

STAGES OF FAITH EXPERIENCE



UNPACKING THE EMMAUS SERIES

Written by John Thornhill SM
Designed and produced by Patrick Lim

THE EMMAUS SERIES



Questions Catholics ask on their journey of Faith

STAGES OF FAITH EXPERIENCE

SESSION 1

NOTE: In order to present the material of this DVD in two parts, Chapter 2, 'Fowler's Stages Explained', is divided between the two sessions. Viewing ends 36 minutes 28 seconds into the DVD, at the heading, 'Stage 5: Community Faith'. Session 2 starts from that point.

Introductory reading

First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians (13:8-12)

Love does not come to an end. But if there are gifts of prophecy, the time will come when they must fail; or the gift of languages, it will not continue for ever; and knowledge – for this, too, the time will come when it must fail. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophesying is imperfect; but once perfection comes, all imperfect things will disappear.

When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and think like a child, and argue like a child, but now I am a man, all childish ways are put behind me. Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror; but then we shall be seeing face to face. The knowledge I now have is imperfect; but then I shall know as fully as I am known. □

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ◆ What are some of the things that shaped your childhood faith?
- ◆ We see things differently as life unfolds. Do you think that the way in which you see the truths of faith has changed over the years? How would you describe these changes?

Viewing of DVD

NOTE: Viewing of Session 1 starts from beginning of the presentation and ends 36 minutes 28 seconds into the DVD, at the heading 'Stage 5: Community Faith'.

- ◆ Introduction
- ◆ Chapter 1: Defining Our Terms;
- ◆ Chapter 2: Fowler's Stages Explained
(ends 36 minutes 28 second into the DVD)

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15 – sharing immediate reactions to the presentation:

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

*The Need for a Theology of the World (1967)
by M.-D. Chenu*

Faith is not the action of a human person ascending toward the Divine. It is the act of response to and of communion with a personal God, who in a divine initiative enters into conversation with us and establishes a communion in love. In accord with the logic of love, this God enters into the life of the 'other' and becomes human in order to bring this act to its full reality ... All this may seem to the unbeliever nothing but myth or illusion, but it is the very object of faith ...

In faith we are dealing with an event. We are no longer in nature but in history. One day, God became one of us and entered into the history of humanity ... To be a Christian is to be in relation to a fact – the fact of Christ – to a history ... The Man-God sums up all values, whatever their source ... By faith, the personal history of the believer is inserted into a 'sacred history', and the believer becomes a collaborator in bringing the creator's designs to fulfilment. ◆

Final reflective sharing

This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15.

It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately.*
- 2. The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

Questions

- ◆ The session has probably brought back memories of your early faith experiences. Would you care to share them with the group?
- ◆ Can you recall people who have had an important influence on the consolidation of your faith?
- ◆ Does our discussion of the stages of faith experience help you understand the attitudes of adolescent Catholics?

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SESSION 2

Introductory reading

Letter of Paul to the Ephesians (4:11-16)

And to some, his gift was that they should be apostles; to some, prophets; to some, evangelists; to some pastors and teachers; so that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ. In this way we are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself.

Then we shall not be children any longer, or tossed one way and another and carried along by every wind of doctrine, at the mercy of all the tricks men play and their cleverness in practising deceit. If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow in all ways into Christ, who is the head by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together, every joint adding its own strength, for each separate part to work according to its function. So the body grows until it has built itself up, in love. ♦

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ♦ So far we have described four of the six stages identified by Fowler. Do you think what you have seen to this point does full justice to your personal faith experience, or does more need to be explored?
- ♦ Do you find yourself becoming more tolerant of other people's views as your journey of faith progresses?

Viewing of DVD

NOTE: *Viewing of Session 2 starts from 36 minutes 28 seconds into the DVD, at the heading 'Stage 5: Community Faith', and continues to the end of the presentation.*

- ♦ Chapter 2:
Fowler's Stages Described
(starts 36 minutes 28 seconds into the DVD)
- ♦ Chapter 3:
Practical Conclusions

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing immediate reactions to the presentation:

Question

- ♦ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

Christian Mystery in the Secular Age (1991, pp 52, 85)

by John Thornhill SM

The passage reminds us that it is in the community of the Church that faith normally develops.

What we have seen ... makes it clear that the believing community provides the context within which the believer has access to the truth of God essential to Christian faith. We are concerned ... with a truth that is lived before it is told. The history in which this truth is expressed belongs to a community - a people living out the drama of their relationship with God. To possess it in its fullness, the believer must enter generously into the life of the people of God as ... it *remembers, celebrates and witnesses* to the great events which had their climax in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The Saviour's assurance 'I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Mt 28) is fulfilled within the context of the life of the Church, 'built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone ... a dwelling place for God in the Spirit' (Ephesians 2)

The dynamic truth embodied in the history of God's people is a truth which vindicates itself by being lived. It is linked with God's covenant promise and is grasped by those who place their trust in that promise. Its possession involves a remembering of past events and also an expectation of the promise they contain. Its ultimate measure is the fulfilment of God's designs – nothing less than the possession of the living God constitutes the ultimate future of God's people. ♦

Final reflective sharing

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It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately.*
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Questions

- ♦ Fowler considers the renewal of Vatican II has pushed faith awareness, for many people, from Stage 3 (Conventional Faith) to Stage 4 (Searching Faith). Does this square with your experience?
- ♦ A healthy faith is developed in a vital Christian community (parish, family, school etc.). Do you recall moments in your experience which illustrate this truth?

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

A child's view of the world is very different from that of an adult. The 20th century gave us important studies in the area of human development. In one of these, James Fowler mapped the pattern of development which takes place in a person's faith experience. Looking at the six stages Fowler identifies can help us to retrace our own faith journey, and to understand better the sometimes-uncomfortable transitions we have made:

- ◆ at *Stage 1*, the small child identifies unquestioningly with the outlook of its family;
- ◆ at *Stage 2*, the child – now aware of a broader group of “people like us” – identifies with the outlook expressed in that group's stories, rituals etc.;
- ◆ at *Stage 3*, the young adolescent becomes aware of the faith community as an institution, with an ordered way of life and conventions they can identify with;
- ◆ at *Stage 4*, young people in adolescence and early adulthood recognise that there are outlooks that reject what their faith has taken for granted, and they are challenged to make a personal commitment;
- ◆ at *Stage 5*, mature adults, now secure in their faith, are able to have a sense of fellowship with humanity at large, and to appreciate what is positive in other traditions;
- ◆ at *Stage 6* (which Fowler says is attained by relatively few) an outlook is achieved which – seeing all things and people through the eyes of God – makes people agents of reconciliation and transformation.

As we review our own life journey through this sequence, it is important to recognize that the progression is not to be understood as an achievement scale. Personal experience and social changes are largely responsible for transition to new stages. The quality of an individual's personal faith depends upon their union with God and their response to God's life-giving call (God's secret) – whatever stage the person may have moved to.

It is clear that the changes taking place in today's world, and today's Church in this time of renewal, have a profound effect upon the journey of faith experience being made today – especially by our young people. ◆

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