

SESSION 10

"QUO VADIS?": PETER'S WAY OF THE CROSS

INTRODUCTION

Today we conclude our study of Peter. In this session, Dr. Gray will discuss the importance of early Christian tradition in regaining our Catholic story, the cost of discipleship, and the role of Peter as shepherd and prophet.

We often forget that Peter lived, preached, and died in Rome. Tradition teaches that the home of a Roman Senator named Pudens was his base of operations. When the persecution under Nero increased, the early Christian community insisted that Peter leave Rome. As he departed, he saw Christ carrying a cross. Peter asked Jesus, "Quo vadis?"—"Lord, where are you going?" Jesus responded, "To be crucified once more." Peter then realized he was called to return to Rome and to pick up his own cross.

The Cross is part of a greater narrative. It is a crucial component of being on "The Way" with and toward Christ. We know from the first chapters in Genesis that Adam and Eve introduced suffering and death into the human condition by their sin. Left there, suffering of any sort could be seen as nothing more than purposeless pain. Yet Jesus, in his mercy, embraced the Cross and took our suffering and death upon himself. He redeemed it. Now, rather than view the Cross as merely a brutal form of torture, we see it as a means of hope, sanctification, and purification. Because of Christ, suffering serves a greater purpose when we offer it up to God. The Church, guided by St. Peter and his successors, leads the faithful toward a better understanding of the cost and meaning of discipleship.

In this session we will reflect on discipleship, using Peter's example to enhance our understanding. His life in Rome, his death and legacy, and the profound question of "Quo Vadis?" will help us connect Peter's story to our own, and help us to see beyond mere facts to gain a deeper grasp of how to walk, as Peter did, "The Way" toward Christ.



CONNECT

First, review the previous session with your group. Can anyone recite the Memory Verse (2 Timothy 4:21) without assistance? Otherwise, look up it from last week (page 173) and recite it as a group. Then bring up any highlights the group may have regarding the COMMIT section from last session.

1. Have you ever visited St. Peter's Basilica? If so, describe your experience. If not, think of a shrine, church, or holy site you have visited that impacted you. Share your experience.

Churches and other holy sites are a great way for us as Catholics to "regain our story." These tangible and visible signs of our faith help us realize the continuity of our faith and our role within it. Sharing experiences of truth and beauty will help the group connect to one another and to better understand the universality of the Catholic faith.

2. Have you ever avoided a task you knew you were meant to do? Explain the circumstances and what you learned from the outcome.

Personal answers. Sometimes we avoid a task because we don't understand what we are being asked to do. Sometimes we avoid a task simply because we don't feel like putting in the effort required. Oftentimes when we avoid a task we then feel remorseful or guilty for not at least attempting what we were given to do. This may increase our resolve to be more courageous in the future.

When he fled Rome, Peter thought it was prudent to consider his entire flock, not recognizing that Jesus was calling him to serve his flock as a witness through martyrdom and suffering. Peter's vision of Christ carrying his Cross made clear what way God was calling him to follow. Many of us are tempted to see a situation in one specific way. Yet, "The Way" of Christ often requires us to look beyond practicalities and submit completely to God, trusting him in ways that will surprise us. We may feel inadequate and unworthy—and we are if we rely on our own strengths. Only by the power of Christ can we do what he has called us to do.

3. Have you ever seen beauty in the midst of hardship or suffering? Share the experience with others in your group.

Personal answers. One example might be the healing of family relationships at the deathbed of a loved one. Though it seems contrary to our human understanding, the martyrdom of Peter was a moment of victory. Our perspective tells us that to die on a cross is defeat. With faith, we are able to see suffering differently, not as a futile experience, but as a source of redemption. Because of Christ and his Passion, we know that pain and death will lead to resurrection. We can only have one because of the other. Then we can join Paul in saying, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).



Play the video segment, which will last for approximately 45 minutes. The Study Guide provides participants with a brief outline of the topics covered in the video teaching.



DISCUSS

Following are suggested answers to the DISCUSS questions.

1. Dr. Gray mentions that we as Catholics have lost our story. How does going back to the early Christian narrative help us to live fuller lives of faith and witness?

As people of faith, we must first know our story before we can share it. Before his Ascension, Jesus commissioned his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." We must be disciples before we can make disciples. Knowing our story in the greater context of Peter and the early Church enables us to connect with our roots. We see that those who helped the early Church were people just like us. They had to make the decision to pick up their cross and follow Christ. By knowing our story, we can give greater witness to our faith.

2. How did Peter move from refusing to accept Jesus' suffering (see Matthew 16:22) to the decision to return to Rome on the Via Appia, knowing he would suffer there?

Understandably, Peter wanted to avoid the Cross. In Matthew 16:22, Peter saw the Cross as a means of defeat. He couldn't fathom that Jesus—the Christ, the Messiah—must embrace the Cross. Many of us share this experience. When the persecution of Christians increased under the Emperor Nero, it was natural for the Christian community to advise Peter to flee. Peter's vision of Jesus called him to behave contrary to his instincts. Only through his faith in Christ could Peter understand the role the Cross had for himself. Peter returned to Rome on the Via Appia to embrace his cross willingly, imitating what he had seen Jesus do in Jerusalem. Oftentimes, we look to role models to strengthen us in our own mission. This is why it is so important to immerse ourselves in a strong Catholic community. We are inspired, and may even inspire others. Additionally, the works of the Apostles in Scripture and the lives of the saints model the meaning of true discipleship for us, helping us to persevere in "The Way" of Christ.

3. How do the works of Caravaggio and Michelangelo depict Peter? What do they say about Peter's legacy?

Michelangelo and Caravaggio painted during the Counter-Reformation, a time when the evangelization and reevangelization of the culture was critical. Caravaggio modeled his painting after Michelangelo's. Both depictions show Peter as he is being crucified. We see the muscular fisherman craning his head toward us as if to ask, "Are you willing to take up the Cross? Are you willing to die for Christ?" These are the questions we must all ask, but especially those who are called to be Peter's successors. Theirs is a role based on self-sacrificial love in the image of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

4. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture...come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal" (CCC 80). What are some of the examples Dr. Gray uses to affirm this statement? Can you think of any from your personal experience?
- Scripture and Tradition go hand in hand. One cannot exist without the other, and one is not more important than the other. Both are crucial in understanding the fullness of truth. In this session, Dr. Gray used several examples of Scripture and Tradition working together. He mentioned the connection between Jesus' words in Matthew 16:18 when he said, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," and the tradition of St. Peter's Basilica being built upon the rock of Peter." Excavations during World War II confirmed this tradition after the first-century bones of a male were found under the main altar of the basilica. Experts believe they are the bones of St. Peter. Another example of the harmony of Scripture and Tradition includes the story of "Quo Vadis." Peter is leaving Rome on the Via Appia and encounters Jesus carrying a cross. Tradition says that Peter asks the Lord, "Where are you going?" The Lord responds that he is going to Rome to be crucified once more. Peter turns back around, having understood that this is "The Way" he must go: the Way of the Cross. This theme of "The Way" is prominent in the Gospel of Mark, which is based on Peter's preaching. As we can connect this relationship between Scripture and Tradition, it strengthens our understanding of the unity found between both.*

5. What is the significance of "The Way" as discussed in the Gospel of Mark and its relationship to Peter's martyrdom? Why is the theme of "The Way" framed by two accounts of the healing of blind men?

As explained briefly above, an important theme of Mark's Gospel is "The Way." This "Way" signifies the Way of Christ, The Way of the Cross. In Mark's Gospel, this theme is bracketed by two stories of healing involving blind men. Mark 8:22-26 recounts the healing of the blind man after Jesus touches him in Bethsaida, while Mark 10:46-52 narrates the healing of another blind man healed by Jesus' word alone. Before he met Jesus on the Via Appia, Peter was spiritually blind to what Jesus was calling him to do at this moment of his life. After his encounter, he sees that he must go back to Rome to continue on "The Way" toward Christ. Because Mark's Gospel is rooted in Peter's preaching, this understanding of "The Way" stems from Peter's experience. All of us experience different degrees of spiritual blindness until we grow in our understanding of "The Way" of Christ.

6. Do you think of Peter as a conqueror? Why or why not?

According to normal worldly thinking, there is nothing about dying on a cross that makes Peter a conqueror. However, Peter conquers when he chooses to be slain for love. As Dr. Gray stated, "He conquers in love." Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. As Romans 8:38-39 reminds us, "...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." This is our truth, our hope. Because of his full embrace of his cross, because of his self-sacrifice, Peter conquers. His love of Christ leaves him fearless.



COMMIT

Following are suggested answers to questions in the daily COMMIT reflections.

COMMIT DAY 1 – WHERE PETER LIVED IN ROME

Participants will learn about the Church of St. Pudentiana, which is built over the home of Pudens, the senator who hosted Peter in Rome.



COMMIT DAY 2 – QUO VADIS

Participants will reflect on Peter's meeting Jesus on the Appian Way.

Look up Mark 8:27-33, noticing the use of the phrase "on the way" at the beginning of this passage. What does "The Way" of Christ entail, according to these verses? What does Peter's return to Rome signify concerning this theme of "the way"? How has Peter changed since Mark 8:32?

As Jesus walks along "The Way" to Caesarea Philippi, he asks his disciples two questions: "Who do men say that I am?" and, "Who do you say that I am?" In doing so, he is inviting his disciples to walk on "The Way" that leads to him. This way must be founded on a complete understanding of who Jesus is. With Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus knows that Peter recognizes him. Jesus then begins to discuss suffering and the Cross. Peter, not understanding the role of both suffering and the Cross in salvation history, rebukes such talk. Only after Christ's Passion, Resurrection and Ascension does Peter grasp the deeper meaning of suffering and the Cross. He must walk in imitation of his Lord.

Now turn to Mark 9:30-35. How does the theme of "The Way" continue here? What teaching does Christ impart to his followers in this excerpt?

Jesus and his followers journey once more. In this passage, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks them, "What were you discussing on the way?" His disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest among them. Jesus explains to his disciples the importance of serving one another in love. Part of being on "The Way" with Jesus means being the servant of all—something Jesus himself will witness to when he washes their feet before his Passion and when he dies on the Cross.

The theme of "The Way" continues into Mark 10:46-52. In this passage, what is the significance of the healing of the blind man? What does he do after he is healed? How can this narrative be related to the story of Peter on "The Way"?

Mark brackets his theme of "The Way" with two stories of the healing of a blind man. In the second story, the healing of physical blindness serves as a metaphor for the healing of spiritual blindness. The blind man's sight is restored in this story, and the account ends saying, "And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way." The man, healed of his blindness, becomes a disciple of Jesus Christ. Peter, too, was a disciple and apostle of Christ, both during Jesus' years of ministry on earth and as the head of the Apostles after Jesus' ascension. When Peter meets Jesus on the Via Appia and heads back to Rome he is a witness of the perseverance to which each disciple is called—a perseverance to follow Christ "on The Way." Even to the last breath. "The Way" of Jesus is not simply a one-time decision, but a continual choice to walk with the Lord in each moment of each day.



DAY 3 – PETER'S MARTYROIDOM

Participants will reflect on Peter's martyrdom.

Look up 1 Peter 3:14-15 and 1 Peter 4:12-14. What is Peter's understanding of the role of the Cross for discipleship? *"The Acts of Peter" highlights Peter's willingness to walk down his own Way of the Cross, confident that, by God's grace, it will lead to his own resurrection. We see no fear of death in the account of Peter's martyrdom. He is so focused on Christ that any anxiety or doubt seems to fall by the wayside. Peter understands that nothing can separate us from God's love. In 1 Peter 3:14, Peter's preaching affirms the attitude exhibited in "The Acts of Peter." He encourages the early Christians to have no fear of suffering. 1 Peter 4:12-14 continues by highlighting Peter's understanding of suffering as part of discipleship. Rather than something to shun or avoid, suffering is a cause for rejoicing. Those called to carry their cross through suffering are truly blessed. Peter's martyrdom gives a firm foundation to his words. He himself has chosen "The Way" of Christ, of the Cross, of victory.*

How does Peter direct his flock in the excerpt above? What direction does Peter give in 1 Peter 4:1-2, 2 Peter 1:5-8 and 2 Peter 3:11-14? Is Peter's advice still relevant today?

Peter is a shepherd to the very end, encouraging his flock even in the last moments of his life. He reminds them to remain focused on Christ and to avoid being distracted by worldly things. By looking to Christ alone, Christians can walk with certainty on the narrow path to holiness. In this excerpt, Peter also surrenders his body to the cross—showing his ultimate surrender to the will of God. This urging of Peter to live in the Spirit is affirmed by his words in 1 Peter 4:1-2, when he advises Christians to strive to overcome their earthly desires and live according to the will of God. In 2 Peter 1:5-8, Peter continues to guide the Christian community toward a life of goodness and virtue. He lists qualities of a life worthy of Christ that lead to fruitfulness in discipleship. Finally, 2 Peter 3:11-14 encourages Christians to keep their goal in sight, for they know neither the day nor the hour of Christ's coming. This readiness will enable Christians to focus on their growth in holiness and not get distracted by worldly things. Peter's advice is still relevant today and will always be relevant to anyone seeking truth. By following Peter's advice concerning perseverance, virtue and a focus on the eternal, we will walk with him and so many who have gone before us on "The Way" of Christ.



COMMIT DAY 4 – SHEPHERD OF CHRIST'S FLOCK

Participants will reflect on the role of Peter, and his successors, as shepherd and prophet.

Look up Genesis 49:24. How is God described?

God is described as the "Mighty One of Jacob" and the "Rock of Israel", but also as "Shepherd."

Look up the following Old Testament passages. What kind of shepherd does each passage describe God as being? What characteristics are noted?

Psalm 23 - *The Lord is described as a shepherd who leads his sheep to good things (green pastures, still-waters, paths of righteousness) and protects them from harm. The Lord is a gentle shepherd that wants his sheep to thrive and dwell with him forever.*

Psalm 80:1-3 - *The Lord is called the Shepherd of Israel and seen as enthroned in heaven, and the one to whom God's people call for salvation.*

Isaiah 40:11 - *The Lord is described as a shepherd who feeds and cares for his flock, even carrying those too young to make the journey on their own.*

Micah 2:12 - *The Lord is described as the one who will gather his flock into one fold.*

Look up the following Old Testament passages. How are God's people described?

Psalm 74:1 - *God's people are described as "the sheep of thy pasture."*

Psalm 95:7 - *God's people are described as "the sheep of his hand."*

Look up the following passages. Who is appointed as shepherd over God's people in each passage?

Numbers 27:15-18 - *Joshua, the son of Nun, is chosen to lead God's people in Moses' stead, and to be as a shepherd to them.*

2 Samuel 7:7 - *While he is speaking to David, the Lord notes that the judges of Israel were commanded to shepherd God's people.*

2 Samuel 5:1-2 - *David is chosen to be king and shepherd over God's people.*

Ezekiel 34 – God chastises the unworthy shepherds who have fed themselves and not cared for God’s sheep. God says that he is against these bad shepherds, and that he himself will seek out and rescue his sheep, feeding them with good pasture and healing those who are crippled and weak.

Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd. Four times he says that he will lay down his life for his sheep. He leads his flock to salvation by taking on the blemishes caused by sin and lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus knows each one of his sheep and calls all of his people to himself—even those who are wandering or lost.

Look up John 21:15-19. What question is Peter asked three times? What command is Peter given three times? *Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Three times Jesus commands Peter to feed and tend his sheep.*



Participants will reflect on Caravaggio's and Michelangelo's "Crucifixion of St. Peter."

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NOTES

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