

The Greatest of These is Love

*A Resource for
Small Group Faith Sharing*

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

- Discipleship Series -

Novo Millennio Press

The Greatest of These is Love

Novo Millennio Press
PO Box 160
La Crescent, MN 55947
www.novomill.com

Nihil obstat: Rev. Samuel A. Martin, S.T.L.
Censor Librorum

Imprimatur: Jerome E. ListECKI, D.D., J.C.D.
Bishop of La Crosse
Nov. 1, 2008

The *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* agree with the contents, opinions, or statements expressed.

Copyright © 2008 by Christopher Ruff.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any manner whatsoever, except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The Catholic Edition of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1965, 1966 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for use in the United States of America copyright © 1994, United States Catholic Conference, Inc. - Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used with Permission.

Cover art:
El Greco, *St. Paul*, 1610-14.
Museo del Greco, Toledo, Spain.
Image licensed by B.P.A. Fine Art, FL.

Graphics and Design:
Alice J. Andersen
www.alicejandersen.com.

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 2007, 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.

Most Rev. Jerome E. Listecki
Bishop of La Crosse

Acknowledgments

I would like gratefully to acknowledge the tremendous encouragement and support I have received from Bishop Jerome ListECKI in the undertaking of this project.

I would also like to thank Alice Andersen for her skilled editing and design.

Finally, and most of all, I would like to thank my wife Clare, whose love for Christ shines out, and who continues to show great patience with my late nights at the keyboard.

Christopher Ruff

Table of Contents

Introduction (page 9)

How to Use This Book (page 12)

Biographical Sketch of St. Paul (page 17)

Year of St. Paul – Prayer of Pope Benedict XVI
(page 20)

Opening Prayer to the Holy Spirit (page 21)

Session 1 - Amazing Grace (page 22)

The Lord in His Scriptures – The Conversion of Saul
Pope Benedict XVI Quote and Catechism n. 448
The Lord in the Life of His People – An Unlikely Apostle
Questions for Discussion
Closing Prayer – Ephesians 1:3-5;7-12

Session 2 - We Are One Body (page 42)

*The Lord in His Scriptures – Many Members, One Spirit,
One Lord*
Pope Benedict XVI Quote and Catechism n. 2045
*The Lord in the Life of His People – A Broken Man Becomes
a Beacon of Light*
Questions for Discussion
Closing Prayer – Cardinal John Henry Newman

Session 3 - The Greatest of These is Love (page 60)

*The Lord in His Scriptures – Paul's Tribute to the Highest
Gift*
Pope Benedict XVI Quote and Catechism n. 1823
*The Lord in the Life of His People – Mother Teresa's Legacy
of Love*
Questions for Discussion
Closing Prayer – Inspired by St. Faustina Kowalska

The Greatest of These is Love

Session 4 - He Chooses the Lowly (page 80)

*The Lord in His Scriptures – The Foolish Shame the Wise
Pope Benedict XVI Quote and Catechism n. 544*

*The Lord in the Life of His People – A Little Child Shall
Lead Them*

Questions for Discussion

Closing Prayer – Prayer to St. Maria Goretti

Session 5 - For the Sake of the Gospel (page 98)

*The Lord in His Scriptures – Embracing the Heart of a
Servant*

Pope Benedict XVI Quote and Catechism nn. 24, 25

*The Lord in the Life of His People – I Make Myself a Leper
with the Lepers to Gain All to Jesus Christ*

Questions for Discussion

Closing Prayer – Prayer to Blessed Damien of Molokai

Session 6 - Transformed by His Cross (page 116)

*The Lord in His Scriptures – Nothing Can Separate Us from
the Love of Christ*

Pope Benedict XVI Quote and Catechism n. 2844

*The Lord in the Life of His People – Forgiveness Lights a
Path of Hope*

Questions for Discussion

*Closing Prayer – For Those Who Suffer for the Name of
Christ*

Appendix – Suggestions for Service (page 134)

Introduction

Welcome to *The Greatest of These is Love*, part of the Discipleship Series of faith-sharing resources.

The aim of this book, and of the series in general, is to foster shared prayer and reflection that bears fruit in loving action; in that it differs from a linear, more academic “Bible study.”

The focus here is to:

- Soak deeply and prayerfully in a select number of Scripture passages.
- See the meaning of those passages come alive in human stories that inspire.
- Reflect as a group on discussion questions that apply to daily living.
- Foster a modest commitment to love of neighbor through service.
- Experience the fullness of joy that only Christ can give!

In just over twenty years of organizing and writing materials for faith-sharing groups, these are the fruits I have come to see and expect. The component of active love of neighbor comes from the conviction that true discipleship must take seriously Jesus’ words, “Whatever you did for the least of my brethren, you did for me” (Mt 25:40). And truly the fruit of love is joy.

The Greatest of These is Love

As support for this approach, I turn to Jesus' allegory of the Vine and the branches (John 15:1-17). We have all heard it many times, with its image of Jesus the Vine, to whom we as branches must be joined if we are to bear fruit. I encourage you to read it again and to consider some key phrases:

“Abide in me . . . abide in my love.”

Let “. . . my words abide in you.”

“. . . that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.”

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

“. . . that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” (see verses 4-12)

I believe we can find in these forty-six words of Jesus the very essence of his Gospel, his call to us. And the faith-sharing approach of the Discipleship Series is an attempt to respond actively and enthusiastically to that call. *“Abiding” bears fruit in love, whose nectar is joy.*

But what of St. Paul, the subject of this book? Actually, the true subject of this and all books in the Discipleship Series is Jesus Christ, but in fact St. Paul and his words are paths to the Lord. And if we have been painting a picture of oneness with Christ, we have already been painting a picture of Paul, who wrote in his letter to the Galatians, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (2:20).

From the moment of his encounter with the Lord on the Road to Damascus, Paul was seized by Christ and full of passion for his Gospel. He poured out his life spreading that Gospel, enduring countless sufferings along the way, culminating in martyrdom.

Paul's words to the men and women of the churches he founded burned with the fire of loving concern, correction, exhortation. Those words speak to us as they first spoke to them. Indeed, as Pope Benedict XVI urged in his homily inaugurating the "Year of St. Paul" (June 28, 2008): "Let us not ask ourselves only: who *was* Paul? Let us ask ourselves above all: who *is* Paul? What does he say to me?"

Let us listen and abide. And may the fruit of our abiding be a fuller, more charitable, more joyful discipleship that moves the world to marvel, as the ancient pagans did: "See how they love one another!"

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.

- 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 small sections. 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 Greatest of These is Love

- 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.

- 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 at least 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).

The Greatest of These is Love

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!

A Biographical Sketch of St. Paul

St. Paul was born in approximately 8 AD (hence the anniversary “Year of St. Paul” declared by Pope Benedict XVI for 2008) in Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province Cilicia, in what is now Turkey. He was both a Jew and a Roman citizen and had two names—Saul, his Jewish/Hebrew name, and Paul, his Roman/Latin name. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke refers to him as Saul until 13:9, where he shifts to Paul. No explanation is given, but it may be intended to signal Paul’s mission as Apostle to the Gentiles.

At age 12 or 13, Paul left Tarsus for Jerusalem to be taught by the renowned Rabbi Gamaliel, a strict Pharisee. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul recalled: “I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (1:14). It is not surprising, then, that he viewed the movement started by Jesus of Nazareth as a threat to Jewish orthodoxy. Three times in his letters he admits he proudly “persecuted the Church of God” (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6). In fact, when we first meet Paul in Acts 7:58, he is guarding the robes of those stoning St. Stephen to death.

Everything changed for Paul upon his dramatic

The Greatest of These is Love

encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19), which took place in approximately 36 AD. Powerfully transformed, this man who had zealously persecuted Christians would become an even more zealous preacher of Christ and the Gospel in what we know today as Israel, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Italy and possibly Spain. His travels are typically clustered into three main missionary journeys.

Wherever Paul went, he preached first in the synagogues and then to the Gentiles. Viewed as a dangerous traitor by the Jewish authorities, Paul was often persecuted and threatened with death. Yet he was able to found numerous churches, and his thirteen letters, which make up nearly a third of the New Testament, consist mostly of his correspondence with these Christian communities. These letters, written roughly between 50 and 67 AD, are generally held to be the earliest New Testament writings we possess. It is possible that a few did not have Paul as their actual author (the letters to Timothy and Titus are the most disputed), but the Pauline tradition behind them is strong.

Paul was arrested and imprisoned or kept under house arrest several times, and Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are known as his “captivity letters.” He was ultimately martyred in Rome, probably under Nero in about 67 AD.

It is worth noting in conclusion that Paul dictated his letters. That spontaneity helps us understand the passion of his words as he pours out the feelings and concerns of his heart. Pledged to celibacy, he had no children of his own, yet he felt himself a father to the people of the churches he founded, and his paternal love and zeal light up his words. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, those words are just as capable of touching us today. As Pope Benedict XVI declared: “For us Paul is not a figure of the past whom we remember with veneration. He is also our teacher, an Apostle and herald of Jesus Christ” (Year of St. Paul, Inaugural Homily, June 28, 2008).

The Greatest of These is Love

Pope Benedict XVI

Let us . . . thank the Lord for having called Paul, making him the light to the Gentiles and the teacher of us all, and let us pray to him:

Give us even today witnesses of the Resurrection, struck by the impact of your love and able to bring the light of the Gospel in our time. St Paul, pray for us! Amen.

(Year of St. Paul, Inaugural Homily, June 28, 2008.)

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



Amazing Grace

The Lord in His Scriptures

The Conversion of Saul

...Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing

no one. Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Anani'as. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Anani'as." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying, and he has seen a man named Anani'as come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Anani'as answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

The Greastest of These is Love

So Anani'as departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and took food and was strengthened. For several days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed, and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called on this name? And he has come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests." But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

Acts 9:1-23.

Soak in the Word.

Two Minutes of Silence.

Reflect . . .

This is where it all begins for Paul . . . a 180 degree turn, a completely new life.

One minute he is Saul the Pharisee, zealous and sure of himself, armed with a mission, determined to stamp out the dangerous sect established by Jesus of Nazareth—in Saul’s eyes, an executed Jewish heretic.

The next minute—a blinding flash of light, the sensation of falling, and that unforgettable voice: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

“Who are you, Lord?”

“I am Jesus”

In that moment it is all over. Blind and helpless, Saul needs to be led by the hand into the city. He humbly bows to the orders he receives from Jesus. How remarkable to think this is the man who in Acts 8 was seen gladly approving of the murder of Stephen and dragging Christian men and women from their homes to be thrown into prison.

Saul denies himself food and drink for three days, then receives the Holy Spirit and Baptism. At last his eyes are opened, he sees.

The Greastest of These is Love

The old Saul has died, a new man is born. Is it any wonder the theme of dying to sin and rising to new life would become so dear to him? He has met his Lord. He would refer to Jesus with that title, “Lord,” a total of 275 times in his letters, far more than any other New Testament writer.

Each time he invoked it, one wonders, did he remember that day on the road when he first begged to know—“Who are you, Lord?” Did the answer still take his breath away . . . ?

“ . . . I am Jesus.”

What about me? Have I heard his voice in my heart? Have I met Him—really met Him—along the road of my life?

Pope Benedict XVI

Paul's faith is being struck by the love of Jesus Christ, a love that overwhelms him to his depths and transforms him. His faith is not a theory, an opinion about God and the world. His faith is the impact of God's love in his heart.

(Year of St. Paul, Inaugural Homily, June 28, 2008.)

Turning now to ourselves, let us ask what this means for us. It means that for us too Christianity is not a new philosophy or a new morality. We are only Christians if we encounter Christ. Of course he does not show himself to us in this overwhelming, luminous way, as he did to Paul But we too can encounter Christ in reading Sacred Scripture, in prayer, in the liturgical life of the Church. We can touch Christ's Heart and feel him touching ours. Only in this personal relationship with Christ, only in this encounter with the Risen One do we truly become Christians.

(Year of St. Paul, General Audience, September 3, 2008.)

The Greastest of These is Love

Catechism of the Catholic Church

448 - Very often in the Gospels people address Jesus as "Lord." . . . At the prompting of the Holy Spirit, "Lord" expresses the recognition of the divine mystery of Jesus. In the encounter with the risen Jesus, this title becomes adoration: "My Lord and my God!" It thus takes on a connotation of love and affection that remains proper to the Christian tradition: "It is the Lord!"

The Lord in the Life of His People

An Unlikely Apostle

From bitter enemy to fervent apostle. That is the story of St. Paul. It is also the story of Bartolo Longo. Though his remarkable journey would take place more than 1800 years later and differ from Paul's in significant ways, both witness to the amazing power of God's grace.

It was the 1860's and Bartolo Longo was studying law at the University of Naples, where St. Thomas Aquinas had studied and taught six centuries before. But times had changed, and now it was full of revolutionary ideas and anti-religious faculty. Under these influences, it wasn't long before Bartolo brushed aside his Catholic upbringing, calling it "childhood nonsense" and declaring that he "grew to hate monks, priests and the pope." With his hardened heart, he welcomed every opportunity to speak harshly of the Church of his youth. And yet there was an emptiness in his soul that hungered for a deeper meaning to life.

Into darkness . . . and back

It was then that a friend introduced Bartolo to the occult. He began attending séances and conversing with spirits that spoke through a psychic medium in a trance. He was so intrigued he decided he

The Greastest of These is Love

wanted to become a priest of the occult. After a period of initiation, he was “consecrated” in a bizarre midnight ritual. From that point he began to experience the presence and guidance of a being he called his “angel.”

But the messages and instructions Bartolo and his like-minded friends received from their spirit guides contradicted each other (besides contradicting the Gospel), and he entered a dark period of confusion, sadness and nervous exhaustion. It would be wrong to characterize him as a satanist, for Bartolo believed he was dealing with “elevated” spirits. But the diabolical source was evident in its fruits—he had lost his faith and was on the verge of losing his sanity.

Bartolo was rescued from his downward spiral by one of the few remaining devout Catholic professors at the University—Professor Vincenzo Pepe. Professor Pepe warned Bartolo of the dangers of his occult path. He prayed for him and introduced him to a holy Dominican priest, Fr. Alberto Radente, who met daily with Bartolo. Gradually the scales fell from the young man’s eyes and he made a good confession and his first Communion in many years.

Charity and the Rosary

Bartolo soon met another holy priest, Fr. Louis da Casoria, a man completely dedicated to helping the needy and the oppressed. This “Mother Teresa” of

Naples radiated gentleness, humility and joy. Fr. Casoria's witness of love captivated Bartolo and radically affected the course of his life. He would later write: "This extraordinary man who founded churches and hospices has been our teacher in charity . . . a living testimony of faith."

Bartolo began to visit dying patients in the hospital. It was now clear to him that while his fascination with the occult had brought him nothing but dark self-absorption and anxiety, the charity of the Gospel fostered humility, generosity and peace. About the same time, Bartolo began to pray the Rosary with friends. These would be the hallmarks of the rest of his life—charity and the Rosary.

At the age of thirty-one, Bartolo made an eye-opening trip to Pompeii on business as an attorney. Never had he encountered such wretched poverty, along with religious ignorance and superstition. When he visited the parish church, he found it infested with pests and falling apart. He had to do something.

A shrine and a legacy of compassion

In 1876, Bartolo began a humble effort to build a new church. This would culminate eleven years later in the magnificent Shrine of Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompeii. Donations poured in, many miracles were recorded, and devotion to the Rosary spread like fire, well beyond the confines of Pompeii.

The Greastest of These is Love

Bartolo would later marvel: “We wanted to provide for the religious life of poor peasants; we succeeded instead in producing a truly universal movement of faith.”

But every bit as spectacular as the Shrine was the charitable work done by Bartolo Longo. After the example of Fr. da Casoria, he could no longer look at the world without seeing the afflicted and asking himself how he could help. And so he founded a school for impoverished young children, noting that the first need was to “wash their faces and rid them of the insects attacking their fragile bodies.” He also established an orphanage for girls, founding an order of women religious to care for them.

It broke Bartolo’s heart to see the plight of many boys who were not orphans but whose fathers were in prison. The experts of the day declared these boys doomed to a life of crime, but Bartolo didn’t agree and founded a home for them. Years later hundreds of these boys had passed through the home and grown into virtuous, successful men. The secret? Bartolo wrote: “I gave them, and taught them to love, Jesus Christ.”

Bartolo Longo died peacefully on the morning of October 5, 1926. He was 85. Fifty-four years later he was beatified by Pope John Paul II, who called him “the apostle of the Rosary, the man of Our Lady.”

Through the mercy of God, Bartolo Longo, like St. Paul, had undergone a most radical conversion, from bitter enemy of Christ's Bride the Church, to intimate friend, "chosen instrument," ardent apostle.

Pope John Paul II on Blessed Bartolo Longo

Bartolo Longo is the apostle of the Rosary, the layman who fully lived his Christian commitment. . . . He can truly be defined as "the man of Our Lady": for love of Mary he became a writer, an apostle of the Gospel, propagator of the Rosary, founder of the famous Shrine . . . for love of Mary he created institutes of charity, he became a beggar on behalf of the children of the poor, he transformed Pompeii into a living citadel of human and Christian goodness."

(Homily at Mass of Beatification, October 26, 1980.)

Questions for Discussion

1. As Saul makes his way to Damascus he swaggers with powerful resolve (“breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord”). But at the moment of his stunning encounter with Jesus he is rendered blind and helpless and must then be “led by the hand” into Damascus by his traveling companions. How does this humbling experience prepare him for the new mission he will receive from the Lord? Are there lessons we can draw from it?

2. Jesus bursts into Saul's life in a spectacular way on the road to Damascus, but then he sends Anani'as to restore his sight and bring him into the Christian community. Why do you think our all-powerful God makes use of mere human instruments like Anani'as—or you and me—when he could do it all himself?

The Greastest of These is Love

3. When Anani'as expresses fear about following God's command to go and meet Saul, God reassures him by telling him that Saul is his "chosen instrument" for spreading the Gospel. In what ways did God use Bartolo Longo as a chosen instrument in his plan? In what sense is each of us a chosen instrument?

Session 1 - Amazing Grace

4. Discuss the similarities and the differences between the conversion stories of Saul of Tarsus and Bartolo Longo.

6. Bartolo Longo became a fervent apostle of the Rosary. What do you think it is about the Rosary that has made it such a beloved devotion in the lives of so many of the faithful, from the simplest peasants to the greatest Popes?

Group Prayers of Intercession

8 to 10 minutes

Closing Prayer

Ephesians 1:3-5;7-12

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus
Christ,
Who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual
blessing in the heavens,
as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the
world,
to be holy and without blemish before him.

In love he destined us for adoption to himself
through Jesus Christ,
in accord with the favor of his will. . . .
In him we have redemption by his blood, the forgive-
ness of transgressions,
in accord with the riches of his grace that he lav-
ished upon us.

In all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us
the mystery of his will
in accord with his favor that he set forth in him
as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all
things in Christ,
in heaven and on earth.

In him we were also chosen,
destined in accord with the purpose of the one
who accomplishes all things according to the inten-
tion of his will,
so that we might exist for the praise of his glory,
we who first hoped in Christ.

Amen.

(Taken from the New American Bible, copyright © 1991, 1986, 1970
Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC, and used by
permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the
New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permis-
sion in writing from the copyright owner.)