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# FAITH IN ACTION

TRANSFORMING  
THE WORLD

“...let your light shine before others...” (Mt. 5:16)

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**FAITH**  
**IN ACTION**  
**TRANSFORMING**  
**THE WORLD**

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Ministries

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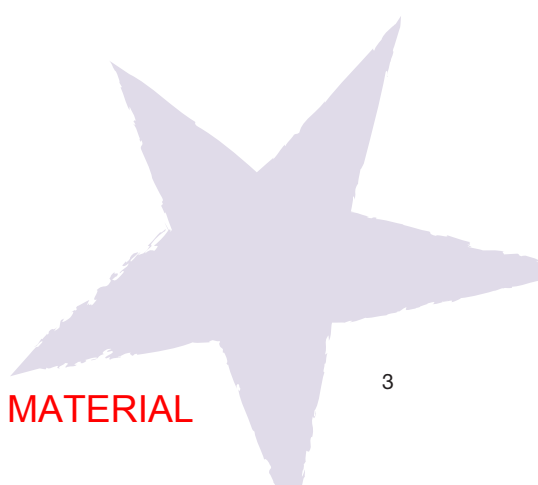
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**SESSION 2:**

# God Sides with the Vulnerable

**(PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR)**

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The group gathers, perhaps with refreshments, and participants welcome each other. Each participant briefly shares something that happened during the past week. The facilitator outlines this session's purpose. Then there is a moment of silence after the facilitator asks the question for reflection.

### QUESTION

*Recall and share a memory from childhood about when someone took care of you or stood up for you when you were in need.*

### SCRIPTURE

A reading from the Book of Exodus (3:7-10):

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

## ESSAY

Sean, nine, was teasing his seven-year old sister Carol about her favorite TV shows (“dumb”) and her freckles (“stupid”). This had become a habit. Their father, Jim, overheard them from the kitchen and came into the family room.

“Sean, we’ve talked about this before. You need to treat your sister more kindly. No iPad games for the rest of the afternoon.” “That’s not fair! Why do you always take her side?” Sean wailed. “You love her more than me!” “No, Sean, I love you equally,” Jim said. “That’s why I take Carol’s side when you’re picking on her. I’ll take your side when anyone picks on you.”

*But the Lord said: I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them...*

“The hottest places in hell,” Dante wrote, “are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality.” Our God does not maintain neutrality. Our God takes sides.

Sometimes, the teaching that God loves everyone equally can lead us to turn God into some sort of divine Switzerland—neutral in every conflict. But it is *because* God loves everyone equally that he stands up with and for the little guy. To do nothing in a moment of oppression is really to side with the oppressor over the oppressed.

So, in our Scripture passage, when God sees the Israelites enslaved and suffering in Egypt, he gets involved, appearing to Moses in the burning bush. Eventually, God sends plagues and parts the sea on behalf of his suffering children. But his first, preferred, mode of intervention is to empower a leader within the community to cooperate in God’s plan of salvation. Moses has a stutter and he isn’t very confident. God chooses him anyway to be an agent of his liberating love. Like Moses, we all have limitations. It’s hard to believe that God would want to use *us* to do his work. Isn’t there someone smarter and stronger out there?

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“No,” God says; his words to Moses echo down through the generations. “I will send you.” Moses confirms the old saying, “God doesn’t call the equipped. He equips the called.” What does God equip Moses—and us—for? It’s our job to stand on the side of those who are pushed to the edges of society—the Israelite slaves, in Moses’ case. For us today, those who are hurting and crying out for justice are the unborn, the prisoner and the victim of violence, the undocumented immigrant, the addicted, the senior citizen in a nursing home, and more.

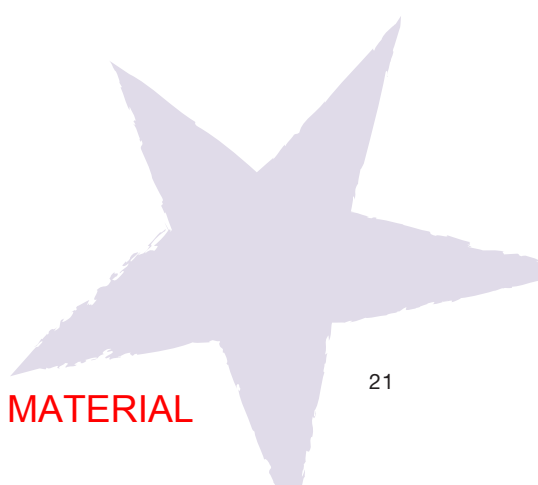
Pope Francis has called people in these groups and others victims of a “throwaway culture.” The required response to this tragedy, the Holy Father suggests, is to build a “culture of encounter.” In our own lives, we know the difference between people who are part of an abstract category, and people whom we have gotten to know, people we have encountered. The poor are no longer faceless statistics when we know their names and their stories.

When we go to the margins of society to build a culture of encounter, we practice what the Catholic Church calls the “preferential option for the poor.” This means that we judge our progress as a society from the bottom up: our success is determined by how the poorest and most vulnerable are faring, not the wealthiest few.

How have we been challenged to prefer “the poor”—people we have met who are in some kind of need? What reluctance have we felt? And what satisfaction?

## DISCUSSION

People give their reactions to the reading.



## FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. *Wrestle with the idea of God's preferential love for the poor. Is there anything about this that challenges or unsettles you? What about it resonates with you?*
2. *Who are the victims of a throwaway culture in your own local area? Imagine building a culture of encounter with these folks. What would it require of you and your community?*
3. *Do you think people today are motivated more by justice or by charity? Why?*

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The preferential option for the poor is one of the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching. The idea of a preference for the poor is not intended to create divisions between socioeconomic groups. It suggests that poverty wounds not only the poor, but the entire community. These wounds will not be healed by separating the poor from society, but “by greater solidarity with the poor and among the poor themselves” (*Economic Justice for All*, no. 88).

“A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first” (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ *Seven Principles of Catholic Social Teaching*).

### References for further reading:

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2543-2549

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Seven Principles of Catholic Social Teaching*



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### PRAYER

*Materials: each participant will be given a slip of paper and a pencil.*

God of Moses, of the Israelites, and of all those who suffer:

We ask you to open our hearts so that we may stand with you on the side of those who are poor and vulnerable.

We will take a moment now to write down the name of someone, or some group, to whom we will reach out this week.

*(Invite participants to take a moment to write down the person's or group's name on their slips of paper and then fold the papers in half.)*

We offer their names and our prayers for them to you now in silence:

*(Pause for a moment of silent prayer.)*

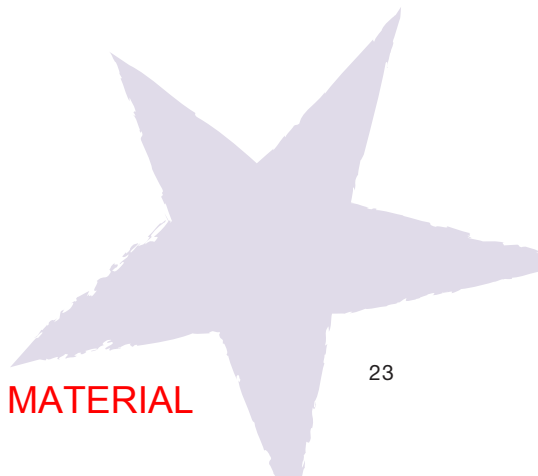
We take these slips of paper with us as a reminder of our call to be with your children in need. We pray that we will go out of our way to reach out to them.

*(Invite participants to take their slips of paper home and put them in a place where they will see them every day throughout the week.)*

As you called Moses, you call us to care for your suffering people. And, as you sent Moses, you say to us tonight, "I will send you."

Be with us, and with those whose names we have written, in a special way this week. Amen.

### ANNOUNCEMENTS AND HOSPITALITY



# APPENDIX

## PRAYER FOR FAITH IN ACTION

Our Father in heaven,  
you have formed us as one community  
of your daughters and sons,  
and created us to care for each other  
as we reflect the divine life of eternal love.

Strengthen the bonds we have with each other,  
make us attentive to the joys and sorrows,  
the hopes and pains, that beset us all.

Help us see that we are each most fully human  
when we are in union with each other.

Let us feel the joy that springs from serving,  
the grace that arises from giving,  
and the love that comes from living to bring  
your Kingdom to fulfillment in the  
human family that you redeemed  
in Jesus, and blessed in his Spirit.

Amen.

### About Paulist Evangelization Ministries

Paulist Evangelization Ministries is an apostolic arm of the Paulist Fathers. Our goal is to help reach those who are not involved in a family of faith—whether seekers who are looking for faith, or Catholics who have halted the regular practice of their faith. Through the development of programs and various publications, we want to reach people to invite them to re-experience Jesus Christ in the richness of our Catholic tradition, and equip parishes to reach out more fully in invitation and welcome. Please visit us at [www.pemdc.org](http://www.pemdc.org), and support our efforts by inviting others to come to know Jesus Christ.