



SESSION 12

Made for Communion



Detail from *First Steps*, after Millet, Vincent van Gogh

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To see that Scripture presents the human person as being created for communion and aided by the law to attain this joyful end
- To discover in marriage a reflection of God's own life and love, as well as a school of virtue that prepares us to receive that same life and love ever more fully
- To understand the indispensable role that friendship plays in human life, at many levels and with both God and man
- To gain a sense of how important social life is for the human person and how, for this reason, the Church offers us guidance and teaching in this area

STEP 1: Begin

OPENING PRAYER

O Heart all lovable and all loving of my Savior,
be the Heart of my heart,
the Soul of my soul,
the Spirit of my spirit,
the Life of my life,
and the sole principle of all my thoughts, words, and actions,
of all the faculties of my soul and of all my senses,
both interior and exterior. Amen.

— *Prayer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus by Saint John Eudes*

INTRODUCTION

“God is love and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image ... God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion.” “God created man in his own image ... male and female he created them”; He blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply.” (CCC 2331, citing Pope Saint John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* 11, and Gen 1:27, 28)

In the First Letter of Saint John, the beloved disciple begins with a beautiful preamble. Referring to lived experience with Jesus, the Eternal Word of God, he writes: “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete” (1:3–4).

With remarkable brevity, these words express the essence and goal of the Christian life: communion. The Greek word for “fellowship” (*koinonia*) can also be translated as “communion” or even “friendship.” All three words highlight different dimensions of a rich reality: shared life with another based on shared love. The biblical text explains that knowing and loving Christ puts us in communion both with other Christians and with the Father and his Son in the Holy Spirit. Lest we overlook the point, this communion is one of complete joy!

We are created to attain perfect fulfillment alongside and in relationship with others. On our own, happiness remains elusive. But with God and others, we look toward a bright and endless horizon. Ultimately, as the *Catechism* indicates, because God is a “personal loving communion,” we who are created in his own image are also called to and fulfilled by “love and communion.”

This session reflects on the rich and varied reality of communion, or friendship, in human life. What is communion? What do Scripture and tradition teach us about our relationships with God and others? In the end, every friendship, close or casual, is meant to bring fulfillment to human life because God created us for fellowship with him and with one other.

STEP 2: Learn

SETTING THE STAGE

An ordinary neighborhood is full of reminders that human life depends upon and is enriched by relationships. Neighbors at home or walking down the street; children and the elderly in a park; multiple generations coming together for a block party or other community gathering—all are signs that our fulfillment comes about through communion with others. A nearby church also calls to mind that we are made for an ultimate relationship, and that our complete happiness and fulfillment lie in the blessed communion that the saints enjoy in Heaven with God.

Everyone longs for a life of happiness and abundance, yet many are unsure of what these mean and where to find them. What is it that we all long for? What are we created for? And where can we find the fulfillment our hearts long for? In this session, we draw from Scripture and tradition to explore how our fulfillment lies in sharing life with others, both God and man, in joyful and loving communion. From

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marriage and family, to friendship, to life in society, Christ has promised us a life of “abundance” (John 10:10), and we see that promise fulfilled partially in this life and wholly in the next.

I. Christ promises us a life of “abundance” (John 10:10)

II. Salvation History: What does a covenant with God mean for how we live?

- A. The Exodus and the Ten Commandments
 - 1. The Ten Commandments can only be fully understood in the context of Exodus
 - 2. God liberates his people out of love and for love
 - 3. The commandments teach us how to live and love in covenantal communion with God
- B. The joy of the law
 - 1. The law is meant for the good of God’s people, guiding them to happiness
 - 2. The New Law gives us a foretaste of that blessed communion with God in Heaven
 - 3. Law is a blessing because it directs us to our ultimate end: loving communion with God and one another

III. Pilgrimage: Communion can be found in marriage and family

- A. God is the author of marriage: for the good of offspring and of spouses, but even more to show forth his inner life of love, especially when elevated to a sacrament
- B. This shoulder-to-shoulder, outward-looking reality is one of service, especially to children
- C. Continuing the generations by raising children is hard; this work helps us love like Jesus loved
- D. This communion requires a committed life of prayer—you can’t give what you don’t have

IV. Catechesis: We are created for communion

- A. The book of Genesis shows that we are made for communion with God and man
 - 1. Created in the image of God, we are perfected by knowing and loving another
 - 2. Imitating God’s own inner life, we flourish in friendship, with God and with other people
- B. Human life involves many forms of friendship and kinds of societies
 - 1. Friends, neighborhoods, countries—all are part of social life and our fulfillment
 - 2. Friendship with Christ is primary; it enriches and ennobles our other relationships
 - 3. The Church teaches us how to live in society as Christ’s disciples: through the works of mercy, the safeguarding and fostering of marriage and family, and following Catholic social teaching

V. *Lectio divina*: John 15:12–17

- A. Jesus’ entire mission revolves around love
- B. Christ’s love sets the standard for our love and for our communion with others
- C. He calls us friends, and by loving as a friend he enables us to love as he does

God communicates His happiness to us, and because this communication between God and man takes place, some kind of friendship is necessarily based on it. Speaking of this, 1 Corinthians 1:19 says: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship (koinonia) of his Son.” The love based on this communication is charity, and thus it is clear that charity is a certain friendship between man and God.

WORD MEANING:

Communion

A union of mind and heart with another (or others) that is formed by shared love for a shared good (or goods) pursued and enjoyed in common.

The communion of love that binds the Son to the Father and to men and women is at the same time the model and source of the fraternal communion that must unite disciples with one another: “Love one another as I have loved you”; “that they may all be one ... even as we are one.” Hence, it is communion of men and women with the Trinitarian God and communion of men and women with one another. ... This life of fellowship with God and with one another is the proper goal of Gospel proclamation, the goal of conversion to Christianity.

— Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience* (March 29, 2006), citing John 15:12 and 17:21–22

STEP 3: Engage

- 1) The first commandment says, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:2–3). By placing who God is and what he has done in the first position, the commandment directs our response to a merciful God: to put God first. When we do that, everything else begins to fall into place, including the rest of the commandments. What can compete with God for first place in our lives? Usually, we affirm with our words that God is Lord of our lives, but do our actions live up to this? What do our actions reveal about competing “divinities” in our lives?

Any number of examples could be raised in this question, from career, to money, to material things, to friendships or interests. It might be helpful to begin grouping the responses together so that participants get a sense of general categories: pleasurable goods (food, sex, luxuries), instrumental goods (money, wealth, power), immaterial goods (honor, reputation, fame, friendship), etc. In this way, the participants can clearly see that people tend to desire and to idolize similar things, i.e., they can be placed in just a few categories. Some help might be needed to understand what it means to consider our actions rather than our words. Here, seeing how our actions might not correspond to our words could be helpful. Professing love for someone but taking very little time for them or caring poorly for their needs is one example. Time is finite; and once we start to take stock of our actions and how we spend our time, we begin to see where our priorities truly lie. We don’t need to spend more of our day praying than working or caring for others—because these activities can also honor God and be offered up to him—but we do need to have the right proportion, and this proportion will always include a generous place for prayer and the sacraments.

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- 2) Christian marriage is lofty and challenging. To strive to live it wholeheartedly is both noble and valiant. With the Sacrament of Marriage both devalued and criticized today, what are some reasons for us to celebrate and defend marriage? While holding to the truth about God's plan for marriage, how can we still be pastoral and loving toward those who do not share the Church's teachings and who might even live contrary to them?

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This question offers a chance to reflect on the goods of marriage and the nobility of the vocation of marriage. The point is not to compare or contrast marriage with the priesthood or religious life, nor is it to be combative towards contrary views in the world today, religious or political. Instead, it is meant to be an appreciation of God's plan for marriage and to encourage those trying to live according to that plan. Various points of appreciation could be raised here: marriage and family as the fundamental cell of society; the tremendous good of children, for the family and for society as a whole; the family as a school of virtue; the mutual perfection and sanctification of spouses, who are called to intimate communion with each other and with God; the mutual complementarity of spouses, which ought not be generalized simplistically; and so on. The central truths about marriage can be defended by looking to the specific purpose of marriage, which has to do with rearing children. Many other types of friendships can be had and many of them can be rich and fulfilling, but marriage is the only type of friendship that involves raising a child or children. This special character is the reason that marriage has a privileged place in society and in legislation. The good of the spouses, embodied in loving friendship, serves the good of children and is enriched by it as well. (Note that it might be necessary to acknowledge the very real suffering of those couples who desire children but struggle with infertility. To acknowledge a real lack honors the suffering these couples experience, but at the same time this lack does not make less of a marriage.) Lastly, when engaging those who disagree with us on marriage and family, the best witness is often the unspoken witness of joy, peace, and a rich life within the home. To invite people into our lives through hospitality or to give a joyful witness when out and about offers a strong practical argument for the good of marriage and family. We needn't run from actual conversations, but it can be helpful to realize that argument is best accompanied by the convinced and joyful witness of Christian families.

- 3) Reflect on ways you have had your community or relationships strengthened. What benefits did you receive from this? How could you further strengthen your community and relationships?

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Concrete ideas for strengthening community might include reaching out to an old friend, making a new friend, scheduling regular time for social interaction, forming a men's or women's group, joining a prayer group or Bible study, helping an elderly neighbor, etc. The possibilities here are very numerous indeed. Tying social life into the life of faith can involve a little bit more. Something like a prayer group or Bible study already has a connection with faith. Letting the liturgical year shape social events and celebrations is one idea. Another could be making prayer a more regular part of our interactions—why not pray with our

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friends, either for specific needs, or for the people in general, or for our community or Church? Finally, by consciously striving to live out the virtues, especially charity, our upright friendships and social interactions can exemplify and give witness to trinitarian love, the goal of all our social interactions.

STEP 4: Conclude

To encounter Christ and learn from him that God is a communion of love touches upon a deep-seated human longing for communion. We all want to love and to be loved, to share life and love with others. Jesus' invitation promises abundant fulfillment of this universal longing. In and through Christ, we are invited into loving fellowship with him and his heavenly Father. Moreover, the fruit of this communion is joyful fellowship with the saints, on earth and in Heaven. What more could we ask for? When we say yes to Jesus' invitation to follow him unto eternal life, we find that all of our hopes and desires are satisfied beyond imagining. He has promised us life in abundance (see John 10:10), and he richly fulfills that promise in our communion with him and with one another.

CLOSING PRAYER

Pierce, O most sweet Lord Jesus, my inmost soul with the most joyous and healthful wound of your love. ...

May it ever thirst for you, the fountain of life, the fountain of wisdom and knowledge, the fountain of eternal light, the torrent of pleasure, the fullness of the house of God;

may it ever compass you, seek you, find you, run to you, come up to you, meditate on you, speak of you, and do all for the praise and glory of your name, with humility and discretion, with love and delight, with ease and affection, with perseverance to the end;

and be you alone ever my hope, my entire confidence, my riches, my delight, my pleasure, my joy, my rest and tranquility, my peace, my sweetness, my food, my refreshment, my refuge, my help, my wisdom, my portion, my possession, my treasure;

in Whom may my mind and my heart be ever fixed and firm and rooted immovably. Amen.

— From a prayer by Saint Bonaventure

MEMORY VERSE

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

—JOHN 15:11



CALL TO CONVERSION

Much about the contemporary world proves corrosive to communion. An exaggerated notion of freedom prizes independence over acknowledging our need for others. An overemphasis on the individual overlooks our social nature. An industrialized economy takes over much of the domestic work that is meant to foster cooperation and unity in the household. A polarized political system divides communities and generations from one another. Given this environment, the good news about Jesus Christ and the social dimension of the Gospel are welcome sources of light and hope. But responding to the good news asks for our commitment and effort.

Our communion with God is our first priority and the deepest source of our communion with others. Ask yourself: What commitments and efforts have I made to develop my relationship with God? What would it take for me to draw closer to him, especially in prayer and the sacraments?

The first fruit of our communion with God is our communion with other members of his Church. Ask yourself: What commitments and efforts have I made to strengthen the fellowship of saints in the Church? Do I pray for the Church, for the Holy Father, and for the bishops, especially my own? Do I contribute to my parish by participating in its sacramental life, giving generously to support and to serve my pastor and the parish community?

The Church is meant to be a light to the world, and we bring that light to those around us, both within the Church and without. Ask yourself: What commitments and efforts have I made to serve the communities where I live and work? Do I invest my time generously in the loved ones closest to me, whether family or friends? Do I look outside these groups to serve and build up communities around me, whether at work, in the neighborhood, or in a local club or organization?

The world has a great need to rediscover the joy of communion with God and others. Let us ask the Lord to embolden and strengthen us so that we can enjoy the richness of communion and bring it to those around us.

Wedding of Adam and Eve, Viennese School, 19th Century



DIGGING DEEPER

The Church takes seriously the creation of man and woman. She treasures this reality and the revelation of creation's most profound meaning. Why? Not only because this is how human beings are created, each one of us, as male or female, but also—and even more so—because our creation as male and female reflects something profound about God, his love for us, and our love for each other.



The *Catechism* begins the section on the sixth commandment—"you shall not commit adultery" (Exod 20:14)—in a surprising way. After telling what the sixth commandment is, it quotes Genesis 1:27 in an overarching title that sets the stage for all that follows: "Male and Female He Created Them ...". God created persons as male and female. Thus sexuality is included in God's sweeping approval of the whole of creation: "Behold, it was very good" (Gen 1:31).

Our sexuality—each of us created male or female—is very good. God has given us this gift to enrich human life through friendships of all sorts, but especially through marriage and its gift of perpetuating mankind through time across successive generations. If this is a gift, then our proper response is to accept this gift: "Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual *identity*" (CCC 2333). Because our sexuality is expressed in the unity of soul and body, "*sexuality* affects all aspects of the human person. ... It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others" (CCC 2332). After accepting this gift, we are called to cultivate it, especially because it is so important for human life.

The Church certainly acknowledges the challenges that arise in cultivating the gift of human sexuality: the struggles of chastity, same-sex attraction, gender dysphoria, marital infidelity, pornography, and the like. But the heart of her response to each of these challenges begins with the affirmation of the goodness of sexuality, the importance of embracing our sexual identity expressed in soul and body, and the appreciation of what our sexuality—in its difference and complementarity—manifests about God and the communion of love into which he invites us.

FOR FURTHER READING

John 15–16, Acts 2, and 1 John

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1322–1405

John Cuddeback, *True Friendship*

Pope Saint John Paul II, *Letter to Families* and *Familiaris consortio*

Pope Saint Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*