



LESSON 2
PREPARATION NOTES

The Battle
Within

THE BATTLE WITHIN IN BRIEF:

We can fight to overcome our inherent human weaknesses with the help of the Holy Spirit.

KEY ELEMENTS:

- We begin this lesson by assuring participants that human weakness, sin and struggles are part of the spiritual life. We can expect to encounter these obstacles. Through the Spirit alive in us, we have supernatural help to persevere and fight through these challenges.
- We will reaffirm what it means to be in a Christ-centred relationship, despite our weaknesses and lack of perfection. This is an important follow-up to what was taught in *Discovery*.
- The term *sanctifying grace*, used early on in the lesson, means: “the gratuitous gift of his life that God makes to us; it is infused by the Holy Spirit into the soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it.” CCC 2023. In other words, it is the gift of God’s life and salvation in our soul.
- Paul’s witness in Romans 7 and 8 is key to this lesson. It is real and honest: he desires to do good but finds himself doing what he does not want to do. Living in the Spirit gives us hope as we face this interior battle. God has not abandoned us in our efforts to follow his will. He has given us his very self: the Spirit who dwells in us.
- Take time to prayerfully prepare reflections on Romans 7 and 8. Share these reflections with your group during the lesson.
- This week’s challenge is to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation. Through this sacrament, the Holy Spirit fills us with grace to fight sin and temptation. Think about how, when and where you can encourage your group to go to Confession. Perhaps you can suggest parishes where they can receive the sacraments at regularly-scheduled times. Consider organizing a time when the group will be able to go to Confession together, adding a social dimension to the experience. This may be the first time some participants will have received this sacrament in a long time—be very gentle as you lead and encourage them to go. You can draw their attention to the guide to making a good confession which appears in the appendix of their participant guides.



LESSON 2

The Battle Within

1 Last week's challenge was to read from the book of Acts. Share which sections you read and what inspired you most.



Introduction

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Hopefully, since last week's lesson we are more interested in experiencing the Holy Spirit in our lives; he is so much more than we realize or understand. We touched on a variety of ways in which the Holy Spirit helps us grow in our relationship with God. He is truly the source and strength of our spiritual life. The chocolate milk analogy emphasized the importance of inviting the Holy Spirit to be active and influence our lives on a regular basis.



Despite genuine desires and attempts to follow God, sometimes—deep down—we aren't sure how good we are at it. We don't seem to be able to be as spiritual as we think we should be. Perhaps we struggle with discouragement, feeling defeated or lack of motivation.

Today's lesson aims to expose this “battle within” and assure us that it is quite normal and, frankly, to be expected. It is precisely when we realize our weakness and inability to master the Christian life on our own strength that we realize our need for God's grace and help. We receive this grace in the Person and presence of the Holy Spirit.

2 What are some obvious obstacles that might cause someone to struggle in faithfulness to God?

A | **ANSWER:** There are certainly obvious ways we struggle spiritually: any variety of serious sins, media and society influencing us away from faith, addictions, laziness (not making an effort to put God first).

3 What are more subtle obstacles a person might encounter in their faith life?

ANSWER: Some *subtle* ways we can become discouraged or feel defeated in our faith life include:

- being lukewarm
- sitting on the fence
- being motivated by guilt
- feeling weak
- having inconsistent prayer times
- inconsistent church attendance or Christian fellowship
- lacking trust in God's plan or his goodness
- lacking joy
- not bearing fruit
- not having a spiritual impact on other people's lives
- basing faith on emotions

A | Make sure participants understand that to have ups and downs on their faith journeys is not necessarily a defeated spiritual life; it is a normal life. In a defeated Christian life, there is no progress forward. Think of the Christian life/growth as climbing a mountain. You will slip and lose some ground, but you should always be getting further up before you slip again; at least you should not be slipping as much or in the same way. In other words, you learn to avoid the same pitfalls, or understand how to handle them better.

4 What helps you make a spiritual turnaround?

LEADERS: Come prepared to discuss some of your own strategies in making a spiritual turnaround.

Struggles and Our Relationship with God

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5 If you were struggling spiritually, which image would best represent your relationship with God?



LEADERS: This question sets up the following section, which should be read as a group. Either have one participant read the whole section, or switch readers with each paragraph.



OUTSIDE OF MY LIFE



PART OF MY LIFE



CENTRE OF MY LIFE



OUTSIDE OF MY LIFE



PART OF MY LIFE



CENTRE OF MY LIFE

LEADERS: Most will say the second image. Tell them to “hold that thought” as you read through the next section.

6 Underline what stands out for you in this section.

We may feel that if we are struggling, we are best represented by the middle image even though we have invited Jesus into our lives. We choose the middle one because we think we are not faithful enough to be in the third one.

We must remember that these images represent the kinds of commitments we make, not levels of perfection. If we have sanctifying grace in our souls through Baptism, repent of our failures, live a sacramental life in the Church, and choose to follow, love and honour God, we are living a Christ-centred relationship. If this is how we live, we can be confident that God's love and commitment to us is unchanging.

Our struggles may occur because other concerns or interests are usurping God's rightful place in our lives, or are leading us into sin. When these sins are *venial* (not of a serious nature) we don't need to worry that we have lost our secure relationship with God. Certainly, we need to repent, change and mature. Our relationship with God is continually growing and, just as in marriage, we have to work through the daily struggles. God is not surprised by our weakness, nor is he anxious to leave or drop us whenever we fail or disappoint him. It would be ridiculous if a married couple found themselves sometimes married or sometimes single several times throughout the week, depending on how good a spouse each partner was. The same is true in our relationship with God: our commitment is not severed by day-to-day failures and weaknesses.

While venial sin does not sever our relationship with God, mortal sin can. Avoiding *mortal* sin (serious sin that is wilfully committed with full knowledge of its gravity) is crucial to the integrity of our relationship. Mortal sin separates us from the protection of God's saving grace; committing a sin of this nature means we have rejected God from our lives. He is not in the centre, and our relationship becomes represented by the first or second image.

However, even if we sin mortally, we can still be reconciled with God. His mercy is endless. Our loving Father longs to restore us to a right relationship with himself. Through our true contrition (sincere sorrow), confession to a priest in the sacrament of Reconciliation, and works of penance, we can respond to his invitation to begin again.

As we strive to live out this Christ-centred relationship, we have not been left alone to carry it out on our own. We have been given the help of the Holy Spirit, who lives in us and empowers us.

7 Does this explanation change the way you would answer which image best represents your relationship with God? Why?

LEADERS: If some participants seem uncomfortable about offering an answer aloud, be respectful of that silence and do not dig for answers. They may be recognizing mortal sin in their lives. Once responses have been shared, gently suggest to your group that if they feel compelled to partake in the sacrament of Reconciliation for mortal or venial sins, they should follow God's prompting in their hearts.

Mention that you are available after the study if they need help finding a priest for Confession.

We are bound to encounter challenges along with growth in our relationship with God. Even with sanctifying grace in our souls, we still have to struggle with our personal weaknesses and temptations. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul shares his own struggles with the ups and downs of the spiritual life.

Paul's Struggle



8 Read Romans 7:18-25. What problem is Paul experiencing? Can you relate to his struggle? How?

9 What do you think Paul means by *the flesh*?

ANSWER: The Church teaches that the struggle with what Paul calls “the flesh” (in Greek, *sarx*) or “the old man” is not due to any sort of wickedness in our human bodies. Paul is referring to *concupiscence*, our innate tendency to be selfish and rebel against God.

Sarx can be translated as *disorderly desires* or *disorderly inclination*.

A

Our desires, emotions and actions are essentially good when they are used for the glory and love of God. When we use them for selfish ends, however, they are considered *fleshly*. For example, taste and enjoyment of food is a natural, God-given desire—but when we abuse that desire, it becomes gluttony. Another example is the desire for sexual intimacy. It is a natural, God-given desire to be fulfilled in a God-given context (marriage), but when that passion is used for selfish gain or inordinate pleasure outside of God’s design, it is lust.

LEADERS: Some participants may be reading from a Protestant translation of the Scriptures. If so, they will find *sarx* sometimes translated as *sinful nature* or *human nature*. Catholic Scripture scholars would not translate *sarx* as sinful/human nature because Catholics have never accepted the Protestant notion that human nature was entirely corrupted by sin. Sin wounded our nature, but did not corrupt it completely. Our humanity (our human nature) is not opposed to divinity either—this is illustrated by the fact that Christ was both God and man. *Sarx* simply refers to our tendency towards evil, something we have all inherited due to original sin.

10 How can Paul's experience give us hope?

ANSWER: Paul struggled with sin, but was able to overcome it with God's help. Although he was not perfect, he still lived a life of holiness. His example shows that there is hope for us, too!

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that Paul's struggle (and ours) is due to concupiscence:

A **“** Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man's moral faculties and, without being in itself an offence, inclines man to commit sins. Because man is a composite being, spirit and body, there already exists a certain tension in him; a certain struggle of tendencies between “spirit” and “flesh” develops. But in fact this struggle belongs to the heritage of sin. It is a consequence of sin and at the same time a confirmation of it. It is part of the daily experience of the spiritual battle. **”**

CCC 2515-2516

Paul's Solution



11 Read Romans 8:1-17. Identify (by colour coding, circling, etc.) what Paul says pertains to the flesh, and what pertains to the Spirit.

LEADERS: Paul's writing can be challenging to read. Marking the text can help participants grasp its meaning.

First, have them circle the key words in this passage: *Spirit* and *flesh*. They could, for example, circle every instance of the word *Spirit* in yellow and *flesh* in blue. Then, have them underline related words or ideas in the appropriate colour (e.g. everything that relates to *Spirit* is underlined in yellow). If they cannot mark up their Bible, have them make a chart with *Spirit* and *flesh* in two separate columns.

12 We are no longer condemned to hopeless despair as slaves to sin. How were we freed from slavery to the law of sin and death? (Especially in verses 1-4.)

ROMANS 8:1-4

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

ANSWER:

- 8:1. Recognize that because of Jesus, we are no longer condemned.
- 8:3. Jesus took our sins upon himself and dealt with them on the cross. This is the message of *Discovery!*
- 8:4. Apart from Jesus, we are condemned to death and separated from God by the requirements of the law (which are unattainable, and which we are incapable of fulfilling). The Holy Spirit gives supernatural power (grace) to fulfill the requirements of the law, freeing us from slavery to sin.

13 How does Paul counsel us to live in this truth and fight “the flesh” from ruling our lives?

A) 8:5-8.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

| **ANSWER:** We need to change our mindset from the flesh
A (worldly mindset, or relying on ourselves instead of on God’s
| grace) to the Spirit.

| **LEADERS:** Follow up by asking, “How can we do that? What
L kinds of things affect how we think and what we think about?”
|

| **ANSWER:** We have to watch what goes into our minds. We
need to dwell on what is good, such as Scripture, spiritual
reading, prayer, Mass and the lives of the saints. We have
to minimize our interaction with things that can lead us to
A sin: certain media, events or even unhealthy relationships
that lead us away from God. A mindset of pride, mediocrity,
complacency or self-satisfaction can also lead us away from a
Christ-centred relationship.

B) 8:12-13.

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

ANSWER: We need to avoid acting according to the flesh and choose godly behaviours instead.

8:12. We are called to live according to the Spirit and not according to our disordered desires. We have an obligation to live this way; to *will* to put to death—to reject—that which is not of the Spirit. We are called to *choose* to live a moral life—the moral life must be a life in the Spirit, and a life in the Spirit must be a moral life.

A

The phrase *putting to death* means denying or stopping wrong and harmful activities. It can also mean putting an end to wrong beliefs (self-reliance, denial of salvation through Jesus). It implies the development of *godly* habits as opposed to falling back into our sinful habits. It should not be understood to suggest any sort of self-harm or physical violence.

This will be addressed again in Lesson 3 with the *choose and ask* model.

C) 8:14.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

ANSWER: We must be *led by the Spirit* in order to live in the Spirit and be children of God. We need to look to the Holy Spirit for help and let our lives be influenced by the Spirit. This small phrase is very important to understanding the solution to our struggle with sin.

A

This will also be addressed again in Lesson 3 with the *choose and ask* model.

D) 8:15-17.

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

ANSWER: We need to recognize our dignity and true identity, and remember it always. In Disney's movie *The Lion King*, Mufasa speaks to Simba from the heavens, saying, "Remember who you are"—the Holy Spirit whispers the same words to us.

A We are the sons and daughters of God (8:15) and heirs to his kingdom (8:17). Therefore, we need not live in despair and hopelessness because of our sinful condition: we have been freed from slavery and condemnation. The Spirit of God lives in us (8:9)—we are true temples of the Holy Spirit. More on this in Lesson 5.

14 What have you learned from this lesson and from reflecting on Romans 7 and 8?

Summary

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The spiritual life is a battle—we must constantly struggle to overcome our sinful tendencies. This battle is not only experienced by those who are far from God—even saints like Paul had to fight to stay faithful. Thankfully, in the midst of our struggles, God is our great encourager. Through Jesus we have been set free from slavery to sin, and through the Holy Spirit we are given the means to live a life pleasing to God.

Living It Out

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CHALLENGE

Partake of the sacrament of Reconciliation. It is a sure means of grace when fighting sinful tendencies.

MEMORIZE ROMANS 8:1-2

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

Leader's Journal



Take 15 minutes as soon as possible after finishing the lesson to reflect on how God moved during your study and how your small group participants responded.

1 Thanksgiving

Reflect and say a prayer of thanksgiving for specific ways the Holy Spirit was present in that small group.

- a. How did you experience the Holy Spirit helping you to lead the lesson?

- b. How did you experience the Holy Spirit moving in the small group today?

- c. What were the positives from today's group?

- d. What were areas for improvement?

2 Prophetic Listening

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you review the lesson. Think about each person in your small group as you prayerfully reflect on these questions.

- a. What are some indications that each participant caught the main points of this lesson?

- b. If you noticed gaps in any participant’s understanding of the main points, is the Holy Spirit inviting you to do anything over the course of this week to help this person better understand?

- c. Are there any other ways the Holy Spirit is inviting you to intentionally care for or nurture your individual small group participants?

- d. Is there anything you want to remind yourself from what played out in this lesson for when you sit down to prepare the next lesson?

3 Intentional Accompaniment

Write down a plan to intercede for your small group participants based on the specific insights above, including how you will reach out to them and/or tailor the next lesson’s introduction based on your reflections.