








**RECOMMENDED FOR GROUP LEADERS:** Plan your discussion sessions according to the chapters of the book. Assume that participants will read chapters prior to coming to sessions.

## PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. In the opening chapter, Aideen bluntly tells Kevin that she's not looking for religion—then implores him to find the curing cross for Michael. Does this seem contradictory to you? Many today claim no religious affiliation or have left the church. Do you think this reflects an absence of faith? Has the secularization of society influenced your views on religion or your faith in God? (Chapter 1)  

2. Have you or a loved one faced a life-threatening, debilitating, or chronic illness? Did the experience change your perspective on faith and spirituality? In what ways?  

3. Kevin dreams that he is visited by his mother's spirit in Iveagh Gardens, where he first met Aideen. What does the poem express about birth, death, purgatory, and eternal life? Might this have been more than a dream? In what ways is Aideen a maternal figure for Kevin? Contemplate how she too later touches his cheek, gentle as a breeze. (Chapter 5)  

4. In the novel, Mary Magdalene is cured of seven symptoms that are described as demons. How might this biblical characterization of disease be relevant to the story's premise? (Chapter 7)  

5. Marco inherits a book of poetry by Michelangelo that is inscribed with the quote, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." He later shares this quote with Kyle. How are Marco and Kyle alike? What are they both seeking? Discuss the ways each helps the other. (Chapter 11)  

6. Kyle and Cristina are immediately attracted to each other. Why? Do their age and cultural differences seem to enhance or hinder their relationship? What do you think is the significance of their sharing St. Michael as a guardian angel? (Chapter 12)





## DISCUSSION GUIDE QUESTIONS *continued*

7. In the novel, it is significant that Mary Magdalene brings the relic to Gaul. Just as important is what her character gradually reveals about Jesus of Nazareth in earlier scenes. Trace that storyline and discuss its relevance to the main plot. (Chapters 2, 6, 8, 12)



8. Kevin and Marco's friendship began in graduate school. What subsequent life experiences do they have in common that foster this bond? In what ways are they like brothers? Do you see any parallels with the emerging friendship between Michael and Kyle? (Chapter 14)



9. Michael's illness triggers a cascade of events affecting multiple characters, each of whom has a different perspective on faith. What impact does the illness have on their individual spiritual journeys? In what ways are their lives intertwined? What does this say about our shared humanity? How does this propel the narrative?



10. Cristina had crossed the Bridge of the Holy Angel many times but never noticed the sad expressions of the statues. Kyle does so immediately, seeing that they hold the instruments of Christ's crucifixion. Earlier, Kevin had praised Kyle on his awareness of local history, which Kyle shrugged off. To what does the young man attribute his knowledge? Do you think he's being modest, or humble? (Chapter 14)



11. After seeing the Sistine fresco of Saint Paul's crucifixion, Kyle asks Cristina if she believes. Initially she thinks he's referring to the Malachy prophecy, then understands. How does her belief in the Trinity differ from her skepticism of the prophecy? What effect does this seem to have on Kyle? (Chapter 18)



12. In the Sistine Chapel, Kyle confesses to Marco, "I don't want to sin. I don't want to go against his will." Marco responds by pointing to a fresco of the Garden of Eden. Explore the relationship between temptation, sin, and free will. What role do you believe grace plays? (Chapter 19)



13. Many characters are profoundly affected by death in the course of the novel, including Aideen, Kevin, Marco, Kyle, Michael, and Brian. In what ways are their coping strategies similar? Different? Contemplate how hope borne of faith can be a powerful antidote against despair. Do you believe that hope plays a role in physical healing?





## DISCUSSION GUIDE QUESTIONS *continued*

14. During her pivotal stroll through St. Stephen's Green, Aideen comes upon a statue of the Three Fates—Past, Present, and Future—in which she sees Maw Maw, herself, and Caitlin. Why do their taunts trigger a spiritual crisis? How does she express this to Kevin? In a later scene, what bit of wisdom does Peg share? (Chapter 26)



15. In recounting her life to Aideen, Peg says, “Love is as love does.” How does Peg embody this truth? What does the saying suggest about forgiveness? Might this have been a lesson for Aideen? Has anyone ever shown you such kindness? How did you respond? (Chapter 28)



16. During the healing ceremony in 1866, Maire first appears on a tomb and later on a bier. She awakens on Easter morning. What other images of death and resurrection are presented in these scenes? What is the meaning of Maire's vision of the cross? (Chapter 29)



17. Through most of the novel, Aideen blames Fr. Finnian for having failed to heal Maw Maw and Caitlin with holy oil and even dismisses the sacrament as magic, yet she later allows herself to be anointed. What does this suggest about the evolution of her faith and her understanding of forgiveness? Compare a similar faith situation you've experienced in your own life. (Chapter 30)



18. In Aideen's dream, she is visited by two spirit orbs as she peers out from the Round Tower at Glendalough. Caitlin appears as a whorl of mirror-dust from the Wicklow Hills and is described as “diffusion coalesced.” Thinking about the circumstances of Caitlin's death and funeral, what might this imagery symbolize? (Chapter 30)



19. With his home life shattered, Kyle flees to the solitude of Skellig Michael. Discuss the spiritual symbolism of his ascending the mountain on slippery steps, emerging through a cloud into the sun. To whom is he referring when he asks, “Where have they gone?” Whose clarion voice responds, and where does it beckon? (Chapter 32)



20. Light is a recurring motif in the novel. Explore its symbolism as a source of illumination in various settings, such as Alyscamps (Chapter 13), St. Peter's Square (Chapter 18), Kildreelig (Chapter 30), and the papal chambers (Chapter 33).