

grown up in a working class home, she or he may know the pain of not being able to afford the clothes that friends buy, whereas a friend from an upper-middle class home likely does not realize the privilege that comes with wealth. One teen may anguish over the problems of an alcoholic parent; another whose father or mother has left the family may wish he or she had a parent to anguish over. Every teen has a unique worldview, and this is the gift teens offer each other in faith sharing.

Faith sharing also works to build companionship and community among teens. In conversation they discover they are not alone in experiencing sickness or death in their families, loving camping trips with family, or delighting in new learning. Teens in faith sharing groups will find their experiences affirmed or at least respected. They will know they are not the only ones who experience God or who question their faith. By praying together, reflecting together, and sharing life experiences, teens get to know each other at a deep level. Even if they are not best friends, they appreciate each other and feel less isolated. The bonds form from getting to know each other's real selves rather than from social labeling.



Faith sharing sounds great for people with a strong faith. What about people who are struggling with their faith or feel they have lost faith?

When have you struggled with your faith? What was happening in your life or the lives of others at the time?

We humans are a mystery even to ourselves. We cannot fully express our experiences of God. We can struggle with anxiety or doubt for weeks and months, even years, then feel peace. Faith journeys are not often easy. Many people experience times when faith feels meaningless or a “dark night of the soul,” a time when it feels as if God has withdrawn all comfort from us.

Faith sharing needs to make room for stories of uncertainty, for hard questions, and for true despair at feeling lost. These frightening, sad, and challenging times are just as much part of faith as the moments when we clearly feel God's presence in our lives. The faith of others can support us as we struggle with our own.

The young man who writes below has experienced the challenge of not believing in God and the mystery of finding faith without quite knowing how. He doesn't know why he stopped believing in God or quite how faith again arose. He is trying to find new words for how he understands God.

During First year in high school I didn't believe in God. It wasn't because of what was happening to my dad—he was dying of cancer. I just decided there was no God. God didn't exist for me. Why should I believe in God? I felt no reason to, and I was very open about that.

In religion class, I would say, "I don't believe in God," and I always made counterpoints to everyone who had faith to support my opinion. I prayed though, and the only thing I ever prayed for during the first half of the year was faith. "If there is a God, give me faith. I wouldn't mind that. If there is a God, I need faith."

Then one day it just dawned on me—there is a God. Out of the blue I was overwhelmed with this sense that there is something out there that is bigger than anything else. The way I think about it now is that I just tapped into the life force that's in everything. For some reason, it just happened.

That day in religion class they asked if there was anything we're thankful for, and I said I'm thankful for faith because I think I believe in God now. They asked why and I said, "I don't know. I just kind of feel I have a reason to now." It was a very cool experience.

I have never felt a strong connection with God because God has always seemed so distant and overwhelming. I feel that God is more of a force—the life force which makes everything work. It's

Stories have power. Stories introduce us to people we have never met, places, things, ideas, and ways of being new to us.

in all things. I've never thought of God as this big omnipotent being but more as what keeps everything going and changing.

When I have problems that I can't handle, I look more to my dad, who has passed away now, instead of going to God just because I know my dad better. It's a personal thing. People tend to have faith in what they know.

In faith sharing teens speak their questions, doubts, experiences, and insights. Catechists and parents not only hand on Christian tradition, they pray with teens and model Christian living. Catechesis means listening teens into words that name the Spirit's activity in their lives, facilitating their conversation, and affirming their deepening faith. Pope John Paul II recognizes the challenge of adolescent catechesis as he describes the teen years:

Adolescence is the time of discovering oneself and one's own inner world, the time of generous plans, and the time when the feeling of love awakens, with the biological impulses of sexuality, the time of the desire to be together, the time of a particularly intense joy connected with the exhilarating discovery of life. But often it is also the age of deeper questioning, of anguished or even frustrated searching, of a certain mistrust of others and dangerous introspection, and the age sometimes of the first experiences of setbacks and of disappointments (On Catechesis in Our Time, #38).

Adolescent catechesis can open the doorway to mature faith. Teens can meet Jesus as a friend, guide, and model. They can discover in Jesus' message and in everyday experience the possibility of purpose in their lives.

ACTIVITIES FOR CATECHISTS AND PARENTS

- Ask people you know what faith means to them. Use these answers to help you think about what faith means for you.
- Make a faith timeline with important moments in your faith journey. Include "official" events, such as baptism and confirmation, as

well as “unofficial” events, such as a particularly moving experience in nature in which you felt connected to the cosmos or a conversation with a friend that changed how you understand God. Also include low points, such as times at which your faith was challenged or you lacked faith, and high points, such as times at which you strongly felt God’s love for you or felt intimately connected to the life of the Church.

■ Think about the important relationships in your life. With whom can you talk about your faith? Make an intentional effort this week to introduce faith as part of your conversation with someone you care about and trust.