

And a Little Child Shall Lead Them

Isa 11:6

Bridging the Divisions Between Us

In collaboration with the Paulist Fathers' Initiative on Polarization



**Small Group Faith Sharing Guide
for Advent 2024**

Advent: The Eye of the Storm

For years, lovers of Christmas have awoken on Christmas day fatigued and over stimulated from weeks of gift buying, card sending, and cookie eating done in the name of the Spirit of Christmas. As wonderful as these activities can be, the sense that we are preparing for the Light of the World to come into our hearts and homes can get lost in translation.

These days, something else is undermining our tidings of comfort and joy besides the traditional Christmas rush. We are living in a highly polarized world where political storms, personal storms, and ecclesial storms swirl around us. Differences of opinion naturally exist within every community, but the mean-spiritedness that characterizes many of our opinions and conversations today is toxic, and light years away from Christian sensibilities. As Fr. Ron Rolheiser puts it, we have become “angry people with a highly selective sense of compassion.”

This Faith Sharing Guide offers an invitation to make Advent the “eye” in the storm of our busy divided world. It creates a place of light winds and fair weather where, together with the members of your faith sharing group, you will spend one hour each of the four weeks of Advent reading scripture and commentaries selected to help you explore how you might become a bridge builder across our differences, and a stakeholder in Isaiah’s prophecy:

*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together,
and a little child shall lead them. Isa 11:6*

Faith Sharing Guidelines

Faith sharing is a unique kind of conversation, so we set aside some of our usual conversational habits in order to allow room for the Spirit.

1. Please try to show up on time. But don't hesitate to quietly join late when you have to, we just won't be able to catch you up as it takes away from the flow of the faith sharing.
2. What is shared in the group is privileged and stays in the group.
3. Everyone's input is valuable, but no one is required to speak.
4. Please only share on the level at which you are comfortable.
5. Please limit your sharing time (two to four minutes) and wait until everyone else has had the opportunity to share before you share again.
6. As a group, we give the moderator permission to gently intervene if someone is speaking for too long, so that everyone has a chance to contribute, and our time together remains balanced and respectful.
7. Only one person speaks at a time.
8. Please, no cross talking, which means no commenting on another person's sharings. We are not here to fix each other. We accept anything said as a gift we hold for the other person. "I" statements are better than "you" statements.
9. Please do not ask for advice. It tends to move the group into "fixing" mode, and takes us away from faith sharing.
10. Please, no side conversations. Value one another by listening.
11. For zoom meetings, please mute your speaker if there is outside noise at your location.
12. Periods of silent are natural and allow the Spirit to work. Resist the urge to fill in the silence unless you have something meaningful to say.

Group Leaders

Thank you for agreeing to facilitate this faith sharing group. Here are a few hints for creating a comfortable environment for prayer and faith sharing.

- Before the first meeting begins, discuss the Faith Sharing Guidelines with the group.
- Reiterate the Guidelines when a new person joins your group, or whenever you feel the group needs a reminder.
- It helps the flow of faith sharing when three people volunteer for to read the readings of the day before you begin.
- Begin each meeting with prayer. (Example offered below).
- It is nice to end each meeting with personal prayer intentions and a closing prayer (example below)
- Gently encourage participation and the sharing of faith. After a period of time you might ask if someone who hasn't had a chance to share would like to speak.
- Be willing to share your own faith experience.
- Honor your group's time commitment. Start and finish on time.
- If the conversation gets off track, gently pull it back to the question at hand.
- Don't feel like you have to get to all of the questions, or that they have to be taken the order they are written. Let the Spirit guide you here.

Opening Prayer for Meetings

Loving God,
be present with us now.
Warm our hearts,
so that we may
listen deeply to one another.
Help each of us trust this sacred space.
Teach us how to listen to difference.
Teach us how to accept the other
so that our faith sharing may bear fruit in our lives
and in our relationships.
We ask this in the name of Emmanuel, God with us. AMEN

Closing Prayer for Meetings

We thank you Lord for nurturing in each of us a disciple's heart.
A heart that rejoices in this Advent preparation.
A heart sustained by your Spirit.
A heart encouraged by these fellow disciples.
Help us be mediums of your grace. AMEN

First Sunday of Advent Increase and Abound in Love for One Another

A Reading from the First Sunday of Advent

1 Thes 3:12—4:2

Brothers and sisters:
May the Lord make you increase and abound in love
for one another and for all,
just as we have for you,
so as to strengthen your hearts,
to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father
at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. Amen.
Finally, brothers and sisters,
we earnestly ask and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that,
as you received from us
how you should conduct yourselves to please God
and as you are conducting yourselves
you do so even more.
For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.
The Word of the Lord

All: Thanks be to God

(A moment of silence)

Living With Contradiction

We must love each one as they are, and not as they are not. This sounds simple and obvious enough. Yet it is surprisingly easy to deceive ourselves and not to recognize the extent to which each person is a mystery, and that we must respect this. Perhaps we once again need to remind ourselves that God is unknowable and inexhaustible, and that if we are all made in the image of God then we too are also ultimately unknowable as well. We must recognize our own inalienable dignity as a God-given gift and respect it.

We need to accept that we are all different. This, which is the message of those personality tests so popular at the moment, is something we could have found already in the Rule of St Benedict. For respect for each individual underlies the whole approach to living with others. It means seeing each single person as a unique creation of God. It means recognizing the worth of each individual. For too often in the history of Christianity theologians and teachers have given us another message, have dwelt on the unworthiness of men and women, their proneness to sin, their worthlessness.

from *Living with Contradiction: An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality*,
by Esther de Waal (Morehouse Publishing)

(A moment of silence)

Bridging the Divide

In 2002, during the height of the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, I worked on the staff of St. Paul the Apostle parish in Los Angeles. June of that year I was quoted in the Los Angeles Times as saying that the scandal could “Mark a seismic shift in the role of the laity in the church,” a statement taken out of context by the reporter, but generally true to my opinion at the time. The next week I received an anonymous letter berating me for the statement and accusing me of being a “feminazi” who had utter disdain for church tradition and supported aborting babies, and gay sex.

I look back on that experience as a great example of how the opinions we form of “the other” are often colored by assumptions and personal prejudices of our own. When we think about how to increase and abound in love for one another within a difficult conversation, it is best to consider the judgements and prejudices we ourselves are bringing to the table. Or, as the Gospel of Matthew teaches us: “*Why do you notice the splinter in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove that splinter from your eye,’ while the wooden beam is in your eye? You hypocrite, remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother’s eye.*” Mt 7:3-5

Claire Henning, D.Min. (catholic-conversations.com)

(A Moment of silence)

Reflection Questions

We are living in a highly polarized world where political storms, personal storms, and ecclesial storms swirl around us. Differences of opinion naturally exist within every community, but the mean-spiritedness that characterizes many of our opinions and conversations today is toxic, and light years away from Christian sensibilities

The second reading (Bridging the Divide) stated that “we must love each one as they are, and not as they are not.” Think of an acquaintance, family member, colleague, or national figure with whom you have strong disagreements (the closer to you personally, the better). Without needing to reveal the person’s name or relationship to you:

1. Are there any characteristics of that person that you find challenging?
2. What attitudes, feelings, or prejudices do you put on this person? Why?
3. What areas of common ground might you have with this person?
4. What one negative attitude might you soften about this person?
5. What stood out to you in the readings today

Personal Prayer Intentions

Let us now offer our personal petitions.

Petitioner: *Please end your petition with, We Pray to the Lord*

Response: **Lord, Hear Our Prayer**

Closing Prayer (p.3)

Second Sunday of Advent Discern What is of Value

A Reading from the Second Sunday of Advent Phil 1:4-6, 8-11

Brothers and sisters:
I pray always with joy in my every prayer for all of you,
because of your partnership for the gospel
from the first day until now.
I am confident of this,
that the one who began a good work in you
will continue to complete it
until the day of Christ Jesus.
God is my witness,
how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.
And this is my prayer:
that your love may increase ever more and more
in knowledge and every kind of perception,
to discern what is of value,
so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,
filled with the fruit of righteousness
that comes through Jesus Christ
for the glory and praise of God.

The Word of the Lord

All: Thanks be to God

(A moment of silence)

Considering Values

As one who has always admired Sandy Koufax's decision not to pitch a World Series game that occurred on Yom Kippur, and one who has watched Chariots of Fire about the Christian athlete who would not run in the Olympics on a Sunday, I very much agree with high school senior Jett Rosen, who reports on how teams at Jewish schools, or teams with many observant Jews, are penalized by elimination from competition on their Sabbath, when they cannot play. This faithful Jewish young man defends the Oakwood Adventist Academy varsity boys' basketball team in Alabama, whose request to move a game to a day other than their Sabbath, was denied. Bravo, again, to these devoted believers, whose allegiance to God's law is more important than winning a game -- a choice, by the way, an American should not be forced to make. But, I have to admit, these two cases prompted me to wonder about our values at our schools and parishes.

When I hear of parents telling the religious education program at the parish that their son won't be coming during basketball season; or when I have Mass at a parish only to see a CYO game going on in the gym, I worry about the signal we're giving our kids.

from *Considering Values*, by Timothy Cardinal Dolan (March 4, 2022)

(A moment of silence)

Bridging the Divide

Values can help bridge the gap between people with different political ideologies and foster understanding of why the other holds their beliefs. Values can even help to identify the common ground between different political views, allowing for a more collaborative approach to solving problems. Values should be the foundation of any political debate. By focusing on values first, we can ensure that our conversations are respectful and productive, regardless of our political differences. This will help to create a more civil and tolerant political discourse, as well as reduce the polarization of our communities.

from *Bridging the Divide: Strategies for Reducing Polarization on the Neighborhood Level*
by John McKnight and Ivis Garcia (resources.depaul.edu)

(A moment of silence)

Reflection Questions

Values can be defined as a person's principles or standards of behavior; one's judgment of what is important in life. The third reading (Bridging the Divide) states that values can be used to bridge the gap between people with different political ideologies and help people to understand why the other side believes what they do.

Here is a list of spiritual values: 1) Beauty, 2) Courage, 3) Dignity, 4) Empathy, 5) Forbearance, 6) Forgiveness, 7) Generosity, 8) Gratitude, 9) Hope, 10) Honesty, 11) Humility, 12) Humor, 13) Joy, 14) Kindness, 15) Love, 16) Patience, 17) Perseverance, 18) Piety, 19) Sincerity, 20) Truthfulness, and 21) Wisdom.

1. Which three values do you consider most important in your life at this time? Or is a value missing that you consider more important?
2. How do your spiritual values help you most when dealing with difficult conversations or experiencing polarizing situations?
3. If God were to wrap up one of these spiritual values and leave it under the tree for you this Christmas, which value would you want to find in the box?
4. Which value(s) do you have in common with someone you currently struggle with in your life?
5. What stood out to you in the readings today?

Personal Prayer Intentions

Let us now offer our personal petitions.

Petitioner: *Please end your petition with, We Pray to the Lord*

Response: **Lord, Hear Our Prayer**

Closing Prayer (p.3)

Third Sunday of Advent Have No Anxiety at All

A Reading from the Third Sunday of Advent

Phil 4:4-7

Brothers and sisters:
Rejoice in the Lord always.
I shall say it again: rejoice!
Your kindness should be known to all.
The Lord is near.
Have no anxiety at all, but in everything,
by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving,
make your requests known to God.
Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding
will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The Word of the Lord

All: Thanks be to God

(A moment of silence)

Be Not Afraid

On Oct. 22, 1978, 43 years ago today, Pope St. John Paul II, then the newly elected Vicar of Christ, looked out at the throng gathered in St. Peter's Square for his inaugural Mass, and urged them: "Be not afraid." These words would become a familiar refrain in his papacy, but in reality, they had long defined his life and would so until his death in 2005. St. John Paul II was fearless. When he defied the Nazis as part of the Polish cultural resistance, when he spoke tirelessly against the evils of Communism, when he forgave his would-be assassin, and when he spent his final years succumbing to illness, his courage never faltered.

For the nearly three decades he led the Catholic Church, John Paul II's bold proclamation of the faith loomed larger than life, a vibrant witness in a world battered by a century of global wars and genocides. His joy and courage never wavered because he was not their source. Christ was. In that first homily of his papacy, he aptly captured the cultural despair of a post-Christian world, and pointed to the antidote: "*So often today man does not know what is within him, in the depths of his mind and heart. So often he is uncertain about the meaning of his life on this earth. He is assailed by doubt, a doubt which turns into despair. We ask you therefore, we beg you with humility and trust, let Christ speak to man. He alone has words of life, yes, of eternal life.*"

from *43 Years Ago Today, John Paul II Urges Us: 'Be Not Afraid'*
by Kelly Marcum, National Catholic Register (Oct. 2021)

(A moment of silence)

Bridging the Divide

The fear problem. We know very little about finding positive solutions to polarized conflicts because how to do so is rarely studied. When scholars study and write about polarization today, they overwhelmingly focus on the problem. “Why are we polarized?” They are keen on analyzing and diagnosing the illness because they assume this will be sufficient to inform remedies. This is a pervasive tendency in all of science – humans tend to prioritize the study of the things we fear.

When tight groups have formed around us-versus-them tribal conflicts, deviating from the in-group in any way – thinking differently, expressing opposition to your group’s attitudes and beliefs, or (God forbid) fraternizing with members of the out-group – can lead to harsh forms of in-group shunning and sanctioning. At a time in our history when social isolation and alienation are incredibly high due to increased fracturing of nuclear families, declines in organized religion, distrust in public institutions, and online addictions, the political and cultural affiliations we do hold tend to become much dearer to us. In this context, the consequences of seeking countercultural solutions or constructive alternatives to the mandated “good group member” actions can be extremely costly.

from *The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization*
by Peter T. Coleman (Columbia University Press)

(A moment of silence)

Reflection Questions

Quoting from the third reading (Bridging the Divide): “At a time in our history when social isolation and alienation are incredibly high due to increased fracturing of nuclear families, declines in organized religion, distrust in public institutions, and online addictions, the political and cultural affiliations we do hold tend to become much dearer to us.”

1. What affiliations do you hold dear in your life?
2. What emotion(s) fuels your attitudes towards those who hold to ideas or affiliations with which you strongly disagree? (e.g. fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, or another)
3. What do you find difficult to hand over to God?
4. What do you find easy to hand over to God?
5. What stood out to you in the readings today?

Personal Prayer Intentions

Let us now offer our personal petitions.

Petitioner: *Please end your petition with, We Pray to the Lord*

Response: **Lord, Hear Our Prayer**

Closing Prayer (p.3)

Fourth Sunday of Advent He Shall Be Peace

A Reading from the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Mi 5:1-4a

Thus says the LORD:
You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah
too small to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel;
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient times.

Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time
when she who is to give birth has borne,
and the rest of his kindred shall return
to the children of Israel.

He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock
by the strength of the LORD,
in the majestic name of the LORD, his God;
and they shall remain, for now his greatness
shall reach to the ends of the earth;
he shall be peace.

The Word of the Lord

All: Thanks be to God

(A moment of silence)

Christmas Shatters Our Expectation

“For centuries, men and women of faith, aware of their helplessness to rectify everything that’s wrong in life, had been praying for God to come to earth as a Messiah, a Savior, to clean up the earth and right all that’s wrong with it. Exactly how this was to happen was perhaps more of an inchoate longing for justice, a hungry hope, than any kind of clear vision, at least until the great Jewish prophets came along.

Eventually prophets like Isaiah began to articulate a vision of what would happen when the Messiah came. In these visions, the Messiah would usher in a “Messianic Age,” a new time, when everything would be made right. There would be prosperity for the poor, healing for the sick, freedom from every type of enslavement, and justice for all (including punishment for the wicked). The poor and the meek would inherit the earth because the long-sought Messiah would simply overpower all evil, drive the wicked off the face of the earth, and make all things right.

And after all those centuries of waiting, of longing, what did we get? A helpless, naked baby, unable to feed himself. That wasn't the way anyone expected this to happen. They had expected a Superhuman, a Superstar, someone whose muscle, intellect, physical stature, invulnerability, and invincibility would simply dwarf all the powers on the planet in a way that there could be no argument, no resistance, no standing against its presence.

That's still the way, mostly, we fantasize how God's power should work in our world...God's power, at least God's power to draw us into intimacy with each other, doesn't normally work through might, muscles, and cool (invulnerability). It works through a lot of things, but it works with a special power through vulnerability and helplessness. Intimacy is predicated on vulnerability. You cannot overpower another person so as to make him or her love you, unless you overpower his or her heart the way an infant does. We can seduce each other through attractiveness, draw admiration through our talents, and intimidate each other through superior strength, but none of these will ultimately provide the basis for a shared community of life for long ... but the powerlessness and innocence of a baby can provide that."

from *Christmas Shatters the Container of Our Expectation*
by Rev. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI (ronrolheiser.com, Dec 21, 2020)

(A moment of silence)

Bridging the Divide

Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice.

Peace results from that order structured into human society by its divine Founder and actualized by men as they thirst after ever greater justice. The common good of humanity finds its ultimate meaning in the eternal law. But since the concrete demands of this common good are constantly changing as time goes on, peace is never attained once and for all but must be built up ceaselessly. Moreover, since the human will is unsteady and wounded by sin, the achievement of peace requires a constant mastering of passions and the vigilance of lawful authority.

But this is not enough. This peace on earth cannot be obtained unless personal well-being is safeguarded, and men freely and trustingly share with one another the riches of their inner spirits and their talents. A firm determination to respect other men and peoples and their dignity, as well as the studied practice of brotherhood are absolutely necessary for the establishment of peace. Hence peace is likewise the fruit of love, which goes beyond what justice can provide.

from *Gaudium et Spes*, #78 Vatican II, 1965

(A moment of silence)

Reflection Questions

We use the word “peace” to mean many things. It often means a kind of freedom. Freedom from: war, civil unrest, emotional turmoil, confrontation, noise, contact with others, even life after death. In the first reading, the prophet Micah predicts that a ruler will come from the backwaters of Judah who will bring peace.

1. How do you understand the peace promised by the prophet?
What kind of peace does this Christmas offer to the world?
2. In the Vatican II reading we are told that “since the concrete demands of this common good are constantly changing as time goes on, peace is never attained once and for all but must be built up ceaselessly.” Where do you see peace “under construction” in our world today?
3. How does this year’s celebration/remembrance of the birth of the Christ child make you feel?
4. What are you taking away from these four weeks of faith-sharing?
5. Has your view of polarization changed from being in this faith-sharing group? If yes, how?

Personal Prayer Intentions

Let us now offer our personal petitions.

Petitioner: *Please end your petition with, We Pray to the Lord*

Response: **Lord, Hear Our Prayer**

Closing Prayer (p.3)

Merry Christmas!

The Rule of Immanuel

1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

2 And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,

4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

5 Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,



and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.

7 The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.

9 They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah 11: 1-9



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