

“Call to Forgiveness and Life through Small Group Ministry”

Today’s readings are challenging; they highlight one of the most difficult themes that Jesus taught and lived: forgiveness. In our own lives, when we experience being wronged, and often the ongoing consequences of an injustice being done to us, our hearts can almost naturally default to what Sirach described in today’s first reading: *to hugging hateful things like wrath or anger*. We do this as we cope with the pain of betrayal, the shattering of dreams, and the realities of how our lives have changed due to injustice. It is supernatural, to begin to let go and to live in the freedom that Jesus promises us and that only Jesus can give. For if we keep hugging onto the anger and wrath, we instead live a life of misery and imprisonment to what has befallen us.

Forgiveness is not the only difficult teaching that Jesus gives to His followers. St. Paul in today’s second reading is likewise challenging: *inviting us to live not for ourselves but for God*. These guidelines for the Christian life have never been easy to live out, but as our culture moves from its Christian grounding, they can become even more difficult to put into practice. This can leave us wondering questions like: how can we come to better understand and live like what Jesus taught?

While there are probably multiple answers to these questions, one great way to be supported in living out the difficult aspects of our faith, and helping those around us, *is by participation in a small group*, shared growth. To have sisters and brothers in Christ in our lives with whom we can walk the Christian journey on a regular basis; with whom we can share struggles; with whom we can receive encouragement to do the right thing when tempted to act on to ungodly thinking. Our Archbishop Hebda realizes the important role that small groups can play an important role in helping us live as faithful Catholics and to provide a safe place for people who don’t yet know Jesus to come to know Him and live their faith.

As a result, our Archbishop is asking all the parishes in the Archdiocese, including ours, to *begin the small group ministry*. After 4 rounds of consultations with laity and clergy, and the resulted voting at the Synod Assembly of last year/Pentecost, he made the conclusion *that all parishes would have a small group ministry begun by Ash Wednesday 2024*. He asked each pastor to name a *team of 12* parishioners and

staff, (SET) and this Team has been preparing through the Catechetical Institute's School of Discipleship and were commissioned to take some initial logistical steps.

Now is time to *prepare leaders for the various small groups* that will begin during Lent. The SET have thus been inviting fellow parishioners to participate this fall series of training to be potential leaders, starting Sept. 28 in our parish, with day/evening sessions. If you are among those who have already been asked to participate in this leadership formation, *I thank those who have already said yes. I am confident that there are others in our parish who could make small group leaders.* My hope is that all parishioners will take advantage of the Lenten opportunity to begin to walk the Catholic faith in a deeper way by being part of a small group, guided by those who go through the training this fall.

The goal is that *no one will be leading their group on their own, but will have the support of other trained team members.* The **topics** discussed in the small groups can vary greatly, from Bible studies to marriage preparation, to friends sharing the faith, to service-oriented groups. This flexibility allows groups, especially as they gain experience, to focus on *topics of interest to them*, and the parish to have a wide variety of small groups, rather than a narrow range of options.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, as we face not only the challenges of life but also the challenging teachings of Jesus on how to live as his disciples, let us be open to consider walking in a new and deeper way with our fellow parishioners through small groups.

In particular, let us be open to the question: is God inviting me, personally, to take a step into the deep, by learning how to lead small groups? To some, this invitation may seem as challenging as forgiving someone who hurt us, even though we might know deep inside we need to do so. To others, it might bring the joy evident in St. Paul's message of living for the Lord, not for ourselves.

For while Small Group leadership may not be what God is asking of you, there is some service to which you are called. When we all embrace that to what we are called, we will see an incredible renewal in our parish, and in our Archdiocese. Kindly refer to our weekly Bulletin for all the details. God's Blessings! – Fr. James