

- **Handout 1, Prayer of Saint John Chrysostom before Reading Sacred Scripture**, prayer card for each participant
- CD or MP3 player and speakers
- [“We Belong to You”](#) by Trevor Thomson and Victoria Thomson (spiritandsong.com)

Extend the Session: Name the Books

- Two 4x6 index cards, for each pair of participants
- Pens or pencils, one for each pair of participants

Prepare in Advance

1. Prepare by reading/reviewing the background references cited in **Resource 1, *Catechism of the Catholic Church on the New Testament***.
2. Invite a participant to proclaim Philippians 2:1-11 in the closing prayer.
3. Prepare the prayer space using the materials mentioned above.
4. Prepare four sheets of newsprint, one for each Gospel. Each sheet should have the name of one Gospel on it along with the following sub-headings in a left-hand column:
 - Written around:
 - Audience:
 - Names for Jesus:
 - Interesting fact:
5. Set up tables and chairs for small group work. Set up tables for refreshments and sign-in. Have one or two people at the sign-in table with a check-in sheet and nametags. **Hospitality is important:** As the leader, do not use the gathering time before the session begins to take care of last-minute preparations. Spend the time moving among the participants, greeting and speaking with them.

Session Outline

Welcome (2 minutes)

Welcome the participants as they arrive. Invite everyone to make a nametag. Introduce yourself and any other adults who will be assisting you. Ask them to turn off their cell phones, and then announce any other guidelines or rules that will govern the session.

Introduction (5 minutes)

Provide this introduction to tonight’s session:

As Catholics, the Bible has always been foundational to who we are because we experience God’s presence through his holy Word and we come to know Jesus

through the stories and letters of the New Testament. Tonight, we will become biblical scholars in our own right, and briefly survey the New Testament, its formation, its content, and its importance in our lives as Catholics.

Opening Prayer (3 minutes)

Invite the participants to gather at the prayer space, or to put all their things away and to focus on the prayer space. Begin by leading the participants through a few breathing exercises in order to prepare them for prayer. Then light the candle purposefully and, using **Resource 3, Prayer of St. John Chrysostom before Reading Scripture**, lead the opening prayer. When the prayer is finished, ask the participants to return to their tables and chairs or to re-focus for the task at hand.

Pop Quiz (10 minutes)

Do a quick quiz with the participants these questions (or some of your own):

- **How many gospels are in the Bible?** Four.
- **What is the last book in New Testament?** Revelation.
- **After Jesus, name three primary characters in the New Testament after Jesus.** Mary, Peter, Paul.
- **Name one of the communities Paul wrote to in his letters.** Corinth, Rome, Philippi, Ephesus, Galatia, Thessalonica, etc.
- **Tell us a famous saying or phrase from the New Testament.** Examples may include: "Love is patient, love is kind" (1 Corinthians 13). "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). "Let no one have contempt for your youth, but set an example for those who believe, in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity" (1 Timothy 4:12).

Share a Story (10 minutes)

Do your parents or grandparents tell stories of their childhood and young adult years? As one gets older, one tends to remember those parts of their lives that were meaningful for them. As extended families get together over holidays or for reunions, more stories are told—connecting generations together.

Invite the participants to share with a partner a story that is told and re-told in their family. It can be about someone who is no longer alive or something that happened in their lifetime that is told when the family gathers. Give each partner about five minutes to tell the story. If needed, consider leading off with a brief story of your own.

The Formation of the New Testament: Oral Tradition (20 minutes)

Introduce how oral tradition comes to be written down as follows:

This notion of telling stories gives us some insight into how the New Testament came to be written.

The Church teaches that the Gospels are the heart of the Scripture because they reveal to us the principal teachings of Jesus the Christ. (CCC #125)

We know that there were at least three stages in the formation of the Gospels as we know it today. (CCC #125)

The first stage:

- **The Life and Teaching of Jesus:** No one seriously believes that the writers of the Gospels (evangelists) followed Jesus around with parchment and stylus and copied down what he said and wrote down what he did as he preached, used parables, performed miracles, suffered, died, rose, and ascended to the Father! They simply lived in his presence and, like Mary, “held all these things in their hearts.” (cf. Luke 2:19)

What are some of the significant teachings of Jesus or episodes from his life?

Get a few answers then continue:

The second stage:

- **The Oral Tradition:** Just as you remembered and re-told a story about an important moment in your life, those who traveled with and encountered Jesus remembered what he said and did.

They shared these remembrances with family and friends. After the resurrection and ascension, they kept telling these stories about Jesus—how he taught (parables), his encounters with various people, his passion, death, and resurrection, the Last Supper, and his gift of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost).

What stories do you remember from the New Testament (where others were talking about Jesus)?

Ask the participants to share their responses to these questions as a large group:

How many of you keep a diary? A journal? (either on paper or on a computer) How many of you blog? What do you journal/blog about in general? What made you decide to begin writing things down? How do you decide to what you are going to write down?

Allow about three minutes for responses, then continue:

The third stage:

- **The Written Gospels:** As those followers of Jesus began to die and as the people who knew those people began to die, it became very important for the Christian community to have a written record of the life and teaching of Jesus to

pass on to those who would come after them, but also to use in their prayer and worship. They wanted to preserve their experiences and memories of Jesus, so some began writing these down.

- ***The Formation of the Canon:*** No matter how the Gospel accounts came into being, the Church teaches, and we believe, that the all the biblical authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit, so their writings convey the truth that God wants us to know for our salvation.

The Church finally had to decide which books revealed God's saving plan for us. The final selection of books is called the canon of Scripture, and, as Catholics, we accept what Councils and Popes have codified for us in this canon. (cf. CCC #120)

(Optional) Extend the Session: Name the Books (15-20 minutes)

Distribute two index cards and a pen or pencil to each pair of participants, asking them to put their Bibles away (if they already have them out and open). Instruct them as follows:

I am going to give you two minutes to write down as many books of the New Testament as you can on one of your index cards. Do not look in your Bibles. Do not begin until I give you the signal.

Give the go-ahead and call time in exactly two minutes. Then, invite one pair to go to the newsprint and write down the books they came up with in exactly the order they wrote them. Then ask if any other pair had additional books not on the list, and invite them to come forward and write them on the newsprint. Continue until there are no new additions to the newsprint.

Then, directing them to the list on the newsprint, ask them to put the books in order on their second index card, telling them there will again be a two-minute time limit. Call time and then invite the group as a whole to say which book is first, second, third, etc. As they reply, you (or one of the adults working with you) write that number by the book on the newsprint. If a book gets two numbers, write down both.

Continue as follows:

Let us see how close we got to the correct order of the writings of the New Testament.

Invite participants to open their Bibles and look at the Table of Contents and to follow along with you.

- We have the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John followed by
- the Acts of the Apostles,
- the Letters of St. Paul to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, the Letter to the Hebrews,

The New Testament: Fulfillment of a Promise

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- the Letters of James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude, and finally
- Revelation.

Take a quick minute to compare their work to the canonical list:

Are there any books we did not mention? How do you think we did on the order of the Books of the New Testament?

The books of the New Testament are arranged like this:

- ***The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles***
 - a. The word, *gospel*, as you know means “good news”. The gospel accounts by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell the story of Jesus’ life and teachings and each one builds to the high and central story of Christ’s death and Resurrection. The core of each Gospel account is the same, but each has its own unique perspective on Jesus. (cf. Mark 1:1)
 - b. We can gather from the text of the *Acts of the Apostles* that it was written by the same author who wrote the Gospel of Luke. It tells the story of how the teachings of Christ about the Kingdom of God spread through the work of his followers (particularly Paul). (Cf. Matthew 28: 19, 20) The Church reads from *Acts* all through the Easter Season.
- ***The Letters***: This section of the New Testament contains 21 *letters* that tell us, as well as explain to us, what the Apostles taught about Christ and how to be his disciple. These letters were sent sometimes to specific individuals and sometimes to Christian communities. The first 14 letters are attributed to St. Paul and the other seven are associated with other early church leaders—Peter, James, John, and Jude.
- ***The Revelation of John***: The uniqueness of this book of the New Testament is undeniable. In terms of its literary *genre* (style), it is apocalyptic. *Apocalypse* is a Greek word meaning *revelation*. While there are several examples of such writing in the Old Testament, this is the only one in the New Testament. It contains prophecies and symbolic visions that speak to the struggle between the Roman Empire and the mission of Christ during the author’s lifetime. It conveys to his community, and to us, that God and God’s will always triumph in the end.

Formation of the New Testament: The Gospels (20 minutes)

Let us spend some time looking at the four Gospel accounts and how each of the four evangelists presented the life and teaching of Jesus.

Establish four groups of participants, assigning each group one of the four Gospel accounts. Distribute copies of **Handout 1, Background on the Gospels**, to each participant. Make sure each participant has a Bible. Give the following directions:

Read the information on your handout about the particular Gospel you have been assigned. In addition, read the introduction to the Gospel in your Bible.

While the groups are reading about their Gospel assignment, post the four sheets of newsprint you prepared in advance of the session. These sheets should be posted side-by-side in this order: Matthew | Mark | Luke/Acts | John.

Invite the participants to send a representative to the newsprint for their Gospel and to fill in the blanks based on what they learned in their reading. When finished, say:

This little exercise shows us that not all of the evangelists chose to include all the same things in their Gospel accounts. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each wrote to a particular Christian community for a particular purpose. The Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the *Synoptic* Gospels; meaning that we can print them up in parallel fashion and find that they include many of the same stories, often in the same sequence, and similar wording.

(Optional) Writings of the Early Church (10 minutes)

Provide this overview of the letters in the New Testament:

Letters of the New Testament

What was the last letter you wrote? To whom? Why? How many letters do you write in a year?

Letter writing seems to be a lost art in this age of technology. Much that has happened in the history of the world since the invention of writing is found in an exchange of letters between famous and not-so-famous people. We have the letters exchanged between Galileo and his daughter, a cloistered nun; between John and Abigail Adams; and between Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, for example. Each series of letters details their relationship, their struggle, the currents of history in which they lived. Following on what we said earlier this evening, many families are publishing the letters of their relatives who served in WWII, and we find letters from Viet Nam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other war zones telling the stories of the soldiers there.

Letters of St. Paul

Towards the end of his life, Paul not only continued his missionary activity but also wrote letters (from about the years 50 to 60). He wrote to teach, to encourage, to correct, to clarify what he had taught, and to introduce himself to a new community (Romans). We find great insight into his own spirituality in his letters which serve as a model for us.

The letters that survive in our New Testament, in their canonical order, are: (Letters to church communities) Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, (Letters to individuals) 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. (Six of these letters are attributed to Paul but disputes exist over their authorship. They may have been written by members of his communities, under Paul's name, which was a custom of the day.)

The letters to Timothy and Titus are referred to as "pastoral letters" because they are addressed to individual pastors of Christian communities.

The main themes of the 13 Letters are:

- That God is a Father who loves us and the Holy Spirit who consecrates us.
- That Jesus made us children of God and brothers and sisters to each other.
- Christians are called to imitate Christ in their relationship to God and to each other, in love, charity, and kindness.

The Catholic Epistles

The seven remaining Letters are called “catholic” because they were not written, like those of St. Paul, only to one church or person but to several churches.

James: This letter was addressed to Jewish Christians, who maintained a close connection with the mother church in Jerusalem, but who did not express their faith sufficiently in good works, especially works of charity, mercy and mortification of the tongue.

Jude: Written to Jews of both Palestine and the Dispersion whose communities had been invaded by fallen away Christians. These false teachers denied Christ’s divinity, his teachings and his second coming, blasphemed the angels, and inculcated pagan vices. The writer bids the Christians to stand firm in the faith delivered to the saints.

1 Peter: This letter is directed to the faithful of several provinces who were on the point of defecting from the Christian faith because of persecutions from both Jews and Gentiles. The writer places before them their true dignity: They are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Suffering is a test of their faith.

2 Peter: Also attributed to St. Peter, this letter warns the Christians of Asia Minor against the heretical teachers who practiced all kinds of vices and denied Christ and his second coming. The writer urges Christians to walk worthily of the vocation in which they were called, describes the punishment in store for the seducers, and reaffirms the second coming of Christ.

1 John: This letter warns the Christians against certain heretics who denied Christ’s divinity or who denied that Christ came in the flesh. The writer briefly explains the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Redemption and urges all to practice charity.

2 John: Also attributed to St. John, this letter urges the Christians to preserve the faith, practice charity, and avoid heretics who were teaching that Christ did not come in the flesh.

3 John: This is a letter of gratitude written to a certain Caius, who gave hospitality to disciples sent out by John.

The Book of Revelation

This last book of the New Testament is *Revelation* which, as we’ve already said, is filled with visions and very dramatic images. It is very difficult to understand because of this extravagant symbolism, which at best appears unusual to us today, but this coded language was about events happening at the time of the writing of the Book. Symbolic language, however, is one of the chief characteristics of apocalyptic literature, which is what *Revelation* is.

The visions are described as received by a disciple named John, and tradition has linked it to St. John the Apostle and Evangelist. Non-Catholics often interpret this

book very literally and very incorrectly by reading it as a condemnation of the Catholic Church today. Rather, the words of *Revelation* can and should be read as an exhortation and admonition to Christians of the first century to stand firm in the faith and to avoid compromise with paganism, despite the threat of adversity and martyrdom; they are to await patiently the fulfillment of God's mighty promises. The message to us is the same.

Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

Gather

Invite a volunteer to light the candle on the prayer table.

Prayer Leader: *(begin with the Sign of the Cross)*

O God, whose Word fills us with the light of faith, draw us ever nearer to you and help us be your witnesses in the world. We make our prayer through Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the most well-known and moving passages in Paul's writings is Philippians 2:5-11, known as the Kenosis Hymn because of the line in v. 7 which said Christ "emptied himself"—which is the translation of the Greek word, *kenosis*. This was most likely a hymn used by early Christians in their Eucharist which was an affirmation of their faith, and it pre-dates any of Paul's writings.

Let us listen with great reverence and thanksgiving as this great hymn of faith is proclaimed for us.

Listen

Invite the reader to proclaim Philippians 2:1-11. Allow a few moments of silence after the reading.

Respond

Prayer Leader:

Our response to the reading will be a reaffirmation of our baptismal vows. The answer to each question is "**I do.**"

Do you believe in God,
the Father almighty
Creator of heaven and earth?
I do.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered death and was buried,
rose again from the dead
and is seated at the right hand of the Father?
I do.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting?

I do.

This is our faith and we are proud to proclaim it in Christ Jesus, our Lord! Amen!

Let us offer each other a sign of peace.

Send Forth

Close by singing “We Belong to You.”

Announcements and Refreshments (5 minutes)

Thank the young people for their participation. Make any needed announcements about upcoming programs and activities. Invite everyone to enjoy some refreshments.

Websites and links in this session were accessed successfully prior to publication.

This session was written by [Leota Roesch](#), Director of Parish Faith Development and Sacramental Life, St. Bridget Parish, Mesa, Arizona. [Fr. Roy Shelly, Ph.D.](#), Pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Spreckels, California, Diocese of Monterey, served as theological consultant on this session.

Catechism of the Catholic Church **on the New Testament**

120: It was by the apostolic Tradition that the Church discerned which writings are to be included in the list of the sacred books. This complete list is called the canon of Scripture. It includes 46 books for the Old Testament (45 if we count Jeremiah and Lamentations as one) and 27 for the New Testament.

The New Testament: the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the Acts of the Apostles, the Letters of St. Paul to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, the Letter to the Hebrews, the Letters of James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude, and Revelation (the Apocalypse).

124: The Word of God, which is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, is set forth and displays its power in a most wonderful way in the writings of the New Testament⁹⁶ which hand on the ultimate truth of God's Revelation. Their central object is Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son: his acts, teachings, Passion and glorification, and his Church's beginnings under the Spirit's guidance.

125: The Gospels are the heart of all the Scriptures "because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Savior. "

126: We can distinguish three stages in the formation of the Gospels:

1. *The life and teaching of Jesus.* The Church holds firmly that the four Gospels, "whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day when he was taken up. "

2. *The oral tradition.* "For, after the ascension of the Lord, the apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done, but with that fuller understanding which they, instructed by the glorious events of Christ and enlightened by the Spirit of truth, now enjoyed."

3. *The written Gospels.* "The sacred authors, in writing the four Gospels, selected certain of the many elements which had been handed on, either orally or already in written form; others they synthesized or explained with an eye to the situation of the churches, while sustaining the form of preaching, but always in such a fashion that they have told us the honest truth about Jesus."

127: The fourfold Gospel holds a unique place in the Church, as is evident both in the veneration which the liturgy accords it and in the surpassing attraction it has exercised on the saints at all times:

There is no doctrine which could be better, more precious and more splendid than the text of the Gospel. Behold and retain what our Lord and Master, Christ, has taught by his words and accomplished by his deeds. (St. Caesarina the Younger)

But above all it's the Gospels that occupy my mind when I'm at prayer; my poor soul has so many needs, and yet this is the one thing needful. I'm always finding fresh lights there, hidden and enthralling meanings. (St. Therese of Lisieux)

Handout 1

Background on the Gospels

Matthew

Writing in the late 70's A.D. or maybe the early 80's, Matthew wrote to address the needs and concerns of his Jewish Christian community who wanted to know if they could be disciples of Jesus, and, at the same time, follow the prescriptions of the Jewish law. Matthew demonstrates all through his account that Jesus is the NEW Moses sent by God to inaugurate a new covenant; he was the fulfillment of the promise of the Law (Old Testament) which had now passed away and given way to the new. This is one of the reasons he most likely began with the genealogy of Jesus to show how this Son of David was the promised Messiah. For Matthew, Jesus is *Son of David; Son of Abraham; King of the Jews; New Lawgiver & Great Teacher (like Moses); Emmanuel ("God with us")*.

Mark

Mark's is the first gospel written most likely in the late 60's or early 70's as the Jews began their uprising against Roman occupation and saw the destruction of the Temple. He writes to those mostly new Gentile Christians suffering persecution in order to encourage them. His is the "beginning of the good news" (Mk 1:1) and he addresses the questions, "Who is Jesus?" and "How does one 'do' discipleship?" Mark is preparing his community for the *Eschaton* (perhaps by the end of the generation of those to whom he was writing), the final coming of Christ. For him, then, Jesus is *Christ/Messiah & Son of God; Suffering Son of Man; Eschatological Judge*.

Luke

Luke most likely wrote in the late 80's, although he certainly used sources earlier than that date. His audience is Gentiles Christians; i.e., those who had not been Jews before they became Christian. Luke wants his community to know that the promises of God to the people of Israel are for them, too. God's love is all-inclusive and no one is to be left out. Hence, there are many stories of the marginalized and the outsiders whom Jesus constantly welcomes—sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, gentiles. He wants to set out an "orderly account" so that these new Christians can follow the story of salvation brought to them through the passion, death, and Resurrection of *Jesus*. The Jesus of Luke's Gospel is *a great Prophet (in word & deed); Lord (of Israel, and of all nations); Savior (of all, but especially of the poor)*.

Acts of the Apostles

The book of *Acts* is a continuation of Luke's Gospel, part 2, as it were. Both are addressed to *Theophilus*, perhaps not so much an individual, but taking its meaning from the word in Greek, any "lover of God." He begins *Acts* by saying:

"In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen." (Acts 1:1, 2)

Luke then proceeds to tell "the rest of the story" of the early Church in four main divisions:

- Prologue (1:1-5);
- The Mission of the Church in Jerusalem and Environs (1:6– 8:3);
- The Mission of the Church in Judea and Samaria (8:4– 12:25); and
- The Mission of the Church to the Ends of the Earth (13:1 – 28:31), the story of the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul.

Acts gives a clue to this outline at 1:8. There the Risen Jesus promises the gift of the Holy Spirit who will enable the apostles to be emboldened and to embark on worldwide missionary activity. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."²

During the Easter Season we hear *Acts* proclaimed at the Liturgy and, when we hear it, we are offered an opportunity to take stock of who we are as Church. We are invited to ask ourselves what kind of "Church" are we? How closely today can we be identified with the ideal qualities of the post-Resurrection faith community portrayed in *Acts*?

Are we still a community entrusted with a mission to carry the "Good News" of Jesus Christ forth to the whole world? Are we primarily a community of believers? Do we gather in fellowship to support each other in our faith? Do we give testimony with joy and hope, confidently trusting that God continues to guide us in the Holy Spirit?

John

If Mark asks, "Who is Jesus?" then John asks, "Where is Jesus?" Remember that the Christian community had anticipated the final coming of Christ long before John was writing in the 90's. (The epilogue seems to be written after the year 100, giving rise to the tradition that John lived to a very old age.) His Gospel is a cosmic hymn to Christ, the *Logos*, the Word of God, and is called the *Book of Signs*, because he tells seven major stories about Jesus' great signs, and he has Jesus speaking in profound theological discourses which he uses to let his community of "beloved disciples" (Brown) know that Christ Risen is still present in his church and in its life. Jesus, then, for John, is *Eternal Logos; Divine Word made Flesh; Only-begotten Son; sent from Father; Passover Lamb; "I Am"; "Equal to God."*

² Cf. "[Acts of the Apostles](#)," *Catholic Update*, April 2007 by Ronald Witherup, S.S.

Handout 2

Prayer of Saint John Chrysostom before Reading Sacred Scripture

O Lord Jesus Christ,
open the eyes of my heart,
that I may hear Your word
and understand and do Your will,
for I am a sojourner upon the earth.
Hide not Your commandments from me,
but open my eyes, that I may perceive the
wonders of Your law.
Speak unto me the hidden and secret things
of Your wisdom.
On You do I set my hope, O my God,
that You shall enlighten
my mind and understanding with
the light of Your knowledge,
not only to cherish those things
which are written, but to do them;
that in reading the lives and sayings
of the saints I may not sin,
but that such may serve for my restoration,
enlightenment
and sanctification, for the salvation of my
soul,
and the inheritance of life everlasting.
For You are the enlightenment of those
who lie in darkness,
and from You comes every good deed
and every gift.

Amen.

Icon source: <http://www.eikonografos.com/>.

