

Handling Our Doubts

Karen May

Hello everyone, I'm Karen May, and I'm so excited to talk to you today about those times when we doubt, when we are doubting God, doubting our faith, doubting our church, even doubting ourselves. These are times that God is ready to step in and help us to grow, and I'm really excited that you are here. Let us begin.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Sweet Jesus, when Thomas doubted, when he said he would not believe until he put his hands in your side and touched your wounds, you came to him and you showed him. Lord, I come to you today. I bring you everyone here who is doubting, who is searching, who is longing, who is crying out to you. Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Lord, speak to their hearts, open their eyes, help them to find you ever clearer and ever more beautifully, Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

The Story of Margaret Anne

So Margaret Anne was this amazing woman in my church. She was probably about 80 when I met her. She was four foot not much, but you couldn't miss her, because when she was in church, she had these beautiful, colorful, really wide hats, and when she went to the front to read, because she was a lector, she had to get her little step stool, climb on up, and she spoke with a voice that was just full of confidence and just loud, rang across the entire church.

And I got to know her through a Bible study. And one day she told us a little bit of her story. Apparently when she was in college long, long ago, she was at the University of Incarnate Word, and it was run by an order of nuns, and she realized about halfway through that she no longer thought she believed in God. And being the wonderful person that she was, she could not lie and had to tell the head nun that this is kind of where she was. And she fully expected to be kicked out of the school.

So, she girded herself, she went in, and she sat in this woman's office and told her, "I don't think I believe in God anymore." And this nun responded to her and said, "Great." And Margaret Ann was totally confused. "What do you mean, great?" And this woman told her, "You have lost your parents' faith. "Go and find yours." And at 80 years old, she was a testament to the power of that faith. She had lost her parents' faith, but oh, she had found her own.

And so, as we're going through these days in our world, it can be really hard to be a person of faith. It can be really hard, given some of the things that happen to us in our lives to believe that God is faithful. And we can wonder if this God that we know is real. And I will tell you, if you have those questions, if you have those doubts, great. Because you are losing a faith that no longer fits you. Go and find your own. Find this new faith.

Pray More Healing Retreat 2021 - Transcript

If you have doubts, if you have questions, I know that those are the places that God is ready for you to grow in relationship with Him. I know this because I've experienced it.

Answering Questions

When my husband and I met, he was an atheist. We met in high school, and I had been raised Catholic, I had practiced my Catholicism, I knew that God was real. I really believed it. I knew that He interacted with me in my life. I also believed that He was kind of way up there, more of like a puppet string kind of thing, or maybe just somebody that came down, did something with you, and then kind of left you alone.

But I knew that He was real. I believed that He loved me and that He cared for me. But my husband, as I brought him to mass one Christmas, came out and said, "So how can she be pregnant if she's a virgin?" And I'm like, that's kind of the whole point of the story. And he had never heard it before. How had he done this? How had he gone through this world without even hearing that part of the story?

Well, he had been baptized, but we're pretty sure it's only because grandma wanted him to be. He had never been raised in church. The only church he saw, the only religion he saw, was what was on television, And at that time it was the televangelists who were taking money from the poor and keeping it for themselves. It was the pastor down the street at the mega church that had been found sleeping with five married women, five, in his congregation. Who wants that religion? Nobody I know. And that's all he knew. He didn't know the story of Adam. He didn't know the story of Eve. He didn't know the story of Noah or Isaac and Abraham, none of it.

And so, he was coming from nothing and challenging me and questioning me. How can you believe what you believe? How does this even make sense? And he's an engineer, so he had a lot, a lot of detailed questions. And a lot of these questions, I had never thought about myself. I just knew that God was real. It's like, well, why does your mother love you? I don't know. Probably she shouldn't half the time, she just does. And that was more my relationship with God. I just know that He is real. I know that things happen that I can't explain any other way.

An Explosion of Faith

Well, all of a sudden, I had to explain them, and it really made me question. So, what is this God that I believe in? Who is He? What is this faith that I have, and why do I have it? He wouldn't ask anybody else. I kept telling him to please, 'cause we were teenagers. I was 16, 17, I didn't know what I was talking about. He wouldn't ask.

And so, I had to go search. I had to find out for myself. I had to pray, I had to ask. And oh, my heavens, I knocked on so many doors. Like, I don't know the answer to this question. I started to do Bible studies. I started to search. And the more that I searched, the more I realized that this faith I had before was so small compared to the faith that I was gaining, because I knew more, and I could love more. As I loved more, I could receive love more, and I could understand more, which meant I could explain more. And through his questions and through his challenges, my faith exploded.

Pray More Healing Retreat 2021 - Transcript

I understood God on a level I'd never understood before. And all of a sudden, I could answer his questions, and he couldn't come back with some challenge that I couldn't answer. He could only come back with, "Well, I guess that takes faith, and I just don't have it." So, he couldn't counter my answers, but he couldn't quite step into faith, until finally he was able to start answering questions of his own.

Learning from These Questions

So, I learned from him that these questions that we're asking ourselves, these questions that are being posed to us, these challenges that we are receiving in this world today, 'cause it's hard to be a person of faith in this world today, isn't it? It's hard. But don't you think those questions really would love answers? When someone says, "How can you believe in this God," don't you know that they want to hear something that allows them to believe in something? Don't you know that they want peace, joy, love, all of the things that come from God?

Don't you know that something in their soul is searching? When you are asking those questions, something in your soul is searching, and we know from Saint Augustine, that our souls are restless until they rest in Him. We search, we long for. And so, in those questions, God is big enough to help you find the answers. And I want to give you hope today that that is possible. If you are doubting, if you are unsure, if you're being challenged and your feet are just wobbling on your faith, great, great. Go and find your own.

Praying and Asking

So how do we do this? Because we're called to always have a reason for our hope. So, we need to find that reason for our hope. How in the world are we supposed to do this when we are so unsure of our own faith? Well, the first thing we need to do is ask.

We are told, ask and you will find, or ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened. We need to be praying and asking, "Lord, I don't understand this, I don't believe this. I'm really struggling with this, and I need you to help me find the answers."

Pray, ask, and expect those prayers to be answered, because God loves to answer those prayers. It may take a while, it may not just come down in a little pamphlet, it probably won't. But He loves to answer those. If you work with Him, if you start to seek and, like I did, I went to Bible studies, I knocked on my pastor, my priests' doors like, you've got to help me. I really went and sought those answers and tried to see what I could find out to answer the questions for my husband and for myself. So, trust that God will answer.

And I think Thomas, Saint Thomas, is a wonderful example for us. When he came in and all the disciples are there saying, "We saw Jesus," the door is still locked, but they saw Jesus, and he's like, I don't really buy it, I don't know. I don't believe you, 'cause you're not really doing anything different. I want to see Jesus for myself. I'm not going to believe until I put my hand into his side. So he asked. I don't know if he expected Jesus to come that next week, but Jesus did, and allowed him to touch his hands and his side. And when that happened, Thomas fell to

his knees, "My Lord and my God." He recognized him. Jesus had broken through his doubts, come through and answered him. So, we need to trust that he will do the same for us.

How to Know if it is God

When I have doubts, I just have to wait. Again, I count on Margaret Anne's story, I count on my husband's story to know that God is going to answer my questions, and so I wait. And we need to search. We need to know who God is. We need to understand what He teaches, what He says, and so we need to go into His Word. We need to go into the Bible and understand who He is, because if we're hearing something that, well, God is this certain way, and it's not consistent with this God we know through the Bible or through the Catechism, then we know, this probably isn't where I'm supposed to be, because it's hard to search these days. You can find anything online. And I will tell you if you are searching for something and it feels like clickbait or it's fearmongering, or if it's super, super, super, you know, regimented that, you know, the way to salvation is these three steps and these only this time, like, these are not the ways that God is calling us.

So, watch for the things that you are searching. Be very, very diligent in discerning what is good and quality materials. Find it, test it, because as we test these things that we learn, we will find that the things that are true will bear fruit. We're told that. A good tree can bear cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. And so, what is the fruit of these things that we are learning and these things that are helping us to grow in our faith?

Looking Up to Saint Ignatius

As Saint Ignatius tells us in his discernment, his process of discernment, is that we need to know, does this help us to grow in faith, hope, and love? If it does, then that's a pretty good sign that we're on the right track. If it helps us to grow in fear and confusion and secrecy and judgmentalism, that's maybe not the right path.

So, we need to be very careful where we're searching, and find people that can help us that maybe are, you know, pretty secure in their faith, or maybe know a little bit more than we do. Find those places. It's hard work. I will tell you it's hard work, but as any athlete knows, if you want to get better, if you want to improve, then you've got to put in the hard work so that you can do the good work. It's so worth the time and the energy that it spends to be searching for the answers to these questions that you have. And finally, we need to verify. So, as I said, you're finding these answers, you're searching, like, what is the answer to this question, or I really feel like this is not who God is, so who are you, Lord?

And Saint Ignatius, again, is a wonderful example for us. I love his story. See, he was incredibly vain, and he loved the stories of courtly love and heroism. And he was a knight, he was out in battle, and he was hit by a cannon ball in his leg. And the story is that in his recuperation, they only had two books for him to read, the Bible and "The Lives of the Saints."

But the thing that I found out recently that is left out of the story most of the time is part of the reason it took his legs so long to heal is that the first time it wasn't set right, and so he was going

Pray More Healing Retreat 2021 - Transcript

to have to live his life with a deformed leg, and he was not willing to do that, so he asked them to re-break the leg and reset it. This was before anesthesia, so that is some pretty amazing dedication. But in that process, the leg became infected, and his recovery was so much longer than it would have been.

But I love how God uses our weaknesses and our failings to bring him closer to Him. So, in this very time of his vanity, he was brought to a place that he could not leave. He could not live this life he wanted to. And in that place, he was brought stories of heroism and love, but they weren't the same as the ones that he was used to reading. He was used to courtly love and chivalry, and you know, knights and battles. But he was reading "The Lives of the Saints." And the thing that he found was when he was thinking about and dreaming about these chivalrous heroism stories and courtly love, he was very happy and elevated for a time, but then shortly after, it really left him empty. But when he sat in these stories of the saints and in the love of God, he was inspired and encouraged and so joyful, and it stayed, and it lasted a long time. And this is the basis for his process of discernment, is watching for those signs, like, these are the things that stay, these are the things that fill our restless hearts and bring us peace.

Understanding Consolation and Desolation

And so we look for consolation, and we look for desolation, and for Ignatius, Saint Ignatius, the consolation is not just feeling good. It is this growing in love and faith and peace, and it is this knowing that God is working within you. And so sometimes consolation actually is accompanied by sadness. So, if I am contemplating Jesus on the cross and the immense love that he had for me, and realizing that he died for me personally, I can be overwhelmed with grief and sadness that my sin put Jesus on that cross, and I can go two ways.

In consolation, I can see that that sacrifice was done for me out of love, and I can repent of my sins, and I can hand them to Jesus and allow him to take them and grow in faith that he has done this for me, grow in love for Jesus, which then spills over into love for others, because I know that I have been forgiven, and so I must forgive.

But I can also go into desolation where I see that Jesus has died for me and I see myself as completely unworthy, and unable to even approach the cross, and unable to be anything worthy of receiving that gift, and a failure. This is desolation. This is not helping me grow in faith, hope, and love.

Both of them are accompanied by sadness. Both of them are accompanied by this understanding of the weight of what has been done for me. But that consolation doesn't just mean, hey, I'm going to take the easy route. It means sometimes even the hard route is the right route, because I see that there's a peace there. I see that this leads me closer to Christ and helps me to grow in love for Him and for my neighbor.

Seeing the Signs

And so, the more that you can look into the concepts of Ignatian discernment, the more that this will help as well. So, we search, we pray, we ask, and as we find, we verify, right, we look. So, like, does this bring consolation? Does this bring me closer to Christ? Does this play out? If I live my life the way that I'm discovering I should live, does this play out in the world in a way that brings Christ into the world, that brings light into the world? So, these are really important to do as you are going through your doubts and your answers. And then get ready to repeat. You will start to see that there are some signs of these times that God is calling you to grow in your faith.

I know for me, some of those signs are just this irritation, or this like unsettled feeling. When I was doing a study on the armor of God, it was really not that big of a deal, you know. There's righteousness and there's peace and there's the gospel of truth, And this study, though, really irritated me. I was so frustrated and agitated, and I felt like the person doing it was just yelling all the time, and I knew that sense of unsettle, that there's something I'm missing here. You have something more for me, Lord, and I don't know what it is, but I know that I'm not getting it. I know that I'm looking at this wrong, and you have a gift for me here.

And so I went into that study and I said, all right, I took it to prayer. What do you have for me, Lord, in this armor of God? How am I seeing it wrong? And through that, through prayer, through reading, through just listening at mass or to people who were talking to me, I discovered the story of David and Goliath, and I realized that I saw this armor completely wrong. I saw this armor as just this aggressive battle, we have to go and fight and conquer, which yes, but no.

And the story of David and Goliath showed me that David put on the armor of Saul. He put on the armor that I was thinking of, the armor of the world, the armor of fear, and it didn't work. He couldn't walk, he couldn't move. He took it off because he had the armor of faith. He knew that the Lord was by his side, and he ran to the battle. And I realized that when I went back to look at this armor of God, that's the armor that I was supposed to be seeing. I was seeing it completely wrong.

Embracing Your Doubts and Challenges

So, as we go through our doubts and our challenges, we need to remember Romans 8:28, that all things work for good for those who love God. All things, our doubts, our challenges, everything that we do, if we love God.

So, when you have doubts and challenges, I invite you to embrace them, to be excited for them, to see them as invitations and gifts, because these are the places that God has for you to grow deeper. If you think that God is not the person that you thought He was, He's not, He's bigger, He's more, and He's ready to show you, and I pray that you can find Him even more in the midst of your doubts. Shall we pray?

Closing Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Heavenly Father, I thank you for the ways that you lead us through the hard times, through the good times. I ask for your consolation, for your peace to settle on each person who is listening today. I ask for your grace to fill them, fill them with light so that they can shine in the darkness. Help them to find you, to see that you are so much closer to them than they are in themselves. Help them to see you and to follow you ever closer, Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen, God bless you.