

Introduction

I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

This quotation is obviously not from a modern textbook on how to be a real man, or from an article on “pop” male psychology. However, it does offer a challenge to the individual who is sincerely searching for an authentic Christian life.

It is confusing to be a man today, particularly a Christian man. There is a natural tension between the stereotypical male—the one many of us were taught to be, the male of the media—and the male that God calls men to be. Men are expected to play a variety of roles and to know how to bounce from one role to the other as the wind blows. The man of today is expected to be protective and hard working on the one hand, and gentle and supportive on the other. What is a man to do?

To further complicate matters, many sincere men are trying to reclaim aspects of their lives that in the past have been abdicated: spiritual leadership of the family; the ability to express love and emotion; and relationships with other men that don’t have to flow from a mutual love for sports, work, or other “men stuff.”

Signs of Hope

There is evidence of a spiritual renewal among men. Promise Keepers, a national men’s organization, has issued a wake-up call through their stadium events for all Christian men to stand and be counted as godly men of integrity. Local and regional events such as Cincinnati’s *Answer the Call*, Oklahoma City’s *In the Father’s Footsteps*, and New Orleans’ *Catholic Men in Action* are providing a source of energy and rejuvenation to men’s faith. Through the Holy Spirit, God is knocking at the door to our hearts.

There are many issues that men need to confront. It’s a different ball game today. Men need help in sorting out all the new demands being made on them. How do we do that effectively, and at the same time, enjoy the process of getting there?

That’s the reason for this series of lesson plans for small group discussions for men. *Signposts: How To Be a Catholic Man in the World Today* is not a scholarly Bible Study, but a series of lessons that are focused on issues of concern to men in the ordinariness of their everyday lives. Holy Scripture and various church documents are drawn upon to help clarify the issues.

Small Fellowship Groups for Men

What are small fellowship groups for men? They are gatherings of men, usually from the same parish, who get together to discuss their lives in the light of their Catholic faith and to share their faith and experiences through friendship, prayer, and fraternity.

Most groups generally meet for ninety minutes to pray, socialize, discuss their faith and the issues they are grappling with in their lives. They support, affirm, and share insights about the difficulties men encounter in both their home and work lives. They also seek God’s help in dealing

with the issues they confront every day. Members strive to reinforce Christian values in their home, reach out to share those values with others in their group, and support other men who are struggling to do the same.

Most men who have attended a small discussion group quickly discover the benefits they offer. Men participating in such groups cultivate friendships among their fellow parishioners, have fun, and learn from one another how to be a better husband, father, son, employee, and Catholic parishioner. Many men say they have grown by this experience, which has helped them to form stronger and happier families and to cope better with the stresses they encounter at work.

How to Use the Plan

A strong facilitator is of great value in using these lesson plans. He need not be an expert in scripture or church doctrine, although some knowledge of both will be helpful. The facilitator does not function as a teacher. His primary responsibilities are to keep the group focused on the particular subject, to see that each man in the group has an opportunity to participate, and to keep the group discussions moving.

If the group is newly organized, we suggest that one person serve as facilitator. After the group has bonded and the men have become comfortable with each other, the facilitator's role may be rotated among the men who are interested in leading the discussions. This will prepare men to lead another group when the current group grows beyond eight or ten men.

Signposts: How To Be a Catholic Man in the World Today has been designed to provide a flexible resource for small groups of men. The following format is suggested, but each group should adapt it to be comfortable and workable for its group.

Music: This can be a recording or a shared song. Some groups may prefer not to start with music.

Opening Prayer: The prayer can be a brief prayer service planned by one of the men, a spontaneous prayer, or any form suitable to the group. The format doesn't matter as long as it is heartfelt and the meeting is started with prayer.

Accountability: One of the values of belonging to a small group of men is that the men in the group can support each other in their quest for living a Christian life (Proverbs 27:17). At the end of each lesson plan, each man is encouraged to develop a plan of action for the coming week to address some area of weakness or some area that needs to be improved in his life. After the group prays together, it is suggested that a few minutes be devoted to sharing how well each man did with his plan for the previous week. When some of the men are struggling with an issue, they may want to ask for the prayers of the group.

Lesson Plan: The lesson plans are designed to be covered in a one-hour session. Depending on the interaction of the group, how well the participants have prepared, or the amount of time spent in sharing and prayer, any lesson could take longer. The group may decide if it wants to eliminate any of the questions, or if it wants to extend the lesson into the following session.

Concluding Prayer: The meetings should always be closed with a prayer in which the participants may lift up their own needs. This would be a good time to pray for any of the men who need God's grace in an area.

Suggestions:

- Form teams of two who will call each other during the week to encourage one another.
- Using multiple translations of the Bible can sometimes be confusing. Discuss the desirability of using a standard Catholic translation such as the *New American Bible*.
- The individual lesson plans are grouped by general topic. However, it is not necessary to strictly follow that format if another format works better for the group. The lesson plans are meant to be a springboard for group discussion on a particular topic and not a rigid format to be precisely followed.
- Encourage personal witnessing and “testimonies” to build faith among the men.
- While a predictable and comfortable format is helpful, flexibility is also necessary at times to adjust to an individual’s needs.
- Start with a few moments of socializing and stop on time.
- Be ready to welcome new members to the group, and to break up into two groups if the original group grows too large.

It is our prayer that each person using this series will be strengthened in his faith, in his role as husband and father, and as a disciple of our Lord Jesus.

But you, remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it, and that from infancy you have known [the] sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:14-15)

Deacon Bill Bawden, Pastoral Associate
The Catholic Parish of St. John the Baptist
Edmond, Oklahoma

Deacon Tim Sullivan, Executive Director
Catholic Charities
Diocese of Tulsa, Oklahoma