

HOW TO USE THIS READING GUIDE

Six small group sessions

Gather. Welcome everyone to your group. Offer a special welcome to participants from other faith traditions who may join you. Ask participants to introduce themselves if needed.

As your class or group session gets underway, always begin with the Sign of the Cross.

Read. Read each section of material aloud in your group, rotating readers with each stanza. Pause at each section to follow the recommended group process. Group members should note items in the pope's teaching that strike them as especially important. Do not read aloud the article numbers. They are included to help you find this section in the original document if you want to explore in more depth certain elements of this apostolic exhortation.

Discuss and Pray. When you come to the group process notes, pause to continue around the circle, discussing or praying as the notes direct. Use our suggestions as a starting point and add your own questions, prayers, or action plans.

Six sessions

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Finish. As you come to the end of your process, invite participants to identify the one or two large ideas that they hear Pope Francis teaching in that segment of the document. Each participant may hear the text differently; there are no "correct" answers.

Conclude your session with a brief prayer and hospitality.

INTRODUCTION

1 *Those who have a true encounter with Christ find their lives filled with happiness. This is a deep happiness that brings inner emptiness to an end because these Christians are set free from selfishness. They are saved. I want to encourage everyone who experiences this to spread the word, beginning a new chapter in the history of the Church.*

I. DEEP HAPPINESS THAT IS SHARED WITH OTHERS

2 In today's world, we are subject to a blizzard of temptations that lead us away from this authentic happiness. Whenever we become selfish, seeking pleasure and profit only for ourselves, we can no longer hear God's voice. Many baptized Christians are led away from faith by this. They become resentful, angry, and listless. God does not want this for us.

3 So I now invite all Christians throughout the world to pause at this very moment in their lives and allow their hearts to be touched by Christ. Be renewed! Do this daily. I mean this invitation for everyone, and no one should think they are not invited. If you take the risk of giving yourself, heart and soul, to Christ, he will respond each and every time. He never

disappoints. His arms are open. Don't ever stop returning to Christ with your whole heart. Now is the time.

Group or personal process

Discuss: What is your experience of “giving your heart to Christ”? How and when do you do that?

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Action: Pass a cross or other sacred object around the group, person to person. As it comes to each, pray aloud or pray quietly, asking for the grace to offer yourself wholeheartedly to Christ.

4 Throughout human history, God has promised that we would find happiness in the Messiah. The prophets spoke eloquently about this. “God ... will rejoice over you with gladness,” Zephaniah wrote. “He will renew you in his love” (3:17). What a fantastic promise! What tender, parental love this is!

5 Likewise, in the Gospels we read time and again that knowing Christ leads to happiness. Jesus himself promised it. I am teaching you about self-giving love, he said, so that your own happiness may be complete and full. “I have said these things to you,” he said in John 15:11, “so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

6 Some Christians live like it's always Lent! They forget about Easter. I do realize that some people are suffering greatly and happiness seems far away for them. But even in these cases, it is possible to live with self-giving love that leads to happiness.

7 Not everything we need and want will ever be provided to us. We should not think that happiness will happen only when everything is in place and “correct” in our lives. In part, this is because our culture is good

at providing fleeting experiences of pleasure, but is not very able to help people be really happy. Nonetheless, I have seen many people, even in the midst of challenging life situations, keep a simple faith alive and allow God to reveal himself. Remember, our faith leads to an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, and that can happen in any circumstance.

8 Only the encounter with Christ leads us away from selfishness and toward self-giving. Only when we imitate Christ and empty ourselves can we know true happiness. And if we have experienced this ourselves, how can we help but tell others about it? This is the inspiration for what I want to tell you in this letter.

Group or personal process

Discuss: How do you hone and refine the art of dying to yourself through self-giving love in your life? To whom are you called to show this love, and how do you do that concretely? How does the practice of self-emptying lead to happiness for you?

II. HAPPINESS GROWS WHEN WE SHARE OUR FAITH

9 Everyone who has experienced Christ in this personal way reaches out to tell others about it and leads them to Christ as well. In this way, the good around us grows ever larger.

10 When I invite you to become part of this, I'm offering you authentic happiness in your own life. Your life has meaning only insofar as you give it away. This is your true purpose and destiny. I ask you to speak about your faith with great joy!

11 The message that we can be freed from selfishness is not itself new,

but how we announce it can be very fresh and invigorating. In our culture today, it may sound very new, indeed.

12 And even though we are going to have to sacrifice ourselves for this work, we must also realize that, first and foremost, it is Christ acting through us. We ourselves are loved first by God; it is God's love that we offer to others. God asks us to give up everything for him, but at the same time, God gives everything to us.

13 The work of helping people see how to live in Christ flows from our own memory of having been shown this way ourselves. Remember when it happened to you, that first encounter with Christ? The encounter that really moved your own heart? When you speak to others of this, you speak from that wonderful memory.

Group or personal process:

Action: Create a list of those whom you feel would benefit from hearing the call to follow Jesus, imitating his own self-giving love. Be specific on this list and avoid listing large groups. Try to think about people who live near you, and you may decide to place your own name on this list if you want.

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Private prayer: Speak to Jesus Christ in prayer, accepting his grace and power to be one of those who tells others about the happiness of living with this love.

III. SPEAKING OF FAITH IN OUR DAY AND AGE

14 I write this today on behalf of the whole Church, represented by a group of bishops who met to discuss this in October 2012. They pointed out that speaking of faith like this happens in three principal groups.

15 First, there is the group whom we usually see at worship, even those we don't see there very often. Second, there is that group of people who are away from the Church pretty much completely. And third are those who have not yet met or known about Christ. Many of these latter ones are quietly seeking God in their own way. They yearn for faith. We want to attract them to us by living our own faith convincingly. In this regard, we want to develop a "missionary pastoral ministry" in the Church.

16 These bishops asked me to write this appeal. I have sought advice from many, and I have my own views as well. There are many issues involved, and I can't address them all. I also don't think the pope has the only voice speaking about this; local bishops and others also have a voice.

17 I plan to present some guidelines and write about how the Church can be reformed in doing missionary outreach, certain temptations that pastoral leaders face, how it is that the whole Church must do this work, the role of the homily, how to include the poor in society, our desire for peace and dialogue, and the spirituality that motivates us to do this work.

18 I am writing this to encourage you to invite people and welcome them in God's name by every activity in your life.

CHAPTER ONE

The Church's Missionary Transformation

19 *Christ sent us all to speak about faith,
faith that flows from his holy heart.*

I. A CHURCH THAT GOES FORTH

20 We are all called to go beyond our comfort zones in order to invite others to faith. **21.** The happiness we experience comes, like it did for the first disciples, from sharing our faith with others. **22.** We speak a word about faith when appropriate, and God does the rest. We can't control how God's word empowers others. **23.** Because no one is excluded from God's love, we want to tell everyone about it. We need not fear that we will fail, for God is with us in this.

24 We dare to “stand at the crossroads” of our society and let others see what we believe, because God first stood at those crossroads waiting for us and welcoming us with mercy and love. God has forgiven us and we now help others know that. We want to show God’s mercy to all. This happens in people’s daily lives; we must get out of our churches and down onto the streets for this. There we patiently plant seeds; God makes them grow. We want to do this without annoying others or driving them away from us, but with warmth, humor, and happiness.

Group or personal process

Discuss: When the right moment arises in our relationships with others, Pope Francis is asking us to speak about how faith fills our lives with meaning. Give an example of a time when you did this in the past, or a time when you could have but failed to do so.

II. PASTORAL ACTIVITY AND CONVERSION TO CHRIST

25 It’s no longer enough merely to run a well-managed church. **26.** The Church herself must be re-invited to give itself to God. Structures can sometimes hinder us, and we have a lot of structure. Every structure we have must be at the service of the Gospel, or else we should renew it. It was Vatican II that called us to this.

27 I dream of a “missionary option” in the Church, making us more inclusive, more open, and more filled with the desire to go out there and welcome God’s people in through the doors. **28.** A key part of this must be the local parish. The parish must be in real contact with the homes and lives of its people. The parish is a true community of communities; each home is a place where people can be invited to faith. **29.**

Other small communities are also arising today, and we encourage them to stay connected with their parishes.

30 Local churches must always be in the process of renewal and reform in order to stay faithful to the mandate to invite and welcome in God's name. **31.** The local bishop must foster this himself. Sometimes he leads, and other times he simply takes his place among the people of God. He must listen closely to his people. **32.** I, too, as the pope must do this. I am indeed open to suggestions that can help us all be more effective in our work. The whole central office of the Church needs this reform as well; we have had too much centralization, and I see a need to decentralize the Church.

33 In short, we must all abandon old attitudes or the idea that we have tried something once that did not work well. I call on everyone to be bold and creative in finding ways to invite and welcome in God's name. We have to work together to find the means of doing this! Let's rethink the structures, style, and methods of our work. But in all this, let's continue to work closely together as a single, unified Church.

III. FROM THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

34 In our day and age, with lightning-fast communications, certain things we teach may be taken out of context or misunderstood. We should not think that everyone understands the background of our teachings. **35.** It isn't our task to be obsessed with insistently teaching a disjointed set of doctrines. We must concentrate on the essentials, on what is most appealing and beautiful in our message. The rest will follow. **36.** As we taught at Vatican II (Decree on Ecumenism, #11), some of the truths we hold are closer to the heart of the Gospel than others. **37.** Likewise, moral teaching also includes matters that are more central to the

Gospel and those that are less so. Works of love toward one's neighbor are very central, for example. Mercy remains the greatest virtue.

38 Those who speak on behalf of the Church must have balance in this regard. For example, if a homilist speaks repeatedly about temperance but fails to speak about charity or justice, he is out of balance. The same is true when we speak more about law than about grace, more about the structures of the Church than about Christ, or more about the pope than about the Word of God.

39 Those who homilize can know they are faithful to the Gospel if this hierarchy of truths is evident in their words. Before all else, the Gospel invites us into a relationship with the God of love; it invites us to see God in others. If this invitation radiates from what we say, we can trust we are near to the heart of the Gospel and all else will follow. If not, our message becomes dry and lifeless.

IV. A MISSION UNDERTAKEN BY HUMAN BEINGS WITH LIMITS

40 The Church herself must grow in her understanding of what all this means and how to accomplish it. We should consult the social sciences, continue to study modern issues, and pay attention to differing currents of thought. Those who want mere doctrine, pure and simple, will find this challenging. But the Gospel offers inexhaustible riches, and it requires various approaches to embrace them all.

41 We are challenged today to restate the abiding truths of our faith in modern terms. As Pope John XXIII said in his opening address at the Council, "The deposit of the faith is one thing... the way it is expressed is another." The meaning of words changes over time and people don't always hear the truth if we use only the old ways of speaking.

42 Having faith always means dying to self, so some people may never be able to accept it. But when people see us living our faith convincingly, they are better able to follow.

43 Certain of our customs have become out of date today; they aren't understood or appreciated by modern men and women. We should examine these and update them. We should not lay burdens on people by demanding they follow out-of-date practices.

44 Those who pastor others in the faith, guiding them in pastoral ministry, should do so with mercy. The circumstances of one's life may have a great impact on one's ability to follow the precepts of the Church. Mercy. Mercy. It is the way we attract others to the faith. This includes the confessional, which should produce joy, not fear. Affirm every small step a person takes, because God's love is at work in people regardless of their failings.

45 Because passing on the faith happens using human words, actions, and situations, we must be careful not to become rigid or closed off. The Spirit is working even in the "mud of the streets."

V. A MOTHER WITH AN OPEN HEART

46 If we are truly a Church "going forth," then our doors must be open. We must not rush out aimlessly, but act with patience when the time is right. Like the father of the prodigal son, we must always watch and wait.

47 When I say that the doors of the Church should be open, I mean that the doors should, literally, be open to allow anyone moved by the Spirit to pray. They should also be open in the sense that our hearts are open to

anyone who comes to us. This is true for baptism, but also for Eucharist. The Eucharist is not an award for good behavior; it is a “powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.” We should consider the pastoral consequences of this but be bold in our actions. God gives grace; we don’t.

48 If we are to do this work of spreading the faith, there is no doubt that we must make it available to all, and especially to the poor and the sick, to those usually despised and rejected. There is simply no doubt about this.

49 So let us go forth to offer people life in Christ. Teach them the art of self-giving love. I know it will be messy, but, as I have often said to the priests in my native Buenos Aires, I prefer a church that is bruised and dirty but out on the streets to one that is safe and sound, hiding behind its own doors. If anything should bother us, it’s not that the Church is bold and reckless in love, but that so many people are living without the comfort of knowing about the self-giving, self-emptying love of Christ. Our fear, if we are to have a fear, is not that we might go astray but that we might remain shut up in our ancient customs, being harsh judges of others, while the people of God wait at our gates, starving for the food we can give them. As Jesus put it, “Give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37).

Group or personal process

Discuss: The chief way we pass on the faith is in our daily lives, speaking of our own faith when the right moment arises. How can your parish support you in doing this?

What do you think are the main reasons why the Church would “close its doors” to people? Talk about both meanings of that phrase.

Pope Francis dreams of a “missionary option” in the Church (#27 and following). In your own words, what does this dream lead us to do and become?

Action: What is your personal reaction to Pope Francis' message in the first chapter? How will you receive this teaching and allow it to change your life? What concrete steps will you take to follow his teaching and leadership?

Prayer: Passing the cross or other sacred object around your circle once again, offer a prayer to Christ, committing yourself to speak about your faith and to invite others to join the faith, all in God's name.

Twenty-Third
Publications
Sample