



SESSION 1

Seeking the Face of God



The Road to Emmaus, Robert Zünd

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To understand what the word *symbolon* means and its significance for the faith
- To become familiar with the structure of the episodes in this program
- To see that human beings are in search of God and that Scripture presents to us the remarkable hope of actually finding him
- To appreciate that, out of love, God is seeking us, and that we are seeking him in response to his loving initiative

STEP 1: Begin

OPENING PRAYER

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?

— *Psalm 42:1-2*

INTRODUCTION

The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for. (CCC 27)

Welcome! You are taking your first steps on a path to more deeply understanding and wholeheartedly loving the faith of the Church. You wouldn't be here if you weren't seeking something—something more that is hard to express.

Jesus knows your position well. In the Gospel of John, the call of the first disciples begins with a relevant and arresting question that Jesus asks: “What do you seek?” (1:38). He doesn't ask them, “Are you seeking something?” He also doesn't say, “You are seeking me. Here I am.” Instead, he puts a question to them that assumes they are seekers but does not assume they know exactly what—or whom—they seek.

All of us are seeking something. We are unsatisfied with what we have and know it, even in the best of times and situations. Why? Because we are made for more than this world can offer. We might not know what exactly we're seeking, or understand it as clearly as we'd like.

When we realize this, we find that Jesus' question to these first disciples is directed at us as well: *What are you seeking?* When contemplating the answer, we also must ask ourselves: Do we know what we're seeking? Do we want to find out?

The disciples fumble a bit when asked this question. They avoid answering and instead reply with another question, about where Jesus is staying. And Jesus' reply is simple and mysterious, and again he addresses us as much as he answers them: “Come and see” (John 1:39).

Come and see. In this first session, these mysterious and inviting words outline the path before us. We are all seeking the face of God, and rather than remaining distant, aloof, or uninterested, the Lord says to each one of us, “Come and see.” So that is what we will do. We will come to Scripture and approach the faith of the Church to see that “the desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself” (CCC 27).

STEP 2: Learn

SETTING THE STAGE

The Augustine Institute, is home of remarkable work being carried out: helping Catholics understand, live and share their faith. As a Catholic educational apostolate, the Augustine Institute uses traditional and innovative media to share the truth and beauty of the Catholic faith. This endeavor is the fruit of seeking the face of God, in service of others who are seeking the same.

Symbolon: The Faith of the Church—the journey begins! All of us are seeking something more, something that goes beyond anything the world can offer. And the surprising truth is that, not only are we ultimately seeking God, but also that we do so only because he is seeking us. How can this be? What does Scripture have to say about these interrelated searches? And what should we do once we become aware of what we truly seek and who is seeking us?

I. The adventure of faith—where and how should we begin?

- A. You have your very own story, and it has brought you to this program!
- B. God is inviting you ... how will you respond?
- C. Why the name *Symbolon*?
 - 1. A "symbolon" was a token indicating identity and relationship
 - 2. It became a name for the Creed, the "symbol of faith," because it indicated and fostered identity and unity in common Christian faith
- D. Each session will have three parts: Salvation History, Pilgrimage with an on-location expert, and Catechesis on theological tradition

II. Salvation History: Who are you and where are you going?

- A. These are fundamental human questions—answering them leads us back to God
- B. Scripture presents the search for God as written on the human heart
- C. God wants to be found by us, so he guides us back to him
- D. As a result, the main characters in Scripture find God—and so can we!

III. Pilgrimage: Saint Augustine—Our hearts are made to rest in God

- A. Our time is one of restlessness and distraction
- B. Augustine offers us a timely example: only God can satisfy us
- C. How do we come to know God? God has revealed himself to us and we come to know him through Scripture and Tradition, interpreted by the Church's teaching Magisterium
- D. Getting to know God is personal: we approach, listen, and converse with him

IV. Catechesis: God is seeking us—what does that mean?

- A. We pray because God prompts us to—just as he draws us to himself more generally
 - 1. We begin with our natural inclinations, supplemented through revelation
 - 2. He draws us by means of his providence and through the gift of grace

[God's] divine activity now takes on dramatic form when, in Jesus Christ, it is God himself who goes in search of the "stray sheep," a suffering and lost humanity. When Jesus speaks in his parables of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, of the woman who looks for the lost coin, of the father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son, these are no mere words: they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity.

— Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 12

- B. Our role is to be receptive to God's action and guidance because God knows us and is close to us

V. *Lectio divina*: Matthew 6:5–15

- A. For Christians, prayer should be a normal, everyday practice
B. In Scripture, we hear God speak and we respond; this is called *lectio divina* (divine reading)
C. A rich source is the book of Psalms, the prayerbook at the heart of the Bible

WORD MEANING:

Symbolon

An ancient seal or token that indicated the identity of a person and his or her relationship to another. Because the Creed is a sign and cause of Christian identity and unity, it was also known as the “symbol of faith,” and anyone who confessed the Creed was identified as a Christian and established as being in relationship to the Church.

MEMORY VERSE

For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered.

—EZEKIEL 34:11–12



STEP 2: Learn

- 1) God is seeking us; and because he guides us through his providence, he has led you to encounter this program. How did you hear about it? What path brought you here? Can you discern how God has led you to this point?

This is a personal question and thus a variety of answers are expected. In addition, participants will have varying degrees of comfort in answering this question. The lowest-stakes question is simply how someone heard about *Symbolon*, making it a good starting point. But additional questions will help to bring out how the Lord has been leading each person to learn more about him and to seek him with increased attention

Leader

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and love. The goal of the question is to begin to see that the Lord truly does draw each one of us closer to himself and that we can see signs of his providence, even though these signs are neither entirely clear nor absolute. But once we begin to catch sight of the Lord's hand in all of this, we also begin to grow in appreciation and love.

- 2) Each of us has faced restlessness and uncertainty in our lives. In the area of faith, what kinds of restlessness have you experienced? In what areas have you experienced uncertainty—about life, about the Bible, about the Catholic faith, about what all of this might mean for you?

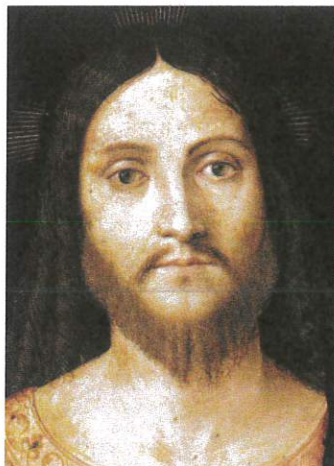
Drawing on the previous question, this question has a twofold goal. The first is to continue to see what has prompted each participant to embark on this journey; areas of restlessness are opportunities to discover the rest that comes through knowing Christ and living in the communion of his Church. The second goal is to bring to light the kinds of questions, concerns, and uncertainties each person might have. Here at the outset, it's important to remember that the point isn't to answer or to address these questions. Rather, the main idea is to set down some markers for the progress that will undoubtedly occur over the course of the upcoming sessions. This session gives each participant, and you as the guide, a chance to see where the obstacles are, where they aren't, and where the Lord will be working through the sessions that will follow. Overall, it will be important to affirm and to acknowledge how normal it is to have questions and uncertainties: we all have them. Being Catholic doesn't mean having all the answers; it means encountering Christ, becoming a part of his Body, the Church, and trusting that he is the way, the truth, and the life, even though in this life we never have all the answers.

Leader

- 3) Have you thought about the fact that God is seeking you? How do you react to this idea? That people are searching for God—where do you see evidence of this search in history, in stories, or in your own life?

This again is an open-ended question. For many, the idea that God is seeking them will be a new one. For some, it might not be new, but it might have been misunderstood or have negative associations. Some might think that God pursuing them has to do with punishment or even vengeance. For this reason, be sure to emphasize that God seeks us out of love and for love. Once we understand this, our reaction ought to be one of pleasant surprise and of returning love for love. As for people searching for God, evidence of this search could be brought forward from various times in history, numerous stories, and the like. The most important realization to have is that we have been and continue to search for God in our own lives. Whether it is in pursuit of a justice the world doesn't seem to offer, a truth that answers all questions, or a love that will always be there, each of us is indeed searching for God. The main goal of this question is to grow in our awareness of this fact and its importance for mankind generally and for each of our lives in particular. Once we recognize this importance, we strengthen our reasons to continue to explore the faith of the Church.

Leader



Jesus wants me to tell you again ... how much is the love He has for each one of you ... He thirsts for you. He loves you always, even when you don't feel worthy. ... Until you know deep inside that Jesus thirsts for you, you can't begin to know who He wants to be for you. Or who He wants you to be for Him.

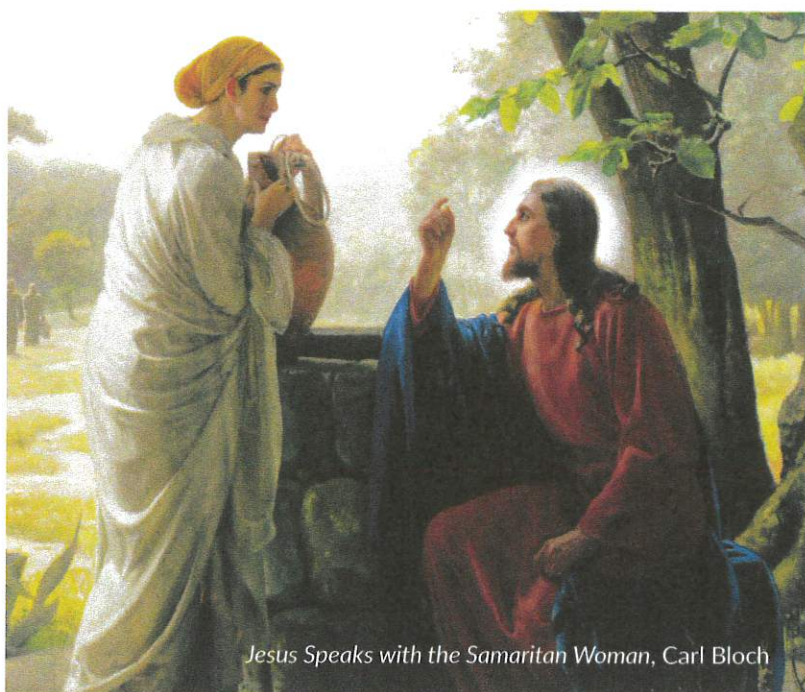
— Saint Teresa of Calcutta, from a letter to her community (March 5, 1993)

Christ Portrait, Lombard School

STEP 4: Conclude

After this first session, we have a better sense of the answer to Jesus' question, "What do you seek?" You might find it hard to believe, but we are seeking the face of God. We were doing this even before starting on this journey. But now we are also ready to respond to Jesus' invitation, "Come and see," and to set out in earnest to explore the Catholic faith and to witness how this faith has transformed hearts, transformed lives, and transformed the world.

We have many places to go and many stories to hear. But each place and story centers on the one story that governs and guides all others: the story of God's loving plan of salvation. Even now, God is drawing us to himself as part of this story. Knowing that we are seeking him because he is seeking us, we look ahead to the details of that story as expressed in the Creed, the symbol of faith.



Jesus Speaks with the Samaritan Woman, Carl Bloch

CLOSING PRAYER

O compassionate and loving Lord of my soul! You likewise say: "Come to me all who thirst, for I will give you drink." ... O Life, who gives life to all! Do not deny me this sweetest water that you promise to those who want it. I want it, Lord, and I beg for it, and I come to You. Don't hide Yourself, Lord, from me, since You know my need.

— Saint Teresa of Ávila, Soliloquies, no. 9



CALL TO CONVERSION

Two of the shortest parables in the Gospel of Matthew have to do with precious, life-changing things: the parable of the hidden treasure (13:44) and the parable of the pearl of great price (13:45–46). Each presents a man who, upon finding something extraordinarily precious, sells all that he has in order to obtain it. What is the remarkable thing found? The treasure and the pearl are used to symbolize the great price—and prize—of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Christian claim about Jesus is called the “good news.” He has come among us to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven and to invite us to share in this mysterious and astonishing reality. Not everyone will be ready to sell all that he or she has upon first hearing this claim. But no one should dismiss this claim as unimportant or unworthy of examination. The stakes are simply too high. God created the world and entered it to give his life for us, so that we can be united to him in perfect love and joy forever—so whether this story is true is of the utmost importance for each and every person. Even for those who are convinced of its truth, continuing to reflect on it and to understand it more profoundly, is one of life’s greatest treasures.

At the outset of this journey, we must acknowledge that there are great things in store. But challenges lie ahead as well: every path to Christ and every journey alongside him will always involve both joys and trials. Just as Christ himself experienced both joys and trials in his earthly life, so too will every disciple of Christ, because the disciple shares in the whole of the Master’s life. So as Saint Teresa of Ávila says, let us commit to this journey with a firm and determinate resolution. In other words, buckle up! The Lord is seeking you. He wants to do great things in your heart and in your life; and he has begun that work by bringing you to this journey that we call *Symbolon: The Faith of the Church*.

DIGGING DEEPER

Around the year 400, a deacon named Deogratias asks Saint Augustine (354–430) for help to instruct new believers. Not satisfied with his own efforts, Deogratias seeks guidance on how best to tell the story of salvation to newbies in the Christian faith. Augustine is understanding and gentle, while also setting a high standard. He writes:

The historical exposition is complete when the instruction delivered to the newcomer begins from the scriptural verse, In the beginning God made heaven and earth (Gen 1:1), and continues down to the present period of the church's history. ...

Indeed, everything that we read in the holy scriptures that was written before the coming of the Lord was written for the sole purpose of drawing attention to his coming and of prefiguring the future Church. That Church is the people of God throughout all the nations; it is his body, and also included in its number are all the faithful servants who lived in this world even before the Lord's coming, believing that he would come even as we believe that he has come. (*Instructing Beginners in Faith*, 3, 5–6)



In patiently helping this deacon, Augustine also helps us understand two essential points. The first is that *the story of salvation is our story*. It is not only a story, not only history, but also our story. And as our story, it shapes our identity. This is why Augustine says to start at the beginning and continue not only through the Old Testament, not only through the Gospels—not even the whole Bible will do! The story must be traced through Scripture and history to this very moment in the Church's life, the moment in which each of us encounters the Lord.

The second point is that, as Augustine writes, if “everything we read in the holy scriptures” before Christ's coming points to Christ and to his Church, then this insight applies also to the Church today and to each person in the Church. This second point is not quite the same as the previous one: Scripture is our story, but it is our story as members of a larger group that we call the People of God. The faith we seek to understand and the life we seek to live are the faith and life of the Church.

FOR FURTHER READING

Psalm 27; Luke 15:11–32 and 19:1–10; 1 John 1 and 4

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 26–95

Benedict XVI, *A School of Prayer: The Saints Show Us How to Pray*, 9–19

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*