

INQUIRER'S BOOKLET

SEEKING CHRIST

FIRST STEPS TOWARD CATHOLIC FAITH



A Ministry of
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SEEKING CHRIST

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for participating in *Seeking Christ*—a process to help you explore the richness and beauty of the Catholic faith.

To ask about the Catholic faith means that God is doing something deep within you. God has awakened some kind of unrest and some kind of desire. God has led you to look to the two-thousand year-old way that Catholics have responded to God's Word, participated in God's life, and committed themselves to live according to the Gospel.

Part of your search involves exploring the Catholic faith—its teachings, its values, its spirituality, its sacraments—in short, its people. Part of your search involves exploring your own heart, what God has planted in you through your life story, and what God calls you to be in the future.

Catholics have a particular approach to conversion. Of course, we know God works through his Spirit in the lives of many people, uncovering deep patterns of change. We know that this desire for change can happen suddenly, at times almost out of nowhere. But we also know that conversion has to be nourished by a way of life, and nestled into a network of faith, in order for it to be sustained. We know, too, that conversion is ongoing, for God continues to call us to renewal and deeper levels of grace.

The Catholic approach to conversion involves discernment, dialogue, and decision. We Catholics trust that when people have the time to reflect, search, and discover, they will make a firmer commitment to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ and as a Catholic. We trust, too, that when those seeking to enter the Church have an opportunity to dialogue with others as they hear the Word of God, and learn how that Word is profoundly echoed in the teachings of the Church, they can secure the process of conversion in a rich way of life as a practicing Catholic.

We call this process of conversion the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (the R.C.I.A.). Almost every Catholic parish has an R.C.I.A. process to help inquirers discover how God is calling them. This process is open, respectful of those who are seeking, and encourages inquirers to find where God is truly leading them. Catholics give people the space to ask questions, to reflect, to seek support, and to freely, with their whole hearts, commit themselves to following Jesus as a Catholic.

Parishes use *Seeking Christ* as part of the precatechumenate, which is the first period of the R.C.I.A. This resource allows an inquirer to explore some basic dimensions and themes of Catholicism. It invites a person to a time of reflection, discussion, and discovery before he or she decides to enter the catechumenate, which is the second period of the R.C.I.A.—if that’s where God leads.

After one or two initial conversations to give an inquirer the opportunity to explain what is going on in his or her life, the inquirer can become involved in the *Seeking Christ* sessions, which, in a basic way, open up aspects of Catholic approaches to faith. These sessions have three components:

- An audiovisual presentation of a reflection or meditation to open up a theme
- A reading from the Scriptures to help focus the search or inquiry
- A Take-Home Reflection with space for individual, private reflection and writing so the inquirer can explore his or her thoughts.

This Inquirer’s Booklet contains, for each session, the text of the audiovisual presentation, the selection from the Bible, and a short essay. These are followed by questions and space to write your reflections, or journal, as you continue to learn about your own desires and the Catholic faith. While not all these sessions need to be attended—it depends on your own needs—each one can help you reflect on yourself and the Catholic faith in a different way.

Be part of as many of these sessions as you can, even though it may not be possible to do all of them. Each session takes around 75 minutes, but none should be longer than 90 minutes.

We expect you will find them enjoyable.

As you are participating in the sessions, keep these points in mind:

- The short DVD presentation opens up aspects of the topic being explored.
- The Scripture reading enables you to hear the Word of God. The questions are designed to help you easily share your own sentiments and to deepen your own sense of how Catholics look at things.
- The Take-Home Reflection will help you deepen your search. You are encouraged to read, reflect, and write your reactions in the time between sessions. As you go through the sessions, you will begin to see your reactions and impressions of Catholic approaches to faith, the Bible, freedom, grace, God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Church, and conversion.

This process is not meant to answer all your questions; rather, it wants to whet your appetite. Be assured that you will be prayed for by Catholics all around the world, because sharing our faith is how we show our love for God and for all the world.

This booklet is yours to reflect on, write in, and save, a record of your initial steps in searching for God's way in your life through the Catholic community. May God lead you more deeply to fullness.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Because life is a journey, so is faith. But life's journey may not be as clear as a vacation or a road trip. Some journeys in life have clear starting and ending points; for some journeys, however, we have a hard time tracing their beginning, or knowing even where the road will lead.

As you think about your life, particularly from the point of view of faith, you might want to spend some time reflecting on where you are, where you've been, and where you think God may be leading you.

The following questions are for your personal reflection. You may want to share them with people at your church who are willing to be a companion to you on this part of your faith journey. Look over these questions, take time to reflect, and jot down your thoughts. This will help you formulate your impressions, your questions, your ideas, and your dreams. All of this will help you journey well on the path to which God is inviting you.

In what ways do you feel that God is part of your life right now?

How do you think of yourself as a believer?

What have been the basic foundations of your faith experience?

How have you felt God directing you? What have been the occasions and persons who have been part of God's pull in your life?

Are there spiritual things you feel yourself particularly hungering for?

What are the things that make you most afraid? Uncertain? Anxious?

What are the deepest religious questions that surface for you at this time?

What are your initial questions about the Catholic faith?

A row of smooth, dark, oval-shaped stones is laid out on a light-colored, textured surface, likely sand. The stones are arranged in a slightly curved line that recedes from the bottom left towards the top right of the frame. The lighting is soft and even, highlighting the smooth texture of the stones and the grain of the sand.

SESSION ONE

SEEKING & FINDING

After the welcome and introductions, the facilitator of the session will help to orient you to *Seeking Christ* and to this first session, which focuses on what it means to seek and find.

DVD Reflection. Watch and listen to the short audiovisual meditation. It contains, in part, the following words:

“Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” This is probably one of the most famous lines ever written. St. Augustine, a Catholic religious leader, wrote this in 398 AD. The line has become famous because of the truth it expresses about the human heart.

Born fragile and small, we are born in need. Our needs lead us to desire, to seek, to ask, even to demand. Modern life has made this process into an industry. We are saturated with advertisements and messages that point out all the needs we have... even if we don't know we have them.

Think of how much energy we can put into making a big purchase. We toss the images around in our heads, we struggle to come to a decision, and then test that decision again and again in our minds—do we really want this? Is it really worth it? Is it worth the cost? Is it worth the sacrifice?

Faith hints that our deepest seeking is not for any one thing, or even any one person. Rather, it is for a fullness, a completeness, that somehow puts all our other seeking into perspective. Some might say we seek life. Or truth. Or wholeness. Or completeness. Or justice. Believers say we seek all these things completely and, when we find God, we find all this, and more.

Many people think that the basic joy in life comes with seeking—they say that the travel is the best part of the vacation. But does it make sense to seek unless we find? Does a desire or a need make sense without a fulfillment, a delivery?

Perhaps the very seeking in our human lives for a reality beyond our experience, for a Fullness, for an Absolute, is the best evidence we have of God. Perhaps all of life is really a search for God. But paying attention to that search means not letting

ourselves be distracted by all the other searching we might do. Paying attention to that search means we recognize it as the basic search of our human existence.

What do we search for? Are we searching for something more? Are we searching for God? And how will we know when we have found God?

Reaction and Discussion. If you have an immediate reaction to the audiovisual presentation, please share it.

SCRIPTURE READING

One of the participants reads the following: the Gospel of John 1:35–51.

THE FIRST DISCIPLES OF JESUS

³⁵The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” ³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). ⁴²He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

JESUS CALLS PHILIP AND NATHANAEL

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Questions for Discussion. The facilitator leads the discussion.

1. How do you see yourself as a seeker? How would you describe your own searching in life?
2. Think of how the two disciples of John the Baptist were initially drawn to Jesus. Have you ever been drawn to someone or something by what another person said about it? How did it happen in your life?
3. Consider how Jesus says to the two disciples of John, “Come and see.” Notice how Philip uses that same phrase later on in the passage. What do you think of the invitation of Jesus? Do you think people hear this invitation today? What is Jesus inviting you to “come and see”?

4. Look at how excited Andrew and Philip are when they find Jesus, how excited their language is. “We have found!” they say. Has anyone ever been that excited about something and told you about it? What is the most exciting finding you have had in life? Was it religious or was it something else?

Silent Reflection. You will be invited to spend some moments of silence as the facilitator reads the following suggestions:

Ask God to help you see your deepest needs more clearly. Ask God to help purify your motives for what you seek. Ask God to guide you in your seeking faith, in your seeking to know God in the Catholic tradition.

Prayer. The participants say this prayer together.

Lord, you have planted a quest in our hearts. It has been part of our lives from the beginning. Help us to know those things that will really bring us fulfillment, and help us to accept them when we find them. Be the guide of our lives now and always. Amen.

Before you leave, there will be hospitality and a chance to socialize with others. The facilitator will also provide information about the next session, and will point out the Take-Home Reflection in this booklet.

SESSION ONE

TAKE-HOME REFLECTION

Please find time to read the following short passage and the questions. Use the blank spaces to write down your responses. This is your private space. You will not be asked to share anything you write, although you are of course free to do so.

Like many people of faith, Catholics believe that there is a part of the human reality that goes beyond, that transcends, our sheer material experience. Often this is called *soul* or *spirit*.

Not everyone accepts this transcendent part of humanity. In fact, if you look at how most humans actually live, their desires and needs seem to be pretty direct and immediate—and material. Food. Clothing. Shelter. Money. Work. Friends. A lover. Because of this, some people believe that human nature can best be understood by the animal dimension that we humans share with other mammals. We eat. We move. We need. We sweat. We love. We die.

Catholics hold that human beings cannot be understood solely in terms of what we share with animals. We humans are different. An essential part of our nature is a dimension that seeks, asks, probes, knows, chooses, and loves. Another essential part of us is a desire for a reality that encompasses, and goes beyond, what we see and experience every day.

It is true that we can be thrown off by observing only the external behavior of people; our seeking and finding does seem pretty immediate and ordinary. We do spend most of our time worrying about “what we will eat, and what we will wear,” as Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew (6:25). But this can fool us. If we uncover what lies behind most of our seeking, particularly the more important things we seek (our careers, our spouses, our faith), we find this other, deeper spiritual dimension to human life.

This in no way denies that we are composed of skin and bones. Sometimes people think of religion as a way to “flee the world” or “escape our limitations.” Catholics in no way espouse doing this. We cannot understand humanity without seeing it as rooted in the world of nature. Does not the opening of the Bible tell us that we are dust (that is, earth) and we return to dust? (See Genesis 2:7 and 2:19.) Catholics do not think of people as “souls stuck in bodies” or, as one thinker put it, “a ghost in a machine.” Rather, as well as the material basis of humankind, there exists also—and as essentially—a transcendent dimension which, although based in the material, goes beyond it.

SESSION ONE

JOURNALING

Spend some time reflecting and writing on the following:

My sense of human nature is...

When I look at my own life, my deepest quests are for...

I see humankind's spirituality, its transcendence, in...



SESSION TWO

WORD & TRUTH

After the welcome and any further introductions, you will have an opportunity to ask any questions that have occurred to you since the first session. The facilitator will orient you to this second session of *Seeking Christ*, which talks about our use of words, truth, and God's truth.

DVD Reflection. Watch and listen to the short audiovisual meditation. It will contain, in part, the following words:

We are bombarded today with so many words that we start to wonder what they really mean. On the one hand, we seem very trusting of words. We believe almost everything we hear on TV or see on the Internet. On the other hand, we have become very suspicious of words. We're always looking for the angle or slant behind them, always looking for a bias.

Yet words can change us. We remember words we heard as children. The stories from our parents or sayings of our first teachers seem to stay with us. We remember the words to the first songs that we danced to, and the first words of romance we spoke. There are the words that seemed to betray us, from politicians and businessmen; they etch themselves into our collective memory. So do the words that stirred us into hope in times of trouble. They seem to live on forever.

With words we communicate; with words we think; with words we figure things out, either alone or with other people. Words can carry lies, but words can also convey truth, deep truth, truth that brings life. Words convey to us the dreams of the future, our victories over our limitations, and our greatest hopes.

Words also help us know what we cannot know, what tantalizes our imaginations, what hints at eternity. Words open up both the vast horizons of our humanity and our limitations—our smallness, our distortions, our frustrations.

What happens when God speaks? What happens when God enters the conversations of human beings? We call this revelation. We refer to God's word as the Bible, the Holy Scriptures. It's the record of how God led a people to a deeper vision and illuminated the whole of humanity. For all we can know with our human words, how much more can we know with divine words?

Reaction and Discussion. Please share any reactions you might have to the audiovisual presentation.

SCRIPTURE READING

One of the participants reads the following selection: the book of Acts 8:26–40.

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Questions for Discussion. The facilitator leads the discussion.

1. How have you used the Scriptures as a guide in your own life? How have they helped you? Have they ever puzzled you?
 2. What is your own experience with the Bible? Feel free to ask any questions about how the Bible is organized. How often do you get to read from the Bible on your own?
 3. What do you do when you are puzzled about the meaning of a Scripture verse? Share any times when your reading of the Bible led you to ponder more deeply, to try and see what God may be asking of you.
 4. Do you ever get the opportunity to explain to another person what God’s Word might mean to another in the situation of today’s life? How would you apply the story of Phillip and the eunuch to your own life?
-

Silent Reflection. You will be invited to spend some moments in silence as the facilitator offers the following questions for reflection:

What are the words by which I live? How is God's Word part of my mind, my understanding? What words do I need to hear at this point in my life? How do I find strength in the Word of God?

Prayer. The participants say the following prayer together.

Lord, you have spoken to us because you want us to know the fullness of truth—the truth of your boundless love for us, and your desire to lead us to your grace. Take away from us all things that block our ears from hearing your Word. Open our hearts to be receptive to your invitation. Open our minds so we may put on the mind of Jesus. Amen.

Before you leave, there will be hospitality and socializing. The facilitator will also provide information about the next session and show you the next Take-Home Reflection.

SESSION TWO

TAKE-HOME REFLECTION

Before the next session, please find time to read the following short passage and use the questions and blank spaces for your reflections. Again, you will not be asked to share what you write, although you are free to share if you want to.

Catholics have long prized the ability of humankind to know and to come to truth. We likewise see an essential role for human reason—the skills we have to reflect on the meaning of words and ideas and to advance them. Of course, Catholics realize that knowing can be distorted and biased due to a variety of causes, particularly sin and selfishness. Likewise, we understand that humankind cannot, by simple use of reasoning and the search for truth, penetrate all that can be known, especially the deepest levels of truth.

This is why humans need Revelation—the way God inspired a people, and individuals within that people, to open up for us the deeper truths about God and about ourselves. While many ancient cultures have a literature and a religious tradition, Catholics believe that God is particularly revealed to the Jewish people—to guide them and to prepare a way for his full Revelation, Jesus Christ.

Revelation is contained in the book we call the Bible—it actually is a collection of books gathered and edited over a long period of time. The primary truths of the Bible are religious: how God relates to us and how we are invited to relate to God. These religious truths are told in a variety of ways, using a variety of literary forms—poetry, genealogy, royal archives, songs, histories—so that the Bible teaches the truth of God in both a symbolic and a direct way.

For Christians, the Bible is divided into the Old Testament—the Hebrew Scriptures—written primarily in Hebrew and, in a few places, in Aramaic; and also the New Testament—the testimony of those who first experienced and remembered Jesus, and the communities of faith that sprang up in the first century after Jesus. The New Testament was originally written entirely in Greek.

People read the Bible for inspiration, to find solace, guidance, and direction in their personal lives. They also read it for study, to understand how the books of the Bible came to be, the historical and archeological background to the various books, and how they have been interpreted through the ages. Many modern Bibles have notes to help readers understand the books and the context of the passages. The New American Bible is the translation used by American Catholics in worship. The New Revised Standard Version is widely used across the English-speaking Catholic and Protestant communities.

Revelation tells us essential things, things that no amount of reasoning or study could show us. This is why believers see the Bible as indispensable in coming to know God and live God's way.

SESSION TWO

JOURNALING

Spend some time jotting down your ideas and reactions to the following:

I know I need the word of God in my life because...

The most important thing I have learned from the Bible is...

What I would like to know about the Scriptures is...



SESSION THREE

GOD & FAITH

After the welcome and any further introductions, the facilitator orients you to this *Seeking Christ* session, which explores aspects of faith and our approach to God. Please ask any questions that have arisen since the second session.

DVD Reflection. Watch and listen to the short audiovisual presentation, which contains, in part, the following words:

It doesn't matter where people live, or what century they lived, or what their social situation is. They always have found faith to be basic to their lives. They might have thought of faith as luck, or superstition, or destiny—but they have looked to something beyond their immediate senses as they try to understand their own existence.

Our own wits, our senses, our questions and answers: all these help us think about life and its meaning. But people have perceived something beyond sense. They have perceived a deeper meaning, a fuller layer of existence, to explain all the pieces and jumble of their daily lives. Behind all the fragments, people have sensed the reality of God.

Faith is that human dimension that opens us up to these deeper layers of life and to God. Some people talk about “blind faith,” as if they leave their minds behind. Or they take “the leap of faith,” as if faith is unseen and unverified. Perhaps it works that way for some people. For many, however, faith is not so much a blind leap as a sound intuition, a solid hunch. They somehow know that existence is nestled in something greater, deeper, wiser, and more powerful than anything around them.

This instinctual hunch probably gives us our first glimmer of God, who is the Being behind all other beings, the Fullness in which everything else finds its place. As we mature, our sense of faith gets keener and sharper; this means that our sense of God also deepens. As we grow, we find ourselves opening more and more to God in prayer.

The great religious leaders of the world throughout history have helped people come to, and express, deeper faith. Christians have said that our instinctual faith needs a greater gift of faith to bring us to the Living God. They call this gift

grace: the way in which a God of love personally touches human lives. Our prayer, then— isn't it really a response to a relationship of love, of grace, which God began in us through faith?

Reaction and Discussion. Please share any immediate reactions you have to the presentation and reflection.

SCRIPTURE READING

One of the participants reads the following passage: the Gospel of Mark, 9:14–29.

THE HEALING OF A BOY WITH A SPIRIT

¹⁴When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” ¹⁷Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” ¹⁹He answered them, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.” ²⁰And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹Jesus asked the father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. ²²It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” ²³Jesus said to him, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the

one who believes.”²⁴Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”²⁵When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!”²⁶After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.”²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.²⁸When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”²⁹He said to them, “This kind can come out only through prayer.”

Questions for Discussion. The facilitator leads the discussion based on these questions.

1. What is this passage telling you about your experience of faith?
 2. Are you surprised that Jesus sounds so frustrated? What do you think is making Jesus so exasperated in the passage? Has there been anything like this in your own experience?
 3. The child’s father cries out, “I believe, help my unbelief.” What do you think he meant by that? Was he trying to get Jesus to excuse his unbelief? Why do you think belief was so hard for this father?
 4. What does Jesus’ final remark to his disciples have to do with faith? How do you think faith can grow or change through prayer?
-

Silent Reflection. The facilitator will help you gather your thoughts in reflection, using the following questions:

Belief is all around us, yet we so often think belief is very difficult. What are the things that we believe in most? When has it been easiest to believe in God? When has it been most difficult? What have I asked for most in faith?

Prayer. The participants say this prayer together:

Lord, you have planted the seeds of faith in our hearts from our very births. You have called on this initial faith to grow, to deepen and mature. We do believe. But we also need help with our unbelief, with those times when we are tempted to doubt or dismiss your presence. Guide us in the deepest parts of our hearts so that our faith may grow more fully through prayer. Amen.

The session ends with time for sharing and hospitality and any announcements about the next session. The facilitator also will direct you to the Take-Home Reflection.

SESSION THREE

TAKE-HOME REFLECTION

Before the next session, take some time to read this essay and write down any responses you have to the questions about it in the blank space provided. Remember, this is your private reflection.

Every now and then in modern life a great cry arises about the “danger” of faith. People who identify themselves as atheists (that is, they believe there is no God) and agnostics (that is, they are not sure there is a God) refer to faith and religion as a kind of gullibility, an escape from reality, a running away from the limitations of human experience.

Perhaps, though, the greatest attacks on faith do not come from any opposition, organized or not, against believers, but from the reluctance of believers to take their belief seriously. People believe, but in a half-hearted way. People claim to have faith, but it would be hard to tell that they believe, or what they believe in, from the way they live.

Can faith be faith unless it organizes the central vision of a person’s life? Can faith be faith unless it helps a person to direct his or her actions and thoughts? Can faith be faith without leading people to pray? It perhaps is easy for people to say, “I believe in God,” but it’s much harder to verify this statement by the way people live. Faith would be strengthened, then, if believers took their faith seriously.

Sometimes it happens that people grow into serious and mature faith—when children who are baptized receive the kind of direction in faith that leads them to deeper and greater acceptance of it. Sometimes it happens that people, whether they are baptized or not, have a dramatic event happen in their lives that leads them to believe. Catholics tend to think that no one event establishes a person as a believer; rather, conversion has to be experienced again and again, at different points in life, in order to be sustained.

Belief, of course, entails beliefs. If we say we have faith, it has to be more than a feeling of trust. There are things we believe in and things that we believe. The core Christian beliefs are contained in *creeds*, which are formal statements of things that ground Christian faith, statements about God, creation, Jesus, redemption, the Holy Spirit, the Church, forgiveness, and eternal life. As one studies to become a Catholic, one studies and prays over these ancient creeds that sum up God's relationship with us.

But behind them all is the basic act of trust, which tells us to put ourselves, totally and completely, in the care of God. No one showed this more than Jesus.

SESSION THREE

JOURNALING

Participants reflect and write on the following topics:

Do I think of myself as a believer? In what ways do I show this?

What about modern life makes faith difficult? What about modern life makes faith easy?

I think my faith would be stronger if...



SESSION FOUR

JESUS

After the greetings and any needed introductions, the facilitator will ask if you have any questions since the last session and will then introduce you to this session, which is about Jesus Christ.

DVD Reflection. This presentation includes a variety of images and words, including the following:

It is impossible to think of the Catholic faith without thinking of Jesus. Some religious groups deny the word *Christian* to Catholics. But all you need to do is visit any Catholic church. You will find, at the center of the building, an image of Jesus crucified. One of the first things you will see any Catholic do, anywhere in the world, is make the sign of the cross on him- or herself. Jesus is at the core of Catholic belief.

Over the centuries, different peoples and cultures have seen Jesus through different lenses. In ancient Greece, Jesus is the mighty one who conquers all because he conquers evil. In ancient Rome, Jesus is the Savior, symbolized in the universal sign of the fish, which means savior. In later centuries, Jesus was depicted as the Good Shepherd or as the crucified one. Some eras have seen Jesus almost as a mystical presence, while others have underlined Jesus' compassion and desire to do good to change the world.

All of this shows the tremendous depth of Jesus—he can be looked at again and again, and, every time we look, we can find something deeper and richer about him. The multiple images of Jesus show the profound richness of his personality. People cannot pigeonhole Jesus because he exceeds all the categories we might try to put him in. In a way, Jesus encompasses all of humanity's hope and needs—and at the same time goes beyond them. Of course millions and millions of Christians claim to believe in Jesus, but it might be hard to know that from the way some Christians live.

Whether one can sustain belief depends, to a large extent, on whether one wishes to become involved in the person of Jesus and commit oneself to following him. Jesus invites us into relationship. He invites us to be his disciples; disciples are people

willing to learn from their teacher. The teaching that Jesus would give us never comes to an end.

Whether it's his words, his healing deeds, his courageous and generous death, or his unexpected resurrection: people can spend their lives looking at Jesus, drinking of his life, and never exhaust him. "I am the way, the truth and the life," Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John. He is telling us that, no matter what we may make of life, there is no getting around him.

Reaction and Discussion. You may offer any immediate responses you have to the audiovisual presentation.

SCRIPTURE READING

One of the participants reads the following passage: the Gospel of Luke, 4:16–22:

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

Questions for Discussion. These questions can be used to start the conversation:

1. How do you see yourself in relation to Jesus? In what ways do you have a relationship with him? In what ways do you want to deepen a relationship with him?
 2. Why do you think Jesus generated so much excitement when he visited the synagogue of his home town? What do you think his neighbors’ expectations of Jesus would have been?
 3. Jesus quotes the words of Isaiah the prophet. What do you think of these words, which form a preface to the life of Jesus? What was Jesus trying to outline about his life?
 4. Jesus says that Isaiah’s words are being fulfilled as his listeners hear them. What do you think he meant by that? What would your response be if you were present that day?
-

Silent Reflection. You will be invited to some moments of silence. The following questions can help in this reflection:

What do I make of Jesus? Would I have wanted to meet him? Would I have been a believer, a bystander, or one who had trouble with Jesus? What might Jesus promise me? What might Jesus say to me?

Prayer. The participants recite the following prayer together:

Jesus, so many millions have believed in you; your words and deeds are recited to this day. No one in history has touched as many lives as you have. We know you can touch our lives even today, because the power of your life and message continues even now. Speak to our hearts; touch our lives; lead us where you would have us go. Amen.

After the session there is opportunity for hospitality and sharing with others. The date and time of the next session are clarified. The facilitator will orient you to the next Take-Home Reflection.

SESSION FOUR

TAKE-HOME REFLECTION

Please find time to read and write your reflections on the following short essay. These are your personal and private reflections.

Although people are immediately drawn to him—almost all of us, whether we are Christian or not, know something about him—Jesus has not been easy to understand. From the beginning, divergent images and ideas about Jesus arose among people, mostly concerning his relationship to God.

In the beginning, it was hard for the early followers of Jesus to call Jesus “God” because Jesus, clearly, was a human being. God, however, was a transcendent being dwelling in the heavens. How could a human being be divine? Be God?

But, from the beginning, Christians showed their faith in Jesus as divine because they adored him and called upon him as their savior and their God. Christians used language like “Son of God” and “Son of Man” to try to explain the unique place Jesus had. Even as a human being, Jesus contained the reality of God, now revealed and made real to humankind.

Conviction about Jesus grew primarily through Christian prayer. As believers gathered to celebrate the Eucharist, they made Jesus the center of their prayer, just as God was the center of their prayer. They saw Jesus as divine because he did what only God could do—he brought salvation and newness to the human situation. He brought us God’s own life. He showed us the inner heart of God.

With time, Christians developed ways to express this powerful understanding of Jesus through statements called “The Creeds”—statements of essential Christian faith. As one prepares to become a Catholic, one studies these statements and learns to pray and profess them. The earliest creed we have is from St. Paul, when he affirms, “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:10) because the word *Lord* was the word Christians used for the name of God.

Once Jesus challenged his followers by asking them who they thought he was. “Who do people say that I am?” he asked them (Mark 8:27). In a way, we have to continue asking that question of ourselves—who do I think Jesus is? Even after years of study and prayer, we still have more to think about Jesus, and we still have more of his glory to profess in faith.

SESSION FOUR

JOURNALING

You can use the following to help you jot down your ideas.

The story of Jesus that I remember the most is...

When I think about Jesus, what intrigues me the most is...

The idea of my developing a relationship with Jesus strikes me as...



SESSION FIVE

THE HOLY SPIRIT

You will be welcomed and hear any needed introductions. The facilitator will then see if there are any questions from the last session and will orient you to this session, which concerns the Holy Spirit.

DVD Reflection. Watch and listen to the presentation, which contains, among other things, the following words:

If you were to travel to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, in the Vatican where the Holy Father, the pope, lives, you would marvel at that building. It is one of the largest churches in the world. You would feel dwarfed by the sheer size of St. Peter's, not to mention the massiveness of the statues of various saints and the main altar.

Nevertheless, what might strike you as much as any of the items in the basilica is the image behind the main altar. There, glowing in a brilliant gold, the image of the Holy Spirit seems to color everything else in the basilica. Compared to the other items at St. Peter's, it is not particularly grand in size. It is made of a translucent stone that allows the bright Italian light to illuminate the whole image and, indeed, color everything else in that vast expanse.

Christians have professed belief in the Holy Spirit from the beginning of the preaching of the apostles—because Christians have experienced the Holy Spirit from the first proclamation of the Gospel. St. Paul talked in his letters about the way the Holy Spirit came to his communities, particularly in Corinth and in Galatia. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul elaborates on the fruits of the Holy Spirit, what the Spirit produces in believers. He points to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He says there is no law against these things. Living in the Spirit, we should be guided by the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit connects believers with the risen Jesus in such a way that God transforms them with signs and powers that continue Jesus' life and work. Sometimes the signs are extraordinary—Christians report speaking in strange tongues and unusual gifts of insight or healing. Most of the time, though, the Spirit works in signs that seem more ordinary—although they too are exceptional—like prayer, virtuous actions, and love of others.

As Christians throughout time thought about their life and calling, they came to see that, without the Holy Spirit, there is no Christian life. Every prayer, every hope, every reading of the Scripture, every act of love for others—all of it is possible because the Holy Spirit is given to us as power in our lives. For Catholics, growth in holiness is only this: to be more open to the Holy Spirit who, in grace and love, makes us more like Jesus Christ.

Reaction and Discussion. Please share any immediate reactions you have to the audiovisual presentation.

SCRIPTURE READING

One of the participants reads from the Scriptures the following selection, St. Paul's letter to the Romans, 8:11–24:

¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Questions for Discussion. You can use the following questions to explore the Scripture reading.

1. Do you feel you have personal experience of the Holy Spirit? How would you describe it?
 2. As you listen to this passage, what role do you think the Holy Spirit played in the personal life of St. Paul? What seems to be Paul's attitude toward the Holy Spirit?
 3. Paul seems to think that even our struggling prayer—what he calls groaning—comes from the Holy Spirit. Do you ever have experiences of prayer like the ones Paul is describing? Explain.
 4. Paul talks a lot about hope and the need for patience. How do you experience hope in your own life? And what about your need for patience?
-

Silent Reflection. The participants spend a few moments in silence and reflection. The facilitator uses the following questions to encourage such reflection:

God wishes to dwell deep within us. How have we felt the divine presence?
How have we experienced guidance and help when we felt lost or disoriented?
When has prayer welled up in our hearts? What gifts would I ask most from the Holy Spirit?

Prayer. Join with others by praying the following together.

Lord, you desire to connect to us intimately. You invite us to enter into your own life and love. You sent your Holy Spirit upon the first followers of Jesus to empower them with his love and life. You continue to send the Spirit upon all who open their hearts to you. Help our hearts to be opened so we might receive the fullness, peace, and joy you would have us experience in the Holy Spirit. Amen.

After an opportunity to mingle with others and share hospitality, you will be given information about the next session's time and place. The Take-Home Reflection will be pointed out to you.

SESSION FIVE

TAKE-HOME REFLECTION

Please give yourself time to read and reflect on the following passage. Use the questions and blank spaces to jot down your own responses. Remember, they will not be shared unless you want to share them.

Most people know that Christians believe that God is a Trinity—that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although they do not completely understand what this means—no one does, because we cannot comprehend God completely—Christians have an easier time thinking about God the Father and God the Son. God the Holy Spirit, however, seems more elusive.

Part of the reason for this is the intimate, internal work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is rather like our own consciousness. We don't think about our consciousness very much, do we? We just are aware it is there, and we are aware of its power, its ability to help us know ourselves and our world. The Spirit dwells in us as something like a consciousness, opening up inside us the dimensions of God and God's action in the world.

Another way to think about the Spirit is *action*. Think about the swing of a bat, the sheer energy in the swing, apart from the batter or the bat itself. Or the insight of the mind. Or the blowing of the wind (the image Jesus gave us in the Gospel of John, 3:8). That's how the Spirit is in us, as the very energy, the vitality of our spiritual lives.

St. Paul gives us a list of the signs of the presence of the Spirit. We might be surprised at this list because the virtues that show the presence of the Spirit are all virtues that can be part of the ordinary life of a person. St. Paul writes: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 2:22-23). Can we imagine a life without these? Can we imagine a follower of Jesus who did not strive to have these gifts, these fruits of the Holy Spirit?

Modern people can appear to have a hard time with the idea of holiness. It can seem very stilted. Holy people can seem to us like extraordinary, even bizarre, people who did not live the ordinary lives of the rest of us. But if we think of Paul’s list of the fruits of the Spirit, then holiness becomes a lot more understandable. Holiness is what the Holy Spirit produces in each of us, if we open our hearts to the divine working inside us.

The exterior facets of Catholicism—reading the Scriptures, going to church, receiving the sacraments, prayers and devotions—are all geared to intensifying the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. Whatever Catholics do on the outside accompanies what God is doing inside the spirit of the Catholic believer. It would be a mistake to reflect on the externals of the Catholic faith without seeing the internal life of the Holy Spirit—the spiritual life of the person—as something essential to faith as well.

SESSION FIVE

JOURNALING

Participants spend time jotting down their reflections on the Holy Spirit.

When I reflect on the Holy Spirit, the sense I have is...

I have seen the Holy Spirit at work in my life or the life of another when...

The gift I seek most from the Holy Spirit is...

SESSION SIX

THE CHURCH

After being welcomed, catch up with other participants about events since the last session. Ask any questions that have occurred to you. The facilitator will orient you to this session about the Church.

DVD Reflection. Watch and listen to the presentation, which will contain the following words:

For Catholics, there cannot be faith without a Church. Why? Because Jesus Christ formed a Church to proclaim his Good News. If you think about it, everyone who comes to faith does so because of the Good News they have heard and accepted. Faith comes in the context of community; faith is supported by community.

People touch other people; people share; people give and receive. Life is an interaction. So, too, the life of faith. We accept Jesus deeply into our lives because Jesus offers himself through a community of believers that supports the Gospel and the life of faith. We become personal believers because of the community that Jesus formed to pass belief on from one generation to the next.

Jesus speaks to each person, but he also speaks to humankind, seeking to enlighten all of us with God's Word and bring us all together as brothers and sisters. How often did Jesus challenge his disciples to love? To serve? To forgive? How often did he gather his disciples around his table, sharing with them his word and his food?

The followers of Jesus formed communities of faith. The book of Acts, which tells the story of these early followers, talks about how their love and community was a distinct sign of their life of faith. St. Paul's letters are all addressed to communities of faith—and each one is a call to love and communion.

To become a believer is to join a community of believers. To join a community of believers is to be supported by a network of others, all on a journey of faith. The sacred rites of the community—what Catholics call sacraments—are ways in which the community celebrates its faith. The primary sacrament that Jesus gave his Church is called the Eucharist (Mass), in which we praise God in Jesus Christ and are joined together as his body.

Church is Christ's way to invite us to fellowship and communion. Church is God's way of continuing the work of Jesus throughout time. Church is his way of saying that, as believers, we are never alone.

Reaction and Discussion. Please share any reactions you have to the presentation.

SCRIPTURE READING

One of the participants reads the following passage, Acts 2:39–47:

[Peter said] The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”⁴⁰ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Questions for Discussion. Explore the scriptural passage using the following questions:

1. Have you been involved formally in a church or other religious congregation? If so, what has been your experience of that? How has it helped, or perhaps complicated, your relationship with God?
 2. What is your reaction to St. Luke's description of life among the early Christians?
 3. Christian life seems to be centered on "the breaking of bread" (= the Eucharist), the Word of God, stewardship (= allocating one's resources for the Kingdom), service of others, and praise of God. How did each of these elements contribute to the common life of the Christians?
 4. Do you think that people today desire to practice their faith like these early Christians? Do you think today people prefer a more private expression of faith?
-

Silent Reflection. Spend a few minutes in silent reflection. Some questions might help this process.

How do I need others in my life? How do other people support or undermine the values that I have? When I think of myself with Jesus, do I think of myself as being alone, or do I see myself in the company of others?

Prayer. The group says the prayer together.

Lord and God, you have made us one human race, descended from the one set of parents, and, in Jesus, have made us a new community, a new creation, in which all human beings can be bound together in faith and love. Help us to see our need for each other, and help us to rejoice in your family, the Church, through which you would gather us all into your Kingdom. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Spend a little time with others, enjoying hospitality. The facilitator will make sure everyone knows the time and place of the next session.

SESSION SIX

TAKE-HOME REFLECTION

Read the following short passage and reflect on its message. Questions, and blank spaces for writing, will help you organize your reflections.

How do most Catholics experience the Church? Primarily through their local parish. It is there that Catholics gather for Mass and for a variety of ministries. The parish helps Catholics experience Jesus Christ today, grow in the Holy Spirit, and give themselves in service to others.

Often Catholics, and others, think of the parish as the church building, but that is mistaking an element of parish life for the whole reality. The parish is really a network of relationships, which includes individuals, families, societies, and ministries. From the education of children, to the gathering of seniors, to ministry to the sick, to works of service for the poor, parishes continue to embody the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Although the style of life today is tilted more toward “spirituality” and against “institution,” people often use this distinction as a blunt instrument, cutting themselves off from some of the most supportive relationships they can have. Spirituality needs others in order to be sustained; otherwise it is a lot like “navel gazing” and a form of self-absorption.

Parishes are part of a larger network, the diocese, which is served by a local bishop. Catholics look upon their bishops as successors of the apostles; we can trace our line of service from bishop to bishop, back to the first followers of Jesus. Why is this important? Because it makes clear the missionary seeds of the Church... how the Church continues the mission of the first followers of Jesus.

Catholics look at four fundamental attributes of the Church: its unity, its holiness, its catholicity, and its apostolic dynamic. The Church's unity means not only that its people are united in the life of faith, but that it calls all humankind to a unity of love and sharing. Its holiness means that the Church not only has the Word of God and the sacraments to help people grow in holiness, but that it strives to be holy in all it does. The Church is catholic in that it embraces all races, languages, social classes, and continents, as a true world-wide community. Its apostolic dynamism means that it traces its origins to the apostles and it carries on the apostles' mission.

Many modern people think that institutions and organizations are arbitrary. Catholics do not think this about the Church. With St. Paul, we think of the Church as the Body of Christ, the organism through which Christ continues to live and work today.

SESSION SIX

JOURNALING

Participants use the following to expand their reflections on the Church.

I find I need people the most when...

In what ways do I need the support of others for faith?

Joining with others in the Church would allow me to...

SESSION SEVEN

FREEDOM & CHOOSING

After you are welcomed, you have a chance to chat with the other participants and catch up with things. Bring up any questions you have from the last session. The facilitator will orient you to the current session, which is about how we use our freedom.

DVD Presentation. The presentation contains, in part, the following content:

Probably no idea has played a more important role in shaping modern life than the idea of freedom. Think of the way society throughout history has often been structured around a dominant group and a dependent group—whether it’s freedmen and slaves, or lords and serfs, or industrialists and workers. Think about how constricted that arrangement made large parts of the population feel. Why? Because their dependent status shrank their options in life substantially. People were stuck, limited; their lives were largely determined by others.

The French Revolution, in the Western world, receives most of the credit for the breakdown of this multi-tiered system—liberty, equality, and fraternity were the slogans of this fight. The “new” world, largely represented by the United States of America, refers mostly to a world of new freedoms, new opportunities, new ways of life. As an ideal, the American model has been widely disseminated so that most nations and peoples expect the freedoms of the “new world”—wherever they happen to live.

Freedom certainly means picking and choosing things, both small and significant. People can choose what they want for breakfast, and they can choose what university to attend. One might say that the growth of freedom has given people even the ability to construct their own lives. “You can be anything you want,” we frequently hear. Whether that is literally true or not makes no difference; it’s the sentiment, the ideal, that matters.

It’s much harder to know what to do with freedom, because freedom is expressed by choice—and choice has value only insofar as people choose what is good, responsible, beneficial to others, and beneficial to the world. Part of the paradox of freedom is that people will choose patterns that lead to their own destruction,

sometimes knowingly so. What is the price, when we think about it, of all the bad choices that have been made? What have individuals, and societies, paid for these choices?

Strange as it may seem, in some way God asks to be chosen. Freedom means that humans can be either open to God or they can ignore God. Even if we think people are naturally open to God, by their lives they frequently choose things other than God.

Without freedom, we are not able to love God, for love is the greatest exercise of freedom. And the God of love asks nothing less from those created in God's image except that they come to choose God freely and in love.

Reaction and Discussion. Share any immediate reactions you have to the audiovisual presentation.

SCRIPTURE READING

One of the participants reads the following passage, from the fifth book of the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 30:11–20), the last book of the Torah—the first five books of the Bible, which are the most important ones for the Jewish people.

¹¹Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹²It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?”

¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?”

¹⁴No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

¹⁵See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Questions for Discussion. You can use these questions to explore the Scripture passage.

1. What do you think are the greatest opportunities, and risks, in your own use of freedom in your life?
2. This passage says that the “word” of God—the access we have to God—is not very far. How do you feel that God is close in your own life? Do you think that God’s way is pretty obvious to people? Why?
3. Deuteronomy seems to teach that if we choose the good, good things will happen to us; if we reject the good, then unfortunate things will happen to us. This was an important idea for the Jewish people as they experienced various dark times in their history. What is your experience? What do you think of this passage in relation to your own life?

4. The choice offered in this passage comes down to a “yes” or “no,” a “good” or “bad.” In this sense, it is a rather stark choice. The Scripture is asking us not to sit on the fence, but to make a clear, sharp decision for God. What do you think of this invitation? Do you think God is a “yes or no” kind of decision? Why?

Silent Reflection. You will spend a few moments in silent reflection. The following ideas may spur that meditation along.

My freedom is part of who I am. My freedom shapes my life, and the life of those around me. How free am I? What takes my freedom from me, what pulls it one way or another without my full choice? How can I be even freer in the depths of my heart?

Prayer. Join in the common prayer of the group.

God of total love, in your unbounded freedom, you have called us to existence and bestowed freedom upon us. So much is your freedom in our hearts that we know no one can really take it away completely. Yet we are prone to use freedom in ways that entrap us, hide your love, and hide ourselves from others. Help us to choose you and to choose all that is good in you. Amen.

Join with others in conversation and hospitality. The facilitator will give the time and place of the next, and final, session of *Seeking Christ*.

SESSION SEVEN

TAKE-HOME REFLECTION

Set aside some time to read the following passage and reflect on it. Fill out your thoughts in the journaling section that follows.

In spite of the way the Catholic Church is usually stereotyped as an authoritarian church of laws, Catholics profoundly believe in freedom. Catholics have always upheld the freedom of the human person to respond to, or to reject, what is most important in their lives.

Of course, Catholics are realistic about freedom—just because we want to fly does not mean we are able to, unless we build devices first! All human freedom happens in contexts, in settings, that affect that freedom. Yet, even given the limiting capacities of our environment, we are truly free.

For this reason, Catholics think that people are, ultimately, responsible for their own actions. Certainly some people may experience limitations of that freedom through psychological issues, but healthy people preserve a core of their freedom to choose basic directions in their lives. Catholics do not blame the devil or their genes for their actions. Sins are those choices we freely make in contradiction to God and the values of God.

Catholics also hold that God's grace does not take away freedom. Catholics do not hold an idea like predestination, whereby people think that God has chosen ahead of time who will be saved and who will be damned. Rather, for a Catholic, God's grace works through the freedom of a person, and that grace is available to all. Those who shut themselves off from that grace do so by their own freedom.

Similarly, if Catholics believe that God knows the future, that hardly means that the future is all determined and freedom is an illusion. Rather, God's knowledge involves the freedom that God has given to human beings, created in the image and likeness of the divine.

For Catholics, the more important question is how people use their freedom because, in the name of freedom, some people make pretty bad choices. The danger, as Catholics see it, lies in people thinking that freedom means "I can do whatever I want"—whereas freedom should mean the ability to do what is best for oneself, others, and the world. Just having choices does not mean that any choice is good. Just having options does not spell out what the best options are.

Catholics believe people are free, but they use their freedom best when they decide to live for the greatest values. This amounts to saying that people are most free when they have given their lives in love to what has come to seem the greatest good.

SESSION SEVEN

JOURNALING

Participants take time to reflect and write on the issue of freedom.

When have I felt most free? Was it a particular event or was it a period of time in my life?

What are the greatest choices I have made in my life, and what have been the consequences of those choices?

What are the things that hinder my freedom? What can help me be even freer in my life?

SESSION EIGHT

CONVERSION



The welcome and the chance to check in with other participants is followed by an opportunity to ask any questions that occurred to you since the last session. The facilitator will orient you to this session, about change and conversion.

DVD Reflection. Watch and listen to the theme of conversion.

Seeking and finding. Freedom and choice. Words and truth. What are these all about except discovery, and the change that comes from discovery? What are these all about except conversion—the deep-rooted change of our very selves as a result of the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

How we change seems mysterious. We can look back at photos of ourselves as children and teenagers and see in them the initial outlines of our later faces. Daily things seem the same, but, imperceptibly, change is happening. Similarly, in our thinking and feeling, above and beyond our choosing one thing or another, there come major changes in our lives.

Conversion is a change like this. We come to give up destructive patterns. We find inner rest and peace. We turn our hearts toward others in need. We renounce patterns of sin. We come to see things as Jesus sees them. We so identify with Jesus that we put on his mind.

Along with these changes, we find ourselves praying more, opening our hearts in their deepest spaces to what God would accomplish in us. We find we are letting go of the “baggage” of our lives and listening more to the Word of God, which comes to us as revelation and enlightenment.

Conversion happens on many levels and at different rates in the different parts of our lives. Conversion can involve our feelings, our ideas, our view of the world, our actions, and our ultimate commitments.

Conversion to the way of God, however, involves all of these conversions, because God is the ultimate Reality, the ultimate Love, the ultimate Truth, and the ultimate Invitation of our lives. Christians give themselves to Jesus because he is God

revealed to us, in the language of our own lives. And Christians give themselves to his Kingdom because that is what Jesus lived and died for.

What conversion awaits me? What change beckons in my life? Am I ready to take steps toward Jesus?

Reaction and Discussion. Share your impressions and reactions to this reflection.

SCRIPTURE READING

One of the participants reads the following Scripture passage from St. John's Gospel: 20:19–29.

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Questions for Discussion.

1. Do I see my life as having breakthroughs? If so, how would I describe the most significant breakthroughs? Have they been something like conversions for me?
 2. What was the situation of the disciples at the time of Jesus’ visit? How do you think they felt at that time? What is Jesus’ attitude toward them?
 3. What changes do you see happening in the disciples, and in Thomas? Compare and contrast Thomas and the other disciples. What do you think of Thomas’s reluctance to accept the word of the disciples?
 4. When Thomas accepts Jesus he declares, “My Lord and my God!” What kind of change happened in Thomas to make him say something like this? Why do you think it happened? What helped Thomas to see and believe?
-

Silent Reflection. You have a few minutes to reflect after the discussion has ended. Some of these phrases might help your meditation.

Thank you for calling me, Lord. Help me to respond. Help me to know how you call me, and how you continue to call me. Make my heart open to the change you desire in me. Make my life responsive to the Kingdom.

Prayer. Recite the following prayer together.

God, revealer of truth and full love, help us hear in the deepest part of our heart your gracious invitation to share your life. Help us to recognize the call of Jesus in his words, his actions, and his daily life. Make us open to the Holy Spirit, who guides our lives and directs our hearts. Take away any “no” in our hearts. Make our lives a “yes” to you. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

As this session ends, be sure to enjoy the company of those who have accompanied you in the *Seeking Christ* process.

SESSION EIGHT

TAKE-HOME REFLECTION

Read and write your responses to the following passage. Use this as a time of prayerful reflection on the path you feel God is calling you to take.

Catholics know that conversion happens in many ways and over a period of time. While the popular way people think of conversion usually refers to a strong transformation of an adult or the movement from one Christian community to another, in reality conversion can, and should, happen throughout Christian life.

Conversion means coming to live for the Kingdom that Jesus preached. A person can begin this at any point in life and, indeed, many Christian traditions baptize children precisely to expose them to the Kingdom from their earliest years. As children grow, they grow in faith and deepen their conversion to the Kingdom.

Many experience conversion as a distinct moment later in their lives, after the turmoil of adolescence or young adult years. A retreat or a weekend prayer event often helps people accept on a deeper level their relationship with God through Jesus. These can be powerful moments of understanding, love, and transformation.

Conversion never stops. While people may identify one or another moment as particularly important in their Christian growth, continued growth demands continued conversion. When have people given themselves completely to God? When have they accepted the power of the Holy Spirit completely?

Conversion often happens in one's life calling. Husbands and wives help each other in conversion through the sacrifice that love entails and the struggles of family life. Catholics with a special vocation as sisters, brothers, or priests know that they will grow profoundly in conversion as their vocations unfold, calling them to deeper levels of service. All the baptized (the single, the married, and those specially consecrated to God) are called to serve others as Christ did.

Catholics have a special path to help form the experience of conversion. We call it the Catechumenate or the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. This process can last a year (sometimes more) and has distinct steps as participants move through the process—steps that mark out the growth and deepening of conversion. Conversion is celebrated in a powerful ceremony, filled with joy and glory, on Easter night, when catechumens (also called the elect) receive the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.

Conversion is and must be personal, surely. Yet communities as well as the individuals experience conversion because all Christians undergo conversion in the process of putting on the mind of Christ.

SESSION EIGHT

JOURNALING

Participants can journal using the following thought-starters.

The greatest inner change I have experienced in my life so far is...

I have noticed my growth in faith through...

When I think of the changes that may happen to me in the future, I imagine...

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thank you for taking part in the *Seeking Christ* process. We hope it has been a way for you to expand and deepen your search.

Seeking faith, however, is never entirely finished. Even after we have come to faith, new avenues and new issues open before us as new events happen in our lives. Because life is continually changing, our opportunities to seek faith at deeper levels never end.

You may now feel a desire to continue a journey into the faith of the Catholic community, a faith that will build upon your past experiences, values, and insights. If so, there will be many resources to help you, and a welcoming community to accompany you.

You may, however, feel that God is calling you to wait, or calling you in another direction. Because God never calls you to violate your conscience or the integrity of your heart, you should do what God is calling you to do. If at some later point you wish to explore all that Catholicism has to offer you (and perhaps your family), you can always resume your inquiry.

Know that you are not alone. You are part of the prayer of over a billion Catholics, who regularly pray that faith will grow on the earth, that hearts will be opened, that people will be converted and turn their lives to the values of God. At Mass in hundreds of thousands of churches around the world, we pray for all those who “seek God with sincere hearts.” St. Augustine claimed that God would not put in us the ability to seek, to ask, to inquire, unless the truth were not already there, around us and inside us.

The truth, of course, is the person of Jesus Christ, God's Word to us, who sends his Spirit in mysterious ways into our lives, a Spirit who works so deeply inside us that sometimes it takes years for us to recognize where God has been leading us.

In every Mass we praise God with a powerful prayer that may, in God's time, come to echo in every heart. May it be present in yours.

“Through him, and with him, and in him,
O God, almighty Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory and honor is yours,
forever and ever. Amen.”

(From the Roman Catholic Mass)

LOOKING AHEAD

Now that you have participated in *Seeking Christ*, the question comes to you. It is time to look ahead and ask yourself what you see as the next move to which God is inviting you. Take a little time and do the reflecting that will help sort out God's voice amid all the other calls and noises in your life.

In what ways has my faith grown through participating in *Seeking Christ*?

Have I had a sense of getting closer to Jesus? To God as Father? To the Spirit?

Do I feel that God is prompting me to continue exploring the Catholic way of life?

As I seek to listen to God's voice, I feel that the next step on my spiritual journey is...



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