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Thank you for reading this description of the Discussion Leaders Guide

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has developed and published the unique and illuminating *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (USCCA). In doing so our bishops have provided to the Church a valuable resource for adult faith formation; **but to be effective the USCCA needs to be studied.** To help do this, the *USCCA Study-Aid* was developed. Since its publication four years ago the Study-Aid has been used by thousands of Catholics to study the USCCA and learn more about our faith.

Directors of Adult Faith Formation in many parishes across the country quickly began using the *USCCA Study-Aid* to organize group-studies of the USCCA because they are aware that participants engaged in the process of group-study tend to learn more of the subject matter and retain it longer than when the same content is studied privately. Additionally, they recognize that group-studies often lead to the formation of Small Christian Communities (SCCs): another important resource in adult faith formation.

Because the discussion process is an integral component of group-study, this *Discussion Leaders Guide* was developed to assist the leaders of such groups in sustaining a meaningful level of participation by all members of their groups. It is intended for use by parochial Directors of Adult Faith Formation in helping them to organize study groups or SCCs, as well as a practical guide for leaders who will be facilitating the actual discussions.

The Introduction to the Discussion Leaders Guide:

- Lays out the duties and responsibilities of the group's leader
- Offers suggestions on scheduling and managing the discussions
- Explains the contents of the Guide and how to use it

Reading its Introduction will give you a good idea of what the Discussion Leaders Guide is all about. Please proceed to the next page to begin.

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INTRODUCTION

(to the Discussion Leaders Guide)

Your main challenges as group leader will be to: (1) maintain the flow of discussion; (2) keep the atmosphere respectful and congenial; (3) keep the group 'on point'; and (4) handle any conflicts which may arise. This Leader's Guide offers resources and suggestions to help you do this.

At the onset, it is important to recognize that there are two elements to every group discussion, *content* (the subject matter being discussed) and *process* (how the discussion takes place and how the group participants interact.) Your role as leader or facilitator requires that you focus on *process*, but not exclusively: you'll need to pay attention to *content* as well. The content will be significantly enhanced if the group's members are well acquainted with the subject matter before the discussion is convened. Thus, it will be to your advantage to enthusiastically urge all of the group (including yourself) to utilize the **Four-Step Study Process** outlined on page 2 of the *USCCA Study-Aid*. If everyone utilizes the study process, it will be much easier for you to manage the discussion process.

Scheduling the Meetings

Parish leaders across the country are devising and utilizing a variety of schedules for studying the USCCA. Much depends on whether one wants to complete the study quickly (as when used with RCIA or "Catholics Coming Home") or prefers to stretch it out and perhaps use it as a resource for building Small Christian Communities (SCCs.) Some detailed ideas and comments on scheduling are provided on pages 3 and 4 of the USCCA Study-Aid.

The biggest constraint on scheduling is meeting space. Meeting in a parish facility is preferable, but not always possible, so groups may need to meet in private homes. This would limit the size of the groups to 6 or possibly 8 participants, but that's the ideal size for study groups; and most parishes are blessed with an ample number of homes which have a dining-room table large enough to seat 6 to 8 people. Tables are a delightful convenience when each participant has two or more books to manipulate.

Finding someone willing to function as both group leader and host can be a challenge, but nowhere is it written (*in official church documents*) that the discussion leader must also host the meetings. The role of host may indeed be rotated among any number of people, but the role of discussion leader is best not shared.

Remember, we gather in study groups to feed our minds and souls, not our bodies, so it is not absolutely necessary to serve snacks: an activity which can become a problem if a contest develops over who can serve the most delectable treats or set the most elaborate table. Try to avoid that complexity, and consider the advantage of serving snacks *before* the discussion begins or *after* it is completed. If participants have had, or know they will have, the opportunity to visit socially aside from the

discussion, they will be more likely to remain focused on topic during the discussion. Serving *before* the discussion begins also has the additional advantage of reducing the probability of disruptions by tardy participants.

Preparing for the Meetings

Preparation by the group leader for each meeting cannot be over emphasized. Hopefully, you will carefully study this booklet which was developed to help you properly prepare yourself to lead the discussions. The Introductory Meeting will set the tone for all subsequent meetings so put extra efforts in being ready for that. But you'll need to prepare yourself before each of the meetings which follow. Utilize the *Four-Step Study Process* and get yourself well acquainted with the particular page in this leaders guide (pgs 15-50) devoted to the specific chapter to be discussed.

Managing the Discussion *(There are no problem-people, just people with problems)*

It has been said that there are two types of people -- those who need to think before they can talk and those who need to talk in order to think. Those in the first group sometimes appear to be reluctant to speak (*laconic*) and may require nurturing encouragement to participate. Those in the second group tend to dominate the discussion by talking excessively (*loquacious*) and need to be managed by the facilitator in a decidedly different fashion. Some specific suggestions on managing these types are offered in the sections: '**Encouraging Ms. Laconic**' on page 7 and '**Managing Mr. Loqui**' on page 8.

A page labeled '**Ground Rules**' will be found on page 10. You can diminish the chances of problems developing in your group by making all participants aware of the ground rules at the Introductory Meeting. Make copies of that page to distribute to participants at your first meeting.

You are also invited to make copies of the **Invocation** which you can use to open your discussion meetings and which you will find on page 11 opposite the 'Ground Rules'. The two have been purposefully located on opposing pages so you can open this Guide to those pages, lay it flat on the copy machine, copy both pages at once, and hand them out to your group members. Having copies of these two pages in the hands of your members will be helpful to everyone. *(The contents of this Leader's Guide is Copyrighted, but you are permitted to make copies of pages 10 and 11.)*

Other Features of this Leader's Guide

A '**Getting acquainted**' exercise is offered on page 9, because remembering participant's names, and addressing them by name is one of the most important steps in managing the discussion process. Perhaps you will decide to include the exercise in your Introductory Meeting and, as new members join your group, introduce them in similar fashion.

You will also find two suggested meeting formats: one for the **Introductory Meeting** on pages 12-13, and another for the ongoing **Interactive Group-study Meetings** (the discussions) on page 14.

The remaining 36 pages (15 thru 50) are comprised of a **Précis** for each chapter of the USCCA and space for you to **make notes** to help you manage the process of each discussion. The Précis is not intended as a complete summary of the abstracted chapter, but simply reiterates salient points to help you focus on the core message therein. The text within quotation marks in every précis is taken directly from the USCCA unless otherwise indicated. You may find it helpful to carefully review the Précis as a prelude to your preparation for managing the discussion.

Many group leaders find it helpful to prepare '**recovery questions**' beforehand to have readily available during the discussion: questions which can be used to revive a dormant discussion or help you to **recover** control of the discussion if you feel the need to do so. One or more such questions are offered on each page below the Précis (along with the answers in most cases) as well as space for you to note your own recovery questions. The annotations at the bottom of pages 19, 25, 39 & 43 can be helpful in managing '**bothersome complexities**' which may surface in a candid discussion.

Some good recovery questions may come to mind as you consider your answers to the questions in the *USCCA Study-Aid*. Make a note of them when they do. The 'Questions for Discussion' in each chapter of the USCCA are also a good source for such recovery questions as are the 'Doctrinal Statements' in the USCCA. You would also be well advised to be ready to respond yourself to any recovery question that you pose to the group - acquaint yourself with appropriate answers before the meeting.

And finally, but perhaps most importantly, on pages 4, 5 and 6 under "**General Comments**" and "**Tips and Reminders**", you will find twenty-seven "do's and don'ts" to help you manage the discussions.

If you will scroll down to the next page you will find a sample page of the Précis which is included in the Discussion Leader's Guide for each of the 36 chapters of the USCCA.
The print size is rather small so you may want to print it out.

USCCA Chapter 5

Précis, Chapter 5: "*The mystery of God is present in our lives and yet remains hidden, beyond the full grasp of our minds*"; and the central mystery of Christian faith is the Trinity. God created the world out of nothing and guides it towards its completion or perfection through Divine Providence - "*the divine plan of his will.*" Until this perfection comes to be, God permits moral evil to exist "*out of respect for the gift of freedom with which he endowed created beings.*" This freedom allows (among other things) humankind to pursue the study of the mysteries of life via the scientific method, which the Church supports, "*provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner and does not override moral laws*" [Gaudium et Spes no.36]. Similarly, one must keep in mind that "*the Bible is not a scientific textbook and should never be read as such; rather it reveals what God wants us to know for the sake of our salvation.*"

Recovery Questions

How does "Divine Providence" (USCCA 56-3) differ from the theology of "predestination" as believed by other religions?

One Answer: Divine Providence "*means that God has absolute sovereignty over all he has made and **guides** his creation according to the divine plan of his will.*" (USCCA 56-3: *emphasis added*) . On the other hand, Predestination teaches that some people are predestined by God for eternal salvation, while others are not. There is a big difference between 'guiding' and 'predestining'.

What was Pope John Paul's II biggest concern about the theory of evolution?

Answer can be found in USCCA 60-3

Other Recovery Questions

If a question surfaces such as "*If everything God created is good, why is evil in the world?*", it may be appropriate to utilize St. Augustine's response. St. Augustine likened evil to a burned hole in an expensive garment, which is certainly not good and thus 'evil'. What exactly is a hole? It's the absence of fabric where it should be: just as evil is the absence of the goodness which God created.