

## “The Dark Knight” Film Discussion Guide

**Film length:** 2hrs. 30 minutes

Film rating: PG-13

Director: Christopher Nolan

Genre: Action/Adventure

### Synopsis:

In “**The Dark Knight**,” Batman raises the stakes in his war on crime. With the help of lieutenant Jim Gordon and District Attorney Harvey Dent, Batman sets out to dismantle the remaining criminal organizations that plague the city streets. The partnership proves to be effective, but they soon find themselves prey to a reign of chaos unleashed by a rising criminal mastermind known to the terrified citizens of Gotham as the Joker.

Batman's struggle against the Joker becomes deeply personal, forcing him to "confront everything he believes." Joker, whose eerie grin, evil laughter, and lack of morality make him far more dangerous than other criminals, holds Gotham hostage to a new level of terrorism. Batman seeks to stop the mysterious Joker at all costs, knowing that both of them are literally in a life and death struggle. Joker's main weapon of mass destruction is chaos, while Batman holds forth a vision of human goodness, truth and justice. In the end, Batman is willing to sacrifice his own hidden identity for the good of Gotham. As a hero figure, he represents hope and is willing to sacrifice himself to bring the peace and order long desired by the citizens of Gotham.



### Themes to Engage Through the Film:

- *The classic struggle of good vs. evil; light vs. darkness; hope vs. cynicism*
- *Batman's moral vision and the source of one's own moral convictions*
- *Complex moral decision-making and ethical choices: Where is the line between right and wrong? When is an action always wrong? Do the ends justify the means?*
- *The importance of justice in a society*
- *The role of citizens and institutions to mediate justice*
- *Law and order vs. chaos and terror*
- *Terrorism, its uses and impact*
- *The Dark Knight and The Dark Night of the Soul*
- *Just War Theory - at what point is the use of force justifiable in confronting evil? What is the role of nonviolence in confronting evil or violence?*

- **This film is an excellent tool to explore and examine moral decision-making, ethical issues and social justice themes.**
- **This film explores not just crime but the effects of terrorism on the individual psyche and society as a whole.**
- **The film raises significant questions about the use of power and the role of justice in society.**

### Web Links:

**The Dark Knight**

<http://thedarkknight.warnerbros.com/>

**USCCB Film Review of The Dark Knight**

[http://www.usccb.org/movies/d/dark\\_knight.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/movies/d/dark_knight.shtml)

## Catholic Social Teaching Connections:

The film, *The Dark Knight* is a complex and disturbing film. The violence in the film is graphic and somewhat gratuitous at times. Despite this fact, the film provides some extraordinary opportunities for examining complex moral issues and Catholic social teaching. The following themes can be explored, and the following connections or illustrations can be teased out through the film.

### The Life and Dignity of the Human Person:

- *Batman lives by the code that excludes the possibility of taking life. In the comic book series as in the film, his adherence to “thou shall not kill” is reinforced clearly and definitively. Doing good can never justify the taking of life in Batman’s ethic.*
- *The film explores the relationship between good and the fullness of human potential as well as the darker side of human nature.*

### The Principle of Subsidiarity:

- *In the film, the new District Attorney, Harvey Dent, is committed to using his position to clean up Gotham City and protect and defend the rights of the citizens. In several places in the film there are great statements that recognize that the fight for good over evil must be fought at every level.*
- *The role of citizens, the nature of politics, the functioning of political institutions and the role of legal systems are explored in a variety of ways. A central question in the film is ‘can order be achieved only by the power of the state?’. In the film, the state is not to be trusted entirely, and many additional levels of involvement and engagement are necessary, illustrating the role of the principle of subsidiarity.*

### The Preferential Option for the Poor:

- *Defending the weak against the strong is an archetypal theme in the Batman story. The way this is portrayed in the film is subtle but consistent. Batman’s role and mission is to defend the weak and innocent against the strong. He challenges and confronts misuse of power and force.*

### The Common Good:

- *The fight for the reign of justice in Gotham involves confronting the forces of evil. It is not just “organized crime” that is the focus, but the triumph of good over evil and order over chaos. The principle of the common good can be explored through a look at what Gotham city needs for the full flourishing and safety of its citizens.*
- *In the movie, Batman is willing to reveal his true identity for the good of the citizens of Gotham. He is true to his vision of protecting and defending the common good.*
- *Lieutenant Gordan works tirelessly to bring about a sustainable atmosphere of security and peace for the citizens of Gotham. He notes, “Vigilance is the true price of safety.”*



### Supporting Education for Justice Resources:

- **Backgrounder on Structural Sin**  
<http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/2906>
- **The Principle of Subsidiarity**  
<http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/2805>
- **The Principle of the Common Good**  
<http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/329>
- **The Just-War Theory and Non-Violence**  
<http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/508>

## Questions for Discussion:

1. **Faith.** How does Batman define faith in this statement?:

*Batman: Sometimes, truth isn't good enough, sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded.*

2. **Order vs. Chaos.** The film looks at the dynamic of order vs. chaos in a post 9/11 world where terrorism holds entirely new levels of threat and casts fear over entire populations. Discuss what Joker implies when he says:

*The Joker: [speaking to Two-Face] Do I really look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it! You know, I just, do things. The mob has plans, the cops have plans, Gordon's got plans. You know, they're schemers. Schemers trying to control their worlds. I'm not a schemer. I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are. So, when I say, ah, come here, when I say that you and your girlfriend was nothing personal, you know that I'm telling the truth.*



*The Joker: It's the schemers that put you where you are. You were a schemer, you had plans, and uh, look where that got you. I just did what I do best. I took your plan and I turned it on itself. Look what I did, to this city with a few drums of gas and a couple of bullets. Hm? You know what, you know what I noticed? Nobody panics when things go according to plan. Even if the plan is horrifying. If tomorrow I tell the press that like a gang banger, will get shot, or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics, because it's all, part of the plan. But when I say that one, little old mayor will die, well then everyone loses their minds!*

*The Joker: [Joker hands Two-Face a gun and points it at himself] Introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos. Oh and you know the thing about chaos, it's fair.*

3. **Trust and Integrity.** A fascinating thread running through the film is the concept of trust that comes from integrity and moral decision-making. Batman/Bruce Wayne affirms and upholds the necessity of trust and integrity for the flourishing of society. Why does Joker reject this?

**Gotham National Bank Manager:** *The criminals in this town used to believe in things. Honor. Respect. Look at you! What do you believe in? What do you believe in!*

*The Joker: I believe whatever doesn't kill you simply makes you... stranger.*

4. **Ethical Life-and-Death Decisions.** The Joker in his sick and diabolical way sets up several “social experiments” having to do with the choices people will make when they are threatened to the point of life or death. What did you observe in these experiments? Did they succeed or fail? What do they reveal about moral courage? What surprised you? Discuss the following examples?

- Batman must choose between saving Rachel or Harvey Dent
- The people on the ferries (one filled with citizens, the other with criminals) must make a choice between saving themselves by destroying the others or facing the possibility of all being destroyed.

5. **Terrorism as Power.** The Joker is not interested in money or control - but in creating and instigating chaos. Why? What does he gain in the dynamic of creating chaos that money or control fail to provide? What impacts have terrorism had on the every day lives of citizens in the U.S.?

6. **The nature of heroes, anti-heroes, wannabees and villains.** Compare and contrast these forms of identity in the film. What is the nature of each type and what is the message here regarding the true self vs. the false self? What happens when the line is blurred between one being a hero and a villain? In the Catholic tradition, we have a name for our heroes: “Saints.” Why does the Church lift up such figures for us? What role do they play in the life of the Church?



# DISCUSSION GUIDE

7. **Masks.** Why do people mask their true identity? What kind of courage does it take to let people see who you really are? Compare and contrast the way Joker and Batman reveal their “true selves.”
8. **Deception.** Batman at first lifts up Harvey Dent as, “A hero with a face.” But Harvey Dent reveals his true nature and moral failure as Two-Face. What happens that causes him to abandon his previous identity and slide into darkness? Why is Batman willing to let Harvey Dent be known as a hero in the end? Why is he allowed to remain, “the hero that Gotham needs?” Do you agree or disagree with this decision? Why?
9. **Peer Pressure.** How do the various characters stand up to the pressure of their peers to make decisions and proceed according to their moral convictions and conscience? Discuss Batman, the Bank Robbers, The Mafia, Joker, and the people on the Ferries in regard to peer pressure.
10. **Chance as Justice?** Two-Face uses a coin throughout the film when making decisions. This “chance-as justice” value is similar to Joker’s. Compare the two. What relation does chance have to justice?
11. **Human Nature.** Batman and Joker provide great foils for each other. Where Batman believes in the inherent goodness of people and their ability to do the right thing, Joker believes just the opposite. What do you believe is the inherent nature of people?  
*The Joker: You'll see, I'll show you, that when the chips are down, these uh... civilized people, they'll eat each other.*
12. **The Spirituality of the Dark Night of the Soul.** Explore this play on words and the spirituality of John of the Cross - the “dark night of soul” referring to the role of spiritual darkness and suffering to purify a human being for ultimate union with God. How might this be compared or contrasted to what Bruce Wayne/Batman is undergoing in the film? What is necessary to find light in darkness?
13. **Trust.** The film presents Harvey Dent as the trustworthy District Attorney. The hope of Gotham City is that his actions for good can uproot evil. What happens when he gives in to the dark side and reveals that he is not worthy of trust?
14. **Revelation.** What is the motivation behind Bruce Wayne/Batman wanting to go public and reveal his true identity? What is your reaction or response to his desire? What would the consequences be for Gotham City ?
15. **Sacrifice and Salvation.** Some see Batman as a Christ figure in the film. How does the message from Isaiah 49:1-26 connect with the themes and messages if we look at the film on a different level? What parallels and comparisons can you draw?

"You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain."

-Harvey Dent



Rachel and Harvey Dent at Bruce Wayne's party.

## Compare and Contrast the Message of Pope Benedict XVI at World Youth Day with the Message of the Film.

### Movie theme: **Pope Benedict's Message:**

- Fear** Almost two thousand years ago, the Apostles, gathered in the upper room together with Mary and some faithful women, were filled with the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:4). At that extraordinary moment, which gave birth to the Church, the confusion and fear that had gripped Christ's disciples were transformed into a vigorous conviction and sense of purpose.
- Ambition** They felt impelled to speak of their encounter with the risen Jesus whom they had come to call affectionately, the Lord. In many ways, the Apostles were ordinary. None could claim to be the perfect disciple. They failed to recognize Christ (cf. Lk 24:13-32), felt ashamed of their own ambition (cf. Lk 22:24-27), and had even denied him (cf. Lk 22:54-62). Yet, when empowered by the Holy Spirit, they were transfixed by the truth of Christ's Gospel and inspired to proclaim it fearlessly.
- Confronting Evil** There is also something sinister which stems from the fact that freedom and tolerance are so often separated from truth. This is fuelled by the notion, widely held today, that there are no absolute truths to guide our lives. Relativism, by indiscriminately giving value to practically everything, has made "experience" all-important. Yet, experiences, detached from any consideration of what is good or true, can lead, not to genuine freedom, but to moral or intellectual confusion, to a lowering of standards, to a loss of self-respect, and even to despair.
- Chaos & Randomness** Dear friends, life is not governed by chance; it is not random. Your very existence has been willed by God, blessed and given a purpose (cf. Gen 1:28)!
- The search for truth, beauty and goodness** It is a search for the true, the good and the beautiful. It is to this end that we make our choices; it is for this that we exercise our freedom; it is in this – in truth, in goodness, and in beauty – that we find happiness and joy. Do not be fooled by those who see you as just another consumer in a market of undifferentiated possibilities, where choice itself becomes the good, novelty usurps beauty, and subjective experience displaces truth.
- Identity & Witness** The task of witness is not easy. There are many today who claim that God should be left on the sidelines, and that religion and faith, while fine for individuals, should either be excluded from the public forum altogether or included only in the pursuit of limited pragmatic goals. This secularist vision seeks to explain human life and shape society with little or no reference to the Creator. It presents itself as neutral, impartial and inclusive of everyone. But in reality, like every ideology, secularism imposes a world-view. If God is irrelevant to public life, then society will be shaped in a godless image, and debate and policy concerning the public good will be driven more by consequences than by principles grounded in truth.
- Disorder and Darkness** Yet experience shows that turning our back on the Creator's plan provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order (cf. 1990 World Day of Peace Message, 5). When God is eclipsed, our ability to recognize the natural order, purpose, and the "good" begins to wane. What was ostensibly promoted as human ingenuity soon manifests itself as folly, greed and selfish exploitation. And so we have become more and more aware of our need for humility before the delicate complexity of God's world.
- Moral Choices** But what of our social environment? Are we equally alert to the signs of turning our back on the moral structure with which God has endowed humanity (cf. 2007 World Day of Peace Message, 8)? Do we recognize that the innate dignity of every individual rests on his or her deepest identity - as image of the Creator - and therefore that human rights are universal, based on the natural law, and not something dependent upon negotiation or patronage, let alone compromise?

--Benedict XVI's Welcome to Youth, "Christ Offers More! Indeed He Offers Everything!",  
Sydney, Australia, July 17, 2008. Source: <http://zenit.org/article-23238?l=english>

