

Starting a Parish Book Club

Best Practices and Advice

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Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Philippians 4:8, NABRE

Book clubs and reading groups have enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in recent years. It is not hard to see why. Exploring an excellent book together and sharing with others the insights we gain enriches our lives and helps us integrate those insights into our daily living. It also helps us grow in our understanding of the people and the world around us. And, of course, for those who find it hard to make time for reading great material because of the pressures and demands of work and daily life, a book club provides an extra motivation to read regularly and gather with friends and neighbors for quality time together.

A Catholic reading group may share some or all of these reasons for meeting, but it also brings with it several additional and important reasons. Reading a great book on some aspect of Catholic faith and life can be a wonderful and rich way to nourish one's faith. **Discussing what we've read with fellow believers—talking about it, sharing and comparing our understanding of the contents, perhaps exploring areas of agreement and disagreement in respectful ways, figuring out together any difficult points—are wonderful ways of nourishing our faith, building our local Christian community, and simply getting to know our neighbors better!**

In a parish reading group, members can expect to be strengthened in their faith through shared thoughts and insights, and to be helped to make practical applications of faith to everyday life. Members can expect to encounter Jesus, both in the words they read and in the people with whom they discuss those words.

Organizing a Parish Reading Group

A parish reading group begins long before the first meeting is called. Let us assume that you are the person charged with forming such a group. We'll take each issue of planning and preparation step-by-step. If you are experienced with organizing groups, some of what follows will seem self-evident.

Overall Time Frame

Choose a time frame for your reading group. Six to eight weeks is usually good. You may want to plan your group to coincide with a particular liturgical season: Advent (you can start in mid-November to get six weeks), Lent, and the Easter season (so

neglected at times in parish life, except for the new Catholics who may continue to meet) may lend themselves to this time frame.

Reading groups may also meet in the summer, and a summer reading group may become a welcome tradition. Very few people are on vacation all summer long. It should be made clear in an invitation to a summer reading group that missing a week or two while being on vacation is not a reason for not registering.

Meeting Options

The following are three meeting formats you can consider. Of course, you can modify each to fit your group's or parish's needs. And for Option C, you may wish to consider this in conjunction with one of the other two options. The primary focus of this resource will be Option A. Much of the guidelines will also easily apply to Option B. Some notes specific to Option C are provided on page 8.

Option A: Gathering at the Parish

A group might meet together at a parish meeting room and gathering place. If the group is especially large, it might be divided into smaller discussion groups. (After a set amount of time for small-group interaction, the facilitator will call the group back together for a whole-group discussion in which all participants share insights.) This is the most likely kind of meeting for a parish reading group.

Option B: Small Groups in Home Gatherings

But members of the group may prefer to meet in participants' homes instead. A setting at home tends to be a little more comfortable, since members can relax in a living room together, perhaps sharing coffee and home-baked food! This arrangement would be announced ahead of time, in a bulletin notice or perhaps in individual communications with those who express interest. Those who register for the book club would be asked in the registration form if they would be open to hosting a small reading group for one or more meetings on a rotating schedule, or perhaps the meeting will be in the same home each time. Ideally, a home group should have six to ten members.

Option C: Guided Independent Study

Independent study is a third option. It might be done in conjunction with either of the above options. Parishioners who would like to participate in a structured reading program but are not able to attend meetings (for reasons of health, scheduling, etc.) can "follow along" with the reading group through resources made available to them on the parish website or by email. For example, the "assignment" for the coming week would be posted or emailed at the start of the week, or after a group meeting has been held, and the discussion questions for that assignment would also be provided.

Meeting Times and Preparation

Your invitation may or may not offer a choice of meeting time preferences (evening, morning, afternoon). The best time for your reading group may be before or after the times when parishioners are already gathered: after Sunday Mass, after a weekday morning Mass, or after an early evening Mass. Also, consider offering two sessions at two separate times, such as a morning group and an evening or Sunday group, to accommodate different needs.

The length of the meeting may vary, but an hour and a half seems a reasonable expectation. The first ten or fifteen minutes might be spent in greetings, sharing snacks, and general settling-in. Ideally, the book discussion itself would fill about an hour. Offer a five-minute break in the middle for personal needs. Then, the last few minutes could be spent in arranging the next meeting, with decisions made on the following issues: Who will lead the meeting? Where will we meet (if it has been decided that the group will rotate among homes)? Who will bring snacks? (See page 8 for more on this topic.) Which chapter(s) should we read? (The assignment sheet should be consulted as a reminder. See “Reading Assignments” on page 5.)

Choosing a Book

The simplest method of selecting a book is to make the choice yourself. You might choose a book that has meant something to you, a popular book by a popular Catholic writer, or a life story of a saint or holy person. Be aware that in a parish-sponsored book group, the pastor may wish to approve the book that’s chosen.

Near the end of the six- to eight-week time frame, you might like to ask for suggestions from the participants or even vote among several books in order to choose the one that will be the focus of the next reading group.

Who Should Be Invited?

Typically, the reading group would be for any and all adults in the parish, both men and women. This can be an enriching spiritual experience for all and may be the preferred option in most cases.

However, you may also wish to present books with gender-specific audiences, such as on male or female spirituality. In this case, the reading groups and books can be alternated, so that, for example, men are invited in the fall and women in the spring, or can be run simultaneously by separate facilitators.

Some parishes have had success with a young adults reading group. Young adults (say, between the ages of 21 and 30) are often at loose ends in parishes. They are too old for youth ministry, and may feel that they are too young for some of the more traditional parish groups. A reading group for young adults can bring them together with their peers around a topic of faith.

Ordering the Book

In your invitation, name the book, the author, and the price of the book. Announce the process of ordering and paying for the book. Participants may do so on their own, through a bookstore or online, if that is convenient for all. Or you may suggest that they send or bring their payment to the parish office by a certain date. On that date (or a few days later, to allow for latecomers), you will order the required number of copies and have them sent to you.

In any case, you will want to let the participants know that they must order the book and have it in their possession (or pick it up at the parish office) ahead of the first meeting, so they can read the first assignment before the first meeting, in order for the meeting to begin with an actual discussion.

Reading Assignments

Prepare a reading assignment sheet for the six to eight weeks that the reading group will meet. If the book has six chapters or eight chapters, this will be easy. You may easily match your time frame to the number of chapters in the book.

If the book is very long, you may need to assign two or more chapters per week. Or, you may target certain chapters to be discussed and others simply to be read by the participants on their own.

The First Meeting and Preparatory Steps

The parish hall is buzzing! Twenty people have responded to your invitation and are here tonight with books in hand. Before this first meeting, you will have arranged the following:

- A sign-in table with name tags on it. You may want to collect contact information (email or phone) in case a meeting is cancelled due to weather or other reasons. (See Handout A, “Reading Group Participants,” at the back of this booklet.)
- An assistant to sit at this table and collect any book money still due, and to give out any remaining books.
- Snacks and a small selection of drinks laid out on a separate table. A volunteer list should be placed on this table for subsequent evenings (if the groups will meet in the parish facility). If the groups will meet on their own, in homes, participants should be asked to rotate “snack duty.”
- Movable chairs for the participants arranged in one large circle.
- Copies of Handouts B and C: “Questions When Beginning a Book” and “Reading Review Questions.” (Handouts are provided at the back of this booklet. Have on hand one copy of each handout for each participant.)

Opening the Meeting

Begin the meeting with the sign of the cross and this prayer (or one of your own!):

Come, Holy Spirit, be with us as we gather to grow in faith and to share insights with one another. Help us grow in knowledge of your truth, that we may live our lives in Christ more fully and with deeper understanding. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who is our Way, our Truth, and our Life. (All: Amen.)

Forming the Small Reading Groups

Explain that tonight's meeting will need to be an organizing meeting, with time for discussion as well. Explain that there will be a five-minute break at the midpoint for personal needs or necessary phone calls.

Even if name tags are worn, have participants introduce themselves. You may ask group members to share whether they have had previous experience with a reading group and why they are interested in a parish reading group.

Then begin organizing the small reading groups. These twenty people can be divided into four groups of five each. This can be done by gathering the group into a large circle and going around the circle counting 1-2-3-4. The participants would then form small groups by number. Explain that participants will continue to meet in these groups for the duration of the session.

Assign an informal, temporary leader for each group. As you assign leaders, state that your expectation is that members will take turns leading the groups and that this should be decided for the next meeting at each week's meeting.

Starting the Book Discussion

Distribute copies of Handouts B and C. Have the groups use Handout B as a springboard for beginning their discussion, but encourage group members to also contribute other insights and questions for the group to focus on as they begin their reading.

Following this general discussion, the group members can refer to Handout C to discuss the first reading assignment. Again, encourage them to contribute additional questions or insights. (Following the first meeting, participants will complete this handout independently and bring it to the meeting.) Note also that many books will include discussion questions. These might be located at the end of each chapter or at the end of the book. If the book your group is reading includes such questions, point them out to participants to guide their discussion.

You may choose to be a part of the reading group and may join one of the small groups. Assure the groups that you can be interrupted at any time if they have questions during the meeting time.

The Last Twenty Minutes

Call the small groups together to meet in one large group. Ask the participants to share their significant insights into the reading. As the end of the meeting nears, announce that there are about five or ten minutes remaining in our first reading group gathering.

Instruct participants to take home their copies of Handout C, "Reading Review Questions," to guide their reading of the coming week's assignment. Encourage them to respond to the handout questions at home or to take notes on their reading—for example, identifying something that struck them or "hit home"—so that they will have something to share at the next meeting.

Thank everyone for coming, and close with a short prayer of thanksgiving to the Holy Spirit for the insights shared.

Digging Deeper, Week by Week

Ideally, each member of the reading group will prepare for each session by reading the material. Handout C, "Reading Review Questions," will be helpful in guiding both the individual reading and the discussion in the reading group. The group might start each weekly discussion by asking each member, in turn, to share the notes made on the assigned reading or important points gleaned from the reading.

The goal of each session is to encourage the active participation of all, so small-group leaders should be encouraged to ask follow-up questions after individual members' sharing. Some examples might be: Did anyone else find something similar in their reading? Did anyone else get that impression from reading this chapter? Did anyone else find this chapter hard going (or inspiring, or challenging to previous beliefs)?

The Last Few Minutes

As with the first meeting, call all participants together for the last fifteen minutes of each meeting for a large-group discussion. Invite participants to share important insights arrived at within their small groups and ask follow-up questions. As you near the end of the discussion time, you may prompt "wrap-up" comments with a statement similar to the following: "We only have a few moments left. Does anyone have a last point about the reading that they would like to share?" Sometimes it takes a deadline to help formulate ideas!

Announce the coming week's reading assignment and distribute copies of Handout C to participants.

Thank everyone for coming, and close with a short prayer.

The Last Meeting

The six-week reading group session has come to an end. The last meeting has arrived! The following information should be emailed or otherwise communicated to each participant of each small group.

- The participants should be thanked with a personal and heartfelt appreciation of sharing this experience.
- Invite participants to share their experience of the reading group. You may also like to have participants complete a survey form (see Handout D at the back of this resource). Or you may want to use an internet survey option. Survey results will help you in planning your next reading group.
- If a selection for the next parish reading group session has been decided on, share this information and the time frame for the next reading group. Ask the participants to watch the parish bulletin for an announcement of the registration and book-buying procedure.

Adapting the Process for Option C, Independent Study

If you choose to offer independent study as an option, either in conjunction with group meetings or as the sole format, it will be important to keep participants on track and engaged through regularly scheduled communication. Communication may include any or all of the following: an introductory email, Handouts B and C (only provided once), discussion questions for each week's reading assignment, and a summary of key observations related to the preceding week's reading. You may also wish to have participants share key insights about the reading by email or through a dedicated blog, if the latter is feasible. If you choose to share by email, streamline the process by asking that feedback be sent to you. You can then share selections from the various emails with all independent study participants. (You might also have a volunteer take on this task.)

At the end of the session, a communication summing up the session will be appropriate. Include a short summary of important learnings drawn from the book. Invite participants to share feedback about their experience and to make suggestions for enhancements, or have them complete the survey form (Handout D). And, of course, thank participants for their contribution and invite them to join you for the next reading group.

Other Considerations

Food

The sharing of food is an extremely generous and hospitable gesture. We cannot help but think that Jesus was well aware of this. He met and taught his people at the table—sinners, tax collectors, and perhaps just hangers-on who were intrigued by

his teachings. Our very Eucharist is a sharing of the food that Jesus gives us, his Body and Blood that nourishes us now and leads us into eternal life.

It is highly recommended that food be shared during the reading group—not just as a “break” in the middle but as a welcoming gesture at the very beginning. Group members might decide what kind of food should be served, and who should bring it or prepare it.

Of course, the particular season of the year will have a bearing on what food might be appropriate. The seasons of Advent and Lent change our food habits somewhat, to a greater or lesser degree. Some Catholics fast by not eating certain foods (particularly sweets). Some fast by not eating in-between meals. An Advent or Lenten reading group should take this into consideration. Serving between-meal snacks or sweets during these seasons would not be supportive of traditional fasting practice. During these seasons, it might be better to share an actual supper. Perhaps these seasons would be appropriate times to form a “soup supper reading group.” Participants would gather, share a simple meal, and, at the same time, discuss their book.

If the reading group meets at the parish, perhaps, for the sake of convenience, the parish could provide a selection of soda and water.

Conversations, On and “Off” the Track

The heart of the reading group is, of course, the conversation among the participants. A strong reading group will have participants who read the material, arrive on time, and are ready to share their personal insights into the reading and the impact the reading has had on them.

In this sharing of insights and impact, participants will tend to go what may seem to be “off track.” In the beginning of the conversation, there will be references to certain passages and certain pages. Gradually, it might seem, everything goes “off track” and no one is talking about the book anymore! They are talking about their own lives and their own issues! What then?

It should be made clear that, in a reading group such as this, we are not seeking a purely academic experience. The book is not a textbook. No one will be tested on the material. The book discussion is a means to an end—to come to greater insight into God’s work in our lives. If the book is a springboard to that insight, it has done its job.

However, those who prefer to “stick to the text” have that gift and insight to offer. They will offer their insights and quotations from the book, thus enriching the connection between the author’s insights and the insights of the reading group members. Both kinds of participants—the participants who apply the book to their own lives in an immediate way, and the participants who further delve into the author’s words and insights, seeking more understanding—are essential.

The Big Secret of Successful Reading Groups

Finally, it can be revealed—the big secret of reading groups is not just to read, or even to discuss, a particular book. It is to create bonds of community, friendship, and support among the participants.

Reading groups help us to know one another, and then we can more easily follow the command of Jesus, to love one another. In parishes with many Masses, often parishioners do not know one another unless they work together in a parish ministry. A reading group can be another avenue in which parishioners can meet and exchange ideas in an atmosphere of mutual support.

Reading groups may seem to be a rather passive activity. Yet, their influence can be widespread. In building community within the parish, reading groups may foster relationships that can lead to enhancing parish life in many ways. For example, those who read and discuss a particular book on poverty may be inspired to act on their new understandings, leading them to form a parish society helping those in need. A more vibrant parish community may be the result of a few parishioners joining together to read a particular book.

In a reading group, faith is shared and strengthened. This in itself is a foundation for a more articulate understanding of the Catholic faith, and may lead to its further communication to others within the parish and beyond. Is not this the heart of the New Evangelization?

Go into the Whole World

Rest assured, there is really no wrong way to form and participate in a reading group. We human beings are hardwired, as it were, to share what we are thinking, for good or ill. A reading group simply provides a constructive avenue for doing what we already do, and also provides, as Saint Paul urged, something true, honorable, or lovely to think about.

In our parish reading groups, however, we can be sure of something more. When Jesus sent his apostles into the world, he did not send them out alone. He sent them out together. And he also promised his presence with them always. Perhaps this promise reminded them, as it does us, of another promise Jesus made during his own time of discussing and sharing insights with the people he met: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20, NABRE).

Handout A

Reading Group Participants

Sign in, please! Please indicate by an asterisk (*) the contact method you prefer.

Handout B

Questions When Beginning a Book

1. What is the title of the book? Is it an evocative or symbolic title? Or is it a straightforward, descriptive title? How does the title prepare you for what is to come?
 2. Who is the author of the book? What do you know about him or her? (More information might be found online.)
 3. What is the genre of the book—fiction, nonfiction, biography, autobiography? If nonfiction, would this book be in the realm of theology or spirituality? Could it be called a “how-to” book in some way, even in spiritual matters? Is its message presented in the form of journal entries or inspirational essay?
 4. Why were you drawn to reading this book? Or, if you do not feel drawn to reading this particular book, why not? Why are you willing to give it a try?
 5. Look over the table of contents. Are you drawn to any particular chapter or chapters? Why?

Handout C

Reading Review Questions

There is no right or wrong way to read a book. People read books differently. Some readers take extensive notes as they read. Other readers take no notes at all and rely on memory or a general impression of what they have read. These questions may help you to read a chapter, note its importance for you, and help you to remember what you have read.

1. Did this chapter build upon the previous one (if it was not the first in the book!) or could it stand alone as an independent article?
 2. Did you take notes while reading this chapter? If you did, share some of the important points you noted here:
 3. If you did not take notes, what was your general understanding of this chapter? What new information or understanding was conveyed in your reading? What do you want to remember from this chapter?
 4. Write here a key quotation from the chapter, or a quotation that impressed you in some way, and be prepared to share it with your reading group:

Handout D

Reading Group Survey

Name: (optional)

Would you consider your participation in this parish reading group to be a positive experience?

If yes, please note two or three elements you most enjoyed or found most beneficial. If no, please note your reasons.

Did this reading group strengthen your faith? If so, how?

Would you recommend a parish reading group to a friend?

Is there a book or a genre (e.g., saint's biography, writings of church fathers, Catholic apologetics) that you would especially like to explore as part of a reading group?

Please share any final comments or suggestions.