

Session 14

One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism

The seal that cannot be repeated, the mercy that cannot be bound, and the life that must be lived.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group gathers fourteen weeks into Paul's seven-fold *one*: one Baptism, unrepeatable, sealing an indelible character; discovers the Great Commission as the Jordan scene turned into the Church's marching orders; receives, at last, the full and honest treatment of God's freedom (baptism of desire, of blood, and the hope for those who die without the sacrament); and is sent to live what the water gave: priest, prophet, and king, under an open heaven.

Catholic Touchstone. The Creed the group professes every Sunday carries tonight in one clause: I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The Catechism completes it: incorporated into Christ by Baptism, the baptized are sealed with an indelible spiritual mark that no sin can erase (CCC 1272), Baptism is the foundation of communion among all Christians (CCC 1271), and God has bound salvation to the sacrament while remaining unbound himself (CCC 1257).

What You Need to Know

The last session has three movements: gather, widen, send. Gather: what the fourteen weeks have built, under Ephesians' great *one*. Widen: the honest edges: other Christians' baptisms, and those who die without the water: the second clause of CCC 1257, promised since Naaman, paid in full tonight. Send: the study refuses to end as information; it ends as commissioning, and its closing prayer is the renewal of baptismal promises.

First, Ephesians 4:4–6: *one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all*. Baptism stands in the sevenfold foundation of Christian unity, between faith and God himself. One baptism means, first, unrepeatable: and here teach the Church's beautiful, strange doctrine of the character: Baptism seals the soul with an indelible spiritual mark, Christ's own seal, which no sin can erase (CCC 1272). St. Augustine reached for the military brand of his day: the deserter still carries the emperor's mark; his desertion changes his loyalty, never his belonging's stamp. This is why the Church has never repeated Baptism: not for the lapsed of the persecutions, not for the returning apostate, not the person who feels their first baptism happened before they meant it: the seal cannot be re-applied because it never left (the appropriate renewal is confession and a life reclaimed, and conditional baptism exists only for genuine doubt that a valid baptism occurred at all). For the scrupulous in your room, this is one of the most consoling doctrines the Church owns: your belonging to Christ is not maintained by the quality of your grip.

One baptism also means one across the Christian divisions, and say this with the joy the Catechism says it: Baptism constitutes the foundation of communion among all Christians, including those not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church; justified by faith in Baptism, they are incorporated into Christ and rightly called brothers and sisters in the Lord (CCC 1271, in substance). Every Baptism

conferred with true water, the Trinitarian formula of tonight's discovery, and the intention of doing what the Church does is the one Baptism; where validity is established, the Catholic Church receives converts without repeating it, because she recognizes her own Lord's seal. In a mixed parish room, with Protestant spouses and in-laws around half the tables, this paragraph heals: fourteen weeks of steelmanning our separated brethren's objections ends by honoring their baptism as fully as our own.

Then the discovery: Matthew 28:18–20, and the group should find in it the Jordan scene of Session 9 folded into a command: *baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*: the theophany become a formula: the Father's voice, the Son in the water, the Spirit descending, now the threefold Name spoken over every font. And *all nations*: Naaman's session promised that grace's reach beyond Israel would offend and prevail; here the reach becomes the errand. Note also the commission's grammar: make disciples by baptizing and teaching: the water and the formation belong together, which the group has lived for fourteen weeks.

Now the widening the study has promised since Session 6, and give it the unhurried honesty it deserves: God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments (CCC 1257). The Church names the unbound mercies she confesses: the baptism of blood, which she has always held (catechumens martyred before the font baptized in their own death for Christ, CCC 1258), and the baptism of desire, which her teaching states with careful precision (the catechumen's explicit desire, with repentance and charity, assures salvation's fruits, CCC 1259; and for those who, through no fault of their own, never knew Christ or his Church yet sincerely seek God and strive to do his will, salvation is a real possibility the Church states with care, CCC 1260). And the tenderest edge: children who die without Baptism: the Church entrusts them to the mercy of God, who desires all to be saved, and to Jesus' own tenderness toward children, which allows us to hope there is a way of salvation for them (CCC 1261): while the same paragraph makes the Church's call all the more urgent not to hinder little children from coming to Christ through Baptism. Someone in your room has been waiting fourteen weeks, or fourteen years, for this: a miscarried child, an unbaptized parent who died, a sibling who left. Keep the Catechism's own distinctions kind and clear (for children, 1261's particular hope; for adults, 1260's careful conditions and the commendation of each soul to the God who reads hearts), and give them the Church's real teaching: confident hope in an unbound mercy, without pretending to a certainty the Church herself does not claim, and without ever making the sacrament seem optional. Both hands, all the way to the end.

Tonight's final steelman lives exactly on that edge, and it is the sharpest of the fourteen: if desire can save, and mercy is unbound, then the exceptions swallow the rule: in practice baptism is optional, sincerity suffices, and mission urgency was always overwrought. The answer: the exceptions presuppose the rule they qualify (baptism of desire is desire FOR BAPTISM: you cannot even describe the exception without the sacrament at its center); the sacrament is covenant certainty while extra-sacramental salvation is real but uncovenanted hope (the Church knows no OTHER means that ASSURES: CCC 1257's own verb); and love has never aimed at minimums: the question what is the least God might accept? is not a question love asks about anyone it loves. The apostles, who knew God's freedom better than we do (they watched the Spirit fall on Cornelius), still ran for water every single time.

End with the sending, because Baptism is a commissioning as well as a birth: the baptized share Christ's threefold anointing as priest, prophet, and king (CCC 1268): worship to offer, truth to speak, service to rule by. Gather the study's images into the charge: the white garment to keep unstained to the end; the open heaven to live under; the sealed guess answered; the name spoken over them still true. The closing

prayer is the renewal of baptismal promises: fourteen weeks of study becoming five spoken *I do*'s. Let the room stand for it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses... And I will put my spirit within you
Ezekiel 36:25, 27 (RSV2CE)

The promise the study traced ends as the unity the Church confesses:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.
Ephesians 4:4–6 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Gregory Nazianzen • *Oration 40, On Holy Baptism*

St. Gregory the Theologian, in the ancient Church's greatest sermon on Baptism, teaches in substance that the gift has as many names as it has splendors: we call it gift, grace, baptism, anointing, illumination, garment of immortality, bath of regeneration, seal: gift, because conferred on those who bring nothing; grace, because given even to debtors; bath, because it washes; seal, because it guards us and marks God's ownership.

Leader note: A lovely closing exercise if time allows: read Gregory's list slowly and ask the group which name the study taught them to love most, and why.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine • *his writings against the Donatists*

St. Augustine, defending the unrepeatable seal across his anti-Donatist works, teaches in substance that Baptism marks the soul as the military brand of his age marked the emperor's soldier: the deserter who flees the ranks still bears the mark; it convicts him while he wanders and identifies him when he returns; and no one re-brands a returning soldier. So the Church receives back the lapsed with penance, never with a second font: the seal outlasts every desertion, waiting.

Leader note: This doctrine is also why the Church recognizes Baptisms conferred in Protestant communities with water, the Trinitarian formula, and the requisite intention: the seal is Christ's, not the minister's or the denomination's, as Session 8's Augustine already taught: it is Christ who baptizes.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Creed of the Church • *Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*

"I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

Sixteen centuries of Sundays, and the whole of this study, in nine words: one (Ephesians' unity, the unrepeatable seal), Baptism (the water God chose), for the forgiveness of sins (Peter's Pentecost

promise, effected, not merely pictured). The group has been professing the conclusion of this study aloud since before it began.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1272–1274 gives tonight's seal: incorporated into Christ by Baptism, the baptized person is configured to Christ, sealed with an indelible spiritual mark of belonging that no sin can erase (though sin can block the fruits): given once for all, Baptism cannot be repeated: and the seal of the Lord is the seal with which the Holy Spirit has marked us for the day of redemption, kept for the faithful Christian until the end as the condition and root of eternal life. CCC 1271 grounds the ecumenical joy: Baptism as the sacramental bond of unity among all who are reborn by it.

CCC 1257–1261 is tonight's honest widening, and read all five paragraphs in preparation until you can say them with both hands: necessity affirmed from the Lord's own words (1257, with its balancing clause); baptism of blood and of desire bearing Baptism's fruits without the sacrament (1258–1259); salvation possible for those who, without fault, never knew the Gospel yet seek God sincerely (1260); and the children who die without Baptism entrusted, with real grounds of hope, to the mercy of God and the tenderness of Jesus (1261). CCC 1268 sends: the baptized share in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal office: the study's last doctrine is a job description.

Paragraphs for this session: 1257–1261, 1268, 1271–1274

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Final inventory, for your eyes: every planted thread has resolved: why water (Sessions 7 and 10); water plus Spirit (9–10); the dove (9); the door in the ark's side (12); baptized into someone (11); the eighth day and the covenant children (13); circumcise the heart (7); the fountain opened (12); water and wood (12); Naaman's child-flesh (10); the Jordan and the true Joshua (9); water-then-Spirit (9); Nicodemus (12). Tonight resolves the last three: **the warning thread** (Session 3: real gifts must be lived: tonight's priest-prophet-king sending is its answer); **he must increase** (Session 8: the baptized life's posture); **the white garment and the open heaven** (11 and 9: gathered into the charge). If the group wants a victory lap, let them name threads from memory: it is a better review than any summary you could give.

One baptism, never repeated (planted Session 13): resolved tonight with the character doctrine and the ecumenical paragraph. Watch for the room member this heals.

God binds and is not bound (planted Session 6): the study's longest pastoral promise, paid in full tonight. Do not rush 1261.

Session Goals

1. The group can place Baptism in Ephesians' sevenfold one and explain both senses of one baptism: unrepeatable, and shared across Christian divisions.

2. The group can describe the baptismal character in Augustine's image and say why the Church never repeats a valid Baptism.
3. The group has discovered the Great Commission as the Jordan scene become formula and errand.
4. The group has received the full teaching on baptism of blood, of desire, and the hope for unbaptized children, with both CCC 1257 clauses intact.
5. The final steelman (the exceptions swallow the rule) has been given at full strength and answered.
6. The group has renewed their baptismal promises aloud, standing, and leaves commissioned: priest, prophet, king.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: Ephesians 4:1–6; the seal and the character; Q1-Q2

10 min • Live discovery: Matthew 28:18–20

15 min • Build: God's freedom: desire, blood, and the little ones; Q4

15 min • Steelman: do the exceptions swallow the rule?

5 min • Send questions

15 min • Live It, memory verse, and the Renewal of Baptismal Promises as closing

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: The Dig Deeper box, and Q1's Ephesians context can be compressed. Never cut the treatment of 1261 or the Renewal of Promises: the first is the study's tenderest debt, the second its true ending.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, fourteen weeks ago we stood at the waters of creation with a sealed question. Tonight we stand at the end with open hands. Gather everything you have shown us, settle it deep, and then do what you have always done with the baptized: send us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Looking back across the whole study: which single session, passage, or moment most changed how you see your own Baptism? Say why in one sentence.

QW2. What is a promise someone kept to you over a very long time? What did the keeping, not just the promise, teach you about them?

Build • into the text

Read Ephesians 4:1–6 aloud. Paul is begging a divided church toward unity, and he grounds it in seven ones. Notice where baptism stands in the list: between one faith and one God.

Q1. Why does Paul put *one baptism* into the very foundation of Christian unity, alongside one Lord and one God? After thirteen sessions, what can this group say that baptism makes us, that mere agreement never could?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Because baptism is not a shared opinion but a shared birth: the same water, the same threefold Name, the same death and rising, the same Body entered (one body and one Spirit heads Paul's list). Organizations are held together by agreement and dissolve when it fails; organisms are held together by common life. Paul grounds unity in baptism because the baptized are not allies; they are siblings: born of one womb, the font: which is why Christian division is not like a club splitting but like a family estranged: and why the path back always runs through remembering the one birth.

Q2. One baptism means never twice. The Church teaches that Baptism seals an indelible character: Christ's own mark on the soul, which no sin, no desertion, no decade of absence can erase (CCC 1272). St. Augustine compared it to the military brand that a deserter still carries. What does this doctrine mean for someone who abandoned the faith for thirty years: and for someone here who secretly wonders if their baptism took?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

For the deserter: the mark never left you, though the friendship did. Grave sin forfeits sanctifying grace and communion; what it cannot erase is the seal, which identifies you in the far country and at the door coming home. So the Church receives you back through confession, which restores the grace, and never through a second font, because the seal was never lost. For the doubter: your

belonging to Christ is not maintained by the quality of your grip, your memory of the day, or the warmth of your feelings since: it was his act, his seal, given once for all: which is why the appropriate response to a shaky faith is never rebaptism but reclamation: live what is already yours. (Conditional baptism is given only when, after serious investigation, prudent doubt remains whether Baptism was conferred, or conferred validly: a question of fact and form, not of feelings.) There is deep rest in a gift that cannot be un-given.

And one baptism reaches across the Christian divisions. Say it with the Catechism's own joy: Baptism is the foundation of communion among all Christians, including those not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church: justified by faith in Baptism, incorporated into Christ, rightly called our brothers and sisters in the Lord (CCC 1271 in substance). Every baptism conferred with true water, the Trinitarian formula, and the intention of doing what the Church does is the one Baptism: the Church never repeats a valid Baptism, wherever it was given, because she recognizes her Lord's own seal. Fourteen weeks of taking our separated brethren's arguments at full strength ends here: honoring their baptism as fully as our own.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The final hunt. Tell the group: the risen Lord's marching orders contain a scene this study stood inside five weeks ago, compressed into a formula. Find **Matthew 28:18-20**, read it aloud, and answer two questions: where have we seen the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit gathered at a baptism before: and who is the water now for?

The Jordan (Session 9): the Father's voice, the Son in the water, the Spirit descending: become the threefold Name spoken over every font. And ALL NATIONS: Naaman's foreshadowing (Session 6) become the errand: the outsider's cleansing that enraged Nazareth is now the Church's standing assignment. Note too the commission's own pairing: baptizing AND teaching: water and formation together, which is what this group has been doing for fourteen weeks.

Q3. Now the promise this study made in Session 6 and has carried since: *God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments* (CCC 1257). Tonight the second clause gets its full hour. What does the Church actually teach about the martyred catechumen, the sincere seeker who never knew Christ, and the child who dies without Baptism?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Three mercies, each ancient. The baptism of blood: catechumens martyred before the font have always been held by the Church to be baptized by their death for and with Christ: the water of the font and the blood of witness flow from the same side (Session 12). The baptism of desire: catechumens who die with the explicit desire for Baptism, together with repentance and charity, are assured the salvation they could not receive through the sacrament (CCC 1259). And those who, through no fault of their own, never knew Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and strive to do his will, MAY attain salvation: the Church holds it may be supposed such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly had they known its necessity (CCC 1260): a real possibility, stated in the Catechism's own careful mood. And the children: the Church entrusts children who die without

Baptism to the mercy of God who desires all to be saved, and to the tenderness of Jesus who said let the children come to me: which allows us, the Catechism says, to HOPE that there is a way of salvation for them (CCC 1261): a real, grounded hope, honestly named as hope rather than inflated into a certainty the Church does not claim: and the same paragraph turns the hope into urgency: all the more, do not hinder the little ones from coming through Baptism. If tonight this touches a grief you carry: a child lost before the font, a parent or friend who died unbaptized: hear the Church's actual voice: for the children, the grounded hope of CCC 1261; for adults, CCC 1260's careful possibility and the commendation of each soul to God who reads hearts: she does not consign; she entrusts, to a mercy she has spent fourteen weeks showing you is wider than its own channels. Hope is not a consolation prize. It is what love is allowed to do at the edge of what it cannot see.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

The study's final objection, and its sharpest, at full strength: you have just taught that desire saves, that sincere seekers who never heard of Christ can be saved, that martyrdom saves without water, and that we may hope even for unbaptized infants. Then the exceptions have swallowed the rule. In practice, on your own showing, the water is optional: God's mercy finds everyone the sacrament misses. Why then the fourteen weeks? Why the apostolic urgency, the midnight baptisms, the missions? Sincerity suffices: which means the honest conclusion of your own final session is that this whole study documented, magnificently, something unnecessary.

Q4. Feel it fully first. Then examine the exceptions themselves: what does each one have at its center?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Look at what every exception is made of. The baptism of desire is desire FOR BAPTISM: explicit in the catechumen, implicit in the seeker who would have desired it had they known: you cannot even state the exception without the sacrament at its center; it is not an alternative route around the font but the font's grace reaching those who were running toward it. The baptism of blood is dying with and for Christ: Baptism's own content (buried with him: Session 11) at maximum intensity. And the hope for the children rests on entrusting them to the very Christ the font unites us to. The exceptions do not compete with the rule; they orbit it. Abolish Baptism's reality and every exception dies with it: there is nothing left to desire, no death to share, no mercy with a face.

Second: the Church's word for what the sacrament gives is not possibility but assurance: she does not know of ANY MEANS OTHER than Baptism that ASSURES entry into eternal beatitude (CCC 1257's own language). This is the difference between covenant and hope: what God has bound himself to give through the sacrament: forgiveness, rebirth, incorporation: we know with the certainty of his promise (initial grace to be lived in persevering fidelity, not a guarantee of final perseverance: Session 3's warning stands to the end): the whole study's grammar, from Naaman's appointed river onward: grace with an address. What God does beyond his sacraments, we hope with real but uncovenanted hope. A father who promises his child dinner at his table has not thereby promised nothing because he might also feed a stranger at the door: and no child reasons from the father's generosity to strangers that the table is optional.

Last, and let the study end on this: minimalism is not a mode love has. What is the least God might accept? is not a question anyone asks about a person they love: love asks what is the most I can bring them?: and the most, this study has spent fourteen weeks unwrapping: forgiveness, the indwelling Spirit, incorporation into Christ, sonship declared, the seal that outlasts desertion, the open heaven. The apostles, who watched God's freedom outrun them at Cornelius's house, did not conclude that water could wait: they concluded, can any one forbid water?, and ran for it: three thousand times on the first day. God's unbound mercy is our hope for those beyond the font. It was never an argument for leaving anyone we love outside it. The study ends where Acts is still running: toward the water, with everyone we can carry.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group, one last treasure: Revelation 22:1–2, the Bible's final chapter: *the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb*, with the tree of life on its banks, its leaves for the healing of the nations. The Scriptures open with the Spirit over the waters and close with a river from the throne of the Lamb: the pierced one of Session 12, enthroned, the fountain never closing. Ask: where is Ezekiel 47's deepening river now, and how deep does the group intend to wade?

Send • out of the room

QS1. You are baptized: priest (worship to offer), prophet (truth to speak), king (service to order). Which of the three offices have you been leaving unexercised, and what is its first act this month?

QS2. Fourteen weeks ago you sealed a guess. Tonight, one last writing assignment, unsealed: finish this sentence for yourself: *Because I am baptized, I will...*

Live It This Week

- Celebrate your baptismal anniversary this year as a real feast: the date is in your calendar since Session 9; plan the meal, light your baptismal candle if you have it, tell the story.
- Exercise each office once this month: offer one intentional act of worship beyond Sunday (priest), have one honest conversation about the faith (prophet), take up one hidden act of service (king).
- Bless yourself with holy water at every entrance and exit of the church from now on, deliberately: you now know the water's whole biography, from Genesis 1:2 to the opened side to your own forehead.
- Pass it on: pray about leading, hosting, or inviting someone into the next study: baptizing and teaching belong together, and formation is how the baptized keep walking.

Memory Verse

one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:5–6 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

(Have the group stand. Leader asks; all answer. This is the Roman Missal's Renewal of Baptismal Promises, in the second form of the renunciations, with the profession of faith: the study's true conclusion.)

Do you renounce sin, so as to live in the freedom of the children of God? : I do.

Do you renounce the lure of evil, so that sin may have no mastery over you? : I do.

Do you renounce Satan, the author and prince of sin? : I do.

Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth? : I do.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered death and was buried, rose again from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father? : I do.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting? : I do.

And may almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given us new birth by water and the Holy Spirit and bestowed on us the forgiveness of our sins, keep us by his grace, in Christ Jesus our Lord, for eternal life. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Ephesians 4:1–6 • The sevenfold one; memory verse at vv. 5–6

Matthew 28:18–20 • Live discovery: the Jordan become formula and errand

Acts 10:44–48 • Callback: God's freedom running ahead, and the apostles running for water

Luke 18:15–17 • Callback: let the children come; the ground of 1261's hope

Revelation 22:1–2 • Dig Deeper: the river from the throne of the Lamb

CCC 1257–1261, 1268, 1271–1274 • Necessity and freedom; the three offices; the seal and the one Baptism

The Nicene Creed • I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins