

Take-Home One

The Hard Saying

Abide

The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ

What We Found

In John 6 the language gets harder, not softer. At verse 35 Jesus is the bread of life, which anyone could hear as an image. At verse 51 the bread is his flesh. At verse 53 he adds his blood and makes it a condition of having life, and then he keeps returning to that eating and drinking all the way through verse 58.

His hearers state the literal reading out loud at verse 52: how can this man give us his flesh to eat? Again and again in John, when someone takes him too literally, the misunderstanding gets cleared up. Nicodemus is corrected at 3:5-8. The woman at the well is corrected at 4:13-14. The disciples are corrected about food at 4:32-34 and about Lazarus being asleep at 11:11-14. Here, disciples walk away at verse 66, and he lets them go and asks the Twelve whether they will leave too.

And Paul tells the Corinthians that a person can be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord, and reports that some had become ill and some had died. It is difficult to be guilty of a symbol.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch

Letter to the Smyrnaeans, ch. 7

Around the year 107 he describes people who stay away from the Eucharist because they will not confess it to be the flesh of our Saviour. He identifies them by that refusal, which means that in the churches he knew the confession was already the ordinary position.

Voice of the Church

St. Justin Martyr

First Apology, ch. 66

Explaining Christian worship to a pagan emperor around 155, he says this food is not received as common bread and common drink, but is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.

Voice of the Church

St. Cyril of Jerusalem

Mystagogical Catecheses, no. 4 (summary)

Instructing the newly baptised, he tells them not to judge by taste: what appears to be bread is the Body, and what appears to be wine is the Blood.

The Sealed Question

Do not discuss this with anyone. Write your answer, fold this page, and bring it still folded to Session Five. We will open them together.

MY ANSWER

A friend asks you, directly: “Are you saved?” Write down exactly what you would say.

Ready Response

“Verse 63 says the flesh is of no avail.” Ask them to read it again slowly: he says the flesh, not my flesh. Twelve verses earlier his flesh is given for the life of the world. In John, flesh in that sense means human capacity acting on its own, as in 3:6 and 8:15.

“He also said he was a door and a vine.” Concede it warmly; John is full of metaphor. Then: “Nobody ever walked out over the door. Why do you think they walked out over this?”

Live It This Week

- Read John 6 in one sitting, 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.

Memory Verse

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

Before Next Session

Read: Psalm 116:12-14. Three verses. Notice what the psalmist decides to lift up.

Catechism: CCC 1373-1377. If you read only one, read 1374.

Take-Home Two

The Sacrifice

Abide

The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ

What We Found

The Passover was not finished when the lamb died. Exodus 12 commands that the lamb be roasted and eaten that same night, entirely, with nothing left until morning. An Israelite who marked his door and skipped the meal had not kept the Passover.

St. John frames the crucifixion as exactly this. He dates it to the day of Preparation, and he records that the soldiers did not break Jesus's legs, saying explicitly that this fulfilled the Scripture, which is the rule for the Passover lamb. St. Paul puts it in a single line: Christ our paschal lamb has been sacrificed. 1 Corinthians 5:7.

And we read what the Church actually teaches, which is that the sacrifice of the cross and the sacrifice of the Mass are one single sacrifice, the same victim offered by the same priest, differing only in the manner of offering. The Mass adds nothing to Calvary. It makes Calvary present.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

The Didache

ch. 14 (summary)

A very early Christian handbook tells believers to gather on the Lord's day, break bread, and give thanks, having confessed their sins so the sacrifice may be pure, and applies Malachi's pure offering among the nations to what they are doing.

Voice of the Church

St. Cyprian of Carthage

Letter 63 (summary)

The priest acts in the place of Christ and offers what Christ offered. Cyprian is regulating practical details, which means the sacrificial character was already settled for him.

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

City of God, Book X (summary)

The whole redeemed community is itself the sacrifice offered to God, and at the altar the Church learns that in what she offers, she herself is offered.

Ready Response

“Hebrews says once for all.” Agree first and agree warmly, because you mean it. The sacrifice is one, unrepeatable, and completely sufficient. Then say the sentence the group had to learn: the Mass adds nothing to Calvary, it makes Calvary present. This is where knowing CCC 1367 in your own words earns its keep.

“Jesus said it is finished.” Agree without qualification. The work of redemption is finished and nothing you do on Sunday adds to it. Then go back to where the session started, which is better ground anyway: the Passover was not over when the lamb died. Exodus 12 commands that it be eaten that same night, entirely. Ask your friend whether an Israelite who marked his door and skipped the meal had kept the Passover.

“It is just a symbolic meal.” Ask what a biblical memorial is. Exodus 12:14 calls Passover a memorial to be kept forever. Then read Exodus 13:8, where the father explains the meal to his son in the first person, as what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt, spoken generations after the event; Deuteronomy 6:20-23 answers the son the same way, we were Pharaoh’s slaves and the LORD brought us out. That is not recollection at a distance. The one keeping the feast counts himself among those brought out, and CCC 1363 says the Church’s memorial works in exactly that biblical sense.

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 in your own words.
- Keep praying for your person by name.

Memory Verse

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

Before Next Session

Read: Galatians 4:4-7. Four verses. Count how many family words Paul uses.

Catechism: CCC 1362-1367. If you read only one, read 1367.

Take-Home Three

Grace and the Covenant Family

Abide

The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ

What We Found

Ask most Christians how someone is saved and you get courtroom words: guilt, verdict, acquittal. All of that is genuinely in Scripture. But it is not the only register, and it is not the controlling one. Again and again Paul reaches for a household: adoption, sons, Abba, heirs, fellow heirs.

And St. John will not let it stay a title. He says we should be called children of God, and then adds three words that decide the whole question: and so we are.

We also traced one covenant promise from Genesis to Revelation, in wordings that vary but keep one shape: I will be your God and you shall be my people. Genesis 17:7 gives the first half of it, Exodus 6:7, Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezekiel 36:28 give both halves, and Revelation 21:3 announces the fulfilment as God dwelling with his people. A contract leaves both parties who they were. This makes a family.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Athanasius

On the Incarnation, ch. 54 (summary)

He became man so that we might be made god; he showed himself in a body so that we might know the unseen Father; he bore our death so that we might inherit incorruption. Read him carefully: not god by nature, which he alone is, but by grace and by participation. We are not changed into God in essence. We are given a share in the life that is his by nature, and so are made sons in the Son.

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

Letter 194, to Sixtus (summary)

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.

Voice of the Church

St. Leo the Great

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

Recognise your dignity: having been made sharers in the divine nature, do not return by base conduct to your former condition. The argument for holiness is consistency with an identity already given.

Ready Response

“Adoption is only a change of status. Nothing actually happens to the person.” Ask them to read 1 John 3:1 to the end of the sentence. John says we should be called children of God, and then he refuses to leave it as a title: and so we are. A status can be conferred at a distance. The Spirit who teaches us to say Abba is given, not merely declared.

“If you are already a son, why do anything?” Because that is what being a son is. And Romans 8:17 puts the condition in the same sentence as the inheritance: fellow heirs, provided we suffer with him.

“Partakers of the divine nature sounds like Mormonism.” A fair worry. The Church does not teach that we become gods by nature. The phrase is 2 Peter 1:4, and it means sharing God’s life by grace. The difference is between sharing a fire’s heat and being the fire.

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.

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

Before Next Session

Read: Romans 3:21-28. Read it twice, slowly, and do not resolve anything. Next week we take it at full strength.

Catechism: CCC 1996-2005. If you read only one, read 1989.

Take-Home Four

Justification

Abide

The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ

What We Found

We started by conceding everything, because everything is true. 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. A Catholic can say all of that warmly and without hedging, and should.

The Church settled this long before it was raised. At the Second Council of Orange in 529 she condemned the idea that anyone can take the first step toward God under his own power, and taught that even the beginning of faith is grace.

And we read the two verses that sit beside the famous ones and almost never get read with them. Romans 2:13 says it is the doers of the law who will be justified. Ephesians 2:10, one sentence after the verse everyone quotes, says we are created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Clement of Rome

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

Around the year 96 he writes that we are not justified through ourselves or our own works but through faith. Then, in the same breath, he asks whether we should therefore give up good works, and says emphatically that we must not.

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

On Grace and Free Will (summary)

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

Voice of the Church

St. John Chrysostom

Homilies on Romans (summary)

The sinner is justified apart from anything he brought, and that is precisely why he must now live differently. Chrysostom uses grace to raise the stakes of the moral life, not to lower them.

Ready Response

“Catholics think you earn heaven.” You have been accused of holding something you do not hold, so treat it as a misunderstanding to clear up rather than a fight to win. Quote your own side and let it do the work. CCC 2010: no one can merit the initial grace of conversion. CCC 2007: with regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man. Then mention the Second Council of Orange in 529, which condemned the claim that anyone can take the first step toward God under his own power, and taught that even the beginning of faith is grace.

“Then why talk about merit at all?” Because Scripture does, and you did not choose the vocabulary. Christ promises reward again and again, and that language has to go somewhere. If you want one sentence to carry it, St. Augustine wrote it already: when God crowns our merits he is crowning his own gifts (Letter 194, to Sixtus).

“Ephesians 2 says not by works.” Agree completely, and say the verse with them rather than after them; you have been saying it out loud all week as a statement about yourself. Then ask whether you can keep going to the end of the passage, and read verse 10 together. It is one page and ten seconds, and your friend can see it for themselves.

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.

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**

Before Next Session

Read: Genesis 22:1-18. Bring your sealed envelope. Do not open it.

Catechism: CCC 1987-1995, 2007-2011. If you read only one, read 2008.

Take-Home Five

Faith Working Through Love

Abide

The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ

What We Found

We opened the envelopes, and the range was wide. Most of the hedging was protecting something sound: Catholics hesitate at the question because they know something about perseverance and do not want to sound presumptuous. That instinct just had no words yet.

Now it does. Scripture speaks of salvation in three tenses. By grace you have been saved. To us who are being saved. He who endures to the end will be saved. So the honest answer is: I have been saved, I am being saved, and I hope to be saved. Not a dodge. Three verses.

Then we found what James does with Abraham. He says the scripture was fulfilled which says Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him, and he says it was fulfilled when Abraham offered Isaac. But that scripture is Genesis 15 and the offering is Genesis 22, many years later. The gap is his argument.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

The Second Council of Orange

529

The council condemned the view that anyone can make the first movement toward God by natural powers, and taught that even the beginning of faith is the effect of grace. Roughly a thousand years before the question was raised again.

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

Given as a summary of his teaching; no locus printed

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

Voice of the Church

St. Gregory the Great

Given as a summary of his teaching; no locus printed

The proof of love is shown in deeds. A faith that never issues in action has given us no reason to think it is there.

Ready Response

“Are you saved?” This is the question you sealed in an envelope in week one, so answer it now the way you could not then, warmly and without apologising: I have been saved, I am being saved, and I hope to be saved. If your friend wants to know where it comes from, it is Ephesians 2:8, 1 Corinthians 1:18, and Matthew 24:13, one verse for each tense.

“James means justified before men.” Grant that it is a serious reading held by serious people, and grant too that James is going after dead assent, which your friend very likely opposes as strongly as you do. Then put the gap in front of them, which is what the group found for itself: whatever justify means, James says the reckoning of Genesis 15 was fulfilled at Genesis 22, many years later; depending on how one reads the chronology of Abraham’s life, decades separate them. That is a claim about the shape of faith over time.

“So faith is not enough for Catholics.” The question hides a premise, that faith and love are two separate things to be stacked up. You do not believe that, so say so before you answer anything. Living faith is enough, and Galatians 5:6 is where you found the phrase for it: faith working through love. Note who wrote it. It is Paul, and it is your memory verse this week.

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.

Memory Verse

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

Before Next Session

Read: John 10:27-30. Four verses, and in 28-29 no one can snatch. Sit with how good it is.

Catechism: CCC 1814-1816. If you read only one, read 1814.

Take-Home Six

Once Saved, Always Saved

Abide

The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ

What We Found

We began where we should have: no one can snatch us out of his hand, and nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Those verses are ours and many Catholics have never heard them preached as ours.

Then we noticed what kind of list Paul is making in Romans 8. Death, life, angels, rulers, powers, height, depth, anything else in creation: every item on it answers his own question, who shall separate us from the love of Christ. They are powers ranged against us from outside, and his answer is that not one of them can tear us away. What he is not asking there is whether a man can walk away himself. That question gets its answer three chapters later.

And in Romans 11 Paul warns believers who are currently standing, grafted in already, and states the condition plainly: provided you continue in his kindness. The Church holds both. Perseverance is a gift to be asked for, and despair and presumption are both named as sins against hope.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

On the Gift of Perseverance (summary)

Perseverance to the end is not something the believer supplies but a gift God gives, which is precisely why it is to be prayed for rather than presumed. A gift is a reason to ask, not a reason for anxiety.

Voice of the Church

St. Cyprian of Carthage

On the Lapsed (summary)

Writing after a persecution in which many had denied the faith, he refuses both easy answers. He will not pretend nothing happened, and he will not say the lapsed are beyond return.

Voice of the Church

The Council of Trent

Session 6, 1547

The justified should have firm hope in God's help; and no one can know with the certainty of faith, apart from special revelation, that he is among the predestined. A real difference from the Reformed doctrine, stated plainly rather than blurred.

Ready Response

“I know I am saved.” Leave it standing. You are not trying to put a crack in anyone’s confidence, and it would be a poor use of an evening. Ask what they mean by it and listen to the whole answer, because most of what they are protecting is something you hold too. Then give your three tenses, the ones you learned to say last week, and let the two answers sit beside each other.

“If you can lose it, it was never grace.” Do not argue about the word grace. Ask them to read Romans 11:17-22 with you and to say who is being warned. Paul is writing to believers who are grafted in already and currently standing, and the condition he gives them is provided you continue in his kindness. Whatever we conclude about the word grace, that warning is addressed to people who are in the tree.

“So Catholics have no assurance.” Say no to that warmly, because it is the opposite of what this week taught you. Firm hope is not optional, and the Church names despair a sin against it just as squarely as presumption; CCC 2091-2092 are two short paragraphs you can read to your friend on the spot. Then say what it looks like in your own life: confession, the Eucharist, trying to love God, and confidence rather than terror.

A Word If Tonight Was Hard

If this session left you frightened rather than serious, that is not what the Church teaches and it is not what tonight was for. Despair is named a sin against hope for a reason. The practical answer to almost everything in this session is confession, the Eucharist, and prayer, not more worrying. If the fear does not lift, talk to a priest about it rather than carrying it alone.

Live It This Week

- Read Romans 8:31-39 out loud once a day, as a statement about yourself.
- Go to confession this week if it has been a while.
- Read Ezekiel 18:21-23 and notice what God says he takes no pleasure in.
- Keep praying for your person by name.

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**

Before Next Session

Read: John 15:1-11. Read it three times this week. It is the last session and the whole book lands there.

Catechism: CCC 1821, 2091-2092.

Take-Home Seven

Abide

Abide

The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ

What We Found

A branch has almost nothing to do. It abides. It bears fruit, which happens in it rather than being manufactured by it. It receives pruning, which is done to it. Nothing in John 15 asks the branch to attach itself or to hold on by its own strength. What the chapter does ask is abiding, and abiding has a content: Jesus commands his disciples to remain in him (15:4), and he speaks of keeping his commandments as the way of remaining in his love (15:10). That is obedience from inside the union, not effort that creates it.

And then verse 16, which settles the tone of the entire course: you did not choose me, but I chose you. The initiative was never ours, and neither is the maintenance.

So the question underneath these seven weeks, what does it take to stay, has an answer that is not effort. Staying is remaining where you were put and continuing to receive what comes through the connection. Which is why the book began where it did: whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. Same verb.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

Confessions I.1

You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Not an achievement being described, but a design. The restlessness is the evidence.

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. She was reminding herself.

Voice of the Church

St. Thérèse of Lisieux

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

She expects to appear before God with empty hands, having no works to offer that are not his gift, and treats this not as a cause for fear but as the ground of her confidence.

Ready Response

“Catholicism is a religion of conditions.” Concede that it can look that way, and that plenty of Catholics have carried it that way. Then walk your friend back through what these seven weeks actually put on the table: the Eucharist, the sacrifice made present, adoption, grace, living faith, perseverance. Say what you noticed about that list. Not one item on it is something you produced. A religion of conditions to be met would be exhausting; what you have been handed is a set of gifts, and what is asked of you is that you not refuse them.

“So what does it take to stay?” Nothing you manufacture. Union with Christ is given, not earned, and the sacraments are how it is given rather than a score you run up. What is asked of you is real but it is a response: keep receiving, keep believing, keep loving, and do not detach yourself. A branch does not hold itself on, and it does not have to; it does have to stay where it was put.

When you are afraid. Go back to John 15:16 and say it about yourself: you did not choose me, but I chose you. You did not arrange this and you are not holding it together by paying attention to it. Then go to confession, receive the Eucharist, and stop auditing yourself. If the fear does not lift, talk to a priest rather than carrying it alone.

Live It This Week

- Memorise John 15:5.
- Go to Mass this Sunday and receive knowing what Sessions One and Two said about it. If you are conscious of grave sin, go to confession before you receive; if you cannot get to confession first, come to Mass anyway and make a spiritual communion (CCC 1385).
- Go to confession within two weeks.
- Keep praying for your person. You have done it for seven weeks. Do not stop now.

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**

Where to Go From Here

The modules: Five standalone sessions extend this course and can be run in any order: Mary; Saints, Statues, and the Charge of Idolatry; Purgatory and the Last Things; Baptism; and Confession.

Catechism: CCC 787-789, 1391-1392, 1821.

Take-Home

Mary

Abide

Module One

What We Found

We laid 2 Samuel 6 beside Luke 1 and found that St. Luke shapes the Visitation so that it reads as an Ark narrative. The correspondences are in the text; that Luke meant them is the natural reading of it, and a longstanding Catholic one, rather than a defined point. David arises and goes to bring the ark up from Baale-judah (2 Samuel 6:2); Mary arises and goes into the hill country of Judah (Luke 1:39). The movement into Judah is a proposed typological association, not a phrase the two texts hold in common. David asks how the ark of the Lord can come to him; Elizabeth asks why the mother of her Lord should come to her. David leaps before the ark; the child leaps in the womb. The ark stays three months; Mary stays about three months.

And Hebrews 9:4 describes the ark as holding the tablets of the covenant, the golden urn of manna, and Aaron's rod, the rod of the priest. She carried the Word made flesh, the bread of life, and the great high priest.

We were also honest about what that does and does not settle. Typology sets a trajectory; it does not define a dogma. The Immaculate Conception and the Assumption do not rest on proof texts, and saying so plainly is what makes the rest of the case credible.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

The Council of Ephesus

431

The council affirmed the title God-bearer against those who would call her only the mother of the man Jesus. The issue was not her status but whether Christ is one person.

Voice of the Church

St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Against Heresies, Book III (summary)

What the virgin Eve bound by unbelief, the virgin Mary loosed by faith and obedience. Second-century material, which means this reading is very early.

Voice of the Church

St. John Damascene

On the Dormition (summary)

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

Ready Response

“Jesus rebuked her.” You are allowed to say you have wondered about that verse yourself. Then ask whether the two of you can read Luke 11:27-28 out loud instead of trading lines about it, and tell your friend what struck you when you read Luke 1 and 2 straight through this week. A shared reading gets further than a rebuttal, and you do not have to pretend you have it all settled.

“The Bible names his brothers.” You will not settle this on the meaning of one word, and the group agreed that pretending otherwise is how you lose a friend. Say plainly that the word alone does not decide it, then offer what you noticed for yourself: Mark 6:3 lists James and Joses among the brothers, and Mark 15:40 names a Mary at the cross, beside Mary Magdalene, as the mother of James and of Joses. Offer it as something worth looking at together rather than as a proof, because it is not one.

“The Immaculate Conception was invented in 1854.” Lead with the concession, the way the session did. This one does not rest on a proof text, and Christians argued about how to say it for centuries before the Church settled the wording. 1854 is the year it was defined, not the year anyone first thought it. Giving ground on the evidence first is what earns you a hearing on everything else.

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.

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

In the Catechism

CCC 484-507, 966, 971. If you read only one, read 971.

Take-Home

Saints, Statues, and the Charge of Idolatry

Abide

Module Two

What We Found

Revelation shows the prayers of God's people held in heaven: golden bowls of incense which are the prayers of the saints, and an angel offering much incense with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar. Hebrews says we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, and Christ says God is not God of the dead but of the living.

And the commandment against images sits in a Bible where God commands two golden cherubim over the mercy seat, a bronze serpent to be looked at, and a temple full of carved figures, built from a plan David handed to Solomon and attributed to the Lord (1 Chronicles 28:11-19). What is forbidden is idolatry: making an image into a god, bowing down to it and serving it as God (Exodus 20:4-5). It is the worship that makes an object an idol, not the carving. Scripture even shows the line being crossed: Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent once people began burning incense to it.

We also named an honest limit. The Church does not define how the saints hear us, and we do not claim they are omniscient.

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.

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

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

Christians do not offer sacrifice to the martyrs but to God alone. The objection is not new, and neither is the answer; he is already fielding it in the fifth century.

Voice of the Church

The Second Council of Nicaea

787

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

Ready Response

“There is one mediator.” Start where you actually live. You ask people to pray for you and you have never once thought of it as competing with Christ, so say that first, in your own words, about your own week. Then offer to read the whole of 1 Timothy 2 together rather than the one verse, and let your friend see for themselves where Paul puts that sentence.

“You are consulting the dead.” Take the worry seriously; your friend is guarding something real, and saying so out loud will do more for the conversation than a rebuttal. Then tell them the thing that settled it for the group: on Christ’s own account these people are not dead. You are asking them the way you would ask your friend to pray for you, and that is the whole of what you mean by it.

“Graven images.” Rather than argue the commandment, open the same Bible beside it: Exodus 25:18, Numbers 21:8-9, 1 Kings 6:23-29, and for the plan of the temple 1 Chronicles 28:11-19. Then tell the Hezekiah story yourself, because it costs you something. God commanded that bronze serpent and it still had to be broken up once people began burning incense to it. Admitting the danger is why you will be believed about the rest.

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.

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**

In the Catechism

CCC 946-962, 2129-2132, 2683.

Take-Home

Purgatory and the Last Things

Abide

Module Three

What We Found

Everyone in purgatory is saved. It is not a second chance, not a middle destination, and not a way of finishing what the cross left undone. If you remember one sentence, remember that one.

The problem it answers comes from two verses almost every Christian accepts. Revelation 21:27 says nothing unclean shall enter. Hebrews 12:14 says holiness is necessary to see the Lord. And most people die genuinely loving God and genuinely unfinished. Every tradition has to say something about that gap.

And we noticed how little the Church defines: not the duration, not the mechanism, not whether fire is literal. The council that defined the doctrine told bishops in the same breath to keep speculation out of preaching.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

Confessions, Book IX (summary)

He records his mother's dying request that her sons remember her at the altar, and then prays for her in the book itself. Not an argument; a fourth-century Christian doing something ordinary for his mother.

Voice of the Church

St. John Chrysostom

Given as a summary of his teaching; no locus printed

The dead are genuinely helped by the prayers and offerings of the living. He urges his people not to weep uselessly but to pray and give alms, which gives grief something faithful to do.

Voice of the Church

The Council of Trent

Session 25, 1563

Affirmed purgatory and the help of the faithful's prayers, and instructed bishops to exclude from popular preaching the difficult and subtle questions that do not build up piety.

Ready Response

“The word is not in the Bible.” Say yes before you say anything else, because it is not there and pretending otherwise costs you the conversation. Then move to what the evening was really about. Nothing unclean shall enter, and almost nobody dies finished. Ask your friend what they do with that gap, and listen; every Christian has to do something with it.

“Hebrews says judgment comes after death.” Agree, and then find out what your friend thinks you believe. Most people who raise this assume Catholics hold that the verdict is still open, and until that is cleared up they are objecting to something you do not hold. Everyone in purgatory has already been judged and is already saved. If you remember one sentence, remember that one.

“That insults the sufficiency of the cross.” This is the one to slow down for, because the person saying it is defending something you love as much as they do. Say that first. Then ask what they think God is doing when he changes a Christian over a lifetime, and whether that has ever looked to them like an insult to the cross. Let them answer before you add anything.

“Indulgences.” Do not defend the sixteenth century and do not change the subject either. Say plainly that the selling was a scandal, that people were genuinely wronged by it, and that the anger it caused was earned. You lose nothing by conceding it, and you will not be heard on anything else until you do.

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.

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**

In the Catechism

CCC 1030-1032, 1054. If you read only one, read 1031.

Take-Home

Baptism

Abide

Module Four

What We Found

We collected the verbs. Born of water and the Spirit. Saved by the washing of regeneration. Wash away your sins. Baptism now saves you. Buried with him and raised with him. Every one is active. To hold that baptism only signifies, you would have to read all of them as figures of speech at once.

And Paul identifies baptism with the circumcision of Christ. Circumcision was given at eight days, to a child who had decided nothing. If the covenant sign was for infants before and is refused to them now, the new covenant would be narrower than the old.

We also conceded the honest fact: no New Testament passage names an infant being baptised. What we have is the household formula, the promise made to you and to your children, and a third-century writer arguing that infant baptism should be delayed, which proves it was already happening.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

Tertullian

On Baptism (summary)

Around the turn of the third century he argues that baptism of small children should be delayed. We cite him against ourselves on purpose: he is arguing against a practice, which shows the practice existed.

Voice of the Church

St. Cyprian of Carthage

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

Asked whether infants should wait until the eighth day in analogy with circumcision, he answers with a council of bishops that none should be delayed. Notice the question: not whether, but whether to wait a week.

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.

Ready Response

“Baptism is a symbol of a decision.” Do not argue the point; do what the group did. Read the verses out loud together and underline the verb each time: John 3:5, Titus 3:5, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, Romans 6:3-4. Then ask your friend what they make of the verbs. They are not wrong about what baptism expresses. The question you are putting to them is what these sentences say it does.

“Acts always shows belief first.” Grant it, and mean it. Those accounts are of grown converts, and the Church still asks the same order of adults today. What you are asking is a smaller question than your friend expects. Missionary preaching tells you how adults came in; it does not tell you what happened to their children, and Acts 2:39 is where the two of you can take that.

“No infant is ever named.” Concede it plainly; it is the honest fact the group had to sit with too. Then say what the silence does and does not carry. No child of Christian parents is ever told to wait, and no surviving early source records a controversy over the practice being introduced or abandoned, in a Church that argued about everything. Tertullian argues about when to baptise, not about whether infants may be.

Live It This Week

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

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**

In the Catechism

CCC 1213-1216, 1250-1252, 1257, 1261.

Take-Home

Confession

Abide

Module Five

What We Found

On Easter evening the risen Christ sends the apostles as the Father sent him, breathes on them in an act that echoes Genesis 2:7 where God breathes life into Adam, and gives them authority to forgive sins and to retain them.

The word retain is where the argument turns. Some read the verse as the commission to preach, so that those who receive the Gospel are forgiven and those who refuse it are not. That reading handles forgive well and retain badly, because a preacher announces a message; he does not retain particular sins. Retaining some sins and not others requires discretion, discretion requires knowing what the sins are, and knowing requires being told.

And the pattern is older than the New Testament. In Leviticus 5 a man confesses the sin he has committed, brings his offering, and the priest makes atonement for him. What changes in the New Testament is the priest and the sacrifice, not the shape.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

The Didache

chs. 4 and 14 (summary)

Confess your transgressions in church, and do not come to prayer with a bad conscience, and confess before breaking bread on the Lord's day. Not private self-examination: it happens in the assembly and is tied to the Eucharist.

Voice of the Church

St. Ambrose

On Penance (summary)

Against rigorists who held the Church could not forgive serious sin after baptism, he argues that the power to forgive was given to the Church and exercised through her ministers. The Catholic side of that dispute was the merciful one.

Voice of the Church

St. John Chrysostom

On the Priesthood, Book III (summary)

He writes with astonishment that priests were entrusted with an authority God gave neither to angels nor archangels, and his whole treatise is about how frightening the office is.

Ready Response

“Why confess to a man?” Give the premise away at once, because you believe it. God alone forgives sins, and the Catechism says exactly that at 1441. Nothing you are about to say puts a rival in his place. What you are asking about is the means he chose, so read John 20:23 together and ask your friend what they make of the word retain.

“James says confess to one another.” Your friend is reading the verse correctly, so say so. On its own, verse 16 does read as something Christians do for each other, and you are not going to pretend otherwise. What you can do is ask to read James 5:14-16 whole rather than the one line, because the sick man there calls for the elders of the church, they pray over him and anoint him, and the forgiveness is spoken of before the confessing is. Read it together and let your friend see where the sentence sits.

“1 John says confess to God.” Agree completely, and lean on it rather than working around it. That verse is yours as much as theirs, and nothing in the sacrament denies that God forgives a contrite heart. Say that you have relied on it yourself, and let the agreement stand for a moment before anything else gets said.

If It Has Been a Long Time

Tell the priest at the start that it has been years and that you do not remember how it goes. He will walk you through it. This is the most ordinary thing in the world to him, and there is nothing you can say that he has not heard. The seal is absolute and there are no exceptions to it.

Live It This Week

- Go to confession. Put it in the calendar before you leave tonight.
- Read Psalm 51 slowly.

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

In the Catechism

CCC 1441-1442, 1456, 1461-1467.