Having a faith conversation with old and new friends is as easy as setting the table.

FAITH FEEDS GUEST GUIDE
CARE FOR THE POOR
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The FAITH FEEDS program is designed for individuals who are hungry for opportunities to talk about their faith with others who share it. Participants gather over coffee or a potluck lunch or dinner, and a host facilitates conversation using the C21 Center’s biannual magazine, C21 Resources.

The FAITH FEEDS GUIDE offers easy, step-by-step instructions for planning, as well as materials to guide the conversation. It’s as simple as deciding to host the gathering wherever your community is found and spreading the word.

All selected articles have been taken from material produced by the C21 Center.
“Oh, how I would like a poor Church, and for the poor.”
—Pope Francis

Here are three articles to guide your FAITH FEEDS conversation. We suggest that you select one that will work best for your group, and if time permits, add in the second or third. In addition to the original article, you will find a relevant quotation, summary, and suggested questions for discussion. We offer these as tools for your use, but feel free to go where the Holy Spirit leads.

This guide’s theme is: Care for the Poor
Before leaving for El Salvador, I had set high expectations for how I would spend my time there. I had crafted in my mind images of helping those whom I had not yet met, and waited in hopeful anticipation for a transformative semester. I had come to hold a firm belief that service for the poor was an essential aspect of my Christian faith. Yet, I was unaware that I had an enormous lesson to learn about what it really means to be a disciple of Christ. The Salvadorans taught me the art of presence, and brought me to an understanding on the beauty of being.

I lived in El Salvador in the spring of my junior year of college and studied with the Casa de la Solidaridad program. The study abroad experience is uniquely structured — three days a week are spent in class while the other two days are spent accompanying an impoverished Salvadoran community. Every Monday and Wednesday two other students and I were led by our praxis site coordinator, Hector, up a volcano to a community called Las Nubes. The community is comprised of 24 homes, made up mostly of tierra (land), tin, and wire. The families do not have access to running water, electricity, or garbage collection. Despite the ever-present reality of extreme poverty, life in Las Nubes is simple and beautiful. Relationships are paramount, and conversations are held as sacred space where the Divine dwells.

We spent our first few weeks in Las Nubes going to each family’s home, introducing ourselves, and talking for hours over un cafecito. As we sat in the

“Ten times a day something happens to me like this — some strengthening throb of amazement — some good sweet empathic ping and swell. This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.”
—Mary Oliver

THE BEAUTY OF BEING WITH THE POOR

By Meg Stapleton Smith
hot Salvadorian sun drinking coffee, my mind drifted
to thoughts about all of the things that needed to be
done in this place that I was slowly learning to call
my home. I could not be present with the very people
who were with me in that moment because my heart
was filled with an unnerving anxiousness and a grave
frustration. Not only was I discouraged by my inability
to fully comprehend the Salvadorans, but I had an
unremitting desire to do something to fix the poverty
that I was encountering daily. I began to carry around
a small notebook and would fill the pages with plans
for fundraising money for a new community center,
or checklists of steps to urge the government to
bring water to the community more often. With all
that needed to be done in Las Nubes, I could not
conceive any possible reason as to why we were just
sitting around and talking. My mind and heart were
overburdened with sights of extreme poverty, and I
had succumbed to feeling powerless in the face of
such systematic oppression.

Over the course of the first month or so, we
developed a routine of stopping first at Nina Tancho’s
home. Nina Tancho was about 80 years old, 4 feet
tall, and had only one tooth that stuck out from her
bottom gum. When we walked into her home on one
particular Wednesday, Nina was sitting in a white
plastic chair crying silently – her face buried in her
hands. When I approached her to ask if she was okay,
she did not look up. I distanced myself in discomfort
and disappointment that I could not help her. Hector
approached her and after whispering to each other for
a few moments he suddenly got up and went into the
house. He came back carrying a large plastic bottle
filled with cooking oil. Hector reverently knelt beside
her, poured the oil into his hands as if it were holy
water, and with tender and loving compassion, started
to gently massage the bottom of her right foot. Nina
Tancho instantly began to scream and moan in agony.
Without hesitating, I ran over and knelt beside her
chair. I fought through the boundaries of discomfort
that had once paralyzed me, and reached out to grab
her hand. As her fingers tightened around mine, I was
hit with the realization that in that moment, nothing
separated us. I was not sitting from a distance thinking
about her lack of health care, and writing down ways
to fix it that seem like simple solutions from my own
privileged perspective. As Hector slowly lowered her
foot to the ground, Nina turned to me as she wiped
the tears from her eyes and said, “Gracias por sostener
mi mano (thank you for holding my hand).”

Those simple words transformed my experience
in El Salvador. As Mary Oliver describes, this was the
empathic ping that left me so in awe of how utterly
human both of us were in that moment. Although
I could have chosen from hundreds of stories that
are still so vivid in my mind, this one instance in Las
Nubes remains my greatest lesson on presence and
the beauty of being with another. For so long, I was
convinced that I needed to do something while I was
in Las Nubes, when the truth of the matter is, I simply
needed to be there – fully present, fully vulnerable,
fully myself. Through this action of vulnerability, and
of dwelling in the unknown, love became palpable.
The times when I would feel useless still occurred
throughout the rest of my semester. Yet, everyday
when I showed up at my praxis site, I was loved
and accepted without condition. And everyday,
people who had no reason to love me, allowed me
to humbly walk alongside them. That is the root of
accompaniment—to walk with those who suffer, and
maybe even to hold their hands along the way. We
enter into solidarity when we break the boundaries of
separation that keep us from this connection. And it
is in this understanding, that we touch the heart of
the Gospel. Jesus was not a man for others, he was
one with them.

The power of that touch was the transforming
point of my entire Salvadoran experience. By holding
Nina Tancho’s hand while she was suffering, I became
completely lost in her reality. I thought I knew the
Gospel, but in that moment, I began to read it in a
different way. Jesus went to the margins and stood
there. That was how he transformed the world. And so,
he calls us to do the same. His resurrection continues
to remind us that although we can say that we are
followers of Christ, we are unable to reach the core of
his message until we stand where he once stood. By my
presence I was able to bear witness with great joy and
simplicity to this Good News that I believe in. Solidarity
is when we realize that our salvation lies in the love of
one another—there is infinite beauty in that realization.
Summary
Author Meg Stapleton Smith reflects on her study abroad experience in El Salvador, which included coursework and service within an impoverished community. Meg recounts her preoccupation with fixing the immediate, material problems the community members faced as well as feeling overwhelmed by the injustices that kept the community in poverty and which seemed impossible to change. Through a simple encounter with one member of the village, Meg learns that her most important mission was to offer a ministry of presence - simply being with someone in a time of acute suffering and offering her the friendship of Jesus.

Questions for Conversation
1. Have you ever accompanied someone in a difficult moment? What was it like? Did it feel like service, friendship, or both?
2. Have you ever done service in a community that is different from your own? Where was it and what did you do? Who did you meet and what did you learn?
3. If you haven’t done service in another community, have you ever been in a neighborhood or place different from your hometown? What were the encounters with local people like? What did you learn about their experience? Were there points of connection?
4. Jesus invites us to serve people who are marginalized wherever we find them. This includes the sick, the hungry and thirsty, the poor, and many others. Is there a person or group of people you know of who needs your help and could use your presence?
In one sense, the notion of the preferential option for the poor is relatively new to Catholic social teaching, as this phrase appeared in no papal social encyclical until 1987 and in no official church documents at all until 1979. But in another sense, the preferential option for those who are poor and vulnerable has been present within the Christian tradition from the very start. The ministry of Jesus, in both words and deeds, was deeply wrapped up with this commitment to the well-being of the least fortunate. Making an option for the poor is not just a knee-jerk reaction to give the benefit of the doubt to those considered to be underdogs, but an abiding commitment, grounded in scripture and tradition, to support social justice by placing oneself on the side of the vulnerable and marginalized....

Without using the precise phrase preferential option for the poor, the Church has long practiced this option in many ways, formal and informal, as it has placed concern for the most vulnerable members of society among its top priorities....

From its very beginning, when nineteenth-century European social Catholicism started to notice and address the plight of hard-pressed working families, this tradition of social concern had consistently expressed the Church’s mission to act as Jesus had acted in befriending the poor of his time. In fact, the 1991 encyclical Centesimus Annus contains a passage in which Pope John Paul II interprets Rerum Novarum’s call, a full century earlier, to improve the conditions of workers as a manifestation of the preferential option for the poor long before the phrase was coined.

John Paul points to the similarity between the Church’s role as advocate of the poor in 1891 and 1991 as evidence of the “church’s constant concern for and dedication to categories of people who are especially beloved to the Lord Jesus” (no. 11). Indeed, throughout his long pontificate, John Paul II made frequent reference to this concept, phrased in various ways, as part of his trademark call to universal solidarity. Though by no means an uncritical proponent of liberation theology, the movement that originated the phrase preferential option for the poor, Pope John Paul II often raised up in his addresses and writings this social priority of working for the benefit of the least-advantaged members of society.... Many of his celebrated travels abroad, especially early in his reign as pope, featured visits to desperately impoverished neighborhoods where he publicized the need for greater solidarity between rich and poor around the world.

The imperative to make an option for the poor takes on distinctive features, of course, in the social context of the world’s most affluent nations. Consider,
for example, the significance of such an option within the United States, the richest society in the history of the world. Although tens of millions of Americans actually live below the federally defined poverty line, the extent and depth of poverty in the United States cannot compare to Latin America and similar parts of the developing world. Distressing social divisions are not nearly as profound in a society that is dominated by a middle-class ethos and where upward mobility, while never easy, is at least imaginably within the reach of citizens of quite modest means. Opportunities for advancement into the mainstream and even upper echelons of American society exist beyond the dreams of the vast majority of people living in other countries, who find most doors to a materially better life shut firmly against them.

What does it mean, then, in U.S. society, to make a preferential option for the poor? There are no easy answers, of course, as each individual must discern an appropriate personal response to this universal but imprecise call. Interestingly, in the course of their 1986 pastoral letter Economic Justice for All, the U.S. Catholic bishops speak frequently of the option for the poor, mentioning the phrase explicitly nine times. Concern for the poor quite evidently pervades the entire letter, and the document urges lawmakers, citizens, consumers, and all others to measure all their decisions by the likely effects they will exert upon the least-advantaged members of society.

To make a preferential option for the poor in a relatively affluent society may not entail an agenda of drastic social change to right a history of deep offenses against human solidarity, but it does probably mean much greater sensitivity to the impact one’s actions exert upon the vulnerable and marginalized. In a largely middle-class society like America, making a sincere preferential option for the poor will lead people to revise their lifestyle choices and numerous personal decisions, as well as to advocate for public policies to advance social justice. This commitment might include greater support for progressive taxation measures, for social safety net programs to assist low-income families, and for better funding for educational services and schools that serve underprivileged neighborhoods.

The entire tradition of Catholic social teaching can be interpreted as a unified effort on the part of church leaders to advocate for a more humane society where the most vulnerable members are better protected from harm. With its limited financial resources, the Church itself can do only so much to advance the lives of the poor. However, popes and bishops, as the official voices of the Church, have exerted great efforts to speak publicly about political, economic, and social issues that have profound impact upon the prospects of our neediest neighbors. The rationale for all the Church’s efforts in this regard may be summarized precisely as the desire to make a preferential option for the poor.

If these church efforts were to really bear fruit, then what would the results look like? If the message of justice and peace within Catholic social teaching were to take root in the hearts of many believers, these disciples would work energetically for a better world, a world characterized by not only acts of individual charity but also structures of justice and equity for all people. Racial discrimination and unfair barriers to progress would be eliminated. True human development would be fostered by wider access to property and by socially responsible policies of businesses and governments throughout the world. All social institutions, from schools to corporations to social clubs, would be measured by how they treat all members of society especially the poorest. Priorities would be altered so that more of the benefits of this abundantly blessed world would find their way to those who currently possess the least. In a prosperous age like the present one, no one should be excluded from enjoying an ample array of opportunities or be left to experience the disturbing fear of permanent powerlessness and deprivation.

Catholic social teaching includes a call for involvement in collaborative efforts to invite all people into the social mainstream; it is not an ethic for apathetic or complacent people. To adopt the principles of Catholic social thought is to concur that all people need to make sincere and vigorous efforts so that full participation is extended to all, without favoritism or discrimination. We all have something to contribute to the common good, and all may benefit from the gifts that we bring to the common table of human community and solidarity.

Thomas Massaro, S.J. a Professor of Systematic Theology at Fordham University.
THE OPTION FOR THE POOR IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

“Love for the poor has been the sign, the light that draws people to give glory to the Father.”
—Pope Francis

Summary
In this essay, Jesuit priest Father Thomas Massaro provides a historical look at the Church’s long-standing commitment to the preferential option for the poor since the time of Jesus. This principle of our Catholic social teaching means that we are to advocate for the needs of the poor so that they might fully participate in society, and that we are to make this is a priority of our mission. Massaro invites readers to consider how they might practice this preference more intentionally and concretely in their daily lives.

Questions for Conversation
1. Why do you think that the Lord has a special love for the poor?
2. What are the “political, economic, and social issues that have profound impact upon the prospects of our neediest neighbors?”
3. Massaro posits, “In a largely middle-class society like America, making a sincere preferential option for the poor will lead people to revise their lifestyle choices and numerous personal decisions, as well as to advocate for public policies to advance social justice.” What are ways that you can exercise this option for the poor in your own life and local community?
4. Jesus mysteriously says, “The poor you will always have with you.” What do you think He means by this? What is our responsibility in light of this claim?
The spiritual works of mercy are: to admonish the sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the sorrowful, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive all injuries, and to pray for the living and the dead.

The corporal works are to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to ransom the captive, to harbor the harborless, to visit the sick, and to bury the dead.

When Peter Maurin talked about the necessity of practicing the works of mercy, he meant all of them, and he envisioned houses of hospitality in poor parishes in every city of the country, where these precepts of Our Lord could be put into effect. He pointed out that we have turned to State responsibility through home relief, social legislation and social security, and we no longer practice personal responsibility for our brother, but are repeating the words of the first murderer, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Not that our passing the buck is as crude as all that....

Peter Maurin, the founder of The Catholic Worker, was very much an apostle to the world today, not only to the poor. He was a prophet with a social message and he wanted to reach the people with it. To get to the people, he pointed out it was necessary to embrace voluntary poverty, to strip yourself, which would give you the means to practice the works of mercy. To reach the man in the street you must go to the street. To reach the workers, you begin to study a philosophy of labor, and take up manual labor, useful labor, instead of white collar work. To be the least, to be the worker, to be poor, to take the lowest place and thus be the spark which would set afire the love of men towards each other and to God (and we can only show our love for God by our love for our fellows). These were Peter’s ideas, and they are indispensable for the performing of the works of mercy....

The works of mercy are a wonderful stimulus to...
our growth in faith as well as in love. Our faith is taxed to the utmost and so grows through this strain put upon it. It is pruned again and again, and springs up bearing much fruit. For anyone starting to live literally the words of the Fathers of the Church, “the bread you retain belongs to the hungry, the dress you lock up is the property of the naked,” “what is superfluous for one’s need is to be regarded as plunder if one retains it for one’s self,” there is always a trial ahead. “Our faith, more precious than gold, must be tried as though by fire.” Here is a letter we received today. “I took a gentleman seemingly in need of spiritual and temporal guidance into my home on a Sunday afternoon. Let him have a nap on my bed, went through the want ads with him, made coffee and sandwiches for him, and when he left, I found my wallet had gone also.”

I can only say that the Saints would only bow their heads and not try to understand or judge. They received no thanks—well then, God had to repay them. They forebore to judge, and it was as though they took off their cloak besides their coat to give away. This is expecting heroic charity of course. But these things happen for our discouragement, for our testing. We are sowing the seed of love, and we are not living in the harvest time so that we can expect a crop.

We must love to the point of folly, and we are indeed fools, as our Lord Himself was who died for such a one as this. We lay down our lives too when we have performed so painfully thankless an act, because this correspondent of ours is poor in this world’s goods. It is agony to go through such bitter experiences, because we all want to love, we desire with a great longing to love our fellows, and our hearts are often crushed at such rejections. But a Carmelite nun said to me last week, “It is the crushed heart which is the soft heart, the tender heart,” and maybe it is one way to become meek and humble of heart like Jesus.

Such an experience is crueler than that of our young men in Baltimore who were arrested for running a disorderly house, i.e., our St. Anthony’s house of hospitality, and who spent a few nights in jail. Such an experience is dramatic to say the least. Such an experience is crueler than that which happened to one of our men here in New York who was attacked (for his pacifism) by a maniac with a knife in our kitchen. Actually to shed one’s blood is a less bitter experience.

Well, our friend has suffered from his experience and it is part of the bitterness of the poor, who cheat each other, who exploit each other, even as they are exploited. Who despise each other even as they are the despised.

And is it to be expected that virtue and destitution should go together? No, as John Cogley has written, they are the destitute in every way, destitute of this world’s goods, destitute of honor, of gratitude, of love, and they need so much, that we cannot take the works of mercy apart, and say I will do this one, or that one work of mercy. We find they all go together.

Some years ago there was an article in Commonweal by Georges Bernanos. He ended his article as I shall end mine, paraphrasing his words, and it is a warning note for these apocalyptic times: “Every particle of Christ’s divine charity is today more precious for your security—for your security, I say—than all the atom bombs in all the stock piles.” It is by the works of mercy that we shall be judged.

Dorothy Day (1897-1980) was a journalist, social activist, and co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Reprinted from Easy Essays (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010).
“The bread which you do not use is the bread of the hungry; the garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of him who is naked; the shoes that you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot; the money that you keep locked away is the money of the poor; the acts of charity that you do not perform are so many injustices that you commit.”
—St. Basil the Great

Summary
In this reflection on the works of mercy, Dorothy Day explores how exercising the spiritual and corporal works of mercy are acts of charity, solidarity, and faith. For Day, to love the poor and marginalized requires a commitment to voluntarily take on a bit of their own suffering in order to love them as Jesus did. In the end, Christians must respond positively and without hesitation to the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Questions for Conversation
1. Do you agree with Peter Maurin’s philosophy that in order to serve the poor well, you must yourself become poor? What role does solidarity play in exercising mercy?
2. Of all of the works of mercy - both spiritual and corporal - which are you most drawn to exercise? Which ones bring you joy by doing them? Which are hardest for you?
3. Day says that practicing the works of mercy are essential for growing in faith. Do you agree? Have you experienced this?
GATHERING PRAYER

Be With Us Today
St. Thomas More (1478-1535)

Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.
Be with us today in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

For more information about Faith Feeds, visit bc.edu/c21faithfeeds

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