

Session One

The Hard Saying

Abide

The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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

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

- 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.