

# Abide

*The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ*

An inductive Bible study in seven sessions,  
with five standalone modules

**Catholic Armory**

*Start with no background. Go as deep as you want.*

## Using This Guide

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This is the second of two studies in defending the Catholic faith. The first, *Unless Someone Guides Me*, took up authority: where Scripture came from, what Tradition is, what the Church is, and who reads rightly. This one takes up what the Church actually holds. It assumes no background and it does not run out of depth, and it can be run without the first book, which it will simply do more of its own lifting to support.

### The three tiers

Every session runs on three levels, marked in the text, so that the newest person in the room and the one who has read Denzinger both leave fed.

**THE FLOOR** One verse and one sentence anyone can say out loud that night. If a participant remembers nothing else, this is what they keep.

**THE GROUND** The inductive body of the session, where the group finds the passages and builds the case themselves. Most of your time goes here.

**THE DEPTH** The full-strength steelman and the leader-only Objection Bench. Deploy as much as the room can carry. Running a session on the Floor and the Ground alone is a legitimate way to run it.

### What is in each session

- A Leader Preparation Guide: background, Old Testament roots, three Voices of the Church, Catechism references, session goals, a timed plan with pre-chosen cuts, and the Objection Bench.
- A Discussion Guide: prayers, opening questions, numbered inductive questions each followed by a shaded ANSWER box, live discovery moments where the group searches for itself, a steelman, Dig Deeper boxes, sending questions, and a memory verse.
- A Leader Reference Card listing every passage used, in order.

### The ANSWER boxes

These are for you, not for the group, and they are labeled to share after the discussion. Reading one aloud before the group has worked is the single easiest way to ruin a session. The discovery is the teaching; the answer only confirms it.

### The Take-Home sheets

There is no participant journal. Instead each session has a two-page Take-Home, distributed after the session, never before. It carries a recap of what the group found, that session's three Voices of the Church, a Ready Response panel that puts what the group found into the participant's own words for real conversations, the week's practices, the memory verse, the reading for next time, and Catechism references.

Take-Home One carries a sealed question: what would you say if a friend asked whether you are saved. Participants write an answer, fold it, and bring it unopened to Session Five, where the three tenses of salvation in Scripture give them the words they were reaching for. Do not let anyone open it early.

No Take-Home contains ANSWER content, steelman material, Objection Bench material, or anything from the Thread Watch. The Ready Response panel is not a compressed bench; it is the participant saying, in their own register, what their group arrived at. Hand them out afterward and the spoiler discipline takes care of itself.

## The modules

Five standalone sessions extend the course and can be run in any order, or years later, or on their own: Mary; Saints, Statues, and the Charge of Idolatry; Purgatory and the Last Things; Baptism; and Confession. Each is self-contained and each carries its own Take-Home.

## Running it

- Plan for 75 to 90 minutes. Every session has a timed plan with cuts already chosen so you are not deciding under pressure.
- The course is built to be run by an ordinary parishioner, not a theologian. Everything you need is on the page.
- Seven sessions is roughly a Lent, or September into late October.
- Session Six, on perseverance, is the one session in this book capable of frightening someone. Read its opening warning before you plan it.

## On sources

Citations in this guide are held to a deliberate standard. A quotation appears only where the wording and attribution are both secure. Where the theology genuinely belongs to a Father or a saint but the exact wording or locus cannot be vouched for, the box says summary and gives the work rather than inventing a chapter number. Where neither could be verified, the material was cut. Catechism references point to the paragraph that actually contains the claim.

Scripture is quoted from the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition.

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*The twelve Take-Home sheets are supplied as separate files so they can be printed and handed out on their own. They are deliberately not bound into this guide, since they are participant-facing and this guide is not.*

# Session One

## *The Hard Saying*

### Abide

*The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers, from John 6 itself, four things John actually records: the hearers state a literal objection out loud, our Lord does not correct them, he sharpens the language instead, and he lets disciples walk away rather than soften it. The group then draws the conclusion those four data point at, that he meant it as they heard it.

**Catholic Touchstone.** The Real Presence is not a Catholic reading imposed on John 6. It is the reading that best accounts for what John reports: a literal objection said aloud, no correction, harder language instead, and Christ letting the room empty rather than taking anything back.

Welcome to Book Two. Book One was about authority: where Scripture came from, what Tradition is, what the Church is, and who reads rightly. This book takes up what the Church actually holds, beginning where the New Testament itself records the first mass departure over a doctrine.

If your group has not done Book One, this session still works on its own. It will simply do more of its own lifting.

### What You Need to Know

John 6 is unusual in the Gospels because it records a doctrinal crisis in real time. Our Lord makes a claim, the hearers understand it in a particular way, they object, and he responds. What he does with that objection is the whole session.

Track the escalation. At verse 35 he says he is the bread of life, which could be read as metaphor by anyone. At verse 51 the language sharpens: the bread he will give is his flesh, for the life of the world. The hearers then dispute among themselves, asking how this man can give them his flesh to eat, which is a literal objection stated plainly. Verse 53 does not walk it back. It goes further: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. He then repeats the point four more times in five verses.

Be precise about who is who. The literal objection at verse 52 comes from the crowd; the ones who draw back at verse 66 are his own disciples, and John never tells us what was in their heads. Our case does not need him to. It rests on what he does record: the objection, the non-correction, the intensification, and the departure.

There is also a shift in vocabulary worth knowing, though you should handle it carefully. In the earlier part of the discourse the ordinary Greek verb for eating is used. Through verse 53 the discourse uses the ordinary Greek verb for eating. Beginning at verse 54 John introduces a different and more physical verb, one that carries the sense of chewing or gnawing, and he uses it at verses 54, 56, 57 and 58. Be precise here: verse 58 keeps both, the ordinary verb for the fathers who ate the manna and died, and the

more physical verb for the one who eats this bread and lives for ever. Some scholars regard the shift as significant intensification; others note that this verb is simply characteristic of John's style and caution against building too much on it. State it as evidence that points in our direction without claiming it settles the matter, because it does not.

### The reaction is the argument

At verse 60 many of his own disciples, not the hostile crowd, say this is a hard saying and ask who can listen to it. At verse 66 many of them draw back and no longer walk with him. This is the only place in the Gospels where a body of disciples abandons Jesus over a point of teaching rather than over the cross.

Now set that against how John normally handles misunderstanding. Nicodemus takes rebirth literally and is corrected. The woman at the well takes living water literally and is corrected. In this Gospel, when someone misreads a metaphor, our Lord explains. Here, watching people leave, he turns to the Twelve and asks whether they will go too. He does not call the others back. He does not say they had misunderstood him.

### Where the Church requires precision from us

Know exactly what is defined. The Church teaches that Christ is present in the Eucharist truly, really, and substantially, body and blood, soul and divinity, and uses the term transubstantiation to express the change. What is defined is the fact of the change and its completeness, not a particular philosophical machinery. The Eastern churches hold the same faith in the Real Presence without the Scholastic vocabulary, and their Eucharist is valid.

Second, do not treat your interlocutor as monolithic. Lutherans affirm a real presence, Anglicans vary widely, and the purely symbolic view is one position among several rather than the Protestant position. A Catholic who assumes the person across the table is a Zwinglian will often be arguing with someone who is not there.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Two patterns stand behind this chapter, and the crowd raises the first one themselves at verse 31.

*"He rained down upon them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance." Psalm 78:24-25*

The crowd asks for a sign and cites the manna. Our Lord takes the comparison and turns it: their fathers ate that bread and died, and he is offering bread that gives life. He is not denying the manna. He is claiming to be the reality it pointed at.

The second pattern is the Passover, and John flags it at verse 4 by noting the feast was at hand. In Exodus 12 the lamb is slain and its blood marks the doorposts, but the rite is not complete there. The lamb must also be eaten, that same night, roasted, by the household. A Passover in which the lamb is killed but not consumed is not a Passover. Hold that; it is where Session Two begins.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Ignatius of Antioch

*Letter to the Smyrnaeans, ch. 7*

Writing around the year 107, Ignatius describes certain people who stay away from the Eucharist because they do not confess that it is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, the flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father raised.

Note the date and note the shape of the sentence. Within roughly a decade of the death of the last apostle, a bishop can identify a group by their refusal to confess the Eucharist as flesh, which means the confession was the ordinary position he expected his readers to share.

*Famous and securely attested at the standard locus; substance given as summary.*

#### Voice of the Church

### St. Justin Martyr

*First Apology, ch. 66*

Explaining Christian worship to a pagan emperor around the year 155, Justin says that this food is not received as common bread and common drink, and that by the prayer of his word it is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.

The context is what makes it valuable. Justin is not preaching to insiders or scoring a point in an argument. He is describing, to an outsider, what Christians ordinarily do on Sunday.

*Famous and securely attested at the standard locus; substance given as summary.*

#### Voice of the Church

### St. Cyril of Jerusalem

*Mystagogical Catecheses, no. 4 (summary)*

Instructing the newly baptised in the fourth century, Cyril tells them not to judge the matter by taste, since what appears to be bread is not bread but the Body of Christ, and what appears to be wine is not wine but the Blood.

This is catechesis rather than controversy, which is the point. He is telling brand new Catholics what they have just received, in the plainest possible terms, as a matter of course.

*Summary of the catechesis; presented without a section number.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1373-1377 give the Real Presence, with 1374 stating that Christ is present truly, really, and substantially, body and blood, soul and divinity.
- CCC 1376 gives the term transubstantiation as the Council of Trent expressed it. Note the wording: it names the change, it does not impose a physics.
- CCC 1333-1336 treat the signs of bread and wine and refer directly to the crisis in John 6.
- CCC 1385 and 1415 on the disposition required to receive, which is where 1 Corinthians 11 lands pastorally.

## Thread Watch

Leader only. Do not read aloud.

- THREAD A, the Abiding Question. Book Two is built around one question: what does it take to stay? It is planted tonight in verses 66 to 69, where some leave and some remain, and it is not answered until Session Seven. Do not name it yet.
- THREAD B, the Sealed Guess. Take-Home 1 asks each participant to write what they would say if a friend asked whether they are saved, then seal it. They open at Session Five. Expect a wide spread of answers, and expect some discomfort; that is the point.
- THREAD C, Received and Delivered. The vocabulary of 1 Corinthians 11:23 recurs through the book. Everything in Book Two is something handed over rather than achieved.

## Session Goals

- 1. Every participant can trace the escalation in John 6 from verse 35 to verse 58.
- 2. Every participant can explain why the departure at verse 66 is evidence rather than an embarrassment.
- 3. The group discovers that John elsewhere corrects literal misunderstandings, and that here he records no correction.
- 4. Every participant can state what the Church defines, including that the definition does not impose a philosophy.
- 5. Nobody leaves assuming every Protestant holds a purely symbolic view, because many do not.

## Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win: 12 minutes.
- The John 6 walk-through, questions 3 through 5: 28 minutes. This is the session.
- The 1 Corinthians 11 discovery, question 6: 15 minutes.
- The steelman and question 7: 25 minutes.
- Send, Live It, closing prayer: 12 minutes.

**If you are running short:** cut the Dig Deeper on the Greek verb, which is the most technical and least necessary item on the page. Do not cut the steelman; John 6:63 is the objection your people will actually meet.

### THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

#### **"Jesus says the flesh is of no avail, two verses later."**

This is the main event and it is answered in the steelman. If it comes early, hold it and say so.

#### **"He also says he is the door and the vine. It is a metaphor."**

Concede completely and immediately; John is full of metaphor and the objection is reasonable.

Then draw the distinction from the reactions rather than from the images. Nobody has ever walked out over the door. Here the hearers state the literal reading aloud, he repeats it more forcefully, and disciples leave. That asymmetry is the evidence, not the vocabulary.

#### **"Drinking blood was forbidden to Jews, and Acts 15 keeps the prohibition."**

Take this seriously, because it is the strongest historical objection and a thoughtful person will press it.

The Levitical prohibition concerns the blood of slaughtered animals, in which the life of the creature was held to reside, and it is bound up with sacrificial practice. The Church has never taught that the Eucharist is the consumption of blood in that sense; the mode is sacramental, and what is received is the living and risen Christ, not a quantity of separated blood.

Say honestly that the Acts 15 decree does raise a real question about early Jewish-Christian practice, and that the answer above is the strongest form of the Catholic response rather than a knockdown. A flagged difficulty costs you nothing; a bluffed answer costs you the person.

#### **"Paul says do this in remembrance, and remembrance means a memorial."**

Agree that the word means memorial, and then ask what a biblical memorial is. In Exodus 12:14 Passover is a memorial, and no Jew celebrating it understood himself to be merely recollecting. The rite makes the participant a sharer in the event.

Then hand them 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 11:27-29 and let Paul do the rest.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you said a hard thing once and watched people leave rather than take it back. Give us the courage to stay when we do not understand, and the honesty to say when we do not. Open this chapter to us tonight. Amen.

### Win

1. Have you ever had someone tell you a truth that cost them your good opinion? What did that take?
2. What is the hardest thing the Church asks you to believe? You may pass.

### Build

**THE GROUND** The whole session lives in one chapter. Keep the Bibles open the entire time.

**Read aloud, in sections: John 6:30-35, then 6:47-52, then 6:53-59, then 6:60-69.**

3. Trace the language across those four sections. Does it get softer or harder?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Harder, steadily. At verse 35 he is the bread of life, which anyone could hear as image. At verse 51 the bread is his flesh, given for the life of the world. At verse 53 he adds drinking his blood and makes it a condition of having life. Then he says it again four more times.

Have someone read verse 52 aloud twice. The hearers object at the literal level, out loud, in the text: how can this man give us his flesh to eat? Whatever they understood, John records it, and John records no correction.

4. Compare this with John 3 and John 4. What does Jesus normally do when someone takes him too literally?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He corrects them. Nicodemus imagines re-entering the womb and is told about being born of water and the Spirit. The Samaritan woman asks for water so she will not have to come back to the well, and is redirected.

The pattern is consistent and it is what makes John 6 stand out. Here the misunderstanding, if it were one, is stated plainly and answered by intensification.

5. Read verses 66 and 67 again. What happens, and what does Jesus not do?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Many of his disciples, not the hostile crowd, draw back and stop walking with him. He does not call after them, does not explain that they have taken him too literally, and does not soften the saying. He turns to the Twelve and asks whether they will also go.

This is the load-bearing observation of the session. A teacher who has been misunderstood clarifies. A

teacher who has been understood, and rejected, lets people go.

Do not skip Peter's answer at verse 68. He does not say he understands. He says there is nowhere else to go. That is the honest posture this whole book is asking for.

**Live discovery.** Give the group 1 Corinthians 11:27-30 with one question: what exactly is Paul saying a person can be guilty of, and what are the consequences he reports?

## 6. What did you find?

### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Not guilty of disrespecting a symbol, and not guilty of a failure of sentiment. Paul then says that because of this some are weak and ill, and some have died.

Ask the obvious question and let it sit: can a person be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord by mishandling bread that is only a reminder?

Add 1 Corinthians 10:16 if there is time: the cup we bless is a participation in the blood of Christ, and the bread a participation in his body.

### DIG DEEPER: The verb that changes

Beginning at verse 54, John starts using a more physical word for eating alongside the ordinary one, a word carrying the sense of chewing or gnawing, at verses 54, 56, 57 and 58. Verse 58 sets the two side by side: the ordinary word for the fathers who ate and died, and the vivid one for the one who eats this bread and lives for ever.

Some scholars read the shift as deliberate intensification at exactly the moment the crowd objects. Others note that this verb is characteristic of John generally and warn against over-reading it. Present it as supporting evidence, not as proof.

## The Steelman

**THE DEPTH** Read in full. This is the objection your people will actually meet, and it is a good one.

### The strongest form of the objection.

Keep reading. Three verses after the passage you are quoting, our Lord says plainly that it is the spirit that gives life and the flesh is of no avail, and that the words he has spoken are spirit and life. He tells you himself how to take the discourse, and he tells you in the same breath as the disciples' complaint. The interpretation is not being imposed from outside; it is supplied inside the chapter.

And consider what the literal reading requires. Jesus is standing in front of them, whole and unbroken. Whatever he is offering, he is not offering the arm they can see. In the same Gospel he is the door, the vine, the light, the way, and the good shepherd, and nobody looks for hinges.

Worse, biblical Hebrew uses eating a person's flesh as a figure for savaging him; see Psalm 27:2 and Micah 3:3. And drinking blood at all was forbidden to Israel, a prohibition the apostles themselves reaffirmed at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. A literal command would have required the first Jewish Christians to break a law they had just voted to keep.

## 7. Start with verse 63. Whose flesh is he talking about?

### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He says the flesh, not my flesh. That distinction is doing everything. Twelve verses earlier he said his flesh is given for the life of the world, so a reading that has him now declare his own flesh useless makes him contradict himself inside one paragraph.

In John, flesh in this sense ordinarily means human nature acting on its own power. John 3:6 sets flesh against Spirit; John 8:15 has judging according to the flesh; John 1:13 has birth not of the will of the flesh. Verse 63 says that natural human capacity cannot receive this, and that the Spirit is what makes it life-giving. That is not a retraction. It is an instruction on how the gift works, and it fits exactly what the Church teaches about grace and the sacraments. Be precise about what carries what weight: the Church has defined the Real Presence, not the exegesis of this one verse. So offer this as the strongest reading of John's own usage of the word, not as a defined interpretation, and say so if you are pressed.

On the metaphors: concede them fully. But no one ever left over the door. Here the hearers name the literal sense out loud, he repeats it more forcefully, and disciples walk. Reactions are the evidence.

On the Hebrew idiom: be exact, then let it cut the other way. The flesh-eating figure is real and well attested, as at Psalm 27:2 and Micah 3:3, where to eat a man's flesh is to savage him. The paired image of drinking a person's blood is much less established as a fixed idiom, so do not claim more than you can show. But so far as the figure applies at all, it hurts the symbolic reading rather than helping it: if eating flesh and drinking blood is a figure for assault, the metaphorical reading has our Lord say that unless you savage him you have no life in you, which is nonsense.

On Acts 15: give the real answer and flag its limits. The prohibition concerns the blood of slain animals as the seat of creaturely life, and the Church has never held that the Eucharist is consumption of blood in that sense. Then say plainly that the historical question about early Jewish-Christian practice is a fair one, and that we are giving the strongest available answer rather than closing the file. Your credibility over six more weeks is worth more than winning this exchange.

## Send

8. Peter says there is nowhere else to go. Have you ever stayed somewhere for that reason?

9. What would change about your Sunday if you took verse 55 at face value?

## Live It This Week

- Read John 6 in one sitting, the whole chapter, without stopping to look anything up.
- Go to Mass once during the week if you can, and watch the elevation without doing anything else.
- Find out when your parish has adoration.
- Pick one person you will pray for by name for the whole of this study. Start tonight.

## Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you gave us yourself and let people leave rather than give us less. Thank you for staying available to us in something so ordinary that we can miss it. Make us the ones who stay. Amen.

## Memory Verse

“For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.” **John 6:55**

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Psalm 78:24-25, the bread of the angels
- Exodus 16, the manna
- Exodus 12:1-14, the lamb slain and eaten (planted for Session Two)
- John 6:4, the Passover was at hand
- John 6:30-35, 47-52, 53-59, 60-69, the discourse (core text, memory verse at v. 55)
- John 3:1-8 and 4:7-15, misunderstandings that are corrected
- John 6:63, the flesh is of no avail (steelman)
- John 1:13, 3:6, 8:15, flesh as natural capacity
- 1 Corinthians 11:23-30, guilty of the body and blood (live discovery)
- 1 Corinthians 10:16, a participation in the blood of Christ
- Acts 15:29, the decree on blood (steelman)

**Catechism:** CCC 1333-1336, 1373-1377, 1385, 1415.

**Patristic:** St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Smyrnaeans ch. 7. St. Justin Martyr, First Apology ch. 66. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catecheses no. 4.

# Session Two

## *The Sacrifice*

### **Abide**

*The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers that a Passover was not finished at the killing of the lamb but at the eating of it, and that this is why the Church has an altar as well as a pulpit.

**Catholic Touchstone.** Calvary happened once, it cannot be repeated, and the Church teaches exactly that. The Mass does not add a sacrifice. It makes the one sacrifice present.

Last week ended with the Passover flagged and left. Tonight it opens. This is the session where a Catholic most often gets accused of insulting the cross, so the leader's task is to state the Church's actual teaching so clearly that the accusation has nowhere to land.

### What You Need to Know

In Exodus 12 the lamb is chosen, kept, and killed, and its blood is put on the doorposts. If the rite ended there, the argument would end there too. It does not. The same chapter commands that the lamb be roasted and eaten that night, by the household, entirely, with nothing left until morning. An Israelite who killed a lamb, marked his door, and then declined to eat had not kept the Passover.

St. John builds his Passion narrative on this. He notes that it was the day of Preparation of the Passover, about the sixth hour, when Pilate hands Jesus over. He records that the soldiers did not break his legs, and says explicitly that this happened so the Scripture would be fulfilled that not a bone of him shall be broken, which is the rule for the Passover lamb in Exodus 12:46. St. Paul says it flatly: Christ our paschal lamb has been sacrificed.

So if Christ is the lamb, and the lamb must be eaten, the question is not whether Christians eat but how.

### **What the Church actually teaches, stated precisely**

CCC 1367 is the paragraph to have open, and it is worth reading aloud twice. The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice. The victim is the same and the offering is made through the ministry of priests by the same one who then offered himself on the cross; only the manner of offering differs. The Mass is not another sacrifice, not a repetition, and not a re-crucifixion. Any Catholic who says otherwise is misstating the faith, and you should correct that in your own group before an outsider does it for you.

The word the Church uses is memorial, in the biblical sense rather than the modern one. In Exodus 12:14 the Passover is called a memorial, and no Jew keeping it understood himself to be merely recollecting. The rite made the participant a sharer in the event. That is the category the Mass belongs to.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

“They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it.” **Exodus 12:8**

And the promise that the sacrifice would one day be offered everywhere rather than in one temple:

“For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering.” **Malachi 1:11**

Malachi speaks of a pure offering made among the nations, in every place, at a time when Israel’s sacrifice was confined to one temple in one city. The earliest Christian writers outside the New Testament read that verse as fulfilled in the Eucharist, which tells you how they understood what they were doing on Sunday.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### The Didache

*ch. 14 (summary)*

This very early Christian manual instructs believers to gather on the Lord’s day, break bread, and give thanks, having first confessed their sins so that their sacrifice may be pure, and it applies the words of Malachi about a pure offering among the nations directly to what they are doing.

Note that this is a practical handbook rather than a theological argument. The sacrificial vocabulary is assumed, not defended.

*Summary of the chapter; the Malachi application is securely present in the text.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Cyprian of Carthage

*Letter 63 (summary)*

Writing about the proper celebration of the Eucharist, Cyprian argues that the priest acts in the place of Christ and offers what Christ offered, so that the sacrifice the Church offers is a true and full one.

His concern in the letter is practical to the point of being fussy, which is what makes it useful evidence: he is regulating something whose sacrificial character he takes as settled.

*Summary of the letter; no section number printed.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Augustine

*City of God, Book X (summary)*

Augustine argues that the whole redeemed community is itself the sacrifice offered to God, and that this is what the Church celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, where she learns that in what she offers, she herself is offered.

This is the deep answer to the charge that the Mass is something done to Christ again. What is being offered is the one offering of Christ, and ourselves inside it.

*Summary of his argument in Book X; no chapter number printed.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1362-1367 on the Eucharist as memorial and sacrifice, with 1367 as the decisive paragraph: one single sacrifice, the same victim, only the manner of offering differing.

- CCC 1330 gives the names of the sacrament, including Holy Sacrifice.
- CCC 1366 quotes Trent on the Mass making present the sacrifice of the cross and applying its fruits.
- CCC 1371 on the offering for the dead, which is where Module Three later picks up.

## Thread Watch

Leader only.

- THREAD A, the Abiding Question. Tonight it deepens quietly: the lamb had to be eaten, which means staying in the covenant was never only a matter of assent. Do not name it.
- THREAD B, the Sealed Guess. Envelopes stay sealed. Three sessions to go.
- THREAD C, Received and Delivered. Point at 1 Corinthians 11:23 again if it comes up naturally; Paul introduces the institution with the vocabulary of handing on.

## Session Goals

- 1. Every participant can explain why the Passover was not complete at the killing.
- 2. Every participant can state, in one sentence, that the Mass does not repeat Calvary.
- 3. The group discovers John's deliberate paschal framing of the crucifixion.
- 4. Every participant can define memorial in the biblical sense.
- 5. Nobody leaves able to be accused fairly of thinking the cross was insufficient.

## Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win: 10 minutes.
- The Exodus 12 discovery, questions 3 and 4: 25 minutes.
- John's paschal framing, question 5: 15 minutes.
- The steelman and question 6: 28 minutes. Protect this.
- Send, Live It, closing prayer: 12 minutes.

**If you are running short:** cut the Malachi material and the Dig Deeper. Never cut the steelman; Hebrews is the objection your people will meet.

### THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

#### "Hebrews says once for all. The Mass is a re-crucifixion."

This is the main event and the steelman handles it. If it arrives early, agree loudly with the once for all and say you are coming back to it.

#### "Jesus said it is finished."

Agree without qualification. The work of redemption is finished and the Church teaches that.

Then ask what happens next in the same Gospel. He rises, he breathes on the apostles, he sends them. Finished does not mean nothing follows; it means nothing needs to be added.

#### "You have no priesthood, so you have no sacrifice."

Hebrews 13:10 says we have an altar, and 1 Corinthians 10:18-21 sets the Christian table against pagan altars using explicitly sacrificial categories.

Do not try to build the full case for the ministerial priesthood tonight; it belongs with Module Five on

confession and with Book One's Session Four. Give the two verses and move on.

**"Malachi is about prayer, not about the Mass."**

Concede that the verse does not name the Eucharist and that a prayer reading is possible.

Then note that the earliest Christians who cite it apply it to what they do on the Lord's day, and that they were closer to the question than we are. This is evidence, not proof, and saying so protects you.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the Lamb, and you gave yourself once and completely. Teach us tonight what it means that you also told us to take and eat. Amen.

### Win

1. What is a meal your family repeats every year? What would be missing if you only talked about it?
2. Has anyone ever suggested to you that the Mass insults the cross? What did you say?

### Build

**Live discovery.** Give the group Exodus 12:1-14 and one instruction: list everything the household is commanded to do with the lamb, in order. Ten minutes.

3. What is on your list, and where does the rite end?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Choose it, keep it, kill it, put the blood on the doorposts, roast it, eat it that night with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, eat it in haste, leave nothing until morning.

The rite does not end at the blood. Ask directly: could an Israelite have marked the door and skipped dinner? The text does not permit it.

4. Read Exodus 12:14. What word does God use for this, and what does it mean here?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

A memorial, a feast to be kept forever. And in Israel's practice that never meant recollection at a distance. The one keeping the feast reckons himself among those brought out.

This is the single most useful definition in the session. When Catholics call the Mass a memorial, this is the sense meant.

5. Now read John 19:14, 31-36. What is John doing with his timing and his details?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He puts the sentencing on the day of Preparation of the Passover, and he records that the soldiers broke the legs of the others but not of Jesus, and says this fulfilled the Scripture that not a bone shall be broken, which is the Passover rule in Exodus 12:46.

John is telling you what he thinks is happening. The lamb is being slain.

Then hand them 1 Corinthians 5:7 and let Paul say it in a single line.

#### DIG DEEPER: The offering among the nations

Malachi 1:11 promises a pure offering made in every place among the nations, written when Israel's sacrifice was confined to one temple.

The earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament apply that verse to the Sunday assembly. Evidence of how they understood themselves, not a proof text.

## The Steelman

**THE DEPTH** Read in full. Do not soften the once for all; it is the strongest thing in the objection and it is true.

### The strongest form of the objection.

Hebrews will not stop saying it. He entered once for all into the Holy Place. He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the conclusion the author draws himself: where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

The contrast the whole letter is built on is between priests who stand daily offering repeatedly, which can never take away sins, and one priest who sat down. A church that has priests standing at altars every morning has reconstructed exactly the thing Hebrews says was superseded.

And from the cross he said it was finished. Not begun, not made available for periodic reapplication. Finished.

## 6. How much of that does a Catholic agree with? And what does the Church actually claim?

### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

A Catholic agrees with all of it, and should say so before anything else. The sacrifice is one, unrepeatable, and completely sufficient. Nothing is added to it and nothing needs to be.

Read CCC 1367 aloud. One single sacrifice, the same victim, the same one offering through the ministry of priests, only the manner of offering differing. If the Church taught that the Mass was a second sacrifice, Hebrews would refute her. She teaches the opposite.

Then the positive case, from the same letter and its neighbours. Hebrews 7:25 says he always lives to make intercession, present tense and continuous. Revelation 5:6 shows a Lamb standing in heaven, alive and yet appearing as one who has been slain. John does not call the wounds permanent; what he shows is the sacrifice still visible before the throne rather than left behind in the past. The one finished offering is not in the past tense in heaven; it is eternally before the Father. The Mass does not repeat it and does not reach back for it. It joins us to it.

On it is finished: agree entirely, and then ask what the objection would prove. If finished meant nothing may follow, then preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper in any form are all equally superfluous. Everyone believes something continues; the question is what.

End with the paschal point rather than the argument. The lamb was slain once. It was still eaten.

## Send

7. Does it change anything to think of Mass as being joined to one event rather than repeating it?
8. What is one thing you could do to arrive at Mass differently this week?

## Live It This Week

- Read Exodus 12 and John 19 back to back in one sitting.

- At Mass, listen for the words that name it as an offering. They are there every time.
- Learn CCC 1367 well enough to say the substance of it in your own words.
- Keep praying for your person by name.

### **Closing Prayer**

Lamb of God, you were slain once and you live for ever. Thank you for not leaving us to remember you from a distance. Draw us into what you have already done. Amen.

### **Memory Verse**

| *“For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed.”* **1 Corinthians 5:7**

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Exodus 12:1-14, the lamb slain and eaten (live discovery)
- Exodus 12:14, memorial
- Exodus 12:46, not a bone broken
- John 19:14, 31-36, the paschal framing of the crucifixion
- 1 Corinthians 5:7, Christ our paschal lamb (memory verse)
- Malachi 1:11, a pure offering among the nations
- Hebrews 9:24-28, 10:11-18, once for all (steelman)
- Hebrews 7:25, he always lives to make intercession
- Revelation 5:6, a Lamb standing as though slain
- Hebrews 13:10, we have an altar
- 1 Corinthians 10:18-21, partners in the altar

**Catechism:** CCC 1330, 1362-1367, 1371.

**Patristic:** Didache ch. 14. St. Cyprian, Letter 63. St. Augustine, City of God Book X.

# Session Three

## *Grace and the Covenant Family*

### **Abide**

*The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers that family language is one of the New Testament's pervasive and indispensable registers for salvation, and that it is not decoration on a legal transaction but the thing itself.

**Catholic Touchstone.** God does not merely acquit us. He adopts us. Everything in the next three sessions depends on whether that adoption is a legal fiction or a real change, and Scripture says it is real.

This is the framework session. Do not let it feel like a detour before the real argument about justification. It is the reason the argument comes out where it does.

### What You Need to Know

Ask a room of Christians how a person is saved and you will get courtroom vocabulary: guilt, verdict, acquittal, a debt paid. All of that is genuinely in Scripture and none of it should be surrendered. But it is not the only register, and it is not the controlling one. Again and again the New Testament reaches for a household.

God sends his Son so that we might receive adoption as sons, and because we are sons he sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying Abba (Galatians 4:4-7). Those led by the Spirit are sons, and if children then heirs, fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:14-17). To all who received him he gave power to become children of God, born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh but of God (John 1:12-13). See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and then St. John adds three words that decide this whole book: and so we are (1 John 3:1).

That last phrase is the hinge. St. John is not content to say we are treated as children or reckoned as children. He says we are called children, and then insists on the reality.

### Why the register matters

If salvation is essentially a verdict, then what happens inside a person afterward is a consequence of salvation but not part of it, and the whole Catholic apparatus of sacraments, growth, and cooperation looks like an intrusion. If salvation is essentially adoption into a family, then transformation is not an add-on; it is what being adopted means. A child who is legally adopted but never brought into the house has not received much.

Both pictures are scriptural and Catholics should hold both. The Church teaches that justification is not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man (CCC 1989). Not instead of. Also.

## Honest ground on the ecumenical question

In 1999 the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification stating a shared understanding of justification by grace through faith, and declaring that the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to the teaching presented in that document. Represent it accurately in both directions. It is a real convergence and dismissing it is dishonest. It also did not resolve every difference, and treating it as though the argument is over is equally dishonest. Say both.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The covenant formula recurs across the whole Bible in a family of closely related wordings, and in every one of them it is kinship language rather than contract language.

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.” **Genesis 17:7**

It returns at Exodus 6:7, Jeremiah 31:33, and Ezekiel 36:28, and it lands at Revelation 21:3. Israel is called God’s firstborn son at Exodus 4:22, and the Davidic king is promised a father in 2 Samuel 7:14. A contract binds parties who remain separate. A covenant of this kind makes kin.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Athanasius

*On the Incarnation, ch. 54 (summary)*

Athanasius states the exchange at the heart of the Incarnation: the Word became man so that we might be made god, that is, so that we might share by grace in what belongs to him by nature.

Handle the famous formulation carefully. The Church does not teach that we become God in essence. She teaches that we are made partakers of the divine nature, which is 2 Peter 1:4, and the Fathers use deliberately strong language for it.

*Summary of the formula at On the Incarnation, ch. 54; the wording here is a paraphrase and not a quotation, and adoptive sonship is the Church’s way of unpacking what the strong language means.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Augustine

*Letter 194, to Sixtus (summary)*

Augustine teaches, in substance, that when God rewards our merits he is crowning his own gifts, because whatever good we do is itself the effect of grace working in us.

This one sentence heads off half the arguments in Sessions Four and Five. Catholics do not hold that we contribute something independent of grace. We hold that grace produces something real in us that God then honours.

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Leo the Great

*On the dignity of the Christian, quoted at CCC 1691 (summary)*

Leo urges Christians to recognise their dignity, since having been made sharers in the divine nature they should not return by base conduct to their former condition.

The pastoral shape is worth noticing. His argument for holiness is not fear of losing a verdict but

consistency with an identity already given.

*Summary of Leo's Christmas sermon on Christian dignity; the same passage is quoted in CCC 1691. Sermon number withheld because editions number the Nativity sermons differently.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1996-2005 on grace: the free and undeserved help God gives, and sanctifying grace as a habitual gift that perfects the soul.
- CCC 1989 states that justification is not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.
- CCC 1265-1266 on what baptism confers, including sanctifying grace and the theological virtues.
- CCC 460 on partaking in the divine nature, quoting 2 Peter 1:4 and the Fathers.

## Thread Watch

Leader only.

- THREAD A, the Abiding Question. Tonight supplies the reason abiding is possible at all: a real relationship has been created. Do not name it.
- THREAD B, the Sealed Guess. Two sessions to go. Some participants will feel tonight that they answered badly. Say nothing.
- THREAD C, Received and Delivered. Sonship is received. Point at it wherever it surfaces.

## Session Goals

- 1. Every participant can name four family words the New Testament uses for salvation.
- 2. Every participant can explain why 1 John 3:1 resists a purely legal reading.
- 3. The group discovers the covenant formula recurring from Genesis to Revelation.
- 4. Every participant can state that Catholics affirm both the legal and the familial registers.
- 5. Nobody leaves thinking Catholics believe we contribute something independent of grace.

## Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win: 12 minutes.
- The Galatians and Romans work, questions 3 and 4: 22 minutes.
- The covenant formula discovery, question 5: 20 minutes.
- The steelman and question 6: 22 minutes.
- Send, Live It, closing prayer: 12 minutes.

**If you are running short:** cut the Joint Declaration material, which is leader background. Do not cut the covenant discovery; Session Four depends on it.

### THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

**"This is sentimental. Paul's language is legal."**

Handled in the steelman. Concede the forensic vocabulary immediately when it arrives.

**"If we are already sons, why do anything?"**

Because that is what being a son is. Ask the room whether a child stops acting like a member of the family once adopted. The obligation flows from the identity rather than earning it.

Romans 8:17 supplies the sober version: fellow heirs, provided we suffer with him. Paul puts the condition in the same sentence as the inheritance.

**"Partakers of the divine nature sounds like the Mormons."**

A fair worry and worth answering carefully. The Church does not teach that we become gods by nature or that God was once as we are.

The phrase is 2 Peter 1:4 and the tradition means participation in God's life by grace, not identity of essence. The distinction is between sharing in a fire's heat and being the fire.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Father, you did not settle for pardoning us. You made us yours. Give us tonight some sense of what that actually means, and keep us from being small about it. Amen.

### Win

1. What is the difference between being forgiven by someone and being taken back in?
2. When you were praying this week, what did you call God?

### Build

**Read aloud: Galatians 4:4-7, then Romans 8:14-17.**

3. List every family word in those two passages.

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Son, born of woman, adoption, sons, Spirit of his Son, Abba Father, no longer a slave but a son, heir, children, fellow heirs.

Ask what is conspicuously absent: there is no courtroom in either passage. The verdict language is elsewhere in Romans and it is real, but it is not what Paul reaches for here.

4. Read 1 John 3:1-2. What does John add after saying we should be called children of God?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

And so we are. Three words, and they are the reason this session exists.

John could have stopped at the title. He refuses to let it be only a title. Whatever else is true, the sonship is not a courtesy.

**Live discovery.** Give five people one verse each and have them read in order: Genesis 17:7, Exodus 6:7, Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:28, Revelation 21:3. Ask the room what they are hearing.

5. What is the pattern, and what kind of relationship is it describing?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The same covenant promise, in wordings that vary but keep one shape, from Abraham to the last page of the Bible: I will be your God and you shall be my people. Genesis 17:7 gives the first half of it, Exodus, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel give both halves, and Revelation 21:3 announces the fulfilment as God dwelling with his people.

It is kinship, not commerce. A contract leaves the parties who they were. This makes a household.

If the group is quick, add Exodus 4:22, where Israel is called God's firstborn son, and 2 Samuel 7:14, where the king is promised a father.

#### DIG DEEPER: The word Abba

Paul keeps the Aramaic word in Greek letters twice, in Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:15, which is unusual

enough to be deliberate.

Whatever precise register it carries, it is a word from inside the household rather than from the court, and Paul thought it was worth preserving untranslated.

## The Steelman

**THE DEPTH** Read in full.

### The strongest form of the objection.

The family language is real and beautiful and it is not the mechanism. When Paul explains how a sinner comes to stand before God, in Romans 3 and 4, he does not use a household. He uses a court. He speaks of being justified, a verdict word. He speaks of righteousness reckoned or credited, an accounting word. He quotes David on the man to whom the Lord does not reckon sin.

And the claim is not that nothing real happens inside a Christian. Regeneration, adoption, and sanctification are real gifts, and every serious Protestant confession says so. The claim is narrower and harder to answer: justification itself is a definitive verdict, received by faith, complete the moment it is spoken, and the renewal that comes with it is a distinct gift rather than a part of the verdict. Making the family language primary quietly relocates salvation from something declared about us to something happening inside us, and once it is inside us it can be measured, doubted, and lost. Which is exactly the anxiety Catholicism produces and the Gospel was meant to end.

## 6. What is right about that, and does Paul actually separate the two?

### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Right, and concede it plainly: the vocabulary of Romans 3 and 4 is genuinely forensic, and any Catholic who tries to talk that away is mishandling Paul. We are not trading the courtroom for the household.

But look at what Paul does next. Romans 8 opens with the verdict, no condemnation, and then moves within a few verses to the Spirit, sonship, Abba, and inheritance, as one continuous argument. He does not treat them as two departments. The verdict opens the door of the house and the Spirit brings you in. A careful Protestant will answer that these are distinct gifts given at the same moment rather than one gift, and that reply is fair. So the real question is not whether they arrive together but what justification itself is, and that is where CCC 1989 and Session Four take the argument.

And 1 John 3:1 will not let the sonship be a title only. And so we are. That phrase does not by itself settle how justification works, since a declaration can confer a real status; what it settles is that the filial status is real and not a courtesy. The Catholic claim that justification includes interior renewal rests on the wider scriptural case and is stated outright in the Catechism.

The Catholic position is not that transformation replaces the verdict but that justification includes both. CCC 1989 says it directly: not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.

Take the last part of the objection seriously rather than brushing it aside. Anxiety is a real pastoral danger and some Catholics do live in it, sometimes from thin catechesis, sometimes from temperament, scrupulosity, or wounds that have nothing to do with doctrine. What the Church actually teaches is hope: confidence in God's mercy and in the grace of final perseverance, and a filial fear that dreads grieving a Father rather than a servile fear that dreads a sentence. Corrosive anxiety is not that teaching, and despair, which the Church does name as a sin against hope, is a different thing from

anxiety and should never be laid on a frightened person as an accusation. Session Seven takes this up properly.

## Send

7. Do you relate to God more as a judge or as a father? Answer honestly.
8. If you took the word heir seriously this week, what would change?

## Live It This Week

- Pray the Our Father slowly once a day, stopping after the first two words.
- Read Romans 8 in one sitting and mark every family word.
- Do one thing this week that a member of the household would do and a defendant would not.
- Keep praying for your person by name.

## Closing Prayer

Father, you could have pardoned us and left it there. You did not. Thank you for the Spirit who teaches us to call you what you are. Make us at home in your house. Amen.

## Memory Verse

*"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."*

**1 John 3:1**

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Genesis 17:7; Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:28; Revelation 21:3, the covenant formula (live discovery)
- Exodus 4:22, Israel my firstborn son
- 2 Samuel 7:14, I will be his father
- Galatians 4:4-7, adoption and Abba (core text)
- Romans 8:14-17, sons, heirs, fellow heirs
- John 1:12-13, power to become children of God
- 1 John 3:1-2, and so we are (memory verse)
- 2 Peter 1:4, partakers of the divine nature
- Titus 3:5-7, the washing of regeneration
- Romans 3:20-28 and 4:1-8, the forensic vocabulary (steelman)

**Catechism:** CCC 460, 1265-1266, 1989, 1996-2005.

**Patristic:** St. Athanasius, On the Incarnation. St. Augustine, Letter 194, to Sixtus. St. Leo the Great, on Christian dignity, quoted at CCC 1691.

# Session Four

## *Justification*

### **Abide**

*The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group hears Romans 3 and 4 at full strength, discovers Romans 2 sitting directly in front of it, and learns to state the Catholic position in a way that concedes everything Scripture actually says about grace.

**Catholic Touchstone.** Catholics believe in salvation by grace alone. Nothing we do before grace earns anything, nothing we do apart from grace merits anything, and the Church condemned the contrary view at a council in 529, a thousand years before anyone nailed anything to a door.

This is the hardest session in either book, and the temptation is to rush past the objection to the answer. Do the opposite. If your group does not feel the force of Romans 3 tonight, they will be defenceless the first time someone reads it to them with conviction.

### What You Need to Know

#### **Start by conceding, because the concessions are enormous**

A Catholic can say all of the following without qualification, and should say them first. We are justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. No one is justified by works of the law. By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not because of works, lest any man should boast. If it is by grace it is no longer on the basis of works.

Every one of those is Scripture and every one is Catholic teaching. If your people cannot say them warmly and without hedging, they have not understood their own faith, and they will sound evasive in every conversation they have.

The Second Council of Orange in 529 condemned the view that anyone can take the first step toward God by natural powers, and taught that even the beginning of faith is the work of grace. The Church settled this question against works-righteousness long before the Reformation raised it.

#### **What is actually in dispute**

Not grace against works. The real question is narrower and more interesting: when God justifies a sinner, does anything happen inside him, and does that inward reality count for anything afterward. The Catholic answer is yes to both, and the reason is Session Three. Adoption is real, so what grace produces in the adopted is real.

#### **Two exegetical notes to hold carefully**

First, the phrase works of the law. In the immediate argument of Romans 3, Paul moves from no one being justified by works of the law directly to asking whether God is the God of Jews only, and answering

that he is God of Gentiles also. Many scholars, Catholic and Protestant, have argued from this that the phrase concerns the Mosaic law and especially its boundary markers rather than good deeds in general. Others contest that reading vigorously. Present it as a serious line of interpretation, not as settled, and do not build the session on it.

Second, and much safer: read Ephesians 2:10. The famous not because of works in verse 9 is followed immediately by the statement that we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. The passage that excludes works as a cause names them as the purpose in the very next breath.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

“And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.” **Genesis 15:6**

This is the verse Paul builds Romans 4 on, and it is the right verse to build on. Abraham has done nothing to earn the promise. He believes, and it is reckoned. Hold this carefully tonight; Session Five returns to Abraham and finds that the story of that reckoning does not end in Genesis 15.

Note also Ezekiel 36:26-27, where God promises a new heart and a new spirit, and says he will cause his people to walk in his statutes. The promise is not only pardon but an interior change that produces obedience. That is the Old Testament shape of what the Church calls justification.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Clement of Rome

*Letter to the Corinthians, chs. 32-33 (summary)*

Writing around the year 96, Clement says that we are not justified through ourselves, nor through our own wisdom or piety or works, but through faith, by which God has justified all men from the beginning.

And then, without pausing, he asks whether we should therefore abandon good works, and answers emphatically that we must not, urging his readers to be eager for every good work. One writer, one paragraph, both halves held together. He evidently did not experience them as a contradiction.

*Summary of his argument across those chapters; presented without a verse-level locus.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Augustine

*On Grace and Free Will (summary)*

Augustine teaches that grace precedes every good movement of the will, that God works in us both to will and to do, and that our freedom is not destroyed by grace but healed and enabled by it.

He is the reason the Church has never been able to be Pelagian. Any Catholic accused of works-righteousness should be able to name him within ten seconds.

*Summary of the argument of that work; no chapter number printed.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. John Chrysostom

*Homilies on Romans (summary)*

Preaching through Romans, Chrysostom insists that the sinner is justified by faith apart from anything he brought, and that this is precisely why the justified must now live differently, since so great a gift

makes indifference monstrous.

His rhetorical move is worth stealing. He does not use grace to lower the stakes of the moral life; he uses it to raise them.

*Summary of the homily series; no homily number printed.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1987-1995 on justification, with 1989 stating that it is not only remission of sins but sanctification and renewal of the interior man.
- CCC 1996 and 2001: grace is the free and undeserved help of God, and the initiative belongs to God always.
- CCC 2007-2011 on merit. CCC 2007: with regard to God there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man, because between God and us there is an immeasurable inequality and we have received everything from him. Read 2008 aloud: our merit before God arises from the fact that God has freely chosen to associate us with the work of his grace.
- CCC 2010 states that no one can merit the initial grace of conversion. Nobody.

## Thread Watch

Leader only.

- THREAD A, the Abiding Question. Tonight it comes near the surface but must not break it. What does it take to stay is the wrong question if nothing real has been given. Session Three established that something real was given; tonight establishes that receiving it was pure gift.
- THREAD B, the Sealed Guess. One session to go. Some participants will realise tonight that they wrote something they now dislike. Do not let anyone open an envelope early.
- THREAD C, Received and Delivered. Everything tonight is received. Say the word when it fits.

## Session Goals

1. Every participant can state the Catholic affirmation of salvation by grace warmly and without hedging.
2. Every participant can name the Second Council of Orange and say what it condemned.
3. The group discovers Romans 2:6-13 and Ephesians 2:10, both of which sit beside the famous verses and are rarely read with them.
4. Every participant can state what is actually in dispute, in one sentence, without caricature.
5. Nobody leaves able to be accused fairly of believing we earn heaven.

## Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win: 10 minutes.
- The concessions, question 3: 15 minutes. Do not shorten this.
- The steelman and question 4: 30 minutes.
- The Romans 2 and Ephesians 2:10 discoveries, questions 5 and 6: 22 minutes.
- Send, Live It, closing prayer: 12 minutes.

**If you are running short:** cut the works of the law material entirely; it is contested and the session is stronger without it. Never cut the concessions.

## THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a*

*shorter version in the participant's own words.*

**"Catholics teach you earn your way to heaven."**

Deny it flatly and then quote your own side. CCC 2010 says no one can merit the initial grace of conversion. CCC 2007 says that with regard to God there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man, and CCC 2008 says that whatever merit we have arises from God's free choice to associate us with the work of his grace.

Then hand them the Council of Orange. The Church condemned the position they are attributing to her in 529.

**"Then why do Catholics talk about merit at all?"**

Because Scripture does. Our Lord promises reward repeatedly and Paul speaks of a crown. The Church's account of merit is an attempt to hold that language without making God a debtor.

Use St. Augustine's formulation from Session Three: when God crowns our merits he crowns his own gifts.

**"Romans 4 says Abraham was justified apart from works. Full stop."**

Agree with the verse. Then say that Session Five takes up what James does with the same Abraham, and that you would rather do it properly next week than badly now.

Resisting the urge to answer immediately is itself a teaching moment for the room.

**"Trent anathematised justification by faith."**

Be precise or do not engage. Trent condemned specific formulations, in context, and its canons are aimed at positions as the council understood them.

The honest and useful fact is that in 1999 the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation jointly declared a shared understanding of justification by grace through faith, and stated that the sixteenth-century condemnations do not apply to the teaching set out in that document. Note also, in the same breath, that the declaration did not resolve every difference. Both halves.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Father, everything we have is a gift, including the desire to be here. Keep us from defending ourselves tonight when we should be thanking you. Amen.

### Win

1. Have you ever been given something so large that you felt uncomfortable? What did you want to do about it?
2. Have you ever been accused of believing something you do not believe?

### Build

**THE FLOOR** If a participant remembers one thing tonight, it is this: we are saved by grace, as a gift, and no Catholic should ever hedge that sentence.

**Read aloud: Romans 3:21-28, then Ephesians 2:8-9.**

3. How much of that can a Catholic say without qualification?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

All of it. Justified by his grace as a gift. Not by works of the law. By grace you have been saved through faith, not your own doing, the gift of God, not because of works, lest any man should boast.

Have someone say those sentences out loud as their own. Some people in the room will find that surprisingly difficult, and noticing that is part of the session.

Then give them the Council of Orange, 529: the Church condemned the idea that a person can make the first move toward God under his own power, and taught that even the beginning of faith is grace.

### The Steelman

**THE DEPTH** Read in full, slowly, and do not rush to the next question. Let there be silence afterward.

#### The strongest form of the objection.

Paul builds the argument with enormous care and then closes every door. All have sinned. No human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law. They are justified by his grace as a gift. And then he asks the question himself: what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? Not on the principle of works, but on the principle of faith.

Then he goes to Abraham, and picks the moment before the covenant of circumcision and before the sacrifice of Isaac, a moment when Abraham had nothing whatever to present as a claim on the promise. Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. And Paul draws out the accounting: to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due, while to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.

Note who is justified in that sentence. The ungodly. Not the improved, not the cooperating, not the sacramentally maintained. And note what happens if anything of ours is added: if it is by grace it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace. The moment you make

room for our contribution, however small and however carefully described, you have made the gift into a wage and Paul has already told you what that costs.

#### 4. What in that must a Catholic simply grant? And where exactly is the disagreement?

##### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Grant all of it. Every sentence in that steelman is either Scripture or a fair restatement of Scripture, and there is no Catholic answer that begins by softening it. Say so plainly to the room before you go further.

The disagreement is not about whether grace is unearned. It is about what grace does in the act of justifying. Both sides agree God gives freely, and both sides agree God really changes the people he saves. The classic Protestant account holds that the righteousness by which we are justified is Christ's own, credited to us, with genuine and necessary renewal following as its fruit. The Catholic account holds that what God gives actually makes the person a son, so that the righteousness is truly his by gift and the renewal belongs to the justifying act itself rather than only to its aftermath.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 is the Old Testament shape of the Catholic answer: a new heart, a new spirit, and God causing his people to walk in his statutes. The change is God's work and it is a real change.

And notice what the objection's own logic requires. If any real inward transformation turns grace into wages, then sanctification itself becomes a threat to the gospel, which nobody believes. Everyone holds that God changes people. The dispute is about whether that change is part of justification or only its consequence.

Land honestly: this is a genuine disagreement, it is old, and serious Christians hold both. We are not going to dissolve it tonight, and a Catholic who claims it dissolves easily is not paying attention.

**Live discovery.** Most of the room has read Romans 3 many times. Ask them to turn back one page and read Romans 2:6-13 aloud, which almost nobody reads alongside it.

#### 5. What does Paul say there, and how do you hold it together with chapter 3?

##### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

That God will render to every man according to his works, eternal life to those who by patience in well-doing seek glory and honour, and that it is not the hearers of the law but the doers of the law who will be justified.

Do not resolve this too quickly and do not let anyone explain it away. The same author, twenty verses apart, says both things. Any reading that has to silence one of them is doing something wrong.

The Catholic reading holds them by saying that the works in chapter 2 are the fruit of grace already given, not a way of earning it. Whether that satisfies is exactly what the two traditions dispute.

#### 6. Now read Ephesians 2:10, the verse immediately after the one everyone quotes.

##### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

The passage that excludes works as a cause names them as the purpose one sentence later, and even the works are prepared by God. That is the Catholic position on grace and works in a single verse, and it belongs to everyone. It does not by itself settle tonight's narrower question about what justification does inside a person; the wider scriptural and doctrinal case carries that.

### **DIG DEEPER: What the Joint Declaration did and did not do**

In 1999 the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed a common statement on justification, affirming a shared understanding that we are justified by grace through faith in Christ, and declaring that the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to the teaching presented there.

It did not resolve every difference and it did not end the conversation. Represent it in both directions or do not raise it at all.

## **Send**

7. Is there any part of you that wants to have contributed something? Be honest.
8. What would change this week if you took Ephesians 2:8 completely at face value?

## **Live It This Week**

- Read Romans 2, 3, and 4 in one sitting, in order, without commentary.
- Say Ephesians 2:8-9 out loud once a day as a statement about yourself.
- Learn what the Second Council of Orange condemned.
- Keep praying for your person by name.

## **Closing Prayer**

Father, we did not start this and we cannot finish it. Thank you for a gift we could not have earned and would not have thought to ask for. Keep us from ever taking credit. Amen.

## **Memory Verse**

*"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God."* **Ephesians 2:8**

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Genesis 15:6, Abraham believed and it was reckoned
- Ezekiel 36:26-27, a new heart and a new spirit
- Romans 3:21-28, justified by grace as a gift (core text and steelman)
- Romans 4:1-8, to one who does not work but trusts
- Romans 2:6-13, the doers of the law will be justified (live discovery)
- Ephesians 2:8-9, memory verse at v. 8
- Ephesians 2:10, created for good works
- Romans 11:6, if by grace, no longer on the basis of works
- Galatians 2:16, not justified by works of the law
- Titus 3:5, not because of deeds done in righteousness

**Catechism:** CCC 1987-1995, 1996, 2001, 2007-2011.

**Patristic and conciliar:** St. Clement of Rome, Letter to the Corinthians chs. 32-33. St. Augustine, On Grace and Free Will. St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans. Second Council of Orange, 529.

# Session Five

*Faith Working Through Love*

## Abide

*The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers that the one place the phrase faith alone appears in Scripture, it is being denied, and that James makes the chronology of Abraham's life into his actual argument.

**Catholic Touchstone.** Faith is not one item on a list with love and works beside it. Faith that is alive works through love, and faith that does not is described by St. James in a single brutal word: dead.

The envelopes open tonight. Plan the order carefully; the reveal comes early and everything after it is shaped by what people wrote.

### What You Need to Know

James 2:24 is the only occurrence in the whole of Scripture of the words faith alone, and it appears in a sentence denying them: a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. That does not by itself settle the doctrine, since the two authors may use terms differently, and an honest leader says so. But it does put the burden of explanation on the person who wants to affirm the exact phrase Scripture negates.

The more interesting move is what James does with Abraham, because he chooses the same man Paul chose. He asks whether Abraham was not justified by works when he offered Isaac on the altar, and then says something easy to read past: the scripture was fulfilled which says Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

The scripture in question is Genesis 15:6. The offering of Isaac is Genesis 22. Genesis gives you part of the gap outright: Abram is eighty-six when Ishmael is born (Genesis 16:16) and a hundred when Isaac is born (Genesis 21:5), and the reckoning of Genesis 15 stands before both, so some fifteen years pass before Isaac exists at all. Genesis never states how old Isaac was at the offering, only that he was old enough to carry the wood and to ask his father a question, so the full interval is longer than fifteen years but the text does not measure it. Do not put a number on it in the room. A long stretch of one man's life is all the argument needs. James is not confused about the order. The gap is his argument. The reckoning of Genesis 15 comes to its completion in the obedience of Genesis 22, which means for James the faith that was reckoned and the obedience that followed are one thing extended in time.

### The three tenses, which the sealed question is designed to surface

Scripture speaks of salvation in three tenses and a Catholic should be able to use all three. By grace you have been saved, past, at Ephesians 2:8. To us who are being saved, present, at 1 Corinthians 1:18. We shall be saved by him from the wrath of God, future, at Romans 5:9, and he who endures to the end will be saved at Matthew 24:13.

So the honest Catholic answer to are you saved is: I have been saved, I am being saved, and I hope to be saved. That is not evasion and it is not doubt. It is three verses.

### Where the gap is narrower than the shouting suggests

Most thoughtful Protestants hold that genuine faith necessarily produces good works, and that a faith producing none was never real. Many Catholics, hearing faith alone, imagine a claim that conduct is irrelevant, which almost nobody actually teaches. Name this out loud tonight. A great deal of the heat in this argument comes from each side attacking a position the other does not hold, and your group should be able to spot that within thirty seconds of a conversation starting.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

“Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” **Genesis 22:12**

Now I know. The obedience does not create the faith; it discloses and completes it. Note also that Isaac carries the wood up the mountain while his father holds the fire and the knife, which the Fathers read as one of the clearest figures of the Passion in the Old Testament.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### The Second Council of Orange

529

This council condemned the view that anyone can make the first movement toward God by natural powers, and taught that even the desire to believe, the beginning of faith itself, is the effect of grace.

Keep this ready for any conversation in which Catholics are accused of works-righteousness. The Church ruled against that position roughly a thousand years before the question was raised again.

*Historical; the council and the substance of its canons are securely attested.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Augustine

*Given as a summary of his teaching; no locus printed*

Augustine teaches that what distinguishes living faith from the faith the demons have is love, and that the same grace which gives faith gives the love by which it works.

This is the exact register of Galatians 5:6, and it is worth noticing that Augustine, the great doctor of grace, is also the one who will not let faith be defined without love.

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Gregory the Great

*Given as a summary of his teaching; no locus printed*

Gregory teaches, in substance, that the proof of love is shown in deeds, and that faith which never issues in action has not been demonstrated to exist at all.

Pastorally this is where the Church has always landed: not that works purchase anything, but that a faith which changes nothing has given us no reason to think it is there.

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1814-1816 on faith: a living faith works through charity, and faith without hope and love does not fully unite the believer to Christ.
- CCC 1991 states that justification includes acceptance of God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ.
- CCC 162 warns that faith can be lost, and urges that it be nourished, which is the bridge into Session Six.
- CCC 2010 again, since someone will ask: no one merits the initial grace of conversion.

## Thread Watch

Leader only. Read this before the session; the order matters.

- THREAD B resolves first, early in the Build. Open envelopes before the Abraham discovery, because the discovery answers what the envelopes surface.
- THREAD A comes near the surface tonight but resolves in Session Seven. If someone names it, acknowledge it and say we will finish it in two weeks.
- Expect a wide spread in the envelopes, and expect at least one person to be embarrassed. Handle the reveal warmly and do not rank the answers.

## Session Goals

1. Every participant can answer the question are you saved using all three tenses.
2. Every participant can explain what James does with the gap between Genesis 15 and Genesis 22.
3. The group discovers that faith alone appears once in Scripture and is negated there.
4. Every participant can state the strongest Protestant reading of James fairly.
5. Nobody leaves thinking most Protestants believe conduct is irrelevant, because most do not.

## Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win: 10 minutes.
- The envelopes and the three tenses, questions 3 and 4: 22 minutes.
- The Abraham discovery, questions 5 and 6: 25 minutes.
- The steelman and question 7: 22 minutes.
- Send, Live It, closing prayer: 12 minutes.

**If you are running short:** compress the steelman to a reading and one response. Never cut the envelopes or the Abraham discovery.

### THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

#### **"James means justification before men, not before God."**

Handled in the steelman. It is the strongest reading and deserves the full treatment.

#### **"So Catholics think faith is not enough."**

Reframe rather than answer as posed. We do not think faith is too small a thing. We think the faith that justifies is living faith, faith formed by charity and given entirely by God's grace, and that this is the faith Scripture is actually talking about, because Galatians 5:6 says so. What we deny is that a dead faith, a faith that has lost charity, saves anybody.

The question assumes faith and charity are two interchangeable items on a list, so that adding one means

doubting the other. Catholics do distinguish them; faith is a real virtue and it can remain in a soul that has lost charity. That is exactly why St. James can call such a faith dead. What we deny is not the distinction. We deny that a faith stripped of charity is the living faith that saves.

**"You are just adding a requirement to the gospel."**

Point at who is doing the adding. Galatians 5:6 is Paul, not the Council of Trent, and 1 Corinthians 13:2 is Paul saying that all faith without love leaves him nothing.

If naming love as intrinsic to living faith is an addition, Paul made it.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Lord, you gave us faith and you gave us the love that makes it move. Do not let us divide what you joined. Open our envelopes and our hearts tonight. Amen.

### Win

1. Has anyone ever asked you whether you are saved? What happened in your chest when they did?
2. Bring out your envelope. What do you remember writing?

### Build

**Open the envelopes.** Have each person read aloud what they wrote. Do not comment on individual answers and do not rank them. Write the range on a board where everyone can see it.

3. Look at the range. What were we all trying to do?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Expect a spread: some flat yes, some hedged, some deflection, some who wrote that they did not know how to answer.

Name what the hedging was protecting rather than treating it as weakness. Most Catholics hesitate because they know something about perseverance and do not want to sound presumptuous. That instinct is sound; it just has no vocabulary yet.

4. Read these three and note the tense in each: Ephesians 2:8, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Matthew 24:13.

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

You have been saved, past. Us who are being saved, present. He who endures to the end will be saved, future.

So the answer is: I have been saved, I am being saved, and I hope to be saved. Have the room say it out loud together. That sentence is the practical payoff of the whole book.

Add that this is not a Catholic dodge invented to avoid the question. It is three verses, and any Christian who reads all three has to account for all three.

**Live discovery.** Give the group Genesis 15:6, then Genesis 22:1-18, then James 2:21-24, in that order and no other. Ask one question: what does James say was fulfilled, and when was it written?

5. What did you find?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

James says the scripture was fulfilled which says Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he says it was fulfilled when Abraham offered Isaac. But that scripture is Genesis 15:6, and the offering is Genesis 22, many years later.

James is not muddling the order. The gap is the point. For James, the faith reckoned in chapter 15 and

the obedience in chapter 22 are one thing stretched across a life.

Then have them read Genesis 22:12 again: now I know that you fear God. The obedience does not manufacture the faith. It discloses and completes it.

**6. Read James 2:24 aloud. What phrase appears there, and where else does it appear in Scripture?**

**ANSWER (share after the discussion)**

Justified by works and not by faith alone. That is the only occurrence of the phrase faith alone in Scripture, and it is being denied.

Be careful and fair here. This does not by itself settle the doctrine, because James and Paul may use justify in different senses, and you should say that before anyone says it to you. What it does do is place the burden on anyone who wants to affirm the exact phrase Scripture negates.

**DIG DEEPER: Galatians 5:6**

Paul writes that in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but faith working through love.

This is the Catholic position stated by the apostle the objection is usually built on. Faith is not one ingredient beside love; living faith is the kind that works through it.

## The Steelman

**THE DEPTH** Read in full.

**The strongest form of the objection.**

James and Paul are answering different questions and the words are doing different work. Paul asks how a guilty man gets right with God, and answers: by faith, apart from works. James asks how you can tell whether someone's claimed faith is real, and answers: look at his life. Justify in James means shown to be righteous, demonstrated, vindicated, which is a normal use of the word. James even sets it up that way, describing a man who says he has faith, and asking what good it is.

And notice that the faith James condemns is not what any Protestant means by faith. He says the demons believe, and shudder. That is bare intellectual assent to a proposition, and no serious Protestant has ever taught that assent saves. Luther himself, in his preface to the Epistle to the Romans, described faith as a living, busy, active thing; the wording here is a paraphrase of that preface rather than a quotation. So James is refuting a position nobody holds, and the Catholic use of him is aimed at an opponent who is not there.

**7. How much of that is right? And what does James still say that has to be answered?**

**ANSWER (share after the discussion)**

A great deal is right, and concede it early. James is plainly attacking dead assent, the demons' faith, and it is true that no serious Protestant defends that. It is also true that the two authors may use justify in different senses, and a Catholic who denies that possibility is overreaching.

What still stands is the Abraham argument, and it does not depend on the meaning of justify. James says the reckoning of Genesis 15 was fulfilled at Genesis 22. Whatever justify means, James has told us that the faith which was credited reached its completion in an act of obedience many years later, far down

the same life. That is a claim about the shape of saving faith over time, not about vocabulary.

And James chose his example deliberately. He goes to the same man and the same verse Paul uses. He is not writing past Paul; he is reading the same text and drawing out what happened next in the story.

Then close the distance honestly. If your interlocutor holds that genuine faith necessarily produces works, the two of you agree about far more than the argument suggests, and you should say so out loud. The remaining question is technical: whether that transformation belongs to justification itself or follows from it. That is worth discussing and it is not worth shouting about.

## Send

8. Say the three-tense answer out loud, in your own words. Does it feel true?
9. Where in your life is your faith currently working through love, and where has it stopped?

## Live It This Week

- Memorise the three-tense answer. Practise it until it is not a speech.
- Read James 2 in one sitting and notice how practical the whole chapter is.
- Do one concrete thing for one person, this week, that costs you something.
- Keep praying for your person by name.

## Closing Prayer

Lord, give us faith that moves. Keep us from arguing about love instead of practising it. Amen.

## Memory Verse

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love.” **Galatians 5:6**

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Genesis 15:6, reckoned as righteousness
- Genesis 22:1-18, the offering of Isaac (live discovery)
- James 2:14-26, with 2:21-24 central
- Galatians 5:6, faith working through love (memory verse)
- Ephesians 2:8, past tense
- 1 Corinthians 1:18, present tense
- Romans 5:9 and Matthew 24:13, future tense
- 1 Corinthians 13:2, all faith without love
- Matthew 25:31-46, the judgment of the nations

**Catechism:** CCC 162, 1814-1816, 1991, 2010.

**Patristic and conciliar:** Second Council of Orange, 529. St. Augustine, on faith working through love (summary; no locus printed). St. Gregory the Great, on proving faith by works (summary; no locus printed).

# Session Six

*Once Saved, Always Saved*

## Abide

*The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers that the New Testament holds two things at once: nothing outside us can separate us from Christ, and we are repeatedly warned not to fall away. Both sets of texts are read tonight, together.

**Catholic Touchstone.** The Church condemns despair and presumption in the same breath. A Catholic is not asked to live in fear. He is asked to live in hope, which is a different thing and a harder one to counterfeit.

**Read this before you plan the session.** This is the session most capable of wounding someone. If anyone in your group struggles with scrupulosity, anxiety, or a history of religious fear, tonight can do real damage, and the damage will not always be visible in the room. Lead with the security texts, mean them, and return to them at the end. Do not let the session close on the warnings. If someone seems shaken, do not press them in front of the group; follow up privately afterward and point them toward confession and, where it is warranted, a good confessor or spiritual director rather than more argument.

### What You Need to Know

Both sets of texts are real and a serious reader has to account for both, so present both.

The security texts. No one shall snatch them out of my hand, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand (John 10:28-29). Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39). He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6). Sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, the guarantee of our inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14). Catholics should quote these with delight. They are ours.

The warning texts. It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened and then commit apostasy (Hebrews 6:4-6). If we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 10:26-29). You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace (Galatians 5:4). I pommel my body... lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:27). Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Corinthians 10:12). And in John 15, the branch that does not abide is thrown away and burned.

The bridge text is Romans 11:20-22, where Paul tells Gentile believers to stand fast through faith, not to become proud but to fear, and adds the condition explicitly: provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off. Note that the branches he is warning are not hypothetical unbelievers. They are the ones standing.

## What the Church holds, stated exactly

Perseverance to the end is itself a gift of grace, not an achievement. The Church teaches that we can and should have a firm hope of salvation, and she also teaches, following the Council of Trent, that no one can know with the certainty of faith that he is among the elect apart from a special revelation. Do not soften that; it is a genuine difference from the Reformed position and pretending otherwise is dishonest.

And immediately alongside it: CCC 2091 and 2092 name both despair and presumption as sins against hope. A Catholic who lives in terror of damnation is not being more faithful than one who lives in confidence. He has fallen into the opposite error, and left alone that error pulls toward despair, which is a sin against hope. Say that as a warning about a direction, not as a verdict on a frightened person: scrupulosity is usually an affliction rather than a sin, and it calls for a steady confessor rather than a rebuke. Say that out loud tonight, more than once.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

“But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity... none of the righteous deeds which he has done shall be remembered.” **Ezekiel 18:24**

And the same chapter says the reverse with equal force at verse 21: when a wicked man turns away from all his sins, he shall surely live. Ezekiel 18 is the Old Testament’s sustained argument that the door swings both ways, and that God’s posture toward the returning is not reluctance but eagerness. Read verse 23 aloud tonight: God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Augustine

*On the Gift of Perseverance (summary)*

Augustine argues that perseverance to the end is not something the believer supplies but a gift God gives, and that this is precisely why it must be prayed for rather than presumed upon.

Note how this reframes the whole dispute. For Augustine, perseverance being a gift is not a reason for anxiety; it is a reason to ask.

*Summary of the work’s argument; no chapter number printed.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Cyprian of Carthage

*On the Lapsed (summary)*

Writing after a persecution in which many Christians had denied the faith to save their lives, Cyprian refuses two easy answers. He will not pretend nothing happened, and he will not say the lapsed are beyond return.

His pastoral judgment is the Church’s pattern: the fall was real, and the door is open. If your group has anyone who has been away and come back, this is the Voice to dwell on.

*Summary of the work’s pastoral argument; no section number printed.*

### Voice of the Church

#### The Council of Trent

*Session 6, 1547*

The council taught that the justified should have firm hope in God’s help, and also that no one can know with the certainty of faith, apart from special revelation, that he has obtained the grace of God or is

among the predestined.

Print this rather than paraphrase it away. It is a real difference from the Reformed doctrine of assurance, and stating it plainly is more persuasive than blurring it.

*Historical; the session and the substance of its teaching are securely attested.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1821 on hope: we hope for the glory of heaven, and hope is expressed and nourished in prayer.
- CCC 2091-2092 name despair and presumption as the two sins against hope. Read both paragraphs aloud.
- CCC 162 on persevering in faith, which must be nourished and can be lost.
- CCC 1861 on mortal sin, and note carefully that the Church entrusts judgment to God's mercy rather than declaring any individual damned.

## Thread Watch

Leader only.

- THREAD A, the Abiding Question. Tonight the group should feel the question sharply: what does it take to stay? Do not answer it. Session Seven answers it, and the answer is not effort of our own manufacture. Staying is receiving, and the receiving is real cooperation carried by grace: keeping his commandments is how John 15 says a branch abides, not a fee it pays to stay on the vine.
- Watch the room. If tonight produces fear rather than seriousness, you have run it wrong, and Session Seven will have repair work to do.

## Session Goals

1. Every participant can quote at least two security texts with warmth.
2. Every participant can name at least three warning texts addressed to believers.
3. The group discovers Romans 11:22 and its condition.
4. Every participant knows that despair and presumption are both sins against hope.
5. Nobody leaves afraid. If anyone does, follow up this week.

## Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win: 10 minutes.
- The security texts, question 3: 15 minutes. Begin here deliberately.
- The steelman and question 4: 25 minutes.
- The warning texts and Romans 11, questions 5 and 6: 25 minutes.
- Question 7 on hope, then Send and closing: 15 minutes. Do not cut question 7 under any circumstances.

### THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

#### "If you can lose it, it was never grace."

A gift can be genuinely given and genuinely refused afterward without becoming a wage. Marriage is freely given and can be abandoned; that does not make it earned.

Ask what the objection implies about the warnings. If falling away is impossible for the truly saved, then Hebrews is warning people who were never in danger, which is a strange thing for Scripture to spend two

chapters doing. Expect the reply that the warnings are the means God uses to keep the elect. Answer it from the second person and the tense: Paul tells standing believers in Romans 11:20-22 that they stand by faith now and will be cut off unless they continue, and Galatians 5:4 says you have fallen away from grace, which is hard to say of a man who never had it.

**"Those warning passages describe people who were never really saved."**

This is the serious version and it is answered in the steelman. Note in advance that Hebrews 6:4 describes them as having been enlightened, having tasted the heavenly gift, and having shared in the Holy Spirit.

**"So Catholics can never have any assurance."**

Wrong, and correct it warmly. The Church teaches firm hope, and names presumption and despair as the two errors. What she declines is the certainty of faith about one's own final perseverance.

Practically: a Catholic in a state of grace, going to confession, receiving the Eucharist, and trying to love God has every reason for confidence and no reason for terror.

**"My friend says she knows she is saved and she seems happier than most Catholics."**

Do not dismiss this. It is often true and it is worth being honest about, because badly catechised Catholics really do carry unnecessary fear.

The answer is not to make her doubt. It is to make sure our own people know that the Church forbids despair as firmly as she forbids presumption, and that confident hope is the commanded posture.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you hold us and you also call us. Give us tonight both your security and your seriousness, and keep fear out of this room. Amen.

### Win

1. Has anyone ever told you they know for certain they are going to heaven? How did that land?
2. When you think about your own death, what is the honest first feeling?

### Build

**THE FLOOR** Start here and end here: nothing outside you can take you from Christ. That is Scripture and it is Catholic teaching.

**Read aloud: John 10:27-30, then Romans 8:38-39.**

3. What do these promise, exactly? Say it in your own words.

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

That no one can snatch us from his hand, and that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Let the group enjoy this. Do not rush to qualify it. Catholics own these verses and many Catholics have never heard them preached as theirs.

One observation to hold for later, offered lightly rather than as a gotcha: Paul lists death, life, angels, principalities, powers, height, depth, and anything else in creation. Ask the group later what kind of thing is on the list.

### The Steelman

**THE DEPTH** Read in full.

#### The strongest form of the objection.

Christ says he gives them eternal life and they shall never perish. Never. If a person can receive eternal life and then lose it, the word eternal has been emptied, and the promise is worth nothing more than the recipient's stamina. Paul says he is sure that nothing can separate us. Paul says the Spirit is a seal and a guarantee. And he says the one who began the good work will finish it, which is a statement about God's reliability rather than ours.

The warning passages describe apostates who were never genuinely converted. St. John says as much: they went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us they would have continued with us. Falling away reveals what was always true rather than destroying something that was there.

And the warnings are not an embarrassment to this position; they are part of it. God keeps his people through means, and one of the ordained means is the warning itself, which is why a warning can be entirely serious and still never fail of its purpose in those who are truly his.

Hebrews 6 describes real covenant privilege: to be enlightened, to taste the heavenly gift, to share in the Holy Spirit is to stand inside the covenant community and to feel its powers, and Scripture itself speaks of those who believe for a while and in time of testing fall away. John 15 and Romans 11 are read the same way. A branch can be attached to the vine or grafted to the root, drawing on the visible life of the covenant people, without ever having been united to Christ by living faith. So the warnings do their work exactly where they are meant to, in the elect, who hear them, fear, and continue, while those who shrug them off show in the end what they always were.

And consider the fruit. Assurance produces gratitude, freedom, and obedience out of love. Uncertainty produces exactly what Catholic history is full of: scrupulosity, indulgence-hunting, and deathbed terror. A doctrine is known by what it grows.

#### 4. What must a Catholic grant? And what does the argument not account for?

##### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Grant the promises entirely; they are ours and we should say so first. Grant also that Catholic practice has sometimes produced fear, and that this is a real failure. Do not defend it.

What it does not account for: the warnings are addressed to believers, in the second person, by apostles who expected to be obeyed. Hebrews 6:4 describes people who were enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, and shared in the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:4 says you have fallen away from grace, which is difficult to say of someone who never had it. And Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:27 that he himself could be disqualified.

On 1 John 2:19: it is a real text and it plainly says what the objection says. But it describes a particular group of departed teachers, and it has to be held with Romans 11:22, where Paul warns standing believers that they will be cut off unless they continue. Both are Scripture.

Now return to Romans 8. Ask what kind of thing is on Paul's list. Death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, anything else in all creation. Every item named is a power outside us, and Paul's question in verse 35 is who shall separate us. Be honest about the limit of this: Paul closes with anything else in all creation, and we are creatures too, so this is not a proof that the self is exempt. The point is narrower and it holds. Paul is denying that any hostile power can tear us away from the love of God; he is not addressing what Romans 11:22 and Hebrews address, which is a believer who stops continuing in God's kindness. The weight of the Catholic case rests on those warning texts and on our real cooperation with grace, not on an argument from silence in Romans 8.

On the fruit argument, concede and correct. Scrupulosity is real and is a distortion. The Church names despair a sin against hope, which means the fearful Catholic is not being rigorous; he is in error, and needs a confessor rather than an argument.

**Live discovery.** Give the group Romans 11:17-22 and ask them to identify who is being warned and what the condition is.

#### 5. What did you find?

##### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Gentile believers, currently standing, are warned not to be proud but to fear, and told they stand fast only through faith. Then the condition: provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off.

The branches being warned are grafted in already. That is the whole force of it.

6. Read John 15:1-6. What happens to a branch in the vine that does not abide?

**ANSWER (share after the discussion)**

It is taken away, thrown out, withers, and is burned. And the branch in question is in the vine to begin with; that is what makes it a branch.

Hold this. It is the text Session Seven is built on, and next week it will read very differently.

7. Read CCC 2091 and 2092 aloud. What are the two sins against hope?

**ANSWER (share after the discussion)**

Despair and presumption. Both. The Church treats living in terror as an error, not as prudence.

Say plainly to the room: if tonight has made anyone afraid rather than serious, that is a misreading of the session and of the faith. A Catholic in a state of grace, confessing, receiving the Eucharist, and trying to love God has every reason for confidence.

End here. Do not let the session close on Hebrews 6.

## Send

8. Which do you personally drift toward, presumption or fear?

9. What is one thing that helps you stay, that you have been neglecting?

## Live It This Week

- Read Romans 8:31-39 out loud once a day, as a statement about yourself.
- Make an examination of conscience this week, and go to confession if you are aware of grave sin or if it has genuinely been a long time. This is where tonight lands in practice: not a way of managing worry, but the place where what we read about actually gets dealt with. If you are someone who tends toward scrupulosity, do not add a confession because of this session. Take it to one regular confessor and follow what he tells you.
- Read Ezekiel 18:21-23 and notice what God says he takes no pleasure in.
- Keep praying for your person by name.

## Closing Prayer

Father, you hold us more firmly than we hold you. Give us the gift of perseverance, since it is a gift, and keep us from both carelessness and fear. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Memory Verse

*"For I am sure that neither death, nor life... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* **Romans 8:38-39**

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Ezekiel 18:21-24, the door swings both ways
- John 10:27-30, no one shall snatch them
- Romans 8:31-39, nothing in all creation (memory verse at 38-39)
- Philippians 1:6 and Ephesians 1:13-14, the good work and the seal
- 1 John 2:19, they went out from us (steelman)
- Hebrews 6:4-6 and 10:26-29, the warnings
- Galatians 5:4, fallen away from grace
- 1 Corinthians 9:27 and 10:12, disqualified, and take heed lest he fall
- Romans 11:17-22, provided you continue (live discovery)
- John 15:1-6, the branch that does not abide

**Catechism:** CCC 162, 1821, 1861, 2091-2092.

**Patristic and conciliar:** St. Augustine, On the Gift of Perseverance. St. Cyprian, On the Lapsed. Council of Trent, Session 6, 1547.

# Session Seven

## *Abide*

### **Abide**

*The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers that the answer to the question running under the whole book, what does it take to stay, is not effort but reception, and that Christ says so in the same chapter where he warns about branches being burned.

**Catholic Touchstone.** Abiding is not gripping. It is remaining where you have been placed, and being fed there. That is why this book began with the Eucharist and ends here.

This is the capstone and it has repair work to do. Session Six was the heaviest session in either book, and some of your people are carrying more fear than they showed. Tonight is where that gets answered.

### What You Need to Know

John 15 is the only place in Scripture where the warning about being cut off and the promise of abiding sit inside a single image, spoken by our Lord, at the Last Supper, hours before the cross. Everything Book Two has argued is in this chapter.

Notice the grammar of the verbs. Abide in me, and I in you. The branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine. Apart from me you can do nothing. Every one of those puts the branch in a receiving posture. The branch does not clutch the vine; it is attached to the vine and it receives. And then the sentence that decides the tone of this whole session: you did not choose me, but I chose you.

Do not let receiving collapse into doing nothing. Verses 9 and 10 put obedience inside the abiding: keep my commandments and you abide in my love. Cooperation is real, but it is grace-carried cooperation, which is why the branch language works. Fruit is borne in the branch, not manufactured by it.

So the answer to the abiding question is not more effort. Abiding is remaining in a place you were put and continuing to receive what comes through the connection. The sacraments are precisely that: not achievements but the means by which Christ attaches us and feeds us. Baptism grafts us into him, the Eucharist nourishes the communion baptism began, and Penance restores it when grave sin has broken it. This is why John 6:56 uses the same verb. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.

### **Holding the warning without fear**

The same chapter says the branch that does not abide is thrown away and burned. Do not delete it and do not dwell on it. The honest reading is that the danger is real and the remedy is not vigilance but attachment. A branch does not stay on a vine by concentrating.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

“For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting.” **Isaiah 5:7**

Israel is the vineyard throughout the prophets. In Isaiah 5 it is a vineyard that has failed, and in Psalm 80 a vine that has been broken down and ravaged, with the psalmist pleading for restoration. When our Lord says I am the true vine, he is saying that what Israel was called to be, he is, and that we are in it by being in him. The vineyard that failed is not discarded. Its vocation is taken up and carried by a vine that cannot fail, and God’s call to Israel is not revoked (Romans 11:29).

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Augustine

*Confessions 1.1*

You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

The most famous sentence in Christian literature after Scripture, and it belongs at the end of this book. Augustine is not describing an achievement. He is describing a design, and the restlessness is evidence of it.

*Famous and securely attested at the standard locus.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Teresa of Ávila

*The bookmark found in her breviary*

Let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you; all things are passing, God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone suffices.

Found among her things after her death, in her own breviary, which is to say she was reminding herself. This is not advice from someone who found it easy.

*Securely associated with her and traditionally titled her bookmark; presented as such.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Thérèse of Lisieux

*Act of Oblation to Merciful Love, printed with Story of a Soul (summary)*

Thérèse teaches that she expects to appear before God with empty hands, since she has no works to offer that are not his gift, and that this is not a cause for fear but the ground of her confidence.

She is a Doctor of the Church, she died at twenty-four, and she is the clearest modern answer to anyone who thinks Catholic teaching produces anxiety. Her whole way is confidence. And her confidence is not passivity. The empty hands are offered so that she may be filled and spend herself in love; that is the whole point of the oblation.

*Summary, not a quotation; locus is the Act of Oblation to Merciful Love. Verify the page reference against the ICS Publications edition of Story of a Soul before print.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 787-789 on communion with Jesus and the Church as his body, which is what the vine image describes.
- CCC 1391-1392 on the Eucharist as what preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at baptism.

- CCC 1821 on hope, and 2091-2092 again if anyone is still carrying last week.
- CCC 260 on the Trinity making its dwelling in those who love God, which is the deepest sense of abiding.

## Thread Watch

Leader only. All threads close tonight.

- THREAD A resolves in question 5. The question under the whole book was what does it take to stay, and the answer is that staying is receiving. Let the group say it rather than announcing it.
- THREAD C, Received and Delivered, closes with the Eucharist named as the ordinary means of abiding.
- Check on anyone who seemed shaken by Session Six, privately, before or after.

## Session Goals

- 1. Every participant can explain what abiding is, and what it is not.
- 2. Every participant can connect John 15:4 to John 6:56.
- 3. The group discovers that the receiving posture runs through the whole chapter, including you did not choose me.
- 4. Every participant leaves with confidence rather than fear.
- 5. Nobody leaves this course thinking the Christian life is mainly a matter of trying harder.

## Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win: 12 minutes.
- John 15 walked slowly, questions 3 through 5: 30 minutes.
- The steelman and question 6: 22 minutes.
- Send, the closing practice, and the blessing: 25 minutes. The course ends here; protect it.

### THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

#### "This all sounds lovely, but Session Six frightened me."

Take it seriously and answer it in the room, since others will be feeling it silently. The warning in John 15 is real and so is the remedy, and the remedy is not vigilance.

Point at verse 16: you did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you. Notice both halves. The initiative was never ours, and neither is the grace that keeps us there; but he does appoint us to go and bear fruit, and later in the chapter he asks us to keep his commandments and abide in his love. The response is real. What it is not is the thing holding us on.

#### "If abiding is receiving, why go to confession or do anything?"

Because those are the receiving. A branch does not work its way onto the vine; it stays attached and takes what comes through. Baptism is the grafting; it is what put you in Christ. The Eucharist is what comes up through the graft and feeds you. Confession mends the branch when you have torn it. None of those is your effort meeting God halfway; each is his life reaching you.

#### "Protestants abide too. What is this actually settling?"

Nothing, and say so happily. Any Christian who takes John 15 seriously is doing something real, and this book has never claimed otherwise.

What Book Two has argued is what abiding concretely involves and what Christ gave us to do it with. That is a claim about means, not a claim about who is sincere.



## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, on the last night you spoke about a vine and asked us to stay. We have spent seven weeks on what you give us. Teach us tonight simply to remain. Amen.

### Win

1. What has stayed with you most from these seven weeks?
2. Is there something you have been holding onto by force lately? You may pass.

### Build

**Read aloud, slowly, the whole of John 15:1-17. Then read verses 4 and 5 again.**

3. What is a branch's job? List everything it does in this passage.

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

It abides. It bears fruit, which is something that happens in it rather than something it manufactures. It receives pruning, which is done to it.

Ask what is not on the list. Nothing about gripping, straining, or holding on. The branch does not attach itself.

4. Read verse 16. Who chose whom?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you.

This is the sentence that settles the tone of the whole course. If anyone is still carrying fear from last week, this is the verse to hand them.

5. **For seven weeks there has been a question underneath this book. What is it, and what is the answer?**

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The question is what does it take to stay. The group has met it in the Eucharist, in the sacrifice, in adoption, in justification, in living faith, and in the warnings about falling away.

The answer this chapter gives is that staying is not a kind of effort. It is remaining where you were put and continuing to receive what comes through the connection.

Let them say it. If they get most of the way, finish it with them rather than for them.

Then hand them John 6:56 and let them see the same verb. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. The book began with that verse without saying why.

#### DIG DEEPER: The vineyard that failed

Isaiah 5 and Psalm 80 both describe Israel as a vineyard God planted and tended, but they are not the same complaint. In Isaiah 5 the vineyard is indicted: it was given everything and it yielded wild grapes. In Psalm 80

the vine is not indicted but lamented: its wall is broken down, it is ravaged and burned, and the psalmist begs God to look down and restore it.

When Christ says I am the true vine, he is taking that history onto himself. We are in the vineyard by being in him, and this vine does not fail.

## The Steelman

**THE DEPTH** This one is aimed at the book itself. Read it in full and let it sit.

### The strongest form of the objection.

Look at what seven weeks have produced. You have learned that the bread must be eaten, that the sacrifice must be applied, that faith must work, that grace can be resisted, and that branches get burned. Whatever the closing session says about receiving, the cumulative effect of this course is a religion with conditions on every side, and a person who takes it seriously will spend the rest of his life auditing himself.

The Gospel was supposed to end that. Christ's work is finished, it is received by faith and not bought, and the obedience that follows is fruit rather than a fee. Do not mistake that for laxity. On this account a Christian still fights sin, still hears the warnings, still uses the means God gave, still expects holiness. The difference is that he is not renegotiating his acceptance every week. What you have built instead is a machine for producing careful people, and careful is not the same as holy.

## 6. Is that a fair description of what we have learned? What would you say to it?

### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Concede the danger without hesitation. It is entirely possible to take this material and turn it into self-auditing, and some Catholics have. The Church names that failure and calls it scrupulosity, and it is a distortion rather than a rigorous version of the faith.

Then answer from the chapter. If the objection were right about this book, John 15 would be a warning passage with a footnote about grace. It is the reverse. The image is horticultural: a branch stays attached and receives. What our Lord asks of it he spells out in verse 10, keeping his commandments and abiding in his love, and that obedience is fruit growing on a branch that is being fed, not a fee the branch pays to stay on. That is not an audit.

And point at what actually goes in the ledger. Every condition this book has described is a gift: the Eucharist, the sacrifice made present, adoption, grace, living faith, and perseverance itself. Nothing on the list is something we generate. A religion of conditions we must meet would be exhausting. A religion of gifts we must not refuse is a different thing.

Finally, say the honest pastoral sentence out loud. If seven weeks have made anyone more anxious rather than more grateful, the course has been misread, and the remedy is confession and the Eucharist rather than more study.

## Send

7. What is one point of attachment you will keep after this course ends?
8. What do you now believe that you did not believe seven weeks ago?

## The Closing Practice

Go around the room. Each person names the one person they have prayed for since Session One, and one thing they will do for that person in the next month that is not an argument. Then read John 15:16 aloud together, as a group, and end.

## Live It This Week

- Memorise John 15:5.
- Go to Mass this Sunday and receive knowing what Session One and Session Two said about it.
- Go to confession within two weeks.
- Keep praying for your person. You have done it for seven weeks. Do not stop now.

## Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the vine and we did not choose you. Thank you for seven weeks in your word and for everyone in this room. Keep us attached. Feed us. And when we drift, come and find us, as you always have. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Memory Verse

*"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." John 15:5*

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Isaiah 5:1-7 and Psalm 80:8-16, the vineyard that failed
- John 15:1-17, the true vine (core text, memory verse at v. 5)
- John 15:9-10, abide in my love, keep my commandments
- John 15:16, you did not choose me
- John 6:56, he who eats my flesh abides in me
- Romans 8:38-39, carried from Session Six
- 1 John 4:16, God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God

**Catechism:** CCC 260, 787-789, 1391-1392, 1821, 2091-2092.

**Patristic and later:** St. Augustine, Confessions I.1. St. Teresa of Ávila, the bookmark. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Act of Oblation to Merciful Love.

# Module One

*Mary*

**Abide**

*A standalone session. Run it any time.*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers, by laying two passages side by side, that St. Luke shapes the Visitation so that it reads as an Ark narrative, and learns what each Marian dogma actually claims and on what basis.

**Catholic Touchstone.** Everything the Church says about Mary is said because of what it means about her Son. Theotokos was defined to protect Christology, not to elevate a woman.

This is the module Catholics most often run badly, in both directions: either apologising for the doctrines or asserting them with proof texts that will not bear the weight. Do neither. Give the strongest evidence, say plainly where the evidence is typological rather than direct, and let the honesty carry it.

### What You Need to Know

#### The four dogmas, and what each actually claims

- Mother of God, defined at the Council of Ephesus in 431. The claim is about Christ: the one she bore is a single divine person, so the mother of that person is the mother of God. In that era refusing the title was judged incompatible with confessing that the one born of Mary is the one divine Son made flesh. This dogma is Christological in its origin and purpose.
- Perpetual virginity. Held from antiquity and affirmed by figures who later became Reformers, including Luther and Calvin, which is worth knowing since it is often assumed to be a Catholic peculiarity.
- Immaculate Conception, defined in 1854. The claim is that Mary was preserved from original sin from the first moment of her conception, by the merits of Christ applied in advance. Note that this makes her the first and greatest beneficiary of the redemption, not an exception to it.
- Assumption, defined in 1950. The claim is that at the end of her earthly life she was taken body and soul into heavenly glory. Note carefully what is left undefined: the definition speaks of her having completed the course of her earthly life and does not settle whether she died first. Catholics may hold either view.

#### What rests on what

Be honest about the evidence and your group will trust you. The Immaculate Conception and the Assumption do not have direct proof texts, and pretending otherwise will get your people humiliated. They rest on the Church's judgment about what is contained in the deposit of faith, supported by typology, by the ancient liturgical tradition, and, in the case of the Assumption, by the striking absence of any claim to her bodily relics in a world that prized relics enormously and argued over them.

What does have strong textual support is the Ark typology, and that is where the session spends its time, because anyone can check it.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The Ark of the Covenant carried the word of God in stone, the manna, and the rod of the priest. The correspondences are close enough, and ordered enough, that the natural conclusion is that Luke wrote his Visitation account with 2 Samuel 6 in view. Say it that way. This is an interpretive judgment about the text, held by many Catholic and other readers, not a defined teaching, and a scholar may resist it.

“And David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, ‘How can the ark of the Lord come to me?’” **2 Samuel 6:9**

“And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” **Luke 1:43**

That is one of five parallels the group will find for themselves. Do not give them the list.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### The Council of Ephesus

431

The council affirmed the title Theotokos, God-bearer, against those who wished to call Mary only the mother of the man Jesus.

The point at issue was not Mary’s status but the unity of Christ. The council’s judgment was that the title safeguards the confession that the one born of Mary is the one divine Son made flesh: if the one she bore is a single divine person, the title follows. Give it as the council’s judgment rather than as a reading of anyone’s mind. Nestorius did not say that Christ is two persons and rejected the charge, and the vocabulary of person and nature was still being settled on both sides. What the council held is that his way of speaking could not be squared with the one incarnate Son, and that refusing the title puts the unity of Christ at risk.

*Historical; the council and the substance of its definition are securely attested.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Irenaeus of Lyons

*Against Heresies, Book III (summary)*

Irenaeus develops the parallel between Eve and Mary: what the virgin Eve bound by unbelief, the virgin Mary loosed by faith and obedience.

The value here is the date. This is second-century material, which means the pattern of reading Mary as the new Eve is very early rather than a medieval accretion.

*Summary of his argument in Book III; no chapter number printed.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. John Damascene

*On the Dormition (summary)*

Preaching in the eighth century, he sets out the tradition that Mary was taken up, and appeals to what the Church had long held and celebrated rather than to a text.

Represent him as what he is: an early and important witness to a tradition, not a proof. Saying that plainly is stronger than pretending he settles the question.

*Summary of the homilies; no section number printed.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 484-507 on the Marian doctrines in their Christological setting, with 495 on Theotokos.
- CCC 490-493 on the Immaculate Conception, including that she was redeemed from the moment of her conception in view of the merits of Christ.
- CCC 499-501 on perpetual virginity, and CCC 500 addressing the brethren of the Lord directly.
- CCC 966 on the Assumption, and CCC 971 stating that devotion to Mary is essentially different from the adoration given to God.

## Session Goals

- 1. Every participant can find at least four Ark parallels in Luke 1 without help.
- 2. Every participant can state each of the four dogmas accurately.
- 3. Every participant can say honestly which doctrines have direct scriptural support and which rest on typology and Tradition.
- 4. Nobody leaves thinking Catholics worship Mary or believe she is a source of grace independent of her Son.

### THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

#### **"Jesus rebukes her. Who is my mother? And blessed rather are those who hear the word of God."**

Read Luke 11:27-28 in full and notice the word rather. A woman blesses the womb that bore him; he redirects to the deeper ground of blessedness, hearing the word of God and keeping it.

Then ask who in Luke's Gospel is the model of exactly that. Luke 1:38, let it be to me according to your word. Luke 2:19 and 2:51, she kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. Luke is not diminishing her; he is telling you why she is blessed.

#### **"The Bible names his brothers."**

The word covers a wider range of kinship in Semitic usage, and the New Testament was written by people thinking in those categories.

Then the textual point, which is stronger than the linguistic one: Mark 6:3 names James and Joses among the brothers, and Mark 15:40 lists among the women at the cross Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses. Mark does not tell us she is a different Mary; the inference is that an evangelist who has just called Jesus the son of Mary would not then identify his mother only as the mother of James and Joses. Compare Matthew 27:56, and John 19:25, which places Mary the wife of Clopas at the cross alongside the mother of Jesus. Present this as a strong inference that the objection has to answer, not as a proof. And in John 19:26-27 Jesus entrusts his mother to a disciple, which is difficult to explain if she had other sons standing by.

On Matthew 1:25 and the word until, note 2 Samuel 6:23, where Michal had no child to the day of her death. The Greek behind Matthew, *heos hou*, and the corresponding expression at 2 Samuel 6:23 mark a terminus without asserting anything about what came after it; nobody reads 2 Samuel 6:23 as implying Michal bore children once she was dead. Until in Scripture does not carry the change of state that an English reader hears in it. Note also that the verse itself reads to the day of her death, not until, so quote it as it stands.

#### **"The Immaculate Conception was invented in 1854."**

Distinguish definition from invention, and use an example they accept: the canon of Scripture was not dogmatically defined until 1546 and nobody thinks it was invented then.

Be honest that the doctrine was genuinely debated in the Middle Ages, including by St. Thomas Aquinas, and that the debate turned on how to affirm it without exempting her from needing redemption. The eventual

answer, preservative redemption applied in advance, resolved that. Telling the story with the debate in it is more persuasive than pretending there was none.

**"Mary distracts from Christ."**

Concede that devotional excess is real and that some popular piety has been unbalanced. The Church herself says so and Vatican II warned against it.

Then note the structure: every dogma is Christological in origin. Theotokos protects the unity of Christ's person, the Immaculate Conception makes her the first fruit of his redemption, and the Assumption shows what he does for those who are his.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you gave us your mother from the cross. Teach us to honour her the way you did, and never to let her stand between us and you. Amen.

### Win

1. What did you learn about Mary growing up, and where did it come from?
2. Has anyone ever accused you of worshipping her? What did you say?

### Build

**Live discovery.** Split the room. Give one half 2 Samuel 6:1-16 and the other half Luke 1:39-56, and tell neither what the other has. Ask each group to list what happens, in order, in plain language. Fifteen minutes. Then read the two lists aloud, side by side.

3. What do you notice?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Expect them to find most of these: David arises and goes to the hill country of Judah, and so does Mary. David asks how the ark of the Lord can come to him, and Elizabeth asks why the mother of her Lord should come to her. David leaps and dances before the ark, and the child leaps in Elizabeth's womb. There is a great shout, and Elizabeth exclaims with a loud cry. The ark remains three months in the house of Obed-edom, and Mary remains about three months.

Let them assemble it. Nobody has to take anyone's word for this; it is two passages and a list.

Then ask what the Ark contained: the tablets of the word, the manna, and the rod of the priest. And what Mary carried: the Word made flesh, the bread of life, the great high priest.

4. What does that establish, and what does it not?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

It establishes a pattern of correspondence strong enough that the best explanation is that Luke is presenting Mary in Ark terms, which is a strong claim about how the New Testament itself regards her.

It does not by itself establish the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption, and you should say so before anyone asks. Typology sets a trajectory; it does not define a dogma. Being clear about that is what makes the rest of your case credible.

5. Read Luke 1:28. What does the angel call her?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The greeting uses a perfect passive participle, *kecharitomene*, meaning one who has been graced or favoured, and it functions almost as a name in place of hers. The perfect points to a completed action with an abiding result, which is why the tradition has found it suggestive. The familiar full of grace comes through the Latin *gratia plena* and is a theological rendering rather than the bare sense of the Greek form, so do not argue as though the grammar alone delivers it.

Handle this carefully. The grammar is suggestive, and it is not a proof. Some translations render it favoured one, and a fair-minded interlocutor can hold that reading. The Catholic case for the Immaculate Conception does not rest on this verse alone and you should not claim it does.

#### **DIG DEEPER: The woman and the serpent**

Genesis 3:15 sets enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between his seed and hers. Revelation 12 shows a woman clothed with the sun, a male child who will rule the nations, and a dragon.

The Church reads these together. Note honestly that Revelation 12 has been read of Mary, of Israel, and of the Church, and that these readings are not exclusive.

## **The Steelman**

**THE DEPTH** Read in full.

### **The strongest form of the objection.**

Count the verses. Outside the infancy narratives, Mary is barely present in the New Testament. She is not mentioned in Romans, or Galatians, or Hebrews, or in any letter where the apostles set out what Christians must believe. Paul refers to her once, without naming her, as a woman.

Meanwhile two of the four things Catholics are required to believe about her were defined in the last two hundred years, from no scriptural text, on the authority of the Church alone. And the devotion that has grown up around her would be unrecognisable to the apostles: titles, apparitions, consecrations, and a level of attention the New Testament simply does not give her.

If this were essential, the apostles would have taught it. Their silence is the evidence.

## **6. What is fair in that? And what does it assume?**

### **ANSWER (share after the discussion)**

Fair, and concede it: she is not a subject of apostolic argument in the letters, and two dogmas were defined recently and do not rest on proof texts. Anyone who denies either fact is not arguing honestly.

What it assumes is that anything not argued in the epistles cannot be part of the deposit. Test that assumption on something else. The canon of Scripture is not listed in Scripture and was not defined until 1546. The doctrine of the Trinity in its settled vocabulary is fourth-century. Development is how doctrine works, and the objection would remove more than Mary.

On the silence: the Gospels are not silent. Luke gives her the longest speech by any woman in the New Testament, writes her Visitation as an Ark narrative, and twice notes that she kept and pondered these things. John places her at the first sign and at the cross, and records Christ giving her to a disciple as mother. That is not incidental placement.

On devotional excess, concede fully. The Church has warned against exaggeration herself. But a distortion of a practice is not an argument against the practice, and the fix is proportion rather than abolition.

## Send

7. Which of the four dogmas do you find hardest? Say why, without defending it.
8. What would it look like to honour her the way Luke does?

## Live It This Week

- Read Luke 1 and 2 in one sitting, watching for how Luke frames her.
- Read 2 Samuel 6 and Luke 1:39-56 back to back once more.
- Pray one decade of the rosary slowly, thinking about the mystery rather than counting.

## Closing Prayer

Father, you asked a young woman for her consent and she gave it. Give us her willingness. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Memory Verse

“And Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.’”

**Luke 1:38**

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- 2 Samuel 6:1-16, the Ark comes to David (live discovery)
- Luke 1:39-56, the Visitation (live discovery, memory verse at v. 38)
- Luke 1:28, the greeting
- Luke 2:19 and 2:51, she kept these things
- Luke 11:27-28, blessed rather
- Mark 6:3 and Mark 15:40, the brothers and the other Mary
- Matthew 1:25 and 2 Samuel 6:23, the word until
- John 2:1-11 and 19:25-27, Cana and the cross
- Genesis 3:15 and Revelation 12, the woman and the serpent

**Catechism:** CCC 484-507, 490-493, 495, 499-501, 966, 971.

**Patristic and conciliar:** Council of Ephesus, 431. St. Irenaeus, Against Heresies Book III. St. John Damascene, On the Dormition.

# Module Two

## *Saints, Statues, and the Charge of Idolatry*

### **Abide**

*A standalone session. Run it any time.*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers that Scripture shows the prayers of God's people being held and presented in heaven, and that the commandment against images sits in a Bible where God commands images.

**Catholic Touchstone.** These are two objections wearing one hat: that Catholics give to creatures what belongs to God. The answer to both is the same distinction, and it is a distinction Scripture itself makes.

### What You Need to Know

#### Asking the saints

Start where every Christian already agrees. Asking another Christian to pray for you is not a rival to Christ's mediation; if it were, no prayer meeting could be held. St. Paul asks for prayer constantly. The only question is whether death ends the relationship.

Scripture says it does not. Our Lord says God is not God of the dead but of the living. Hebrews describes a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. And Revelation twice shows the prayers of the saints being presented in heaven: the elders hold golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints, and later an angel offers much incense with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar.

One honest limit. The Church does not define the mechanism by which the saints know our prayers, and Catholics should not claim they are omniscient. What the Church does hold is that they are alive in God, that they love us, and that they intercede for us. That they know what we ask because God makes it known to them is the ordinary way the tradition has accounted for it, and it is a reasonable trust rather than a defined teaching; say it that way, and it will match what you say later at the Objection Bench. Anyone who demands a fuller account than that should be told plainly that the Church has not given one.

#### Images

Exodus 20 forbids making a graven image and bowing to it. Five chapters later God commands two cherubim of hammered gold over the mercy seat. In Numbers 21 he commands a bronze serpent to be made and looked at. Solomon's temple is full of carved figures: cherubim in the inner sanctuary, and cherubim, palm trees and open flowers carved on the walls and doors. 1 Chronicles 28:11-19 adds that the plan for the temple was handed to Solomon by David as coming from the Lord. So the commandment cannot forbid images as such.

And Scripture shows the line being crossed. In 2 Kings 18:4 Hezekiah destroys the bronze serpent, the very object God commanded, because the people were burning incense to it. Tell that story. It concedes the danger honestly and shows that the distinction is biblical rather than invented.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

“And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat.” **Exodus 25:18**

The holiest object in Israel, the place where God promised to meet Moses, carried sculpted figures made at his command. Consider also 2 Maccabees 15:12-16, where Onias, a dead high priest, is seen praying for the people, and Jeremiah, long dead, is described as one who prays much for the people and the holy city. Whatever weight one gives that book, it attests that a Jewish writer of the period could picture the righteous dead praying for God’s people and the holy city, and expect his readers to find that intelligible.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Basil the Great

*Cited in the Catechism at CCC 2132*

The honour rendered to an image passes to the one whom the image represents.

The Catechism draws the conclusion itself: whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it. This is the single cleanest answer to the charge of idolatry, and it is not a modern rationalisation.

*Securely located: quoted in the Catechism at the paragraph cited.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Augustine

*On honouring the martyrs, City of God VIII.27 (summary)*

Augustine insists that Christians do not offer sacrifice to the martyrs but to God alone, and that the martyrs are honoured for the sake of the God who crowned them. He is explicit that building altars to a martyr rather than to God would be the very thing pagans do.

Note that the objection is not new and neither is the answer. Augustine is already fielding the accusation in the fifth century.

*Summary rather than quotation; see City of God VIII.27, on the manner in which the martyrs are honoured.*

### Voice of the Church

#### The Second Council of Nicaea

787

The seventh ecumenical council distinguished the veneration given to images from the adoration due to God alone, and taught that the honour given to an image passes to its prototype.

Useful because it shows the Church settling this in council in the eighth century, some seven hundred years before the Reformation raised it again. A second wave of iconoclasm followed in the East in the ninth century and was finally rejected in 843, which is worth knowing: the question was fought over, not merely legislated.

*Historical; the council and its subject matter are securely attested.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 946-962 on the communion of saints, with 956 on their intercession.

- CCC 2683 states that the saints intercede for us and contemplate God, and that we can and should ask them.
- CCC 2129-2132 on images, the Incarnation, and the distinction between veneration and adoration.
- CCC 2112-2114 on idolatry, which is worth reading so your group knows the Church takes the charge seriously.

## Session Goals

- 1. Every participant can cite two passages showing the saints in heaven and prayer together.
- 2. Every participant can answer the one mediator objection from its own context.
- 3. The group discovers that God commands images in the same book that forbids them.
- 4. Every participant can tell the Hezekiah story and explain why Catholics tell it.

### THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

#### **"There is one mediator between God and men."**

This is the main objection and the steelman handles it. If it comes early, ask them to read the four verses before it.

#### **"Deuteronomy forbids consulting the dead."**

Take it seriously; the prohibition is real and severe. What it forbids is necromancy: conjuring the dead to extract knowledge, as at Endor.

Asking a member of the Body of Christ who is alive in God to pray for you is a different act with a different object. And on the transfiguration mount, Moses and Elijah appear and speak with Christ, which no one calls necromancy.

#### **"The saints cannot hear millions of prayers at once. That makes them gods."**

Concede that we do not claim omniscience for them and that the Church has not defined the mechanism.

What is claimed is that they are alive in God and that God can make our prayers known. If someone wants more detail than that, tell them honestly that the Church has not supplied it. A flagged limit is better than a bluffed explanation.

#### **"People clearly do treat statues superstitiously."**

Agree without qualification. It happens, the Church condemns it, and CCC 2112-2114 name idolatry as a real sin.

Hezekiah is the answer: Scripture itself records an object God commanded being destroyed once it was abused. Abuse does not make the thing forbidden.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Father, you are the only one we worship, and you have surrounded us with people who love you and love us. Teach us the difference tonight, and keep us from both coldness and confusion. Amen.

### Win

1. Who have you asked to pray for you in the last month?
2. Do you have a photograph of someone who has died? What do you do with it?

### Build

3. Read Revelation 5:8 and 8:3-4. What are the elders and the angel holding?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints, and then much incense offered with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar.

Ask the plain question: are those in heaven presented as involved with the prayers of God's people, or as uninvolved?

Add Hebrews 12:1, the cloud of witnesses, and Mark 12:27, that God is not God of the dead but of the living.

**Live discovery.** Give the group Exodus 20:4-5 and ask them to hold it. Then hand out Exodus 25:18-22, Numbers 21:8-9, and 1 Kings 6:23-29, and ask what has happened.

4. What did you find?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

God commands the making of images: two golden cherubim over the mercy seat, a bronze serpent to be looked at for healing, and a temple full of carved figures.

So the commandment cannot forbid images as such. It forbids making a god, an image treated as divine in itself.

Then give them 2 Kings 18:4 and let it land. Hezekiah destroys the bronze serpent because people were burning incense to it. The danger is real, Scripture names it, and it does not abolish the cherubim.

5. What is the distinction Catholics are actually making?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Between the worship due to God alone and the honour given to those he has glorified, and between an image and the person it represents.

CCC 2132: the honour rendered to an image passes to the one it represents. Nobody thinks a soldier saluting a flag is worshipping cloth.

## The Steelman

**THE DEPTH** Read in full.

### The strongest form of the objection.

There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. One. Not one supreme mediator among many lesser ones. The whole point of the letter to the Hebrews is that we may now approach the throne of grace with confidence, directly, because the curtain is torn. Reintroducing a hierarchy of intercessors puts back the very apparatus the cross removed.

And whatever the theology says, look at the practice. People pray to a saint for a specific need, address statues, carry medals, and speak of particular saints as reliable for particular problems. Whatever a catechism paragraph distinguishes, that is functionally a pantheon, and it is exactly what the prophets spent centuries denouncing.

### 6. Read 1 Timothy 2:1-5 in full. What does Paul command in the four verses before the one everyone quotes?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

That supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all in high positions. He commands intercession, and then says there is one mediator.

So Paul plainly does not regard asking others to intercede as competing with Christ's unique mediation. He commands the first and asserts the second in one breath. That is the whole answer, and it is in the passage the objection is built on.

The Catholic position is that the saints intercede in Christ and through him, not alongside him. Their prayer has whatever value it has because they are in him.

On the practice: concede it, and do not defend the worst of it. Some popular devotion is unbalanced, some is superstitious, and the Church condemns superstition explicitly at CCC 2111. The remedy is catechesis, not pretending it does not happen.

End with the honest limit: we do not claim to know how they hear us, and the Church has not defined it.

## Send

7. Is there a saint you actually have a relationship with? What is it like?
8. Where in your own practice could someone reasonably accuse you of superstition?

## Live It This Week

- Ask one saint, by name, to pray for the person you have been praying for.
- Read Revelation 5 and 8 and notice what heaven is doing.
- Read 2 Kings 18:4 and sit with it.

## Closing Prayer

Father, we worship you alone. Thank you for the friends you have given us in heaven and on earth. Keep our love ordered. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Memory Verse

*"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." Hebrews 12:1*

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Exodus 20:4-5, the commandment
- Exodus 25:18-22; Numbers 21:8-9; 1 Kings 6:23-29 (live discovery)
- 1 Chronicles 28:11-19, the plan for the temple given to Solomon
- 2 Kings 18:4, Hezekiah destroys the bronze serpent
- Revelation 5:8 and 8:3-4, the prayers of the saints
- Hebrews 12:1, the cloud of witnesses (memory verse)
- Mark 12:27, God of the living
- 1 Timothy 2:1-5, intercession and the one mediator (steelman)
- Deuteronomy 18:10-11, necromancy forbidden
- Matthew 17:1-8, Moses and Elijah on the mountain
- 2 Maccabees 15:12-16, Onias and Jeremiah praying

**Catechism:** CCC 946-962, 956, 2111-2114, 2129-2132, 2683.

**Patristic and conciliar:** St. Basil, quoted at CCC 2132. St. Augustine, on honouring the martyrs, City of God VIII.27. Second Council of Nicaea, 787.

# Module Three

## *Purgatory and the Last Things*

### Abide

*A standalone session. Run it any time.*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers that the Catholic doctrine is far narrower than the caricature, and that the problem it answers is created by two verses almost every Christian accepts.

**Catholic Touchstone.** Everyone in purgatory is saved. It is not a second chance, not a third destination, and not a way of finishing what the cross left undone. It is the last stage of being made ready.

### What You Need to Know

Begin by clearing the ground, because most objections are aimed at things the Church does not teach. Purgatory is not a place where the fate of a soul is still undecided. Nobody in purgatory can be lost. It is not a middle destination between heaven and hell; it is the antechamber of heaven, and everyone in it is on the way in. It is not a supplement to Christ's merits; it is an application of them.

Note also how little the Church defines. What is held is that there is a final purification of the elect, and that prayer for the dead is efficacious. The duration, the mechanism, and whether fire is literal or figurative are not defined. The Council of Trent, when it addressed the subject, explicitly warned against speculative and curious questions that do not build up piety. If your group starts asking how long it takes, you may honestly say the Church does not know.

### The problem the doctrine answers

Two verses create it, and both are in every Christian's Bible. Revelation 21:27 says nothing unclean shall enter the heavenly city. Hebrews 12:14 says to strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. Now consider the ordinary Christian death: someone who genuinely loves God, dies in his friendship, and is plainly not yet perfectly holy. Neither obstinate nor finished.

Every Christian tradition has to say something about that person. Purgatory is the name for the answer that God completes the work. The alternative answers are that God perfects them instantaneously at death, which is a real position and worth respecting, or that the holiness required is not personal at all. The disagreement is not about whether purification happens but about whether it takes any form we can name.

### Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

*He made atonement for the dead, "that they might be delivered from their sin." 2 Maccabees 12:45*

Judas Maccabeus takes up a collection and sends it to Jerusalem for a sin offering on behalf of soldiers who had died, and the author commends the act as holy and pious. Whatever weight a given reader

gives that book, it shows this much: praying and making an offering for the dead was a practice known in Jewish circles of the period and one this author regarded as holy and pious. That is a claim about what the text approves, not a survey of what every Jew did. Note separately, and on its own evidence, that Christians prayed for their dead very early, in the funerary inscriptions of the catacombs and in the offering at the altar. Whether the Christian practice descends directly from the Jewish one or arose alongside it is a historical question this session does not have to settle, and you should not assert the descent in the room. What matters for the argument is that Christians were doing it, and doing it early.

Note also Malachi 3:2-3, where the Lord is like a refiner's fire, sitting as a refiner and purifier of silver. Refining is not destruction. It is what you do to something you intend to keep.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Augustine

*Confessions, Book IX (summary)*

Augustine records his mother Monica's dying request: that wherever her sons might be, they should remember her at the altar of the Lord. He then prays for her at length in the book itself, asking God to forgive her sins.

This is not a theological argument, which is what makes it useful. It is a fourth-century Christian doing something ordinary. Prayer for the dead is presented as what one does for one's mother.

*Securely attested; substance given as summary with the book named.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. John Chrysostom

*Given as a summary of his teaching; no locus printed*

Chrysostom teaches, in substance, that the dead are genuinely helped by the prayers and offerings of the living, and urges his congregation not to weep uselessly but to pray and to give alms for those they have lost.

The pastoral instinct is worth noticing. His argument is not primarily about the state of the dead but about giving grief something faithful to do.

### Voice of the Church

#### The Council of Trent

*Session 25, 1563*

The council affirmed that there is a purgatory and that souls detained there are helped by the prayers of the faithful and above all by the sacrifice of the altar, and in the same breath instructed bishops to exclude from popular preaching the difficult and subtle questions that do not build up piety.

Print the second half as well as the first. The Church defined the doctrine and immediately restrained speculation about it, which is worth knowing when someone attacks the medieval imagery.

*Historical; the session and the substance of its decree are securely attested.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1030-1032 on final purification, with 1031 noting that the Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.
- CCC 1032 on prayer and the offering of the Eucharist for the dead.
- CCC 1472-1473 on temporal consequences of sin, which is the framework the doctrine sits inside.

- CCC 1054 on the state of those who die in God's grace but imperfectly purified.

### **THE OBJECTION BENCH**

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

#### **"The word purgatory is not in the Bible."**

True, and concede it at once. Neither is Trinity, nor incarnation, nor bible. A name given later to a reality is not the same as a doctrine invented later.

#### **"Hebrews 9:27 says it is appointed for men to die once and after that comes judgment."**

Agree entirely; the Church teaches a particular judgment at death. Purgatory is not a delay of the judgment or a chance to change its outcome.

It is what happens to a soul already judged and already saved. If someone thinks Catholics believe the verdict is still open, correct that first, because they are objecting to something we do not hold.

#### **"The blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin. A further purification insults it."**

Take this seriously; it is the deepest form of the objection and it is theologically motivated.

The Catholic answer is that purgatory is not something added to Christ's work but the application of it to a particular soul. Ask a parallel question: does sanctification during this life insult the cross? Everyone believes God changes people after conversion. Purgatory is the completion of that same work, not a second one.

#### **"This is where indulgences came from, and we know how that went."**

Concede the abuses without hedging. The selling of indulgences was a genuine scandal, the Church acted against it, and the Reformers had real grounds for anger on this point.

Then distinguish the abuse from the underlying claim. An abuse of a doctrine does not refute the doctrine, and Catholics gain nothing by defending the sixteenth-century practice.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Lord, we pray tonight for everyone we have loved and lost. Give them rest, and give us hope. Amen.

### Win

1. Have you ever prayed for someone who had died? What did you say?
2. What did you grow up thinking purgatory was?

### Build

3. Read Revelation 21:27 and Hebrews 12:14. What do they require?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

That nothing unclean enters, and that holiness is necessary to see the Lord.

Now ask the honest question. Think of the best Christian you have known who has died. Were they perfectly holy at the end? Almost nobody says yes.

That gap is the whole problem, and every tradition has to answer it somehow.

**Live discovery.** Give the group 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 and ask two questions: what is tested, and what happens to the man?

4. What did you find?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The work is tested by fire. If it is burned up he suffers loss, and then Paul adds that he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Be scrupulously fair here. The primary reference is to the work of those building on the foundation, and a reader can take the whole thing as a metaphor for ministry being assessed. Say that yourself.

What remains is the last clause, which is about the man rather than his work: saved, and yet through fire. Loss and salvation in the same sentence, and the man himself passing through fire to reach it.

Notice what the verse does not say: it does not use the word purification, and it does not date any of this to after death. That step is an inference, the one the Catholic tradition has drawn from this text for centuries, and it is stronger, not weaker, for being named as an inference.

5. What does the Catholic doctrine actually claim, and what does it leave open?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Claims: there is a final purification of those who die in God's friendship but imperfectly purified, and the prayers of the living help them.

Leaves open: duration, mechanism, and whether fire is literal. Trent explicitly told bishops to keep speculative questions out of popular preaching.

Say clearly: everyone in purgatory is saved. If your group takes away one sentence, that is the one.

## The Steelman

### The strongest form of the objection.

Not one New Testament author teaches this. The clearest text on offer is about builders having their work assessed, and the clearest text of all is in a book we do not accept as Scripture, which is convenient. Meanwhile Paul says that to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord, and the thief on the cross is told today you will be with me in Paradise, with no interval and no purification mentioned. And it is not as if we have nothing positive to put in its place. John says that when he appears we shall be like him. Hebrews speaks of the spirits of just men made perfect, already perfect, in the heavenly assembly. God finishes what he begins, and Scripture describes the finish without ever describing a waiting room.

And look at what the doctrine produced. Centuries of fear, a commerce in indulgences, and a Christian imagination full of accounting. Whatever the refined modern version says, the doctrine as it actually functioned in history obscured the sufficiency of the cross for millions of people.

## 6. What must be granted, and what still needs an answer?

### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Grant that no New Testament passage teaches it explicitly, that 1 Corinthians 3 is primarily about the work, and that the historical abuses were real and grave. Grant the thief and 2 Corinthians 5:8 as genuine texts that the Catholic account must accommodate, and it can: nothing in the doctrine requires that purification take time as we measure it, or that it applies to everyone.

What still needs answering is the gap. If nothing unclean enters, and if most Christians die genuinely imperfect, something happens. The Protestant answer is usually instantaneous perfection at death, and it is not a bare assertion. 1 John 3:2 says that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is, and Hebrews 12:23 speaks of the spirits of just men made perfect. Those texts state the outcome plainly. What they do not state is any process or timing by which the outcome is reached, and that silence is the whole of the disagreement: whether saying nothing about a process rules one out. Both sides are inferring, and both are inferring from strong texts.

So the honest statement is that this is a question Scripture does not settle directly, and both traditions answer it by inference from what Scripture requires. Ours has a name and a practice attached; theirs does not. That is a smaller disagreement than the shouting suggests.

On the abuses: agree, name them, and refuse to defend them. Then note that the Council which defined the doctrine is the same one that moved against the abuse.

## Send

7. Who will you pray for by name this week?

8. Does the idea of being made ready before you see God frighten you or comfort you?

## Live It This Week

- Have a Mass offered for someone who has died.
- Read Malachi 3:2-3 and notice what a refiner is doing and why.
- Pray for the dead by name every day this week.

## Closing Prayer

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.

## Memory Verse

“If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” **1 Corinthians 3:15**

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Revelation 21:27, nothing unclean shall enter
- Hebrews 12:14, the holiness without which no one will see the Lord
- 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, saved but only as through fire (live discovery, memory verse at v. 15)
- Matthew 5:25-26 and 12:32
- 2 Maccabees 12:38-46, offering for the dead
- Malachi 3:2-3, the refiner's fire
- Hebrews 9:27; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Luke 23:43; 1 John 3:2; Hebrews 12:23 (steelman)

**Catechism:** CCC 1030-1032, 1054, 1472-1473.

**Patristic and conciliar:** St. Augustine, Confessions Book IX. St. John Chrysostom, on aiding the dead (summary; no locus printed). Council of Trent, Session 25, 1563.

# Module Four

## Baptism

### Abide

*A standalone session. Run it any time.*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers that the New Testament speaks of baptism as an efficacious sign that truly effects what it signifies rather than as a bare symbol of a decision already made, and that the covenant sign it replaces was given to infants.

**Catholic Touchstone.** Baptism is not our statement about God. It is God's act on us, which is why an infant can receive it.

### What You Need to Know

Gather the verbs first, because they do the work. Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit. Rise and be baptised, and wash away your sins. Baptism now saves you. Be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. All of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death.

In four of those, baptism is named outright and stands as the subject of an active verb or the instrument of one. In the other two, John 3:5 and Titus 3:5, the word baptism does not appear; the Church has always read birth of water and the Spirit and the washing of regeneration as baptismal, and you should say that out loud rather than let someone find it. Even granting the point, the texts that do name baptism still carry the whole weight of the claim. It saves, it washes, it regenerates, and it buries; and at Colossians 2:12 you are raised with him in it. A purely declarative reading has to turn all of them into figures of speech at once, which is a heavy load for one doctrine to carry.

### Infants

Concede the honest fact first: no New Testament passage narrates the baptism of an identifiable infant. Say it before anyone says it to you.

Then give the case. Acts 2:39 says the promise is to you and to your children. Whole households are baptised on the faith of their head at Acts 16:15, 16:33, and 1 Corinthians 1:16, and at Acts 18:8 Crispus believes together with all his household, and a first-century household would ordinarily include children. Colossians 2:11-12 identifies baptism as the circumcision of Christ, and a male child born into the covenant was circumcised on the eighth day, on nobody's profession of faith. Circumcision was not an infant rite only: the same verse puts the sign on the males of the household, and Genesis 17:23-27 has Abraham circumcising Ishmael at thirteen and every male of his house on one day. Say that plainly, because it is in the text they will read. The point the argument needs is narrower and survives it: where the sign was given to an infant, it was given without decision, profession or consent, and it was given to a household on the faith of its head.

And use the hostile witness, which is more persuasive than a friendly one. Around the turn of the third century, Tertullian argues that baptism should be delayed in the case of little children. He is arguing against a practice, which means the practice already existed and was current enough in the churches he was writing to that he thought it needed answering. That is all the argument needs, and it is more than a friendly witness could give us.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

*“He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring.”* **Genesis 17:12**

The sign of the covenant was placed on a child who had made no decision, could profess nothing, and would grow into the identity he had already been given. Colossians 2:11-12 then puts baptism in exactly that position. If the covenant sign was for infants under the old dispensation and is refused to them under the new, the new covenant would be narrower than the old, which is not the direction the New Testament ever moves.

Consider also 1 Peter 3:20-21, which reads the flood as the pattern: eight persons were saved through water, and baptism corresponds to that and now saves you.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### Tertullian

*On Baptism (summary)*

Writing around the turn of the third century, Tertullian argues that baptism should be delayed in the case of small children, on the grounds that sponsors take on a risk and that innocence can wait.

We cite him against ourselves deliberately. He is arguing against infant baptism, which establishes beyond dispute that it was being practised. A hostile witness to a practice is stronger evidence than a friendly one.

*Summary of his argument; presented as a witness against the practice, not for it.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Cyprian of Carthage

*Letter 64, to Fidus, on the baptism of infants (summary)*

Asked by a bishop whether infants should wait until the eighth day, in analogy with circumcision, Cyprian answers with a council of African bishops that none should be delayed, and that the mercy of God is to be denied to no one born.

Notice what the question is. Nobody is asking whether infants may be baptised. They are asking whether to wait a week.

*Summary of Cyprian's reply to Bishop Fidus and of the African synod that answered with him. The letter is numbered 64 in the modern critical numbering and 58 in the older Ante-Nicene Fathers collection; no section number printed.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Augustine

*On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and the Baptism of Infants, Book One; and On Baptism, Against the Donatists, Book Four (summary)*

In the anti-Pelagian treatise on the baptism of infants, Augustine argues that it would make no sense for

the Church to baptise infants for the forgiveness of sins if there were no sin in them to forgive. In *On Baptism*, Against the Donatists he treats the Church's custom of baptising infants as received tradition rather than an innovation, something not to be scorned and not to be believed at all unless it came down from the apostles.

The argument runs from practice to doctrine rather than the reverse, which tells you how settled the practice was by his time.

*Summary of two arguments, given by work and book; chapter and section numbers to be added from the edition used.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1213-1216 on baptism as the gateway and on regeneration.
- CCC 1250-1252 on infant baptism, including that the practice is attested from the second century and that it is likely the apostolic period already saw household baptisms include children.
- CCC 1257 states that God has bound salvation to the sacrament of baptism, but that he himself is not bound by his sacraments.
- CCC 1261 on children who die without baptism, which allows us to hope. Read it if the question arises; it will.

### THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

#### "Baptism is an outward sign of an inward decision."

Ask where Scripture says that. It says baptism saves, washes, and regenerates. The declarative account is not wrong that baptism signifies; it is silent about what the New Testament says baptism does. A sacrament is a sign that does the thing it shows.

#### "Acts always shows belief first, then baptism."

True of adult converts, and it should be. The Church requires the same order for adults and runs a whole catechumenate to preserve it.

Then note what is being generalised from. Missionary preaching to adults tells you the order for adults. It does not tell you what happens to their children, and Acts 2:39 addresses exactly that.

#### "Baptising a baby who cannot believe is meaningless."

It assumes the sacrament is our act rather than God's. Ask whether the infant did anything to receive circumcision, or to be born.

The Church also takes the objection seriously in practice: infant baptism carries an obligation on parents and godparents to raise the child in the faith, and the Church requires a founded hope of that before baptising.

#### "What about babies who die unbaptised?"

Answer immediately and gently, because someone in the room may be asking for a reason. The Church entrusts them to the mercy of God and allows us to hope for their salvation.

Do not offer limbo as a doctrine; it was a theological opinion, never a defined teaching. CCC 1261 is the paragraph, and it is warm. If someone is grieving, put the theology down and be kind first.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Father, you claimed us before we could claim you. Thank you for the water. Amen.

### Win

1. Do you know the date of your baptism? Do you know who was there?
2. What were you taught baptism does?

### Build

**Live discovery.** Give five people one verse each: John 3:5, Titus 3:5, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, Romans 6:3-4. Ask each to underline the verb attached to baptism and read only that.

3. What are the verbs?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Born of water and the Spirit. Saved by the washing of regeneration. Wash away your sins. Baptism now saves you. Buried with him by baptism into death, so that we might walk in newness of life.

Every one is active. Baptism is doing something in these sentences, or God is doing something through it. Be precise on Romans 6: the one raised in verse 4 is Christ, and what follows for us is newness of life. Colossians 2:12 is the verse that says you were raised with him in baptism, through faith in the working of God.

Ask the honest follow-up: how many of these would you have to read as figures of speech to hold a purely symbolic view? The answer is all of them at once.

4. Read Colossians 2:11-12. What does Paul identify baptism with?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The circumcision of Christ, a circumcision made without hands, and then he says you were buried with him in baptism.

Now ask when a boy born into the covenant received the sign. Genesis 17:12: at eight days. Read the rest of the verse too, which extends it to the males of the household, so that nobody can say you stopped the quotation where it suited you.

If the covenant sign was for infants before, and is refused to them now, the new covenant would be narrower than the old.

5. What does the New Testament actually say about households?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Acts 16:15, Lydia and her household. Acts 16:33, the jailer and all his family, immediately, that same hour. Acts 18:8, Crispus believed in the Lord together with all his household; note honestly that this verse names the household's faith, not its baptism. 1 Corinthians 1:16, the household of Stephanas.

Concede plainly that no infant is named. Then note that household is a term of art in that world and would ordinarily include children and servants.

## The Steelman

### The strongest form of the objection.

Every baptism narrated in the New Testament follows the same pattern: someone hears the word, believes, and is baptised. Repent and be baptised. Those who received his word were baptised. He believed, and was baptised, with all his family. Faith comes by hearing, and an infant cannot hear in that sense.

And not one infant is ever named. Not one. A practice this central, if apostolic, would have left a trace, and instead the first clear evidence appears well into the second century, alongside a Christian writer arguing against it.

Baptising infants also empties the thing of meaning. If the sacrament works regardless of faith, then the millions of baptised Europeans who believe nothing are proof either that it does not work or that it does not matter.

## 6. What is granted, and where does the case actually stand?

### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Granted: no infant is named, the narrated baptisms are of adult converts, and the earliest explicit discussion is second-century. Say all of it first.

What the objection does not reckon with: the argument from silence cuts both ways. No surviving source records a child of Christian parents being told to wait, and no surviving source records a controversy over a change in practice, which is remarkable for a Church whose arguments about everything else came down to us in volumes.

Then the positive case. Acts 2:39, the promise is to you and to your children. The household formula. And Colossians 2:11-12, which identifies baptism with the covenant sign given to eight-day-old infants.

On Tertullian: use him. He argues for delay, which means the practice was there to argue against.

On the last part, concede hard. Widespread nominal Christianity is a real scandal and baptism without formation is a failure. But note what the objection assumes: that a gift is void if the recipient neglects it. The Church says instead that baptism truly gives something which can be neglected, which is precisely why she treats a lapsed baptised person as a Christian in need of return rather than a stranger.

## Send

7. What difference does it make that God moved first?

8. Who could you bring back toward their own baptism this year?

## Live It This Week

- Find out the date of your baptism and mark it in your calendar as an anniversary.
- Bless yourself with holy water deliberately, thinking about what it recalls.
- Read Romans 6:1-11 slowly.

## Closing Prayer

Father, you buried us with your Son and raised us with him before we knew what was happening. Make us live like it. Amen.

## Memory Verse

*"Baptism... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." 1 Peter 3:21*

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Genesis 17:12, circumcision at eight days
- John 3:5; Titus 3:5; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; Romans 6:3-4 (live discovery, memory verse at 1 Pet 3:21)
- Acts 2:38-39, the promise is to you and to your children
- Colossians 2:11-12, the circumcision of Christ
- Acts 16:15, 16:33; 1 Corinthians 1:16, the households baptised (Acts 18:8, a household that believes)
- 1 Peter 3:20-21, the flood as pattern

**Catechism:** CCC 1213-1216, 1250-1252, 1257, 1261.

**Patristic:** Tertullian, On Baptism (cited against the practice). St. Cyprian, Letter 64 to Fidus (Letter 58 in the Ante-Nicene Fathers numbering). St. Augustine, On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and the Baptism of Infants, Book One; On Baptism, Against the Donatists, Book Four.

# Module Five

## Confession

### Abide

*A standalone session. Run it any time.*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers that the risen Christ gave the apostles authority both to forgive and to retain sins, and works out what retaining would require.

**Catholic Touchstone.** God forgives sins. The question is not whether a priest has power of his own, which he does not, but whether Christ chose to forgive through men, and John 20 says he did.

### What You Need to Know

John 20:21-23 is the centre and it repays slow reading. The risen Christ says as the Father has sent me, even so I send you. He breathes on them, and the gesture is meant to be heard against Genesis 2:7, where God breathes the breath of life into Adam, with Ezekiel 37 behind it, where the breath is commanded to breathe on the slain so that they live. Both are scenes of God making the dead alive. He says receive the Holy Spirit. And then: if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

The retaining half is what makes the passage decisive. Forgiving alone could be read as announcing a general pardon. Retaining cannot. To retain some sins and not others requires discretion, discretion requires knowing what the sins are, and ordinarily the only way to know is to be told. So the text itself establishes a real discerning authority over particular sins. It does not by itself dictate the ritual form. The Church, holding that authority from the apostles, has ordered its exercise so that the penitent discloses his sins and the priest judges; see CCC 1484 in the Catechism Connection below on why that personal form is the ordinary one.

### Concede the development

The form has changed considerably and you should say so. In the early centuries penance was often public and sometimes once in a lifetime, and the private, repeatable form familiar to us spread through Celtic and monastic practice. What is claimed as apostolic is the authority and the reality of sacramental absolution, not the confessional box or the modern schedule.

### Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

*“When a man is guilty in any of these, he shall confess the sin he has committed, and he shall bring his guilt offering to the Lord... and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.”*

**Leviticus 5:5-6**

Spoken confession of the specific sin, a sacrificial offering, and atonement made by the priest for that person. The verses do not say the confession is addressed to the priest; they do set it inside the priestly rite that the priest alone can complete. The pattern is not a Catholic innovation; under the Law it is the

ordinary appointed shape of forgiveness, confession joined to sacrifice and to priestly atonement. Israel knew contrition sought straight from God too, as Psalm 51 shows, but the cult is where God fixed the ordinary means. Numbers 5:6-8 runs the same way with restitution added: the person confesses the sin committed, makes full restitution to the one wronged, and where there is no kinsman to receive it the restitution goes to the priest, along with the ram of atonement by which atonement is made for him. What changes in the New Testament is not the pattern but the priest and the sacrifice.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### The Didache

*chs. 4 and 14 (summary)*

This very early handbook instructs believers to confess their transgressions in church, and not to come to prayer with a bad conscience, and to confess before breaking bread on the Lord's day so that the sacrifice may be pure.

Note the setting. Confession here is not private self-examination before God; it happens in the assembly and it is tied to the Eucharist.

*Summary of the relevant chapters.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Ambrose

*On Penance (summary)*

Writing against those who held that the Church could not forgive serious sin after baptism, Ambrose argues that the power to forgive was given to the Church and is exercised through her ministers, and that God granted this to no one apart from priests.

The context matters: he is arguing against rigorists who wanted the Church to withhold forgiveness. The Catholic side of that dispute was the merciful one.

*Summary of the work's argument; no section number printed.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. John Chrysostom

*On the Priesthood, Book III (summary)*

Chrysostom writes with astonishment that priests have been entrusted with an authority God gave neither to angels nor archangels, since what they bind on earth is bound in heaven.

He treats it as awe-inspiring rather than as a privilege, and his whole treatise is about how frightening the office is. That tone is worth passing on.

*Summary of his argument in Book III; no section number printed.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1441-1442: God alone forgives sins, and he has willed to exercise that forgiveness through the ministry of the apostles and their successors.
- CCC 1461-1467 on the minister, the seal of confession, and the absolute nature of that seal.
- CCC 1456 on confessing serious sins, and CCC 1458 commending frequent confession of venial sins.
- CCC 1484 on why the personal form is the ordinary one.

## THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

**"There is one mediator. Why confess to a man?"**

CCC 1441 concedes the premise: God alone forgives sins. The Catholic claim is about the means he chose, not about a rival source of forgiveness.

Then ask what the objection does with John 20:23, and specifically with the word retain.

**"James says confess to one another, which is mutual."**

Read the whole passage. James 5:14-16 tells the sick to call for the elders of the church, who pray over him and anoint him, and says that if he has committed sins he will be forgiven. The confessing sits inside an instruction about calling the elders.

Concede verse 16 outright, and concede more than they ask. The command is reciprocal, and the same sentence says pray for one another, which nobody restricts to elders. Do not claim the context supplies the officeholder; it does not settle who hears the confession. What the context does is put the confessing inside a passage where sickness, sin and forgiveness are handled by calling the elders of the church, who pray over the man and anoint him, and where the forgiveness of his sins is spoken of in that setting. That makes the presbyteral reading a natural one, not a proved one, and the honest way to say so is that James shows the early Church already joining confession, prayer and the ministry of the elders. Then move: this passage is not where the case rests. John 20:23 is, and the word retain is why.

**"1 John 1:9 says confess to God and he is faithful to forgive."**

Agree completely; that verse is true and Catholics rely on it. Nothing in the sacrament denies that God forgives the contrite.

The question is what Christ established for the ordinary life of the Church, and John 20:23 is in the same author's Gospel.

**"The confessional has been used to abuse people."**

Do not deflect this and do not answer it fast. It is true, it has happened, and the Church has failed people badly.

What can be said honestly: the seal exists to protect the penitent absolutely and is never set aside, canon law makes the absolution of an accomplice in a sin against the sixth commandment invalid except in danger of death, and the modern safeguarding requirements built around the sacrament, which govern the setting and never touch the seal itself, exist because of real failures. If someone in the room has been hurt, the pastoral response comes first and the argument does not come at all.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you know everything we have done and you came anyway. Take our fear of being known. Amen.

### Win

1. When did you last say something out loud that you had only ever thought? What did that do?
2. What keeps you from confession, when something does?

### Build

**Read aloud: John 20:19-23.**

3. List everything Jesus does in verses 21 to 23, in order.

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Sends them as the Father sent him. Breathes on them. Says receive the Holy Spirit. Gives authority to forgive and to retain.

Note the breathing. Interpreters hear Genesis 2:7 behind it, where God breathes the breath of life into Adam, and Ezekiel 37, where the breath is commanded to breathe on the slain so that they live. John is signalling that something is being created here.

4. Take the word retain seriously. What would a person need in order to retain some sins and not others?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Discretion, which requires knowledge, which requires being told.

This is the whole argument and it is worth letting the group arrive at it slowly. Forgiving alone could be a general announcement. Retaining cannot be done blind.

5. Read Leviticus 5:5-6. What is the pattern there?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The man confesses the sin he has committed, brings his offering, and the priest makes atonement for him.

Confession spoken, an offering brought, atonement made by the priest. What changes in the New Testament is the priest and the sacrifice, not the shape.

### The Steelman

#### The strongest form of the objection.

Not once in the New Testament does anyone confess a sin to an apostle. Not once. For a practice supposedly instituted by Christ on Easter evening and essential to the Christian life, the silence in

Acts and the letters is total. What we find instead is that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us, addressed to everyone, with no minister in sight.

John 20:23 is better read as the commission to preach the Gospel, which does exactly this: those who receive it are forgiven, those who refuse it are not. That reading requires no new institution and fits the sending in verse 21, which is a sending to preach.

And the practice as Catholics know it is demonstrably late. Public penance, once in a lifetime, gave way over centuries to something entirely different. What is claimed as apostolic is a medieval Irish invention with a first-century verse attached to it afterward.

## 6. What has to be granted here? And what does the text still require?

### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Grant a great deal. No narrative of sacramental confession appears in the New Testament. 1 John 1:9 is real and Catholics use it. And the developed form is genuinely much later than the apostolic age; the private repeatable practice spread from Celtic and monastic sources.

What the text still requires is the word retain. The preaching reading handles forgive well and retain badly. A preacher who proclaims the Gospel does not retain particular sins; he announces a message and hearers respond. Christ gives the apostles a discriminating authority, and discrimination requires knowledge of particulars.

On development: the Catholic claim has never been that the confessional box is apostolic. It is that the authority is, and that the Church may order its exercise. Compare it to something they accept: the canon of Scripture was discerned over centuries and no one calls the process an invention.

On silence: note also that the letters do not narrate a great deal that everyone agrees happened, including the ordinary Sunday liturgy. The epistles are occasional documents, written to address problems, not manuals of practice.

End pastorally rather than triumphantly. The best argument for confession is not an argument. It is that people walk out of it different, and most of your group already know that.

## Send

7. What is the actual fear? Being known, or being judged?

8. When will you go? Name a day.

## Live It This Week

- Go to confession. Put it in the calendar before you leave tonight.
- Read Psalm 51 slowly.
- If it has been years, tell the priest that at the start. He will help you. It is the most ordinary thing in the world to him.

## Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you breathed on them and gave them your own authority to forgive. Thank you for making mercy something we can hear out loud. Give us the courage to go. Amen.

## Memory Verse

*"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

**John 20:23**

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Leviticus 5:5-6, confess and bring the guilt offering; Numbers 5:6-8, confess, make restitution, ram of atonement
- John 20:19-23, the commission (core text, memory verse at v. 23)
- Genesis 2:7, God breathes
- Matthew 16:19 and 18:18, binding and loosing
- James 5:14-16, call for the elders
- 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, the ministry of reconciliation
- 1 John 1:9, if we confess our sins (steelman)
- Psalm 51, for personal prayer

**Catechism:** CCC 1441-1442, 1456, 1458, 1461-1467, 1484.

**Patristic:** Didache chs. 4 and 14. St. Ambrose, On Penance. St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood Book III.