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## How to Use This Guide

If you want to understand why we celebrate the Mass, the natural place to begin is the Bible.

In this book we will read from Scripture to learn about the Mass. As we proceed, we will explore connections between what we find in Scripture and our own lives.

Our approach will be a *guided discovery*. It will be *guided* because we all need support in understanding Scripture and reflecting on what it means for our lives. Scripture was written to be understood and applied in the community of faith, so we read the Bible *for* ourselves but not *by* ourselves. Even if we are reading alone rather than in a group, we need resources that help us grow in understanding. Our approach is also one of *discovery*, because each of us needs to encounter Scripture for ourselves and consider its meaning for our life. No one can do this for us.

This book is designed to give you both guidance for understanding and tools for discovery.

The introduction on page 6 will guide your reading by providing background material and helping you get oriented to the subject of our exploration. Each week, a brief “Background” section will give you context for the reading, and the “Exploring the Theme” section that follows the reading will bring out the meaning of the Scripture passages. Supplementary material between sessions will offer further resources for understanding.

The main tool for discovery is the “Questions for Reflection and Discussion” section in each session. The first questions in this section are designed to spur you to notice things in the text, sharpen your powers of observation, and read for comprehension. Other questions suggest ways to compare the people, situations, and experiences in the biblical texts with your own life and the world today—an important step toward grasping what God is saying to you through the Scripture and what your response might be. Choose the questions you think will work best for you. Preparing to answer all the questions ahead of time is highly recommended.

We suggest that you pay particular attention to the final question each week, labeled “Focus Question.” This question points to an especially important issue about the Mass raised by

the reading. You may find it difficult to answer this focus question briefly. Do leave enough time for everyone in the group to discuss it!

Other sections encourage you to take an active approach to your Bible reading and discussion. At the start of each session, “Questions to Begin” will help you break the ice and start talk flowing. Often these questions are light and have only a slight connection to the reading. After each Scripture reading, there is a suggested time for a “First Impression.” This gives you a chance to express a brief, initial, personal response to the text. Each session ends with a “Prayer to Close” that suggests a way of expressing your response to God.

**How long are the discussion sessions?** We’ve assumed you will have about an hour and twenty minutes. If you have less time, you’ll find that most of the elements can be shortened somewhat.

**Is homework necessary?** You will get the most out of your discussions if you read the weekly material and prepare your answers to the questions in advance of each meeting. If participants are not able to prepare, read the “Exploring the Theme” sections aloud at the points where they appear.

**What about leadership?** You don’t have to be an expert in the Bible to lead a discussion. Choose one or two people to act as discussion facilitators, and have everyone in the group read “Suggestions for Bible Discussion Groups” (page 92) before beginning.

**Does everyone need a guide? a Bible?** Everyone in the group will need their own copy of this book. It contains the biblical texts, so a Bible is not absolutely necessary—but each person will find it useful to have one. You should have at least one Bible on hand for your discussions. (See page 96 for recommendations.)

Before you begin, take a look at the suggestions for Bible discussion groups (page 92) or individuals (page 95).

## **This Thing We Do**

***“Do this in remembrance of me.” Luke 22:19***

It's spring. Looking ahead to summer, my son and his wife are hoping to have a barbecue with their children. Nothing fancy, probably some spareribs, potato salad, and soda on the patio behind the house. To Dominic, Heidi, and the children it won't seem ordinary, though. Dominic's an army doctor. Right now, he's deployed. On a Saturday afternoon some months from now, when, God willing, he's shooing the dogs away from the potato salad and giving the children one of his typically long answers to a short question while turning ribs on the grill, the very ordinariness of it all will seem far from ordinary. The fragrant curl of smoke, the familiar male voice, the usual scramble for seats at the picnic table—every detail will carry a weight of meaning: Dad is home; the family's together again.

If you think about it, what we do at Mass is fairly ordinary. There are no Olympic displays of endurance and skill; no blazing, computer-generated, video entertainments; just folks standing and sitting, reciting prayers and listening. We kneel, which is a bit unusual but requires no special training. Some of us sing, but the Metropolitan Opera we're not, or even the Grand Ole Opry. There is some walking back and forth and a little eating. Yet what an immense weight of meaning these simple actions bear!

In the Mass, Jesus Christ makes himself present to us. Consider who he is: the eternal wisdom through whom God brought all things into existence, the Word made flesh—God in human form. Jesus lived his whole human life in attentiveness to his heavenly Father; then he offered himself completely to the Father on a cross, rose in triumph over death, and reigns now in glory. In the Mass, Jesus gives us access to his giving of self, his death-conquering resurrection, his entry into God's presence in heaven. Jesus renews our relationship with him by making himself our food and drink.

The Mass, in a famous Catholic phrase, is the “source and summit of the Christian life.” To participate in it is to get to the center of God's relationship with the human race and to expose ourselves to powers of personal transformation more profound than any others. In the Mass, God draws us into the life of his Son, making us “participants of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

Our low-key actions on a Sunday morning seem staggeringly out of proportion to the immensity of the unseen realities.

Sometimes, as I look around at my fellow parishioners at Mass and think about what we're engaged in, I feel a bit dizzy—the way a passenger belowdecks might feel when his eyes tell him the cabin is level and steady, but his inner ear tells him the ship is pitching in a heavy sea.

**The Mass is the source and summit** of Christian life because it renews our contact with Jesus. If we wish to deepen our understanding of the Mass, the starting point is to ponder Jesus' role in God's plans. The primary source of insight into God's relationship with the human race is the Bible. The biblical story is long and complex, but its outline can be stated briefly. God created the human race intending that we would use our lives and the good things of earth to grow to maturity in companionship with him. We humans, however, chose a different path. Refusing to accept our lives with thankfulness to God and to live according to God's purposes, we preferred sin in various forms—selfishness, idolatry, injustice. God, however, did not accept our refusal as the end of the story. A prayer in the Mass summarizes the sweep of God's action:

You formed man in your own image  
and entrusted the whole world to his care,  
so that in serving you alone, the Creator,  
he might have dominion over all creatures.  
And when through disobedience he had lost your friendship,  
you did not abandon him to the domain of death.  
For you came in mercy to the aid of all,  
so that those who seek might find you.  
Time and again you offered them covenants  
and through the prophets  
taught them to look forward to salvation.

And you so loved the world, Father most holy,  
that in the fullness of time  
you sent your Only Begotten Son to be our Savior.  
Made incarnate by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the Virgin Mary,  
he shared our human nature  
in all things but sin.