

Session 5: Honest Doubt

A study for seekers and the friends who walk with them

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: The group discovers how Jesus actually treats doubters in the Gospels: with evidence, presence, and commissioning rather than scolding, and that Scripture commands mercy toward those who doubt.

Catholic Touchstone: Faith is certain because it rests on the word of God, yet revealed truth can seem obscure to human reason and experience; the Church distinguishes involuntary doubt, the honest difficulty in believing, from voluntary doubt, and treats the first with mercy (CCC 157, 164, 2088).

HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

Tonight lives or dies on the believers in the room. Three commitments:

- Believers go first. Before the seeker is asked anything, at least one host confesses a real, current or past doubt of their own, specifically. Nothing in six weeks will build trust faster, and nothing will destroy it faster than performed certainty.
- Do not treat your friend's doubt as a problem to be solved tonight. The session's claim is that Jesus keeps company with doubters; keep company.
- If anyone's doubt is tangled with grief, depression, or a dark season, do not theologize it. Acknowledge it, leave silence, and afterward, privately, point toward real support: a priest, a counselor, a trusted friend. The Church has room for the dark; so should this group.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The objection tonight comes in two voices. The skeptic's version: persistent doubt among believers is evidence against the whole thing; a real God would produce steady believers, and the wobble in the pews is data. The seeker's quieter version: my doubt proves faith is not for me; whatever this is, I am disqualified. Both versions assume that doubt and faith are opposites and that the tradition treats doubters as failures. Tonight's texts test that assumption against Jesus's recorded behavior.

The pattern in the texts is remarkably consistent. The father at the foot of the mountain confesses belief and unbelief in one breath, and Jesus heals his son anyway. John the Baptist, whom Jesus calls the greatest born of women, sends the searching question from prison, his own doubt or his disciples', interpreters differ, and Jesus answers with evidence and then praises him to the crowds. Thomas demands proof, and the risen Christ arrives with the proof requested, wounds first. At the Great Commission itself, Matthew records that some doubted, and Jesus commissions them anyway. Jude commands the community: convince some, who doubt. Engaging doubters is apostolic instruction. (Leaders: many translations of Jude 22 read, have mercy on some who doubt; the manuscripts vary, and both readings serve tonight.)

Hold the balance honestly. Jesus's word to Thomas ends in an exhortation, do not be faithless, but believing, and a beatitude for those who believe without seeing; the texts never celebrate doubt as a destination. The Church's precision helps here (CCC 2088): involuntary doubt, the hesitation and difficulty an honest person cannot simply switch off, is not sin, while voluntary doubt, the refusal to

hold what one knows, is another matter. Newman's distinction runs the same line: difficulties are not doubts, and ten thousand of the first need not add up to one of the second. Tonight's mercy is real; so is the direction of travel.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The prayer of struggle is an Old Testament genre. Roughly a third of the Psalter is lament; the psalmists interrogate God to his face and are canonized for it. Psalm 77, which the group read this week, models the turn: the psalmist doubts aloud (has his steadfast love for ever ceased?) and then deliberately remembers the deeds of the LORD, arguing himself back toward trust from evidence, exactly the movement Hebrews 11:19 attributed to Abraham. Job's book holds protest that God receives and corrects: the friends' tidy answers are rejected (42:7), Job himself is interrogated and humbled (42:6), and then restored. The New Testament doubters stand in this lineage, and Christ receives them the way the LORD received Job: with presence.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, St. John Henry Newman writes that ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, as he understood the subject. In this guide's gloss of his distinction: a difficulty is a question not yet resolved; a doubt is a verdict. For Newman, an honest mind can carry unresolved difficulties inside a settled trust, the way a good marriage carries unanswered questions without becoming an open question itself.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. GREGORY THE GREAT

St. Gregory the Great teaches in his *Homilies on the Gospels* (Homily 26) that the disbelief of Thomas has done more for our faith than the belief of the other disciples: because Thomas touched and was convinced, every later generation's doubt finds its answer in his. In God's providence, St. Gregory says, the doubter's demand was allowed precisely so that the Church would forever hold the evidence he required.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. TERESA OF CALCUTTA

St. Teresa of Calcutta's posthumously published letters (gathered in *Come Be My Light*) reveal that for roughly the last half century of her life she experienced a profound interior darkness, a felt absence of God, through which she continued to pray, serve, and believe. The Church, which reviews a candidate's writings in the canonization process, canonized her. Felt certainty, it turns out, is not the measure of real faith; fidelity in the dark is.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 157:** Faith is certain, more certain than all human knowledge, because it is founded on the very word of God; yet revealed truths can seem obscure to human reason and experience.
- **CCC 164:** We walk by faith, not by sight; faith can be put to the test, and the experience of evil, suffering, and injustice can seem to contradict the Good News.
- **CCC 2088:** Voluntary doubt disregards or refuses to hold as true what God has revealed and the Church proposes for belief; involuntary doubt is hesitation in believing and difficulty in overcoming objections. The honest struggler and the refuser are not the same case.

THREAD WATCH

The main thread develops one last time before resolution: notice that in every text tonight, Jesus meets doubt with evidence and presence, deeds reported to John, wounds offered to Thomas. God's pattern of speaking bends toward showing up. Next session it resolves; tonight, do not name it. Envelopes are not used tonight; do not mention them.

SESSION GOALS

1. State both versions of the doubt objection, the skeptic's and the seeker's, at full strength.
2. Let the group discover Jesus's consistent treatment of doubters: mercy, evidence, presence, commissioning.
3. Establish the Church's distinction between involuntary and voluntary doubt, and Newman's between difficulty and doubt.
4. Have the believing hosts model confessed doubt before any seeker is asked to.

TIME NOTE

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: fold the Matthew 28:17 discovery into the Thomas answer, then cut the Jude 22 line from discussion (keep it in the leader's pocket). Do not cut Mark 9, Matthew 11, or John 20.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

Leader prays: Lord, we believe; help our unbelief. That prayer is already in your book, so we know you take it. Tonight we bring you the sure and the unsure parts of every person here, and we ask you to treat us the way the Gospels show you treating people like us. Amen.

WIN

5. Hosts first, and specifically: name a doubt you have actually carried, or carry, about God. Not a safe one. (Leader: do not move on until at least one believer has really answered.)
6. Where did you learn what doubt is supposed to mean about a person: that it is honest, or that it is shameful?

BUILD

Leader, present the objection at full strength, both voices. Read slowly: The skeptic says, look at the believers: they wobble, they waver, they lie awake. A real God would produce steady conviction; all this doubt is evidence against him. And the quieter voice, maybe in this room, says: my doubt proves this is not for me. Whatever faith is, I am disqualified.

- 3. Both versions assume faith and doubt cannot live in the same person. Before we test that: has that assumption cost you, or someone you love, anything?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Let stories surface; do not argue with them. Then frame the test: the only way to know how this tradition treats doubters is to watch its Founder do it, on the record, four times.

Live discovery. Find Mark 9:20-27, a father with an afflicted son. Read verses 22 to 24 aloud.

- 4. The father's prayer in verse 24 is a contradiction spoken in one breath. What is it, and what does Jesus do with it?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

"I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). Belief and unbelief, confessed together, by the same man, in the same sentence, and Jesus heals his son. Jesus receives the father's imperfect faith and heals, and note verse 23, all things are possible to him who believes: the passage invites the divided heart to come honestly AND calls it to grow; it does not certify certainty as the entry fee. This prayer has long been cherished and prayed in the Church.

Live discovery. Find Matthew 11:2-6, then keep a finger there and look at verse 11. Read 2 to 6 aloud.

- 5. Who is asking whether Jesus is really the one, and from where? How does Jesus answer, and then what does he say about the asker?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

John the Baptist, from prison, the man who baptized Jesus and pointed him out: *"Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"* (Matthew 11:3). Jesus points the messengers to the messianic deeds they hear and see (in Luke's parallel, performed before their eyes, Luke 7:21), adds *"blessed is he who takes no offense at me"* (11:6), and then turns to the crowd and calls John the greatest born of women (11:11). Whether the question was John's own or carried for his disciples, it received

evidence, a warning against taking offense, and public honor, and no loss of standing. Note what Jesus's answer was made of: not a rebuke, evidence.

Live discovery. Find John 20:24-29, Thomas. Read it aloud, slowly.

- 6. Thomas sets conditions for belief: what are they? And when Jesus comes, what does he do about those conditions?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Thomas demands to see and touch the wounds, and the risen Christ arrives and offers exactly that: *"Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing"* (John 20:27). He meets the demand, and then points beyond it: *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe"* (20:29). Hold both halves. Mercy toward the doubter is total; and the exhortation is real: the texts keep company with doubt while still calling it toward trust. Doubt is met, not celebrated.

Live discovery. Find Matthew 28:16-20, the Great Commission. Read verse 17 carefully.

- 7. Verse 17 records something startling about the group receiving the Great Commission. What is it, and what does Jesus do next?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

"And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted" (Matthew 28:17). At the Resurrection appearance itself, some doubted, and the next verses are Jesus commissioning that exact group to make disciples of all nations. He entrusted the mission to a room that included doubters. The Church has never, from minute one, been a doubt-free zone, on the testimony of her own founding documents.

Reason, then the Church's precision. Offer Newman's distinction, in our own words: a difficulty is a question not yet resolved; a doubt is a verdict; his line from the Apologia is that ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt. And the Catechism's (CCC 2088): involuntary doubt, the hesitation an honest person cannot switch off, is not sin; it is a condition Jesus is shown treating with evidence and patience. The direction of travel still matters, and no one tonight is being told doubt is the destination. But no one gets to say the doubter is disqualified. The record says otherwise.

- 8. Which have you been carrying: difficulties, or a verdict? Would the people around you know the difference?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

A self-locating question; let it be personal and do not collect answers aloud unless offered. If it helps, name Jude 22, a one-line apostolic command: convince some, who doubt. Engaging doubters patiently is an instruction, not a concession.

DIG DEEPER

If time allows: Psalm 77, which the group read this week, models the movement from doubt to remembrance: the psalmist asks whether God's steadfast love has ceased for ever, then deliberately calls to mind the deeds of the LORD, reasoning from evidence back toward trust. The same movement as Abraham in Hebrews 11:19, and available to anyone this week.

SEND

7. What would it change to bring your doubt to God instead of only holding it about him: to pray it, Mark 9:24 style, instead of just thinking it?
8. Who is one person who needs to hear from you that doubt did not disqualify Thomas, or John, or the eleven, and will not disqualify them?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Pray Mark 9:24 once a day, in those words, whatever your ratio of belief to unbelief currently is.
- Try Psalm 77's move once: when the doubt surfaces, deliberately list three things, evidence, experiences, people, that originally made God seem possible or real to you, and look at the list before you rule.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"I believe; help my unbelief!" Mark 9:24

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader prays: Lord Jesus, you answered a father's divided heart with healing, a prisoner's question with evidence, and a skeptic's conditions with your own wounds. Do with our doubts what you did with theirs. We believe; help our unbelief. Amen.

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 5, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.

- **Mark 9:20-27** I believe; help my unbelief (live discovery; memory verse from v. 24; do not cut)
- **Matthew 11:2-6, 11** John the Baptist's question from prison; answered with evidence, then praised (live discovery; do not cut)
- **John 20:24-29** Thomas: conditions met, then the beatitude (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Matthew 28:16-20** some doubted; commissioned anyway (live discovery; first fold if short)
- **Jude 22** convince some, who doubt (leader's pocket; second cut)
- **Psalms 77** doubt turning to remembrance (Dig Deeper; ties to this week's reading)
- **Hebrews 11:19** Abraham's reasoning trust (callback to Session 2)

Catechism: CCC 157; 164; 2088.

Voices: St. John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*; St. Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospels*, Homily 26; St. Teresa of Calcutta, letters published in *Come Be My Light*.