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# EMPOWERING FAITH

INNER STRENGTHS FOR  
BELIEVING & LIVING



“...be strong in the Lord...” (Eph. 6:10)

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**SESSION 1:**

# Faith

**PUTTING PIECES TOGETHER**

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The group gathers, perhaps with refreshments, and welcomes each other. The facilitator orients the group for this session. Each participant briefly shares something that happened during the past week. Then there is a moment of silence while the facilitator asks the question:

*What have been your greatest moments of faith?*

*What do they show you?*

## SCRIPTURE

*A Reading from the Gospel of Matthew (14:22-33)*

Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

## ESSAY

How illuminating is the scene of a child putting together his or her first jigsaw puzzle?

One child will jump right into the puzzle, not stopping until every last piece is put into place. Another child will dither for a while, randomly shuffling the pieces, not really getting into the exercise at all. Many children will enjoy the exercise but quickly lose interest, even to the point of shoving together pieces that do not fit, desperate to end the exercise.

However children react, the whole game of building a puzzle mirrors so accurately what constantly goes on inside our heads. We are always trying to fit things together, to always make sense of them. We watch crime stories so we put the little clues together and figure out the perpetrators even before the detectives do. We plan our commutes each morning so that we will put in the least amount of time between the various segments of our trip. When a friend does something strange, something out of character, we spin the alternative explanations in our head until we have puzzled out the likely motive. We match the dispositions and skills of our children with the many scenarios that will give them what we hope will be the best life.

Putting pieces together—that's what humans do. Sometimes we do it well, because the problem is fairly straightforward: we can put together a patio deck, or the ingredients of a new recipe. Sometimes we botch it terribly—as we see in times of economic crises or war: things have come apart and we do not know how to piece them together again. Often our own most important connections—the family or our work—can puzzle us the most as we try to absorb new patterns of behavior.

How, though, do we figure out the biggest pieces of the greatest puzzle that we face? How do we figure out the meaning of life? Why are we here? Where do we come from? Where, if anywhere, are we going? Why do we seek the way we do? Or love the way we do? Or die the way we do?

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Of course, here too there are varying skills. Some people never ask the questions at all; life for them is about having a minimum of pain and maximum of pleasure. Others seem engaged with the question, becoming amateur philosophers, articulating large theories or formulas for approaching life and dealing with its hardships. Others seem to come to a halt as they deal with these issues, finding themselves in a kind of semi-depression or stupor, like a vehicle stuck in the mud.

At the bottom, however, we are all stumped by these questions, at least at some point in our lives, if not throughout our whole lives. The more science uncovers about the vastness of the universe, and the infinite smallness and strangeness of the molecules that compose our matter, the more we puzzle at the mystery of our own existence. The more modern life complicates our relationships with its analyses and abstractions, the more we wonder about our human connections. We seem forever about the issue of human meaning.

Then faith comes in—as the divine gift that gives us the power to put together, at ever-deeper levels, the basic pieces of human existence. It is a gift, for sure—just like any insight or discovery we have had seems to come from nowhere. With the gift of faith we come to see in ways that we have not been able to see before; with the gift of faith we arrive at a vision that holds in place the biggest pieces of human experience—our wonder, our love, our suffering, our striving, our hopes and future.

The first gift of faith is God: faith allows us to look upon the same world that everyone else sees but from the point of view of its being freely given to us, of its giftedness. Faith brings us to a creator—to the One who gives us existence. Like Peter, we all have to reach out our hands to God for help. Faith, then, relates us to this Creator as we plumb the infinite generosity and the unbounded love that surrounds all existence. Indeed, we often glimpse little hints of this boundless love, little clues; faith drives us beyond the clues to a fuller picture.

Faith gives us a language—how to speak of God, speak to God, hear God, respond to God.

Faith also gives us a way to talk and think about the ultimate puzzles of human life—how our dreams keep coming into conflict with our dark side, how violence and sin weave themselves into human interactions, how we long to transcend death—how do we put these pieces together? Faith leads us to Jesus Christ who uniquely deals with human sin and death through his dying and rising.

Faith, then, is a gift for our human vision of reality, helping us see things that exceed our capacity, helping us see from the perspective of God, and bringing us into relationship with God.

## **DISCUSSION**

Participants give their reactions to the reading.

## **FURTHER DISCUSSION**

- 1. How have you come to see faith as a gift in your life?*
- 2. What do you think your life would be like without the gift of faith?*
- 3. How does believing transform the other dimensions of your human life?*



## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

“Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us, and that the Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself. By faith ‘man freely commits his entire self to God.’ For this reason the believer seeks to know and do God’s will.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1814)

Faith, then, has a content, but it also is a dynamic inner act by which we commit ourselves, in trust, to God. Faith is also a gift, something the Lord offers us in our need. Catholics do not think of faith as a one-time, everything gift; faith grows as we grow in our relationship to God and live out faith by loving and serving God and others.

## **PRAYER**

Lord, through the gift of faith, you have transformed our lives, allowing us to see more deeply aspects of our lives, helping us know more fully the richness of yourself. We ask that you increase our faith and help us with our unbelief. May the power of believing bring us the energy to live more fully, serve us more readily, and fill us with consolation. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, in the power of his Spirit. Amen.

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS AND HOSPITALITY**

# APPENDIX

## PRAYER FOR EMPOWERING FAITH

Loving God,  
create in us an ever-growing faith,  
with hearts open and centered in you.

Empower within us the fire of your Spirit,  
so that your love may fill us more fully,  
and flow throughout our lives.

Increase within us a desire to reach out,  
to invite and to share,  
to welcome and accept.

Empower the faith of all your children,  
especially those who have grown distant from you,  
those ready to hear an invitation  
to the love you alone can bring.

Empower us, loving God,  
to see the fullness of your grace and peace.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

### About Paulist Evangelization Ministries

Paulist Evangelization Ministries is an apostolic arm of the Paulist Fathers. Our goal is to help reach those who are not involved in a family of faith—whether seekers who are looking for faith, or Catholics who have halted the regular practice of their faith. Through the development of programs and various publications, we want to reach people to invite them to re-experience Jesus Christ in the richness of our Catholic tradition, and equip parishes to reach out more fully in invitation and welcome. Please visit us at [www.pemdc.org](http://www.pemdc.org), and support our efforts through by inviting others to come to know Jesus Christ.