

# **Mission of Saint Thorlak Group Leader's Guide**

## Mission Of Saint Thorlak Group Leader's Guide

This resource is meant to be a set of guidelines for you to facilitate groups who wish to pray, contemplate and relate together as Missionaries of Saint Thorlak.

We begin with a set of questions and answers intended to get you started on your journey.

### I. Frequently Asked Questions

#### What do Missionaries of Saint Thorlak do?

Missionaries of Saint Thorlak do everything we usually do in our everyday lives; except, we choose to pray, contemplate and relate to others in a manner inspired by the way St. Thorlak lived out the Gospel call, for the purposes of combating spiritual starvation in our circles.

Our Missionaries pray – that is, have a solid relationship with God, speaking with and listening to Him regularly. We contemplate, meaning that we turn ideas over and over in our minds and hearts, imagining and wondering and discovering truths and applications and patterns within these ideas. We relate, meaning that we deliberately interact with other people in a carefully studied manner that fosters true spiritual connection. This last component is the crucial one which sets our

Missionary work apart from our ordinary manner of thinking. We intentionally see in others the opportunity to learn from, and to be greeted by, God Himself, through them. We feed others by seeking spiritual nourishment from them, making ourselves available through offering our need.

To accomplish this, we need to make sure we place ourselves around others. We cannot be hermits. We cannot decline invitations. We cannot claim seclusion as our default; solitude must be something from which we sip, judiciously, only when we need to recharge and not to our excess pleasure. We do not require Missionaries to be outgoing, extroverted, confident or booked socially solid. Introverts and homebodies are just fine; in fact, the quieter among us are often very well suited to our Mission work, so long as they do not give in to the urge to be alone, or occupied, all of the time.

It is a great advantage that our Mission work can be done wherever we happen to be: in school, at work, with our families, with our neighbors, with people standing in line and in situations we have never been before. It requires only ourselves and a commitment to pray, contemplate and relate. There are no other inherent costs or supplies, other than anything we might personally need to accomplish this. The key is to do what we do consistently, as a habit of life. Our Mission is

ongoing. Nourishment lasts only a short while before it is needed again; there will never be a lack of need.

### Who can be a Missionary of Saint Thorlak?

Generally speaking, a person has to be at a developmental level to comprehend the material discussed on the Mission of Saint Thorlak website. The concepts themselves are spiritual and therefore abstract; however, the methods are simple, so it is theoretically possible that people of any ability can participate so long as the methods make sense and are practical to them. The majority of our Missionaries are approximately grade nine and higher, but this is a guideline and not a rule.

### How does a person become a Missionary of Saint Thorlak?

At this time, the Mission of Saint Thorlak has no formalized enrollment process for Missionaries. Should this change, it will be communicated widely to all participants. To become a Missionary of Saint Thorlak at this time, it is necessary and sufficient to study the principles of the way of Saint Thorlak, and then commit to putting these into action in our daily lives, wherever we are.

The three fundamental steps are:

- 1) Pray.
- 2) Contemplate.
- 3) Relate.

Each step connects to the next in a continuous chain:

PRAY [Relationship with God] ==> CONTEMPLATE [Relationship to self] ==> RELATE [Relationship to others]

PRAY: Each Missionary needs to be open to daily prayer. There are so many aspects to this one concept alone that we might discuss, but for now, what we require is a regular effort to be in touch with God, the One, True God of the Holy Trinity. Everything we do must begin, be experienced, and end with an active awareness that God is present (as we pray), is eager to know us for who we truly are (as we contemplate) and is eager to greet us in other people (as we relate).

You will note that we do not mention prescribed words or prayer quotas. We feel prayer should cultivate an intimate relationship with God. Just as

people don't use scripts in human friendships, there is no single formula when it comes to experiencing God. It must be a spontaneous, genuine and deeply personal experience, as individual as each one of our Missionaries. For some, this is reading; others, song; others, memorized words recited in the comforting rhythm of praise. Others prefer completely impromptu thoughts, remarks and recollections along the activities of the day.

Some people have not spent much time thinking about God. Some have no real idea what God is all about. Some feel God is unapproachable, or judgmental, or distant. All of that is okay, so long as you call this your starting point. All we ask is that you get to know God, so that He can get to know you.

**CONTEMPLATE:** Our Missionaries need to be learners: thinkers, artists, ordinary workers, puzzlers, dreamers, improvisers, makers and doers. The key is to approach our learning with wonder, not as a chore, always finding the end in discovering something about God and His designs – and how these relate to who we are, and who God created us to be. Whether our concepts are

quickly understood or slower to make sense, they can still be pondered, imagined, tested and considered across the situations we experience each day. We do not memorize and move on; we seek to uncover the principles of spiritual nourishment in as many settings as we can.

Please note: Some people are very comfortable studying things, and others are not. There is just as much beauty in simplicity as there is in complexity. "Learning" takes countless forms. We are confident that, if you have the desire to be one of our Missionaries, you are already able to learn and contemplate; how else could you be considering our Missionary work in the first place?

RELATE: By definition, all missionaries are sent out to connect with others. In the manner of St. Thorlak, however, we specifically use Matthew 18:20 as our Missionaries' guiding principle. It is written that when he was appointed prior over the brothers of the monastery at Þykkvibær, Iceland, St. Thorlak "at once ordered their life so beautifully that it was remarked by wise men that they had never seen such good conduct where there had been a regular life for so short a time as there." Later, when he became Abbot, St. Thorlak "began

anew to hold a remarkable rule over the brothers over whom he was set. He commanded them to maintain love and concord between them and explained to them how much was at stake, since the Son of God says that wherever two or three gathered together in his name that he would be among them" (The Saga of Bishop Thorlak, p. 7). Matthew 18:20 brought something remarkable to the brothers at Þykkvibær, and we want it to bring something remarkable to our Mission: God Himself. When we connect with someone else [relate], we share in their ideas [contemplate] and bring God present to us [pray].

What are Domestic Prayer Missionaries of Saint Thorlak, and how does this ministry connect to the group I am looking to facilitate?

Domestic Prayer Missionaries of St. Thorlak are missionaries-in-place who pray for individuals who have asked for prayer. They do their praying right where they are, in their current circumstances, in their current frames of mind. They can be absolutely anywhere people live. This makes for a beautiful paradox: They are "domestic," meaning, in place; but they are everywhere... thus, transforming "everywhere" into one, common household, and validating our view of humanity as one family of one God.

The primary focus of Mission of Saint Thorlak groups will always be the active ministry of our Regular Missionaries, but it is certainly possible for Domestic Prayer Missionaries to meet and pray together, or for ordinary meetings to include prayer time for Domestic Prayer Missionaries.

#### Who can facilitate Mission of Saint Thorlak groups?

There is virtually no limit to who might be a group facilitator. Parents, teachers, coaches, counselors, youth ministers, campus ministers, chaplains, pastors, deacons, homeschoolers, peer leaders and therapists are some who immediately come to mind.

All leaders must be appropriately insured, trained and supervised according to the requirements of their roles and settings (please note: The Mission of Saint Thorlak provides no direct supervision or oversight of its group activities).

#### Where should Mission of Saint Thorlak groups be held?

Any small, comfortable setting will serve the meeting needs well. A low-key atmosphere conducive to prayer, contemplation and thoughtful discussion is ideal.

### How large should Mission of Saint Thorlak groups be?

The smaller the number, the more meaningful the discussions can be (with a certain comfortable minimum of, perhaps, four or five). The group should feel like a gathering of friends and not a classroom.

### What is discussed in a Mission of Saint Thorlak group?

At this time, we suggest using our Missionary Thoughts of the Week as a springboard for discussion; alternatively, our daily devotional posts may be used as discussion starters (see in greater detail our "suggested meeting format"). As more material becomes available, you may find it useful to systematically go through the Mission of Saint Thorlak Guidebook or Manual on Spiritual Starvation. We will post recommendations for group leaders when these materials become available.

### How many meetings should we schedule, and how frequently?

Weekly meetings are best as they naturally follow the "Missionary Thought of the Week" and can provide support, reflection and feedback about the topics presented. Biweekly meetings also work.

The total number of meetings should be decided based on your needs and circumstances. Groups in academic settings will likely follow the calendar of their institution, whereas church groups will follow the youth ministry calendar, and homeschool groups may theoretically wish to meet year-round. It is best to gauge the need, setting and comfort of the group in making this decision.

How long does a Mission of Saint Thorlak meeting last?

You will want to keep in mind the power of brevity without looking to rush through the agenda. Meetings should be a coming together for support and spiritual nourishment, but not run so long that they feel sacrificial. It is very likely that participants will already have several other activities scheduled. It is also possible that participants may find gathering with others difficult. The guideline is for meetings to be long enough to be fruitful... and it is always good to end when people are looking forward to the next meeting, not when they are checking the clock.

What are some considerations to remember about participants with autism?

We greatly value the insights offered by people with autism. We also recognize that their group participation can be impacted by several variables

associated with autism. Be sure to see the “Fairs and Fouls” page of this Leader’s Guide for more information. Generally speaking, we want participants to be comfortable as they are. Some people are naturally more reflective and take longer to mull concepts before speaking about them, and we do not want to mistake their quietude for non-participation. Some may also need to move around, even during short meetings, and this will be something you can establish in the ground rules ahead of time (e.g., frequency/policy regarding bathroom breaks). If a behavior is distracting or disruptive, it should be assessed with dignity, assuming the best, and understood objectively from both sides. Most situations have many possible solutions if everyone recognizes that both the individuals’ and the group’s best interests are in mind.

What if I have a question not listed here, or about a specific situation?

Feel free to contact the Mission of Saint Thorlak for mission-specific questions. For more immediate needs, we encourage you to seek out the person who supervises the department or ministry overseeing your group.

## **II. Typical Mission of Saint Thorlak Group Meeting Agenda**

The following is a sample annotated agenda for a Mission of Saint Thorlak meeting. Feel free to adjust this as works best for your specific group. We strongly recommend keeping the agenda posted and sticking to the schedule, as this helps keep things running smoothly and helps participants feel on task. A blank agenda is included at the end of this Leader's Guide.

### **SAMPLE MISSION OF SAINT THORLAK MEETING AGENDA**

#### **1. Welcome and arrival**

This is as simple as it sounds. It is important to commence the meeting on time.

#### **2. Opening prayer**

You may choose a prayer that is particularly meaningful to your group, or pray the prayer offered at the end of this Leader's Guide.

#### **3. Experiences since last meeting -OR- Introductions, if this is the initial meeting or new members are present**

Introductions are important for initial meetings and for anyone new to the group; however, do bear in mind that some people are anxious and do not speak well if they feel like they are on the spot. A simple “We’re so glad to meet you – please, tell us your name, and what led you to our group” works well, with full acceptance of brief answers (or, no answers) as needed.

Initial group meetings or those welcoming new members might begin with a mild icebreaker, again bearing in mind that some may feel anxious at first. Always choose something light-hearted and easy to experience in a group (see suggestions at the end of this Leader's Guide).

If there are no introductions, meetings can proceed to discussing participants' experiences since last meeting. The Mission Goal from last meeting is read, and participants are encouraged to talk about what they did, thought and observed as they considered that goal. Leaders will decide if an open format works, or if participants are more comfortable with something predictable, such as each taking a turn around the circle. Participants always have the option of passing if they are not comfortable enough to share.

#### **4. Topic at hand for this meeting**

Assuming the topic comes from the Missionary Thought of the Week, this is the point where leaders read the next consecutive Missionary Thought aloud. It may also be displayed for viewing or printed and distributed to participants, if leaders find this useful. The leader then may elaborate on the topic and open the floor to spontaneous reaction and discussion among participants.

#### **5. Specific Mission Goal for the week (or two weeks) ahead**

Again, assuming the topic comes from the Missionary Thought of the Week, this is where leaders review the PRAY-CONTEMPLATE-RELATE portion of the thought. This, also, may be printed and distributed if this would be useful for participants to have.

Some find it useful to provide folders or binders to participants to keep Missionary Thoughts and/or PRAY-CONTEMPLATE-RELATE portions along with space for journaling, notations, challenges or questions that may arise throughout the week (or two weeks) before the next meeting.

## **6. Open floor for general Mission-related discussion**

**- If participants have no thoughts to share, leader may introduce a topic**

This is the opportunity for group discussion about things relating to Mission themes but not necessarily the weekly topic. For instance, someone might wish to ask the group their preferred method of prayer. Another might reflect on how they witnessed voluntary humility in action. Another might express frustration about a situation and ask for input from a Missionary perspective.

If no participants have items to discuss, the leader may opt to introduce a question, topic or situation relating to Mission themes (see suggestions in this Leader's Guide).

### **6a. OPTIONAL: DOMESTIC MISSIONARIES OF ST. THORLAK**

If this aspect is incorporated into the regular group meeting, this may be a time of silent prayer, a recitation of prayers of intercession with names of entrusted souls kept in the silence of the hearts of participants (see suggestions), or a brief open discussion of any issues/observation encountered in praying for others.

## **7. Review of the week's Mission Goal, and concluding prayer**

As the meeting wraps up, the leader will review one more time the PRAY-CONTEMPLATE-RELATE for the week/two weeks ahead, and conclude with a suitable prayer (see suggested closing prayer at the end of this Leader's Guide).

## **8. Dismissal**

The meeting is adjourned until next session, whose date and time should be announced.

### **III. Suggested Resources**

#### **A. Suggested Prayers**

Familiar and ordinary prayers are always useful. The Mission of Saint Thorlak offers the following prayers specific to our Mission and Ministry for group use.

**Opening prayer**

Dear Heavenly Father,

Your Grace has brought us  
here together,  
Just as we are,

So that, through our sharing,

we may know You better  
and love You better,

And that we may offer  
You, here,  
the gift of ourselves;

That You may know us

in our needs,  
in our yearnings

and in all the ways  
we long to know  
how You see us.

Through Our Lord,  
Jesus Christ, Your Son,  
Present with us,  
As we gather together in His name, AMEN.

**Closing prayer**

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for being here with us  
As we encounter You in our lives  
And in each other.

Please remain with us  
As we return to our other activities  
And be a guide to our hearts  
As we seek to remain with you  
In love, fellowship and mission.

Through Our Lord Jesus Christ,  
Your Son,  
Who Lives and Reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,  
One God,  
Forever and ever.

AMEN.

## Prayer for Saint Thorlak's Help With ASD

Most gentle and loving St. Thorlak,

Feed my spiritual hunger today with your  
patronal love;

Give the water of your friendship to my lonely, thirsting  
soul.

Clothe my vulnerability with your reassurance  
and protection.

In moments of distress, breathe peaceful refuge deep  
within me.

Reach out to me even when I am struggling or pushing  
people away.

When fear traps me, visit me; stay close at hand to  
encourage me.

Ransom me with your winsome affection whenever I  
feel excluded.

Help me remember the people who love me,  
and all those who hunger and thirst, struggle and flee,

or hide from the faces of those who might help them.

In the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus  
and the Immaculate Heart of Mary,  
I thank you, Holy Thorlak. AMEN.

## **B. Suggested Meeting Agenda Format (Blank)**

### **MISSION OF SAINT THORLAK MEETING AGENDA**

- 1. Welcome and arrival**
- 2. Opening prayer**
- 3. Experiences since last meeting -OR-  
Introductions, if this is the initial meeting or new members are present**
- 4. Topic at hand for this meeting**
- 5. Specific Mission Goal for the week (or two weeks) ahead**
- 6. Open floor for general Mission-related discussion**
  - If participants have no thoughts to share, leader may introduce a topic**
- 6a. OPTIONAL: DOMESTIC MISSIONARIES OF ST. THORLAK**
- 7. Review of the week's Mission Goal, and concluding prayer**
- 8. Dismissal**

### **C. Suggested Topics at Hand and Mission Goals (Pray-Contemplate-Relate)**

Weekly thoughts can be found at [mission-of-saint-thorlak.weebly.com/mission-activities](http://mission-of-saint-thorlak.weebly.com/mission-activities)

Leaders are encouraged to use the most current Missionary Thoughts of the Week, or may go consecutively through the Archives of the Mission Activities page.

Alternatively, Daily Devotions might be used as topics for discussion. These are found on our Twitter Feed page: [mission-of-saint-thorlak.weebly.com/daily-devotional-tweets.html](http://mission-of-saint-thorlak.weebly.com/daily-devotional-tweets.html)

Please note: Only the Mission Thoughts include the Pray-Contemplate-Relate discussion, so those using the Daily Devotions will need to devise this themselves.

### **D. Suggested Mission-Related Topics**

If participants have no particular related items to discuss, leaders can choose a related theme of their own, or may consider the following topics drawn from the qualities exhibited by St. Thorlak in his lifetime we which to study and emulate.

- Caritas (the genuine interest in securing the dignity and wellbeing of others)
  - Constant delight in, and value of, the stories, lives and wisdom of others
  - Striving to help others recognize their value to him, and to God
  - Comfort with silence when in the company of others
  - Connecting with others, vs. socializing with others
  - “Where two or more are gathered, I am with them” (Matthew 18:20)
  
- Voluntary humility (the choice to be exactly as you are, where you are)
  - Spiritual mendicancy (the willingness to ask others to help you with your needs) – offering our need to others
  - Sincerity in everything we do
  
- Contemplative sense of wonder (falling in love thinking about God and Creation, seeing how each reveals the other, infused by familiarity with psalms and Sacred Scripture)

- Desire to share the wonder of knowledge and discoveries with others
- Willingness to set the standard of respectable conduct through our own behavior
- Consecration of all we are to God's service
- Our Mission Statement and Objectives

The **Mission of St. Thorlak** aims to understand, recognize, address and prevent spiritual starvation, letting people with autism lead us on our way:

- To make people aware of their humanity: their human need to be known and loved

- To make people aware that these are also the immediate needs of those around them

- To make people aware that these needs spring from God's thirst to be known and loved

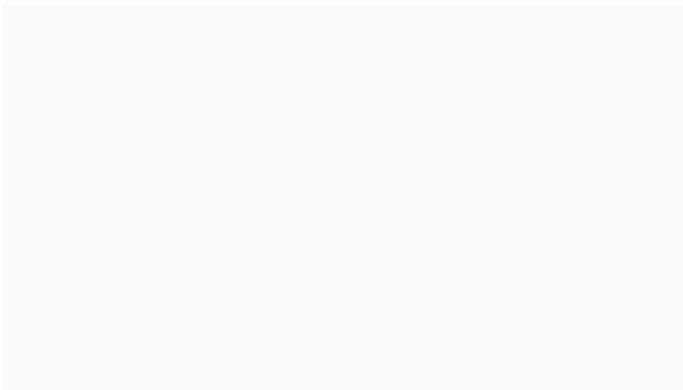
- To make people aware that resisting these needs limits their experience of God

- To teach people to see how God sees them, and how God sees those around them

- To encourage people to live as God sees them

- To teach people to gently encourage others to live as God sees them –

First, by the example of their own lives;  
then, by friendship to them;  
then, by words.



## E. Fairs and Fouls

This sample list may be used as is or modified for your group's use. It is helpful to have expectations posted visibly.

### FAIRS

- One person speaks at a time
- It is always okay to "pass" if someone does not wish to speak or feels embarrassed, shy, uncomfortable or anxious – but please do so politely.
- Group leaders can come back to those who have passed, offering a chance to speak later on. Some need longer time to think before responding. This ensures nobody feels left out even if they need extra time.
- Begin with "I," not "You" or "They"
- Ask questions
- Be sincere
- Ask first before doing anything that affects others or might come on too strong
- If you need a break, wait until the current speaker finishes
- Keep your volume down
- Observe "arm's length" space
- Tell only the stories you own, both in and out of group
- Challenge others, gently, with CARITAS (genuine concern for the other)

## FOULS

- Accusations
- Distractions
- Insincerity
- Crowding
- Put-downs
- Telling about others when it does not involve you directly
- Antagonizing
- Pushing things that are embarrassing or humiliating (*when in doubt, don't!*)
- Persisting, persuading, ridiculing, pressuring

\* If someone commits a foul, please point this out gently, quietly, and help them rephrase or reframe as needed. Leaders are role models of group dynamics. If this becomes an ongoing issue, leaders are encouraged to speak individually with those in question to try to see where this is coming from. Surprisingly, many off-putting behaviors are disguises for anxiety, and supportive validation is often a powerful antidote.

## F. Optional Supplies, if useful and desired

- ✓ Folders – Three prong or two-pocket
- ✓ Snacks
- ✓ Mobile devices for common reading and reference
- ✓ Multimedia projectors
- ✓ Agenda (printed/posted)
- ✓ Prayers (printed/posted)
- ✓ Print-out of week's discussion

## G. Icebreaker activities

**(Feel free to search and find out more online)**

The trick is to find an activity that is fun, low-key and easy, especially for people who might have difficulty speaking in new situations.

Anxiety often runs very high during icebreakers, so it is vital to minimize chances that participants will feel embarrassed or inadequate in front of their peers.

Some examples of helpful icebreaker activities:

-“Would You Rather” style questions (e.g., “You Gotta Be Kidding” Card Game): Everyone says their name, then one person has to draw a card and choose someone by name to answer the question. Then, that person chooses... and so on.

- “Tell us your name, and \_\_\_\_\_”

-----then make up a secret identity.

E.G., I am Mrs. O’Connell, but I live a secret life as a Grocery Cart Racer.

-----then something you have never done.

E.G., I am Mrs. O’Connell, and I have never used a parachute.

- Category Game: Everyone keep going until we run out of ideas.

E.G.,

“Things that people like on pizza.”

“Names of breakfast cereals.”

“Different holidays.”

**\* PLEASE NOTE:** Leaders are strongly urged to pre-screen cards, questions and prompts to keep them as mild as possible. Open-ended questions are stressful for most people in new situations, and it is imperative to keep topics light and easy, humorous but not too personal.

\* If group members should react in ways that might make their peers uncomfortable (excessive laughter, for instance), please redirect the group and remind them to laugh together, not at one another; to build up, not knock down.

## H. Contact Information

Email [mission.of.st.thorlak@gmail.com](mailto:mission.of.st.thorlak@gmail.com)

WWW <http://mission-of-saint-thorlak.weebly.com>

**NOTES:**