

Week 2

A Church of Saints and Sinners



Introductions

If there are newcomers, begin with introductions.

Opening Prayer

Take a few moments to enter more deeply into the presence of God.

Song: "Here I Am, Lord," Dan Schutte, OCP

On a table in the midst of the group, place a Bible open to the appropriate Scripture passage and a candle (ready to be lighted when the service begins).

Leader: We are gathered to pray. *(Someone lights the candle.)* Let us take a few silent moments to recognize that Jesus is with us as he promised: "...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20).

Leader: Our tradition is a rich one, and we have many resources to call on in this time of crisis.

All: Help us, O Lord, to remember who we are, a people called to yourself.

Leader: Lord, Jesus, turn our anger into patience and understanding. Turn our desire for vengeance into a desire for peace. Turn our pride into humility.

All: Hear us, O Lord.

Leader: Blessed Mary, Mother of our beloved Church, Saint of all Saints, intercede for us in our hour of need.

All: Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

Leader: Help us, O Lord, to be mindful that we are part of the communion of saints. We call on Peter and Paul, Mary Magdalene, Augustine, Catherine of Siena, Francis, Clare, Benedict, Scholastica, John XXIII.

All: *(Here participants mention the name of a favorite saint and the name of a friend or relative who has gone before us.)*

Leader: Dear Saints, we remember that we are part of you as we struggle on our way.
Amen

Living Our Faith Sharing

Share how you lived your faith during the previous week.

Focus of the Session

From the beginning of his public life, Jesus invited sinners to walk in his company. In the history of the Church, whenever human weakness or selfishness caused scandal, the Holy Spirit inspired great women and men to respond, challenge and remind us to live a life worthy of Christ's calling. A call to holiness and a flourishing of spiritual renewal ensued.

Sharing Our Experience

Take a few minutes to read the following reflection silently or aloud.

From the beginning, the Church has been a mixture of saints and sinners. Judas betrayed the Son of God. Peter denied Jesus three times. Even God's chosen ones can betray him.

The Church is made up of people who by God's grace can reach the heights of communion with God, can choose mediocrity or even fall into scandalous behavior. While guided by the Holy Spirit in its proclamation of the gospel, the Church is also all too familiar with our human condition. St. Paul understood this well, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15).

Scandal has been part of the Church's history—scandals that involved both leadership and great numbers of people. Yet the darkest of times brought about some of the finest pages of our history. God raised up great saints such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Dominic, St. Teresa of Avila and St. Ignatius of Loyola. They are profound examples of the power of God's grace to renew lives and the body of the Church. As large numbers of people turned their lives to spiritual renewal, the Church became a light to the world.

As with the early Church, we may choose to focus on the shock of Judas' betrayal, the scandal of others in our time, or to focus on Christ and the example of those who follow him faithfully. Shifting our focus from betrayal to a more positive direction may be very difficult and take time for some, especially for those who are most deeply in the grieving process. We ask God's help for what is beyond our human ability. In faith, we believe that having been tested by the fire of scandal, we can become stronger than ever as we respond to God's call to holiness.

We are all called to be saints! Much as we might like to refuse that invitation, we cannot, for the call comes from our Creator. We are called to a goodness beyond human endeavor but made possible by God's grace. Despite our sinfulness, our limitations, our lack of saintly motivation, our fears and obsessions, within each of us divinely created holiness is waiting to emerge. We are to be holy in response to God's love for us. Because God loves, we are to love; because God is holy, we are to be holy.

Small Community Sharing

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following. Then share your reflections.

- Each of us is probably both saint and sinner. In what ways do I experience the pull in opposite directions of which Paul speaks? (“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” Romans 7:15.)
- Whom among my personal friends or relatives do I regard as saintly? Why?

Listening To The Word

Read Ephesians 4:1-8, 11-16.

Pause for a few minutes of quiet reflection, allowing the Word of God to enter deeply into you.

Reflection

Holiness is not a vocation reserved for the religious and ordained; nor does sainthood necessarily require martyrdom or a life devoted to extravagantly selfless works of mercy. Jesus, the Son of God, a Jew, a tradesman-turned-itinerant-preacher, brought his message of radical love and acceptance to all people: “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mark 2:17). Today, here, now, we respond to that call.

In the reading from Ephesians, Paul begs us “to lead a life worthy of the calling” (v. 1): We are to be humble and gentle, we are to build up the Body of Christ. And where do we find the Body of Christ? Not only in church! We are part of that Body, members of the People of God, wherever we are. Most of us answer our vocational calling in the world—not in a hermitage. We are family members who work in the home and in society; we labor and teach, sell and travel, study and interact with one another. We cannot go where God is not; wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we are called to holiness.

In the past, some may have had a tendency to regard the call to holiness from a negative perspective—to avoid sin. For too long, some may have also regarded sin only as an act forbidden by God and merely as a private matter between the individual and God. But doing nothing can be equally hurtful to others. And when we sin, no matter how private the sin, it is an offense against God and it affects the community. Through sin, we are less than we can be and as a result, the community is lessened. Not only is wrong done, but much good is also either not done or diminished. Sin is that proverbial pebble cast into the still pool.

In contrast, the effects of holiness on individuals and on the world are also often beyond measure. Holiness challenges us to see the world and ourselves with honesty and truth, while sin concerns itself with deception and lies.

Holiness strips away the deceptive trappings that lead us into exalting money or power or prestige, possessions or achievements, entertainment or substances or pleasures in the place reserved for the Divine. Holiness grounds us in reality for it reassures us that only God is God. Two results of holiness are inner peace and joy—a peace despite the chaos that may surround us; a joy that is independent of circumstances or success or wealth. We are centered in God’s love and it is sufficient.

Small Community Sharing

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following. Then share your reflections.

- In light of the theme of today, “A Church of Saints and Sinners,” what does the reading from Ephesians say to me?
- What specific things can I do to improve my spiritual life?
- What gifts has the Holy Spirit given me? How can I best use these gifts for the benefit of others?

Living Our Faith

No sharing would be complete without a commitment to putting our faith into practice. What is the specific action God is inviting you to take to change your own life or to respond to someone else’s need? **Choose a specific, concrete action that flows from your sharing.** The examples below are given only as ideas to generate a creative response.

1. Discern an area of weakness in your spiritual life. Determine positive steps for growth.
2. This week, try to love one person whom you feel is unlovable.
3. Affirm someone you consider to be holy and thank him or her for the inspiration he or she provides.
4. Resolve to spend 15 minutes each day reading Scripture. Confer with the following Web sites: USCCB, www.usccb.org/nab/index.htm for the readings of the day or Sacred Space, www.jesuit.ie/prayer/.

Put in writing what you have determined you will do to respond to this session.

If you wish to do so, share your commitment with others in your small community.

Closing Prayer

Leader: Help us to remember that we are all the Body of Christ.

All: Help us to remember, Lord.

Leader: When one of us wounded, we all suffer. When one of us is hurt, we all cry.

All: Help us to remember, Lord.

Leader: Help us to remember that as we fall and stumble on our spiritual journey, we will help one another to get up, and hand in hand continue our walk with you.

All: Help us to remember, Lord.

Leader: Give us the strength to apologize to those who have been abused. Help us to bless them and, in turn, ask them for their blessing, so that we may together be sons and daughters of our Creator in name and in action.

All: Bless us with your strength, O Lord.

Leader: Heal those who have been abused. May they experience time and again the innocence and joy of belonging to you.

All: Give them your peace, O Lord.

Leader: Help our leaders to continue to develop opportunities for dialogue with each other, with our priests, and with the laity.

All: Free us from our fears, O Lord.

Leader: Thank you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for all your many gifts and blessings.

All: *(Mention those blessings which are dear to your heart.)*

Leader: Let us offer each other a sign of Christ's peace.

Song: "Prayer of St. Francis," Sebastian Temple, OCP
or
"Peace is Flowing Like a River," Carey Landry, OCP

Reminder

Please read and reflect on the upcoming session, "Healing, Repentance and Forgiveness," before the next meeting, so that you can come prepared to listen and share.



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