



# Living in the Spirit

Landings2

## SESSION #7

### Faith in Times of Crisis

### **Check-in time (15 minutes)**

#### **Opening Prayer:**

For thousands of years, the psalms have provided the backbone of Christians' and Jews' daily prayer. Many of these psalms lament the suffering of God's people while also affirming hope that God will bring salvation. Today you might try praying Psalm 44 in order to express lament for the suffering you and others have endured as well as your hope for salvation.

### **Spiritual Journey Storytelling (25 minutes)**

#### **Response to story (10 minutes)**

#### **Hospitality break (10 minutes)**

#### **Conversation Starter (5 minutes)**

As we all know too well, every person experiences ups and downs along their journey of discipleship. However, in the lives of some people and in some eras, the challenges can be extraordinary. The year 2020 - a year of worldwide suffering, economic hardship, and racial reckoning - ushered in such an extraordinary time. What was your experience of the events of 2020? How has your faith life been impacted by the pandemic and the other events of this period?

### **Reflections on a Catholic Theme: (20 minutes)**

On March 27, 2020, in the early days of the pandemic when the world was gripped by fear and uncertainty, Pope Francis stood before an empty St. Peter's Square and delivered an extraordinary address. He likened the world's present turmoil to the apostles' experience of being caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mt 4:35-41): "Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented."

We learn a lot about ourselves in times of crisis. The events of 2020 and beyond revealed that, in spite of all our knowledge and technological sophistication, we are still inescapably vulnerable. We are mortal. These events brought into stark relief the inequalities in our societies as the effects of pandemic landed most heavily upon the vulnerable among us - the poor, the infirmed, the elderly - and as instances of racial injustice were captured on video and broadcasted around the world. They revealed that, despite the trivial differences that often divide us, we are all inherently united, all "on the same boat." Crises like this one also have a way of revealing what lies within the depths of each person's heart. In the Pope's words,

"The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities."

Part of the challenge for people of faith was the question of where God was in all this. Pope Francis gave voice to this question, the same question the disciples asked Jesus in the midst of the storm: "Do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mk 4:38) How we answer this question under stress reveals much about the quality of our faith. If we have put our faith more in ourselves than in God - in our own abilities, resources, plans - we might look at the storm raging around us, like Peter looking at the wind and waves, and despair of being saved. If, however,

we have truly placed our hope in Christ, we are more likely to recognize Him drawing near to us in the midst of the storm.

Neither Pope Francis nor Jesus promises that faith will spare us suffering. What faith in Christ does is transform our suffering. Our faith is capable of transforming suffering and even death because it is anchored upon Jesus' cross. The cross is our guarantee that "neither death, nor life... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). When acts of injustice, illness, and death threaten the integrity of our lives, it is God alone who can save us. Indeed, says Pope Francis, "this is God's strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things." Just as God turned Jesus' murder into the instrument of our salvation, so can God use our suffering and even our wrongdoings for our good (though God never wants us to sin or suffer). Knowing what God has done for us in Jesus Christ gives us the ability to look at the crises we experience and see, not only the wind and the waves (the plans that were ruined and the loved ones we lost), but also God drawing near to us, often through the love of other people.

This is not a vague hope or an abstract pious sentiment. God has come to us in the flesh in the person of Jesus, and God continues to draw near to us in the Eucharist, which is Jesus' real body and blood. In so doing, God addresses a deep human need that many people came to appreciate more deeply in the isolation of the pandemic. Besides being spiritual beings, we are also beings of flesh and blood, and we crave physical presence. We do not feel fully human without it. Out of necessity, we had to worship virtually during the pandemic, and it was a blessing that technology enabled us to do this. But as it becomes possible to worship together in person again, God is calling us back to be present with Him in a more intimate way.

God also comes to us through one another. Just as the bread and wine that are transformed in the Eucharist, so too are we. Just as God sends the Holy Spirit down upon the gifts on the altar, so too does God send the Spirit down upon the people assembled in the church. One way that we are transformed is that, having witnessed God's willingness to stand with us in our suffering out of love for us, we can recognize suffering as an opportunity to let our love shine forth for others, "*to unleash love in the human person*," as Pope John Paul II once wrote. As God has come to us in the midst of our suffering, so too, wrote John Paul II, "every individual must feel as if called personally to bear witness to love in suffering."

Here we get at the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. On the night before he went to the cross, Jesus told his disciples, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13: 34-35). This is the mission of all Christian disciples - to bring God's love to the world, especially to those who are suffering. And, as we discussed in previous sessions, God equips us for this mission by bestowing upon all of us a variety of spiritual gifts that enable us to bring love and healing into diverse settings and circumstances.

Times of suffering and injustice can be a great trial. But they are also opportunities, for it is often in the midst of suffering, when our defenses have broken down, that we are most open to recognizing and receiving God's love. Not infrequently these are the times when our gifts are drawn out of us. These are the times when simple acts of love shine most brightly. As Christian disciples, we are called to look for and respond to these opportunities - to care for the sick, to console those in mourning, to provide for those who are in need, to cry out for justice for the oppressed, to bring peace to those who are in distress, and to testify to the light that we have seen when others may look around and see only darkness.

## **Reflection questions**

- In his March 2020 *Urbi et Orbi* address, Pope Francis said that the pandemic had shown us “how we have allowed ourselves to become dull and feeble, the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities.” What are the things that nourish, sustain and strengthen you? Have you allowed these things to become dull and feeble? Alternatively, how have you remained committed to them?
- Who were the people who helped you to stay grounded during this crisis or others? How did they help you? What anchors them or keeps them grounded?
- How do you experience God’s presence in the Eucharist? Has worship been different for you since the pandemic? How?
- How have you witnessed others transform suffering by their love? How have you been able to transform suffering, or how might you in the future?
- Have you ever discovered new spiritual gifts within yourself or others around you during a time of crisis or challenge? Have you seen new gifts mature?

## **Facilitator’s reflection (10 minutes)**

### **Invitation to commitment and a new Faith practice**

Introducing a new Faith practice: Eucharistic Adoration

God has given us a great gift in the Eucharist whereby we are able to receive Christ not only spiritually into our hearts but also really and substantially into our very bodies. Outside of the Mass, Catholics have long revered Christ’s real presence through the practice of Eucharistic adoration. This involves praying before the Blessed Sacrament displayed on the altar at designated times. Many people find this to be a special, intimate way to spend time with the Lord. Many churches and chapels offer Eucharistic adoration - some even perpetually (i.e., available at all times).

Invitation to commitment: Pope Francis has invited us to seize times of trial as a time of choosing, “a time to choose what matters and what passes away.” Do you choose now to reaffirm your commitment to the life of discipleship? What are the important things in life that you want to reaffirm? What are the less important things that you want to allow to pass away?

## **Housekeeping / Closing Prayer (5 minutes)**