

OCIA Retreat

Grace and the Theological Virtues Faith, Hope, and Love

Facilitator Guide

JP2 Parish

Facilitator Overview

Retreat Purpose

This retreat is designed to help catechumens in the Catechumenate stage deepen their understanding of how they personally receive and respond to God's love through grace and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Participant Background

These catechumens have already completed instruction on:

- The existence of God and the problem of evil
- Love as the integration of truth, justice, and mercy
- The dignity of the human person
- The Blessed Trinity
- God's covenant plan
- Jesus Christ
- The Church and its four marks
- Scripture and Tradition
- The Mass
- Mary and the Communion of Saints
- The Sacramental Economy

This retreat builds on that foundation by focusing on the personal encounter with God.

Retreat Goals

By the end of this retreat, participants should:

- Understand Grace — Know that grace is God's free gift of His divine life, not something we earn
- Embrace Faith — Recognize faith as a response to God's self-revelation
- Cultivate Hope — Distinguish Christian hope from mere optimism
- Live Love — See love as the greatest virtue that integrates all others
- Experience Encounter — Have personal time with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament

Session Flow

Each session follows this pattern:

| Phase | Duration | Location | Purpose | |-----|-----|-----|-----| | Teaching | 30 min | Parish Hall | Present the content | | Prayer with Jesus | 25 min | Sanctuary | Personal encounter with the Blessed Sacrament | | Group Discussion | 20 min | Parish Hall | Share insights and process together |

Key Insight: The prayer time comes after teaching so participants can bring what they learned directly to Jesus. The discussion comes after prayer so they can share what they experienced.

Your Role as Facilitator

During Teaching

- Present the material with conviction and personal witness
- Keep to time (30 minutes)
- Use the teaching notes for guidance, but speak from the heart

During Prayer Time

- Ensure smooth transition to Sanctuary
- Ring a gentle bell/chime at the 25-minute mark
- Have someone remain with the Blessed Sacrament at all times

During Discussion

- Begin with the opening question: "What struck you most during your time with Jesus?"
- Let participants share freely before using backup questions
- Create a safe space for honest sharing
- Keep to time (20 minutes)

Team Roles

| Role | Responsibilities | |-----|-----| | Lead Facilitator | Overall coordination, welcome, closing | | Session Teachers | Deliver teaching content for each session | | Discussion Leaders | Facilitate small group discussions | | Sanctuary Coordinator | Manage Blessed Sacrament exposition, transitions | | Hospitality | Setup, lunch, participant needs |

Critical Reminders

- The Blessed Sacrament is the heart of this retreat — Everything flows to and from Jesus truly present
- Keep to the schedule — We have a hard stop at 4:30 PM
- Create space for encounter — Don't over-talk; let God work

- Pray for participants — Before, during, and after the retreat

Retreat Schedule

OCIA Retreat: Grace and the Theological Virtues

Schedule Overview

Date: TBD

Location: JP2 Parish (Parish Hall & Sanctuary)

Start: 8:00 AM

End: 4:30 PM (hard stop)

Session Format

Each teaching session follows this pattern:

- 30 minutes - Teaching (Parish Hall)
- 25 minutes - Prayer with Jesus (Sanctuary - Blessed Sacrament exposed)
- 20 minutes - Group Discussion (Parish Hall)

Discussion Format: Each group discussion begins with an open question inviting participants to share insights from their time with Jesus. Additional discussion questions (drawn from the devotional reflection questions) are available if needed.

Total per session: 1 hour 15 minutes

Detailed Timeline

Morning - Foundation

Time	Duration	Activity	Location	----- ----- ----- -----	8:00 AM	25 min	Welcome & Introduction
Parish Hall		- Retreat overview		- Introduction to Grace and Theological Virtues			
8:25 AM	5 min	Transition to Sanctuary	—	8:30 AM	25 min	Rosary	Sanctuary
9:00 AM	50 min	Mass (open to public)	Sanctuary	9:50 AM	10 min	Break	Parish Hall

Note: Two options for Eucharistic Adoration - see "Adoration Options" section below.

Session 1: Grace - God's Gift of Himself

| Time | Duration | Activity | Location | |-----|-----|-----|-----| | 10:00 AM | 30 min | Teaching: Grace | Parish Hall | | | | - What grace is: God's free gift of His divine life | | | | - How grace works in us | | | | - Saint: St. Thérèse of Lisieux | | | 10:30 AM | 25 min | Prayer with Jesus | Sanctuary | | 10:55 AM | 20 min | Group Discussion | Parish Hall |

Discussion Questions for Session 1:

- Opening: "What struck you most during your time with Jesus? What insight or feeling did you experience?"
- If needed:
- Where have you been trying to earn God's love? What would it mean to stop striving and simply receive?
- What weakness are you ashamed of? Can you bring it to Jesus and hear Him say, "My grace is sufficient for you"?
- How is God inviting you to trust Him more deeply?

Session 2: Faith - Believing in Love

| Time | Duration | Activity | Location | |-----|-----|-----|-----| | 11:15 AM | 30 min | Teaching: Faith | Parish Hall | | | | - Faith as response to God's revelation | | | | - Believing what we cannot see | | | | - Saint: St. Thomas the Apostle | | | 11:45 AM | 25 min | Prayer with Jesus | Sanctuary | | 12:10 PM | 20 min | Group Discussion | Parish Hall |

Discussion Questions for Session 2:

- Opening: "What struck you most during your time with Jesus? What insight about faith did you experience?"
- If needed:
- What has God done to reveal Himself to you? A person? An experience? A longing that won't go away?
- Where do you struggle to believe? Can you bring that struggle honestly to Jesus?
- What would it mean for you to say "yes" to God today—not a perfect yes, just an honest yes?

Lunch

| Time | Duration | Activity | Location | |-----|-----|-----|-----| | 12:30 PM | 30 min | Lunch | Parish Hall |

Session 3: Hope - Trusting in Love's Promise

| Time | Duration | Activity | Location | |-----|-----|-----|-----| | 1:00 PM | 30 min | Teaching: Hope | Parish Hall | | | | - Hope as confident trust in God's faithfulness | | | | - Hope vs. optimism | | | | - Saint: St. Josephine Bakhita | | | 1:30 PM | 25 min | Prayer with Jesus | Sanctuary | | 1:55 PM | 20 min | Group Discussion | Parish Hall |

Discussion Questions for Session 3:

- Opening: "What struck you most during your time with Jesus? What insight about hope did you experience?"
- If needed:
- Where in your life are you tempted to despair or discouragement? Can you bring that place to Jesus and ask for hope?
- What are you trying to carry that you need to surrender to God? Anxiety? Grief? Fear? The need to control?
- How would your life be different if you truly believed God's promises?

Session 4: Love - Participating in God's Life

Time	Duration	Activity	Location	----- ----- ----- -----	2:15 PM	30 min	Teaching: Love
Parish Hall		- Love as the greatest virtue		- Love integrates faith and hope		- Saint: St. Maximilian Kolbe	
2:45 PM	25 min	Prayer with Jesus	Sanctuary		3:10 PM	20 min	Group Discussion
Parish Hall							

Discussion Questions for Session 4:

- Opening: "What struck you most during your time with Jesus? What insight about love did you experience?"
- If needed:
- Do you truly believe that God—who IS love—has been pursuing you your whole life? How does this change the way you see your past, present, and future?
- Are you willing to give your whole life to Christ, as He gave His life for you? What are you still holding back?
- How is God calling you to be His love in the world? To bear truth? To do justice? To love mercy? To walk humbly?
- Will you accept the call to be light in the darkness?

Closing: Integration and Commissioning

Time	Duration	Activity	Location	----- ----- ----- -----	3:30 PM	60 min	Closing Session
Sanctuary		- Integration: How the virtues work together		- Living the theological virtues daily		- Communal prayer and blessing	
4:30 PM	—	Reposition of Blessed Sacrament		4:30 PM	—	Retreat Ends	—

Time Summary

Category	Total Time	----- -----	Welcome & Rosary	55 min		Mass	50 min		Teaching (4 sessions × 30 min)	2 hr		Prayer with Jesus (4 sessions × 25 min)	1 hr 40 min		Group Discussion (4 sessions × 20 min)	1 hr 20 min		Closing Session	1 hr		Lunch	30 min		Breaks/Transitions	15 min		Total	8 hr 30 min
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Location Notes

Parish Hall

- Teaching sessions
- Group discussions
- Lunch
- Welcome and breaks

Sanctuary

- Rosary (8:30 AM)
- Mass (9:00 AM)
- Blessed Sacrament exposed after Mass (~9:50 AM onwards)
- Prayer with Jesus (25 min after each teaching)
- Closing session (3:30-4:30 PM)

Blessed Sacrament Exposition

The Blessed Sacrament will be exposed in the Sanctuary from approximately 9:50 AM until the closing of the retreat. This means:

Option A: Exposition All Day (9:50 AM - 4:30 PM)

- Blessed Sacrament exposed after Mass until Benediction
- Every prayer break is time with Jesus truly present
- Requires rotating adorer during Parish Hall sessions

Option B: Exposition During Closing Hour Only (3:30 - 4:30 PM)

- Exposition begins at start of closing session
- Prayer breaks still valuable (prayer before tabernacle)
- Benediction concludes the retreat

Either option maintains the rhythm of teaching → prayer → discussion, with the Sanctuary as the heart of the retreat.

Facilitator Notes

- Ensure smooth transitions between Parish Hall and Sanctuary
- Have someone remain with the Blessed Sacrament at all times during exposition
- Ring a gentle bell or chime to signal end of prayer times (25 minutes)
- Keep teaching times to 30 minutes to allow adequate prayer and discussion time
- Session Flow: Teaching (30 min) → Prayer with Jesus (25 min) → Group Discussion (20 min)

- Discussion Format: Always begin with the open question about insights from prayer time; use backup questions only if needed
- The closing session in the Sanctuary will include Benediction
- If using Option A (all-day exposition): Assign a rotating adorer from leadership team during Parish Hall sessions

Room Setup Guide

Parish Hall Setup

Teaching Area

- Chairs arranged in a semi-circle or classroom style facing the presenter
- Podium or music stand for speaker notes
- Screen/TV if using slides (optional)
- Whiteboard or flip chart (optional)

Discussion Area

- Small group seating (4-6 per group)
- Tables optional but helpful for participant guides

Hospitality Area

- Coffee/water station
- Lunch setup area
- Participant guide pickup table

Supplies Needed

- ☐ Participant Guides (one per person)
- ☐ Pens/pencils
- ☐ Name tags
- ☐ Bell or chime for transitions
- ☐ Clock visible to facilitators

Sanctuary Setup

Blessed Sacrament Exposition

- Monstrance prepared
- Altar of repose or main altar
- Candles lit
- Kneelers available
- Chairs for those who cannot kneel

Atmosphere

- Dim lighting (if possible)
- Silence maintained
- Devotional music (optional, very soft)

Logistics

- Clear path from Parish Hall to Sanctuary
- Someone assigned to remain with Blessed Sacrament at all times
- Bell/chime for signaling end of prayer time

Timeline Checklist

Day Before

- ☐ Print Participant Guides
- ☐ Print Facilitator Guide
- ☐ Confirm with priest for Mass and Exposition
- ☐ Test any A/V equipment
- ☐ Prepare hospitality supplies

Morning of Retreat (7:00 AM arrival)

- ☐ Unlock Parish Hall and Sanctuary
- ☐ Set up chairs in Parish Hall
- ☐ Set up hospitality station
- ☐ Place Participant Guides at seats or welcome table
- ☐ Prepare Sanctuary for Rosary and Mass
- ☐ Brief prayer with team

During Retreat

- ☐ Assign rotating adorer for Blessed Sacrament
- ☐ Monitor time for each session
- ☐ Coordinate transitions between spaces

After Retreat

- ☐ Return Sanctuary to normal
- ☐ Clean Parish Hall
- ☐ Debrief with team
- ☐ Follow up with participants as needed

Emergency Contacts

Role	Name	Phone	-----	-----	-----	Lead Facilitator				Pastor/Priest				Parish Office				Facilities

Session 1: Grace

Teaching Notes

Session 1: Grace - Teaching Notes

Key Points to Emphasize

- Grace is a gift, not a reward - We cannot earn God's love
- Grace transforms us - It's not just forgiveness, but new life
- Grace comes through the sacraments - Especially Baptism and Eucharist

Common Questions

Q: If grace is free, why do we need to do anything? A: Grace empowers us to respond. Our cooperation is itself a gift of grace.

Q: How do I know if I have grace? A: The desire for God is itself a sign of grace at work.

Transition to Prayer Time

Invite participants to simply sit with Jesus and receive. No agenda, no performance - just presence.

Discussion Starter

"What struck you most during your time with Jesus? What insight or feeling did you experience?"

Session Content

Session 1: Grace - God's Gift of Himself

Time: 10:00 AM - 11:15 AM

Location: Parish Hall (Teaching & Discussion) → Sanctuary (Prayer)

Session Overview

Time	Duration	Activity	Location
10:00 AM	30 min	Teaching: Grace	Parish Hall
10:30 AM	30 min	Group Discussion	Parish Hall
11:00 AM	15 min	Prayer with Jesus	Sanctuary

Part 1: Teaching (30 minutes)

Central Truth

God gives his own life and friendship to us. We call this gift grace. We do not earn or deserve God's grace. Grace allows us to become God's adopted children and to respond to his abundant love.

Opening (3 minutes)

Begin with this question to the group: "Have you ever received a gift so extravagant, so undeserved, that you didn't know how to respond?"

That's what we're talking about today. Grace is God giving us himself—not just blessings, not just help, but his very life.

Talking Point 1: What Grace Actually Is (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: Ephesians 2:4-10 (NABRE)

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ (by grace you have been saved), raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast. For

we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them."

Key points to emphasize:

- Grace is not a thing—it's God's own divine life shared with us
 - We were dead in sin. Dead people can't save themselves. God made us alive.
 - This is pure gift. We didn't earn it. We can't earn it. We can only receive it.
 - Grace makes us God's adopted children—not servants, not employees, but sons and daughters
- CCC 1996: "Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God."

Talking Point 2: How Grace Works in Us (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: John 15:1-5 (NABRE)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit. You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you. Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing."

Key points to emphasize:

- Grace isn't just a one-time gift at Baptism—it's an ongoing relationship
- Like a branch connected to the vine, we receive life continuously from Christ
- "Apart from me you can do nothing"—this is humbling but also liberating
- The sacraments are the primary channels through which grace flows to us
- We can cooperate with grace or resist it—God respects our freedom

Two kinds of grace:

- Sanctifying grace — God's life dwelling in us (received at Baptism, restored in Confession)
- Actual grace — God's help in specific moments to do good and avoid evil

Talking Point 3: Why This Changes Everything (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NABRE)

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me."

Key points to emphasize:

- St. Paul begged God three times to remove his "thorn in the flesh"
- God's answer: "My grace is sufficient." Not "I'll fix your problem" but "I am enough."

- This means: In your weakness, in your struggle, in your failure—God's grace is enough
- Grace transforms us from the inside out—new intellect, new will, new capacity to love
- We become capable of things we could never do on our own

The stakes:

- Sanctifying grace can be lost through mortal sin
- It is restored through the Sacrament of Reconciliation
- We increase in grace by prayer, the sacraments, and acts of love

Closing (3 minutes)

Grace is the foundation of everything else we'll discuss today. Faith, hope, and love are only possible because God first gives us his grace.

The question isn't "Am I good enough for God?" The question is "Will I receive what God is offering?"

Transition to discussion...

Part 2: Group Discussion (30 minutes)

Allow approximately 10 minutes per question. These questions are designed to help participants recognize their need for God's grace and begin to open themselves to receive it.

Question 1: Recognizing Our Need (10 minutes)

"Think of a time when you tried to change something about yourself—a habit, a pattern, a relationship—through sheer willpower alone. What happened? What does this tell you about your need for something beyond your own strength?"

Facilitator notes:

- Let people share honestly about failure—this isn't about shame, it's about truth
- Guide toward the realization that lasting transformation requires more than human effort
- Connect their experience to Paul's words: "Apart from me you can do nothing"
- The goal is not discouragement but honest recognition of our need

Question 2: Receiving vs. Earning (10 minutes)

"Many of us were raised to believe we have to earn everything we get. How does the idea that God's grace is completely free—that you cannot earn it and don't deserve it—make you feel? Does it bring relief? Discomfort? Why?"

Facilitator notes:

- This question often surfaces deep-seated beliefs about worthiness

- Some may feel relief ("I don't have to be perfect")
- Others may feel uncomfortable ("If I can't earn it, how do I know I have it?")
- Guide toward understanding that receiving a gift requires humility, not achievement
- Connect to the reality that love cannot be earned—only received

Question 3: Opening to Grace (10 minutes)

"Jesus said his grace is 'sufficient'—enough. Where in your life right now do you most need to hear that God's grace is enough? What would it look like to actually believe that?"

Facilitator notes:

- This question moves from concept to personal application
- Encourage specificity—not "my life in general" but "this relationship," "this struggle," "this fear"
- What would change if they truly believed grace was sufficient?
- How might they live differently starting today?
- This prepares them for the prayer time that follows

Part 3: Prayer with Jesus (15 minutes)

In the Sanctuary, before the Blessed Sacrament

Guide participants to:

- Sit quietly in the presence of Jesus
- Bring to him the area of life they identified in Question 3
- Simply ask: "Lord, help me receive your grace"
- Rest in silence, trusting that he hears

Close with the Prayer for Grace:

Lord Jesus, I cannot save myself. I cannot transform myself. I cannot earn your love. But I can receive it. Open my heart to your grace. Help me to stop striving and start receiving. Let your life flow into me like sap into a branch. Apart from you, I can do nothing. With you, all things are possible. Amen.

Devotional Guide

Session 1 Devotional: Resting in God's Grace

15 Minutes with Jesus

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ." — Ephesians 2:4-5 (NABRE)

The Gift You Cannot Earn

You are sitting in the midst of Love Himself.

The God who created the universe—who holds every star in place, who knows every hair on your head—is here. And He is not here to judge you, to fix you, or to demand something from you. He is here to give Himself to you.

This is grace.

You have learned that God exists, that He is Trinity—a communion of love. You have seen His covenant plan unfold through history, culminating in Jesus Christ. You have discovered the Church, the sacraments, the Mass. You know about God.

But grace is how you come to know God personally. Grace is not a thing God gives. Grace is God giving Himself. Right now, in this moment, the infinite God is pouring out His divine life toward you—not because you've earned it, not because you deserve it, but simply because He loves you.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux understood this when she wrote:

"It is not because I have been preserved from mortal sin that I lift up my heart to God in trust and love. I feel that even if I had on my conscience every crime one could commit, I would lose nothing of my confidence. Heartbroken with repentance, I would simply throw myself into my Savior's arms."

Can you receive this? Can you let go of the need to earn, to prove, to be worthy—and simply receive?

Grace and the Virtues: The Foundation of Everything

Today we begin a journey through the theological virtues: Faith, Hope, and Love. But before we can believe, before we can hope, before we can love—we must first receive.

Grace is the foundation.

- Faith is possible because grace opens our eyes to see God.
- Hope is possible because grace assures us of God's promises.
- Love is possible because grace pours God's own love into our hearts.

Without grace, we cannot take a single step toward God. But with grace, everything becomes possible.

St. Augustine, who knew the depths of his own weakness, wrote:

"God does not command the impossible, but in commanding He admonishes you to do what you can, and to ask for what you cannot do, and He helps you so that you can do it."

You are not alone. You have never been alone. God's grace surrounds you, sustains you, and empowers you for everything He calls you to.

Reflection Questions

Sit quietly with Jesus. Let these questions rest in your heart. You don't need to answer them—just let them open you to God's presence.

- Where have I been trying to earn God's love?

What would it mean to stop striving and simply receive?

- What weakness am I ashamed of?

Can I bring it to Jesus right now and hear Him say, "My grace is sufficient for you"?

- How is God inviting me to trust Him more deeply?

Grace is the beginning—faith, hope, and love will follow.

A Prayer of Surrender

Pray this slowly, from your heart:

Lord Jesus, I come to You just as I am. I have nothing to offer You but my need. I cannot earn Your love. I cannot deserve Your grace. But I can receive. Help me to receive. Open my hands that have been clenched in striving. Open my heart that has been closed in shame. Open my soul to the flood of Your mercy. I believe that Your grace is enough. I believe that Your love is real. I believe that You are here, right now, giving Yourself to me. Jesus, I trust in You. Amen.

Closing Prayer: The Anima Christi

This ancient prayer, beloved by St. Ignatius of Loyola, is a perfect way to close your time with Jesus. It asks

Christ to sanctify us with His grace—the very gift we have been reflecting on.

Soul of Christ, sanctify me. Body of Christ, save me. Blood of Christ, inebriate me. Water from the side of Christ, wash me. Passion of Christ, strengthen me. O good Jesus, hear me. Within your wounds, hide me. Permit me not to be separated from you. From the wicked foe, defend me. At the hour of my death, call me and bid me come to you, that with your saints I may praise you forever and ever. Amen.

We do not walk this journey alone. The saints who have gone before us intercede for us. Ask for their prayers:

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us. St. John Paul II, our parish patron, pray for us. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, pray for us. St. Augustine, pray for us. St. Ignatius of Loyola, pray for us. All holy men and women, pray for us.

As You Leave

While making the Sign of the Cross, pray:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Thank you, Lord. I receive Your grace. Amen.

You don't need to feel anything special. You don't need to have had a profound experience. Grace works whether we feel it or not.

Go in peace. The journey continues.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God." — Ephesians 2:8 (NABRE)

Session 2: Faith

Teaching Notes

Session 2: Faith - Teaching Notes

Key Points to Emphasize

- Faith is a response to God's revelation - God speaks first, we respond
- Faith is both gift and choice - God gives the grace, we say yes
- Faith grows through practice - Like a muscle, it strengthens with use

Common Questions

Q: What if I have doubts? A: Doubts are normal. Bring them to God. Faith is not the absence of questions but trust despite them.

Q: How is Catholic faith different from just believing in God? A: Catholic faith includes trust in what God has revealed through Scripture and Tradition, and in the Church He established.

Transition to Prayer Time

Invite participants to ask Jesus: "Lord, increase my faith. Help me to trust you more."

Discussion Starter

"What struck you most during your time with Jesus? What insight or feeling did you experience?"

Session Content

Session 2: Faith - Believing in Love

Time: 11:15 AM - 12:30 PM

Location: Parish Hall (Teaching & Discussion) → Sanctuary (Prayer)

Session Overview

Time	Duration	Activity	Location
11:15 AM	30 min	Teaching: Faith	Parish Hall
11:45 AM	30 min	Group Discussion	Parish Hall
12:15 PM	15 min	Prayer with Jesus	Sanctuary

Part 1: Teaching (30 minutes)

Central Truth

We believe because of the authority of God who reveals. Our response is a gift of his grace. We must remain steadfast in faith to see God.

Opening (3 minutes)

Connect to Session 1: We just talked about grace—God giving us his very life. But how do we receive that gift? Through faith. Faith is how we say "yes" to what God is offering.

Ask the group: "What's the difference between knowing about someone and actually trusting them?"

That's the difference between information about God and faith in God.

Talking Point 1: Faith Is Personal Trust, Not Just Information (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: John 14:1-6 (NABRE)

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. Where I am going you know the way." Thomas said to him, "Master, we do

not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Key points to emphasize:

- Jesus doesn't say "believe these facts about me"—he says "believe in me"
 - Faith is personal trust in a Person, not just intellectual agreement with doctrines
 - "Let not your hearts be troubled"—faith is meant to bring peace, not anxiety
 - Jesus claims to be the way—not a way. This is exclusive, but it's also an invitation.
- CCC 1814: "Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself."

The key phrase: "because he is truth itself." We don't believe because we've figured everything out. We believe because God cannot lie.

Talking Point 2: Faith Is a Gift We Must Choose to Receive (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: Mark 9:21-24 (NABRE)

"And he asked his father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' He replied, 'Since childhood. It has often thrown him into fire and into water to kill him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, "'If you can!' Everything is possible to one who has faith.' Then the boy's father cried out, 'I do believe, help my unbelief!'"

Key points to emphasize:

- This father is honest: "I believe; help my unbelief!" This is the most honest prayer.
- Faith is a gift from God—we can't manufacture it on our own
- But we must choose to receive it and cooperate with it
- Faith can grow or shrink depending on how we nurture it
- Doubt is not the opposite of faith—refusal is the opposite of faith

How faith grows:

- Prayer—asking God for more faith
- The sacraments—especially Eucharist and Confession
- Scripture and the teaching of the Church
- Community with other believers
- Acting on the faith we have (faith without works is dead)

How faith weakens:

- Neglecting prayer and the sacraments
- Surrounding ourselves only with unbelief
- Refusing to act on what we know to be true
- Letting other things become more important than God

Talking Point 3: Faith Is the Foundation for Everything Else (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: Hebrews 11:1, 6 (NABRE)

"Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen... But without faith it is impossible to please him, for anyone who approaches God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

Key points to emphasize:

- Faith is "assurance" and "conviction"—not wishful thinking, but confident trust
- We believe in things we cannot see—but that doesn't mean they're not real
- "Without faith it is impossible to please God"—this is sobering
- Faith is the door through which we enter relationship with God
- By faith, we believe; in hope, we trust his promises; in love, we respond

The connection to love:

- Faith is not the end—it's the beginning
- Faith opens us to receive God's love
- Faith leads to hope, and hope leads to love
- "Faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6)—faith that doesn't lead to love isn't real faith

Closing (3 minutes)

Faith is saying "yes" to God—yes to his existence, yes to his revelation, yes to his love. It's not a blind leap into the dark; it's a trusting step toward the Light.

The father in Mark's Gospel gives us the perfect prayer: "I believe; help my unbelief!" That's where most of us live—somewhere between belief and doubt. And Jesus doesn't reject that. He works with it.

Transition to discussion...

Part 2: Group Discussion (30 minutes)

Allow approximately 10 minutes per question. These questions build on Session 1, moving participants from recognizing their need for grace to examining their willingness to trust God.

Question 1: The Struggle to Trust (10 minutes)

"In Session 1, we talked about receiving grace. But receiving requires trust. What makes it hard for you to trust God? Is it something from your past? Something you've seen? Something you don't understand?"

Facilitator notes:

- This question invites honesty about obstacles to faith

- Common answers: past hurts, unanswered prayers, suffering in the world, hypocrisy in the Church
- Don't try to "fix" people's doubts—let them name them
- The goal is honest acknowledgment, not resolution (yet)
- Connect to the father's prayer: "Help my unbelief"

Question 2: Faith vs. Certainty (10 minutes)

"Faith is 'the conviction of things not seen.' If God wanted us to believe, why doesn't he just show himself clearly and remove all doubt? What might be the purpose of faith requiring trust rather than proof?"

Facilitator notes:

- This is a deep theological question—don't rush to easy answers
- Possible directions: Love requires freedom; proof would compel, not invite
- Faith is relational—you can't have a relationship with a mathematical proof
- God gives enough evidence to believe, but not so much that we're forced
- Connect to Jesus blessing those "who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29)

Question 3: Acting on Faith (10 minutes)

"James says 'faith without works is dead.' Where in your life is God asking you to act on faith—to do something that requires trusting him even though you can't see the outcome? What's holding you back?"

Facilitator notes:

- This question moves from concept to commitment
- Encourage specificity: a conversation, a decision, a change, a risk
- What would it look like to take one step of faith this week?
- Connect to the progression: Grace enables → Faith responds → Action follows
- This prepares them for the deeper questions in Sessions 3 and 4

Part 3: Prayer with Jesus (15 minutes)

In the Sanctuary, before the Blessed Sacrament

Guide participants to:

- Sit quietly in the presence of Jesus—the One in whom we place our faith
- Bring to him any doubts, fears, or obstacles to trust
- Pray the father's prayer: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief"
- Ask for the grace to take one step of faith

Close with the Act of Faith:

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 you have

revealed them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. Amen.

Devotional Guide

Session 2 Devotional: Saying Yes to God

15 Minutes with Jesus

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" — John 14:6 (NABRE)

The Leap That Isn't Blind

You have been on a journey. You have learned that God exists, that He answers the problem of evil with love. You have encountered the Trinity, traced God's covenant plan, and met Jesus Christ—the Answer Incarnate. You have discovered the Church, Scripture, Tradition, the Mass, the saints.

You know so much more than when you started. And yet—knowing is not the same as believing.

Faith is not pretending to be certain when you're not. Faith is not checking your brain at the door. Faith is responding to a God who has already reached out to you—a God who reveals Himself through Scripture and Tradition, through the Church, through the sacraments—and waits for your response.

St. John Henry Newman described his own journey this way:

"Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt."

You can have questions. You can struggle. You can wrestle. That's not the opposite of faith—that's often how faith grows. What matters is that you keep turning toward the One who created you, who loves you, who is calling you to a life in Him.

Faith Built on Grace

In our first session, we reflected on grace—God's free gift of Himself. Now we see that faith is our response to that gift.

Grace comes first. Always. God reveals Himself before we seek Him. God loves us before we love Him. God calls us before we answer.

Faith is simply saying yes to what God has already done.

- Grace is God reaching out to us.

- Faith is us reaching back.
- Hope will be trusting where that relationship leads.
- Love will be living fully in that relationship.

Without grace, we could not believe. But grace has been given. The question now is: Will you believe?

St. Augustine, after years of running from God, finally surrendered:

"Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside... You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness."

God is calling. He is breaking through. Faith is hearing that call and responding.

Reflection Questions

Sit quietly with Jesus. Let these questions rest in your heart.

- What has God done to reveal Himself to me?

A person? An experience? A longing that won't go away?

- Where do I struggle to believe?

Can I bring that struggle honestly to Jesus right now?

- What would it mean for me to say "yes" to God today?

Not a perfect yes. Not a certain yes. Just an honest yes.

A Prayer for Faith

Pray this slowly, from your heart:

Lord Jesus, I want to believe. I bring You my doubts, my questions, my uncertainties. I bring You the parts of me that struggle to trust. I bring You my whole self—not just the parts that feel ready. You have revealed Yourself to me in ways I'm only beginning to understand. Help me to see. Help me to hear. Help me to respond. I believe, Lord. Help my unbelief. Amen.

Traditional Prayer: Act of Faith

This ancient prayer expresses the heart of what it means to believe. Pray it slowly, making each phrase your own.

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 you

have revealed them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. Amen.

Closing Prayer: The Anima Christi

Ask Christ to deepen your faith as you pray:

Soul of Christ, sanctify me. Body of Christ, save me. Blood of Christ, inebriate me. Water from the side of Christ, wash me. Passion of Christ, strengthen me. O good Jesus, hear me. Within your wounds, hide me. Permit me not to be separated from you. From the wicked foe, defend me. At the hour of my death, call me and bid me come to you, that with your saints I may praise you forever and ever. Amen.

We do not walk this journey alone. The saints who have gone before us intercede for us. Ask for their prayers:

Holy Mary, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us. St. John Paul II, our parish patron, pray for us. St. John Henry Newman, pray for us. St. Augustine, pray for us. All holy men and women, pray for us.

As You Leave

While making the Sign of the Cross, pray:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. I believe, Lord. Help my unbelief. Amen.

You have taken another step. Faith grows not by having all the answers, but by continuing to walk toward the One who is the Answer.

Go in peace. The journey continues.

"I do believe, help my unbelief!" — Mark 9:24 (NABRE)

Session 3: Hope

Teaching Notes

Session 3: Hope - Teaching Notes

Key Points to Emphasize

- Hope is not wishful thinking - It's confident expectation based on God's promises
- Hope anchors us in trials - It keeps us steady when life is hard
- Hope is forward-looking - It orients us toward heaven and eternal life

Common Questions

Q: How is hope different from optimism? A: Optimism is based on circumstances; hope is based on God's faithfulness regardless of circumstances.

Q: What if I feel hopeless? A: Feelings of hopelessness are not the same as losing the virtue of hope. Bring your feelings to Jesus.

Transition to Prayer Time

Invite participants to bring their fears and discouragements to Jesus. Ask Him for the gift of hope.

Discussion Starter

"What struck you most during your time with Jesus? What insight or feeling did you experience?"

Session Content

Session 3: Hope - Trusting in Love's Promise

Time: 1:00 PM - 2:15 PM

Location: Parish Hall (Teaching & Discussion) → Sanctuary (Prayer)

Session Overview

Time	Duration	Activity	Location
1:00 PM	30 min	Teaching: Hope	Parish Hall
1:30 PM	30 min	Group Discussion	Parish Hall
2:00 PM	15 min	Prayer with Jesus	Sanctuary

Part 1: Teaching (30 minutes)

Central Truth

We hope in God's promise of a share in his glory in Heaven. God's promises are trustworthy. Hope offers to us authentic joy and true courage, and sustains us in times of trial.

Opening (3 minutes)

Connect to Sessions 1 & 2: We've talked about grace—God giving us his life. We've talked about faith—saying "yes" to God. Now we come to hope. If faith says "I believe God exists and loves me," hope says "I trust that God will keep his promises."

Ask the group: "What's the difference between hope and wishful thinking?"

Hope isn't crossing your fingers. Hope is anchoring your soul to the faithfulness of God.

Talking Point 1: Hope Is Anchored in God's Promises, Not Our Circumstances (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: Romans 5:1-5 (NABRE)

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces

endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us."

Key points to emphasize:

- Notice the progression: suffering → endurance → character → hope
- Hope doesn't come despite suffering—it often comes through suffering
- "Hope does not disappoint"—this is a bold claim. Why? Because it's anchored in God's love, not our circumstances.
- The Holy Spirit pours God's love into our hearts—hope is connected to experiencing God's love

CCC 1817: "Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit."

Key phrase: "relying not on our own strength." Hope is not optimism about our abilities. It's confidence in God's faithfulness.

Talking Point 2: Hope Gives Us a Reason to Live Differently (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: Jeremiah 29:11-13 (NABRE)

"For I know well the plans I have in mind for you—oracle of the LORD—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope. When you call me, and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart."

Key points to emphasize:

- God spoke these words to Israel in exile—when everything seemed lost
- Hope is not denial of present suffering; it's confidence in future redemption
- "Plans for welfare and not for evil"—God is for us, not against us
- "You will seek me and find me"—hope leads to seeking, and seeking leads to finding
- Hope reorders our priorities: If Heaven is real, then this life is preparation, not the main event

What hope does:

- Puts our problems in perspective—they're real, but they're not the end of the story
- Gives us courage to face difficulty—we know how the story ends
- Frees us from despair—even when things look hopeless, God is working
- Motivates holiness—if Heaven is our destination, we want to be ready

Talking Point 3: The Enemies of Hope (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: Romans 8:24-25, 28 (NABRE)

"For in hope we were saved. Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees?"

But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance... We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

Key points to emphasize:

- Hope requires patience—we don't see the fulfillment yet
- "In everything God works for good"—not "everything is good," but God works in everything

Two sins against hope:

1. Despair — Giving up on God's promises

- Believing your sins are too great to be forgiven
- Believing your situation is beyond God's help
- Believing that Heaven isn't real or isn't for you
- Despair says: "God can't" or "God won't"

2. Presumption — Taking God's promises for granted

- Assuming you'll be saved without conversion
- Expecting forgiveness without repentance
- Living however you want because "God is merciful"
- Presumption says: "God must" or "God owes me"

CCC 2091: "Despair... is contrary to God's goodness, to his justice—for the Lord is faithful to his promises—and to his mercy."

Hope walks the middle path: trusting God's mercy while taking his justice seriously.

Closing (3 minutes)

Hope is what gets us through. When the diagnosis is bad, when the relationship is broken, when the future is uncertain—hope says, "God is faithful. He keeps his promises. This is not the end."

By faith, we believe. In hope, we trust. And hope prepares us for love—because when we're confident in God's love for us, we're freed to love others.

Transition to discussion...

Part 2: Group Discussion (30 minutes)

Allow approximately 10 minutes per question. These questions go deeper, helping participants confront their fears and disappointments, and discover where they need to anchor their hope in God.

Question 1: Where Hope Has Been Tested (10 minutes)

"Think of a time when you felt hopeless—when circumstances seemed impossible or when you couldn't see a

way forward. What happened to your relationship with God during that time? Did you draw closer or pull away?"

Facilitator notes:

- This question invites vulnerability about dark times
- Some may share loss, illness, broken relationships, failure
- Don't rush to "fix" or offer platitudes—let people sit with the reality
- Notice patterns: Do people tend toward despair (giving up) or presumption (denial)?
- Connect to Romans 5: suffering can produce hope, but it's a process

Question 2: What Are You Really Hoping For? (10 minutes)

"Be honest: When you think about what you're hoping for in life, how much of it is about this world—success, health, relationships, comfort—and how much is about Heaven and eternal life with God? What does that reveal about where your heart is anchored?"

Facilitator notes:

- This is a challenging question—most of us hope primarily for earthly things
- The goal isn't to shame, but to honestly examine our priorities
- Connect to Jesus' teaching: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"
- If our hope is only in this world, what happens when this world disappoints?
- Guide toward the realization that ultimate hope must be in something that can't be taken away

Question 3: Choosing Hope (10 minutes)

"Hope is a virtue—which means it can be practiced and strengthened. Given what you've heard today, what is one concrete way you could practice hope this week? What would it look like to anchor your soul more firmly in God's promises?"

Facilitator notes:

- Move from reflection to action
- Possible answers: praying when anxious instead of worrying, meditating on Scripture promises, going to Confession to address despair, trusting God with a specific situation
- Connect to the progression of the retreat: We've recognized our need (grace), said yes to God (faith), and now we're learning to trust his promises (hope)
- This prepares them for the final session on love—hope frees us to love

Part 3: Prayer with Jesus (15 minutes)

In the Sanctuary, before the Blessed Sacrament

Guide participants to:

- Sit quietly in the presence of Jesus—the One who is our hope
- Bring to him any area of despair or presumption
- Ask him: "Lord, anchor my hope in you"
- Meditate on his promise: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20)

Close with the Act of Hope:

O my God, relying on your infinite goodness and promises, I hope to obtain pardon of my sins, the help of your grace, and life everlasting, through the merits of Jesus Christ, my Lord and Redeemer. Amen.

Devotional Guide

Session 3 Devotional: Anchored in Hope

15 Minutes with Jesus

"Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us." — Romans 5:5 (NABRE)

The Anchor That Holds

Life is hard. You know this.

You have learned that God exists—and that evil and suffering are real. You have seen how God's answer to suffering is love: truth, justice, and mercy woven together. You have traced His covenant faithfulness through history, even when His people failed Him again and again.

God does not abandon. God keeps His promises. This is the foundation of hope.

And yet—there are days when the weight feels unbearable. Anxiety about the future. Grief over the past. Discouragement in the present. The state of the world. The struggles in your own life. Moments when you wonder if things will ever change.

And yet—you are here. You have not given up. Something in you keeps reaching for the light.

That something is hope.

Hope is not optimism. Optimism says, "Things will probably work out." Hope says, "God is faithful, no matter what happens." Optimism depends on circumstances. Hope depends on God.

Jesus said:

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid." (John 14:27, NABRE)

St. Padre Pio wrote:

"Pray, hope, and don't worry. Worry is useless. God is merciful and will hear your prayer."

St. Thomas Aquinas defined hope this way:

"Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our

happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit."

Notice: hope relies not on our own strength. This is crucial. Hope is not about being strong enough to endure. Hope is about trusting a God who is strong enough to carry us.

Hope Built on Grace and Faith

We have journeyed through grace—God's free gift of Himself. We have said yes in faith—believing that God is who He says He is. Now hope takes us further.

Hope is faith looking forward.

- Grace is God giving Himself to us.
- Faith is believing that gift is real.
- Hope is trusting that God will complete what He has begun.
- Love will be living fully in that completion.

St. Paul understood this progression when he wrote to the Philippians:

"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6, NABRE)

God has begun something in you. Hope trusts that He will finish it.

Reflection Questions

Sit quietly with Jesus. Let these questions rest in your heart.

- Where in my life am I tempted to despair or discouragement?

Can I bring that place to Jesus right now and ask for hope?

- What am I trying to carry that I need to surrender to God?

Anxiety? Grief? Fear? The need to control?

- How would my life be different if I truly believed God's promises?

What would I do? What would I stop doing? How would I face tomorrow?

A Prayer for Hope

Pray this slowly, from your heart:

Lord Jesus, I am tired. I am tired of struggling. Tired of waiting. Tired of wondering if things will ever change. But I come to You because I believe You are faithful. I come to You because Your promises are

true. I come to You because You are my only hope. Anchor my soul in You. When the storms come, hold me fast. When the darkness closes in, be my light. When I am tempted to give up, remind me that You never give up on me. I place my hope in You alone. Amen.

Traditional Prayer: Act of Hope

This ancient prayer expresses confident trust in God's promises. Pray it slowly, letting each phrase strengthen your heart.

O my God, relying on your infinite goodness and promises, I hope to obtain pardon of my sins, the help of your grace, and life everlasting, through the merits of Jesus Christ, my Lord and Redeemer. Amen.

Closing Prayer: The Anima Christi

Ask Christ to anchor your hope as you pray:

Soul of Christ, sanctify me. Body of Christ, save me. Blood of Christ, inebriate me. Water from the side of Christ, wash me. Passion of Christ, strengthen me. O good Jesus, hear me. Within your wounds, hide me. Permit me not to be separated from you. From the wicked foe, defend me. At the hour of my death, call me and bid me come to you, that with your saints I may praise you forever and ever. Amen.

We do not walk this journey alone. The saints who have gone before us intercede for us. Ask for their prayers:

Holy Mary, Mother of Hope, pray for us. St. John Paul II, our parish patron, pray for us. St. Padre Pio, pray for us. St. Thomas Aquinas, pray for us. All holy men and women, pray for us.

As You Leave

While making the Sign of the Cross, pray:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Lord, I place my hope in You. Amen.

You are not alone. You have never been alone. The God who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it.

Go in peace. The journey continues.

"For I know well the plans I have in mind for you—oracle of the LORD—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope." — Jeremiah 29:11 (NABRE)

Session 4: Love

Teaching Notes

Session 4: Love - Teaching Notes

Key Points to Emphasize

- God IS love - Love is not just what God does, it's who He is
- We love because He first loved us - Our love is always a response
- Love integrates truth, justice, mercy, and sacrifice - It's not sentimental

Common Questions

Q: How can I love people I don't like? A: Love is not a feeling but a choice to will the good of another. Feelings may follow, but they're not required.

Q: What's the difference between loving God and loving neighbor? A: They're inseparable. "Whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

Transition to Prayer Time

Invite participants to let Jesus love them. Don't try to do anything - just receive His gaze.

Discussion Starter

"What struck you most during your time with Jesus? What insight or feeling did you experience?"

Session Content

Session 4: Love - Participating in God's Life

Time: 2:15 PM - 3:30 PM

Location: Parish Hall (Teaching & Discussion) → Sanctuary (Prayer)

Session Overview

	Time	Duration	Activity	Location
	2:15 PM	30 min	Teaching: Love	Parish Hall
	2:45 PM	30 min	Group Discussion	Parish Hall
	3:15 PM	15 min	Prayer with Jesus	Sanctuary

Part 1: Teaching (30 minutes)

Central Truth

Love is the essence of the inner life of the Trinity. It is the soul of holiness and the basis upon which we will be judged. In Heaven, the faithful will live in the joy of perfect love.

Opening (3 minutes)

Connect to the entire retreat: Everything we've talked about today leads here. Grace is God giving us his life. Faith is saying "yes" to God. Hope is trusting his promises. But love—love is the destination. Love is why God created us. Love is what we were made for.

Ask the group: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

That's the question a lawyer asked Jesus in Luke 10. And Jesus' answer was: Love. Love God. Love your neighbor. "Do this, and you will live."

Talking Point 1: God IS Love—Not Just That He Loves (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12, 16 (NABRE)

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was

revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us... God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him."

Key points to emphasize:

- "God IS love"—not just that God loves, but that love is his very nature
- The Trinity is an eternal communion of love: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit giving themselves to each other
- We were created to participate in this love—to receive it and to give it
- "He who does not love does not know God"—you cannot know God without loving
- Love is not optional for Christians—it's the very definition of what it means to follow Christ

CCC 1822: "Charity is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God."

Notice: We love God for his own sake—not for what we get from him. And we love neighbor for the love of God—not because they deserve it.

Talking Point 2: Love Is a Command—Which Means It's a Choice (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: John 13:34-35; 15:12-13 (NABRE)

"I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

"This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Key points to emphasize:

- Jesus commands us to love—which means love is an act of the will, not just a feeling
- "As I have loved you"—the standard is Christ's love, not human affection
- How did Jesus love? Sacrificially. Unconditionally. To the point of death.
- "By this all men will know"—love is the mark of a Christian, the proof of our faith
- Love is not "something to do"—it is the point of all doing

What love is NOT:

- Love is not a feeling (though feelings may accompany it)
- Love is not approval of everything someone does
- Love is not being "nice" or avoiding conflict
- Love is not earned or deserved

What love IS:

- Willing the good of the other

- Self-gift—giving yourself for the sake of another
- An act of the will that can be commanded and chosen
- The fulfillment of the entire law (Romans 13:10)

Talking Point 3: The Final Test—Love in Action (8 minutes)

Primary Scripture: Matthew 25:31-40 (NABRE)

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

Key points to emphasize:

- This is the "final test"—the basis on which we will be judged
- Notice: Jesus doesn't ask about our theology or our feelings. He asks about our actions.
- "As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me"—Jesus identifies with the poor, the suffering, the forgotten
- Love must be concrete—it must take action
- Faith and hope prepare us for love; love is the destination

CCC 1826: "If I... have not charity, I am nothing... Charity is superior to all the virtues. It is the first of the theological virtues."

The sins against love:

- Indifference—not caring
- Ingratitude—taking God's love for granted
- Lukewarmness—half-hearted response to God's love
- Acedia (spiritual sloth)—refusing to engage with God's love
- Hatred—the direct opposite of love

Closing (3 minutes)

Here's the truth we've been building toward all day:

- Grace is God giving us his life—so that we can love
- Faith is saying "yes" to God—so that we can receive his love

- Hope is trusting God's promises—so that we're freed to love without fear
- Love is the destination—participating in the very life of the Trinity

The question isn't "Do you feel loving?" The question is "Will you choose to love?"

Jesus said: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Not by your knowledge. Not by your attendance. Not by your feelings. By your love.

Transition to discussion...

Part 2: Group Discussion (30 minutes)

Allow approximately 10 minutes per question. These are the deepest questions of the retreat—designed to bring participants to a point of decision about how they will live in response to God's love.

Question 1: Receiving Love Before Giving It (10 minutes)

"We've talked all day about God's love for you—his grace, his faithfulness, his promises. Be honest: Do you actually believe God loves you? Not in theory, but personally—do you believe God delights in you, wants you, pursues you? What makes it hard to receive that love?"

Facilitator notes:

- This is the foundational question—we cannot give what we haven't received
- Many people struggle to believe God loves them specifically
- Common obstacles: shame, past failures, feeling unworthy, comparing to others
- Connect to 1 John 4:19: "We love because he first loved us"
- The goal is to help participants receive before they're asked to give

Question 2: The Person You Find Hardest to Love (10 minutes)

"Jesus commands us to love—even our enemies. Think of the person in your life who is hardest for you to love. It might be someone who hurt you, someone who annoys you, or someone you've written off. What would it look like to actually love that person—not to feel warm toward them, but to will their good and act for their benefit?"

Facilitator notes:

- This question makes love concrete and uncomfortable
- Remind them: love is an act of the will, not a feeling
- Possible actions: praying for them, forgiving them, serving them, speaking well of them
- Connect to Jesus' teaching: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"
- The goal is not to resolve the situation today, but to name it honestly

Question 3: What Will You Do? (10 minutes)

"At the end of your life, Jesus will ask: 'Did you love?' Not 'Did you believe the right things?' or 'Did you attend the right services?' but 'Did you love?' Based on everything you've heard today, what is one specific way you will choose to love this week—either in receiving God's love more deeply, or in giving love to someone who needs it?"

Facilitator notes:

- This is the decision point of the entire retreat
- Encourage specificity: not "I'll try to be more loving" but "I will call my estranged brother" or "I will spend 10 minutes in prayer each morning receiving God's love"
- Connect to the progression: Grace → Faith → Hope → Love → Action
- This prepares them for the closing session and their return to daily life

Part 3: Prayer with Jesus (15 minutes)

In the Sanctuary, before the Blessed Sacrament

Guide participants to:

- Sit quietly in the presence of Jesus—Love Incarnate
- Ask him: "Lord, help me receive your love"
- Bring to him the person you find hardest to love
- Ask him: "Lord, help me love as you love"
- Make a commitment: What will you do this week?

Close with the Act of Love:

O my God, I love you above all things, with my whole heart and soul, because you are all good and worthy of all my love. I love my neighbor as myself for the love of you. I forgive all who have injured me, and I ask pardon of all whom I have injured. Amen.

Devotional Guide

Session 4 Devotional: Abiding in Love

15 Minutes with Jesus

"God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him." — 1 John 4:16 (NABRE)

The Destination of the Journey

You have traveled far—not just today, but throughout your entire OCIA journey.

You learned that God exists and that the solution to evil and suffering is love. You discovered that love is not a feeling but a reality that binds truth, justice, and mercy together. You met the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—an eternal communion of love. You traced God's covenant plan, saw it fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and found it alive in the Church, the Mass, the sacraments.

Everything you have learned has been pointing here. To love.

Today you began with grace—the overwhelming gift of God pouring out His very life toward you. You responded with faith—saying yes to a God who reveals Himself. You anchored yourself in hope—trusting that God will complete what He has begun.

Now you arrive at the destination: Love.

But here is the beautiful truth—love is not just the destination. Love has been with you all along. Grace is love reaching out. Faith is love received. Hope is love trusted. And now, love calls you to remain.

St. John understood this when he wrote:

"In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10, NABRE)

Love begins with God. Always. You are not here to earn God's love. You are here to receive it, to rest in it, and to let it transform you.

God IS Love

St. Paul wrote that faith, hope, and love abide—but the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Why is love the greatest?

Because love is who God is. Not just what God does—who God is. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are an eternal communion of self-giving love. And this love—this very love—has been pursuing you your entire life. Before you knew His name. Before you walked through the doors of this parish. Before you took your first breath. God's love was there.

St. Augustine captured this beautifully:

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

The restlessness you have felt—the longing, the searching, the ache for something more—that is your heart seeking the love it was made for. And that love is here. That love is now. That love is Jesus, present before you.

Called to Be Love in the World

But God does not call you simply to receive His love. He calls you to become His love in the world.

The prophet Micah asked what the Lord requires of us. The answer echoes through the ages:

"You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8, NABRE)

This is your calling. This is why you are here. Not just to know about God's love, but to be God's love—to bear truth in a world drowning in lies, to do justice where injustice reigns, to love mercy when the world demands vengeance, and to walk humbly with your God every step of the way.

Jesus gave everything for you. Now He invites you to give your whole life to Him.

St. John of the Cross wrote:

"In the evening of life, we will be judged on love alone."

Not on how much we knew. Not on how much we accomplished. Not on how impressive our faith appeared. On love. Only love.

The Next Generation

Look around you. The world is dark. But you—you—are called to be light.

Jesus said:

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden." (Matthew 5:14, NABRE)

You are the next generation that brings light into the darkness. You are the ones who will carry the faith forward. You are the hands and feet of Christ in a world that desperately needs to see His love made visible.

This is not a burden. This is a gift. This is the adventure you were made for.

Reflection Questions

Sit quietly with Jesus. Let these questions rest in your heart.

- Do I truly believe that God—who IS love—has been pursuing me my whole life?

How does this change the way I see my past, my present, my future?

- Am I willing to give my whole life to Christ, as He gave His life for me?

What am I still holding back? What would it look like to surrender completely?

- How is God calling me to be His love in the world?

To bear truth? To do justice? To love mercy? To walk humbly? Where is He sending me?

- Will I accept the call to be light in the darkness?

The world needs what you have received. Will you share it?

A Prayer of Total Surrender

Pray this slowly, from your heart:

Lord Jesus, You are Love. You loved me before I knew You. You loved me when I ran from You. You love me now, in all my weakness and failure. I give You my whole life. Not part of it. Not the easy parts. All of it. As You gave Yourself completely for me, I give myself completely to You. Make me Your love in the world. Send me to bear truth where there are lies. Send me to do justice where there is oppression. Send me to love mercy where there is cruelty. Teach me to walk humbly with You every day. I am Yours. Use me. Send me. I am ready. "You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) Amen.

Traditional Prayer: Act of Love

This ancient prayer expresses the heart of charity—loving God above all and neighbor for God's sake. Pray it slowly, letting each phrase become your own.

O my God, I love you above all things, with my whole heart and soul, because you are all good and worthy of all my love. I love my neighbor as myself for the love of you. I forgive all who have injured me, and I ask pardon of all whom I have injured. Amen.

Closing Prayer: The Anima Christi

Ask Christ to fill you with His love as you pray:

Soul of Christ, sanctify me. Body of Christ, save me. Blood of Christ, inebriate me. Water from the side of Christ, wash me. Passion of Christ, strengthen me. O good Jesus, hear me. Within your wounds, hide me. Permit me not to be separated from you. From the wicked foe, defend me. At the hour of my death, call me and bid me come to you, that with your saints I may praise you forever and ever. Amen.

We do not walk this journey alone. The saints who have gone before us intercede for us. Ask for their prayers:

Holy Mary, Queen of Heaven, pray for us. St. John Paul II, our parish patron, pray for us. St. Augustine, pray for us. St. John of the Cross, pray for us. All holy men and women, pray for us.

As You Leave

While making the Sign of the Cross, pray:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Lord, help me to love as You love. Amen.

You have received grace. You have said yes in faith. You have anchored yourself in hope. Now go and love—for love is why you were made.

Go in peace. The journey continues—and love leads the way.

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God." — 1 John 4:7 (NABRE)

Session 5: Closing

Session 5: Closing - Integration and Commissioning

Time: 3:30 PM - 4:30 PM

Location: Sanctuary

Session Overview

Time	Duration	Activity	Location	----- ----- ----- -----	3:30 PM	60 min	Closing Session	
Sanctuary								

Teaching Content

Key Points

- Integration: How the virtues work together
- Living the theological virtues daily
- Communal prayer and blessing
- Reposition of Blessed Sacrament

Scripture Foundation

All Scripture from previous sessions integrated:

Grace

- Ephesians 2:4-10 - "For by grace you have been saved through faith"
- 2 Corinthians 12:9 - "My grace is sufficient for you"
- John 1:14-16 - "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace"

Faith

- Hebrews 11:1 - "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for"
- Romans 10:17 - "Faith comes from hearing"

- Mark 9:24 - "I believe; help my unbelief!"

Hope

- Romans 5:5 - "Hope does not disappoint us"
- Romans 8:24-25 - "In hope we were saved"
- 1 Peter 3:15 - "Always be ready to give a reason for your hope"

Love

- 1 John 4:8 - "God is love"
- 1 Corinthians 13:13 - "The greatest of these is love"
- John 15:13 - "Greater love has no one than this"

Catechism References

All Catechism references from previous sessions:

- Grace: CCC 1996-2005
- Theological Virtues Overview: CCC 1812-1829
- Faith: CCC 1814-1816
- Hope: CCC 1817-1821
- Love (Charity): CCC 1822-1829

Closing Prayer

To be developed

Commissioning

To be developed

Facilitator Tips

Leading Discussions

The Opening Question

Always begin each discussion with:

"What struck you most during your time with Jesus? What insight or feeling did you experience?"

Why this works:

- It's open-ended and non-threatening
- It honors what God did during prayer time
- It invites personal sharing, not "right answers"
- It creates space for the Holy Spirit

If the Group is Quiet

- Wait. Silence is okay. Count to 10 slowly before speaking.
- Share briefly from your own experience first
- Ask: "What was it like to sit with Jesus just now?"
- Use one of the backup questions from the schedule

If Someone Dominates

- Thank them and redirect: "That's beautiful. Let's hear from someone else."
- Make eye contact with quieter participants
- Ask specifically: "What about you, [name]?"

If Someone Shares Something Heavy

- Thank them for their honesty
- Don't try to fix or solve
- Acknowledge: "That sounds really hard. Thank you for trusting us with that."
- Remind them: "Jesus heard that too, just now in the Sanctuary."
- Follow up privately after the session if needed

Teaching Tips

Keep It Personal

- Share your own struggles and growth
- Use "we" language, not "you should"
- Connect doctrine to real life

Keep It Moving

- 30 minutes goes fast
- Don't try to cover everything
- Hit the main points; trust the Holy Spirit

Keep It Prayerful

- You're not just informing; you're forming
- Pause for emphasis
- Let Scripture breathe

Managing Time

| Signal | Meaning | |-----|-----| | 5-minute warning | Wrap up current point | | Time's up | Finish your sentence and transition | | Bell/chime | Move to next location |

Be disciplined about time. The schedule is tight, and the 4:30 PM end is a hard stop.

Handling Common Situations

Someone Arrives Late

- Welcome them quietly
- Give them a Participant Guide
- Don't stop to catch them up

Someone Needs to Leave Early

- That's okay; thank them for coming
- Offer to connect later

Technical Difficulties

- Have a backup plan (no slides needed)
- The content is in the Participant Guide
- Keep going; don't let tech derail the retreat

Someone is Emotional

- This is good—the Holy Spirit is working
- Have tissues available
- Don't rush them
- A team member can sit with them if needed

Prayer for Facilitators

Before the retreat, pray together as a team:

Lord Jesus, we place this retreat in Your hands. We are not the ones who will change hearts—You are. Help us to decrease so that You may increase. Give us wisdom, patience, and love. Protect this day from distraction and disruption. Let every participant encounter Your love. Mary, Mother of the Church, pray for us. St. Thérèse, St. Thomas, St. Josephine Bakhita, St. Maximilian Kolbe—pray for us. Amen.

After the Retreat

Debrief Questions

- What went well?
- What would we do differently?
- Who might need follow-up?
- What did we learn for next time?

Follow-Up

- Send a thank-you note to participants
- Check in with anyone who seemed to be struggling
- Connect them with ongoing OCIA formation
- Pray for them by name