

SESSION 13

Witnesses

Acts 1:8 • Acts 4 • Acts 7 • Sponsors and Saints

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

Sealed, gifted, and growing fruit: tonight the group learns what it is all FOR. Jesus' last sentence before ascending gives the confirmed their job title: "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my WITNESSES." The Greek word is *martyrs*, and participants watch what it did to actual people: Peter, who folded before a servant girl, standing before the same council that had opposed Jesus and handed him over, and refusing to be silenced; and Stephen, in the live discovery, praying for his executioners with a young man named Saul holding the coats. The session then turns intensely practical: the two companions the Church commends for this road, a sponsor on earth (to be provided insofar as possible) and, by cherished custom, a patron in heaven, how to choose both well, and what the parents' own irreplaceable role is and is not.

Catholic Touchstone

Confirmation gives a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ (CCC 1285). Martyrdom is the supreme witness to the truth of the faith, borne even unto death (CCC 2473). And the witnesses who have preceded us into the kingdom, especially those the Church recognizes as saints, contemplate God, praise him, and do not cease to care for those they have left on earth; their intercession is their most exalted service (CCC 2683).

What You Need to Know

Martyrs. The Greek *martyrs* simply means witness: a person who testifies to what they have seen and know, especially in court. In the Church's early centuries, so many witnesses paid for their testimony with their lives that the word increasingly took on its second meaning, and English keeps only that one: martyr. Teach the sequence honestly: the job title is witness; the price tag, in some times and places, was everything; and the Church has never separated the word from its cost. Most witness is unbloody: a lunch table, a locker room, a break room. But the unbloody kind is real currency of the same denomination, which is why courage is what the sacrament is for.

The Peter comparison is the sacrament's before-and-after photo. The night before the crucifixion, Peter denied Jesus three times at a fire, the first challenge coming from a servant girl, the next from others. In Acts 4, the same man, "filled with the Holy Spirit," stands before the Sanhedrin, the council that had opposed Jesus and delivered him to Pilate, and the court is astonished at his *parrhesia*, his boldness, noting that he is uneducated and common, and recognizing only that he "had been with Jesus." Nothing about Peter's résumé changed between the fire and the courtroom. One thing changed, and this study spent Session 7 on it.

The sponsor, precisely. Church law asks that, insofar as possible, each candidate have a sponsor (canon 892), and sets the qualifications (canons 893 and 874): a Catholic who has been confirmed, has received the Eucharist, leads a life in harmony with the faith, is normally at least sixteen, is not bound by a canonical penalty, and is not the candidate's parent; check with the parish, since particular law can adjust details. The Church even recommends, where suitable, the baptismal godparent, to underline that

Confirmation completes what Baptism began. Explain the not-the-parent rule as gift rather than slight: the parents' role is primary, prior, and permanent, and needs no appointment; the sponsor is the wider Church physically showing up, proof that the candidate's faith has a family bigger than their household. Practical counsel for choosing: someone whose actual practiced faith the candidate has SEEN, who will still be praying for them at twenty-five, and who can be asked hard questions. Holiness over convenience; availability over prestige.

The saint name, precisely. Taking a saint's name at Confirmation is a venerable custom, strong in this country, though not an absolute requirement everywhere; candidates may also carry forward their baptismal name, especially if it is already a saint's. Where the custom is kept, frame the choice as choosing a patron: an ally in heaven whose life the candidate will actually study, whose prayers they will actually ask, and whose name they intend to grow into. Counsel against choosing by coolness of name alone; counsel toward reading three or four short lives first and noticing which one will not leave them alone. The right patron often feels less chosen than assigned.

For the parents in the room. Two pastoral currents run tonight. First, the not-the-parent sponsor rule can sting; the framing above, primary role needs no appointment, usually heals it; in the liturgy the candidates are ordinarily presented by the pastor or another minister, with parents accompanying, and the parents' formative role stands prior to the whole day. Second, tonight's steelman is the one many parents have absorbed from the surrounding culture or their own upbringing: that asking saints' prayers detracts from Christ. Give it full strength and a full answer; a parent who leaves tonight able to explain the communion of saints to a skeptical relative has been handed a tool they will use for years.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- "You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen" (Isaiah 43:10): the job title predates the courtroom of Acts; Israel was commissioned as witness to the nations, and the confirmed inherit the commission.
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego before the furnace (Daniel 3:16-18): the Bible's young witnesses under state pressure, and the greatest "but if not" in Scripture. Tonight's Dig Deeper.
- The prophets, from Samuel to the Baptist, are the long line of witnesses whose testimony cost them; Stephen, in his final speech, names the pattern to the faces of his judges.

Voices of the Church

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ignatius of Antioch (*Letter to the Romans, around AD 107*)

St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote ahead to Rome while under armed guard, traveling to his execution, and begged the Christians there not to rescue him: I am God's wheat, he wrote, and am ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may be found pure bread of Christ. A man one lifetime from the apostles, facing the arena, described his death in the vocabulary of the Eucharist. Witness, for Ignatius, was not a tragedy interrupting his faith; it was his faith arriving at its destination.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Polycarp of Smyrna (*the Martyrdom of Polycarp, around AD 155*)

St. Polycarp, who had known the apostle John, testified that he had served Christ for eighty-six years when the proconsul offered him his life for one small blasphemy. His answer, preserved in the

church of Smyrna's account of his martyrdom, became the most famous sentence attributed to any martyr: eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my King who saved me? An entire theology of witness in two clauses: long fidelity, and a loyalty that will not trade the King for anything, which the group will recognize as fear of the Lord, the seventh gift, at full maturity.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

Tertullian of Carthage (*Apology, around AD 197*)

Tertullian, writing an open defense of the persecuted Christians to the Roman authorities, ended with a warning the empire proved true: the more you mow us down, the more we grow; the blood of Christians is seed. Witness under pressure did not shrink the Church; it planted her. Every candidate in your room is downstream of testimony somebody paid for, and most of them have never once been told so.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1285.** Confirmation gives a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ.
- **CCC 2473.** Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: the martyr bears witness to Christ, and to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine, enduring death.
- **CCC 2683.** The witnesses who have preceded us into the kingdom contemplate God, praise him, and do not cease to care for those on earth; their intercession is their most exalted service to God's plan.

Thread Watch

The title verse surfaces. Acts 1:8 is the sentence this whole study is named for, and tonight it becomes the memory verse. When it is read, let it be read twice, and say nothing about the title; anyone who notices gets a smile.

One week out. At the door tonight: every household must bring Take-Home 1 next week, sealed boxes intact. Say it plainly, and add the promise: next week, everything in this study gets opened, the pages and the rest of it. Session 14 needs your full preparation; reread every Thread Watch note from all thirteen sessions, and obtain a copy of the Order of Confirmation from your pastor this week if you do not have one. You will be walking the group through it text in hand.

Session Goals

1. Participants know what martyrs means, what it came to cost, and can tell the Peter before-and-after from the texts.
2. Participants have found Stephen themselves and noticed both his prayer and the young man holding the coats.
3. The group has faced the "one mediator" objection at full strength and can explain asking a saint's prayers without embarrassment.
4. Every candidate leaves knowing what a sponsor is for, how to choose one, and how to choose a patron saint, with the parent's own role honored and distinguished.
5. Every household knows to bring Take-Home 1, sealed, next week.

Time Note

Full plan runs about 80 minutes; the sponsor and saint section deserves its time. To land at 60: drop Win question 1 (keep question 2), skip the Dig Deeper box on Daniel, and present the steelman objection yourself in ninety seconds. Never cut the Peter comparison, the Stephen discovery, or the sponsor and saint counsel; those carry the session.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Come, Holy Spirit, Advocate of every witness. You turned a fisherman who feared a servant girl into a man no court could silence, and You gave a deacon dying under stones the breath to bless his killers. We are not asking to be spared the stand. We are asking to be ready for it. Fill us with the boldness You gave them, and surround us with the friends You have given us, on earth and in heaven. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win: Opening Questions

Parent and candidate pairs. Two minutes each question, then a few pairs share with the table.

1. If you were on trial for something and could pick one person to stand in your corner, who would you pick, and what makes them the one?
2. Is there someone no longer living whose example still shapes how you act? Tell your partner who, and how.

Build: Into the Text

Scene One: The Job Title (Acts 1:8)

Households reread Acts 1:1-11 this week with orders to memorize the job title in verse 8. Have verse 8 read aloud, twice, then collect: what is the job title?

Question 1. Witnesses. The Greek word is *martyrs*: someone who testifies to what they have seen and know, especially in court. In the early Christian centuries, the word grew a second meaning, the one English kept. What is it, how do you suppose that happened to a word, and what does the word's history tell you about the job?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Martyr. The word for courtroom testimony became, over the Church's early centuries, the word for dying, because so many witnesses paid for their testimony with their lives that the testimony and the price fused into one word. Let the room absorb what that etymology is: a fossil record of courage. Two things follow for your table. First, the job is testimony, saying what you have seen and know about Jesus Christ, and most of it happens in cafeterias and break rooms, not arenas; the unbloody witness is the same currency. Second, the Church has never pretended the job is free, and neither should Confirmation prep: the sacrament's special strength (CCC 1285) exists because the job needs it. Nobody issues body armor for a desk job.

Question 2. Now the before-and-after. Recall Peter on the night of the arrest: three denials at a charcoal fire, the first prompted by a servant girl, the rest by others around it (Luke 22:54-62, summarize or read). Then have someone read Acts 4:8-13: the same man before the Sanhedrin, the council that had opposed Jesus and handed him over. List what the court notices about him. What changed between the fire and the courtroom, and what emphatically did not?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The court notices his BOLDNESS (parrhesia, fearless open speech), notices that he is uneducated and common, is astonished, and can produce only one explanation: "they recognized that they had been with Jesus." What did not change: Peter's education, class, connections, or nerve; he brought no new résumé to the courtroom. What changed sits between Luke 22 and Acts 4, and this study spent an entire evening on it: Pentecost. The Spirit did not make Peter clever; He made Peter unstoppable, and the court's own minutes record the difference. This is the sacrament's before-and-after photograph, and it is admissible evidence: the strength Confirmation confers is the strength that turned that man into this one. Same man. New wind.

Scene Two: Live Discovery

Do not announce the passage. Read the clue and let the tables hunt. Allow three or four minutes; if they stall, tell them he first appears being chosen to wait on tables, then that his story runs from Acts 6 into Acts 7.

DIG DEEPER

The clue. "A man chosen to wait on tables ends up on trial for his life, and his judges see his face looking like the face of an angel. As the stones begin to fall, he sees heaven standing open, prays for the men killing him, and falls asleep. And a young man is minding the coats of the witnesses, a young man whose name you know. Find the man on trial, and find the young man with the coats."

When found, have the discovering table read Acts 6:8-15, then Acts 7:54-60, aloud, unhurried.

Question 3. Stephen, "full of grace and power," full of the Spirit. Walk his last minutes: what does he see, what does he say, and for whom are his final words? Then the detail Luke plants on purpose: who is the young man named Saul, what is he doing at this scene, and what do you know about the rest of his story?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Stephen, gazing up, sees the heavens opened and the Son of man STANDING at the right hand of God: standing, as if risen to his feet for the testimony of his witness. His final words are Christ's own dying words made his: receive my spirit, and, kneeling under the stones, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." The fruit of Session 12 at its extremity: love of enemies, actually prayed, for the men killing him, mid-execution; natural virtue does not grow this, and the group has the categories now to say so. And Saul: consenting to the death, holding the coats, breathing threats within two chapters, and then, on the Damascus road, becoming the apostle Paul, this study's second witness, whose letters fill so much of the New Testament. The Church has always dared to connect the two: the first martyr's dying prayer, and the conversion of the man who watched him die. Witness under pressure is never wasted; God brings fruit from it in ways and on timelines nobody at the scene can see. Somebody may be watching your candidates the same way. That sentence belongs out loud in your room.

Scene Three: The Two Helpers

Shift registers: from the text to their preparation. This scene is counsel, not exegesis; keep it warm and concrete.

Question 4. The Church does not send witnesses out alone; she gives every candidate two helpers, one on earth and one in heaven. First, the sponsor, whom the Church asks be provided insofar as possible. The qualifications, in brief: a confirmed Catholic who has received the Eucharist and lives the faith, normally at least sixteen, and, hear the rule before judging it, NOT your parent; where it fits, the Church even suggests your baptismal godparent (your parish has the full requirements). Work the puzzle at your tables: why would the Church, which trusts parents with everything, insist the sponsor be someone else?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Because the parents' role needs no appointment: it is primary, prior, and permanent; parents were their child's first heralds of the faith and remain so for life; in the liturgy itself the candidates are ordinarily presented by the pastor or another minister, while many celebrations involve parents in accompanying their candidates, and the parents' formative role stands prior to the whole day. The sponsor is a different gift: the wider Church physically showing up, living proof that this candidate's faith has a family bigger than their household, and an adult who can be asked the questions a teenager will not ask a parent. Suggesting the baptismal godparent, where suitable, stitches the two sacraments visibly together. Then the practical counsel, said slowly: choose someone whose practiced faith you have actually SEEN, who will still be praying for you at twenty-five, whom you could call at a bad hour. Holiness over convenience; availability over prestige; never merely the relative it would be awkward not to pick. And candidates: the ask should come from YOU, personally, this week; it is the first act of your adult faith, and it should be done like one.

Question 5. The second helper: the patron saint, and where the custom is kept, the name. Recall CCC 2683 from tonight: the witnesses who have gone before us do not cease to care for those on earth, and their intercession is their most exalted service. What is a patron saint actually FOR, and how does a person choose well rather than just choosing a name that sounds good?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Three things a patron is for, and none of them is decoration. An ally: a member of the Body, more alive than ever, who will actually be asked for prayers, by name, for the rest of the candidate's life. A syllabus: a real human life, with documents, that the candidate will actually study, because you cannot imitate what you have not read. A trajectory: a name to grow into, chosen on purpose, which is why Scripture keeps marking new missions with new names. How to choose: read three or four short lives before deciding; notice which saint will not leave you alone, because the right patron often feels less chosen than assigned; consider saints who faced what you face, your temperament, your interests, your particular fear; and pray about it, since the friendship runs both directions. Candidates who already bear a saint's baptismal name may carry it forward, and doing so deliberately is itself a worthy choice. What matters is not the paperwork but the friendship: nobody should walk toward that day accompanied by a stranger.

The Push-Back: One Mediator

Build the objection at full strength before answering it. Many in the room have relatives and friends who hold it sincerely; treat it with the respect a serious argument deserves.

The objection. Scripture is explicit: "there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). ONE mediator. The Bible never records a single prayer addressed to a departed saint, not one, in either Testament; what it does record is stern warnings against consulting the dead. The "cloud of witnesses" of Hebrews 12 means examples to imitate, spectators in the stands, not switchboard operators taking requests. When the Church teaches a sixteen-year-old to choose a heavenly patron and ask that person's prayers, she is teaching a Christian to route requests through the dead when Jesus himself said: come to ME. However tenderly it is framed, the practice trains the instinct to go somewhere other than Christ. The saint-name custom is the gateway habit.

Question 6. Begin with the verse itself: what IS 1 Timothy 2:5 claiming, and, crucially, what is Paul doing in the verses immediately before it (read 1 Timothy 2:1-5 whole)? Then test the objection's picture of death against Romans 8:38-39 and Revelation 5:8, and sort out what should be conceded.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Read 1 Timothy 2:1-5 whole, and the objection's own proof text reorganizes itself: Paul URGES that supplications and intercessions be made by Christians FOR all men, and grounds that very command in the one mediator. So intercession by the redeemed for others is not competition with Christ's mediation; in Paul's own paragraph it is the FRUIT of it. Nobody thinks asking a friend to pray for you before a test violates the one mediator; Paul begs churches for exactly such prayers constantly. The whole question, then, is whether death disqualifies a member of the Body from doing what every member does. Romans 8:38-39 answers: death cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ, and what death cannot sever, death cannot sever; the saints are not the dead in the objection's sense, they are the most alive members the Body has. And Revelation's imagery points the same direction: in Revelation 5:8 the elders before the throne hold bowls of incense "which are the prayers of the saints," prayer rising and presented before God in heaven; the verse does not by itself prove the invocation of saints, but it shows a heaven that is anything but sealed off from the Church's prayer. So a Catholic asks a saint's prayers exactly as one asks a friend's, IN Christ, never around him, and worships no one but God. Now the concessions, given honestly: Scripture indeed records no prayer addressed to a departed saint, and the group should never claim it does; the practice rests on the communion of saints as the Church has lived it from her early centuries; ancient graffiti at Roman shrine sites asking Peter and Paul to pray for the writers is among the early evidence commonly cited, and its dating and interpretation belong to the scholars, so hold it as supporting testimony rather than a knockout. The condemned consulting of the dead, necromancy, sought secret knowledge from spirits apart from God, and is as forbidden to Catholics now as ever; asking a brother in Christ to pray to Christ is not that, and confusing the two is the objection's central slip. And one concession with teeth: authentic devotion must lead toward Christ, never away from him, and a devotion that in practice obscures Christ has gone wrong, as the Church's whole Christ-centered teaching on devotion implies; Catholics may say so out loud. The test of a true patron friendship is simple: it should end you up talking to Jesus more, not less. That is, after all, what the saints themselves are doing.

DIG DEEPER

Daniel 3:16-18. If time allows: three young men, roughly your candidates' age, before a king and a furnace. Their answer is the gold standard of witness under pressure: our God is able to deliver us; BUT IF NOT, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods. Faith that negotiates no exit clause. "But if not" belongs in every candidate's vocabulary before the day they are sealed.

One Last Glimpse

Read Revelation 2:17 aloud yourself, without introduction.

To him who conquers, says the risen Christ, he will give some of the hidden manna, and a white stone with a new name written on it which no one knows except him who receives it. Say only this, and then stop: new names, given at thresholds, known first between you and God. You have sealed pages at home with guesses and memories written inside them, and some of you have a new name half-chosen. Next week: bring the sealed pages. Everything opens.

Send: Closing Questions

1. Name the one place in your week, a table, a chat, a room, where testimony from you would cost the most. What would the smallest true witness there look like?
2. Peter's only credential was that he "had been with Jesus." If people examined your ordinary week, what would show that you had been with him, and what would you want to be there that is not yet?

Live It This Week

For every household, parent and candidate together: two appointments. First, each evening read one short saint's life together, five minutes, any solid source; by next week the candidate should have a patron chosen or a shortlist of two, and if the baptismal name is the choice, choose it out loud and on purpose. Second, the candidate personally asks their intended sponsor this week, by call or face to face, not by text relayed through a parent; parents, your job is only to help them rehearse the ask. And on the door frame on your way out: Take-Home 1 comes back next week, sealed. On your honor, one more week.

Closing Prayer

Leader: *Lord God, You have never once sent a witness out alone. Thank You for the sponsor already living who will stand by these candidates, and the friend already home who will pray for them by name. Give every person in this room one moment this week to say what we have seen and know, and the boldness of Peter when the moment comes. We are Your witnesses. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Scripture Memory Verse

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 13, in order of use. RSV2CE.

- **Acts 1:1-11** (read at home this week; verse 8 aloud twice, memory verse)
- **Luke 22:54-62** (Build, Scene One: Peter at the fire, summarized or read)
- **Acts 4:8-13** (Build, Scene One: Peter before the Sanhedrin)
- **Acts 6:8-15; Acts 7:54-60** (Build, Scene Two: live discovery, Stephen and Saul)
- **1 Timothy 2:1-5** (Push-Back: the one mediator, read whole)
- **Romans 8:38-39; Revelation 5:8** (Push-Back answer: death does not sever; the prayers of the saints)
- **Isaiah 43:10** (Old Testament root: you are my witnesses)
- **Daniel 3:16-18** (Dig Deeper: but if not)
- **Revelation 2:17** (One Last Glimpse: the new name on the white stone)

Catechism: CCC 1285, 2473, 2683.

Voices: St. Ignatius of Antioch (Letter to the Romans); St. Polycarp of Smyrna (the Martyrdom of Polycarp); Tertullian of Carthage (Apology).

At the door: Take-Home 13 out; Take-Home 1 comes back next week, SEALED. Leader homework: reread all Thread Watch notes, and obtain the Order of Confirmation from your pastor this week.