

Saints *Alive!*

Issue
18

The Quarterly Newsletter of Emmaus Journey

Why Small-Group Bible Studies?

By Rich Cleveland

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Less than a year ago, in December 2010, Pope Benedict XVI published his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *The Word of the Lord* (Verbum Domini). At the conclusion of this profound document he states, “I wish once more to encourage all the People of God, pastors, consecrated persons and the laity, to become increasingly familiar with the sacred Scriptures. We must never forget that all authentic and living Christian spirituality is based on the word of God proclaimed, accepted, celebrated and meditated upon in the Church.”¹

Two questions came to mind as I read the above remarks: 1) To what extent do we really believe “that all authentic and living Christian spirituality is based on the word of God?” and 2) What are our plans for helping laity “to become increasingly familiar with the sacred Scriptures?” If the above is true, and we do not make a concerted effort and develop plans to help the laity become increasingly familiar with sacred Scripture, then *authentic and living spirituality* probably will not be the experience of the majority of Catholic laity.

The consequences of this not happening are too great to not expend the effort. For instance, Pope Benedict mentions three ways in which familiarity with sacred Scripture affects the laity, and in turn the Church, and the world. First he points out the laity’s role in spreading the Gospel in the many places where our lives touch the peoples of the world, and of the need to consciously develop a life that manifests and accounts for the hope within us. Consequently, “the laity need to be trained to discern God’s will through a familiarity with his word, read and studied in the Church....”²

During this time of increasing pressure on marriage and family life, he points out

the critical relationship between healthy marriages and sacred Scripture; “it must never be forgotten that *the word of God is at the very origin of marriage* (cf. Gen 2:24)” Continuing he points out that “The great mystery of marriage is the source of the *essential responsibility of parents towards their children*. ... The ecclesial community must support and assist them in fostering family prayer, attentive hearing of the word of God, and knowledge of the Bible.”³

The last point I would draw our attention to is the way in which sacred Scripture influences the discernment process to vocations. “Candidates for the priesthood must learn to love the word of God. ... it is in the light and strength of God’s word that one’s specific vocation can be discerned and appreciated, loved and followed, and one’s proper mission carried out, by nourishing the heart with thoughts of God. ...”⁴ If these are the results we can expect from the laity’s becoming familiar with sacred Scriptures, can we afford to not make it a major focus and offering of our parishes?

This brings us back to the title of this issue of *SaintsAlive!*, “Why Small Group Bible Studies?” This essential need to familiarize laity with sacred Scripture cannot be laid solely at the feet of parish pastors. All the pastors I know are overly worked as it is. However, if with the encouragement of pastors, parishes encourage the development of discussion based small-group bible studies, the overall biblical literacy of people will be greatly enhanced. Like a tiny snowball picking up layer after layer of snow as it is rolled along, so the small-group bible study participant accrues layer after layer of applicable scripture knowledge, week after week, and year after year. Additionally, a well led bible-study discussion encourages a person to turn off their “u-huh” and internally engage with sacred

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Emmaus Journey Mission Statement

Emmaus Journey is a Catholic evangelization and discipleship ministry that is conducted primarily in and through Catholic parishes. Emmaus Journey has embraced Goal 1 of *Go and Make Disciples: A Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*, produced by The National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "To bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others."

Emmaus Journey's goals are:

- To help enable non-practicing Catholics, occasional Catholics, and nominal Catholics experience conversion to Christ, transformation in Christ, and mobilization for Christ as Catholic disciples.
- To encourage Catholics to embrace Jesus' call to advance the Gospel and his Kingdom by becoming laborers who live and disciple others from among the nonreligious.
- To help mature and gifted Catholics discover a particular call to participate more fully in the task of evangelization.
- To indirectly serve Catholic parishes' evangelization efforts through small-group materials, evangelization and discipleship resources, seminars, ministry events, and messages that move them forward in their efforts to make Christ known, and to nurture mature Catholic disciples who can help others experience conversion, transformation, and mobilization for Christ.



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Multiple copies of *Saints Alive!* are available upon request.

From the Heart

By Rich Cleveland

On October 23 we celebrated "The Feast of Blessed John Paul II." Like many around the world my life was impacted by his life and writings, in particular by *The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People* (Christifideles Laici). I saw within it a workable solution for world evangelization, namely the mobilization of a vast multitude of Catholic laborers into the harvest. Here is how Pope John Paul II expressed it:

"At the same time the vocation to holiness is *intimately connected to mission* and to the responsibility entrusted to the lay faithful in the Church and in the world. ... The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring labourers who work in the Lord's vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God's grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history." (17)

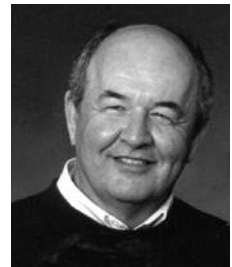
This vision was expressed in 1988. How have we progressed in implementing this vision in the last 23 years? How can we expedite even greater progress in the coming decade?

I would suggest that one thing we must do is to design our evangelization and formation forms so that they are reproducible in the venues which John Paul II mentions in the above vision; the everyday world. Obviously there is a place for classroom instruction within the parish, but let's be realistic, for most Catholics this is not a reproducible form they can use in their work places and neighborhoods to win and form followers for Christ. Non-Christians, non-churched people, and many practicing Catholics are looking for a more relational, give-and-take environment where there can be an interchange of ideas, and questions asked and discussed. In the midst of this environment friendships can be formed which provide the witness-of-life that so effectively empowers the verbal explanations that comes from within the discussion of Christ.

Over the last couple of decades we have seen an exodus of Catholics leave the Church to pursue non-Catholic bible studies in an attempt to find the personal attention and formation they desired. Their departures have both affirmed the value of individual and small-group formation, and exposed a weakness in our evangelization and formation offerings. If parishes developed equipping centers for individual and small-group ministry would that not only stem the exodus, but also stimulate a reverse flow into Christ's Kingdom and Church? Would not one of the biggest pluses for parishes be that Catholic laity will discover a form which they can use in their workplaces, during breakfast or lunch meetings with friends, and in their homes in neighborhoods?

Some fear that the loosing of the laity to minister in this fashion, might cause people to lose their Catholicity, however in 19 years of Catholic ministry involvement on a local and national level, I do not know of even one case where this has happened. Rather I would suggest that if a parish is pro-active, training their parishioners well, encouraging the use of *Catholic* small-group materials, and relationally connecting the leaders of small-groups to the sacramental life of the parish community they will see evangelization blossom and a surge in membership.

Part of that training should not only be tools like *A Facilitator's Guide* but also the reading and discussion of relevant Church documents like *Evangelization and the Modern World* (Pope Paul VI), *Mission of the Redeemer* (Pope John Paul II), etc. These books provide motivation and essential understanding leaders need. Perhaps summers should be used to strengthen the leaders so that during the other nine months of the year they can give themselves to a ministry of evangelization and formation within the venues of the world. Mobilizing laity and equipping them with forms and resources *they* can use in *their* world—it is a vision and a solution we must pursue.



Saints: The Extraordinary Lives of Ordinary People

Saint Paul

Saint Paul is known for many things, his conversion on the road to Damascus, the many epistles he wrote, and his missionary trials and martyrdom. Truly he is one who could unabashedly say, “Be followers of me even as I am of

Christ.” What I find fascinating about him is his direct and simple process of forming followers of Christ.

In “The Acts of the Apostles” we see him constantly surrounding himself with people with whom he shared the truth of the Gospel. We see him occasionally *preaching* to the crowds, but as we read of his life and explore his epistles the more subtle, and perhaps more effective methodology of forming people in their faith is his life-on-life mentoring. In 1 Thessalonians Paul reminds the recipients of the relational nature of his formation by using family terms like “mother,” “father,” and “brothers (or sisters)” to describe relational formation. The essence of his pedagogy; was the example of his life, the imparting of the Scriptures and teachings of the early Church, and the giving of his very soul through these familial relationships. Consequently we are not surprised when he writes to Timothy, “what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others also,” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Paul understood that the most elementary aspects of human reproduction also pertain to spiritual reproduction; parents have children, parents raise their children to be healthy people who are naturally desirous of reproducing their lives, adult children marry and have children—and so the world is populated. In a similar manner, so the Church is grown, by natural expansion as one Christian reaches out to and births another, forming them in the faith and within the faith community of the Church, so that they mature and naturally desire to “go and do likewise.” St. Paul could say to some, “For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me (1 Corinthians 4:15, 16).” He trained lay leaders to reproduce their lives through life-on-life ministry.

“Transmitting the faith essentially means to transmit the Scriptures, primarily the Gospel, which give a person the opportunity of knowing Jesus, the Lord.”⁵ Today we need to read St. Paul’s life and writings once again to find within them a philosophy of evangelization and formation that can involve large portions of the laity, using a familial form that is effective for them. Perhaps that form is small-groups.

Pras and Dewi—Changed Lives

In 1999 an ordinary lay-couple, Pras and Dewi, were given a copy of the Emmaus Journey Series small-group bible studies which consisted of three booklets, each approximately 10 lessons long. They began with a group of twelve individuals from their parish and led them through the entire Series. In the booklets participants learned to read sacred Scriptures daily, and journal the essence of their meditation. Each week participants shared what they had been reading and learning. They studied and discussed essentials like; Christian living, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and their responsibility to be good stewards of their time, talents, and treasure. The group flourished.

St. Monica’s pastor, seeing the quality of the graduates’ lives, encouraged others in the parish to participate. The numbers began to multiply each year, from 12 participants, to 60, to 100, with 300 currently involved this year. Now after eleven years, over 1400 people have graduated from the three book, nine month series. Additionally, the Emmaus Journey Series has become one of the parish’s primary offerings for adult formation. The joyful results can be summed up in the testimony of one of the participants, “I know my faith, I enjoy it, I can walk with God day by day—and I want others to experience it—and so I invite them.” That is how the groups have flourished since their inception.

Several key ingredients contributed to the success of these groups: First each group is indeed small consisting of six participants, an assistant facilitator, and the primary facilitator. Within the first few weeks the group becomes comfortable with one another and deepening bonds enhance the sharing around Scripture. Second, the groups themselves have maintained high standards requiring the completion of the weekly homework, and faithful attendance. Third, before a person can be a facilitator they must have successfully graduated as a participant, and then serve as an assistant facilitator for another complete series before they can lead. So quality is high.

Most importantly, Pras and Dewi explained, “It is not about learning facts, but about having a relationship with Jesus, and with the small-group community.” Future participants are easily recruited from within the parish as a consequence of the changed lives of the graduates. Like St. Paul, Pras and Dewi, by initiating these small-groups have replicated what Pope Benedict encourages, *opening up to the faithful the treasures of God’s word, which also brought about an encounter with Christ the living word of God.*



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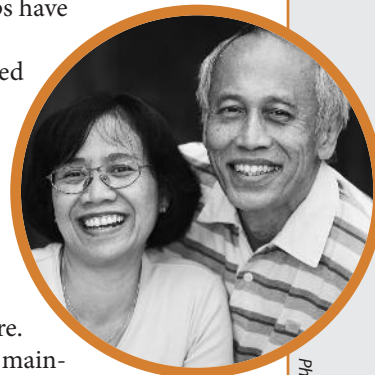


Photo courtesy of Paul Hensley

⁵ Nikola Eterovic, Titular Archbishop of Sisak, in *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith-Lineamenta*.

Save the Date!
Emmaus Journey's Annual Conference
Witness to His Love
The Role of the Laity in Ministry

You too, go into my vineyard.
—Matthew 20:4

at Glen Eyrie Conference Center
August 23-26, 2012

“...the laity are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth.”
—Lumen Gentium

 **Emmaus Journey**
A Ministry of Catholic Evangelization & Discipleship

Join us for rest and refreshment at the enchanting Glen Eyrie Conference Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado, located in the beautiful Colorado Rockies. Experience daily mass, inspirational messages from outstanding Catholic leaders, motivational workshops, and meaningful fellowship. Register online at emmausjourney.org beginning January 2nd!

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Why Small-Group Bible Studies? continued from front page

Scripture sufficiently enough to express their thoughts, either verbally or in writing. Thus their understanding grows “as thoughts disentangle themselves, as they pass over their lips and through their fingertips.” We constantly receive feedback of how the simple process of looking up a passage, writing down an answer to a question, and discussing it with others, deepens and authenticates a person’s spirituality.

The small group bible study process is not unlike *lectio divina*. Instead of simply sitting and listening to what someone else has discovered in sacred Scripture, or even sitting and taking notes on a well delivered talk, discovery oriented bible studies require the person to read a passage, think about its meaning, and articulate their understanding. Included in the process is both personal and group prayer, and an effective small-group study will always ask the participant to think about the practical implications of truth to their life. This is a contemporary version of the *lectio divina* process; read/*lectio*, meditate/*meditation*, pray/*oratio*, and apply/*contemplation*, and it is life changing.

Ghislaine was in her eighties when she realized she needed “revitalization” and desired to become involved with Scripture

to continue a process of renewal she experienced through her parish’s “50th Jubilee” celebration. With her parish priest’s support she found a discovery oriented bible study, *Serving the Master*, which her pastor agreed to help teach, and for which she agreed to recruit. Thirty people were in the first groups, and four bible studies later over 75 people were participating from two parishes. Why did so many become excited and involved about studying the Bible,—because in this process they encountered Jesus, the Word of God.

It would be nice if we could all just open the Bible and begin doing pure *lectio divina*, but the reality is that most of us can’t, and won’t. Whereas an effectively written discovery small-group bible study will enable a person to become involved in the *lectio divina* process, and loving it, without even realizing that they are doing *lectio divina*. Why small-group bible studies?—because they work.

¹ *The Word of the Lord* (Verbum Domini), by Pope Benedict XVI, section 121

² *Ibid*, Section 84

³ *Ibid*, Section 85

⁴ *Ibid*, Section 82