

33 Days  
to  
Merciful  
Love

Retreat Coordinator's Guide

Fr. Michael E. Gaitley, MIC



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Image of St. Therese © Office Central de Lisieux

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## AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Thank you for choosing to run a 33 Days to Merciful Love Group Retreat. The purpose of this guide is to make the process as simple and easy as possible — and it *will* be relatively easy. I say that not only because you'll have this guide to assist you, but also because, most importantly, St. Thérèse of Lisieux herself is surely going to be very close to you with her prayers. After all, this is a retreat dedicated to her and her teaching, and with it, you're going to help her bring many people along the consoling path of her Little Way. That will not only make her and the people on your retreat happy, but it will make you happy, too. In fact, I'm sure that you'll be greatly blessed and that you'll not regret the sacrifices you'll make as you offer this retreat to others.

But what are those sacrifices? I'll summarize the main ones now so you'll know what to expect right at the outset.

First, you'll probably face the temptation of self-doubt. By this, I mean that during the time of retreat preparation and during the retreat itself, you may be tempted to think you're not really qualified to lead a retreat. You may say to yourself, "Who am I to be leading a retreat?" Or, if one of the retreat meetings doesn't go as well as you'd hoped, you may think of yourself as a failure. Well, be not afraid! This is a retreat for "little souls." And while you may be "little" and "weak," remember that God's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

Second, you'll have a bit more work than the other members of your retreat. Put differently, in imitation of Christ our Savior, you'll be "washing the feet" of the people in your group by performing behind-the-scenes tasks that make the retreat possible. For instance, you'll need to find a place to meet, communicate with participants, arrive early, rally the Small-group Leaders, secure a TV and DVD player, and speak with the pastor if the venue is a parish. This all takes time and energy. But be not afraid! The Lord will be your strength, and you will be greatly blessed by He who is not outdone in generosity.

Third, as you probably already know if you're reading this, you'll have to pay a bit more than the retreat participants, because Retreat Coordinators are required to get the *Retreat Coordinator Kit*. The extra cost is for the DVDs. On the bright side, when the retreat is all over and done, you'll own the DVDs and can watch my talks over and over — what a great penance! Seriously, though, I hope it's at least comforting to learn that proceeds from the sales of the Hearts Afire programs — which are relatively inexpensive compared to other programs — go to support the good works and mission of my religious congregation, the Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In closing, I'd like to thank you again for your help running this retreat. My prayers are with you. Also, through our website ([allheartsafire.org](http://allheartsafire.org)) and phone number (1-844-551-3755), our Hearts Afire team is there to help you.

God bless you,

**Fr. Michael E. Gaitley, MIC, STL**

National Shrine of The Divine Mercy

Stockbridge, Massachusetts

August 15, 2016

Solemnity of the Assumption



## HOW THIS GUIDE WORKS

To understand how this guide works, it's first important to know the basics of what's expected of Retreat Coordinators. The introduction you just read mentioned some of the sacrifices involved in running the retreat, but now let's cover a few more things.

As a Retreat Coordinator, your job will be to run the entire 33 Days to Merciful Love Group Retreat at your parish or gathering space. Now, once again, be not afraid! You will have the HAPP Team assisting you through this *Retreat Coordinator's Guide*, support lines, and through special Retreat Coordinator materials on our website. You will also likely have a team of Small-group Leaders if your retreat includes more than two groups. It will be your responsibility to train and organize these leaders, which this guide will teach you to do. (Don't worry, it's all laid out for you.)

Okay, so here's how the guide works: It's broken up into four parts that will lead you through all the steps to running the retreat. The first part gives you an overview of the whole Hearts Afire Program itself (the big picture). Then follows an overview of this particular 33-day retreat. In the second part, we'll cover your preparation steps before the retreat begins. The third part will get into the nitty-gritty of the retreat itself, specifically, the weekly meetings. Finally, in the fourth part, we'll look at all aspects of the big day (Consecration Day): before, during, and after. Here's an outline to help you take it all in:

### **PART ONE: Overview**

- The HAPP® Program
- The 33 Days to Merciful Love Group Retreat

### **PART TWO: Preparation**

- Seven Steps to Running the Retreat

### **PART THREE: The Weekly Meetings**

- The Gift of Christian Fellowship
- Small-group Dynamics — and Seven Tips for Managing Them
- Structure of the Meetings

### **PART FOUR: Consecration Day**

- Before Consecration Day
- On Consecration Day
- After Consecration Day

## PART ONE OVERVIEW

### THE HEARTS AFIRE PROGRAM

The 33 Days to Merciful Love Group Retreat falls within Stage Three of the Hearts Afire program. But don't worry if this is your first group retreat from Hearts Afire and you haven't gone through Stages One and Two — you can still do them later, and in fact, I encourage you to do so. Below is a more detailed explanation of the Hearts Afire program, to give you the “big picture.”

#### What Is Hearts Afire?

Hearts Afire: Parish-based Programs from the Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception (HAPP®) is a bold and fresh approach to small-group, parish-level, adult faith formation programs. It's designed to help us live the complete Catholic life. It aims to help set our hearts on fire with love of God and neighbor and to inspire us to works of mercy in our families, parishes, and communities. It also inspires us to work together and build up community.

Beginning with you and friends from your parish or neighboring parishes, the goal of HAPP is to lead the whole world to the burning love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus through the fire of love of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. It's about heeding Jesus' words, “*I have come to set fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already burning!*” (Lk 12:49). It's about heeding Mary, who with her Spouse, the Holy Spirit, wants to get this blaze going as quickly as possible. In short, HAPP is about burning hearts: Jesus' Heart and Mary's Heart, my heart and your heart, and someday, all hearts.

#### Three Big Ideas

Three big ideas help us unpack the logic behind HAPP:

##### *(1) Time of Evil, Time of Grace*

According to Saint John Paul II, ours is a time of extraordinary evil. For this very reason, it's also a time of extraordinary grace. Saint Paul explains, “Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5:20). Concretely, this time of extraordinary grace means some very good news: It's easier than ever before to grow in holiness and even to become saints! Indeed, God wants to raise up many, many saints in our day. And he'll do it — gently, quickly, and easily — if only we'll let him, if only we'll tap into the extraordinary graces he's sending our way.

##### *(2) Heart of Jesus, Heart of Mary*

How do we “let the Lord do it”? How do we let him form us into saints? How do we tap into the amazing graces he's pouring out during this extraordinary time of mercy? We go to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Within that Heart, we find the fire of Divine Mercy. Within that Heart, we discover extraordinary graces for our time. But how do we get

there? First, we go to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Her role is to lead us to the Heart of Jesus, and she does this in the best way possible. According to the saints, she's the quickest, easiest, surest way to the fire of love that burns in the Heart of Jesus.

### *(3) Small Groups, Big Difference*

“No man is an island,” as the saying goes. Jesus didn't call just one person to set the world on fire with his love. Rather, he gathered around him a small group: twelve apostles. He formed them, sent them out into the world, and they made a big difference. That's what Jesus wants to do now. He wants to form new apostles for the New Evangelization, and he wants to begin in parishes and small groups of Christians. He wants to begin with you and a few of your friends. He wants to set the world ablaze, using your small group.

## **How Does Hearts Afire Work?**

It's simple. Gather a group — or better yet, several groups — of six to twelve people who want to be set on fire with God's love, find a place to meet, and start the program. There are three stages to the program.

### STAGE ONE:

#### **The Two Hearts**

Stage One has two parts: the Immaculate Heart and the Sacred Heart. We begin with the Immaculate Heart, because Mary leads us to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. We begin our journey to the Immaculate Heart with the book *33 Days to Morning Glory* and its accompanying group-retreat program. The goal of this program is to lead us to formally entrust ourselves to Mary. Mary then leads us to the Sacred Heart, which begins the second part of Stage One, the book *Consoling the Heart of Jesus* and its accompanying group-retreat program.

### STAGE TWO:

#### **Wisdom and Works of Mercy**

We begin Stage Two with the “Wisdom” part — the book *The ‘One Thing’ Is Three* and its accompanying group-study program. This book gives group members a kind of crash-course in Catholic theology and deepens their understanding of the Mass, the sacraments, and the communion we are all called to as baptized persons. Then, the “Works of Mercy” part includes the book *‘You Did It to Me’* (and supplemental DVD), which offer various opportunities, ideas, and support for works of mercy. With this stage, the members of the group would discern and choose an apostolate individually, as a group, or both. They would also be asked to consider helping their parish launch a solemn Divine Mercy Sunday celebration. Moreover, the group could formally register with the Association of Marian Helpers and receive a certificate from the Congregation of Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception.

## STAGE THREE:

**Keeping the Hearts Afire**

The heart of Stage Three is the Marian Missionaries of Divine Mercy (MMDM). The Marian Missionaries “keep hearts afire” by giving concrete, livable expression to the spiritualities of Divine Mercy and Marian consecration. MMDM also helps you live everything you’ve learned in the HAPP program, and in fact, requires that you have gone through Stages One and Two prior to joining. Why do you have to go through Stages One and Two before joining the Marian Missionaries? Simply put: the HAPP program is one of the most complete adult faith formation programs for laity available today. So, to fully and effectively live as a Marian Missionary, you need to be formed and the main formation program we use for MMDM is the Hearts Afire program. [For more info visit [MarianMissionaries.org](http://MarianMissionaries.org) or call 413-899-8500.]

Stage Three also provides opportunities for ongoing formation. After having completed the 33 Days to Morning Glory and Consoling the Heart of Jesus Group Retreats, and The ‘One Thing’ is Three Group Study and ‘You Did it to Me’ Group Guide; after having undertaken works of mercy; and after joining the Marian Missionaries, your group will probably want to continue to meet together and grow in your faith.

Now, it’s here in Stage Three that you find this current program: the 33 Days to Merciful Love Group Retreat. It fits here for two reasons. First, it’s the official means of joining the Marian Missionaries of Divine Mercy. Meaning, in addition to going through Stages One and Two of the HAPP program, we ask that all MMDM members make their membership official by consecrating themselves to Divine Mercy, using the 33 Days to Merciful Love Group Retreat. This group retreat also fits in with Stage Three because it’s an additional program we’re proud to offer, even if groups have not gone through the rest of the HAPP program.

[In case people in your group are concerned about joining this retreat if they have not gone through the other HAPP retreats, please tell him or her that they still are welcome to join your group and finishing Stages One and Two is not required in order to join this retreat.]

## THE 33 DAYS TO MERCIFUL LOVE GROUP RETREAT

The 33 Days to Merciful Love Group Retreat consists of **Reading, Pondering, and Meeting (RPM)**. We’ll explain these three things now. (They’re also covered during the first DVD session, “Introduction.”)

### Reading

What will we read? The book, *33 Days to Merciful Love: A Do-It-Yourself Retreat in Preparation for Consecration to Divine Mercy*. To make the retreat, each participant will need to read this book every day for 33 days. The book is short, and the daily reading is only about two and a half pages. That’s less than five minutes a day of reading. As a Retreat Coordinator, you can assure prospective participants that the daily reading is easily doable, even if they aren’t used to reading regularly. Also, the style is simple, straight forward, and easy to understand.

## Pondering

What will we ponder? Each day's readings. In other words, throughout the day, we should reflect on the day's reading in our hearts.

One practical point: If the goal is to reflect on the daily reading, then it would be a good idea to try to do the daily reading sometime in the morning or the night before. This way you'll have the whole day, every day, to ponder the day's teaching.

Another practical point: the *33 Days to Merciful Love Retreat Companion* is a powerful aid to pondering. Each day it provides questions to answer that are meant to help us ponder the reading from the retreat book. While we should try to answer all the questions each day, we shouldn't look at it as a burdensome homework assignment or a quiz. So tell your group members not to panic if they don't get through all the questions. They're simply aids to pondering.

*Objection:* "There's not enough vocal prayers." Some retreat participants may express surprise that there aren't a lot of vocal prayers to say each day. That's because the goal of the retreat is for us to be constantly pondering in our minds and hearts. It's not that we have just one set time of vocal prayer a day, and then we're done. The goal is to be praying all day! Moreover, the prayer style of the retreat aims at helping the participants to assimilate into their minds and hearts exactly *what Divine Mercy consecration really means*. This is better accomplished through prayerful pondering than through saying lots of set prayers.

*Problem:* What if I miss a day or two or three? If a participant of the retreat worries that because he missed one or some of the days of reading then his consecration won't count, reassure him that he can still make the consecration. You should also encourage him to make up the days of missed reading, at least because the daily teaching tends to build on the previous days.

*Warning:* People who prepare to consecrate themselves to Divine Mercy will likely experience temptations to stop their preparation for the consecration. Encourage those who may be struggling with some of the teachings to persevere, and remind them that the 33 days is a journey that will surely have its ups and downs.

## Meeting

Each meeting will last about an hour and a half and is broken up into four parts: (1) 5-minute Large-group Opening with a prayer and announcements; (2) 30-minute Large-group Video Viewing with a talk on DVD that illustrates the key points of each week and keeps them simple and livable; (3) 45-minute Small-group Sharing that draws from the daily questions in the *Retreat Companion*; (4) 5-minute Large-group Closing. In a later section (Part Three: The Weekly Meeting), we'll explore these three parts of the weekly meeting in greater detail. Before then, let's talk preparation, because the weekly meeting will never come together unless you're well prepared.

## PART TWO

# PREPARATION

So, you're a Retreat Coordinator and you want to run a 33 Days to Merciful Love Group Retreat at your parish (or home). Chances are, since you're reading this, you've already done some of what comes next, but for the sake of being thorough, here are all the steps you'll want to take if you're starting from scratch.

[Note: We recommend that you finish reading this guide before actually starting the steps listed below.]

## SEVEN STEPS FOR RUNNING THE RETREAT

### STEP ONE:

#### **Visit the Website**

First, you'll want to visit the website, [AllHeartsAfire.org](http://AllHeartsAfire.org). There, you'll get a sense of the program and be introduced to the resources available to help you plan, organize, and implement the retreat.

One of the best tools as you begin preparation for your 33 Days to Merciful Love Group Retreat is the Retreat Coordinator Preparation Checklist. This downloadable checklist walks you through your necessary tasks starting six weeks prior to the beginning of the retreat.

### STEP TWO:

#### **Pick a Date**

If you do decide you want to run the retreat, you'll need to pick a date to make the consecration. Ideally, you'll want to start at least 33 days before the feast day. You can find a list of starting dates on the following chart. Obviously, you'll want to pick a date far enough in advance so as to give yourself time to organize and prepare. Depending on whether or not you already have a group and the support of your pastor, you'll want to give yourself *at least* two weeks before the starting date, but preferably two months. So, for instance, let's say it's May, and you don't have anyone in mind to make the retreat with you, you haven't spoken with the pastor, and don't have the materials. Well, then you'd probably want to shoot for the Feast (Solemnity) of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, which is celebrated on August 15, as your Consecration Day. The starting date for this feast day is July 13, which would give you two months to prepare.

By the way, because a given feast day will not necessarily fall on the day of the week that's most convenient for your group — for instance, let's say your group plans to meet on Wednesdays but the feast is on a Friday — you'll therefore conclude the 33 days prior to the feast day. That's no problem.

## STARTING DATE CHART

START OF THE 33 DAYS	FEAST DAY	CONSECRATION/FEAST
January 9	Our Lady of Lourdes	February 11
February 20*	The Annunciation	March 25
Varies	Divine Mercy Sunday	Sunday after Easter
April 10	Our Lady of Fatima	May 13
April 28	The Visitation	May 31
Varies	Pentecost Sunday	50 days after Easter
Varies	Trinity Sunday	Sunday after Pentecost
Varies	Sacred Heart of Jesus	Friday after Corpus Christi
Varies	Immaculate Heart of Mary	Saturday after Corpus Christi
May 27	Sts. Peter and Paul	June 29
June 13	Our Lady of Mt. Carmel	July 16
June 19	St. Mary Magdalene	July 22
June 29	St. Alphonsus Liguori	August 1
July 12	St. Maximilian Kolbe	August 14
July 13	The Assumption	August 15
July 20	Queenship of Mary	August 22
August 3	Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta	September 5
August 6	Nativity of Mary	September 8
August 10	Holy Name of Mary	September 12
August 13	Our Lady of Sorrows	September 15
August 29	St. Thérèse of Lisieux	October 1
September 2	St. Faustina Kowalska	October 5
September 4	Our Lady of the Rosary	October 7
September 13	St. Margaret Mary Alacoque	October 16
September 19	St. John Paul II	October 22
October 19	Presentation of Mary	November 21
November 5	Immaculate Conception	December 8
November 9	Our Lady of Guadalupe	December 12
November 22	Christmas	December 25
November 24	St. John the Apostle, Evangelist	December 27
November 29	Mother of God	January 1
December 23	Conversion of St. Paul	January 25
December 31	Presentation of the Lord	February 2

\* During a leap year, when February has 29 days, the starting date is February 21.

\* OPTIONAL STEP \*

### **Order Your Retreat Coordinator Kit**

Before you approach your pastor about having the retreat at the parish (the next step), you may want to have your retreat materials to show him. If this is the case, then you will want to order the 33 Days to Merciful Love Retreat Coordinator Kit, which includes a *Retreat Companion* and the DVD talks that go with the retreat and comes with or without the retreat book, *33 Days to Merciful Love*. This may be helpful to have before the meeting with the pastor if he wants the opportunity to look the materials over.

STEP THREE:

### **Find a Venue**

Once you have at least a tentative date, you'll want to decide whether or not you will do the program at your parish, at a friend's parish, or at some other venue, such as someone's home. We recommend it be done at a parish, if possible.

To determine whether or not it can be done at your parish or a neighboring parish, you'll want to call the parish office and schedule a meeting with the pastor. Here's what you'll need from the parish/pastor: (1) Permission to run the retreat at and through the parish; (2) a suitable gathering place for your group; (3) a TV and DVD player. Here's what you'll want from the parish, but don't absolutely have to have: (1) Assistance with promotion — more on this later; (2) a special Mass on Consecration Day and/or a special blessing from a priest at the parish; (3) permission to hold a reception at the parish hall following the consecration day.

For resources for presenting the retreat to your pastor, visit the website, [AllHeartsAfire.org](http://AllHeartsAfire.org).

STEP FOUR:

### **Promote the Program**

As baptized Catholics, we're called to awaken people to a relationship with Christ. Inviting people to join this retreat is an excellent way to do just that. In fact, when it comes to this retreat, the principle, "the more the merrier," really applies, provided you have enough space to accommodate everyone during the meetings.

Here are ways you can promote the program at the parish:

- Call friends and invite them.
- Send an e-blast to your Catholic friends who live close to the parish and to members of the Legion of Mary, Knights of Columbus, or other groups from the parish that might be interested.
- Insert a bulletin insert into the parish bulletin. (You'll need permission from the parish to do this.)
- Ask the pastor to invite people to participate in the retreat at the time of the announcements at the Sunday Masses, and be prepared with a sign-up sheet at the back of the church.

With proper permission, post fliers on the bulletin boards of all the local parishes. If your pastor allows, make a 3-minute pulpit announcement after Communion, and

have registration tables in your gathering space for people to ask questions and/or register on site. The greatest marketing of your retreat is a heart that's been transformed by Christ, so any time you can share that joy with others, be sure to do so.

On our website, you can see examples of ways to promote the retreat and can even download and print PDFs of parish pulpit announcements, sign-up sheets, and fliers. One important thing to keep in mind is that if your group grows to more than about 10-12 people, you will want to break them up into small-groups for the discussion period of the weekly meetings. For each small group, you will need to select a Small-group Leader. This is someone who will help run the small groups. The Small-group Leader needs to be a responsible person who is willing to lead group discussion. (See Step Six for more information about the Small-group Leaders.)

#### STEP FIVE:

### Order the Retreat Materials

Once you have a group of people who want to do the retreat, then at least two weeks before your first meeting, you'll want to order the retreat materials — three weeks would be ideal.

*Retreat Participant Materials.* Each retreat participant will need **two things:** (1) The book, *33 Days to Merciful Love: A Do-It-Yourself Retreat in Preparation for Consecration to Divine Mercy* and (2) The 33 Days to Merciful Love Participant Packet. The packet includes the following:

- *33 Days to Merciful Love Retreat Companion*
- *Prayer of Consecration to Merciful Love* Prayercard
- “Episode 2” DVD excerpt from the program *Divine Mercy in the Second Greatest Story Ever Told*
- 8 ½ x 11 full-color *Consecration to Merciful Love* Certificate
- St. Thérèse Card (limited edition card with photograph of St. Thérèse)

The total cost for each participant of the 6-week retreat is relatively inexpensive. Please visit our website for prices.

*Retreat Coordinator Materials.* The retreat coordinator will need **two things:** (1) The book, *33 Days to Merciful Love*, and (2) The 33 Days to Merciful Love Retreat Coordinator Kit. The kit includes the following:

- 33 Days to Merciful Love Participant Packet
  - *33 Days to Merciful Love Retreat Companion*
  - *Prayer of Consecration to Merciful Love* Prayercard
  - “Episode 2” DVD excerpt from the program *Divine Mercy in the Second Greatest Story Ever Told*
  - 8 ½ x 11 full-color *Consecration to Merciful Love* Certificate
  - St. Thérèse Card (limited edition card with photograph of St. Thérèse)
- *33 Days to Merciful Love: Retreat Talks by Fr. Michael Gaitley, MIC* (DVD set: six sessions, approximately 30-min each)
- *Retreat Coordinator's Guide*

As the Retreat Coordinator, you will have to pay more than the retreat participants because of the DVDs and Coordinator's Guide. (See website for details on pricing.) To cut down on the cost of shipping and handling for everyone, try to order all your materials at the same time and have them shipped to the same location, such as to the parish or to the Retreat Coordinator's home. The Retreat Coordinator can then distribute the retreat materials at the first meeting and people can reimburse the Retreat Coordinator or parish. (It is not necessary that the participants have the retreat materials before the first meeting.) Also, some people like to increase their order of retreat materials for participants by 10 percent to be able to accommodate any last-minute additions.

**To order your materials** (order minimally two weeks in advance of the first group retreat meeting):

By phone:

Call the Member Services Department at the Marian Helpers Center at 1-800-4-MARIAN (1-800-462-7426).

Online:

ShopMercy.org/happ

Again, proceeds from the sales of the Hearts Afire programs through the Marian Fathers and the Marian Helpers Center go to support the good works of the Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception. When ordering, please use the following product codes:

PARTICIPANT PACKET (**without** retreat book) = **MLPS**

PARTICIPANT PACKET (with retreat book) = **MLPSWB**

COORDINATOR KIT (**without** retreat book) = **MLCK**

COORDINATOR KIT (with retreat book) = **MLCKWB**

Please note: The "retreat book" mentioned above is *33 Days to Merciful Love: A Do-It-Yourself Retreat in Preparation for Consecration to Divine Mercy*. We are offering the Participant Packets and Coordinator Kits "without retreat book" in consideration of people who already own the retreat book. For pricing, please visit our website, ShopMercy.org/happ.

STEP SIX:

### **Train Small-group Leaders**

Once you have your group members signed up, you will need to decide how many small groups your retreat will accommodate. Usually, the small groups consist of 6-12 people. Before the retreat begins, a Small-group Leader for each small group needs to be selected and trained to lead the small-group discussion. Because it is often difficult to determine exactly how many participants you'll have for a given retreat, it's a good idea to hold the training meeting shortly before the first retreat meeting.

During the Small-group Leader training session, you'll want to go over all of Part Three of this *Retreat Coordinator's Guide*, entitled "The Weekly Meeting" (see next page).

In fact, you might want to photocopy or download and print that entire chapter and hand it out to all your Small-group Leaders. A free PDF of this *Retreat Coordinator's Guide* is available for download at [AllHeartsAfire.org](http://AllHeartsAfire.org).

STEP SEVEN:

### **Plan for Consecration Day**

You will want to make Consecration Day as memorable as possible for the participants of your retreat. To do this, you can read Part Four of this *Retreat Coordinator's Guide*, "Consecration Day."

## PART THREE

# THE WEEKLY MEETINGS

Once a week for six weeks, you'll be meeting with your group for the 33 Days to Merciful Love Group Retreat. We've already covered the basics of these 90-minute meetings in Part One: Overview. Here, we're going to do three things:

- (1) Speak to the importance of rediscovering the gift of Christian fellowship;
- (2) Provide tips for Small-group Leaders as they manage group dynamics;
- (3) Go into greater detail with regard to the structure of the meetings.

Let's begin now with the first of these three things.

## THE GIFT OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

Jesus teaches us that when two or more are gathered in his name, there he is in our midst (see Mt 18:20). Does this apply only to Sunday Mass? No. Our Lord not only wants his followers to come together to worship for the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist, where he becomes sacramentally present, but he also wants them to come together for fellowship and prayer at other times as well. Such coming together of Christians for prayer and deepening in the faith is a good and holy thing. It pleases Jesus, makes him spiritually present, and brings us into his abundant life.

Unfortunately, making a commitment to come together as Christians outside of Sunday Mass is not always easy for people in our modern society. We've become so busy that not only do we often find it impossible to make time to be with friends, but many families no longer even take time to share the evening meal together — and when they do, the television is often on, stealing their attention from one another. Moreover, how many of us are becoming so glued to our smartphones that we miss important face-to-face time with those we love?

Because our society is becoming more and more fragmented, dissipated, and distracted, authentic Christian communion is, sadly, becoming something rare. It's no wonder, then, that an alarming number of people are depressed, unhappy, and stuck with a growing sense of loneliness.

The antidote to this problem begins with saying yes to communion with others and no to so many routine recreations that involve digitized pseudo-communion. It's

time to relearn the gift of presence, rediscover the joy of group fellowship, and develop new friendships in Christ. And while this retreat can be made by people on their own, God gives especially great graces when two or more are gathered in his name.

## SMALL-GROUP DYNAMICS — AND SEVEN TIPS FOR MANAGING THEM

Each person is an unrepeatable, unfathomable mystery that should trigger our sense of wonder. Even more so then, a whole group of persons who gather together in Christ, is a mystery worthy of our contemplation and awe. What depth of experience is contained in a single group of six, seven, eight, or more? How many hundreds of hidden persons are brought to each group meeting, held in each participant's heart with loving concern? How many secret prayers lie unspoken in a small group, waiting to come to the surface if only given an invitation? How many thousand times will the Holy Spirit flash forth in a word, facial expression, or movement of the heart? How many lifelong friendships does Christ want to form during the sacred time of meeting?

The place of the small-group gathering is indeed holy ground, and so it's fitting that it begin with prayer, as we'll explain in a later section. But the prayer doesn't stop at the beginning of the meeting. Just as the 33 Days to Merciful Love Group Retreat is meant to be a time of constant prayerful pondering, so also such prayerful pondering should be part of the small-group meeting. In fact, such prayerful pondering should even intensify. For it's in a group setting that the Holy Spirit especially likes to give his gifts through insights, lights, and deepening understanding.

See what a responsibility the Small-group Leader has! He needs to facilitate the occasion of grace that is the small-group meetings. To do this, he needs to be a man or woman of prayer both before the meeting and especially during the meeting. He should pray for the members of his small group, asking the Lord to bless them. He should also ask for the graces he needs to recognize God's presence in his fellow group members, hear the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, and preserve the bond of charity. He also may need some tips. And that's what we'll provide now.

TIP ONE:

### **Truly Listen**

Yes, you will need to have your questions ready and will have lots of things on your mind, but fight the temptation to be distracted when someone is sharing her heart. The Holy Spirit rewards loving attention and will inspire you with the right questions when you listen with your heart.

TIP TWO:

### **Acknowledge the Good**

You might not be able to give a word of affirmation in response to everything someone has said, but it is important for you, as the Small-group Leader, to acknowledge what is shared — and it should be genuine. You should say things like, "Thank you, Sally, for sharing that personal experience," or perhaps repeat back to the group what the person said, "Bob, that was really interesting there, you said ... ."

## TIP THREE:

**Don't Push the Silent Participant**

Sometimes you'll have a participant who rarely speaks, or speaks only when asked. This could be out of shyness or habit, or he could simply be listening and reflecting on what others are saying. Some people need several weeks to get comfortable enough to say anything. If they are put on the spot, even gently, they may be uncomfortable enough not to return. It's important to show warmth to the silent participant who may feel self-conscious of the fact that he is not opening up. Usually, when he feels safe and accepted, he will begin to open up on his own. So, while it's true that everyone should come to the meetings with a readiness to share, nobody should be pushed to do so.

Here's one way to invite the silent participant to speak that doesn't push the person, "Julie, it looks like you had something to say ... ." To do this genuinely, you'll want to monitor their eye contact. Also, because many times silent people are forming their sentences in their minds before they speak, you might want to set up some quiet time up front. For example, you could say, "Ok, let's take 30 seconds and just think about this one as it is an especially good question." Then monitor the silent person's eye contact. Finally, affirming them when they do speak up gives them the confidence to continue to contribute.

## TIP FOUR:

**Lovingly Direct the Talkative Participant**

While some participants may be quiet, others may be quite lively and talkative. The challenge for the Small-group Leader is to keep the talkative participant involved and excited but also to make sure that he doesn't dominate the conversation. The key is to direct his conversation, and this will take practice and patience. Here are a few examples of how to direct his conversation: If he's talking for too long, gently break in and say, "You're covering a lot of interesting (exciting, important, etc.) territory, Thomas. Let's back up a second and see if anyone else has something to add. What do you think, Judy?" Or, "Let's stop there, Luke. That's an interesting experience. Has anyone had a similar experience?" The principle is to lovingly direct the conversation of the talkative participant and to draw other participants back into the conversation.

## TIP FIVE:

**Hand Off the "Problem Person" to the Appropriate People**

It's rare, but it does happen. Someone in the group may engage in inappropriate sharing or repeatedly "off the wall" opinions. It's important that the Small-group Leader bring in the priest or other pastoral leader for one-on-one guidance in dealing with the problem person. The Small-group Leader should also bring this person to the attention of the Retreat Coordinator.

Of course, not every "problem person" will require this kind of action. In some cases, it's simply a matter of someone being overly knowledgeable and they just need to be roped in and made part of the solution, perhaps an assistant to the leader. For example, taking someone aside outside of the group and saying, "Wow, Mark, you know a ton about Marian Dogmas, and that's great, but it appears that every time a question

comes up, you talk about one of them and the group gets a little confused. Let's do this: I really need some help getting some of the members in the group to interact. How about if you and I remain quiet for the first 60 seconds and then, if no one is speaking, I'll nod to you and you can jump in with a relevant comment, but remember to really encourage the others to speak."

TIP SIX:

### **Attend to the Sometimes-Absent Participant**

It's ideal that every participant attend every meeting, but sometimes this is not possible. So what do you do if a participant misses one or more meetings? If the participant misses the first meeting, make sure you introduce him at the second meeting, and give him the opportunity to express why he's making the retreat and what he hopes to gain by it.

If a participant misses any other meeting, you may want to arrange for him (and any other absentee members from other small groups) to come early to the next group meeting, and then play the DVD talk that he missed. Of course, you'll have to make sure that you can use the gathering room earlier and that you can come early to the next meeting to set up the video talk.

If the participant misses the first two meetings, or two consecutive meetings, he may want to consider starting the program again, with another group. This would need to be his decision. If he decides to continue with the group, he should be encouraged to do all the make-up reading before he attends the next meeting. Moreover, you might want to reiterate the importance of attendance, depending on the reason for his absence.

Make sure that you cover the procedures for absences in your first group meeting. It's worth emphasizing that the presence and participation of each member is important. Each member should let the group leader know in advance of any anticipated absences. And as a Small-group Leader, you'll need to contact your absent participant before he returns to the small group and update him on any announcements, as well as coordinate his review of the video talk he missed.

TIP SEVEN:

### **Hand Out the "10 Commandments for Small-group Success"**

This document, which is available on our website, offers 10 guidelines for the small-group discussion. The Small-group Leader should know them well, and will hand them out at the first meeting. The guidelines are as follows:

1. **Be willing to share.** Participants should come to the meetings with a joyful readiness to share. The small-group experience depends on sharing. You never know how much something you share may help another. Sometimes you may not want to share, and that's okay.
2. **Let others share.** Everyone needs to be given an opportunity to share. Give others the chance to talk. Do not fear silence. Try to give "equal time" to everyone. No one person should dominate the small group's time with lengthy sharing, even if unintentional. It is the Small-group Leader's role to ask people to observe this rule should someone get "carried away."

3. **Do your homework.** Participants are expected to do their best to do the daily prayer, reading, and writing at home. This provides the basis for the small-group time. If you haven't done your homework, give others a chance to speak first.
4. **Stay focused.** The small-group sessions are to be focused on reading and questions, not on personal problems, theological opinions, gossip, or promotion of a cause — even a worthy one.
5. **Don't give advice.** It is not appropriate to give advice to someone during the small-group sessions. If a person seeks advice from you, speak to one another at the end of the meeting.
6. **Don't lecture.** This is not a time for teaching or lecturing, unless the Small-group Leader is explaining something related to the subject matter at hand.
7. **Be respectful.** Everyone's experience with the reading and questions is valid. If you disagree with something, do so respectfully and charitably. Never ridicule or cut down another person. When someone else is speaking, we should be listening.
8. **Keep confidentiality.** A promise of confidentiality is asked and expected of each group member, giving one another freedom to share sensitive feelings or personal information relevant to the reading and questions, if desired. However, this is not the time for confession or counseling.
9. **Follow the Leader.** It is important to give support and cooperation to the Small-group Leader who is charged with the responsibility of seeing that these group guidelines are followed.
10. **Enjoy yourself!**

[Inspiration for many of these commandments is taken with permission from the ideas of Carol Marquardt.]

## STRUCTURE OF THE MEETINGS

Recall that the weekly, 90-minute meeting is divided into three parts: (1) 5-minute Large-group Opening with a prayer and announcements; (2) 30-minute Large-group Video Viewing; (3) 45-minute Small-group Sharing that draws from the daily questions in the *Retreat Companion*; (4) 5-minute Large-group Closing. Here, we'll look more closely at each of these three parts.

### LARGE-GROUP

#### **Opening** (5 Minutes)

You'll begin each session by coming together in a large group. Within that large group, you'll begin with a prayer and the Retreat Coordinator will make any necessary announcements.

**IMPORTANT:** During your very first Large-group Opening, as will often be the case, the participants will be receiving their materials for the first time. The Retreat Coordinator should hand out the materials at the beginning of the first Large-group

meeting, before watching the video (the participants can take notes on the designated pages in the *Retreat Companion* while watching the video talk).

#### LARGE-GROUP

##### **Video Viewing Talk** (30 Minutes)

Following the prayer and any necessary announcements, the Retreat Coordinator will play the DVD talk for the group to watch. In the *Retreat Companion*, we've provided a "Video Notes" section in each week so you have a place to jot down your ideas or impressions during the talk.

#### SMALL-GROUP

##### **Sharing** (45 Minutes)

Small groups (about 6-12 people, depending on your group and available space) meet for a 45-minute discussion time that follows the guidelines laid out in the *Retreat Companion*. The small-group dynamic is an important aspect of the retreat, because it fosters a true spirit of fellowship and friendship in Christ is fostered and developed. By friendships in Christ, the members of his Mystical Body are connected in holiness to Christ and to one another in prayer and so are able to better receive his divine power (see Mt 18:20). The friendships that you discover and nourish in your small group are important sources of support and encouragement on your journey to a deeper relationship with Christ.

Small-group Leaders: Be sure to read the Small-group Session Outline at the end of each week in the *Retreat Companion* before each gathering. The Small-group Session Outline lists the questions for each week and outlines the small-group format, which is summarized as follows:

1. PRAYER: This is the Our Father; Hail Mary; Come, Holy Spirit; or other brief prayer.
2. PERSONAL RESPONSE: Particular questions selected from the week will be used for small-group sharing.
3. CLOSING PRAYER: The group closes by praying the Our Father; Hail Mary; Come, Holy Spirit; or other brief prayer.

**IMPORTANT:** During the very first Small-group Discussion, the Small-group Leader will introduce himself and explain briefly why he decided to lead the small-group discussion (see the Session 1, Small-group Session Outline for details). Then, he invites the other small-group members to also introduce themselves. It's important that the Retreat Coordinator instructs the Small-group Leaders to kindly limit their introduction time and that of the other small-group members so that the small group can get to the session questions.

#### LARGE-GROUP

##### **Closing** (5 Minutes)

You'll end each session by coming back together in a large group. Together, you'll conclude with a prayer and the Retreat Coordinator will make any necessary announcements.

## PART FOUR

# CONSECRATION DAY

Consecration Day will be a deeply significant day for you and your group members, and as such, we recommend that you celebrate it with a certain degree of solemnity. Below are tips and suggestions for preparing to celebrate your consecration before, on the day of, and after your consecration.

### Before Consecration Day

In anticipation of Consecration Day, here are a few ways to prepare. We recommend that you start preparing for your Consecration Day at least three or more weeks in advance.

- Ask your pastor if you can have a special ceremony (preferably after Mass) on the day of your consecration. (It helps to plan this at the very start of the retreat.)
- Print up or order copies of the *Consecration to Merciful Love* Certificate for each member of your group if they don't already have them.
- If you wish, you may order Divine Mercy images, rosaries, or chaplets for each member of your group. If you do plan on ordering them, we recommend ordering them by the third week of the retreat to ensure availability and that they are shipped in time.
- Arrange to have a reception after the ceremony. (If you're doing this in your parish, make sure that you have the proper permissions for reserving the room, etc.)
- Invite family and friends to the ceremony and reception.
- You may wish to have each participant place a rose before an Image of Divine Mercy or picture of the Sacred Heart after his or her consecration. This, and many other beautiful gestures, are not required, but they do require planning.

### On Consecration Day

These are the basic steps for the consecration ceremony:

- Have everyone meet after Mass (if you can attend Mass together) and recite the consecration prayer (individually or collectively).
- Ask them to sign their own handwritten prayer or printed certificate.
- Have the priest (if he is willing and able) give a special blessing.
- You may also wish to conclude with a hymn.
- After the ceremony, have a reception with food and decorations. This is only a suggestion, and you can make it as elaborate or as simple as you like. A reception gives your group time to celebrate the conclusion of your 33-day journey together. You may also want to invite your family, friends, and the pastor to the reception as well.
- Structure the reception however you wish. Some ideas include asking a few group members to share their experience with the rest of the group or taking pictures.

## After Consecration Day

After Consecration Day, it's likely that your group will want to continue to meet. You have several options in this regard:

- If you've already finished Stages One and Two of the Hearts Afire Program, invite everyone in your group to get the FREE Marian Missionaries Handbook (written by Fr. Michael Gaitley, MIC). Call 800-462-7426 or go online to [MarianMissionaries.org](http://MarianMissionaries.org). Use code MMDBK.
- If you haven't completed Stages One and Two of the Hearts Afire Program, invite your group to start or continue on with another retreat or study from the Hearts Afire Program.
- Keep in contact with your group members to the extent that you are able. These friendships in Christ can provide an important support in our own spiritual growth.

## CONCLUSION

We hope this guide answered many of your questions and gave you a sense of the responsibilities of and options for Retreat Coordinators. Don't forget to check out our website for helpful resources such as bulletin announcements, checklists, and time lines. If you think that the Lord is calling you to be a Retreat Coordinator, we hope and pray that you answer this important call and that you have a very blessed time. Also, keep in mind that the Lord doesn't call the perfect to work in his vineyard. Rather, his merciful Heart prefers to select everyday, imperfect people like you and me. Just don't forget the prayer, "Jesus, I trust in you!"