

# Study Guide for Catholics

*The Way of Mary: Following Her Footsteps Toward God*

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## ACTIVITIES FOR GROUPS

- Create a Mary altar. Plan to sit in a circle when you meet, and create a beautiful Mary altar on a low table or on the floor in the center of the circle (see pages 59-60). If you gather in different homes, the host takes responsibility for the altar, but she or he may wish to invite group members to bring certain items.
- Bring a symbol. Bring to each meeting a symbol of Mary, of what she means to you, and place it on the altar for the duration of the session. You may wish to bring the same item to each meeting or different ones to express the evolution of your understanding of her. At the final session, share with the group what the symbol you bring on this occasion means to you.
- Bake “Cakes for the Queen of Heaven.” Conclude the final group meeting by preparing a special feast that has deep roots in Christian history. Bake small “cakes for the queen of heaven,” and serve with wine or juice. Here is a recipe:

## CAKES FOR THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN

Women knead dough, to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven.

(Jeremiah 7:18)

Women in ancient Mesopotamia worshipped the goddess Ishtar with offerings of crescent-shaped or star-shaped cakes bearing her image. (Jer. 44:19) Jewish

women perpetuated the custom in the first millennium B.C., and Christian women incorporated the practice into their veneration of Mary during the early Christian centuries. All we know of the original recipe is that dough was involved. Since Cakes for the Queen of Heaven may have contained a sweet filling made from one of the many fruits available in the area, I recommend as a modern equivalent the following recipe for crescent-shaped pastries with a date filling. Any number of similar recipes are possible of course, or you may like to create your own.

#### Crescents

2 eggs, well beaten

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup hot water

1 cake yeas

4 cups sifted flour

1 teaspoon salt

2 tablespoons butter

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup butter

Beat the eggs, add water, and dissolve the yeast in this mixture. Set in the refrigerator for about 15 minutes. Blend together all remaining ingredients. When the yeast mixture has cooled, pour onto the flour mixture and knead dough for about 2 minutes or until smooth. Form the dough into a large ball, wrap in plastic wrap, and refrigerate for about ½ hour. Then roll out dough to ¼ inch in thickness, and cut into 3-inch squares. Cut each square to make 2 triangles. Place about a teaspoon of filling on each triangle and, beginning with the long side, roll each triangle into a crescent. Place on a non-stick sheet. When the crescents have risen to about twice the original size, bake at 375 degrees for about 18 minutes.

### Filling

¼ cup butter

1/3 cup brown sugar

¾ cup chopped dates

¼ cup almond paste

½ teaspoon cinnamon

Melt butter and simmer with sugar for about 2 minutes. Remove from heat, and stir in all other ingredients. Allow to cool for a few minutes before filling crescents.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS

1. Pope John Paul II's motto was *totus tuus*, meaning "All yours; I am all yours, Mary." What do you think he meant by this prayer? Which Step pertains to His Holiness's relationship with Mary? How would you describe your own relationship with Mary before reading the book? How has it changed since then?
2. On page 180 you read, "Essential to Mary's universal motherhood is her availability in our time and always to raise up children in the image of her Son." Do you agree that Mary can help us to heal and grow up and become more Christ-like at any age? Do you know someone who needs this kind of help now? Have you prayed to her about this person? How could you bring Mary into his or her life, as well as to other's lives?
3. How did you feel when the surgeon said (page ix), "I don't have that kind of power"? The author had not consciously prayed for healing: In what ways do you find that significant? What factors do you think contributed to the healing (pages vii-x)? In what ways did the statue of Mary play a significant role? Is there something in your own life that needs healing -- physically, emotionally, or spiritually? Would it be helpful to invoke Mary; to pray for healing; to take action; to let go of control and place your trust in God; or combine some of these approaches?

4. “Everything seemed to slow down and stop. I could feel myself sinking deeper and deeper into beauty, into holiness. Before long I lost track of time and even of myself.” (page viii). What experience in your own life are you reminded of by this description? Were you in a beautiful natural setting? If you were at Mass, what was happening at the time? Did your experience of the Holy have a lasting impact? The author’s mystical experience led to a long search: What do you think she was looking for? Did she find it?
5. How do women other than Mary play an important role in *The Way of Mary*? What woman stood out for you? Why did she make a strong impression? In what ways were anonymous women -- such as grandmothers and other ancestors – contributors to Mary’s life? One of the prophets she met was “a holy woman ... renowned for the intensity of her spiritual practice, her moral authority, her breadth of vision and ... wisdom” (page 119). What was this great woman’s spiritual practice like? How do you think 14-year-old Mary’s meeting with such a great soul affected Mary?
6. How did you feel when Mary and her cousin greeted each other (Steps 2 and 3)? Who in your life has welcomed you with joy and affection such as Elizabeth showed Mary? Whom have you welcomed similarly? How does Mary and Elizabeth’s example of women’s intimacy and bonding compare to contemporary women’s ways of connecting?
7. All over the world, Catholic men have strong devotion to Mary, and men play a vital role in *The Way of Mary*. Individual men and groups, some named and some unnamed, appear actively or implicitly in almost all of the Steps. Without

- considering Jesus, what man made the strongest impression on you? Why was he especially significant? What man in your own experience best exemplifies men's unique spiritual beauty and depth? What other characteristics do you associate with men's spirituality?
8. Do you agree that "nothing is closer to God than silence" (page 35)? What kind of a role does silence play in your spiritual life? How do you think increased silence would deepen you spiritually? The Way of Mary recommends that you "make an effort to enter silence before you begin" each Step (page 34). What method(s) did you use – or could you use in the future -- to enter silence? Why do you think it is important to cultivate silence before beginning spiritual practice?
  9. Of all the strengths and virtues Mary models for us, "learning to 'ponder things in the heart' is the most important" (page 96). Do you agree? How could this practice become personally transforming? How do you think we would change if we paused to "ponder things in the heart" before speaking or taking action or judging others? How would the world be different if everyone followed Mary by making this practice permanent?
  10. "Muslims revere Mary more than any other woman in history and regard her as a prophet. An entire chapter in the Koran is devoted to her, and many mosques offer a prayer niche in the eastern corner dedicated to Mary" (page 4). Did you know Mary is such a beloved figure in Islam, a religion with over a billion adherents? An even larger number of Christians believe that she "always hears human prayers." In what

ways could our mutual reverence for Mary help to heal wounds existing between some Muslims and some Christians today?

11. A spiritual practice offered in each step of the Way of Mary -- “Imagining the Story” -- invites you to imagine yourself as an eye witness to a real event taking place in Mary’s life. (See, for example, pages 50-51). Guidance is given to make the biblical story come alive, peopled with real women, men, and children coming and going in a setting you vividly embellish with sensual details and feelings. Recall one of the Steps that became especially vibrant for you through this exercise, and if you are participating in a group, describe the scene as you envisioned it, noting as many details as possible. How was “Imagining the Story” beneficial? How did it change your understanding of a familiar biblical story? How could this practice enrich other areas of your spiritual life?
  
12. Step 1, the Annunciation, notes that Mary’s invitation to become the mother of Jesus will never be equaled or repeated. Nevertheless, annunciations continue to occur in human experience. On page 55, you read, “An angel of annunciation may be trying to reach you with wonderful news ” at any time of the day or night. Dreams offer one way in which angels bring messages from God: What other ways can you think of? What was your own most recent annunciation-event? Did you respond to the invitation by saying “yes,” like Mary, or “no”? Did you take time to reflect and question, as she does, before giving your answer? When do you wish you had? Why do you think people so often refuse or ignore God’s invitations?

13. Some people believe that when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, she submitted herself to God's will immediately and totally, without much deliberation. After reading Step 1 in *The Way of Mary*, do you agree that she "submitted," or do you see Mary as a person who made a conscious choice about the way she wanted to live her life? (If you wish, review the meditations on Mary's decision-making [pages 51-54].) What have you learned from her about making thoughtful decisions? How could you be more proactive about choosing the way you want to use your time?
14. Even though Mary undergoes "massive tests and trials that would challenge anyone's beliefs, she does not discard her precious ancestral heritage" of faith (page 63). Which Steps prior to the crucifixion concern events that could test one's faith? How does her faith help her?
15. On page 87, you read: "In jobs, careers, relationships, there comes a time when the waters of fullness pass; we feel a dryness, or emptiness, a realization that we must act or we will taste something of death. We must decide to set about being born toward the next stage of existence." When have you felt this way? How did your "rebirth," your renewal, come about? The next time you come to the end of a chapter in your life story, what could you do differently? Will you ask Mary to help you find your way?
16. A "famous Hollywood actress ... attributed her tormented life to the fact that, as she put it, 'Everywhere I go, I take me with me'" (page 21). In contrast to this desolate person, the mystic Nicolas of Cusa remarked: "Wherever I turn, You are there." (page 21). How do you account for the difference between her attitude and his? How

prevalent do you think her attitude is in the 21st century? Do you think our era is more afflicted than previous eras with spiritual emptiness, self-loathing, and narcissism? Why? Is Mary any less the mother of the actress than of the saint? How can we as Catholics maternal love to such people?

17. In what ways do you see Mary's pilgrimage as "a path we can follow" (page 17)? Do you think it is an "easy" path, or does it call for some self-exertion and striving? Give an example of how you have already begun to "follow Mary's footsteps toward God." How do you plan to integrate her "Way" into your spiritual life?
18. How is Mary a model for you? What about her would you most like to imitate in the future?
19. When, in a time of difficulty or crisis, have you prayed to Mary? What did you say to her? How did she respond? How do we respond to other's cries for help? Did the book inspire you to take action in some way?
20. Which Step of The Way of Mary was most meaningful or spiritually beneficial to you? Why did this Step stand out? Do you agree that there is almost no limit to the holiness that we can reach through closeness to Mary?