

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

A Catholic Bible Study

· SESSION NINE ·

Christ and His Church

The Good Shepherd · The Sheepfold · The True Vine · The Bridegroom and the Bride

"I am the vine, you are the branches. ... Apart from me you can do nothing."

John 15:5 (RSV2CE)

LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE · WITH PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION

SESSION OVERVIEW

This session moves into ecclesiology and Christology together. The images of John 10 and John 15, together with the Bridegroom imagery gathered across the Gospels, are not loose moral teachings. They are Jesus' own deepest claims about who he is and what the Church is. The Shepherd and Bridegroom identify him with images Israel's prophets used for God himself; the True Vine identifies him as the faithful Israel the nation failed to be, the one source of his disciples' life. Each places the disciple inside a community whose life depends on staying connected to him.

A note on genre: strictly speaking these are not narrative parables like the Sower or the Prodigal Son. The Good Shepherd, the Sheepfold, and the True Vine are Jesus' great "I am" self-revelations in John's Gospel; John himself calls the shepherd discourse a *paroimia* (a figure of speech, Jn 10:6). The Bridegroom is an image Jesus applies to himself (Mk 2:19-20) and Paul develops for Christ and the Church (Eph 5). They belong in a study of the parables because they are the same kind of teaching, an image that reveals, raised to its highest pitch, and because they disclose who the Shepherd and the Vine of all the other parables actually is.

Audience note: participants often have a thin or reduced ecclesiology. The Church is, in their experience, a building they go to, an institution with rules, sometimes a community they have been hurt by. These images insist on something more: the Church is the body and bride of Christ, the place where his life flows into his disciples through the sacraments. Treat the move from ethics to ecclesiology with patience; for many this is new territory.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The Good Shepherd: Jesus claims what Ezekiel said only God could do

John 10:1-18 must be read against Ezekiel 34. There God indicts the kings, priests, and prophets of Israel for being shepherds who feed themselves rather than the flock, and then makes a promise unique in the Old Testament: “I, I myself will search for my sheep ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep” (Ez 34:11, 15). God himself will become the Shepherd the human shepherds failed to be. When Jesus stands in the Temple during the feast of Dedication and declares “I am the good shepherd” (Jn 10:11), he is not borrowing a pastoral image; he is claiming the identity Ezekiel says God himself will take up, while also fulfilling Ezekiel’s parallel promise of “my servant David” as shepherd (Ez 34:23): both promises converge in Christ, true God and Son of David. His audience understands exactly what he is claiming: a few verses later they pick up stones to kill him for blasphemy, because “he, being a man,” makes himself God (Jn 10:33). Jesus does not correct them; he doubles down, “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30).

Two elements carry weight. First, the Shepherd “lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11, repeated in 10:15, 17, 18). In the ordinary world the sheep die for the shepherd, not the reverse; Jesus names his coming passion as the defining act of his shepherding. The cross is not an interruption of the shepherding; it is the shepherding itself at its decisive moment. Second, the Shepherd knows his sheep by name (Jn 10:3, 14, 27). The relationship is personal, particular, and mutual, and the Catholic theology of vocation, the personal call of Christ to each disciple, is grounded here.

The Sheepfold and the door: the singularity of Christ

Within the same chapter (Jn 10:1-9) Jesus uses the related image of the sheepfold: he himself is the door of the sheep (Jn 10:7, 9), and anyone who enters by another way is a thief and a robber. The image is intentionally exclusive: there is one door, and the door is Christ. The Church’s teaching that there is no salvation apart from Christ (cf. Acts 4:12) is grounded in passages like this. The exclusivity is not ecclesiastical narrowness but Christological clarity: Christ is not one door among many; he is the door.

The True Vine: abiding and the Eucharist

John 15:1-17 belongs to the discourse Jesus gives at the Last Supper, after the institution of the Eucharist (Jn 13-17 forms the single Farewell Discourse). “I am the true vine” (Jn 15:1) takes up the Old Testament image of Israel as God’s vineyard (Is 5:1-7; Ps 80:8-16; Jer 2:21) and claims it for himself: he is the true Israel, the vine planted by God, and the branches are the disciples, who apart from him can do nothing (Jn 15:5). St. Cyril of Alexandria’s *Commentary on the Gospel of John* develops a strongly Eucharistic reading: the branches abide in the vine by sharing the vine’s own life (the same sap, in this guide’s image), and for St. Cyril this abiding is corporeal as well as spiritual, mediated through the Eucharist by which the disciple receives Christ’s own life. The tradition holds this Eucharistic reading alongside a broader account of abiding synthesized from St. Thomas Aquinas, who treats John 15 directly in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (ch. 15): the indwelling of grace through every means God uses to keep the Christian united to Christ (Word, sacrament, prayer, the moral life). Both stand; the Eucharistic dimension is central but not exclusive.

The pruning of John 15:2 is crucial: even the fruitful branches are pruned, that they may bear more fruit. Pruning is the painful but loving work by which God removes what is wasting the disciple’s energy on growth that does not bear the fruit he wants. The disciple’s sufferings, received in faith, are often this pruning. It is not punishment; it is love at work.

St. Augustine and the Donatists: the unity of the body

St. Augustine's preaching on John, especially *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 45-47, takes up the Good Shepherd discourse in the context of his long argument against the Donatist schism. The Donatists had separated from the Catholic Church over the validity of sacraments performed by clergy who had compromised under persecution. St. Augustine's teaching, drawing on the parable: there is one flock and one Shepherd, and schism, the deliberate breaking of the Church's unity, wounds the Body of Christ. The unity of the Church is not an organizational matter; it is a consequence of the unity of Christ himself (cf. CCC 1396, the Eucharist as source and sign of unity).

The Bridegroom: Christ and his Church

The image of Christ as Bridegroom and the Church as Bride runs throughout the New Testament: Mark 2:18-20 (Jesus identifies himself as the Bridegroom, and the disciples cannot fast while he is with them), the Ten Bridesmaids (Mt 25:1-13, treated in Session 10), and Ephesians 5:25-32 (Paul reads the Genesis 2 "one flesh" as a great mystery referring to Christ and the Church). The prophets repeatedly describe Israel as God's bride (Hos 2:16-20; Is 54:5; Is 62:5; Jer 2:2). When Jesus identifies himself as the Bridegroom, he takes up the divine role and claims the Church as the New Israel (cf. Rom 11:29).

St. Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (eighty-six sermons, unfinished at his death) is the most influential Catholic mystical reading of the bridal imagery. St. Bernard reads the Song as describing the soul's union with Christ, with the Church as the larger Bride within whom each soul is a particular bride. The union is at once corporate (the whole Church is the Bride) and personal (each soul is invited into a personal love-union with the Bridegroom). Both dimensions matter; either without the other distorts the teaching.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

These are the deep roots of Session 9. The group opens Ezekiel 34 together in the Good Shepherd discussion; the rest are developed here.

EZEKIEL 34:11-12, 15-16 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep ... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak."

The most important Old Testament passage for understanding Jesus' self-identification as the Good Shepherd. God promises that he himself will be the Shepherd; when Jesus claims the title in John 10, he claims the divine shepherding God promised for himself, and fulfills the Davidic promise as well (Ez 34:23).

PSALM 23:1-4 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ... he restores my soul ... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

Psalms 23 is the prayer of the sheep who belong to the Shepherd. Read alongside John 10, it becomes the prayer of the disciple who belongs to Christ. The valley of the shadow of death is the territory through which the Good Shepherd passed for his sheep and through which he leads them home.

ISAIAH 5:1-2, 7 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard ... he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes ... For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel.”

Isaiah’s Song of the Vineyard is the foundational image of Israel as God’s vineyard. When Jesus says “I am the true vine” (Jn 15:1), he claims to be the faithful Israel the historical nation failed to be, and the Church, grafted into him, shares in Israel’s vocation brought to fulfillment: not by God revoking his gifts and call to the Jewish people, which are irrevocable (Rom 11:29; CCC 839-840), but by the wild branches being grafted into Israel’s own olive tree (Rom 11:17-24).

HOSEA 2:19-20 (RSV2CE)

“And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.”

Hosea’s image of God betrothing Israel is the foundation of New Testament bridal theology. The Bridegroom imagery in the Gospels and Ephesians 5 takes up this promise and identifies its fulfillment in Christ and the Church.

ISAIAH 62:5 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”

Isaiah 62 explicitly applies the bridegroom-bride image to God’s love for his people. When the New Testament identifies Christ as Bridegroom, it locates him in the divine role Isaiah described.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

Method: *Direct quotations appear in quotation marks with citation; faithfully represented teaching without a single quotable line is given as paraphrase with citation.*

St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

St. Augustine’s engagement with the Good Shepherd comes through his *Tractates on the Gospel of John* (notably 45-47, on Jn 10), preached during his long effort against the Donatist schism: there is one flock and one Shepherd, and the unity of the Church is a consequence of the unity of Christ himself. To break communion with the Catholic Church is, theologically, to wound the body of the Good Shepherd. On the Vine, his preaching (Tractates 80-82) emphasizes that no branch bears fruit of itself; the Christian who tries to live apart from the constant reception of grace through prayer, sacrament, and Scripture is a branch disconnected from the vine, and the absence of fruit is the diagnosis.

St. Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376–444)

St. Cyril's Commentary on the Gospel of John, especially Book 4 (on Jn 6:53-56) and Book 10 (on Jn 15:1), develops the Eucharistic reading of "abiding in the vine": the branches abide through the same life, the same sap, which he identifies with Christ's own life received sacramentally. The disciple's union with Christ is not metaphor but real participation, mediated supremely through the Eucharist. This Eucharistic reading is one important strand within the tradition, not the only legitimate reading, but theologically central.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)

St. Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* is the most influential Catholic mystical reading of the bridal imagery. He reads the Song as describing the soul's personal union with Christ, with the Church as the larger Bride within whom each soul is loved as a particular bride. Christ is Bridegroom of the whole Church and, in a personal way, of each soul; the personal love does not bypass the Church but is received within her.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

St. Thomas' theology of the Mystical Body in *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 8 (on the headship of Christ over the Church) supplies the systematic framework: Christ is the Head of the Body that is the Church, and the disciples are members; abiding in him is the constant reception of grace from the Head into the members. The Eucharistic dimension is central (qq. 73-83 on the Eucharist), and in his Commentary on the Gospel of John (ch. 15) he treats abiding directly; the description of abiding through Word, sacrament, prayer, and the moral life lived in charity is a faithful synthesis of his teaching rather than the words of a single passage.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 754

"The Church is, accordingly, a sheepfold, the sole and necessary gateway to which is Christ. It is also the flock of which God himself foretold that he would be the shepherd ... led and nourished by Christ himself, the Good Shepherd ... who gave his life for the sheep."

CCC 755

"The Church is the cultivated field, the tillage of God. ... The Church is the vineyard of the Lord. The branches live by the holy and life-giving Spirit, the Spirit of Christ."

CCC 796

"The unity of Christ and the Church, head and members of one Body, also implies the distinction of the two within a personal relationship. This aspect is often expressed by the image of bridegroom and bride. ... The Church is the spotless bride of the spotless Lamb."

SESSION GOALS AND TIME ESTIMATE

Goals for the leader

1. Establish that Jesus' self-identification as Shepherd, Vine, and Bridegroom is in each case a staggering claim: to the divine roles of Shepherd and Bridegroom, and to being the true Israel in whom the disciples live as branches.
2. Connect the Vine and the Eucharist explicitly: the disciple abides through participation in Christ's sacramental life.
3. Press the implication that the Church is not an institution we choose to join but the body and bride of Christ, the place where his life flows.
4. Help participants name where they have experienced being known by name (the Shepherd) or united as branches to the vine.

Time estimate (90 minutes)



Opening prayer and check-in: 10 min



The Good Shepherd and the Sheepfold (read, Ezekiel discovery, discussion): 32 min



The True Vine (read, discussion): 28 min



The Bridegroom and the Bride (read, discussion): 15 min



Application and closing prayer: 5 min

PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

“Lord Jesus, you are the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, and the Bridegroom of your Church. Tonight as we hear your own deepest claims about who you are, give us hearts to receive you not just as teacher but as Shepherd of our souls. Make us branches that abide in you, members of your one flock, and the bride who waits for the Bridegroom. We ask this in your name. Amen.”

Check-In (5–10 min)

Briefly: how is the practice of persistent prayer going from last week? Have you noticed anything in keeping a long petition before God deliberately?

READ ALOUD

For eight sessions we have listened to Jesus teach about the Kingdom, mercy, money, neighbor, and prayer. Tonight he teaches about himself, and about the community he is gathering. Three images, each drawn from the Old Testament and each previously used by Israel's prophets to describe God himself. As you hear "I am the Good Shepherd," "I am the true vine," and "the Bridegroom is here," listen for how high the claim actually goes.

PART ONE · THE GOOD SHEPHERD AND THE SHEEPFOLD (JOHN 10:1-18)

Have someone read John 10:1-18 aloud.

JOHN 10:11-15 (RSV2CE)

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd ... sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees ... I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."

Q1. [TEXT] Look at how often Jesus repeats "lays down his life" in this passage (verses 11, 15, 17, 18). What is he refusing to let his hearers miss about who he is and what he came to do?

Leader note: *He refuses to let his shepherding be reduced to teaching, healing, or moral example; it climaxes in his death. The cross is not an interruption of the shepherding but its central act. He also indicates that his death is something he is doing, not merely suffering: "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:18). His sovereignty over his own death is part of who he is.*

Now have someone read Ezekiel 34:11-16 aloud, spoken by God through the prophet some five centuries before Christ.

EZEKIEL 34:11-12, 15-16 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep ... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak."

Q2. [TRADITION] What does God promise in Ezekiel 34 that only he can do? Now set it beside Jesus' words, "I am the good shepherd." What is he claiming, and why, a few verses later, do his hearers pick up stones (Jn 10:33)?

Leader note: *Let the group make the connection themselves. God promised, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep", a role reserved for God alone. When Jesus takes that exact title, he is claiming the divine identity, and his hearers understand precisely: they reach for stones because "he, being a man, makes himself God." They were not wrong about the claim, only about whether it was true. Jesus does not soften it; he says, "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30).*

Q3. [TEXT] Three times (verses 3, 14, 27) Jesus speaks of the Shepherd knowing his sheep by name. Why is the personal knowing important? What does it say about how Christ relates to each disciple?

Leader note: The relationship is personal and particular, not generic. Christ does not love a collective; he loves you, by name, and the Catholic theology of personal vocation is grounded in this image. This consoles the participant who feels lost in the crowd of the Church and challenges the one who would prefer to remain anonymous.

Q4. [TRADITION] St. Augustine taught, against the Donatist schism, that there is one flock and one Shepherd, and that the Church's unity is a consequence of the unity of Christ himself, so that breaking communion wounds the body of the Good Shepherd. How does this change the way you think about Church unity?

Leader note: It moves Church unity from an organizational concern to a Christological one: the Church's unity is a participation in the unity of Christ, and schism is not a regrettable administrative event but a wound to the body of Christ. This shapes how Catholics relate to other Christians (the Catechism on ecumenism, CCC 813-822, builds on it) and how we regard the unity of our own parish.

Q5. [LIFE] Have you experienced being personally known by Christ in some specific season or event? Without forcing it, can you name a time when the Shepherd was clearly seeking you by name?

Leader note: Many will have experiences they have rarely articulated: the night they returned to confession after years away, the retreat where they felt seen, the crisis through which they found themselves prayed for. Honor what comes up. Some will have nothing yet; that is also fine. The question itself is an invitation to look.

PART TWO · THE TRUE VINE (JOHN 15:1-17)

Have someone read John 15:1-17 aloud. Notice that this discourse comes from the Last Supper, just hours after Jesus instituted the Eucharist.

JOHN 15:4-5 (RSV2CE)

"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 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."

READ ALOUD

St. Cyril of Alexandria, in the fifth century, drew the connection between this passage and the Eucharist: the branches abide in the vine through the same life, the same sap, and the disciple's union with Christ is not chiefly an idea or a feeling but real participation in Christ's own life, mediated supremely through the Eucharist. St. Thomas Aquinas extends it: abiding also includes the indwelling of grace through every means God uses to keep us united to him, the Word read, the sacraments received, prayer, and the moral life lived in charity. The Eucharist is not the only channel of abiding, but it is the densest one.

Q6. [TEXT] Jesus says in verse 5 that apart from him we can do "nothing." Not "little" or "less." Nothing. Why such an absolute word? What does it tell us about the Christian life?

Leader note: He distinguishes activity from fruitfulness: we can do many things apart from Christ, but we cannot bear the fruit that lasts. The Christian life is not chiefly self-improvement powered by our own effort; it is the life of Christ flowing through us. The branch does not produce sap; it receives sap and turns it into fruit. The disciple does not generate grace; the disciple receives grace and bears the fruit grace produces.

Q7. [TEXT] Look at verse 2: even the fruitful branches are pruned, that they may bear more fruit. What does pruning typically feel like in a disciple's life, and what is it not?

Leader note: *It typically feels like loss or restriction, the removal of something good but unnecessary. It is not punishment and not a sign of God's displeasure; it is the loving, painful work by which God removes what wastes our energy on growth that does not bear the fruit he wants. Many sufferings, received in faith, are pruning. The signal is that the suffering is not random but is shaping the soul to bear more fruit, not less.*

Q8. [LIFE] Where in your life right now do you feel like a branch trying to bear fruit by your own effort, disconnected from the vine? Given St. Cyril's point about the Eucharist, what is one specific way to reconnect to the sap this week?

Leader note: *Common forms of disconnection in young-adult life: prayer gone rare, missed Mass, postponed confession, isolation from Christian community. The reconnection is usually not exotic: read Scripture fifteen minutes a day, go to confession this week, be at Mass on Sunday with attention, find one person to pray with. Small, real reconnections, with the Eucharist as the densest place Christ gives his life.*

PART THREE · THE BRIDEGROOM AND THE BRIDE (MARK 2:18-20; EPHESIANS 5:25-32)

Have someone read Mark 2:18-20 and then Ephesians 5:25-32 aloud.

MARK 2:19-20 (RSV2CE)

"And Jesus said to them, 'Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? ... The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.'"

EPHESIANS 5:25, 31-32 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ... 'the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

READ ALOUD

When Jesus calls himself the Bridegroom, he again takes up an Old Testament image the prophets had used for God himself: Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all describe God as the husband of Israel. Paul develops this in Ephesians 5: marriage itself, in its deepest meaning, is an icon of Christ and the Church. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in his sermons on the Song of Songs, taught that Christ is Bridegroom of the whole Church and, in a personal way, of each soul. Each disciple is loved by Christ as a particular bride, within the larger Bride that is the Church.

Q9. [TRADITION] St. Bernard of Clairvaux taught that Christ is Bridegroom both of the whole Church and of each individual soul. Why is it important to hold both together? What goes wrong if we hold only one?

Leader note: *If we hold only the corporate, the personal love disappears and the Christian life becomes membership rather than relationship. If we hold only the personal, the Church becomes optional and the disciple becomes a private*

spirituality detached from the body of Christ. St. Bernard insists on both: the personal love is real, and it is received within the larger Bride. We are loved individually within the love given to the whole Church.

Q10. [LIFE] Most of us think of the Church as something we go to or belong to. The bridal imagery suggests something different: the Church is the bride who waits, prays, and prepares for the Bridegroom. What changes about your relationship to the Church if you think of yourself as part of her?

Leader note: The change is from membership in an institution to participation in a love. The Church is not a building or chiefly an organization; she is the bride of Christ, in whom each disciple is loved and formed. Hostility, indifference, or distance toward the Church becomes more serious in this light, because the relationship is not with an institution but with a bride being prepared for her Bridegroom. Session 10 presses this further with the Ten Bridesmaids.

APPLICATION AND CLOSING

CLOSING CHALLENGE

Two practices this week. First, the next time you are at Mass, slow down at the moment of Communion. Receive the Eucharist with the awareness that the union with Christ begun in your Baptism is being renewed, strengthened, and deepened (CCC 1396), the sap of Christ's own life flowing into the branch. Do not let it pass as routine. Second, take the area you named in question eight and make one concrete reconnection: read fifteen minutes of Scripture daily, schedule confession, find one person to pray with weekly, or make Sunday Mass the fixed center of your week.

Scripture Memory

JOHN 10:11 (RSV2CE)

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Closing Prayer

"Lord Jesus, you are our Good Shepherd, our True Vine, and the Bridegroom of our souls. Forgive us for the times we have wandered from your flock, withered as branches disconnected from your sap, or grown distant from your bride the Church. Tonight gather us back. Renew and deepen our life in you. Make us, in the week that begins tomorrow, members of your one flock, abiding branches in your vine, and the bride who waits for you with lit lamps. We ask this in your name. Amen."

GOING DEEPER (OPTIONAL)

Use any of these as your group has time and interest.

QGD1. [TEXT] Read Ezekiel 34 in full alongside John 10. Where does Ezekiel's promise of God as Shepherd intersect with his promise of "my servant David" as shepherd (Ez 34:23)?

Leader note: Ezekiel makes two promises that in the Old Testament look like separate fulfillments: God will be Shepherd, and “my servant David” will be Shepherd. Both are fulfilled in one person in Christ, the Son of David who is also the divine Shepherd. The mystery of the Incarnation is what allows the two prophecies to converge: Jesus is the human Davidic Shepherd and the divine Shepherd in one person.

QGD2. [TRADITION] CCC 1396 teaches that “the Eucharist makes the Church”: those who receive it are united more closely to Christ and to one another in his Body (cf. CCC 1323, which, quoting Vatican II, calls the Eucharist “a sign of unity”). How does this depend on the Vine and Branches imagery, and what does it imply for divisions among Christians?

Leader note: If the Eucharist is the sap by which the branches abide in the vine, then sharing it is not casual. The Catholic teaching that Eucharistic communion presupposes communion in faith and Church order is the ecclesiological consequence of the Vine. Divisions in faith are real wounds in the body of Christ, and the path toward Eucharistic communion runs through healing them: the goal of ecumenism is real unity, not the appearance of unity at the table while the underlying communion is broken.

QGD3. [LIFE] What does it mean for the way you treat your local parish to think of it as a branch of the vine and part of the bride? Have you related to your parish more like a consumer than a member of the body?

Leader note: Many young Catholics relate to their parish as one of several spiritual options to be judged by personal preference. The Vine and the Bride resist that posture. The parish is where, in the concrete, the disciple lives out being a branch in the vine and a member of the bride; the local Church is the Church for that disciple, and how one relates to it is how one relates to Christ’s body.

QGD4. [TRADITION] St. Bernard’s reading of the Song of Songs as the soul’s union with Christ has shaped the tradition for nearly a millennium. Why has the Church been comfortable using such intensely personal imagery, and what does it protect us from?

Leader note: Because the deepest reality of the Christian life is love, and love is the most personal of realities. The bridal language protects us from a Christianity reduced to ethics or doctrine: the point is not chiefly to know what to believe and do, important as both are, but to be loved by Christ and to love him in return. The bridal language protects this center.

SCRIPTURE INDEX FOR THIS SESSION

Primary texts: John 10:1-18 | John 15:1-17 | Mark 2:18-20 | Ephesians 5:25-32

Old Testament background: Ezekiel 34 | Psalm 23 | Isaiah 5:1-7 | Hosea 2:19-20 | Isaiah 62:5 | Jeremiah 2:2 | Psalm 80:8-16

New Testament support: 1 Peter 2:25 | 1 Peter 5:1-4 | Hebrews 13:20-21 | Revelation 21:9 | John 6:53-56

Catechism: CCC 754, 755, 796, 813-822, 1396

Sources cited: St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John 45-47 (on Jn 10) and 80-82 (on Jn 15) | St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, Book 4 (on Jn 6:53-56) and Book 10 (on Jn 15:1) | St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* | St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae III, q. 8 and qq. 73-83; Commentary on the Gospel of John, ch. 15.