



# SAINT PAUL

## Evangelization Institute

### Basic Evangelization Training

#### Course 3: Introduction to Christian Testimony

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## **Basic Evangelization Training**

### Course 3: Introduction to Christian Testimony

#### 3.1 Summary

### Summary

Stories are powerful! A personal testimony is a story of conversion to Jesus and His church, shared with another person for his spiritual benefit. As a unique witness of the good that God has done in your life, your personal testimony is a powerful tool for evangelization, breaking through barriers and making Jesus and His saving love real to those who hear it. Your testimony shares select elements of your life from before your conversion, during your conversion, and after your conversion. It should be told in a way that gives God glory, and is understandable to the hearer while inviting them to accept the Lord into their life as you have. Developing your best basic testimony requires some reflection, prayer, and practice, but the benefits are more than worth the effort!

#### 3.2 The Power of a Good Story

### Introductory Story

When part of our first street evangelization team, Saint Paul Street Evangelization founder Steve Dawson encountered a lanky young man in a black tank top, arms and neck covered in tattoos. He offered him a rosary. The man's name was Joey. From the conversation that ensued, Steve learnt that Joey was baptized Catholic but, having no guidance as a child, had turned headlong into a life of sex and drugs. And now, after having done so many things that he was ashamed of, Joey didn't believe that he ever could turn back and be accepted by God or the Church. This left him in an almost continual state of sadness.

Steve saw some similarities between himself and this man. Though Steve didn't have any tattoos, the two of them were about the same age and there was a lot in common between their lives; at least, between Joey's life, and Steve's *earlier* life. Steve was no longer entangled in sin, and no longer sad, since he had some years since returned to God and the Church, and had received mercy.

Steve knew that he needed to share his story with Joey. Knowing also that fear of hell helped him make the needed change in his life, he asked him, "If you were to die today, where do you think you would end up?" He answered, "I know that I would go to hell."

Steve answered, "You don't have to!" *Then, he told Joey his story:* where he had been, what he had done, how he came to see that he was walking the path to destruction, and how he cried out to God for mercy. He also told him of the joy and peace he now experienced as a practicing Catholic. He then asked him, "Would you like to get right with God?"

*By this point, the story had done its work.* Like Steve had years before, Joey now had hope aroused in his heart. The two of them met shortly after at the local Catholic Church so that Joey could receive the Sacrament of Confession. Because of Steve's story, Joey was now a changed man.

## The Power of a Good Story

When was the last time that you got teary-eyed or felt triumphant watching a film or television show? We all have had the experience of being pulled in by a good story — captured by a good narrative. We all have found ourselves rooting for the characters, feeling their victories and defeats, identifying with their hopes and disappointments. We feel the need to hear stories.

We also feel the need to tell stories. Children often come home from school excited to share what happened in class that day. Parents and grandparents tell stories from their youth — how they met their spouses, what they experienced when a child was born, what happened when they took their first job. Friends “catching up” on life in a coffee shop will share the most significant things that they have done, and that have happened to them, since the last time they talked — adding how they felt, who was involved, the challenges they faced, and what they learned from them. *We make sense of our lives by fitting them into narratives. And then, through sharing those narratives, we share our lives with others.* When we are close to someone, we are impelled to share our stories with them. When we want to get to know someone, we want to hear stories from their own life.

We make stories, we tell stories, and we listen to stories. Stories are in many ways the “currency” of our lives. If we think about it, it should be clear: God intended and created us to be this way. This, in turn, is very important to understand because as evangelists, we want to use the best kinds of means that we can to share the truth of the Catholic faith with others. A good story is one of those means. By and large, stories convince us, and move us to action, better than mere arguments.

You might want to convince someone, for example, that the Sacraments of Baptism and Confession are the ways that Christ established to reconcile sinners to Himself. In the process you can and often should make arguments from the authority of the Bible and from human nature; but you would be remiss if you didn't share your own experience of Confession, how you feel lighter and more joyful after receiving it, like a burden has been lifted off your shoulders. *You would be negligent if you didn't tell your story* - the story about the ways that the sacraments have given you peace and made it easier for you to resist sins than before. You might also further your case by *telling Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son* (see Lk 15:11-32). You can compare the grace of the Sacrament of Confession to the robe that the father, in the story, puts on his repentant son after he returns to him (see Lk 15:22, cf. Is 61:10). This, of course, reminds us that a huge part of Jesus's ministry of preaching and teaching in the gospels includes the use of parables, many of which, like that of the *Prodigal Son*, are stories.

As it is with Jesus' teaching ministry, so it is in general: *a big part of the way that God chooses to reveal Himself to human beings is through story-telling.* God revealed Himself in the history of the people of Israel, and then inspired men from that people as they told and wrote down their stories: the result was much of the Old Testament. God then revealed Himself fully in His Divine Incarnate Son Jesus Christ, and

then inspired His disciples and their associates as they told and wrote down their stories: the result was the Gospels, and other parts of the New Testament.

Among many great examples from the Bible, the power of a good story is on full display in the Second Book of Samuel, chapter 12. The prophet Nathan told King David a story to convict his heart. David had committed the greatest sin of his life: he took the wife of Uriah the Hittite into his bed, and when he found out that she had conceived his child, he tried to cover it up. But when he couldn't, he had Uriah killed.

The prophet Nathan's story to David went like this:

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared it for the man who had come to him. (verses 1-4)

As Nathan told this story, David became inflamed with anger at the rich man: "As the Lord lives," he burst out, "the man who has done this deserves to die"! But he did not expect what the prophet would say next. Nathan said to David, "You are the man." He continued, to David's horror: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ... You have smitten Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife. ... By this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord." Moved by this story and its interpretation, David was struck to his very core, and fully repented of his sin. Because of the power of Nathan's story, to this very day we still read and pray the poem-prayer that King David wrote on the occasion, the penitential Psalm 51.<sup>1</sup>

In the last lesson, we explained the meaning and power of the message of the gospel, of the kerygma. But the center of the kerygma, in fact, is a story — a true story about the coming of Jesus Christ from God into the world, and the mission He fulfilled. It is "the greatest story ever told": the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, and how He has been established as Lord and Messiah who brings forgiveness, salvation, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who receive Him. In this lesson, we will introduce an important tool for the work of evangelization: the personal testimony. *We will help you tell your own powerful story.*

*"O God, from my youth thou hast taught me, and I still proclaim thy wondrous deeds" (Ps 71:17).*

### Topic Outline

- **What is a personal testimony?**
- **What are the basic principles of a personal testimony?**

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<sup>1</sup> This Psalm famously begins, "Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness. In your compassion blot out my offense. O wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin."

- **How do we build our basic testimony?**

### 3.3 What Is a Personal Testimony?

#### Proclaiming how much Jesus has done for you

*To give a testimony is to bear witness to something that you have seen or heard.* Testimony allows us to speak to the truth or to the falsehood of something based upon what we have experienced personally. When it is a matter of proving some incident as true or false, testimony becomes very important. Courts of law, for example, must hear the testimony of those who were witnesses to a crime or to the circumstances surrounding a crime. Most of our daily conversations involve, in an informal way, giving testimony to things that we've seen or heard of family, friends, co-workers, strangers, pets, or things we've experienced when alone.

To proclaim the gospel is to give testimony (see Mt 24:14). When the twelve Apostles brought the gospel to the nations, they bore witness to the events surrounding the person of Jesus. They proclaimed Jesus Christ as someone they knew personally, who they saw crucified and buried, risen from the grave, and ascended to the right hand of the Father (see 1 Jn 1:1-4; Acts 2:22-24, 32-35).<sup>2</sup> When Saint Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles preached the gospel, he too gave a testimony. He knew that Jesus was alive and reigning over the universe, not just from what he had heard preached by Christians, but from personal experience. He spoke from a personal encounter with Christ, from when the Lord Jesus appeared to him in power on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:1-9, 22:6-11, 26:12-18; 1 Cor 15:8; Gal 1:11-16).

*All Christians, in fact, must share the gospel from what they have personally experienced of Jesus Christ.* We are considered more trustworthy and our words are more compelling, when it is evident that we really know this living Lord and King whom we profess to follow. As important as they are, we cannot just repeat the words about Jesus that we've heard from others or read in the Bible, but we need to speak about Our Blessed Lord, the One with whom we have an intimate friendship (see Jn 4:39-42). The bond that we have to our God is not established on "a written code but in the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:6, NAB). We are united to Our Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, and so we know Jesus personally — in our prayer, the sacraments, and through the events of our lives (seen with the eyes of faith). We proclaim the One whom we know and love. We too, give testimony.

If to proclaim the gospel is to give testimony to Jesus, what then is "personal testimony"? Personal testimony is an essential tool for proclaiming the gospel effectively. A personal testimony is a special way of giving testimony to Jesus, unique to each individual. *By our personal testimonies, we show people how the true story of Jesus Christ intersects with the true stories of our own lives.* A great example of personal testimony in the gospel comes from the Gospel of Mark. In it, Our Lord encountered a man tormented by many demons, living in a cemetery. The man lived a miserable life, crying out day and

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<sup>2</sup> These twelve were chosen by the Lord personally, when He was in the flesh (Mk 3:14-19). Among them, the Lord Jesus chose Judas, knowing that he would fall away (see Jn 6:64). After Judas betrayed the Lord and perished, the remaining eleven apostles asked the guidance of the Holy Spirit and chose Matthias to replace him (see Acts 1:21-26). The Twelve were among the first to proclaim the gospel, but Saint Mary Magdalene was in fact the very first person to do so (see Mk 16:9-10; Jn 20:1).

night, and bruising himself with rocks. After Jesus healed him, He said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mk 5:19). At that, the man proceeded to travel throughout ten nearby cities, proclaiming “how much Jesus had done for him” (Mk 5:20). Can you imagine it? A hopeless situation, turned around in a matter of minutes: what a powerful story to tell!

Like the man who had been freed from the demons, when you give a personal testimony, you proclaim how the Lord has been present to you and working to save you. It might be the story of how knowing the love of God helped you conquer self-hatred or excessive anger. It might be the story of how prayer and the Sacred Scriptures helped you to overcome a sinful addiction. It might be the story of how the Catholic faith helped you raise your children well. By telling such stories, we can show people that the teachings of Our Lord Jesus are true, and that He is alive right now and active in the world. We show them that Jesus is truly risen from the dead to die no more, and that He is ready and willing to break into their lives and give them the forgiveness and grace that they long for. What a wonderful tool of evangelization!

### **Your initial conversion story is important**

Among the various kinds of personal testimonies that you might tell, there is one most important kind: *the story of your initial or major conversion*. This is the story of how it was that you came to reject self-reliance, worldly desires, and sin to personally embrace Jesus Christ with faith. It is also the story of how you came to be incorporated into the Body of Christ, the Church. How was it that you came to be baptized? When did you experience God calling you to become a committed disciple, and embrace Him as the Lord of your life? How have His promises been confirmed in your life? In answering these and other similar questions, your personal testimony bears witness that ordinary people can receive the grace of God and become a new creation.<sup>3</sup>

*A well-prepared personal testimony can be a very powerful story.* By giving an example of what a conversion to Christ really looks like, it can remove barriers to belief by knocking down prejudices and false presuppositions. Many people, for example, have been led to believe that Christians are by-and-large hypocrites who don't really believe what they profess to believe. They need to see the authenticity and honesty of a true Christian. Others think that Christians don't have good reasons for embracing the faith. They need to know how it is that intelligent, critical-thinking people become convinced of the faith and commit themselves to God wholeheartedly. Still others think that they are too weak and sinful to ever change their lives. They need to know that the grace of God overcomes great obstacles of sin in the

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<sup>3</sup> Initial/major conversion stories vary greatly. On the one end, there are people who are converted from a life of grave sin to a life of grace. (Many of these are baptized at the time of their conversion, and others were baptized long before their conversion. *In both cases, baptism is an important part of their story.*) On the other end, there are people who are raised in the faith and never reject or fall away from it in significant ways. These, too, have a kind of major conversion story to tell — the story of how they first received the faith and the grace of God in baptism, and how also, at a later time, they had a significant, “stand out” encounter with the Lord which called them to a more intentional, more faithful, or more intimate relationship with the Lord.

lives of those who submit to it. With the help of God's grace, a good personal testimony shatters false ideas and softens hardened hearts, and says, "If God did it for me, he will do it for you!"

### 3.4 How do we Build our Testimony?

The Sacred Scriptures tell us, "Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you" (1 Pt 3:15). Before we set out to give our own personal testimonies, we need to be prepared. *How do we prepare? We prepare ourselves first and foremost by prayer and reflection on the "wonderful works" that the Lord has done in our lives (Ps 105:5; cf. Ps 77:11-12, 143:5).*<sup>4</sup> In the light of the Word of God, we want to truly understand the great things that God has done for us.

#### Before it Happened, What Happened, After it Happened

When we reflect on our lives with the goal of building a personal testimony, we want to keep in mind the *basic structure or outline* of most testimonies. This structure is simple: (1) life *before* receiving a special grace of God, (2) *what happened* when that grace was received, and (3) what life was like *after* having received the grace. If we are giving our most important personal testimony, our initial or major conversion, we can speak of the three parts even more simply as (1) *Before conversion*, (2) *Conversion*, and (3) *After conversion*. At the time of delivery a *fourth part* is often added, where you make (4) an *invitation* to the hearer(s) to respond to your story in some way, with the hope that they will be converted and embrace Jesus Christ as you have.

This complete four-part structure can be seen clearly in the book of Acts, where Saint Paul presents his own personal testimony. Standing before King Agrippa, he tells the story of his own initial conversion to Jesus Christ. The passage is Acts chapter 26, verses 4 through 29. Open your Bible, and read the account slowly. Notice each of the four parts of his speech — *before conversion* (v. 4-11), *conversion* (v. 12-18), *after conversion* (v. 19-23), and *invitation* (v. 24-29).<sup>5</sup>

After you have read St. Paul's testimony, start to think about how you might tell the story of your own initial conversion according to the same outline. Ask the Lord to guide you. Get a pad of paper, and take notes as you consider the following questions. Before Conversion: *What were things like before your conversion? Where did you get your security? Where did you think happiness was to be found? What motivated you in life? How did those things let you down?*

Conversion: *How did you encounter God? What helped you come to believe in Him? How did your conversion come about? Which sacraments gave you the grace you needed? When was the first time that you really heard the gospel? What was your initial reaction to it? When did your life start to*

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<sup>4</sup> At the Last Supper, Jesus commanded His disciples, "Do this in memory of me." When we participate in the Holy Eucharist, we recall and make present the greatest work that the Lord has done for us, His suffering and death on the cross. Flowing from this, we ought to develop the habit of regularly — even daily — calling to mind all the good things that the Lord has done for us. We do this first of all that we might thank Him and praise Him, secondly that we might be ready to share the goodness of the Lord with others.

<sup>5</sup> Also pay attention to the casual way that Paul speaks, and how he speaks to his audience, and how he proclaims the gospel while he gives his testimony. We will cover these things at greater length in future lessons.

*change? What happened inside of you? Were there final struggles just before you made Jesus the Lord of your life?*

After Conversion: *What is life like now that you've converted to Christ? Are there sins that you have overcome? How do you view or experience your life differently? How have your motivations for life changed? What is your relationship with the Lord Jesus like?* You may use the printable "Building Your Testimony" handout provided with this lesson for more help reflecting on what your best testimony might look like.

## Conversions happen in different ways

*As you reflect on the grace of God in your life, understand that not all conversion stories will be as simple and straightforward as that of St. Paul, who was profoundly transformed in a single experience from an enemy of Christ to His devoted disciple, and in short order was sent out to preach Him to the world. Most conversion stories, on the other hand, are more complex. Some of us, for instance, experienced a number of partial conversions to Christ that culminated in a more complete one. Are you one of those people? Some others find that their conversion cannot be pinned down to any one moment at all, but consisted, rather, in a gradual transformation that took place over a period of time. Was that the way it happened for you? Such conversions are no less real than conversions that take place (or come to a climax) in a clearly identifiable moment. When you deliver such testimonies, it can be helpful to describe a moment when you realized, looking back with gratitude, that you had already been transformed by the Lord.*

Some of us, when building our testimony, find it difficult to identify any major conversion at all. Usually this is because we were baptized as infants, grew up in the faith of the Church, and never strayed from the path of Our Lord in major ways. Does this describe you? If so, know that you, too, probably have an initial or "major" conversion story to tell, even if it might be more difficult to tease out. *Your story may be about a conversion to a more intimate relationship with Jesus, or a conversion away from some kind of sin, or a conversion to a greater degree of personal maturity in the Lord.* There are a great many examples, in the history of the Church, of this kind of conversion.<sup>6</sup>

There is something else to be aware of. *As we reflect on the grace of God in our life for the first time, some of us will discover that our major conversion story is not yet complete.* Perhaps we presently are struggling to overcome some mortal sin that we keep falling into. Perhaps there is some important part of our life (money, family, free time, etc.) that up until now we have refused to submit to Jesus's rule —

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<sup>6</sup> A classic example of this kind of major/initial conversion comes from the life of St. Therese of Lisieux. Although she was baptized in infancy and raised in the faith by devout parents, she points to a "Christmas grace" she received at the age of fourteen as a critical point in her spiritual life, even calling it "the precious grace of complete conversion." That grace freed her from the (relatively minor) vice of over-sensitivity and childishness. From the moment she received that grace on Christmas Eve, she writes, "charity took possession of my heart, making me forget myself, and I have been happy ever since." After that experience, she very quickly became moved with a great longing to intercede and save souls from hell. See Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*, ed. Mother Agnes of Jesus, trans. Michael Day (Charlotte, NC: Saint Benedict Press, 2010), 53-55.

we've refused to obey. Perhaps we are tyrannized by fear, anger, envy, lust, greed, laziness, unforgiveness, or addiction, and we have not yet begged for and received freedom from the Lord. As we consider how the saving power of Christ has changed our life, many times we realize that we still need His power in big ways — perhaps even urgently, desperately. In such cases, we may still sometimes be called to give a personal testimony; but more importantly, in such cases we are called to beg the Lord for transforming grace, and take the concrete steps needed to rid ourselves of whatever is holding us back. Trusting in Jesus, we know that He will deliver us. He is faithful — if we ask Him, we know that at a future time we will have occasion to praise Him anew as we tell the story of how He brought us from darkness to light, from death to life. In the meantime, we can still tell others of the good things the Lord has done for us.

### 3.5 How do we Give our Testimony?

#### Practice makes perfect

After you have prayerfully reflected upon the grace of God in your life and taken some good notes, you may be prepared to start sharing your testimony with others — at least with fellow Catholics, for practice. *It is important to practice!* Practice is a second step, after initial prayer and reflection, that helps prepare us to share our personal testimonies as a tool of evangelization.

Remember again that while your primary personal testimony is the story of your initial or major conversion, you have potentially thousands of other testimonies to give — countless stories of the grace of God working in your life: blessing you, consoling you, enlightening you, making you stronger. You might practice giving a number of different personal testimonies.<sup>7</sup>

#### Grateful, Flexible, Concrete, Accessible, Thematic

When giving your personal testimony, whether for practice or “for real,” you should keep in mind five basic qualities that every testimony should have. Each personal testimony should demonstrate gratitude and be flexible, concrete, accessible, and thematic. Let's consider each one of these in turn.

*First and foremost, your personal testimony should (1) come from a grateful heart.* Although your personal testimony is a story of your life, the main character is not you, but God. You should tell your testimony in a way that glorifies God instead of yourself, showing His goodness and your gratitude to Him. It is not so much about what you have done, but what God has done for you. If we are living according to the call that we have received, then we will be abiding in Jesus through the sacraments, prayer, obedience to His commandments, and faith (see Jn 6:56; 15:4; 1 Jn 3:24; 4:15). Then we, with His life welling up powerfully within us (see Jn 4:7-14), will be capable of giving a personal testimony that

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<sup>7</sup> *Our skills as evangelists can greatly benefit from making these two preparation steps — (1) prayer & reflection, and (2) practice — into a way of life.* In our personal prayer, we can develop the habit of recalling the good things that the Lord has done for us, perhaps writing them down in a journal, with the purpose of giving praise and thanks to God. Likewise we can regularly share those good things with our fellow Christians, perhaps within a weekly prayer group, also to give praise and thanks to God. When we do these things regularly, it becomes easier joyfully to share the Lord's blessings with others to evangelize them.

flows from the intimacy that we share with Him. When Jesus Christ is manifestly alive within us, we will not just tell stories about Jesus' presence, but our stories will be the means of revealing His presence in the here and now.

*When you do give your testimony, remember also that different circumstances and audiences require distinct approaches.* For this reason, you need to (2) *be flexible*. Sometimes you have 2 to 3 minutes to share your testimony, other times 30 seconds or less.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes you need to bear witness to the Lord in a specific way that speaks to the needs of the person listening to you. Sometimes you need to pause and allow your hearers to ask questions. Sometimes, the Spirit will redirect what you focus on. You need to be prepared for this. You should let your testimony be fluid and adaptable.

*When you give your testimony, you also should not be vague about the various elements of your story; you should (3) give concrete details.* Where did/do you live? What did/do you do for a living? What were/are your family relationships? What happened and when? How did/do you feel? What kinds of things were you struggling with? In being concrete, you show your hearers that you are *real and relatable*. That way, they are more likely to see that they, too, can experience something like what you've experienced.

*When you give your testimony, you also ought to (4) be accessible.* This means that your story should be straightforward, easy to follow, and easy to understand. Of first importance here is to *avoid bogging down your story*. Although concrete details are important, don't make your story overly complex by including too many details about your life pre-conversion or post-conversion, or by going on-and-on about how sublime a spiritual experience was. Be concise. Don't necessarily include each of the various factors contributing to your conversion. Incorporating too many details, using drawn-out explanations, and going on unnecessary tangents has the effect of drowning out the main point of the testimony — how God saved you and set you apart for Himself. For example, some people spend so much time speaking about their life pre-conversion and all the sins they committed, that their testimony to the moment of conversion loses some of its force. The "wow-factor" of a sinful lifestyle is often greater than that of a conversion, which is often a gentle transformation of life. Deliver your testimony in a way that brings your listeners' attention to God.

*Another important way to be accessible is to avoid using words that your hearers are unlikely to understand, like Church words, Bible references, theological terms, and uniquely Catholic expressions.* Most people don't know terms like "Altar," "Holy Mass," "Sacrament," "Real Presence," "Trinity," "Incarnation," "Ecumenical Council," "the Holy Eucharist," "Communion," "Bishop," "Cardinal," or "Crucifix." They don't understand "Transubstantiation," "Adoration," "the Second Coming," "Arc of the Covenant," "The Immaculate Conception," "Our Lady," or "Blessed Virgin Mary." If any of these things are involved in your conversion story, use more recognizable words and phrases for them (like "Mary,

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<sup>8</sup> You should almost always be brief. Some circumstances where you might lengthen your story are, for example, when the person asks you to tell your story in greater detail, or when you are giving your testimony as a presentation to a room full of people.

the mother of Jesus,” “church leaders,” “church service”), and take time to explain those words and phrases that you need to use.

*Finally, it is important that you (5) give your personal testimony a theme.* A theme is something that you intentionally bring up multiple times in the course of giving your testimony, in each of its three main parts. The theme, for example, could be a gift or virtue that you longed for and received; like hope, courage, friendship, joy, or peace. It could also be an emotion or vice that you suffered from and overcame; like fear, anger, hatred, or despair. It could be a name, title, or attribute of God that was meaningful to you; like “Lord of Hosts,” “Hound of Heaven,” “Savior,” “King,” “I AM,” “Father,” “Good Shepherd,” All-Wise, Merciful, or Loving. It could be something that was of special spiritual use to you, like the Bible or the Sacrament of the Eucharist. A testimony is often more effective when given with a theme.

Any conversion story could be told and retold according to a great number of different themes, though each person’s conversion story is usually most effective when paired with a particular theme. Consider a fictional woman named Michelle who is working on her testimony. Let’s suppose that Michelle experienced sexual abuse as a teen, and then suffered from fear, guilt, and anxiety throughout her adult life. She also struggled with loneliness, depression, and the sins of lust, gluttony, and laziness. But Michelle came to know the faithful love of God in Christ, and through the power of God’s grace she gradually overcame sin and became a strong, confident, and peaceful woman. Her favorite images of God through her journey were ‘the Good Shepherd,’ and ‘Savior.’ With all the struggles she’s been through, and all the graces she’s received, Michelle clearly has a lot of options to choose from in picking a theme for her testimony! She could pick “freedom from fear” or “overcoming guilt” or “seeking peace” or “Jesus is my Good Shepherd” as her theme, to name just a few. Even so, however, she finds that her testimony (all other things being equal) is usually most impactful when told with the theme of being “saved from loneliness.”

Why might a theme give your testimony more impact? A theme, first of all, gives your testimony focus and emphasis, which helps keep it clear and understandable. But it also has another potential benefit: *a carefully chosen theme can speak even more directly into the hearts of your hearers.* Think of Michelle again: she could share her testimony according to any number of themes, each of which could help a different person with a distinct spiritual need. Depending upon who she’s talking to and what difficulties they are dealing with, Michelle could re-focus her story in a different way. If the person also experienced sexual abuse, she might tell her story as how she was able to bounce back from her abuse. If the person is searching for peace, she could tell her story as how she found the peace she once lacked. Or if the person is in immediate need for some concrete ways of growing closer to Jesus, Michelle could focus on the role that different spiritual tools played in her conversion — gifts the Lord has given to the Church — like the sacraments, the Scriptures, and the reading of the Church Fathers and other Catholic authors.

## Helpful tips

After considering five qualities of a good testimony, here are some additional tips to keep in mind for when you actually go out to share the wonderful works of the Lord in your life:

*Before each time you give any personal testimony, pray that the Holy Spirit be with you and give you the words to say. During and after you give your testimony, you should pray that your words bear good fruit. Remember — you are not doing this on your own! Remember that you are making yourself available to the Lord as His instrument, to partner with the Holy Spirit!*

*Remember also to show Christian charity to the people you share your testimony with. As the Scriptures say, you are “making a defense ... for the hope that is in you” — so you should “do it with gentleness and reverence ... [keeping] your conscience clear” (1 Pt 3:15-16). When you’re paving the way for faith, you don’t want to set up obstacles to faith at the same time.*

*Practically speaking, it’s also very helpful to have prepared some conversational transitions for sharing your personal testimony. If you are talking with someone about the faith and you begin to think that sharing your personal testimony might be useful, it’s often helpful first (1) to affirm that you share some common ground with them, or feel compassion for them, and then (2) ask if you could share with them, through your story, *how that’s the case*. How you do that will vary, depending on the circumstances and the conversation. Here are some examples:*

- “You know, I had some of the same questions that you did before I committed myself to practicing the Catholic faith. Can I tell you a bit of my story?”
- “I hear your arguments: They definitely make sense. But can I tell you why I follow Jesus?”
- “I understand how you feel. As a Catholic, I can’t help but struggle with the sex abuse scandal. But let me tell you a little bit about how I came to become Catholic — I think that it will help explain why I haven’t lost my faith through all this. Is that alright?”
- “My marriage was on the rocks for a while, too. ... Can I tell you what difference Jesus has made to my marriage?”

After you have shared your personal testimony in its three parts (*Before, During, After*), you might prepare the way for part four (Invitation) by asking a question like, “So, what do you think of my story?” or “Have you ever thought about becoming Catholic?” or “Do you believe in Jesus?”

*Also, be ready to field clarifying questions or concerns that the person may have while you speak. For this reason, you need to remain attentive to them even while you’re telling your own story. The goal is to be of help to them, so you shouldn’t lose sight of where they’re at during the process.*

*Also, be authentic and keep a positive tone. Do not exaggerate elements of your story, or downplay things out of excessive shame or a false sense of humility. The key here is to be truthful without giving*

information that is unnecessary or potentially harmful.<sup>9</sup> Do not be negative about other people or other religions; a testimony is about hope and your thankfulness for God's mercies. Let that be the focus.<sup>10</sup>

*Finally, relax, and trust in the Lord!* The Lord is faithful: you've begun your day with prayer, you've asked the Lord to help you as you built your testimony (and perhaps again quietly to yourself as you began to share it) — so do not be afraid! If you do happen to “mess up” in some way, take it as the Lord continuing to prepare you to give fruitful testimonies. Discover the lesson in whatever mistake you've made, and with the Lord's help, do better the next time.

Now, go and give your testimony!

### 3.6 Final Thoughts

Because of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus, we have been delivered from the dominion of sin and given a new life in the Holy Spirit. Now, we can walk in justice and holiness in the sight of our Father. Together with the Apostle Paul, each of us who live as disciples of Jesus can say,

We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures ... ; but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. (Ti 3:3-7)

What a wonderful God we have! What a great Savior! The story of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ belongs to each of us. Let's celebrate this story by recalling again and again the wonderful deeds that the Lord has done for us, and by sharing them with one another. Let's create a culture of declaring the great and wonderful deeds of the Lord!

### 3.7 Practical Activity

#### Testimony Practice-Session

It's time to share your personal testimony. This practical activity is meant to help you build confidence in sharing the story of your conversion with others. It has 4 steps:

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to be with you and inspire you. Then use what you have learned in this lesson, and the “Building Your Testimony” reference sheet, to *put together your personal testimony — in this case, your initial or major conversion story*. This may take some time, as you read the questions we've provided, prayerfully reflect upon the wonderful works of the Lord in your life, and take notes.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, don't give all the sordid details about your past sinful exploits.

<sup>10</sup> For example, if you became Catholic after leaving Baptist Christianity or Buddhism, it's good to be honest about the good things you remember from your time as a Baptist or Buddhist. If you became Catholic or discovered your faith after suffering in a bad relationship, don't demonize the person who hurt you.

2. Once you are happy with the results, *ask a friend or family member to help you practice giving your testimony.* (You might ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you the person or persons that you should ask.) You may bring some notes to help keep you on track. When you have shared your testimony, ask them for input: Were you clear? Do they have any questions? Enter into dialogue with them about what you shared.
3. *Pray with them.* You may pray in your own words, thanking and praising God, asking Him for deeper knowledge and love of Him. Or you may just pray the Lord's Prayer — an "Our Father" — sincerely from the heart.
4. When you are ready, please also *post in the Community Forums about your experience doing this practical activity.* There is a specific topic created for this. Also, *give a constructive question or comment* about the lesson, or somebody else's post on their experience doing the practical activity. All of this is required for your basic certification!\*

Your "testimony practice-session" might be an occasion of conversion for your friend or family member, or for yourself. You should do this practical activity a number of times until you feel comfortable sharing your testimony.

\*If you are a new SPSE team leader, you have the option to replace practical activities and forum postings with similar activities associated with the team leader onboarding process, followed by a post on your team blog, a group discussion with your team, or a conversation with SPSE staff about your experiences. Please contact Brian Lee ([brian@stpaulse.com](mailto:brian@stpaulse.com)) with any questions.

### 3.8 Study Questions

1. To give a testimony is to \_\_\_\_\_ to something that you have seen or heard.
2. The most important kind of personal testimony is the story of your \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_.
3. The basic structure of a personal testimony consists of three parts: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.
4. After you've shared the three parts of your testimony, you might add a fourth part, which is a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.

5. Before each time you give any personal testimony, you should

\_\_\_\_\_.

6. The five basic qualities of a testimony: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.

7. Now in your own words, explain what a personal testimony is and why it is important.

8. In your own words, explain why a theme can give your personal testimony greater impact.

