St Luke at his desk, detail from altarpiece of St Luke by Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506)
Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.

Luke 1:1–4
Session Introduction

The Third Gospel is a beautiful and powerful portrait of Our Lord Jesus Christ. But it’s much more than just a portrait. As a part of Sacred Scripture, the Gospel of Luke is heaven’s own invitation to us to draw close to the Son of God. You could call it a divine summons: to know Jesus Christ; to love, serve, and become like Him; and to awaken everyone we know to the good news of His salvation.

That salvation is possible because of the abundant mercy of God, flowing out from His heart to a blind and broken world. For this reason, St. Luke, the author of the Third Gospel, returns again and again to the theme of divine mercy—God’s offer of forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation.

This session provides an overview of the author and the text by addressing these important questions: What do we know about Luke himself? How did he write this book, and why? What sets this Gospel apart from the other three biblical Gospels? And most importantly: Are we willing to let this book change our lives?

Prayer to Prepare for Study

Lord, my God, bestow upon me an understanding that knows You, diligence in seeking You, wisdom in finding You, a way of life that is pleasing to You, perseverance that waits trustfully for you, and confidence that I shall embrace you at the last. Amen.

—Prayer of St. Thomas Aquinas before study

Study Notes

These notes provide insights to help you understand and reflect upon the biblical text.

According to ancient tradition, Luke was from Antioch in Syria, the only known Gentile (non-Jewish) author of the New Testament (see Col 4:10–14).

Luke was a disciple of St. Paul and learned the Gospel from him (see Phlm 1:24; 2 Tm 4:11). His writing reflects several themes from St. Paul, including a focus on God’s mercy, salvation history, the redemption of the Gentiles, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the call of the disciple to continue the work of Jesus Christ.

Luke wrote his Gospel and Acts of the Apostles as a single work (see Lk 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–2). Some scholars believe that the Church later divided Luke’s Gospel from Acts in order to have the four Gos-
pel books and Acts parallel the five books of the *Pentateuch* in the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). Given that division, it would seem to make sense that the books would be ordered Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, and John, so that the two parts of Luke’s work would remain together. But from ancient times, the Church has considered the Gospels the most important books in the New Testament, first in honor. So they were placed together and before all the other books.

Why, then, wouldn’t Luke have been listed as the fourth Gospel, with Acts placed immediately after it? The ordering of the Gospels in ancient lists varies, and some of those lists actually do place Luke fourth, perhaps for that very reason. Even so, the order that seems to be the most ancient is the present one. This order probably became standard because it reflects the chronological order of the Gospels’ composition according to ancient tradition, with John last. So John had to be placed between Luke and Acts.

Luke was a well-educated and well-traveled man. His writing displays a wide knowledge of the Mediterranean world, its geography and culture (see Acts, especially chapters 16–28). He also had an extensive knowledge of Jewish culture and history, including the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament widely used at that time. He writes some of the most elegantly-styled Greek to appear in the New Testament.

Luke was a physician by profession, so he emphasizes scenes of medical interest (such as healing miracles) in his Gospel and Acts (see Col 4:14). It is possible that he studied medicine at the famous school in Tarsus and met the Apostle Paul while there.

Luke was the only one among the “apostolic men” (those associated with the Apostles) and the Gospel writers who did not meet the Lord during his public ministry. Some traditions suggest that he was one of the seventy disciples sent out to preach (see Lk 10:1–24) or the second disciple (along with Cleopas) who met Jesus on the way to Emmaus (see Lk 24:13). But these suggestions are difficult to reconcile with Luke’s own statement implying that he was not among the eyewitnesses to the events he recorded in his Gospel (see Lk 1:1–4).

Sacred art represents the Gospel of Luke as an ox. Each of the four Evangelists are presented as being guided in the authorship of his Gospel by one of the four faces appearing on angelic creatures in the Book of Ezekiel (see Ez 1:4–14; see also Rev 4:6–8). The faces are of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. Luke is associated with the ox because his Gospel begins with Zechariah offering a sacrifice in the Temple (see Lk 1:8–10).
The principal relics of Luke are contained in the Abbey of St. Giustinia in Padua, Italy. The saint’s feast day is October 18, and his Gospel is used for the Sunday “C” Cycle of Mass Readings.

One tradition holds that Luke wrote his Gospel (24 chapters) and Acts of the Apostles (28 chapters) during St. Paul’s two-year imprisonment, sometime between A.D. 62 and 68. But scholars debate the matter, and others consider a later date of A.D. 80 to 90 more probable for the full composition.

Luke’s writings are addressed to “Theophilus,” which means “loved by God” or “lover of God.” There may have been an individual with this name or title, but it may well be a general designation for all people of good will (especially the Gentiles) who are seeking to be “lovers of God” (see Lk 1:3). Luke stresses the universality of salvation for all people in an attempt to receive a large Gentile hearing for the message of Jesus Christ.

In his writings, Luke follows the classical historiographical tradition—the standard protocols for writing history in his culture. His opening prologue imitates the style of Greek and Roman historians of his day. He provides a geographical and chronological framework for his story by noting where events took place and who was occupying secular positions of power at various times. (There was no universally accepted method of dating at the time, so identifying publicly known rulers established a timeframe.)

Luke’s historical approach is reflected as well in that he attempted a chronological biography of Jesus, the only Gospel writer to do so (see Lk 1:1–4). The other three Gospel writers had other concerns that governed the structure of their works: Matthew, writing primarily for a Jewish audience, makes frequent reference to the Law of Moses and the Prophets, emphasizing Jesus as both the new Moses and the new David. Mark provides a compact handbook for living the Christian way of life. And John’s Gospel follows the Jewish liturgical year, showing Jesus as the new Temple.

Writing from a Greek perspective, Luke is unique in his stress on the role of women and of Gentiles in the Lord’s ministry, both in his Gospel and in Acts. He also echoes the Old Testament emphasis on God’s care for the poor and lowly.

Luke’s style of narration could be described as a “foot and food” approach. His Gospel reflects a
Mediterranean culture in that much of the narrative revolves around Jesus’ walking or being at a meal. This narrative pattern culminates in the Emmaus scene at the end of his Gospel (see Lk 24:13–35).

As a physician, Luke is deeply aware of the human condition, so he provides some warm pastoral stories from the Lord Jesus that are not given in the other Gospels. These include the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, and the Good Thief (see Lk 15:11–32; 10:25–37; 23:39–43). He also uses precise medical terms typically found only in the technical medical literature of his day.

Tradition teaches that Mary was one of the eyewitnesses interviewed by Luke in the writing of his Gospel (see Lk 1:1–4). He includes details that could have been known only to Mary or to someone close to her, such as the events of the Annunciation and her pondering of events in her heart (see Lk 1:26–38; 2:19, 51). One uncertain tradition that can be traced back to the eighth century claims Luke was an artist who drew several images of Mary that are now venerated in several churches throughout the world.

Luke visited St. Paul frequently during his two-year house imprisonment (see Acts 28:30), and may have had extensive access during this time to other early Church leaders—the “eyewitnesses” (Lk 1:2), such as St. Peter.

Luke is frequently mentioned alongside St. Mark (see Phlm 1:24; 2 Tm 4:11). He seems to have used Mark’s Gospel (according to tradition, written at the feet of St. Peter) in the composition of his own Gospel.

As a disciple of St. Paul, Luke was involved in his apostolic journeys. Beginning in Acts 16:10, Luke often speaks in the first person (“we”) because of his involvement in the work.

Eusebius, a fourth-century bishop of Caesaria (d. before A.D. 341), is known as the “Father of Church History.” He reported in his Ecclesiastical History (3.4): “They say that Paul was actually accustomed to quote the Gospel according to St. Luke.”

TO PREPARE FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION, TURN AHEAD NOW TO THIS SESSION’S “DIGGING DEEPER” AND “LIFE APPLICATION” SECTIONS.
Opening Prayer

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer!

—Psalm 19:14

Session 1 Video: An Introduction to Luke

This first video, hosted by Dr. Paul Thigpen, takes a closer look at the author of the Gospel of Luke and some fundamental features of the book. Here are some key highlights of his presentation, with room to take notes as you view the video to assist you in the group discussion.

Why Luke wrote the Gospel and the Book of Acts

What we know about Luke

Evidence that Luke was writing as both an historian and an evangelist
Major themes of the book

Literary genres in the book

Material unique to Luke’s Gospel

Small Group Discussion

PART 1: DIGGING DEEPER

1. Why would the early Christians need a reliable historical record of Jesus’ life and ministry, and of the early days of the Church? Why would they need a written record in addition to the preaching of the Apostles?
2. What aspects of Luke’s training, skills, gifts, and personal experience made him especially well suited to write these particular books (his Gospel and the Book of Acts)?

3. Why would Luke consider it essential for the earliest Christians to recognize that God’s offer of salvation was universal—for both Jews and Gentiles; men and women; the rich, prominent, and powerful, and the poor, lowly, and weak?

4. Why was it so important for Luke to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus and the life of the early Church?

5. Why was it so important for Luke to place his account of Jesus’ life and ministry, and of the early days of the Church, in the context of earlier events in salvation history?
PART II: LIFE APPLICATION

1. What do we hope to learn from Luke’s Gospel that could strengthen our faith and hope in God and deepen our love for Him and for others?

2. What implications for our personal relationships do we find in the Gospel’s declaration that God invites every single person to repentance and redemption in Jesus Christ?

3. In what practical ways might we get to know the Holy Spirit better and rely on Him more to bear spiritual fruit in our lives?

Session 1 Life Application Video

After breaking from your small group discussion, gather to watch the second video, a pastoral reflection from Fr. Jeffrey Kirby, STL.
How Then Shall We Live?

Silently review the following summary of Fr. Kirby’s reflection to prepare for answering the questions in “Living It Out.”

Look at what the Lord was able to accomplish in and through Luke, who was actually a Gentile, not one of the original Chosen People. And yet all that God has accomplished through this beloved physician, He seeks to do in and through each of us according to our own vocation and state in life.

Will we give God this permission? Will we take the great leap of faith and allow God to do a great work in us and in the midst of our world today? Are we willing to leave our comfort zone—to be like Luke, the Gentile, leaving what he knew best and entering on a whole new journey? Will we dare to live in Jesus Christ and allow His grace to transform us and others through us?

God calls every one of us, as He called Luke, to share His good news, to live out the gospel, each of us in our own way. What work does God want to do in your life? Is He calling you to forgive or befriend someone? What good news is He asking you to carry to others, or to receive from others?

Out of what kind of darkness is God calling you? What marvelous light does He desire to give you? What work does God want to accomplish in your marriage and family? And what about your neighbors? Is God calling you to go the extra mile for a neighbor? Is He calling you to a greater charity and service to others? Perhaps God wants to send you as a missionary into your work place?

And what about the poor? Do you recognize them in your life—those who need food, love, or the talents that only you possess?

Let’s say to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, I will follow. I will let you work. Come, give me Your grace, and let me be Your instrument in my world today.”
Living It Out

On your own, spend three to five minutes praying, discerning, and writing down the specific ways that God might be calling you to make changes in your life. Share and discuss afterwards only if you feel comfortable doing so.

Consider this week how God is calling you to . . .

❖ Move out of your comfort zone to share some aspect of the Gospel with someone you know.
❖ Demonstrate God’s mercy to someone who needs it.
❖ Cooperate with the Holy Spirit to cultivate a particular virtue in your life.

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Words to Know

**Evangelists, the Four** Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; according to ancient tradition, the writers of the four biblical Gospels.

**Gentiles** People who are not Jews.

**Gospel** Literally, “good news.” In general, the term is used to refer to the “good news” of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. It is also used to refer to any one of the first four books in the New Testament that record the events of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

**Martyrology, Roman** A martyrology is a list for every day of the year of martyrs and other saints whose feasts or commemorations occur on each day, usually with a brief note about each one. The Roman Martyrology is the official martyrology of the Catholic Church, extensive though not exhaustive, and subject to historical revision.


**Septuagint** A Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, begun in Alexandria, Egypt, in the third century B.C. and completed around 100 B.C. It also includes several books not found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Early Christians writing in Greek often quoted the Septuagint when citing the Old Testament.

Rome to Home

Now more than ever, in a world that is often without light and without the courage of noble ideals, people need the fresh, vital spirituality of the gospel. Do not be afraid to go out on the streets and into public places, like the first apostles who preached Christ and the Good News of salvation in the squares of cities, towns, and villages. This is no time to be afraid of the gospel! It is the time to preach it from the rooftops. Do not be afraid to break out of comfortable and routine modes of living, in order to take up the challenge of making Christ known in the modern metropolis. . . . The gospel must not be hidden because of fear or indifference. It was never meant to be hidden away in private.

—St. John Paul II, World Youth Day Homily, Denver, Colorado, August 15, 1993
Catechism Connections

These readings from the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) will deepen your understanding of this session’s presentations and discussions. The numbers identify the relevant paragraphs in the Catechism.

- The inspiration and truth of Sacred Scripture: CCC 101–108.
- The gospel is for the entire human race: CCC 831.
- The missionary mandate of the Church follows from her catholic nature: CCC 849–856.

Voice of the Saints

“Luke writes his Gospel to Theophilus, that is, to the one whom God loves. But if you love God, it was also written to you. And if it was written to you, you too must fulfill the duty of an evangelist. Diligently keep this token of Luke’s friendship close to your heart.”

St. Ambrose of Milan

Closing Prayer

Lord, Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I am Your servant; give me discernment so that I may know Your decrees. The unfolding of Your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. I long for Your salvation, Lord; Your teaching is my delight.

—Adapted from Ps 119:105, 125, 130, 174