

AVOW

discernment group

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Avow

Every woman is called to make a gift of herself in love. Discovering the form of this gift is the art of discernment.

Is Jesus calling you to belong to Him alone? It's not an easy question to answer. Prayer, study, and time are needed to discover if religious life is truly your vocation.

This is a journey you were not meant to make by yourself. Avow is a small discussion group for Catholic women who want to make the journey of discernment *together*. With the prayerful fellowship of like-minded women, you will have less apprehension and more freedom as you explore the possibility of religious life.

Seven sessions per semester, about 90 minutes each, are designed to give you the spiritual tools you need to discern your vocation. To guide this process, groups use the book *Discerning Religious Life* by Sr. Clare Matthiass, CFR.

Avow isn't meant to convince you to become a religious sister. Neither does Avow endorse any particular religious community; it is up to you to explore where God could be calling.

The focus of Avow is deeper intimacy with Jesus. With a loving relationship with the Lord and a trusted community of women, you can move with confidence from discernment to decision.

DISCERNAVOW.COM



This guide includes questions for fourteen meetings, seven in the first semester, and seven in the second semester. A mobile-friendly version is available at www.discernavow.com

Opening Prayer

The Road Ahead

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain
where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
And the fact that I think I am following
Your will does not mean that I am
actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please
You does in fact please You.
And I hope that I have that desire
in all that I am doing.
And I know that if I do this,
You will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust You always
though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death,
I will not fear,
for You are ever with me
and You will never leave me
to face my perils alone. Amen.

~ Fr. Thomas Merton

Closing Prayer

Prayer of Abandonment

Father,
I abandon myself into Your hands;
do with me what You will.
Whatever You may do, I thank You:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only Your will be done in me,
and in all Your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into Your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to You
with all the love of my heart,
for I love You, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into Your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for You are my Father. Amen.

~ Fr. Charles de Foucauld

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

Proverbs 3:5-6

Meeting One


The Foundation of Discernment

Watch the short film *For Love Alone* together as a group. (17 min., available on DVD, iTunes or Google Play)

1. What strikes you from the film? Why? What is your personal experience of religious life? Does the film challenge your views?

 Read aloud page 193-196.

2. Which stage of discernment are you in? Why do you think so?

 Read aloud the first paragraph of page 23, then the second and third paragraphs on page 26.

3. How do you relate to the personal love of God? How can you improve your relationship with God so as to better begin the discernment process?


4. What is your daily rhythm of prayer? How is your sacramental life? Is it what you would like it to be? If not, what would you like to change?

5. Discuss the Prayer Point with the group before ending the meeting:

Prayer Point: Improving Your Prayer Life What is one concrete and attainable step you can make this week to deepen or to regularize your prayer life? For example, you might resolve to make a morning offering each day before leaving your bedroom, or read the daily Gospel before 8 p.m. Share your resolution with the group.

Meeting Two

Overcoming Fears

 Read aloud page 1 to the first paragraph of page 4.

1. Overcoming fears is a big part of the discernment journey. Take 5-10 minutes of silence and write down a list of your fears. Let yourself go! Try to put into words all the nameless fears you have experienced as you have thought about discerning your vocation.

2. Share some of your fears with the group. Can you identify a dominant fear?

 Read aloud pages 55-56.

3. What strikes you from the text? Have you experienced the fear of uncertainty? How does this affect your discernment?

 Read silently page 66, from “Fear of Losing my Identity” through the top of page 70.


4. General reactions to the reading?

5. On page 68 it says “Love is willing to risk.” What risk is too big? What are you most afraid of losing? Why?


6. Think about your favorite saint or a holy person in your life. What are some of their unique characteristics? What are some of *your* gifts that you can offer to the Church?

Prayer Point: Rejecting Fear in the Name of Jesus Bring your root fear into your prayer times this week. As fears arise, combat them by stating the truth in the powerful name of Jesus. For example, as thoughts arise such as, “I won’t be truly happy if I become a sister!” you should pray, “In the name of Jesus, I reject the fear that I won’t find happiness.”

Meeting Three Letting Go

 Read aloud page 70 to the top of page 73. Stop before “Fear of Leaving Your Family.”

1. What is your reaction to the reading? How do you relate to these fears?
2. Overcoming fear requires a perspective shift. “Self-reliance is the enemy of the Christian life.” How do you think you can rely more on Jesus and less on yourself this week?
3. How do you see the fear of permanence or commitment in your peers or in society at large? What has been your longest commitment? Why do you think it’s difficult to stick to commitments?
4. Of all the married couples you know, who has been married the longest? What is the value of making a firm commitment to something or someone? A life-long commitment?


 Read aloud page 73 (“Fear of Leaving Your Family”) through page 77.

5. General reactions to the reading?
6. Are you afraid to tell your family or friends about your discernment? If they know already, what do they think? What is the most difficult aspect of letting go for you? What about for them?


Prayer Point: Meditation on the End of Your Life We are made for permanence; in fact, we are made for eternity. As you pray this week, try to imagine yourself before Jesus Christ at the end of your life. What do you say to Him? What does He say to you?

Meeting Four Your True Identity

1. Which Person of the Trinity do you speak to the most in your prayer? What is your relationship with Him like? Have you had an experience that convinces you of His personal love for you?

 Read aloud the section “The Way I Think About God,” pages 45-47.

2. Initial reactions to the text?
3. Think about the most loving father figure you can imagine, perhaps your own father, a coach, teacher, youth minister, or priest. What characteristics stand out to you as fatherly? Because God is the most loving of fathers, indeed the origin of all fatherhood, how does He see you? How should this affect your discernment?
4. How have the shortcomings of father figures in your life affected your relationship with God?

 Read aloud “The Way I Think About Myself,” pages 47-48.

5. What is the difference between identity and self-image? Where do you receive your identity? How do you develop your self-image?
6. If you are comfortable, share about inner healing you have experienced or would like to experience.

Prayer Points: A. The Transfiguration Ask Jesus to draw you into deeper relationship with His Father. Pray with the Transfiguration from Matthew 17:1-9. (Consult pages 27-28 for an explanation of how to pray with Scripture.) **B. The Father’s Perspective** Spend some time praying with the question: “Heavenly Father, when you look at me, what do You see?”


Meeting Five

The Vows & Holy Indifference

1. Share some reflections from last meeting's prayer assignment.

 Read aloud the first par. on page 3.

2. What strikes you from this brief text?

 Read aloud pages 48-53. Stop before "Holy Indifference."


3. What is your image of the religious life? Do you know any religious sisters? What have you learned from them?

Group activity to separate fact from fiction: Have one person divide a piece of paper into two columns, labelled "Myths" and "Facts." As a group, discuss and write down the myths and stereotypes about religious life. Now record the facts you know. Where do the false ideas come from?

 Read aloud *Philippians 2:1-18*

4. Poverty, chastity, and obedience were characteristics of Jesus's life that defined His relationship with the Father.

- Why did Jesus remain chaste?
- How was Jesus obedient to the Father? What can we learn from this?
- Why is Jesus's poverty important?

 Read aloud the section "Holy Indifference," pages 53-54.

5. How would you feel if you discovered that you were being called by the Lord to belong to Him alone as a religious sister or a consecrated virgin?

6. How can you achieve holy indifference?

Prayer Point: Explore your attachments during prayer—to entertainment, social media, a relationship, etc. What does the Lord want you to let go of?

Meeting Six

Contemplative Life & Essential Elements of Religious Life

 Take turns reading aloud pp. 109-112

1. Initial response to the reading?

2. The woman who anointed Jesus with the precious and expensive ointment (and went so far as to break the jar) is a model or icon of religious life. Why is this fitting?

3. Why are contemplative nuns considered a "hidden power source for the Church and for the world?" (p. 112)

 Read aloud page 113 to the top of page 115.

4. How does this reading address any misconceptions you may have held about contemplative life?

 Read aloud p. 123 to top of p. 126.

5. What surprised you in the text?

6. Take a few minutes to skim pages 126-136. Of the nine essential elements listed, which seem most appealing to you? Why? Which element would pose the greatest challenge to you? Why?


7. How is Our Lady the "perfect model" of religious life?

Action Steps: **A. Research Religious communities** Visit the websites of at least three religious communities that you find attractive. Be sure to visit the sites of both active and contemplative communities. (One list of active communities can be found at cmswr.org.) **B. Read chapter ten, "A Day in the Life"** to gain a sense of the lives of religious sisters.

Meeting Seven The Six-Month Discernment Challenge


 Return to page 193 and read the stages aloud.

1. Where are you now? What has changed? What graces have you received in our discernment group?

 Read aloud “Step Three: Spiritual Accompaniment,” pages 88-89.

2. Why is spiritual direction considered essential to the Christian life, and especially to the discernment process? Share your experience of spiritual direction. What are some of its fruits?

Group activity to identify spiritual directors: Brainstorm as a group and create a list of people who would make good spiritual directors (the list might include priests, deacons, religious, and laity). Decide who you would like to approach for spiritual direction (but make sure you don't all choose the same person!).

 Read aloud “The Six Month Discernment Challenge,” page 107.

3. Discuss with the group whether you are ready to make a commitment to the six-month discernment challenge. What difficulties do you anticipate?

4. Individual activity: Write a statement in your journal committing to the six-month discernment challenge. Read your statement aloud to the group.

Prayer Point: Schedule a Holy Hour
Choose a time and place to meet as a group before the Blessed Sacrament. (Alternatively, hold the Holy Hour immediately after this meeting.)



End of Semester Group Holy Hour

End this semester of Avow with a group Holy Hour. Plan to meet at a church or chapel in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Bring a rosary, notebook, and pen. (It's good to have a priest lead the Holy Hour and expose the Blessed Sacrament, but if you can't arrange this, just meet before Our Lord Jesus in the tabernacle.)

Rosary

During the first part of the Holy Hour, pray together the Joyful Mysteries of the rosary, asking Our Lady to reveal your vocation to you. Afterwards spend time in silence.

Prayer Journal

During the second part of the Holy Hour, prayerfully reflect on a few of these questions and write down your answers:


- 1.** How has my confidence that I am truly loved by God grown over the past few months?
- 2.** How has my desire grown to follow Jesus and to love Him in concrete ways?
- 3.** How do I feel about giving up family life to follow Jesus?
- 4.** What experiences may be pointing me toward a vocation to religious life?
- 5.** Overall, how well have I discerned my vocation? What more do I need to do?
- 6.** Write a prayer of trust to God the Father, fully entrusting your life and happiness to Him.

Ending


Pray together the “Prayer of Abandonment” on p. 3. Sign and date it as an external sign of your inward abandonment.

Meeting Eight

Our Lady & What a Community is Looking for in You

 Read aloud p. 36, second paragraph, through Sr. Catherine's story on page 38.

1. Initial responses to these stories?
2. Share about a moment when you experienced a profound spiritual insight.
3. When did your relationship with Our Lady begin? What is it like now? How is it growing?

 Read aloud the benefits to Marian Consecration on page 39.

4. Which benefit is most attractive to you? Why?

 Read aloud page 153 to the top of page 155.

5. Which of these criteria seem least common in young people today?
6. Why is it important for a community to accept women who fit these criteria? What do they risk by accepting a candidate who is not ready?

Ending Prayer: Pray together “Consecration to the Virgin Mary” on page 200.

Prayer Points: A. Spend some time praying about your relationship with Our Lady. Considering praying the rosary every day this week, especially for the grace of discovering your true vocation.


B. Bring Chapter 11, “What a Community is Looking for in You” into a Holy Hour and pray about your capacity for religious life. End with an act of surrender to God's will.

Meeting Nine

First Stirrings of a Call

 Read aloud pages 9 to top of 11.

1. What strikes you from the stories of Sr. John Paul, Sr. Chiara, Sr. Ann Kateri and Sr. Veronica? How do you relate?
2. Take 2-3 minutes of silent reflection, then share an experience you have had that may be the first stirrings of a call.

 Read aloud pp. 155-157 “How Do I Know If This is a Call from God?”

3. Have you ever experienced sadness or turmoil like Sr. Ann Kateri?
4. If your heart is a budding rose, is it a tightly closed bud or an opening bloom?

 Read aloud p. 157 thru top of p. 159.

5. “The head and the heart must be in league for good discernment.” In your experience, what happens when they are not in sync?
6. Would you describe your life as having “sacramental intensity?” Share about an uplifting sacramental experience.

 Read aloud pages 159-162 “Desire for Religious Life”


7. What is your initial reaction to this text?
8. “If our vocation is planted like a seed in our hearts, why don't we want it from the beginning?” What are your thoughts on this mystery?

Prayer Point: Parable of the Sower


In your prayer this week use the parable of the sower from page 161. Envision the seed planted in your own heart. How is it growing? What may be restricting its growth? Which toxins or soil types have affected you?

Meeting Ten


Assessing your Capacity

 Read aloud the section “Good Health” pages 162-163.

1. What are your initial thoughts about the text?
2. In your own words, why is good physical and mental health important, both for the sister and her community?

 Read aloud the section “Maturity” on pages 163-165.

3. Think about yourself two years ago. How have you matured?
4. Which of the six indicators of maturity are you strong in? Which are growth areas for you?
5. How can you grow in maturity in your current work/living situation?


 Read aloud pages 165-169 “Desire and Capacity for the Vows,” and “Interest & Desire for the Specific Charism of the Institute.”

6. Which of your gifts, skills, and inclinations would be a good addition to a religious community?
7. On a scale of 1-10 how much do you desire Religious Life? Has it grown or lessened recently?

Prayer Points: **A. Bride of Christ** This week go back to the idea of becoming the Bride of Christ. Read pages 166-167 again during your prayer. Talk to Jesus about this heart to heart. **B. Read Chapter 13**, “Stages of Religious Life” on your own this week.

Meeting Eleven

Preparing through Prayer

 Read aloud the first two paragraphs of page 171.

1. If Jesus were to call you to religious life, what is the difference between the way Levi respond and the way you might respond?
2. What is holding you back from getting up and following Jesus?

 Read the section on Spiritual Preparation on pages 171-172.

3. How do you think agenda-free prayer could be a benefit to your prayer life?
4. Why is the Liturgy of the Hours important? What has been your experience praying “the prayer of the Church”?
5. Imagine yourself moving through the preparation process. Which part seems like it would be most difficult?
6. How does the thought of actually entering religious life compare to other big life transitions you have made?

 Read aloud page 113 to top of 114, “Misconceptions and Stereotypes”

7. What are the top two career paths you would see yourself pursuing? How could these skills be at the service of the Church and the world as a religious sister?


Prayer Point: Agenda-free Prayer

This week try to have a few sessions of agenda-free prayer. Don't fixate on your vocation. Consider reading the Gospel of the day, then let the Lord lead your mind and heart wherever He wills.

Meeting Twelve Sharing the News

 Read aloud Psalm 23.

1. Share about a time in your life when you had to rely on God. What happened? Have you fully entrusted your vocation to the Good Shepherd?

 Read the section on “Family and Friends” beginning on page 173.

2. What strikes you from the text? Why?

3. Why is it natural and good to conceal and protect the tender “plant” of your vocation (at least at first)?

4. How would your parents react to you becoming a religious sister?

5. Who have you told about your discernment so far? What kinds of responses have you received? If you haven’t told some people, what is your plan to do so?

 Read aloud pages 176-178, “Material Matters.”

6. What is your financial situation going forward? What are your concerns?

7. Discuss the advantages of a simple life such as that lived by a sister.

8. How does the vow of poverty make life more free?


Prayer Points: A. Family and Friends

This week spend some time praying about the people you most love and planning with the Lord how to bring them into your discernment journey.

B. Surrender Material Attachments


Spend some time surrendering your material situation over to the Lord and ask Him for guidance and inspiration about how to proceed.

Meeting Thirteen Protecting Your Vocation

 Read aloud “Preparing for a Life of Service” on page 178.

1. Why is service important during the discernment journey? What are ways you serving right now?

2. What acts of loving service can you incorporate in your life going forward?

 Read aloud “Protecting Your Vocation” on page 179.

3. What aspects of your current lifestyle might need to change if you get serious about becoming a sister?

4. How much of your day is spent with entertainment or technology or something else that would not be part of your life as a sister?

5. What is a strategy for wisely managing media in your life? Spend two to three minutes of quiet reflection before answering this question.

6. “The religious becomes a mirror reflecting Christ to her contemporaries” (DRL p. 51). Discuss how to be a clear reflection of Christ to your peers even now.

7. Discuss how the concept of “protecting your vocation” applies to the vocation of marriage as well as religious life.

Prayer Points: A. Give the Lord Your Lifestyle Pray about your current lifestyle.

Ask the Lord in prayer if there is something He may be asking you to give up as you draw closer to Him and possibly to religious life. **B. Less Is More** Explore what new things might fill your life as a sister. Consider calling a vocation director and talking with her about this question.

Meeting Fourteen Pearls of Wisdom

1. What do you think is the most beautiful aspect of the call to be a religious sister?

EE Read the pearl of advice found on pages 187 by Sr. Antonia.

2. Exercise: Take five minutes of silence to write a list of obstacles to entering religious life.

3. Share the highlights of your list with the others in the group.

EE Take turns reading aloud the other sections of Chapter 14.

4. Which piece of advice touched your heart most? Why? Which are you most likely to act on?

5. Discuss the adage, “If it’s a real call from the Lord, it won’t go away; it will only get stronger.” Is it possible to ignore the call?

EE Once again, read silently the five steps on page 193.

6. Which step you are on?

7. Share with the group what your next concrete move forward will be. Together, work out a plan to keep each other accountable.

Prayer Points: A. Surrender Your Obstacles Take your obstacle list into prayer with you this week. Make a conscious act of surrender of each one. Do this in adoration if possible.

B. Pray for Each Other Pray for each woman in the group by name, asking that each can move forward following Jesus in the Father’s will.

Action Step: Plan your final gathering.

Final Meeting Holy Mass & Marian Consecration

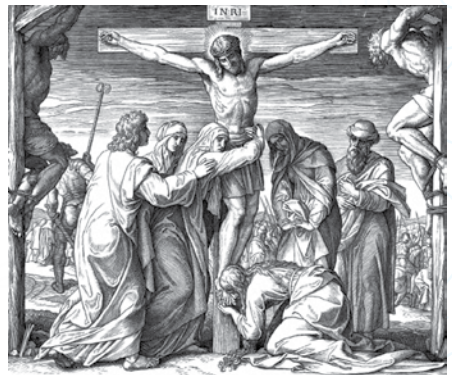
Plan to attend Mass together as a group. (Bring with you *Discerning Religious Life*.)

After Mass, gather before Our Lady’s image. Refer to p. 199, “Consecration to the Blessed Virgin.” As a group, consecrate yourself and your vocation to Mary. Sign and date the consecration prayer in your book. Plan to share a meal afterwards.

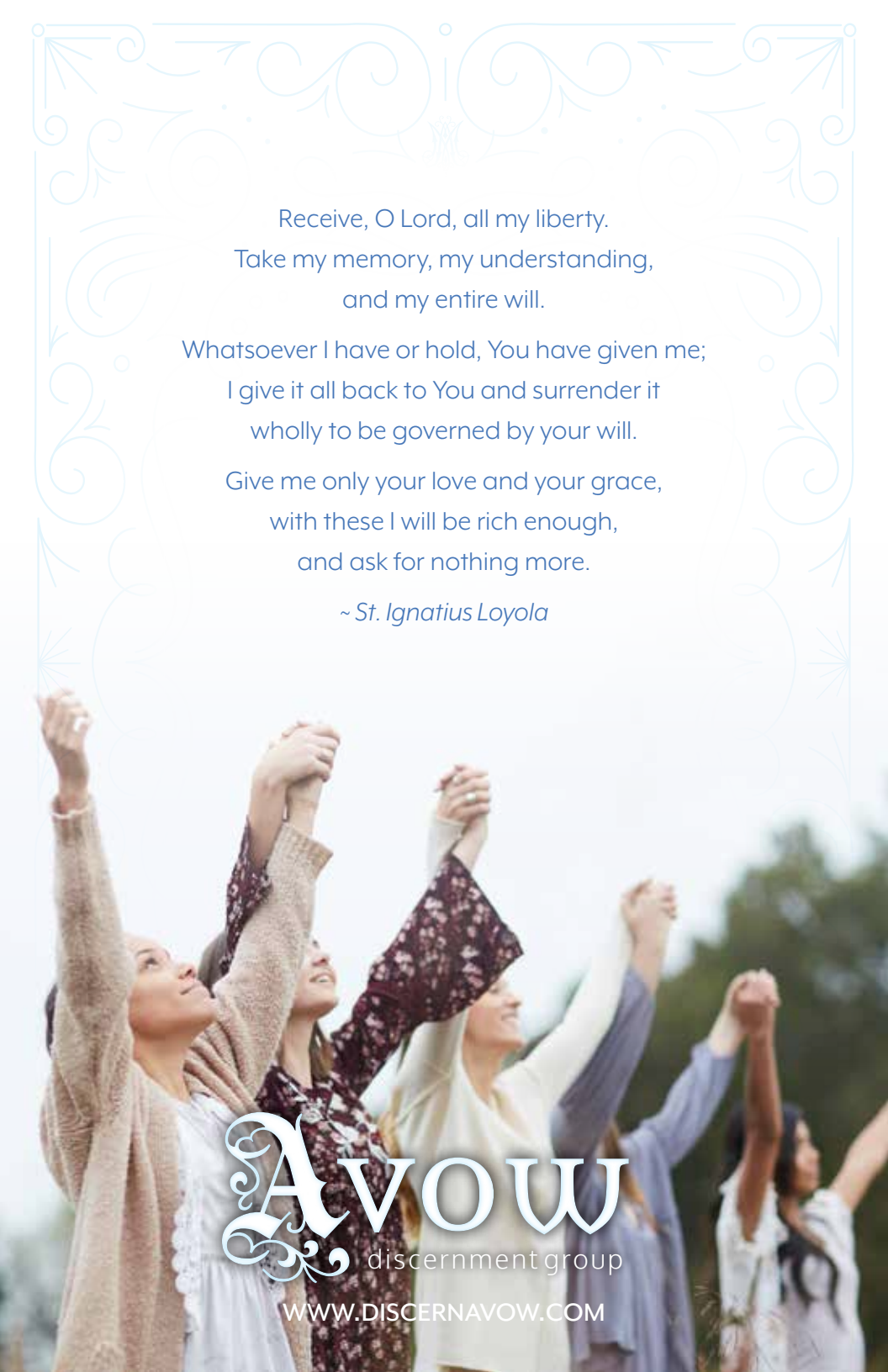
Continuing Your Discernment

Read scripture: Choose one of the four Gospels to read in its entirety, noting examples of Jesus’ poverty, chastity, and obedience. Plan to get back together for a discussion on the vows.

Visit a Community: Decide on a community with whom you would like to make a “Come and See.” Make steps to visit. Plan an Avow reunion after at least two group members have made a “Come and See.” Share your experiences over dinner together.



Mary, Mother of the Crucified One, help me to embrace your Son as I discern my vocation. Give me the grace to say yes to Jesus, no matter the cost. “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul!”



Receive, O Lord, all my liberty.
Take my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will.

Whatever I have or hold, You have given me;
I give it all back to You and surrender it
wholly to be governed by your will.

Give me only your love and your grace,
with these I will be rich enough,
and ask for nothing more.

~ St. Ignatius Loyola



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