

As I Have Loved You

*A Resource for
Small Group Faith Sharing*

By Christopher J. Ruff, M.A., S.T.L.

- Discipleship Series -

Novo Millennio Press

As I Have Loved You

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Foreword

In the summer of 2006, Christopher Ruff, director of the Office of Ministries and Social Concerns for our diocese, came to me with a proposal. He wanted to develop a diocesan small group faith-sharing program that would take the typical “Bible study” ingredients of prayer, reflective study and fellowship, and add one more—loving service.

Chris felt too many Catholics saw ministry to the suffering and needy as belonging only to Church social justice committees and institutions like Catholic Charities, with their own role reduced to giving these groups financial support. Of course it is true that Jesus tells the story of a Samaritan who gave money to an innkeeper for the care of a beaten man—but not before compassion had moved the Samaritan personally to clean the man’s wounds with oil and wine and to lift him onto his own animal to bring him to that inn.

With this kind of love of neighbor in mind, Chris looked for a faith-sharing resource that would combine a prayerful, contemplative spirit with the universal call to serve Christ in “the least of his brethren.” He wanted to find something that penetrated to the heart of the Gospel but that was

concise, readable and workable for people with busy lives. Even the vital service component had to be manageable and broad enough to include various kinds of service. In the end, Chris decided to write his own resource, on his own time so he could publish it. He then wrote a second book, with a third in the works and more planned.

The response in the Diocese of La Crosse has been extraordinary.

In what was supposed to be a small pilot phase in Lent of 2007, over one thousand people in more than thirty parishes took part (in our modest Wisconsin diocese of 165 parishes). Concluding surveys reflected great enthusiasm and more than 95% said they wished to continue with the next resource. As the program was made available to the entire diocese with the second book in the fall of 2008, nearly two thousand people joined groups in close to one hundred parishes.

This expanding set of faith-sharing resources is aptly named the Discipleship Series. I am seeing it form disciples in our diocese—integral and authentic disciples growing in love of God and love of neighbor. It is my hope that in the planting and nurturing brought about through this Discipleship Series, we will look forward to a harvest of apostolic works. I

recommend it wholeheartedly to individuals, groups, parishes and other dioceses that wish to foster a deeper discipleship in Christ, so that the surrounding world may be moved to say, as it did of the first Christians: “See how they love one another!”

Most Rev. Jerome E. ListECKi
Bishop of La Crosse

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Finally, and most of all, I would like to thank my wife Clare, whose love for Christ shines out, and who has been so patient with my late nights on this project.

Christopher Ruff

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Introduction

In twenty years of parish and diocesan work in the Church, I have experienced nothing so powerful as small group faith sharing for personal and community renewal.

Certainly the center of our Christian life is the Mass, the Eucharist, but that does not remove the human need to form “family” clusters, joining together and lifting up minds and hearts. It is my experience that such groups, if run with a certain simplicity and respect for busy schedules, become woven into the very fabric of life. Faith penetrates homes and friendships, and the Sunday Eucharist itself is profoundly enriched. These groups often remain together indefinitely.

The goals of the Discipleship Series of faith-sharing resources are to provide a framework for people to draw closer to Jesus in prayer and conversion, to share the treasures of our faith, to grow in bonds of friendship, and to serve Christ in others. In short:

- Prayer
- Reflection
- Fellowship
- Service

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The first three components are common to virtually all faith-sharing resources. The fourth component, service, is included in the conviction that we are not truly disciples of Christ until we take seriously his words: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (*Matthew 25:40*). Clearly the early Christian communities embraced this call, as witnessed in the words of the surrounding pagans: “See how they love one another!”

This resource contains six brief sessions. The materials for each session include Scripture passages, commentary, real-life anecdotes and illustrations, relevant quotes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, excerpts from papal writings, and questions for group discussion. Each session also opens and closes with prayer.

Finally, while this resource has been designed for faith-sharing groups, it could be very fruitful for individual use as well.

May God bless you as you go forward in his name, that you might experience the fullness of Christ’s joy! (*cf., John 15:11*).

Christopher Ruff

How to Use This Book

The Discipleship Series of faith-sharing materials aims to be simple and flexible. What follows is everything you need to know to move forward:

Establishing and Running One or More Groups

- Through personal invitation or parish announcements, form one or more small groups (5-12 people each).
- If established for Lent, the groups should meet weekly. Otherwise, once a month tends to be more workable for most people's schedules. Typical length for a session is about 90 minutes. Whatever time frame is established, it should be rigorously respected.
- Each group should have a facilitator. It can be the same person at each meeting, or the facilitator role can rotate.
- The job of the facilitator is not to be an expert in the material or to do a lot of talking. Rather, it is to start and end the meeting on time, to help keep things moving and on topic, and to foster a friendly, supportive environment in which everyone feels invited to contribute.

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- The group members decide where they would like to meet. It is ideal to hold the sessions in each other's homes since a key goal is to bring faith into daily life. If this is not workable, a room on church grounds is fine, or some combination of the two.
- Each member is expected to read the material prayerfully ahead of the session, jotting a few notes in response to the "Questions for Discussion."
- The session begins with the Prayer to the Holy Spirit or some other appropriate prayer so that hearts may be opened to God's presence.
- The group members then read aloud the material for that session, taking turns reading a paragraph or small section. This pattern should continue all the way through the discussion questions.
- When there are about ten minutes left in the allotted schedule, it is time to proceed to the "Group Prayers of Intercession," even if the group has not finished all the discussion questions.
- The prayers of intercession are intended to be spontaneous prayer intentions. They direct the power of prayer to various needs and simultaneously deepen the spirit of fellowship in the group. Conclude with the "Closing Prayer."

- The session should end on time, even if members are eager to keep going. This is vital for the health and longevity of the group. It is good to follow with fifteen or twenty minutes of social time for those who are able to stay. Simple refreshments are a nice touch, with emphasis on the word simple; otherwise, people feel pressure to keep up with high expectations.

The Service Component

- The Service Component distinguishes this program from many other faith-sharing approaches. It is anticipated that group members will devote an hour or two to some form of service between sessions (if meetings are weekly, this could be an hour or two each month). The service may be carried out individually or together with others.
- Service can take many forms, but it should come from the heart. Certainly service to the poor, the sick, the elderly, the homebound, the homeless, etc., has always had a privileged place for Christ's followers.

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- Some may already be devoting a great deal of time to service. In that case, it is enough to consciously “dedicate” some portion of that service to the group’s communal effort and spirit.
- Each set of “Questions for Discussion” includes one that touches on the component of service. This is to keep alive the awareness of the importance of the service aspect, which however is done on the “honor system” (with no one watching over anyone else’s shoulder).

Group Etiquette

- Pray for the members of your group between sessions.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Be a good listener and encourage everyone to contribute to the discussion, without anyone monopolizing. Members that are more talkative should allow everyone a chance to respond before they speak a second time.
- Love your neighbor by speaking charitably and refraining from any kind of gossip.
- Be on time, come prepared, and actively take part in discussion and prayer.
- Take seriously the service component so that you may be a loving (and always humble) witness to the others in your group.
- Be open and expect God's action in your life and prayer—expect to be changed!

Recommended prayer to start each session:

Prayer to the Holy Spirit

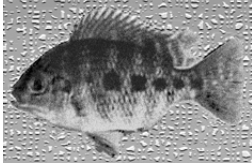
**Come Holy Spirit,
Fill our hearts with the fire of your love.**

**Draw us near to Jesus,
so that we may witness to his presence
in every moment of our lives.**

**Renew us, so that our homes, parishes,
neighborhoods and world
may be transformed into the heavenly
Father's kingdom on earth,
where love and mercy reign.**

Amen.

Session 1



Awakening: The Call of Jesus

Jesus in the Scriptures

The Apostle Peter and Awakening / Conversion / Mission

While the people pressed upon [Jesus] to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret. And he saw two boats by the lake; but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

And when he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I

will let down the nets.” And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men.” And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:1-11.)

Soak in the Word.

Two Minutes of Silence.

Reflect . . .

There are three vital stages of growth that should exist in the life of a committed Christian:

- **Awakening:** Who is Christ and what is my relationship to him?
- **Conversion:** To “convert” comes from Latin and means “to turn.” How do I renounce sin and turn radically to Christ, becoming his disciple?
- **Mission:** How can I help bring the love and truth of Christ to others?

It is interesting that in the Bible account of Simon Peter and the great catch of fish, we see evidence of all three of these stages.

Awakening: At the beginning of the account, Simon is washing his nets after a frustrating night of fishing when Jesus asks him to let him teach the crowd from his boat. So Simon puts out from shore and presumably sits next to Jesus while he teaches. What does Jesus teach? The account doesn't tell us, but we know the words of the Son of God penetrate and awaken the hearts of those who are open to the Gospel. Something must be stirring in Peter as he listens to Jesus, because when the miraculous catch of fish occurs, he . . .

Conversion: . . . falls to his knees and says, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” We are so used to reading these words that we may not reflect on the strangeness of the reaction. Why doesn’t Peter jump up and down for joy, embrace Jesus, celebrate? Why does his attention suddenly go to his sinfulness? Perhaps because he has been deeply moved by the person of Jesus and his teachings, and senses that he is standing in the presence of extraordinary holiness. Perhaps he feels humbled and even ashamed by contrast, prompting him to want to step away from this radiant light that clashes with the darkness he perceives in his own soul.

Mission: But Jesus tells him not to be afraid, that “from now on you will be catching men.” And Peter puts his trust in Jesus, in spite of his own weakness and sinfulness. In fact, the account tells us that he and James and John “left everything and followed him.” With the assistance of the Holy Spirit, these men and the other Apostles would become the first evangelizers for Christ.

The Gospels show us that Peter would continue to “awaken,” to grow in his awareness and understanding of Jesus.

With his volatile and unreliable nature, he also had much opportunity for continued “conversion,”

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climaxing in his tearful repentance when he denied Christ three times following Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Finally, we can all draw encouragement from the fact that this flawed and sinful man ultimately embraced his "mission" as a fervent disciple of Jesus Christ, a powerful evangelizer, the first Pope, and a martyr for the Faith.

Jesus in the Life of His People

Mission Hollywood

Peter, the rough fisherman, was brought to his knees by Jesus' call. He became keenly aware of his sinfulness, his unworthiness, yet Jesus didn't hesitate to call him to a new life and to entrust him with a great mission.

Jesus continues to work in this way. Witness how he touched the life of Eduardo Verástegui, a Mexican pop and television star who made his way to Hollywood in search of money, pleasure and stardom. Stunningly handsome, Eduardo had landed the leading role in *Chasing Papi*, a major motion picture. But he needed to improve his English for the part, so he began working with a tutor.

Eduardo's tutor turned out to be a devout Catholic, and she began to ask him questions like, "Who is God in your life?" "How are you using your talents?" "Do you recognize that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?"

When Eduardo told her that he was a Christian and that he loved God, she asked him how this could be, given his self-centered celebrity lifestyle and the kind of acting roles he was taking. Eduardo resisted

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her loving challenges as long as he could, but one day he found himself alone, thinking about her questions, and suddenly his defenses came crashing down and he realized she was right.

He remembers, “I fell to my knees and started crying like I’d never cried before, and I kept saying, ‘Please forgive me.’”

Eduardo made up his mind no longer to accept the kind of Hollywood roles that had typically come his way—roles that stereotyped Latino men as liars, drug dealers or womanizers. “I realized that instead of using my talents to serve and to contribute to a better world, I had been poisoning society by the projects I was involved in.” He saw that Hollywood was drawn to the “dark side” of human experience, and instead he “wanted to light a candle” of beauty and hope.

Eduardo credits his conversion to his mother’s prayers, recounting that she had said to his father, “Eduardo is lost to us, my words don’t touch him anymore. But if my words don’t touch him, one day my prayers will.” Eduardo believes that is exactly what happened, saying, “Nothing is more powerful than the prayers of a mother.”

Soon after this conversion experience, Eduardo

went to a priest, Fr. Juan Rivas, for confession and to seek direction. He began attending daily Mass. He told the priest that he thought he should give up acting and make a mission trip to the jungles of Brazil. The priest told him that Hollywood was a worse “jungle” and needed missionaries even more than Brazil.

But how would he make a living? Where would he find movie roles he could accept?

Eduardo went three years without acting, and it became a struggle just to pay the rent. But Fr. Rivas had told him that God would send like-minded people his way and help him to see the path ahead. Indeed, in 2004 he met two other men, Leo Severino and Alejandro Monteverde, who were in the entertainment business and who, having come back to their own Catholic faith, were eager to do something worthy and beautiful. The “Three Amigos,” as they called themselves, worked together with a tiny budget to create the movie *Bella*, a beautiful, life-affirming film that won the 2006 Toronto Film Festival and became a box office success. Even more importantly, a number of women in crisis pregnancies have said that *Bella*, which has a pro-life, pro-adoption theme, moved them to turn away from scheduled abortions and to choose life for their babies.

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What was true for St. Peter will no doubt prove true for Eduardo Verástegui—there will be continuing opportunities for awakening, conversion and mission. But already Eduardo evidences a radical commitment to his new life and purpose. As he puts it, “Not only did God forgive me, he made me a new man and he became the center of my life—my Savior, my Creator, my Manager, my Everything.”

(For more information on Eduardo Verástegui and the movie *Bella*, visit www.bellamoviesite.com.)

Catechism of the Catholic Church

1432 - The human heart is heavy and hardened. God must give man a new heart.¹ Conversion is first of all a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to him. . . . It is in discovering the greatness of God's love that our heart is shaken by the horror and weight of sin and begins to fear offending God by sin and being separated from him.

¹ Cf. *Ezek* 36:26-27.

Questions for Discussion

1. As Jesus taught from Peter's boat and led him to the great catch of fish, Peter was "awakened" to who Jesus was. When and how are you most aware of the presence of Jesus in your life?

Session 1 - Awakening: The Call of Jesus

2. Peter was drawn to conversion when Jesus filled his empty net. As you look at your own life, have there been times when frustration or emptiness—or just the realization that earthly things can't fully satisfy you—have prompted you to look more deeply to Christ as the answer? Discuss.

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3. Imagine that Jesus appears to you one day, calls you by name and says, “I know you, I know your good qualities, your weaknesses and your sinfulness, and I’ve got a mission for you. I want you to help me ‘catch fish,’ catch souls, for the Kingdom of Heaven. You will need to be purified along the way, but trust me and follow me.”

- How would you feel? Would you be willing? What would be some of the steps you would want to take to get ready?

- But wait—do you think this personal call from Jesus to you may have already taken place? Think about it and discuss.

Session 1 - Awakening: The Call of Jesus

4. Peter was a fisherman, with a fisherman's industriousness and determination. Jesus was able to build upon those gifts, making him a "fisher of men." What are some of your gifts and passions that God can use in his service and in the service of your neighbor?

Group Prayers of Intercession

8 to 10 minutes

Closing Prayer

Psalm 139

LORD, you have probed me, you know me:
you know when I sit and stand; you understand my
thoughts from afar.

My travels and my rest you mark; with all my
ways you are familiar.

Even before a word is on my tongue, LORD, you
know it all.

Behind and before you encircle me and rest your
hand upon me.

Such knowledge is beyond me, far too lofty for me
to reach.

Where can I hide from your spirit? From your
presence, where can I flee?

If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I lie
down in Sheol, you are there too.

Session 1 - Awakening: The Call of Jesus

If I fly with the wings of dawn and alight beyond
the sea,

Even there your hand will guide me, your right
hand hold me fast.

If I say, “Surely darkness shall hide me, and night
shall be my light”—

Darkness is not dark for you, and night shines as
the day. Darkness and light are but one.

You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my
mother’s womb. . . .

My very self you knew; . . .

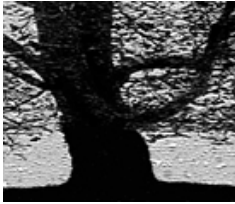
Probe me, God, know my heart; try me, know my
concerns.

See if my way is crooked, then lead me in the
ancient paths.

(vv. 1-14, 23-24.)

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Session 2



Conversion: Cause for Rejoicing

Jesus in the Scriptures

The Joy of Conversion

[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way.

And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it they all murmured, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a

Session 2 - Conversion: Cause for Rejoicing

sinner." And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold."

And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost."
(Luke 19:1-10.)

Soak in the Word.

Two Minutes of Silence.

Reflect . . .

Many of us may associate conversion first of all with a spirit of repentance, of sorrow for sin. Of course, true conversion cannot take place without repentance and the will to reform, but the story of Zaccheus shows us that what is at the very heart of conversion is first of all something else. For if, as has been noted, to convert means “to turn” away from sin and toward God, it is the turning toward that has primacy. In fact, it’s what gives meaning and motivation to turning away from sin in the first place.

How do we see this manifested in the story of Zaccheus? Notice that the first emotion attributed to him when Jesus calls out to him is not pain and sorrow, but joy in having been invited into friendship with Christ. And it is as a consequence of hearing this invitation and turning toward the loving Christ who extends it, that Zaccheus reflects on his own sinfulness and resolves to turn away from it, righting his wrongs through acts of reparation.

It is in beholding and turning toward the glorious light of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, that we become aware of the darkness of sin in our lives and are moved to want to change. If the focus were only on

Session 2 - Conversion: Cause for Rejoicing

our own sinfulness, we might easily be thrown into depression or even despair. But if we first catch sight of Christ's radiant beauty, if we "taste and see that the Lord is good" (*Psalm 34:8*), then we can face and repent of our sins with a sense of hope and even joy. Zaccheus, in his joyful and humble encounter with Christ, was far more open to conversion than the grumbling bystanders in their self-righteousness.

Jesus in the Life of His People

The Joyful Breakthrough of Grace

St. Augustine, who lived in the Fourth Century, is regarded as one of the greatest saints in Church history. He is also a “Father” and “Doctor” of the Church because of his profound influence on the articulation of Christian doctrine as it took precise shape in the early centuries.

But Augustine was not always so holy. Indeed, he caused his mother St. Monica quite a lot of worry and tears, and she never stopped praying for him. He had a mistress as a youth and fathered a child by the age of eighteen. He was also proud and ambitious, moving to Milan (the “big city”) to make a name for himself as an orator and philosopher. And in this he succeeded.

But despite his celebrity status and much dabbling in the latest philosophical trends, he was left with a feeling of restlessness that nothing seemed able to satisfy.

At last, it seems, the prayers of his mother were answered in the person of St. Ambrose, Bishop of

Session 2 - Conversion: Cause for Rejoicing

Milan, who witnessed by word and example to Christ and the Gospel. After much hesitation and painful wrestling with the vices he had developed and found hard to break, Augustine finally opened himself to true and deep conversion. This conversion brought him overwhelming joy, which he expressed in the following poetic passage from his *Confessions*:

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. . . . Created things kept me from you. . . . You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace (X, 27, 38).

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Catechism of the Catholic Church

1 - God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. . . .

142 - . . . “[T]he invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends, and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company.”²

² *Dei Verbum* 2; cf. *Col* 1:15; *1 Tim* 1:17; *Ex* 33:11; *Jn* 15:14-15; *Bar* 3:38 (Vulg.).

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you think the secular world looks at conversion, and religion in general, as a source of joy? Why or why not?

2. When God approaches us in the midst of our own sinfulness, why should we feel joy and hope? Does this mean that painful feelings like guilt are bad?

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3. When you think of conversion, is your first impulse to think more of the turning away from sin, or the turning toward God? Discuss the reasons for your answer.

4. How does serving others bring joy?

Session 2 - Conversion: Cause for Rejoicing

5. What does this Bible passage reveal about Jesus, about Zaccheus, and about the grumbling bystanders? What lessons can we draw from it?

6. In your spiritual life, your life of faith, can you recall some moments of great joy that you might share?

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7. If Jesus were speaking to you right now, what could he tell you that would give you the greatest possible joy?

Group Prayers of Intercession

8 to 10 minutes

Closing Prayer

Lord God, living and true,
You are love and charity, you are wisdom,

you are humility, you are patience,
you are beauty, you are sweetness,
you are safety, you are rest, you are joy. . .
you are our life everlasting,
great and wonderful Lord,
all powerful God, merciful Savior!

Amen.

(Brief excerpt from a Prayer of Praise of St. Francis of Assisi.)