

Session 1: Could a Jew Say This?

John 6:22-71, with Genesis 9:3-4 and Leviticus 17:10-14

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers for themselves why John 6:53 was the most shocking sentence a first century Jewish audience could hear, and that Jesus, given every chance to soften it, intensified it instead.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church has always read the Bread of Life discourse as pointing to the Eucharist, in which Christ gives his true flesh and blood as real food and real drink (CCC 1336, 1406).

What You Need to Know

This study begins where most Eucharist studies end: with the scandal. Before we ask what the Eucharist is, we are going to ask what it sounded like. Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew speaking to Jews, and everything he said about eating his flesh and drinking his blood landed on ears formed by the Torah. To hear him the way his first audience heard him, we have to know what they knew.

What they knew was this: few commands in their Scriptures are stated more solemnly or repeated more insistently than the prohibition on consuming blood. It predates Sinai. It is given to Noah, the ancestor of the whole post-flood family, repeated to Moses, and grounded in a principle: the life of the flesh is in the blood, and life belongs to God alone. Against that backdrop, Jesus does not merely say something strange in the synagogue at Capernaum. He says the one thing the Law seems to forbid most strictly, and he says it about himself.

The leader's task tonight is restraint. Do not rush to reassure the group that it all works out. Let the difficulty stand, because the difficulty is the discovery: the crowd's shock, the drawing back of many disciples, and Jesus's refusal to walk it back are themselves the strongest evidence of what he meant. This session plants questions the rest of the study will spend eleven weeks answering.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Genesis 9:3-4. After the flood, God gives Noah every moving thing for food, with one exception: flesh with its blood. It is given to Noah, ancestor of the whole post-flood family, before Israel exists.

Leviticus 17:10-14. God promises to set his face against anyone who eats blood, Israelite or sojourner alike, and gives the reason: the life is in the blood, and God has given blood one purpose only, atonement on the altar. Blood is for God, not for the table.

Deuteronomy 12:23. Moses repeats the command with unusual urgency: only be sure that you do not eat the blood. Israel's whole instinct about blood was formed by texts like these.

Fulfillment. In John 6, Jesus commands what Torah-formed ears could only hear as forbidden, and the rest of this study will ask why. Here is the shape of the answer we will discover together: the prohibition guarded a truth, that life is in the blood and that blood belongs to God. Jesus does not abolish that truth. He fulfills it: he gives his own life-giving blood, the blood of the divine Son, received not as ordinary blood at an ordinary table but sacramentally, in the mode he himself would provide, precisely so that his life would be in us (John 6:53).

Voices of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. c. 107)

Writing to the church at Smyrna within living memory of the apostles, St. Ignatius described certain teachers who stayed away from the Eucharist. His summary of their error is striking: they abstain, he

wrote, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, the flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father raised (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 7). Ignatius goes on to tell the faithful to keep away from such teachers; for a bishop of the apostolic age, this confession stood at the border of the Church's faith.

St. Justin Martyr (d. c. 165)

Explaining Christian worship to a pagan emperor around the year 155, St. Justin wrote that Christians do not receive the Eucharist as common bread or common drink, but as the flesh and blood of the Jesus who was made flesh (*First Apology* 66). Notice the audience: this is not private devotional language. It is how the Church publicly described her own faith little more than a century after the Last Supper.

St. John Chrysostom (d. 407)

Preaching through John's Gospel for his people, St. John Chrysostom drew attention, in summary, to the very thing your group will notice tonight: when the crowd found the saying hard, Jesus did not explain it away. Chrysostom took this as Christ teaching us that the Eucharist calls for faith before comprehension, and he urged his hearers to approach the altar with the awe the words deserve.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 1336: the first announcement of the Eucharist divided the disciples, just as the announcement of the Passion scandalized them; the Eucharist and the Cross are stumbling blocks, and the same mystery is a cause of division.
- CCC 1406: Jesus said that whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood has eternal life; the Catechism cites John 6 directly as Eucharistic.
- CCC 1381: with St. Thomas Aquinas, the Church confesses that the true body and true blood of Christ in this sacrament cannot be apprehended by the senses, but only by faith, which rests on the authority of God.

THREAD WATCH

The command to eat. Tonight the group meets a command to eat that sounds impossible. Do not resolve it. This thread runs through the whole study: the lamb that had to be eaten, the manna that had to be gathered, the bread that stood before God's face. Keep a running mental list; the group will assemble it themselves by Session 12.

Sealed guess. Take-Home 1, distributed after tonight, carries the sealed My Guess box: in John's Gospel, Jesus's final word from the cross is that it is finished. What was finished? Collect the sealed sheets next week and keep them safe. They open at Session 10. Do not discuss the question tonight beyond reading it aloud.

Session Goals

1. Establish the group's covenant of honesty: hard questions are welcome here.
2. Discover the blood prohibition in Genesis, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy from the texts themselves.
3. Read John 6:22-71 and feel its full force without premature reassurance.
4. Meet the strongest form of the metaphor reading and begin answering it from the text.
5. Plant the sealed guess and the command-to-eat thread.

A note on time. This session runs 75 to 90 minutes. If you must cut, cut Dig Deeper and the second Send question. Do not cut the steelman chain; the honesty of this study depends on it.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Father, your Son said things that were hard to hear, and he let his friends wrestle with them. Give us the honesty to wrestle tonight, and the trust of Simon Peter, who did not understand everything but knew he had nowhere better to go. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win: Opening the Conversation

1. Tell us about a time someone you trusted asked you to accept something you could not yet understand. What did you do?
2. What is the hardest teaching of Jesus for you personally, the one you would quietly soften if you could?

Build: Into the Text

Leader: Before we open the Gospels tonight, we need to build the world Jesus's listeners lived in. Have three different people look up and read aloud Genesis 9:3-4, Leviticus 17:10-14, and Deuteronomy 12:23.

3. From these three passages alone, how serious was the prohibition on consuming blood? Who did it apply to, and what reason does God himself give for it?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

It is among the most absolute commands in the Torah. Genesis gives it to Noah, before Israel exists, addressed to the whole post-flood family. Leviticus extends it explicitly to the sojourner, threatens being cut off from the people, and God says he will set his face against the one who eats blood.

The reason is stated twice in Leviticus 17: the life of the flesh is in the blood. Blood carries life, life belongs to God, and God assigned blood a single sacred use, atonement on the altar. In the biblical world, to drink blood would be to seize for yourself what belongs to God alone.

4. Now keep all of that in your ears. Have someone read John 6:22-40. What is the crowd looking for, and what does Jesus offer them instead?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The crowd wants more of yesterday's miracle, bread for the stomach, and they even cite the manna their fathers ate in the wilderness. Jesus redirects them from perishable food to food that endures to eternal life, and then makes the claim the whole study turns on: the true bread from heaven is not a thing but a person. I am the bread of life.

Do not miss that the crowd raised the manna first. We will spend two full sessions there. File it away.

5. Read John 6:41-51. The audience murmurs. Where else in Israel's story did the people murmur about bread from heaven? And how does Jesus respond to the murmuring: does he clarify, or escalate?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

They murmur just as the wilderness generation murmured against Moses when the manna was first given (Exodus 16). John is deliberately replaying the exodus.

Jesus escalates. The discourse climbs from believing in him, to eating the bread which is his flesh, given for the life of the world. Verse 51 removes the comfortable distance: the bread is his flesh.

6. Read John 6:52-59 slowly. The audience asks how this man can give us his flesh to eat. List exactly what Jesus does and does not do in his answer.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

He does not say he was speaking figuratively. He does not soften a single word. Instead he adds the most offensive element possible for a Jewish audience: drinking his blood, the very thing the group just read God forbidding on pain of being cut off.

And the Greek sharpens. From verse 54 John shifts to *trogo*, a more concrete verb for eating, often carrying the sense of chewing. Treat the shift as supporting color rather than proof; the argument stands on the audience's reaction and Jesus's response. And be precise about what the Church claims: real eating, sacramental in mode, not a crude physical devouring. He also declares his flesh true food and his blood true drink (verse 55).

The Other Side of the Table

Leader: Now we let the strongest objection speak at full strength before we answer it. Read this to the group as persuasively as you can; do not weaken it.

The metaphor reading. Jesus constantly spoke in metaphors. He is the door, the vine, the light; nobody thinks he is made of wood or leaves. In this very chapter, eating and believing run in parallel: he who comes to me shall not hunger, he who believes in me shall never thirst (verse 35). And near the end he seems to say so himself: it is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail (verse 63). Surely eating his flesh simply means believing in him, and Catholics have built a mountain on a figure of speech. And the strongest form of this reading is not bare symbolism: many Reformed and evangelical Christians affirm a real, spiritual feeding on Christ received by faith, so that John 6 is fully true without any change in bread and wine, and they note that the discourse comes long before any institution narrative and contains no sacramental command.

7. That is a serious argument. Before anyone answers it, strengthen it: what is the best additional point you could add to it?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Let the group genuinely try. Good additions: metaphors were normal rabbinic teaching style; John's Gospel is full of misunderstood figures (the temple of his body, being born again, living water); and a literal reading seems to make Jesus command something the Torah forbids.

8. Now answer it from the text itself. Stay inside John 6 and the passages we have already read. What does the metaphor reading fail to explain?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

First, the audience's reaction and Jesus's response. When his words are misunderstood elsewhere in John, clarification comes: Jesus unpacks being born again as water and the Spirit (John 3:5), and when the disciples take sleep literally he tells them plainly, Lazarus is dead (John 11:14); where he leaves a saying dark, John himself supplies the key later (the temple of his body, John 2:21-22). Here, as many of his disciples draw back and no longer walk with him, he explains nothing and intensifies everything, then turns to the Twelve and asks if they will also leave. People do not abandon a rabbi over a metaphor they were free to have explained.

Second, the idiom problem. Where eating someone's flesh appears figuratively in the Hebrew Scriptures, the sense is hostile: predatory oppression in Micah 3:3, and in Psalm 27:2 the RSV2CE renders the Hebrew idiom, to eat up my flesh, as uttering slanders. These texts do not fix one mechanical meaning, but they all point one direction: no biblical figure of eating flesh means believing in someone. A merely figurative reading would lean toward whoever persecutes me, not whoever trusts me; it does not produce belief.

Third, verse 63. Jesus says the flesh is of no avail, not my flesh, and the Catholic reading takes the contrast as Scripture elsewhere uses flesh against spirit: natural human perception against what God gives (compare John 3:6; 8:15). Others read verse 63 differently, and the group should know that; but on any reading, the verse cannot mean that Christ's own flesh avails nothing, or the Incarnation and the Cross would avail nothing either.

Be honest with the group about what we have and have not shown. Tonight establishes that Jesus meant something far more than a figure of speech and refused every exit. The spiritual-feeding reading is right that faith is how this bread is received (verse 47 stands); the open question it leaves, and this study presses, is whether the Lord who spoke this way gave only an idea to feed on, or the gift his words describe. How his words are fulfilled without violating what the blood prohibition protected is the question the next eleven sessions answer.

DIG DEEPER: The Words That Cost Him Disciples

Read John 6:60-71 as a group. This is the one passage where a Gospel records many disciples drawing back and no longer walking with Jesus over a teaching, and where he offers the Twelve the chance to leave with them.

Ask: what does Peter's answer, that they have nowhere else to go because Jesus has the words of eternal life, teach about the relationship between understanding and trust? Note verses 70-71: John himself ends the discourse on Judas, tying its unbelief to the betrayal to come.

Send: Taking It With You

9. Peter did not say I understand; he said to whom shall we go. Where in your life right now is God asking for that kind of trust?

10. If John 6 means what it appears to mean, what would have to change about the way you approach Mass this Sunday?

Live It This Week

- Read John 6 once more on your own, out loud if you can, and mark every place Jesus could have softened his words and did not.
- At Mass this Sunday, listen for the moment the priest says the words of Jesus over the bread and the cup, and silently pray Peter's words: Lord, to whom shall we go?
- Fill in your sealed My Guess sheet from the Take-Home, seal it, and bring it next week. Do not sign your name.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. John 6:68

Closing Prayer

Together: Lord Jesus, you said what you meant and you meant what you said, and you would not unsay it even when it cost you your friends. Give us ears formed by your whole word, and bring us back next week hungrier than we came. Amen.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Passage	Used For
Genesis 9:3-4	Blood prohibition given to Noah, binding all humanity
Leviticus 17:10-14	Life is in the blood; blood reserved for atonement; live discovery
Deuteronomy 12:23	Moses's urgent repetition of the prohibition
Exodus 16 (reference)	Wilderness murmuring behind John 6:41; developed in Session 5
John 6:22-40	Crowd seeks bread; Jesus the bread of life; manna raised by the crowd
John 6:41-51	Murmuring parallel; the bread is his flesh
John 6:52-59	Eat flesh, drink blood; trogo intensification; true food, true drink
John 6:60-71	Desertion of disciples; Peter's confession; Dig Deeper
John 6:35, 6:63	Steelman texts for the metaphor reading
Micah 3:3; Psalm 27:2	Figurative eat-flesh idiom means persecution (note: RSV2CE renders the Ps 27:2 idiom as slander); steelman answer
John 6:68	Memory verse