. In Wisdom literature, *folly* invites guests to a meal but only serves bread and water rather than the festive wine and meat prepared for Lady Wisdom's

banquet. In light of this contrast, Christians have to make a significant decision about which table they will dine at. How we "eat" depends upon whose invitation we choose to accept. In this reading, Paul is strongly encouraging his readers to reject the way of foolishness and to embrace the path of wisdom which seeks to discover God's will and sing his praises.

GOSPEL PROCLAMATION: John 6:51-58

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to write down the Word you hear.

GOSPEL: John 6: 51-58

In this latter part of his Bread of Life discourse, Jesus states that he *is* bread from heaven and those desiring eternal life must "eat his Flesh and drink his Blood."

In other words, they must participate in the Eucharist. In the previous section of this discourse, bread meant teaching and wisdom; in today's Gospel, it is to be understood in a Eucharistic and sacramental sense. Quarreling among themselves, the people ask, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Given their background, theirs is a valid objection. To eat the flesh of another was and is a repulsive idea. Drinking blood was and is equally shocking and forbidden by law (Gen 9:4, Lev 3:7).

Jesus intends his eating and drinking to be understood in a *Eucharistic* sense—in a way that baffles the human mind. We Catholics believe that when we partake of the host and drink from the cup at Mass, we are receiving into our being the very life of Jesus, the One who became flesh 2,000 years ago, who offered himself as a sacrificial Lamb on the hill of Calvary, and who was raised from the dead.

To make sure his listeners understand what he is saying, Jesus repeats himself *four* times. It is not enough just to partake of Jesus in and through his teaching; we must also partake of him in a sacramental, Eucharistic sense. In doing so, we experience *here and now* a taste of eternal life and a pledge of future glory.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. What are forms of "*foolish*" thinking in our society today? What kinds of "*foolishness*" do some Christians seem to be embracing?
3. How would you go about explaining the presence of Christ in the bread and wine to someone who has no belief about this reality?
4. Have you ever lost appreciation for the Eucharist and then rediscovered its giftedness? If so, share that story. If you have not lost your appreciation for the Eucharist, how have you grown in your appreciation for it over the years? If raised a non-Catholic, what helped you to come to believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist?

5. Jesus said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." Do you have a felt sense of Jesus' presence within you? Do you ever have a sense of His absence?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed/act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, help me to witness to the profound joy of receiving you in the Eucharist.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: In the coming weeks, try to be more conscious of whom you are receiving when you come to Holy Communion. As you go through the week, be also aware that this Divine Presence fills your being, calling you to share your life with others.

CONCLUDING WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION, THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom to we need to pray? Suggestion: Pray especially for Catholics who no longer come to Mass. Pray also for those of us who do, that we may live more fully the meaning of the Eucharist by our self-giving service to others.

CLOSING PRAYER (TOGETHER)

*Lord,
help me to keep my eyes fixed on you
since you have the words of
everlasting life.*

Amen

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Jesus, we once again gather in your name to share your Word. In the readings today, people are asked to decide for you. May we always say a strong “No” to other gods and proclaim a strong “Yes” to you and your ways. Nourish us now with the bread of your Word. Amen.*

Response to last week’s Word: (Facilitator briefly recalls last week’s Gospel.) *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: *“Decide whom you will serve” is the challenge placed before people in the first and third readings. In the second reading, Paul challenges married couples to submit to the Lord and to each other.*

Let us listen to God’s Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b

In a covenant ceremony at Shechem, Joshua gathers all the tribes of Israel and challenges them to make a very important decision as to which God they will serve: the gods of the new homeland or the Lord who delivered them from Egypt. Then Joshua makes it clear whom he will serve: *“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”* Following Joshua’s lead, all the people pledge their allegiance to the God who has been so good to them.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 34

In these verses, the Lord says that he will hear the cry of the just.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 5:21-32

The relationship between husbands and wives is patterned after the relationship between Christ and his Church. Even though Paul accepts the patriarchal model of domination/ submission between husbands and wives, in reality, he is pushing for mutual submission. *“Defer to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* Because husbands are asked to love their wives as Christ loves his Church, there is no room for domination. A Christ-like love would never cause a husband or

wife to dominate the other but rather lay down his/her life for the other—just as Christ laid down his life for his Church.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: John 6:60-69

Today’s reading concludes Jesus’ Bread of Life discourse. As with the first reading, the setting for this Gospel shows people gathered around a leader raised up by God. Words are spoken to declare what God has done or is doing. Those who hear are given a free choice to either accept or decline what God offers.

The disciples mumble among themselves about what Jesus has been teaching, which echoes the murmuring of their ancestors in the desert. Their faith is “shaken” by Jesus’ words but Jesus makes no effort to water down what he has been teaching them. In fact, he questions them, “If you were troubled by the thought of me *descending* from heaven, what will you think of me when I *ascend* and go back to heaven?” Both descending and ascending imply that Jesus is a heavenly being, the very claim that scandalized his hearers in the first place. Jesus is telling us that if we live only in the “flesh” (i.e., on the natural level), we can never understand who he is or what he is about. We must become spiritually connected to him by faith which, of course, is a gift—but it demands our cooperation.

At this point, many disciples walk away. They just cannot embrace Jesus or his claims. But some *remain*. For John, a big part of discipleship is *remaining* with Jesus. His “leaving” versus “remaining” is also an issue for John’s communities, especially after Christians have been expelled from the synagogue.

Jesus’ Bread of Life discourse ends on a positive note with Peter’s profession of faith: “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*” Through-out the discourse, Jesus is calling his listeners to have faith in him as the one sent by God. But the people resist and continue in disbelief. Finally, a small core group, the Twelve, represented by Peter, professes faith in Jesus.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. “*As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*” Concretely, what does this statement mean for you and your household?
3. The disciples found Jesus’ teaching on the Eucharist hard to take. Are there some of his teachings that you find very hard to embrace? If so, give an example/s.

4. What are some ingredients of a positive relationship between husbands and wives (or two friends)? Why is domestic violence so widespread today?

5. Give some examples of ways you occasionally slip into a former way of life, e.g. not coming as faithfully, fervently to Mass; spending money frivolously; resuming bad habits. What brought you back?

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed/act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, too often I fall back into patterns of speech and behavior that do not reflect my relationship with you. Help me to more faithfully and fervently stay true to you.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestions: If married, try to be very respectful to your spouse and try harder to be a good listener. If unmarried, try to do the same with your best friend.

CONCLUDING WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION, THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom to we need to pray? Suggestion: Pray especially for Catholics who no longer come to church, as well as for married couples who are struggling at this time.

CLOSING PRAYER (TOGETHER)

Prayer of Spouses for Each Other

Lord Jesus, grant that my spouse and I
may have a true and understanding love
for each other.

Grant that we may both be filled
with faith and trust.

Give us the grace to live with each other
in peace and harmony.

May we always bear with one another's
weaknesses and grow
from each other's strengths.

Help us to forgive one another's failings
and grant us patience, kindness, cheerfulness,
and the spirit of placing the well-being
of one another ahead of self.

May the love that brought us together grow
and mature with each passing year.

Bring us both closer to you through our love
for each other.

Let our love grow to perfection.

Amen.

From *Treasury of Prayers*
by Father Eamon Tobin

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Loving God, we thank you for gathering us together to share your Word. Help us to humbly welcome your Word that you have planted in our hearts. Help us also to be doers of your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: (Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.) *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: After five weeks of listening to Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life, we return this week to our semi-continuous reading of Mark's Gospel. All three readings speak to us about faithful adherence to God's Word and serving him with purity of heart.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

The law, as presented in Deuteronomy, provides a way for the people to draw closer to God. It exhorts them to hear and adhere to God's decrees and statutes. If they are obedient to God's decrees, they will "experience fullness of life," "take possession of the Lord," and become a people known for their "wisdom and intelligence."

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 15

This Psalm tells us that true worshippers are those who live good virtuous lives.

SECOND READING: James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

This week we listen to the first of four excerpts from the epistle of St. James, a letter that is profound for its simplicity and challenge. James' audience are both Jews and Gentiles who have converted to Christianity.

We are reminded that every good gift comes from above; hence, our reason to always be grateful to God. Here, we come across one of the most beautiful exhortations in all of Scripture: "*Humbly welcome the Word that has been planted in you and has the power to save souls.*" Opening our hearts to God's Word always implies a readiness to *act* on what the Word asks of us; hence, James' famous

exhortation: "*Be doers of the Word and not just hearers.*" One of his suggestions on how we can accomplish this is to reach out to widows and orphans, two of the most uncared-for groups in his time. True Gospel living always leads to some form of social action or justice.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

After listening to John's *Bread of Life* discourse, we now return to Mark's Gospel. This week's excerpt centers around one of the many 600+ human traditions that Jewish leaders have added to the Law given to Moses. In time, these human traditions will become as important as God's Law. The tradition in question in this Gospel is "ritual hand-washing" done before eating. Ritual washing

is performed very carefully following strict rules. Unfortunately, it will gradually become identified with inner holiness. When questioned why his disciples disregard this important tradition of their ancestors, Jesus answers that holiness involves a lot more than ritual washing. It entails a *lived* faith which responds to God's Word and cooperates with God's forgiving, cleansing grace. Impeccably washed hands are no substitute for a clean heart. What Jesus seeks is a heart turned toward him. Of the Pharisees, he says: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

In the final verses of this week's Gospel, Jesus says that defilement does not result from dirty hands but rather from a dirty heart where evil schemes are hatched. Jesus gives 13 examples

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. What does "humbly welcoming the Word of God" mean to you? How easy or hard is it for you to do this?
3. What "word" have you heard and failed to act on? How did you justify yourself and then got back on track?
4. What are the characteristics of a pure heart? How do we go about cultivating one?
5. What are examples of lip service that we can give to God?
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed/act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, please help me to remove from my life all that distracts me from purity of heart – the internet; entertainment that implants unchaste, immoral or arrogant thoughts, images, actions; occasions and/or people who tempt me to sin.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

St. James tells us that we must be "doers of the Word and not just hearers." Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Examine the contents of your heart. Sift through the motivations that come from love and ones that are self-serving or flow from fear or self-interest. Confess the latter if necessary and pray for a pure, clean heart (see Psalm 51).

CONCLUDING WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION, THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom to we need to pray? Suggestion: Pray especially for the grace of a pure heart. Pray for widows and orphans and for a deep desire to *act* on God's Word.

CLOSING PRAYER (TOGETHER)

Prayer for a Godly Heart

Give me, O Lord, a steadfast heart,
which no unworthy affection may
drag downwards.

Give me an unconquered heart,
Which no tribulation can wear out.

Give me an upright heart,
Which no unworthy purpose
may tempt aside.

St. Thomas Aquinas

From *Treasury of Prayers*
by Father Eamon Tobin

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Loving and caring God, thank you for gathering us together to share your Word. Help us to humbly welcome the Word you speak to us today. Remove our fears so that we may be free to serve you with our whole heart. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: (Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.) *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: During the next several weeks, Jesus will teach us several lessons on the nature of true discipleship. His *first lesson* has to do with inclusiveness which is mentioned in the second and third readings. In the first reading, Isaiah brings good news to exiles.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 35:4-7

The prophet is sent to speak good news to a people in exile who are broken and filled with fear. The prophet tells them that their bad times are coming to an end. God is coming to heal their physical maladies and to heal their land.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 146

This is a Psalm of praise to a God who brings liberation to those who are oppressed.

SECOND READING: James 2:1-5

Social discrimination is strongly and bluntly condemned: "*Brothers and sisters, show no partiality.*" The poorly dressed should not be treated any differently from those with the trappings of wealth. In fact, God would have true disciples develop a special affection or preferential option for the poor, the downcast, the suffering, and all who are treated as unimportant in our world. True disciples will go out of their way to welcome and *include* those whom our society is wont to exclude.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

A participant reads the Gospel, then all pause to reflect.

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Mark 7:31-37

Mark sometimes uses geographical locations to make a theological statement. The healing of the deaf and mute man takes place in *Gentile* territory. Mark's point: the Gospel Christ comes to preach and the Kingdom he inaugurates are intended for the Jews as well as for the Gentiles. Jesus teaches his disciples the importance of *including* those considered outsiders in his Kingdom.

The Gospel is the fulfillment of the first reading which speaks about God healing the deaf and the mute. In this story, Jesus is showing his concern and hospitality for someone who is most likely excluded from the community. He offers healing, acceptance, and wholeness to a man with two disabilities. Notice that Jesus physically touches the man.

The deaf and mute man is, in a way, symbolic of the Gentile people. Until that time, they are unable to hear God's message and unable to speak it. But in this Gospel, Jesus changes all that. Unlike their Jewish counterparts, the Gentiles are able to hear the message and proclaim it to others. They prove themselves to be disciples by becoming *hearers* and *doers* of the Word.

The command not to tell anyone is called the "messianic secret." Because most of the people have a wrong understanding of the nature of the Messiah (they expect him to be a military person, a new David), Jesus does not want his messiah ship to be broadcast until he has time to explain its true nature, namely, that of a suffering servant. Jesus will conquer, not with military might, but by suffering on the cross.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Can you recall a time when you needed to hear the words: "Be strong; fear not"?
3. Name forms of snobbery and social discrimination present in our society or church today. What can help us to overcome any forms of snobbery and social discrimination?
4. How can our church be more welcoming to persons of same-sex attraction while upholding the church's teaching on the Sacrament of Marriage?
5. How can our church be more accommodating to the blind, lame, deaf, those with a speech impediment or other disabilities and how can we be more proactive in eliminating demeaning or disrespectful comments or jokes regarding handicaps or disabilities of any kind?
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed/act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you.

Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, help me to see the crucified you in all – those with handicaps or disabilities I can see and those I can't but knowing that wounds do indeed exist.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to any form of social discrimination that might exist in your attitude or behavior. Try to remove all forms of snobbery from your life. Pray for all who are blind, lame, deaf or have a speech impediment or disability of any kind.

CONCLUDING WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION, THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom to we need to pray? Suggestion: Pray especially for those who endure the dual suffering of physical disability and social discrimination.

CLOSING PRAYER (TOGETHER)

For Those Suffering Affliction

Be merciful, Lord,
to all our brothers and sisters
who suffer any kind of persecution
or affliction, whether in mind or body,
especially those who suffer
for your name and gospel.
Give them patience,
constancy and steadfast hope
until you send them full and good
deliverance of all their troubles.
Through Jesus Christ Our Lord.
Amen.

From *Treasury of Prayers*
by Father Eamon Tobin

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Loving and caring Father, thank you for gathering us together to share your Word. Teach us your ways and give us the strength to embrace the cross when it becomes our path. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: (Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.) *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: Our first reading speaks about a faithful servant who suffers for his fidelity to God. In the Gospel, Peter makes an important profession of faith about Jesus. Jesus teaches his **second lesson** on the nature of true discipleship, namely, a willingness to carry one's cross. In the second reading, James states that authentic faith must express itself in good works.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 50:4-9

The speaker recounts the abuse he has suffered at the hands of his persecutors and then makes an act of confidence in the Divine Providence. Despite all the suffering he has had to endure, he firmly feels that God is with him, and that makes all the difference.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 116

This is a thanksgiving prayer of one who has recovered from a serious illness. It reflects the feelings of both the servant and Jesus in the first and third readings.

SECOND READING: James 2:14-18

James responds to a misunderstanding in the early church about the true nature of faith. It seems some within the community think that faith only means correct belief as articulated in orthodox doctrine. James insists that authentic faith must express itself in good works. Action and right conduct are essential elements of faith. Faith that does not express itself in good works is a false or dead faith. James gives a concrete example of how faith must lead to care for a needy brother or sister.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Mark 8:27-35

This Gospel has two parts. The first deals with Peter's profession of faith. The second involves Jesus' teaching on the true nature of his messiahship—how it will involve suffering and how the cross will also be the lot of those who will follow him.

In the *circle*, say first part, Jesus seeks to find out how his actions and words are being understood by the people. Peter tells him that many of the people think that he is a prophet raised from the dead. Then Jesus asks, "*And who do you, my inner I am?*"

Peter, serving as spokesperson for his brothers, answers: “*You are the Christ.*” This means that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God.

Even though Peter answers correctly, his reaction to Jesus’ reference to a *suffering* Messiah clearly shows how much he needs to grow in his understanding of Jesus’ messiah ship. Peter is repulsed at the very idea of a *wounded* and *suffering* Messiah, as well as a discipleship that will involve carrying one’s cross. It will take a lot of time and the action of the Holy Spirit for Peter and his friends to embrace the idea of a wounded and suffering Messiah and the belief that disciples will also suffer for being followers of Jesus. This teaching on the importance of the cross is the second lesson in a series of teachings on the characteristics of true discipleship.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Today’s first reading is chosen to underline Jesus’ message on the cross. What helps you to deal with the painful experiences of life?
3. a) True faith must express itself in good works. What does this mean in your life? How do you express your faith in good works?
b) It is clear from James that for him, faith must express itself in the care of the poor. How do you seek to live this piece of the Gospel?
4. Who is Jesus for you? Give Jesus a name in your life, e.g. teacher, healer.
5. Share one cross you have carried or are carrying for the sake of the gospel.
6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed/act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you.

Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, I do not know the cross others are carrying, help me to be compassionate and kind when they may not be.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: Reach out to someone carrying a big cross at this time.

CONCLUDING WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION, THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom to we need to pray? Pray especially for people carrying the cross of persecution because of their belief in Jesus.

CLOSING PRAYER (TOGETHER)

Prayer of Abandonment

Father, I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me as you will.
For whatever you do, I thank you;
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let your will be done in me as in all creatures;
I ask nothing else.
Into your hands I commend my soul;
I give it to you with all the love
of my heart.
I love you and I want to give myself
into your hands
with a trust beyond all measure
Because you are my Father.

Charles de Foucauld

From *Treasury of Prayers*
by Father Eamon Tobin

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Loving God, in today's Word you teach us that an important part of true discipleship involves humble trust in you and a willingness to serve others. As we reflect on your Word together, deepen our love for you and each other. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: (Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.) *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: In today's second reading, James tells us that "*evil cravings unchecked lead us into immoral behavior.*" We see clear examples of this in the first and third readings. In the first reading, the wicked plot the downfall of an innocent man. In the Gospel, sinful inner cravings of the Apostles have them jockeying for the first place in Jesus' kingdom. In this **third lesson** on discipleship, Jesus calls his disciples to a leadership style that finds its fullest expression in humble service.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Wisdom 2:12, 17-20

In the Gospel, Jesus speaks about his upcoming passion and death. This reading is chosen because it speaks of the rejection and mistreatment of God's servant. It also fits in well with the second reading which speaks of "inner cravings"—like jealousy and envy.

The people have an intense dislike for the Just One. His way of life is a condemnation of their own. His virtue shows their lack of virtue. Like the enemies of Jesus, they plan and plot to silence and actually kill the virtuous one. Their minds and hearts are so distorted and twisted that they see nothing wrong in their behavior.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 54

This Psalm is a lament by a just person whose life is in danger. It harmonizes well with the first and third readings about a just man's life in danger.

SECOND READING: James 3:16-4:3

James is addressing disharmony within the Christian community. The causes listed are

internal. When our sinful inner cravings go unchecked, they can wreck the life of the community. Or we can say that the author contrasts heavenly and earthly wisdom. Wisdom from above is peaceable, docile and rich in compassion. It produces a rich harvest of right relationships with others. In contrast, earthly wisdom is self-centered, e.g., when one doesn't get his/her way, he/she can become disruptive and divisive.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Mark 9:30-37

This is Mark's *third lesson* on discipleship. *The true disciple is one who seeks to serve rather than be served.* The Gospel opens with Jesus' second prediction about his suffering and death. The disciples have no idea what Jesus is talking about. Their lack of understanding shows when they get into a discussion as to who among them will be the most important in the new Kingdom Jesus is about to establish. When Jesus arrives, they fall silent because they are embarrassed to tell him what they have been arguing about.

Jesus teaches another *lesson on the nature of discipleship.* He illustrates his lesson by standing a child in their midst. (In Aramaic, the same word is used for a child and servant.) Jesus then tells his ambitious disciples: "If you want to be truly great, you must learn to be humble and unimportant like this little child." The best and purest kind of service is that rendered to the most insignificant members of society, symbolized here by a child. Jesus is also saying that false ambition is the desire to rule over others—which is very damaging to the unity of a community. True ambition, on the other hand, is the desire to serve others—which helps build a strong community. Here, Jesus does not condemn ambition but rather redefines it.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.

2. "If we were truly in touch with our giftedness and blessings, we would never suffer from feelings of jealousy." Agree or disagree? Why?

In your opinion, what causes us to be jealous of others? What will help us to be freed of this vice?

3. St. James speaks about the *disordered* inner inclinations that can get us into trouble. Can you name one disordered inner inclination, past or present, that you struggle with? What helps you to cope with it so that it does not become a destructive force in your life?

4. How would you distinguish false ambition from true ambition? How does one seek to get ahead in the work situation without succumbing to false ambition?

5. What will help us to grow in humble service particularly when we are in a leadership position?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed/act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Dear Lord, I so want to be the person you created me to be, but it seems the harder I try, the more I get in my own way. Help me to surrender all to you that you may lead me.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: This week, be attentive to any dis-ordered inclinations that surface in your thinking and behavior. Seek to curb any tendency to let such inclinations rule your life.

CONCLUDING WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION, THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom to we need to pray? Pray for government and Church leaders and also parents that they all strive to follow the leadership style of Jesus.

CLOSING PRAYER (TOGETHER)

Prayer of Surrender

Take and receive, Lord, all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding
and my will,
all that I have and own.

You gave them to me; to you,
Lord, I return them.

They are all yours;
do with them what you will.

Give me your love and your grace;
these are enough for me;
then I am rich enough.

I do not ask anything more.

Amen.

St. Ignatius Loyola

From *Treasury of Prayers*
by Father Eamon Tobin

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Father, thank you for gathering us together to share life and your Word. Open our minds and hearts to hear the Word you want us to take with us today. Open our hearts to the surprising ways of your Spirit. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: (Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.) *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: In this *fourth lesson* on the characteristics of true discipleship, we are told that *faithful discipleship* involves openness to the surprising movement of the Spirit, solidarity with the poor, avoiding occasions of sin, and not causing others to sin.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Numbers 11:25-29

Both Joshua and John in today's Gospel are guilty of the sin of intolerance. They want to control the Spirit. They seem to think that the Spirit can only move in people belonging to *their group*.

In the verses leading up to this reading, Moses is complaining to God about being overworked. In response, God orders Moses to choose 70 elders to whom he will grant a share of the Spirit which he has given to Moses.

Two elders are missing from the meeting (perhaps they are sick or taking their grandkids to Little League!). Nevertheless, God grants them a portion of his Spirit. Somehow, Joshua (Moses' associate pastor) is not happy with God's action and wants Moses to silence the two elders. Moses answers: "*I will not! Joshua, are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of God were prophets.*" But happily, it is a successful volunteer sign-up Sunday and Moses gets himself 70 new helpers!

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 19

This Psalm seeks to extol the Law. We must remember, for the Israelites the Law is primarily seen as directives for living a full and God-fearing

life. Love for the Law is like love for the will of God.

SECOND READING: James 5:1-6

This reading is a blunt, "in-your-face" condemnation of those who put their trust in material wealth and of employers who become rich by failing to pay their employees a fair wage.

It seems many of the people in James' community are very preoccupied with acquiring material wealth. James' word to them is: "Such wealth is not lasting. It is foolish to use one's energies seeking it. Instead, we should spend our energies accumulating lasting treasure." James' exhortation is intensified by his admonition that the *parousia* (Jesus' Second Coming) is imminent. In the next world, material wealth will count for nothing. In powerful imagery, James visualizes the rich who enjoy their wealth and do not share with the poor as being "fattened for the day of slaughter," the Day of Judgment.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

Jesus gives four declarations on faithful discipleship:

- The *first declaration* (vv 38-41) connects the Gospel to the first reading. In both readings, Jesus and Moses tell the people that God can work outside of institutions or some “in groups.” One doesn’t need to be a member of the Twelve to perform an exorcism. Jesus’ words remind us of a saying attributed to St. Augustine: “*God has many whom the Church does not have. The Church has many whom God does not have.*” Jesus’ saying, “*Whoever is not against us is for us,*” is a good principle to follow in ecumenical dialogue with both Christians and non-Christians.
- In the *second declaration* (v.41), Jesus says that all who support missionaries will be rewarded.
- The *third declaration* (vv 42-44) concerns bringing scandal, especially to children: “*Whoever causes these little ones to sin....*” To commit sin is bad enough; to cause another to fall into sin is worse.
- In the *fourth declaration*, Jesus uses a “surgical metaphor” to speak about the importance of avoiding occasions of sin. Jesus is not proposing self-mutilation of hands, feet and eyes. He is rather saying that if there is anything in our lives that comes between us and our relationship with God, it must be rooted out. This may be as painful as a surgical operation, like cutting out a part of our own body, but if we are to experience happiness and peace, it must be done. Jesus ends by saying that spiritual surgery is certainly preferable to Gehenna (hell).

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. In our readings today, both Jesus and Moses condemn intolerance as restricting the way God can work. Can you name some instances where the Spirit is at work in people that we may not see or notice?
3. *Charity* involves giving handout to the poor. *Social justice* involves changing unjust policies that keep the poor, poor. Can you give examples of unjust social systems in our society today (e.g., lack of health insurance for millions of Americans, failing schools in certain areas)? Most Christians and parishes do well with giving handouts to the poor, but not so good on working at changing unjust practices that keep the poor, poor. Why is this? How do you feel about this and other unjust social practices?
4. The late Archbishop Helder Camara, advocate for the poor in Brazil, used to say: “*When I said we should help the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked: Why are the poor, poor, they called me a communist.*” Comment. How true is it to say that we are much more at ease talking about *charity* (giving handout to the poor) than about *social justice* (changing unjust social structures)?
5. What helps us to cut out a behavior that is hindering our growth in Christ?
6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed/act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Dear Jesus, help me to see where there is sin in my thoughts, words and actions. Help me to repent and sin no more.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Take time to name "occasions of sin" or real sources of temptation for you. Pray for guidance on what you need to do to avoid these situations and temptations.

CONCLUDING WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION, THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom to we need to pray? Pray especially for protection against intolerance, occasions of sin, scandal, and a heart for social justice issues.

CLOSING PRAYER (TOGETHER)

Prayer of Surrender

Lord Jesus,
I give you my hands
to do your work.
I give you my feet
to go your way.
I give you my eyes
to see as you see.

I give you my tongue
to speak your words.
I give you my mind
that you may think in me.
I give you my spirit
that you may pray in me.

Above all,
I give you my heart
that you may love in me –
love the Father and all humanity.
I give you my whole self
that you may grow in me,
So that you, Lord,
may be the one who lives,
and works, and prays in me.
Amen.

From *Treasury of Prayers*
by Father Eamon Tobin