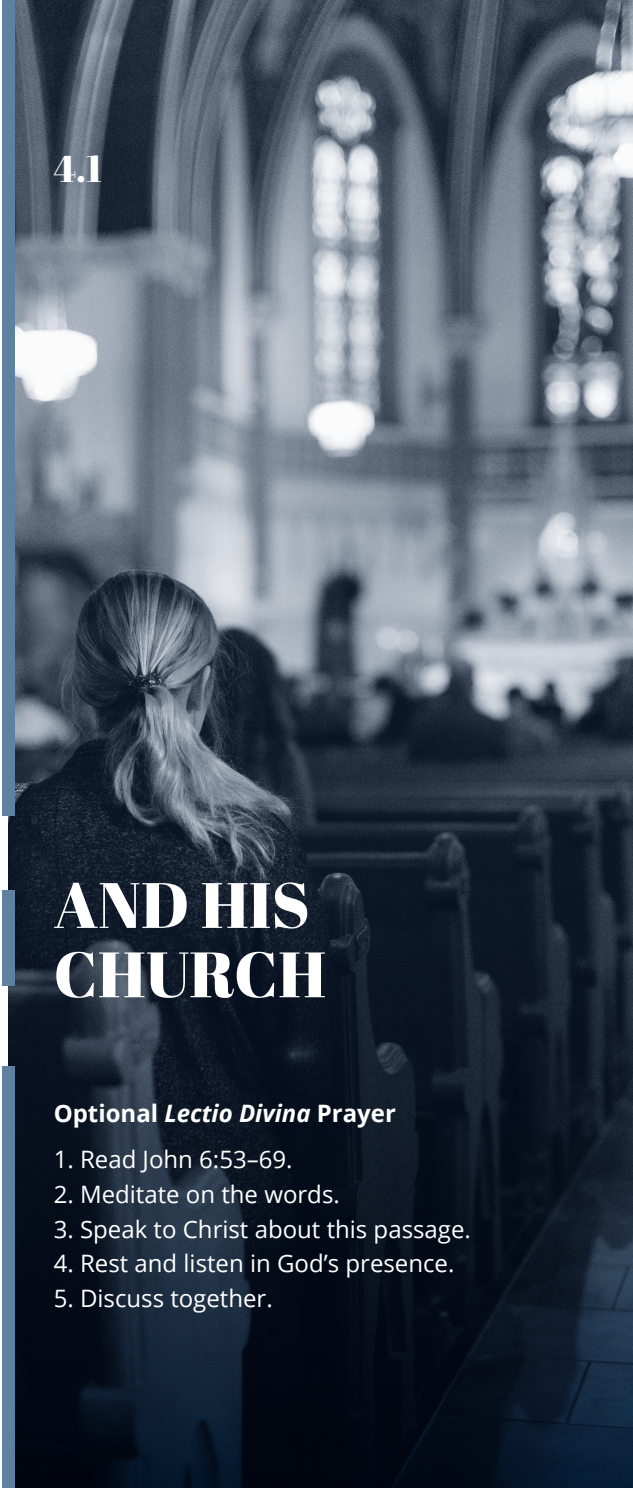
4.1

FAITHFULNESS TO CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH



Optional *Lectio Divina* Prayer

1. Read John 6:53–69.
2. Meditate on the words.
3. Speak to Christ about this passage.
4. Rest and listen in God's presence.
5. Discuss together.

Do you know St. Peter's most heroic moment?

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It wasn't when he dropped his fishing nets to follow Jesus. It wasn't when he recognized Jesus as the Messiah and received the keys to the kingdom. Arguably, it came in a lesser-known scene when Jesus taught something controversial that turned his popular public ministry upside down.

The enthusiastic crowds had been asking Jesus for a miraculous sign, like the manna that Moses provided for the Israelites in the desert. In response, Jesus told them about a greater food he would offer them: his own Body and Blood in the Eucharist. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn 6:53–54).

But this teaching on the Eucharist was too much for their minds to grasp. Many in the crowds rejected Jesus at this moment, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (Jn 6:52). Even his own disciples struggled, saying, "This is a hard saying, who can listen to it?" (Jn 6:60). Some of those disciples rejected Jesus and walked away that day.

Turning to the Twelve Apostles, Jesus said, "Will you also go away?"

That's when Peter's heroic moment came into play. He responds, saying, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:68–69).

Notice that Peter doesn't say, "Jesus, I'll follow you because this teaching makes perfect sense to me." Peter is probably just as puzzled as everyone else. But the difference between Peter and the crowds is that he trusts Jesus and stays with him, whereas the others walk away.

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DISCUSS

What stands out to you about Peter's response? What does this teach you about following Jesus?

LEADING BY FAITH

When we are in a position of Christian leadership, we are not asking people to follow us, but rather the one true leader, Jesus Christ. And that comes with a tremendous responsibility — for our teaching is not our own. We are heralds of the Gospel, "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor 5:20), witnesses to the truth he revealed. As representatives of so noble a King, we must be careful to faithfully pass on the truth that Jesus revealed — and to never, under any condition, pass on ideas that are contrary to the teachings of his Church.

After all, Jesus himself established the Church so that people throughout the ages could come to know him and his plan for our lives. That's why he gave authority to his apostles to teach in his name. He said to them, "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Mt 10:40). That same authority was handed on to the apostles' successors, the bishops, throughout the centuries to today.

Take a moment right now and feel the weight of what this means: To accept the teachings of the apostles is to accept Jesus. To the extent we knowingly reject the teachings of the apostles (and their successors), we are also distancing ourselves from Jesus. That's why it's absolutely crucial for Christian leaders to represent Jesus faithfully, to guard the "deposit of faith" — not to pass on a "counterfeit faith" based on our own opinions or the popular whims of the world (2 Tm 3:8), but rather the true faith of Jesus and the Catholic Church.

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He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me.

— Luke 10:16

This won't always be easy. Jesus himself regularly experienced disagreement and opposition to his teaching. We live in a world that often doesn't accept God's truth about human life, love, sex, marriage, the poor, and the dignity of every human person no matter their age, race, religion, or beliefs. This leads us to a choice: When Christ's teaching is unpopular or, worse still, labeled as old-fashioned, impossible, judgmental, or even evil, will we stand up for the truth? Or will we deny our Lord Jesus Christ?

St. Paul warned about times not unlike our own. He emphasized that the most important thing Christian leaders can do in an era of doctrinal and moral confusion is to be steady and grounded in faithfully passing on the truth:

> [P]reach the word, be urgent in season and out of season … For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady … do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry. (2 Tm 4:2–5)

In sum, we can't be "cafeteria Catholics." When we eat a meal in a cafeteria, we can pick and choose which food we want to put on our plate. But we can't do that with the teachings of Christ and his Church; we can't pick and choose which Catholic teachings we want to follow and pass on to others and which ones we don't. Our teaching is not our own. We represent Christ. Even when these

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teachings challenge us or when the world around us rejects them, we need to be faithful to Jesus.

DISCUSS

Have you ever thought of yourself as a representative of Jesus? Have you embraced that responsibility by accepting the teachings of Jesus and his Church? How have you seen Jesus' teaching come into conflict with the ideas and opinions of the world?

DIFFICULTIES VS. DOUBTS

But what if we still have some questions about the Catholic Faith, whether it be related to the Church's teaching about the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, contraception, same-sex marriage, or the preferential love Christians must have for the poor? Can we still be Jesus' followers, faithful representatives of him and his Church?

Here, we need to understand the difference between having a difficulty and having a doubt.

Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt.

— St. John Henry Cardinal Newman

Difficulties are the challenges that we have in understanding a particular aspect of the Catholic Faith. When we face questions about a certain Catholic teaching, a part of us wonders, "Is this right? Could this be true?" But at the same time, we still trust Jesus and the Church more than ourselves, so we're willing to accept it. Like Peter when he was confronted with Christ's mind-blowing teaching about the Eucharist, we may not fully understand an aspect of the Catholic Faith, but we still believe it because we believe in Jesus and trust his Church. If Jesus were standing before us when we have these difficulties, we, too, would say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:68–69). As St. John Henry Cardinal Newman once said: "Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt" (CCC 157).

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Doubt, however, is something different. It's ultimately a lack of trust in Jesus and the Church he established. When someone doubts, they withhold belief, refusing to believe what has been revealed — like "Doubting Thomas," the apostle who for a week refused to believe in the risen Christ, or the crowds who rejected Jesus' teaching about the Eucharist and walked away from him. When we oppose the teachings of Jesus as handed down through the Catholic Church, we undermine our role as Christians. We are not true ambassadors of Jesus. We present our own ideas as being wiser than what Jesus taught and do great harm in misleading the people we serve.

DISCUSS

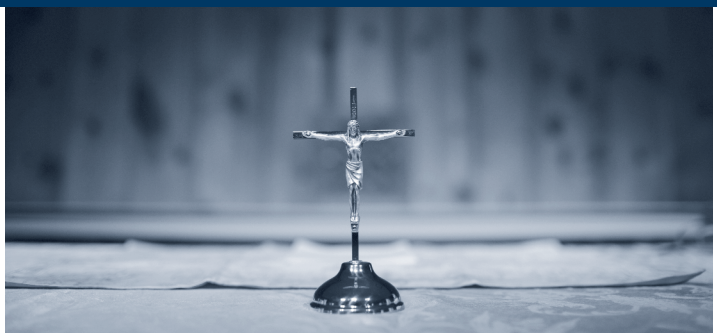
Do you have any difficulties or doubts? Are there any teachings of the Church that you struggle with? How can you grow toward embracing those teachings wholeheartedly?

GROWING IN FAITH

Though we may wrestle with difficulties, there is a way forward. Faith is not a blind acceptance of what we do not understand; instead, a believer should *seek understanding*. According to the Catechism: "it is intrinsic to faith that a believer desires to know better the one in whom he has put his faith and to understand what he has revealed; a more penetrating knowledge will in turn call forth a greater faith, increasingly set afire by love" (CCC 158). St. Augustine described this well when he professed, "I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe" (CCC 158). Deepening our understanding does not limit our freedom, but rather allows our "yes" to be truly free.

As you prepare to serve as a leader for Christ and grow in your understanding of the Faith, a great way to reaffirm and deepen your belief in Jesus and the teachings of the Church is to recite a traditional prayer called the "Act of Faith." Whether you are solid in your convictions about the Catholic Faith or you have questions about certain teachings, the Act of Faith helps you to declare your

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faith in God and your willingness to trust that the Church teaches the truth. Many saints and ordinary Christians have found strength in making an Act of Faith like this:

> O my God, I firmly believe that you are one God in three divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I believe that your divine Son became man and died for our sins, and that he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe these and all the truths which the holy Catholic Church teaches, because in revealing them you can neither deceive nor be deceived. Amen.

DISCUSS

Do you want to say an Act of Faith right now as a profession of total faith in Jesus and his Church?

TAKE ACTION

If you currently doubt certain teachings of the Church, it's time to discuss those things. If you already accept all the teachings of Jesus and his Church, take a moment and consider some of the teachings you don't understand well.

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Make two lists. For the first, write out some teachings you don't understand or have a hard time believing. For the second, consider some teachings you believe but would have trouble explaining to someone else who was confused about them.

Then, make a plan. How can you grow in your understanding of these teachings?

KEY CONCEPTS

Apostolic Authority: Jesus gave his apostles authority to teach: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Lk 10:16). That same authority was handed on to the apostles' successors, the bishops, throughout the centuries to today.

Ambassadors for Christ: As members of the kingdom, we are representatives of the King and must faithfully bear witness to his teachings (2 Cor 5:20).

Difficulties vs. Doubts: Difficulties are the challenges that we have in understanding a particular aspect of the Catholic Faith. Doubts show a lack of trust in Jesus and the Church he established.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Why We're Catholic by Trent Horn

CCC 142–165: "I Believe"

CCC 74–95: "The Transmission of Divine Revelation"

Fides et Ratio by Pope St. John Paul II

SLS20 Talk on focusequip.org: "Leading from a Catholic Worldview" by Helen Alvaré