

1 | Sharing

It is often said that the most difficult thing for most people is public speaking. And this seems to be true, based on the experience of a lot of people.

We imagine ourselves on a stage, with many faces looking at us, as we scramble for a piece of paper with some words on it. We clear our throat. We say “ahem” a couple of times. And then, fighting nerves and cold, clammy hands, we manage to say a few words.

“How did I do?” we ask afterward. “Was I too high-pitched, too nervous, too hard to hear, not funny enough?”

Yet, I would say that an even greater reluctance is sharing inner parts of ourselves. We have something like a separate container within us, a reservoir of private thoughts that have surprising power over our lives. But we mostly keep this inside.

What might be in this container? What we think about ourselves. Times of great vulnerability. Moments of shame when something awful happened. Deep feelings we have toward those closest to us—feelings that come flooding out of us when someone we love gets very ill or dies. Maybe a dream that never came to be.

We also keep, in this private reservoir, our faith.

Imagine someone asking you: “What do you believe?” Picture yourself looking within for some words and sentences. Maybe dozens of religion classes come flooding into your mind. Or words you hear at church. Or a Scripture quote. Or prayers you have become accustomed to saying.

But those words and memories hardly get at the reality of our faith. That’s because faith is something other than the packaging in which it often comes. Perhaps we get closest to articulating our faith when we face a grave crisis in our lives, like a terrible diagnosis or the breakup of a relationship that we depended on. At those moments, we find ourselves whispering inside, “Lord, I depend completely on you. I totally need you. Show me your love.”

At those moments, we feel like we have touched the very foundation of our lives, a foundation that has supported us for years even though

we do not often allude to it and may not be consciously aware of it. “Now I know how much I believe,” we might say to ourselves. “Now I realize how important God is to me!”

But these moments are hard for us to speak of, even to ourselves. So, how do we share them with others? How can we find words when we are asked about faith? It seems difficult even to imagine.

Yet, are there not times when we need to share our faith? This certainly happens on a regular basis in family life, as parents try to raise their children in their faith. Perhaps when children are young, it’s more straightforward: we teach them to pray, take them to Mass, and read them Bible stories. But when children grow into their teen years and start declaring their independence, many parents feel a burning need to share their own experience of faith with their kids: what brought their faith to life and keeps it strong.

These moments of disclosure might be among the most powerful faith moments in the lives of both parent and child.

Sometimes with our peers, we find ourselves looking for words of faith. We meet a parent, for example, at a school meeting. We start chatting. The parent begins to realize that we are Catholic or we are a believer. They say, almost offhandedly, “You’re a believer. I’d like to get my child involved in church, but I don’t know where to begin. How about you? What do you suggest?”

Another, more subtle example might be in the workplace. We are part of a team that, say, strategizes or develops products. Or maybe we are involved in marketing of one sort or another. During this work experience, a moral issue emerges that makes us uncomfortable. But how do we speak up?

How, in these situations, do we help others see the values we feel we must uphold? How do we find common ground that would allow us to share our reservations about something without our words coming across as moralizing or judgmental?



Yes, I can share my faith.

In the following pages, you will find considerations to help you develop your ability to articulate what you feel is essential about your faith.

To be sure, words on a page cannot do the work that you, as a believer, have to do. After all, faith is essentially personal. Formulas of faith from Church teaching or from our Creeds might give us a framework, but the core of our faith resides deep within us.

While words cannot do this kind of work for us, they can help us get to points of wonder, prayer, and feeling that lie deep in that personal reservoir inside us. Words can be like exercises we might do in a gym or our backyard, giving us the structure and strength that we can put into practice when we go jogging, play pickleball, or go to the driving range. Words can help us speak the faith deep inside us.

Knowing how difficult it is to talk about faith, you can now ask God to help you explore some of the ways that can make it easier.

For Reflection

1. Think of a time when you spoke freely about faith to someone else. What was it about that situation that made it easier?
2. Think of people with whom you would like to talk about and share faith. How could you start the conversation?
3. What role does Sunday Mass, or adult faith formation, have in helping you think about and talk about your faith?

Slowly pray the Our Father, reflecting on each word.

2 | Speaking

Before we can speak to others, we need to take a little time to speak to ourselves. We have to speak to ourselves about our faith to learn the grammar and vocabulary we have developed as we have approached God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and our faith communities.

This involves a willingness to sit quietly for some extended time now and then so the words can emerge from deep within us. Here are some points on which we can reflect.

Someone Else Helped Us Believe

Someone was instrumental in helping us to believe. Most of the time we hardly think of these people. But when we recall them and the force of their faith, it becomes clear that they were bedrocks in our faith life.

Reflect, then, on who you feel was the strongest believer in your experience, the person who exemplified faith most powerfully in your life. One way or another, this person spoke faith to you, whether that happened explicitly or just as a matter of course.

Think about relatives. Who seemed to be the strongest believer in your family, and how did she or he embody that? Was it the regularity of their praying? Was it the comfort with which they prayed in family settings? Was it a peace inside of them? Was it a gift they gave to you, perhaps for First Communion or Confirmation, that made such an impression on you?

Then think about friends, maybe even from your adolescent years or early adulthood. These were people who seemed so sure about their faith, who carried their faith with a particular joy or pride. Perhaps a friend once said, "Let's go to church and light a candle." Or "Let's go to church and ask Jesus for something." Or perhaps a classmate in college who was a believer noticed that you were not acting like your usual self and said, "If you want to talk to me, I'm here."

Or perhaps a colleague faced a moral situation with unusual courage. Maybe a group was talking about someone in racist or demeaning ways and your colleague held up a hand and said, "I'm not going to participate in a conversation like this. It's just not right and the person we

are talking about has feelings just like any one of us.” You would never forget that gesture!

Many people point to those who serve professionally in the Church as the ones who helped them believe. Those of us who were fortunate to be taught by religious women or men often heard stories or saw actions that permanently impressed us. Many of us were taught by women and men in the parish who volunteered to teach religious education. “What makes them want to do this?” we might have asked ourselves. Perhaps at one moment they gathered the class in a circle to pray, and that felt like something precious.

Others point to clergy, deacons or priests, who helped them put things together because their homilies seemed so insightful or powerful. In fact, it might not have been any particular homily or lesson that helped us. It might have been the way our faith seemed to unfold over a period of time as we heard the parish minister speak. “Now I see how I can understand that,” we may have said to ourselves with a smile. And then we found ourselves praying more freely or experiencing fewer doubts.

Our Own Experience

Our reflections can proceed further as we think about our own lives.

For most of us, faith comes in a package that we simply accept. We go to Mass. We say these prayers. We learn these traditions. We hang out with this or that group of people.

While sometimes the package of faith can be easily mocked (“All those externals that seem like props”), the fact is that almost everything important in our lives has some actions or traditions associated with it. Much of life is “given” to us—our families, our language, our preferred foods, our neighborhood.

But beneath the factors of faith that seemed to be given to us, we can come to realize how we saw or felt something exceptional.

Think, for example, about a time when you got into a lot of trouble. Maybe it was something you said about someone else, or an angry action that went way too far, or associating with a group of people who were mostly bad news. However it happened, you felt stuck. On the one

hand, there was the action you did; on the other hand, there were going to be consequences.

You probably felt desperate. Perhaps you scrambled inside for any kind of justification you could come up with, or someone else to blame, or how you would explain things to your parents. But in that moment of crisis, did you not find yourself uttering a prayer or saying something like “God, please help me”?

These moments of getting caught bring the whole situation of our lives to a point: Who are we in this world of endless possibilities? How do we make sense of things? How do we find peace inside ourselves? What can we do with our guilt or shame?

These moments of crisis often open us up to faith.

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We can also think about a very different point of personal experience—like when we first discovered love.

Our culture sees first crushes as cute. There’s the boy doing everything he can to get a girl’s attention. There’s the girl scribbling sentimental words on a sheet of paper about the “love of her life.” Usually, these crushes do not last, but they bring us to a realization that we did not have before.

After all, when we first fall in love, we come face to face, probably for the first time, with the reality of another person. We begin to realize that there are other people with feelings, thoughts, hopes, and desired futures. We begin to notice that we have needs inside of us that are enormously powerful. We feel drawn outside ourselves and come to see our smallness but also our greatness. “Who am I to have such powerful feelings like this?”

These initial crushes open for us the mystery of our lives and the lives of others. They become the first test of our understanding of love. “I love Molly because she makes me feel great.” How does that grow into “I love Molly because she is so lovable”?

As we begin to discover the importance of people, we begin to discover the wonder and beauty that makes such love possible. We begin to discover God.

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A famous sociologist, to bring up another example, asked us to reflect on a situation like this. A mother hears her toddler crying in the night. She puts on her robe and makes her way to the child's room. Perhaps the child had a nightmare. Or the child was missing someone deeply. The mother holds the child in her arms and strokes the child's head.

"Don't worry. Everything will be all right. Don't be afraid. Things will get better. I'll be here for you."

The sociologist then asks: "Do we think the mother was lying when she said these things?" Of course not. The mother is tapping into something profound about human experience: We cannot know what any moment might bring, but underneath all those moments is God's providence and God's care. Despite the crises and fears of our lives, most of the time we are doing fine. We are doing fine because, ultimately, we are in God's hands.

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With considerations such as the ones we have been exploring, we might now feel ready to look inside our hearts more directly.

Every one of us has had powerful emotional experiences. These have been emotions of strong passion, something way beyond the early crushes in our lives. For example, you embrace a partner in life with a force so powerful, you feel you could not hold that other person close enough to yourself. Or you looked upon the face of your newborn child for the first time and your heart seemed to melt. Or you were faced with a career choice so clear that your entire life seemed to depend on the decision you were about to make.

These powerful experiences are moments when, whether you knew it or not, you were beholding God. God, after all, must be "embodied" one way or another. Sure, we have Jesus as the incarnation of God. But we also have powerful human moments that open up for us dimensions of divine life. Think, for example, about how becoming a parent helps someone realize how God is a Father and Mother to us. Think about how parents love their children in spite of the weaknesses of their youngsters; isn't this a sign by which we can understand God's patience with us?

Explore those powerful moments in your own life: from childhood, through adolescence, through young adulthood, through middle age and old age. What are the moments that stand out, that seem to define a period of your life? How did these moments help you feel, know, and engage with God more fully?

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We all have stories of faith. We all have experiences with others and our own personal experience that have opened us up to something more wondrous than everyday life, to a larger vision of ourselves.

Spend some time getting in touch with this part of your life. These are the moments you can use to share with others.

For Reflection

1. During what period of your life did you seem to grow the most in terms of accepting yourself and your gifts?
2. When did you find yourself praying with tremendous energy and hope?
3. Where does the general optimism of your life come from?

Slowly pray the Our Father, reflecting on each word.