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Session Time Frame

The sessions in this guide have been created to work in periods of 60 to 75 minutes. The sessions' core activities—listed at the beginning of the sessions, under the "At a Glance" heading—will fill a 60-minute session. If you have more time, consider using the optional 15-minute session extensions. The session outlines include additional discussion questions and media suggestions that can be incorporated to create sessions that go beyond 75 minutes.

2 GOD THE FATHER

Session Overview

In this session the participants will create a list of qualities that best describe human fathers, which will be used later to help them understand the title God our Father. They will explore the nature of clouds and why the Bible uses this imagery to portray God. The participants will also explore how God has revealed himself to us, especially in the image of the Father that was taught by Jesus. Finally, the young people will conclude with a prayerful meditation that will help them listen to the voice of God in their lives. In the optional session extension, the participants will reflect on ways to nurture their relationships with God, family, and friends.

Objectives

Enable the participants to do the following:

- experience God as a mystery that is beyond our grasp to completely understand
- explain that God has revealed himself to us as Truth and Love
- identify God as the Father of Jesus Christ and listen prayerfully to his voice

At a Glance

A. Quick-Start Activity	(5 minutes)
B. Welcome and Opening Prayer	(5 minutes)
C. The Cloud of Unknowing	(15 minutes)
D. Our Father Reveals Himself	(15 minutes)
E. Listening to the Father	(15 minutes)
F. Closing Prayer	(5 minutes)

Optional Session Extension:

Taking Care of Relationships	(15 minutes)
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Materials and Preparation

Materials Needed

Gather the following items, one for every three or four participants:

- ☐ sets of markers

Gather the following additional items:

- ☐ one (or two if you have a large group) long sheet of newsprint, about 6 feet in length (or some smaller sheets taped together)
- ☐ a black marker
- ☐ four Bibles with one of the following passages marked in each: Exodus 13:20–22, Numbers 9:15–18, 1 Kings 8:12, Matthew 17:5

Preparation Tasks

- ☐ With a black marker, draw an outline of a person on the sheet(s) of newsprint. At the top of the drawing write, “The Best Qualities of Human Fathers.” Place the newsprint on the floor in the middle of the meeting space. Scatter the sets of markers around the newsprint.
- ☐ Write on the board the following instructions for the quick-start activity:

Write three to five good qualities of a human father on the paper with the human outline. No repeats!

Read the introduction to chapter 2, starting on page 24 of *The Catholic Connections Handbook for Middle Schoolers*.

Catechist Prayer

God our Father,
 You are my perfect parent.
 You give me discipline when I step out of line.
 You give me mercy when I do not deserve it but need it so desperately.
 And most of all, you are loving.
 You would never abandon me.
 When I stray you wait at home, ready to throw a party upon my return.
 I am grateful for your love.
 Please guide me as I work with your children.
 Help me to express your true love for them.
 Amen.

Background Reading

- *The Catholic Connections Handbook for Middle Schoolers*, chapter 2
- CCC, numbers 198–213, 232–237 (God the Father)
- Exodus 13:20–22, Numbers 9:15–18, 1 Kings 8:12, Matthew 17:5, Isaiah 66:13

Session Steps

A. Quick-Start Activity (5 minutes)

Greet the participants as they enter the meeting space, and invite them to begin the quick-start activity. Point out the following instructions on the board, but also share them verbally for any participants who may need help referencing the board:

Write three to five good qualities of a human father on the paper with the human outline. No repeats!

A

Read the introduction to chapter 2, starting on page 24 of *The Catholic Connections Handbook for Middle Schoolers*.

B. Welcome and Opening Prayer (5 minutes)

1. **Welcome** everyone and make any announcements.

2. **Light** a candle, make the Sign of the Cross, and lead everyone in saying, "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God."

3. **Pray** the following:

- ▶ God our Father, we gather to ask for your guidance. Remind us that you are always near, ready to guide us with your loving hands. Amen.

4. Briefly **explain** that the topic for this session will be God the Father.

2

God THE FATHER

A

When you picture God in your mind, what do you see? Many people see an old man with white hair and a beard sitting on a throne in a cloud up in the sky. Is this what God really looks like? Not really. It seems that many of us have adapted this image of the Greek god Zeus, whom the stories about the ancient Greek gods describe just like this.

You might be curious why you have the image of this Greek god in your head when you think about the one, true God. Centuries ago, artists needed some way to portray God in their works, but the Bible contained no physical descriptions of God the

Middle Ages painted God as an old man with a white beard. What image comes to your mind when you think of God? What are some other ways to think about God?



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C. The Cloud of Unknowing (15 minutes)

1. **Invite** the participants to share their experiences of clouds. Use the following questions to start a discussion:
 - ▶ Have you ever flown in an airplane? What is it like flying through a cloud? What can you see?
 - ▶ Have you ever walked through fog? What is it like being in fog? When you are in the middle of fog, can you see it close to you? Can you take hold of it or put it in your hand?
2. Make the following points:
 - ▶ In the Bible, God is often experienced in the form of a cloud. Like a cloud, God is difficult to see when he is right in front of you.
 - ▶ Nonetheless, God the Father makes himself known to us through his Spirit and through his Son, Jesus Christ.
 - ▶ God is infinitely mysterious, yet close and intimately known to us.
3. **Distribute** the marked Bibles to four volunteers and **invite** the volunteers to read the following passages from the Bible. After each reading, **ask** the questions as indicated.
 - ▶ Exodus 13:20–22: What did the cloud offer the Israelites? [*direction and freedom*]
 - ▶ Numbers 9:15–18: What did the cloud give the Israelites in the desert? [*guidance*]
 - ▶ 1 Kings 8:12: Where does God live? [*in the clouds and darkness; be sure to point out that God does not literally live in the clouds*]
 - ▶ Matthew 17:5: What does the voice from the cloud call Jesus? [*"My own dear son"*]
4. **Share** the following points in your own words:
 - ▶ God is mysterious. Trying to understand God can be difficult. It can be like trying to grasp fog. It can be right in front of us, but we just cannot take hold of it. How is God like that? [*It is impossible to completely grasp or understand God.*]
 - ▶ When we are in the middle of fog, we can see it in the distance, but not right in front of us. How is this similar to God? [*We sometimes do not know that God is right here with us.*]
 - ▶ Nonetheless, God the Father is right here to guide us. Through the Holy Spirit, he guides us to freedom and happiness, and he sent us his Son to save us. He is both mysterious and closer to us than our own breath.

D. Our Father Reveals Himself (15 minutes)

- Explain** that although God is ultimately a mystery, he has revealed himself to us.
- Ask** a volunteer to describe a person he or she likes, naming the characteristics that make the person so likeable (e.g., the person is nice, smart, helpful). Then **ask** the volunteer how she or he knows these characteristics to be true of this person (e.g., the person helps her or him with homework).
- Explain** that this is how we can know about God too. We can describe who God is, the characteristics of God, by looking at what he has done.
- Invite** the participants to share what God has done throughout history. **Ask** them to write on the board what these actions say about who God is. For example, if a participant says that God created the world, then he or she should write "Creator" on the board.
- Ask** the participants to take out their handbooks and turn to the "Who Is God?" section on page 25. When all are ready, **invite** a volunteer to read this section aloud.

B

- Describe** the Catholic perspective on God the Father by explaining the following points in your own words:

- God the Father has revealed himself to us. God made himself known to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the prophets.

Chapter 2: God the Father

Father. Some painters used Zeus as the model because he was the most powerful of the Greek gods. The image of Zeus helped many people connect to some of the traits of God. That image has stuck with us. It is not wrong to picture God like this, just remember that it is an incomplete image of God. If God is not an old man with a white beard in the clouds, then who is God?

D

PRAY IT!

God, our Father, I understand so little about you, but I know a few things. You exist beyond the farthest star, but I also know you are here with me now. I do not know everywhere I will go in the future, but I do know I came from you. I do not always understand your ways, but I do know I can trust you. I cannot even guess how you came to be, but I do know you will always be with me. Thank you, God, for being you. Amen.

B

Who Is God?

If you were asked to describe a friend, you might answer in a few different ways. You could say something about her relationships to others (she is a daughter, a sister, and a friend). You might talk about what she does (she is a student and a softball player). Maybe you would say what kind of person she is (she is smart and kind). We get to know people through their relationships with others and by observing what they do and listening to what they say.

Whatever we know about God, we know because he revealed it to us. God first revealed his name to Moses. It is pretty simple, but very powerful: I AM. The Hebrew word for I AM is **Yahweh**. The name I AM or Yahweh reminds us how immense

- ▶ God the Father most fully revealed himself through his Son, Jesus Christ.
 - ▶ Jesus told us to call God “Our Father” because he wanted us to have a close relationship with God.
7. **Take out** the newsprint drawing(s) of the “father” from the quick-start activity. **Review** the adjectives the participants wrote as the best qualities of human fathers. **Affirm** their efforts, but be sure to **identify** adjectives that may not be appropriate for God.
8. Continue **describing** the Catholic perspective on God the Father. (Refer to page 28 in the handbook.)
- ▶ God is our Father, but does this mean God is a man? [*Being male and female are human characteristics. God is not human and is beyond being male and female.*]
 - ▶ Does God also have feminine characteristics? In Isaiah 66:13, the Lord says, “As a mother comforts her son, so will I comfort you.”

Part 1: God, Revelation, and Faith

The Trinity

Did You Know?

“Abba”: Jesus’ Name for His Father

In the Gospels, Jesus sometimes calls the Father “**Abba**.” The language Jesus spoke was Aramaic, and *abba* is the Aramaic word for “father.” This gives us an idea of the special bond Jesus has with his Father. The Father loves Jesus, much as a human father loves his children by protecting, feeding, and teaching them. Yet even the Bible sometimes portrays God’s motherly characteristics: “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you,” says the Lord (Isaiah 66:13, NRSV). Jesus teaches us to begin our prayers with “Abba” and to share in his special close relationship with God, our Father.

Long after God told Moses his name was Yahweh, he revealed much more about himself.

He revealed that he is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—one God in three equally divine Persons who is the Holy Trinity. This is the central belief of all Christians. If this sounds confusing, don’t be alarmed. (See more on the Trinity in chapter 3.) Even when God reveals himself to us, he remains a **mystery**.

As hard as we try, we can’t fully understand God.

The Father

Let’s explore the first Person of the Trinity—God the Father. He is far beyond any image we can conjure up in our minds. When we pray the Creed, we call the Father “almighty.” No creature in the universe possesses more power. God the Father is all knowing

- ▶ We can say two things about God the Father with complete certainty: We (1) God is Truth, and (2) God is Love.
- ▶ God is Truth, and therefore everything that he tells us is true. We can trust God because he always keeps his promises.
- ▶ We can say that God is Love because God loves us. He created us and sent his only Son to save us.

9. **Summarize** by making the following comments:

- ▶ God is mysterious and sometimes difficult to understand. But because he loves us, he has revealed himself to us in many ways, the most important being through his Son, Jesus Christ.
- ▶ God is our Father, but that does not mean he is a man.
- ▶ We know that God is both Truth and Love.

E. Listening to the Father (15 minutes)

1. **Explain** how God's title of Father is a title that points to a relationship. If there is a father, there must be a child. **Explain** that like every other relationship, our relationship with God the Father needs care and attention if it is going to grow.
2. **Ask** the participants what would happen in a relationship where only one person talked and the other person just listened.
3. **Explain** that sometimes we think of prayer as a time to tell God what we need. This is called a prayer of petition. Prayers of petition are fine, but that should not be our only way to pray. We need to listen to God as well.
4. **Suggest** that one way to pray is by using our imagination. By using our imagination, we can open up a place within us to allow God to speak to us.
5. **Explain** to the young people that you are going to lead them through a meditation, and that they are to let their minds wander freely within the story. Let them know that at times you will pose a question to them and they should respond without thinking about whether their answer is the "right" answer.
6. **Set the mood** for prayer by dimming the lights and lighting a candle.
7. **Tell** the participants to assume a posture in which they are most relaxed and to close their eyes.
8. Make the Sign of the Cross and **say**:
 - ▶ Dear Lord, we place ourselves in your hands. We quiet ourselves. Guide us and let us hear your voice in our prayer.
 Sit for a minute in silence, or with soft music playing.
9. **Present** the following meditation. **Speak** slowly, and whenever you see the ellipsis (. . .), **pause** for a moment to allow the young people time to imagine.

- Imagine that you are walking along a dirt road on the outskirts of a forest. . . . You feel safe and comfortable, but there is something nagging at you, making you want to enter into the darkness of the woods. . . .

After walking for a while, you know there is something that you need in there, so you decide to enter the forest. . . . Walking along the path, you notice people from your past and present life all around. They are tending to their own issues, but someone who has always been special to you approaches. This person has a gift for you and something important to say to you. What does he or she give you? . . . What does he or she say to you? . . .

You thank this special person and continue on. You know that there is something else important down the path. . . .

You arrive at a cave and you go inside. There you find a wise old woman. Her smile reassures you that everything is okay. . . . She tells you that today God will speak to you. . . . She offers you something that she says will help you to hear God. . . . What does she give you? . . .

She leaves you alone in the cave. . . . You listen to the quiet stillness all around you. . . . You look at the gift you received along the way and the gift of the wise old woman. . . . The quiet stillness is peaceful. . . .

God reaches out to people in different ways . . . to some he speaks, to others he moves, to some he writes, and to others he gives visions. . . . In God's own way, he begins to let you know why you are here. . . . What does God have to say to you or show you? . . . *[long pause here]*

When God has finished, he blesses you and reminds you he is always near. . . . You exit the cave and return along the path that brought you there. . . . You eventually pass all the people you know and return to the place where you entered the forest. . . . You leave on the same dirt path and return to the world you know. . . .

10. **Invite** the participants to open their eyes and bring their focus back to the meeting space. When all are ready, **ask** for volunteers to share their experiences.

F. Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

1. Ask the participants to gather around the candle.
2. Have the young people take out their handbooks and turn to the "Pray It!" sidebar on page 25. When all are ready, read the prayer in the sidebar aloud.
3. Say the Lord's Prayer together and close with the Sign of the Cross.

Note: If doing the optional course project, you may wish to take time now to explain the project and hand out any take-home instructions for parents.

Optional Session Extension

Taking Care of Relationships (15 minutes)

This session extension works best after step D, the "Our Father Reveals Himself" activity.

Materials Needed


Gather the following items, one for each participant:

- ☐ white business-size envelopes
- ☐ ten to twelve pieces of string, each 8 to 12 inches long
- ☐ ten to twelve circle cutouts, each 2 inches in diameter

Gather the following items, one for every three or four participants:

- ☐ sets of markers or colored pencils
- ☐ rolls of clear tape
- ☐ pads of sticky notes

Chapter 2: God the Father




E

LIVE IT!

Lord, you have examined me
and you know me.
You know everything I do . . .
Where could I go to escape
from you?
Where could I get away
from your presence?
If I went up to heaven, you
would be there;
if I lay down in the world
of the dead, you
would be there . . .
When my bones were
being formed,
carefully put together in
my mother's womb,
when I was growing there
in secret,
you knew that I was there—
you saw me before I was born.

(Psalm 139:1, 2, 7-8, 15-16)

When reading the Bible, you'll notice that God did not just create us and then run off. He continues to care for us with truth and love. We are also called to follow God's footsteps here. Our relationships with our friends, classmates, teachers, and family are not just created and left on their own. These relationships must also grow. The only way that will happen is if, like God, we are truthful and loving. We cannot have a real relationship with someone if it is based on lies and selfishness. Those relationships fall apart. Relationships based on love and honesty last . . . just like our relationships with God.



The author of Psalm 139 expresses how deeply God knows and loves each one of us—from the earliest days in our mother's womb.

27

1. **Distribute** the envelopes, strings, and circle cutouts to each participant. **Set** the markers or colored pencils and the tape in a common area where all the participants can access them.
2. **Read** aloud the "Live It!" sidebar on page 27 in the handbook.
3. **Explain** that God nurtures his relationships, and we too must care for and nurture our relationships.
4. **Direct** the participants to write the names of God, their friends, and family members on the circle cutouts.
5. **Ask** them to write on the sticky notes the things they need to do to nurture each of these relationships.
6. **Instruct** the young people to attach the sticky notes (with tape) to the string, one sticky note per string. They are to tape one end of each string near the opening of the envelope and then connect the other end of each string to the appropriate circle cutout. **Explain** that the string represents how they nurture their relationship with each person.
7. If there is time, **invite** the young people to present their projects to the rest of the group.
8. When they are finished, **instruct** the participants to tuck the circle cutouts and strings inside their envelopes to take home.

Discussion Starters

- What are some ways God is like a mother?
- We discussed how God is like a father and a cloud. What are some other images that could represent God?
- God tells Moses that his name is "I AM." How is that a fitting name for God?

Materials and Preparation

Materials Needed

Gather the following items, one for each participant:

- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of handout 3-A, "Crossword Puzzle: John's Prologue"

2

Media Connections

- In the movie *Evan Almighty* (2007, 95 minutes, rated A-II and PG), Academy Award-winning actor Morgan Freeman portrays God. This film offers young people a chance to explore the deeper questions about our Creator in an inviting and entertaining manner.
- The Web site “The Interview with God” has a short video in which questions are posed to “God” and “God” replies. This site can be used to start a conversation about how the participants think God would answer the deeper and more difficult questions about life.

Note: For movies with a U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops rating of A-II, show only preselected scenes. Obtain parental permission for the participants who are under age thirteen to view an A-II rated movie, and use your best judgment regarding the appropriateness of the film and the advisability of viewing relevant excerpts.

Materials Needed

Gather the following items, one for every three or four participants:

<input type="checkbox"/>	white index cards
<input type="checkbox"/>	envelopes
<input type="checkbox"/>	ten to twenty place cards
<input type="checkbox"/>	scissors
<input type="checkbox"/>	glue
<input type="checkbox"/>	markers
<input type="checkbox"/>	colored pencils
<input type="checkbox"/>	rolls of clear tape
<input type="checkbox"/>	pads of sticky notes

Gather the following items, one for every three or four participants:

- ☐ sets of markers or colored pencils
- ☐ rolls of clear tape
- ☐ pads of sticky notes

Use markers or colored pencils to draw a picture of your answer to the question.

