

Preparing Good Questions (for Catholic Scripture Sharing Groups)

By Kendra McClelland (April 29, 2019; <https://www.evangelicalcatholic.org/2019/04/preparing-good-questions/>)

Good questions are a critical ingredient in all great discussions. Jesus himself was the master questioner, often responding to questions with deeper questions.¹ Questions open us to God and one another, engage us in a topic, and bring out one of the great gifts God bestowed upon humanity: an inquisitive nature that seeks after truth.

Yet not all questions are equal. It can be difficult to ask questions that effectively prompt Spirit-filled dialogue. This material provides guidance on how to ask an effective question.

Ask Good Questions to Supplement Resources

Do you need to prepare questions even if you're utilizing a quality Catholic small group discussion resource?

The answer is—emphatically—YES!

While seeking help from quality materials is encouraged, always remember that no publisher knows your group as well as you. No author can prepare for all contexts, demographics and individuals.

Effective resources sometimes provide great questions, but the Holy Spirit will also honor your preparation and use *you* to bring an authenticity, attentiveness, and tone that cannot be scripted generically.

Three Basic Types of Questions

There are three basic question types to note while preparing for a small group discussion: Observation, Understanding, and Application. These reflect the natural way we seek to apprehend truth of any kind, be it natural or supernatural.

The illustration below shows how these categories, in this sequence, mimic that of *lectio divina*. This is no coincidence! When we read, reflect upon, and respond to Scripture in our groups, we reinforce what hopefully will become ever more the “staple diet”² of our daily prayer.



1. Observation (Enter the Text)

Carefully observing the scene or teaching in a Scripture text opens up the reality of the revelation God wants to give us.

Imagine a landscape or piece of art you seek to appreciate. You cannot simply glance or rush to conclusions. You must pause to soak in the experience, notice details, and seek further insight from what you find.

As you lead your group in this process, you discover “raw material” upon which to draw when considering the meanings and applications of the passage.

¹ “Jesus is asked 183 questions in the Gospels. He answers just three of them—and he asks 307 questions back!” ~ Don Everts & Doug Schaupp, *I Once Was Lost*, by (IVP, 2008), p. 54.

² Pope Benedict XVI, Inaugural Session of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, May, 2007.

A small group leader can prompt a group to observe the text in a number of fruitful ways, including the following two: ask observation questions, or use the mark-up method. Try them both or combine them to see what works best for your group.

Ask Observation Questions

When facilitating, say something similar to the following:

Answers to these questions will be found in the text. They are not speculative at all. This doesn't take deep thought. We're just looking to see what's there. Noticing details helps us see what is happening before we try to understand the meaning.

Prepare two to four observation questions per session.

Examples:

- What does Mary say to Jesus?
- How many times does the word "remain" appear here?
- To whom is Jesus addressing this parable?

A general question to fall back on often opens up whatever the Spirit wants to show the group: "What details of this passage stand out to you?"

Mark-Up Method

Another way to help people observe the text:

- Distribute the reading on paper with plenty of white space
- Provide pens for everyone
- Ask someone or several people to read the passage aloud
- Encourage everyone to spend 5 minutes in silence looking over the reading and marking it up
- Suggest things to mark: whatever stands out for them, themes, repeated words or phrases, connections or contrasts within the text, confusing parts, or questions that arise

The Mark-up Method can improve participation, especially from the quieter members.

If you distribute the reading on loose-leaf, we still recommend people bring their Bibles. With physical Bibles present, the leader can encourage things like reading additional context for a passage, flipping to other relevant passages, consulting footnotes, and comparing translations. This helps people start to become familiar with the Bible, to feel it is something they can, something they want, to use on their own.

Have a few extra Bibles with you in case someone does not own one or forgets to bring one.

Do *not* allow the use of the Mark-Up Method to replace your own prayerful preparation for the small group discussion. Your preparation remains essential to fruitful discussion. Advance preparation allows you to make many of the "game-time" decisions needed during a discussion.

2. Understanding (Probe for Meaning)

Understanding questions search for meaning—both the original meaning, and what the passage means for us or for an individual today. They help us ruminate over God's Word and seek to comprehend it.

With understanding questions, answers will not be found directly in the text itself; they'll require thought. Some understanding questions will be more objective in nature, others more subjective or speculative. Prepare three to four understanding questions per session.

Examples:

- How might the cultural attitude towards tax collectors have sharpened the sting of Jesus' words here?
- How do you imagine Jesus felt when the rich young man walked away?
- What is the significance, for you, of the metaphor Jesus uses here?

Tips:

- Balance "head" and "heart" questions.
- Keep questions open-ended: No yes/no or "leading" questions.

12 Types of Understanding Questions

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| 1. Definition (How would you define...) | 7. Value (How important is...) |
| 2. Example (Give an example of...) | 8. Opposites (What is the opposite of...) |
| 3. Explanation (How do you explain...) | 9. Feeling (How do you feel about...) |
| 4. Differences (What is the difference between...) | 10. Synonyms (What is another word for...) |
| 5. Similarities (What are the similarities between...) | 11. Summary (How would you summarize...) |
| 6. Relationship (What is the relationship between...) | 12. Identification (Where do you see yourself in this...) |

The Power of Experience Questions

Experience questions are a type of understanding question. Whenever we can draw out the experience of group members in their encounters with God, it enhances the quality of the discussion.

Experience questions are easy to ask, keep or move the focus to lived discipleship, and can sometimes elicit inspiring stories or vulnerable sharing. They also lead well into application questions. Use them often!

Examples:

- Has anyone ever felt like Peter in this passage? How so?
- Have you ever said these or similar words to God? (Why, and what came of it?)
- Which of these types of soil fits best with your experience of faith?
- Have you ever witnessed a miracle of healing?

3. Application (Live it Out)

Application questions are resolution-based, oriented to life change. They move conversation to its most practical level. This is where faith meets life, head meets heart, and heart drives us into action. These questions are conversion-oriented. Prepare one to two application questions per session.

Pope Francis encourages us to let the Scripture move us to do something.

“Another common temptation is to think about what the text means for other people, and so avoid applying it to our own life.”³

“It is good to ask, for example: ‘Lord, what does this text say to me? What is it about my life that you want to change by this text?’”⁴

Examples:

- What, practically, does this mean for us?
- How might this discussion affect our lives this week?
- Do you see any practical applications here for you?
- This was a great discussion on Mary and Martha.
 - How does it challenge or encourage you to carve out time to “sit at the feet of Jesus?”
 - What might this look like in your life?

³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 153.

⁴ *ibid.*

PREPARING GOOD QUESTIONS - EXERCISE

Based on Luke 1:57-66, formulate two or three questions for each of these stages:

1. Observation (Enter the Text)

2. Understanding (Probe for Meaning)

3. Application (Live it Out)