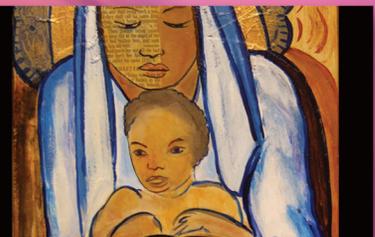


Cycle C

The
Unsheltered
HEART

a guide for
small-group discussions



Ronald Patrick Raab, c.s.c.



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WELCOME

This guide has been developed for weekly small-group gatherings of individuals who are making the at-home Advent retreat, *The Unsheltered Heart*. In many places, groups will gather at the parish center for a simple meal, then break into smaller groups for conversation about how the at-home retreat is going. In other places, small groups will gather in homes, schools, or offices.

The simple process outlined in this guide is intended to help small groups structure the time spent together each week for faith sharing and prayer. It assumes that each small-group participant is following the retreat and seeking to share whatever enrichment he or she finds there. Participants should bring their copies of *The Unsheltered Heart* retreat booklet with them each week to the small-group gathering.

Peace and all good in your Advent growth,
Fr. Ronald Patrick Raab, C.S.C.

Pray That You Have Strength

1. *The Silence*

Invite the group to spend a few minutes in silence, letting go of whatever might distract from the conversation at hand. In these busy and often chaotic days of Advent, silence refreshes the spirit and opens the group to authentic sharing and reflection on the prophetic gospel reading.

2. *The Word*

Refresh everyone's memory of the Sunday gospel by slowly reading the sacred text aloud (Luke 21:25–28, 34–36, pages 7–8 of *The Unsheltered Heart*). Although most of the people are reflecting on the text daily, reading the gospel within the group grounds the reflections more closely to the group's prayer. Invite each person to share what insight he or she has gained this week from daily reflection on the question: “**For what do I need strength today?**” (See Step 2, Monday through Saturday of the week in *The Unsheltered Heart* booklet).

3. *Connecting to the Gospel*

Give each person an opportunity to speak what he or she hears from the gospel. Make sure the group is aware that no one will critique or challenge what the individual shares, as each person speaks with an open heart and the group hears with

an open heart. Use the following questions for reflection or write some of your own.

- In what ways can we see the trials of the gospel reading in our own life, and how can we ask the Son of Man for strength during those times?
- How are we being called to unshelter our hearts, opening them to new events, people, situations, and, most importantly to the suffering of others?

4. Responding to the Call

Ask participants to share some of their reflections from the week, from their journal entries, or new insights about their own lives. Depending on the size of the group and the time spent, each person may have a certain length of time to share their insights. A possible question to offer the group: "Seeing the suffering around me, how do I use the strength given to me to help others?"

5. Closing

To close the group, people may articulate one item of action or prayer that they will incorporate into their lives in the coming week. The following prayer is used to close the conversation. It may be prayed by several members, by the entire group together, or by the facilitator. Another prayer may be used instead.

Reader 1

God,
You wake me in the night to keep vigil.
You stir my heart even in times of worry and defeat.
You call me amid storms and destruction.

Reader 2

Can I hide my heart from your call?
I so want to turn my face from my struggles.
At times, my anxieties choke my heart.

Reader 3

I want to make my own choices.

I desire to live from my own power.
Now I am weary from the search.

Reader 4

I do not always trust my surrender to you.
I am reluctant to give you my all.
I hesitate because I do not easily believe you will love me.

Reader 5

My heart is sometimes weary
And I can no longer trust my life and my decisions.
I need your love in my sheltered existence.

Reader 6

You call to me in the place I live.
You are there waiting for me to let go.
You receive me when I fall into your love.
Amen.

See the Salvation of God

1. *The Silence*

Begin the group this week welcoming people to rest in comfortable silence. The facilitator may ask the group to reflect on last week's session or articulate insights, prayers, or concerns from the previous week's private retreat time spent journaling or praying.

2. *The Word*

Read aloud the gospel for the second week of Advent (Luke 3:1–6, pages 25–26 of *The Unsheltered Heart*). Slowly and lovingly bring those words to the lives and wisdom of this group, today. Invite each person to share what insight they have gained this week from daily reflection on the question: “**Where do I see salvation today?**” (See Step 2, Monday through Saturday, of the Second Week).

3. *Connecting to the Gospel*

The facilitator may ask each person to reflect on the gospel passage. Reflection questions may be asked such as:

- How can John's message of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins change the way we approach life?
- What does it mean to “prepare the way of the Lord” and to “make straight his paths in your life situation?”

- How are we being called to unshelter our hearts, opening them to new events, people, situations, and, most importantly to the suffering of others?

4. Responding to the Call

As the sharing of the group grows stronger and more trusting, invite the participants to explore the challenges of the gospel as it calls for a surrender as we too cry out in our own desert. How do our voices cry out the genuine love of God? How are our voices a message of hope for other people?

5. Closing

Briefly summarize what the group has talked about in responding to the gospel message. Highlight some of the ways in which members talked about making their voices heard. Then invite the group to bring those ideas and desires to prayer.

Reader 1

God,
You call me from my emotional and spiritual traps.
You wait for me while I make mistakes.
You long to be close to me even when I am alone and weak.

Reader 2

Can I find you in my own desert?
I trudge through my heartaches.
I plod along the mistakes and regrets.

Reader 3

I fantasize about what my life could be.
I dream of how life might be, if only I were not *me*.
And I land deeper in the traps of my doubt.

Reader 4

Yet I am beginning again this Advent.
I now see my life amid other people's hopes.
I am slowly discovering your hand in the desert.

Reader 5

The desert is full of voices.
My fears cry louder and louder.
I hear the echoes of John in my life as it truly is.

Reader 6

Mountains are made low and winding roads made straight.
The path toward your love is my own heart.
Help me rest there with your love and acceptance.
Amen.

What Should We Do?

1. *The Silence*

Settle into a peace-filled silence.

2. *The Word*

Listen again to the gospel reading for the Third Sunday of Advent (Luke 3:10–18, pages 43–44 in *The Unsheltered Heart*). Invite each person to share what insight they have gained from this week from daily reflection on the question: **“What should I do to announce Christ’s presence?”** (See Step 2, Monday through Saturday).

3. *Connecting to the Gospel*

Share the insights, struggles and challenges of the week’s reflections on the gospel. Allow respectful silence after each person speaks so as not to judge or dismiss the insights offered. The facilitator may use these questions for reflection:

- How would John answer the question, “What should we do to tell those we encounter each day that Christ is present?”
- In what ways can we prepare the way for the Messiah?
- How are we being called to unshelter our hearts, opening them to new events, people, situations, and, most importantly to the suffering of others?

4. Responding to the Call

Reflect together on the message of the Gospel. How might we receive in faith the question “What should we do?” Why is God calling us to listen to John’s challenge?

5. Closing

Wrap up the discussion by asking each group member to name one thing he or she will do during the coming week to focus on responding the the question “What should we do?” Then finish with a brief prayer

Reader 1

Gracious God,
You challenge my belief that I own my life.
You call me into a common ground of sharing.

Reader 2

Can I hide from your call to share my possessions?
I want to cling to what owns me.
I want to hang on to what gives me identity.

Reader 3

My heart is sheltered from shivering people.
I turn away from extending my life to the broken.
I want what is mine and what keeps me comfortable.

Reader 4

I fear surrendering to the needs of others.
I believe there will not be enough for me.
My body will freeze in the cold winter.

Reader 5

You call me to share so we will stand on equal ground.
You promise to be with us even in the bitter cold.
You promise your love will warm us all.

Reader 6

So I now surrender my cloak and my heart.

I feel the warmth of your love in the sharing and opening up.

I long to be counted among the gathered and the wise.

Amen.

Blessed Are You Who Believe

1. *The Silence*

Begin once again in prayerful silence. Invite group members to acknowledge and try to release whatever stresses they are feeling. Invite them to reflect on their retreat time over the past week.

2. *The Word*

Read once again the gospel reading for the Fourth Week of Advent (Luke 1: 39–45, pages 63–64 of *The Unsheltered Heart*). Ask group members to share the moments of insight, struggle or concern from the week's reflection on the gospel. Invite each person to share what insight they have gained this week from daily reflection on the question: **"In what do I believe most strongly today?"** (See Step 2, Monday through Saturday).

3. *Connecting to the Gospel*

Discuss this week's well-known Gospel passage. The facilitator may use these questions for reflection:

- How does Elizabeth's reaction to the arrival of Mary affect how we look at allowing Christ into our lives?
- How can we better believe in what has been spoken to us, as Mary did?

- How are we being called to unshelter our hearts, opening them to new events, people, situations, and, most importantly to the suffering of others?

Invite participants to reflect further on those questions that have remained with them throughout the retreat experience of these four weeks of Advent.

4. Responding to the Call

Allow the group to share what they consider a new commitment for themselves or their new desire to serve people in need. Ask the group to articulate how—if at all—their understanding about the meaning Advent has changed because of the *The Unsheltered Heart*.

5. Closing

As you bring the conversation to a close, invite each participant to share a spiritual gift he or she hopes to receive this Christmas. Once everyone has had a chance to speak, close with one of the prayers written by a member of the group during their retreat or invite each person to share one. Or you may close with the following prayer.

Reader 1

God,
You visit us in our sheltered hearts
and wait for us to turn to you.
You claim our hearts as we wait for joy.

Reader 2

Can I hide from your grace within me?
I want to make my own choices with my talents
in ways that please me.
But what is your desire for me?

Reader 3

In my own choices I fear being alone.
I hesitate to unshelter my heart to anyone.
My fears collide in loneliness.

Reader 4

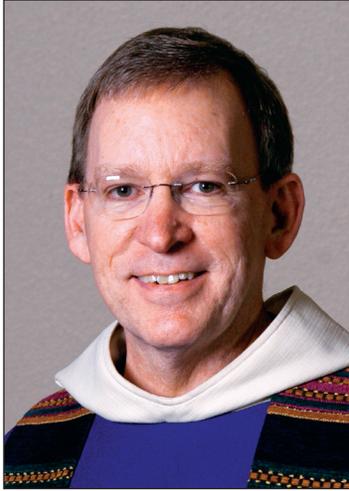
I long for your visit to reassure me.
I wait in prayer for a new birth of hope.
I struggle to understand your silent presence within me.

Reader 5

You are born amid our worries.
You are here being made flesh in our waiting.
You arrive unexpectedly in our relationships.

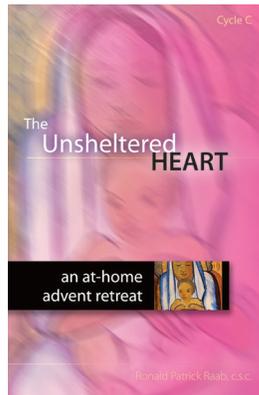
Reader 6

Be born in our voices of greeting.
Be born in our discovery of hearts that remain unsheltered.
Be born always in our voices of praise and thanksgiving.
Amen.



RONALD P. RAAB, C.S.C., ministers among the vulnerable and marginalized of society and the Church. From his experiences in living the Gospel among the poor, he speaks and writes about prayer and service and knowing the love of God through our common poverty. He hosts *On the Margins*, a weekly radio scripture commentary on KBVM 88.3 FM, Catholic Broadcasting Northwest. He is active as a retreat director, workshop presenter, blogger, and award-winning author. He contributes regularly to several

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An At-Home Advent Retreat (Cycle C)

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