

Pastoral Liturgy®



Relying on God's Grace

Celebrating Seventy Years: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

Mary Mirrione

Preaching at School Masses: Six Tips for Sharing the Word of God with Children

Ann M. Garrido

Seeking the Peace of the Good Shepherd

Sr. Mary Michael Fox

A Grace-Filled Time

Dear Friends,

As we move further into this season of Ordinary Time, we find ourselves in what practitioners of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) call our “growing time.” Indeed, this season of the Church year is one of growth and vitality—of watering seeds of faith and of marveling as God brings about spiritual fruit in abundance.

In this issue, we join with catechists, formators, and participants of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in celebrating a milestone anniversary of their founding. In “Celebrating Seventy Years: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd,” Mary Mirrione reflects on the many graces experienced during CGS’s history and bears witness to its enduring contribution to the renewal of catechesis in our time.

In “Preaching at School Masses: Six Tips for Sharing the Word of God with Children,” author Ann M. Garrido draws from her work in CGS to propose practical guidance aimed at assisting preachers in crafting homilies that will communicate the Gospel message effectively to children of varying ages.

Through her reflection on Psalm 23, “Seeking the Peace of the Good Shepherd,” Sr. Mary Michael Fox invites us to contemplate what it means to trust and follow our Good Shepherd, even as we face struggles and challenges in life.

Next, Susan Jett invites us into the atrium, the retreat-like environment where CGS formation takes place. In “The CGS Atrium: A Place That Fosters Liturgical Participation,” we are



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The deep, prayerful response of children to their work in the atrium attests to the fruitfulness of CGS.

invited to contemplate the ways that this space is designed to enhance the liturgical formation of young and old alike.

Just as the atrium provides a space specifically tailored to children’s spiritual needs and sensitivities so that they can encounter God, Jayne Porcelli invites us to consider the specific needs of newcomers and inquirers in her piece, “Preparing a Welcoming Environment during the Precatechumenate.” Her work provides practical ideas for parish ministers seeking to welcome others as they begin the journey of faith.

Continuing this focus on welcome and hospitality, Kathy Kuczka’s article “Welcoming Children’s Participation at Mass” invites the whole parish community to consider their role in helping children feel wanted and included in the worshipping assembly at Mass. In “Christ’s Gift of Healing in the Anointing of the Sick,” Kathryn Ball-Boruff offers ideas for helping children to understand and appreciate the gift of this beautiful sacrament.

This issue closes with Mary Beth Jambor’s look at the life and catechetical ministry of Nicholas Black Elk, reminding us of the many and varied graces God gives to his people to build up his Church on earth.

May this season be a particularly fruitful time for you and your ministry.

Bishop Joseph N. Perry

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A Catechesis of the Good Shepherd atrium in Oak Park, Illinois.



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Photo © The United States Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd offers young children a place to celebrate and live out their relationship with God.

Celebrating Seventy Years: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

Mary Mirrione

Shout joyfully to the LORD, all you lands;
serve the Lord with gladness;
come before him with joyful song.
Know that the LORD is God,
he made us, we belong to him,
we are his people, the flock he shepherds.
— Psalm 100:1-3

CATECHESIS AS CELEBRATION

Ana is eighteen months old. For months, she has been coming each week with her mom to a place prepared for her to encounter God at her own pace known as the atrium. She enters the room slowly, stopping at the little sheepfold with the small chunky shepherd and three sheep. I read a passage from a small scripture booklet for her. “I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:14). She smiles. She then goes to work in the garden, picking flowers to arrange for the prayer table. She goes on to

help prepare the food and set the table for the communal meal with the other children. Ana is happy in the atrium. Her mother beholds the precious relationship between her daughter and God. Ana does not yet have a large vocabulary, but she comes to me with joy in her eyes and carrying the tone bell that is used as our call to prayer. She smiles at me and strikes the bell to signal the start of prayer. At the sound, the children gather at the prayer table and choose a musical rhythm instrument to use during the procession. Nash is thirty-two months old; he takes the processional cross and raises it high. They all line up behind Nash and begin to sing. “Come follow me. . . .” It is time for our prayer celebration! The child has once again led us all—catechists, parents, and children—into the kingdom of God with peace and joy.

In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS), celebrations like this are an integral part of the time in the atrium, a room prepared for the religious life of children. These celebrations of prayer spring from the life of the small community that is formed in every atrium. In the introduction to the Italian edition of *The Religious Potential of the Child*, Fr. Dalmazio Mongillo, OP,¹ lifts up celebration as an essential aspect of catechesis. Sofia Cavalletti (cofounder of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd) met Fr. Mongillo in the home of a mutual friend. She gave him a ride home in her car that day. As he was stepping out of the car, he said: “What have we done to Christianity? We have made it into a lot of rules; but Christianity is to enjoy a Person.”² For Sofia, this insight was enough for her to realize that Fr. Mongillo was a person worth knowing and, even more, worth listening to. She writes of Fr. Mongillo’s wisdom:

He helped me to understand that celebration is an important aspect of catechesis, that catechesis is “to be celebration.” With this single word he had explained to me the reason for that very particular atmosphere that children create in the atrium, and in which they seem to be so at ease. . . . When the revelation of God is being proclaimed, it is not sufficient only to know that we are not dealing with a learning material of the kind that is offered in school. When one is seeking to transmit that Word, . . . we must, together with the children, stretch ourselves to hear in the way that the book of Deuteronomy teaches us (6:5): “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” It is only in this way that our listening involves not only hearing with our ears, but it becomes, in the solemnity of a celebration, a listening that reaches down into the heart and permeates the whole of our being.³

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is a method of catechesis that seriously considers the developmental religious needs and capacities of children. Through this method, children grow in their love and knowledge of God by receiving biblical and liturgical themes that allow them to deeply hear the key announcements of the Christian message. They come to know the person of Jesus and recognize the signs and symbols of the Christian faith; through this knowledge, they also begin to understand to whom they belong as a beloved child of God. This method has



Gianna Gobbi (left) and Sofia Cavalletti, cofounders of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

also been life changing for many adults. Parents, grandparents, lay ministers, and clergy who receive catechist formation in CGS are prepared to offer this way of enjoying the person and presence of Jesus as catechists for the children, while also noticing a profound transformation in their own spiritual lives.

For seventy years, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has been this way of listening that Sofia says, “involves not only hearing with our ears, but . . . becomes, in the solemnity of a celebration, a listening that reaches down into the heart and permeates the whole of our being.” Catechists around the world have been welcoming children into this celebration and encounter with the one who loved them first. For almost fifty years in the United States, CGS catechists have built atria to foster the religious life of children. And this year, the United States Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGSUSA) will celebrate its fortieth anniversary.

THE HISTORY OF CGS

From its beginning, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd was grounded in the celebration of relationship. In 1954 in Italy, Adele Costa Gnocchi (a friend of Sofia Cavalletti) invited Sofia, a Scripture scholar, to read the Bible—first with one boy, then with a small group of children. Through her friendship with Adele, Sofia met the Montessori educator Gianna Gobbi, and together they began working with children and experimenting with materials to help the children encounter our Good Shepherd. The first atrium was in Sofia’s home on Via degli Orsini in Rome. Sofia and Gianna knew a symbiotic relationship existed among the family in the home, the catechists in the atrium, and the Church community as a whole: “The initiation of the child into Christian life is not a work that can be fulfilled by the catechist alone, nor by the parents alone. It is the whole Christian community that proclaims Christ, and the child must enter into contact with the entire Christian community. The catechist’s work—valuable as it is—must be sustained and confirmed by a community that lives what the catechist proclaims.”⁴ It is in

community that we best experience the encounter with the Good Shepherd.

In 1975, the first atrium in the United States began in St. Giles Community in Oak Park, Illinois, led by Lillian Lewis, who had studied in Rome with Sofia and Gianna. That same year, Sofia Cavalletti was invited by A. M. Joosten to St. Paul, Minnesota, and an atrium was opened there by Carol Dittberner. Sofia returned to the United States each summer between 1982 and 1985. The forming of a national association for the United States began in the summers of 1983 and 1984 when participants on a retreat led by Sofia realized there was a deep friendship growing among them and that they wanted to nurture and celebrate a world where the religious life of the child was honored. In 1984, a five-member board was elected, a newsletter was prepared, and discussions were held to choose a name: the National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGSUSA). Since then, this association has played an active role in the spiritual formation of children and adults in the United States, spreading the Good News of the Gospel and promoting the religious capacities of young children through the method of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

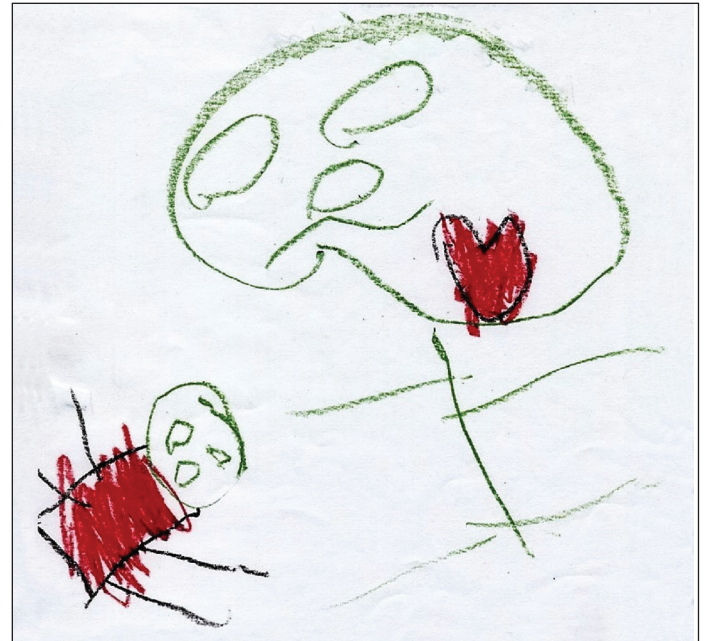
CGSUSA TODAY

Today, there are over 4500 active CGSUSA members from 21 Christian denominations. CGSUSA is the association in the United States authorized to certify catechists and the formation leaders who train them. We offer support and resources to parents, catechists, and others serving children. We have developed a library of 65 books and publications. Most of these are published under the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications imprint of Liturgy Training Publications (LTP). Through these publications, we have worked diligently to give the child a voice, to pass along the wisdom of Sofia Cavalletti, Gianna Gobbi, and others, and to provide authoritative resources for parents, catechists, and Church leaders on the religious life of children.

It is estimated that CGUSA serves over 135,000 children and their families in over 6,750 atria in churches and schools throughout the United States. Each year, CGSUSA hosts over 200 catechist formation courses offered by more than 160 formation leaders, with each course meeting for 90 to 100 formation hours to prepare adults to work with children ranging in age from 0–12 years old. Through these courses, our association prepares over 2,000 catechists for their service to children. In turn, these catechists volunteer over 40,000 hours of monthly service in their ministry with children, parents, and other caregivers, alongside pastors and principals in parishes and schools.

CONTEMPLATING MYSTERY

In these years we have learned much about what we call “the meeting of the two mysteries,” God and the child. In their years of observing children, Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi discovered that they have a deep and unique relationship with God that grows with them. The children’s bond with their Creator cannot be explained—and yet is of such great importance that no one should interfere with it. In CGS circles, we use the word *mystery* to indicate our attitude of respect and wonder for the relationship between God and the child. In contemplating the



Through art, children further contemplate the love of the Good Shepherd.

Photo © The United States Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

child’s relationship with God, we recognize that we are standing before something that is both knowable and yet beyond complete comprehension. Our constant aim is to honor and nurture this relationship by seeking to answer the child’s silent request: “Help me come closer to God by myself.”

Scripture is central in the atrium from the children’s first week, when they process to the prayer table and enthrone the Holy Bible. This is how the year begins in every level. Week after week, we proclaim the same Scriptures they will hear at Mass. In hearing the words of the Bible, the children are also learning a language of prayer. Nathaniel, who is four years old, listens to the parables of the Good Shepherd and the Found Sheep. He then draws this picture of the Good Shepherd and his sheep. Notice that the lips of the Shepherd are shaped like a heart. Nathaniel says of his artwork: “The Good Shepherd is kissing the found sheep.” The sheep is filled with the love of the Shepherd.

Liturgy is another vital source of this catechesis because it is “oriented toward bringing to life the experience of God’s love.”⁵ What the Word proclaims, the sacrament makes visible through liturgical signs. Keeping in mind the catechumenal method, and knowing that the children coming to the atrium have received the graces of baptism, they—like those initiated into the Church at the Easter Vigil—need to participate in a mystagogical journey that includes an “introduction to the meaning of liturgical signs.”⁶

PRAYER IS KEY

At the heart of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd we also find prayer. Everything that we do in the atrium is aimed toward helping the child enter a more conscious relationship with God. This requires a very observant attitude on the part of the adult to recognize the ways young children respond to God and help them in a way that corresponds to their need. As Gianna Gobbi reminded us, prayer is “the particular key which opens up the

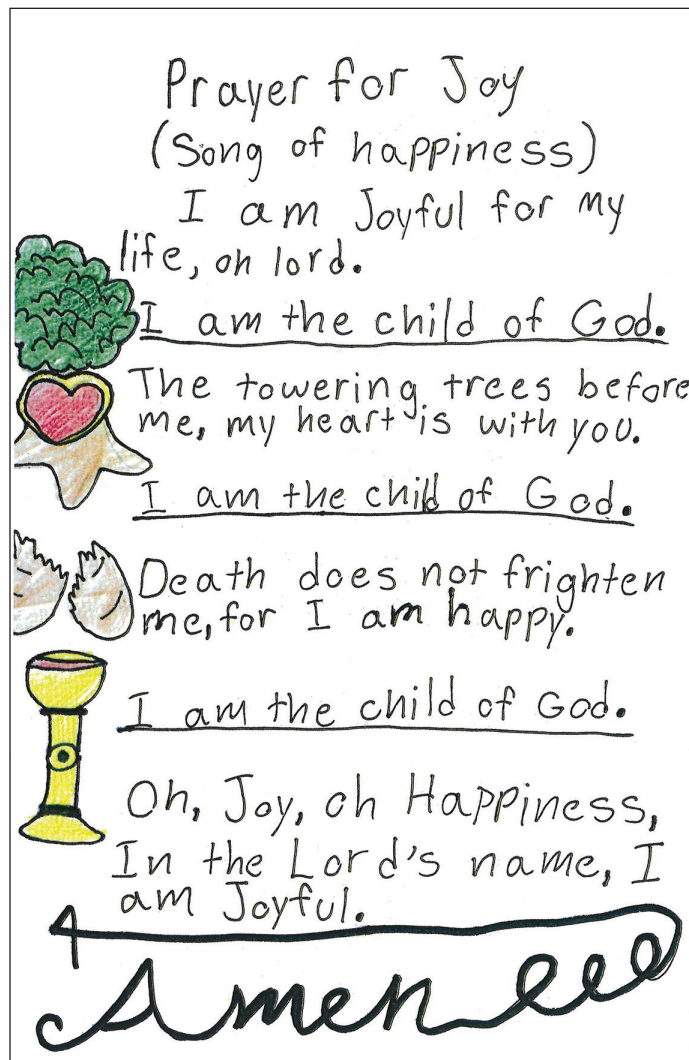
mystery of God's relationship with God's creature. It is a key that not only belongs to God, but that is also given to all God's creatures regardless of denomination, class, or race, one that is offered in every moment, place, and circumstance."⁷⁷

In transmitting the Word of God, the catechist is attending to an important task of formation for a life of prayer. And here it is important to be clear: formation in prayer does not just mean teaching formulated prayers. Parents and educators sometimes only teach their children prayer formulas and not how to pray, how to lift one's gaze upward toward God and listen to him, conversing with him in a personal way; and this is very hard to put right later on. Ten-year-old Sofia writes a "Prayer for Joy" or as she also calls it, a "Song of Happiness." She illustrates her prayer with a towering tree with a big heart and states that "I am the child of God" and that "Death does not frighten me, for I am happy," words written immediately next to a drawing of the broken bread and chalice of the holy Eucharist.

We need to remember that while we might be successful in teaching prayers, we may also be failing to teach one how to pray. Of course, formulated prayers have their part in one's prayer life, but we must first concentrate on helping children be attentive to the dialogue with God; we must focus on what gives rise to a response in them. That is, we must seek to help the response, which is often implicit in them, become more conscious and find its own expression. For example, a group of Level III children are studying the prophet Isaiah, focused on chapter 40, verses 3-5. Having pondered this promise with their catechist they begin to prepare the closing prayer celebration. A nine-year-old writes:

A Voice cries out in the desert.
 He who fills in with the light of the glory of God.
 He is in our heart.
 Let the glory be revealed.
 Let there be paths to guide the Light in our hearts.
 Amen.

It is in the prayer life of the children, where we see true communion, true intimacy with Christ. While as catechists, we do have a part in the prayer of the children, we must always remember that prayer is made up of two moments. The first moment is foundational; this is the moment in which God speaks to his creatures, and it is the time of listening. This is the moment when we proclaim to the children what God wants us to know about him, the announcement of the kerygma as found in Scripture. The second moment of prayer is that of the personal response to God. This is holy ground, where we must tread lightly. In this moment we can offer the peripheral assistance which is the prepared environment. This space is easily accessible to the child and free of adult interruptions. It is in this environment that the child can deepen within themselves the desire for divine love. As the *Directory for Catechesis* states: "At the center of every process of catechesis is the living encounter with Christ. . . . The encounter with Christ involves the person in his totality: heart, mind, senses. It does not concern only the mind, but also the body and above all the heart."⁷⁸



An example of a prayer written by a ten-year-old in the atrium.

In CGS we take great care to help the child have their own encounter with the Lord, to fall deeply in love with Christ so that their actions come as a response to his love. This is accomplished by offering their minds moral parables and principles, and by helping them, through practical life exercises, to develop the self-discipline necessary to carry out in action what the heart and mind have come to know. Brock is eight years old. Given time and space for him to reflect on his relationship with God, he prays:

Holy one you give us the love of you. Great and powerful one you give us life. We get blessed in peace you are the breath taker. You love us and we love you. We eat and drink your body and blood. God you are great, powerful, and holy. God you are strength love, and the vine and we are the branches. We bear fruit with all the love we give you. God, we sinned we start to break. God, we love you. God you are the Good Shepherd, and we are the sheep you care about us with all your heart.

God the great holy one. We love you with our whole heart. Amen.



A child's prayer, following a presentation on the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Brock was not directed in any way to write such things; he had time and space to deepen the listening to the announcement of the kerygma. CGS is a kerygmatic⁹ catechesis that the *Directory for Catechesis* says the Church needs today. After a meditation on the Good Samaritan, William, who is seven, draws the ten commandments held in the dove's beak and in the illuminated "D." To the right he draws the True Vine bearing fruit with the dove flying over the Vine. William writes his prayer: "Dear Lord, please help us to understand to love our neighbor and to love them. Amen." Such wisdom from the heart of a child. Alexa has studied the Parables of Mercy found in the fifteenth chapter of Luke. Alexa is seven and prays: "God will always forgive us and never not love us for we are His sheep and children, for we are His only."

Claudia is ten years old. After working with a card work in Level III that depicts the complete rite of baptism, she draws a self-portrait. In this portrait, her hands hold a large heart colored yellow. The text over the portrait reads "I want to have a very brilliant light." Around the image Claudia writes:

God has given me many gifts and I need to make the most of them. I do not know if I am more than others, but I would like to know for sure that in front of God and my neighbors I would be a good, noble, respectful woman,

with a light that cannot be extinguished, as the light God has given me in baptism which I reinforce in Communion. I know that someday, when God calls me, with my effort I will be a messenger of peace.

In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, we recognize the power of the liturgical signs that "speak to us" through our senses and our spirit. Dr. Maria Montessori spoke of the liturgy as "the magnificent teaching tool of the Church." Signs speak a language that is rich in meaning and impact, and children need to be introduced to this language as they would to their mother tongue or other languages. Therefore, we help the children become aware of the sign, to look closely at it, and then offer them tools for "reading" these signs in their on-going discovery of their deeper meaning. Children have the capacity to disengage from distractions and be attuned to God in the liturgical action. They enter the liturgical celebration with their whole person, body, mind, and soul. With their capacity to "see" what God is doing in the liturgical action, they can cooperate with sacramental grace so that their lives, and those who know them, are transformed.

Through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, we continue to celebrate the meeting of the mystery of God and the mystery of the child. In a spirit of praise and thanksgiving, we stand alongside the children, listening to our Lord who raised His eyes to heaven and proclaimed: "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will" (Matthew 11:25–26). And such is cause for celebration. ♦

Notes

1. Fr. Dalmazio Mongillo, OP, (1928–2005) was a professor of moral theology at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum) in Rome. He frequently gave courses in many prestigious universities. In recognition of his academic achievements, the Dominican order conferred on him the highest honor, awarding him the title Master in Sacred Theology.
2. Sofia Cavalletti, "Christianity? To Enjoy a Person," *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd 2006 Journal*, no. 21, 113.
3. Cavalletti, "Christianity? To Enjoy a Person," 113.
4. Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 2020), 31.
5. *Directory for Catechesis* (DC), 95.
6. DC, 98.
7. Gianna Gobbi, *Nurturing the Whole Child* (Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 2024), 97.
8. DC, 75, 76.
9. DC, 57.

MARY MIRRIONE is the national director for the United States Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

Preaching at School Masses:

Six Tips for Sharing the Word of God with Children

Ann M. Garrido

When comedians complain about tough crowds, preachers smile and think to themselves, “Hah! You should try preaching at an all-school Mass.” Picture pews filled with children ages anywhere from three to thirteen—some of whom are happy to be there, some of whom would prefer to be anywhere else. The rowdiest and those considered flight risks are seated on either side of the vastly outnumbered adults in the congregation—some of whom themselves are happy to be there and some of whom also would prefer to be elsewhere. Here is a generation accustomed to tablets and computer screens and iPhones. Their days are filled with fast-moving visuals and constant interaction. How can a lone voice in the sanctuary speaking about the Word of God possibly compete for their attention? Who wouldn’t be tempted to tell a good joke, perhaps a funny story, and then move on with the rest of the service?

But the Word of God is serious business. It speaks to the deepest hungers of the human heart, including the hungers of children. Lives find meaning in its light. Fears are cast out, sorrows healed, confusion dispelled. We cannot imagine our own lives without the Word of God, and children should not be asked to do so either. Like our Jewish sisters and brothers who kiss the Torah scroll each time it passes through the synagogue, we know the Word of God is to be savored. We do not want to waste away the opportunity that preaching in school Masses can provide. As Psalm 78 proclaims: “What we have heard and know; things our ancestors have recounted to us. We do not keep them from our children; we recount them to the next generation” (Psalm 78:3–4).

But how to make the most of this opportunity? Here are six tips to keep in mind:

TIP 1: KNOW YOUR CONGREGATION

As preachers, have a responsibility to exegete the text, and many of us take that responsibility quite seriously. We realize that what the text says cannot always be taken at face value and requires study. Yet we often slack in our duty to exegete our congregation. We assume that because we are human and they are human we know all we need to know. While there are aspects of being human that weave through the whole of our lives, there

are aspects of childhood that are distinctive. Children meet different challenges and ask different questions at different stages of their journey toward maturity. Cultivating awareness of the planes of development that children pass through and the spiritual characteristics associated with each of those planes can be a



Effective preaching at school Masses requires the ability to connect with a variety of age groups.

great help to preachers in knowing what kinds of messages will connect with children. The challenge, of course, is that our days tend to be full, and ministry pulls us in many directions. It is hard to take the time necessary to sit with children, observe their interactions, and truly get to know them. Many preachers have found the insights of Maria Montessori—and in particular, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd movement—as a valuable primer on the physical, intellectual, social, and especially spiritual markers associated with various periods of child-

hood. Know that you can also ask their teachers for help: What are your third graders able to do now that they couldn’t do in second grade? What kinds of struggles do you see your middle schoolers wrestling with? What do I need to know about preschoolers that might surprise me? Great preachers live in a state of ongoing curiosity about their people.

TIP 2: HONOR CHILDREN’S ESSENTIALITY

The first characteristic of childhood of which every preacher needs to be aware is “essentiality.” As adults we might think children are not yet ready for “the heavy stuff,” but Cavalletti’s insight was that the younger the child, the weightier their questions and the greater their concern to grasp “the essence.” Rather than starting with the peripheral, hoping that someday when they age, children might spiral inward toward what is truly important, she advocated starting with what is truly important and slowly moving outward toward its fuller expression. The mysteries our faith reveals as most core—those mysteries so deep that they can barely even be expressed in language but are best contemplated in silence—are exactly the mysteries that the youngest children are hungriest for: the incarnation, the paschal mystery, the kingdom of God, baptism, Eucharist. When children are offered content they consider peripheral, they are restless and unengaged. When children have the opportunity to engage what they consider essential, they become concentrated and still. We must not shy away from speaking about the greatest mysteries of our faith but explore them with

children in the fewest words possible. “We must give children rich food and not too much of it,” Cavalletti said.

TIP 3: SELECT TEXTS CAREFULLY

Honoring children’s essentiality begins with selecting the text on which one will focus. School Masses are generally celebrated during the school week, meaning that the lectionary usually offers the preacher three scripture passages to preach from (the first reading, the responsorial psalm, and the Gospel). With children it is best to choose just one reading rather than trying to find a connection between them. The weekday lectionary was not constructed with a typological reading of the texts in mind, and younger children are not yet ready for that kind of synthesis developmentally. Readings from the Old Testament can offer wonderfully rich material to explore from the pulpit, but because Jesus Christ is the center of the Christian faith, given the essentiality of children, it tends to make the most sense to focus on the Gospel. As children get older—after the age of nine—one might begin to explore some of the great stories of the Old Testament with them (Creation, Noah, Abraham, Moses), but often these will require more context than time allows during a school Mass. One caveat: sometimes the Gospel of the day will seem inappropriate for children or too difficult to open without lots of historical context. In this case, don’t be afraid to look at the responsorial psalm as an option. The psalms contain the most ancient prayers we have in our tradition and offer the kind of language children often find beautiful and meaningful when trying to express their own prayers to God.

TIP 4: HAVE A SINGLE POINT

After exegeting the congregation and exegeting the chosen text, every preacher must wrestle with what each has to say to the other. In the case of a school Mass: What would children find interesting about this text? Are there ways that this text speaks to the questions they are asking in their lives? Does it offer guidance in the struggles they face? Is there something here that they would find good news? It can take a while to get clear for ourselves: What is the point that I want to lift up in this preaching event? Every preacher should be able to summarize what their point is in thirty words or less. A good point has substance to it. It illumines something essential—not peripheral—to our Christian faith. At the same time, it does not have too much substance. If what you intend to communicate in your preaching cannot be summarized in thirty words, you are trying to say too much in too small a space of time. Every preaching worth its salt only has one point. If you find yourself wanting to make multiple points in the same preaching event, you will lose any congregation, but especially one comprised predominantly of children.

TIP 5: USE STORIES AND HUMOR WISELY

Saying that one has to be able to summarize one’s message in thirty words or less does not mean that one’s sermon is only thirty words. Once we know what we want to say we must figure out how to communicate it in a way that will stick in peoples’ minds past the end of Mass. We want the message to linger with

them at least all week, if not for the rest of their lives. We know that some “forms” of speech linger longer than other. Lists work well in writing but for listening, keep it to three bullet points or less. Stories are a particularly effective way of embedding a point. Indeed, neuroscience is showing our minds are wired to hold onto narrative. Humor also lingers in memory. In fact, stories and humor are so memorable that we have to be careful with them when preaching because if the story or punchline do not directly communicate the point of our sermon, the congregation will remember them but totally miss the point. In preaching school Masses, this is a particular hazard because preachers have long realized children love stories and laughing.

TIP 6: COUNT YOUR WORDS AND LEAVE THEM WONDERING

As hinted already, the essentiality of children mandates that every word we speak counts. In the consideration of Jesus’ preaching, scholars often point out there is not one sentence that could be excised without losing something of substance. There are details that might add vividness to the scene he was painting, but no extraneous details. The younger the child, the greater brevity required. A general rule of thumb might be “one minute per year.” If you are speaking with a group of kindergartners, no more than five minutes. If you are speaking with a group of middle schoolers, no more than twelve minutes. Of course, at a school Mass, you are often speaking with children anywhere from three to thirteen, so you might shoot for an average of seven minutes. Remember that you don’t have to say all that needs to be said about a subject in one homily. Jesus’ preaching often consisted of a story (or even a single metaphor) and a question. He did not explain how the Kingdom of God was like a mustard seed or how his death was like a grain of wheat. He simply planted the picture in their mind and left them wondering: How is this true? What does this mean? If we find the right questions, the questions will continue to be discussed in the classroom and the cafeteria and around the dinner table at home. Preaching intends to initiate a conversation; it does not need to end it.

Preaching school Masses can certainly be challenging. These six tips can give our preaching a better chance of having a lasting effect. In the end, we must believe that the Word of God has a power of its own. In the words of evangelical preacher J.I. Packer, “Read yourself full, think yourself clear, pray yourself hot, and then let yourself go.” God will take it from here. ♦

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At www.PastoralLiturgy.org

Find and share this article with parish staff and the liturgy committee at the following URL: <http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/preachingschoolmass.pdf>.

Seeking the Peace of the Good Shepherd

Sr. Mary Michael Fox, OP

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
In verdant pastures he gives me repose;
beside restful waters he leads me;
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me in right paths
For his name's sake.
Even though I walk in the dark valley
I fear no evil; for you are at my side . . .

— Psalm 23:1–4a, excerpt from the Responsorial Psalm
on the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The readings for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time provide a glimpse into the peace found in the hearts of all who *hear* the voice the Good Shepherd and *follow* him. To the beleaguered people of Israel suffering Babylonian captivity, the prophet Jeremiah promises that one day they would be led by a shepherd who is good and just to dwell in peace and security. St. Paul promises peace to those who embrace the transforming power of the Good Shepherd's grace, which alone is capable of fashioning brothers and sisters out of racial, political, or ethnic enemies. In the Gospel according to St. Mark, Jesus invites his apostles to follow him to a place of rest—a place of peace. Noticing the many others with similar longing, his heart aches to bring peace of mind, and soul, and body to them as well. Drawing all themes together as in one motif of peace, the beloved psalmist poetically invites us to follow the Good Shepherd who *can* and *will* subdue all manner of fear, anxiety, hopelessness, and enmity in our heart so that true and lasting peace may reign in our soul.

LET NOTHING DISTURB YOU

Peace is so much more than the absence of war or strife; peace is the interior disposition that the soul enjoys when the Holy Spirit orders the passions and desires to their proper end: God. This is why a person facing tremendous suffering can be at peace while another person who has everything he or she has ever “wanted” remains restless. St. Augustine said it most succinctly: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” And rest they do. When the heart is set firmly on love for God, nothing else matters—*nothing*. This is what St. Teresa of Avila eventually came to understand, and we are all the beneficiaries of her wisdom: “Let nothing disturb you, nothing frighten you. All things are passing away. God alone suffices.”

Consider the first-century deacon St. Lawrence, who while being roasted alive had the peace of mind—and levity of heart—to quip, “Turn me over, I’m done on this side.” Then there is our

friend St. Thomas More, who after addressing his hateful accusers with a serene “I die the King’s good servant; but God’s first,” placed his own neck on the chopping block. St. Maximilian Kolbe spent fourteen days in a starvation bunker at Auschwitz and sang the entire time. These—and your own favorite saints!—all attest to the same promise: when we trust that our Good Shepherd is with us, providing for all that we truly need, our souls are at peace.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SILENCE

We may be tempted to protest, “Well, of course the saints could endure their trials with peace—but I’m not a saint!” Neither am I—neither are most of us—but the Good Shepherd can and wants to lead us beside restful waters. He calls each one of us by

name. “God speaks in the silence of our heart,” Mother Teresa gently reminded. Hence, our desperate need to be able to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd. The challenge is for us to discern his gentle voice in the cacophony of the world’s noise and the noise of our own heart. Silence is the key to peace.

It takes work to settle down—to still our bodies and our souls—but there is a way to do this that even a three-year-old can manage. It’s called “The Gift of Silence.” The Gift of Silence is a presentation offered in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) approach to children’s catechesis. The various moments of the lesson lead the child to still his body, then his mind, then his heart while becoming increasingly aware of the sounds in the room, then the silence in their heart, then the voice God. At the heart of the CGS pedagogy is the conviction that God is already pursuing us, already calling our name. He has already fallen in love with us and has already showered us with gift upon gift upon gift. Hence, the CGS approach is imbued with a contemplative spirit that strives to dispose within the child and the catechist a listening heart.¹

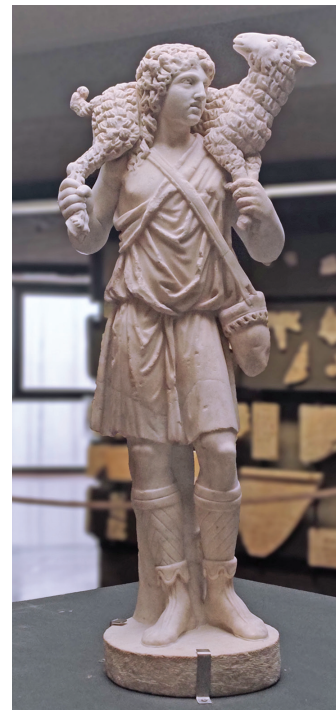


Photo © LTP

The psalm on the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time invites us to trust in the Good Shepherd.

Could it really be that easy? Yes . . . *and no*. Many years ago, I heard the well-known Psalm 23 sung at a funeral and was struck by its refrain: “Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.”² The song haunts my prayer as year after year, I slowly come to terms with my false desires, false concerns, false fears, and false idols. As a young woman, I heard the voice of the Good Shepherd and even followed him into the convent, but the process of allowing God to shepherd me in all things is taking a lifetime. I know that I am not alone in this struggle.

AN INVITATION TO TRUST

In his small treatise on gaining peace of heart, the popular retreat master Father Jacques Philippe encourages his readers to ask themselves the life-changing question “What must we do in order to let the grace of God act freely in our lives?”³ Of course, there is no unequivocal answer to this question, but there is a baseline start for each of us: trust. If silence is the key to hearing the Good Shepherd’s voice, “Trust me” is what he is most often saying.

We read in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus looked upon the crowd “with pity because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 8:29). God wants so much to take care of us, yet so often we default to miserable self-reliance. “Why don’t you have confidence in me?” God once spoke to St. Catherine of Siena. “Why do you rely on yourself? Am I not faithful and loyal to you?”⁴ Since the time of Adam and Eve, humankind has struggled to trust in God’s goodness and providence and what we learn from saints like Catherine, Therese, and Faustina is that our lack of trust hurts God more than any other offense against his love. How then are we to grow in trust? Father Philippe suggests three simple ways to begin.

First, we need to purify our image of God. All of us have inherited a particular image of God fashioned by our family, our culture, and some representative of the Church. For some, God’s face is harsh. For others, it is a caricature of Santa. For many there is some distortion from the beautiful truth, otherwise more of us would readily trust God in all things. Hence, the second way to grow in trust is to meditate regularly on the Scriptures that reveal God’s true face. Drawing from both the Old and New Testament we see that God is faithful, merciful, and just. He is our rock, our refuge, and our shield. He is our Father, our Mother, and our Source of Life. He is a powerful healer, a merciful savior, and an extravagant provider. Finally, to grow in trust, we must *trust*. Acts of entrustment (such as a simple prayer of surrender) strengthen our resolve to trust that God is going to take care of anything and everything that is a concern.

In the process of writing this, I have had the sacred privilege of accompanying a husband and father of seven children as he watches his beautiful wife struggle to recover from heart failure that caused an anoxic brain injury. The fact that Katie is alive is a medical miracle. Brandon’s faith and trust in God is a *spiritual* one. He has had to walk that very dark valley clinging to the Good Shepherd. Every day has been a battle to fight the fears of losing his beloved wife to death and now losing her vivacity to twenty-four-hour care. A man of ordinary faith,

Brandon has had to beg for the grace to believe the promises of Psalm 23 and to find that peace of soul that “surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). Throughout these months, I’ve reflected more consequentially that it is one thing to think and write about how the Good Shepherd cares for us; it is quite another thing to live it—to have to live it—moment by moment, breath by breath.

Those of us who have been blessed to live in the atrium with children have given presentation after presentation on the parable of the Good Shepherd. The purpose of this proclamation is to deepen the child’s trust in God—to fix in their mind and heart that Jesus is their Good Shepherd who will always care for them. As our Good Shepherd, Jesus cares for us and suffers with us. His heart suffers with Brandon and Katie and their family. His heart suffers with you and your family as well. If we proclaim no other doctrine to our children, to our teenagers, to our OCIA adults, let us firmly and boldly proclaim this one: when the Lord is our Shepherd, we lack *nothing*.

We have in the CGS atrium any number of simple songs that coincide with a particular proclamation and aid the prayer of the child. One of my favorites is “The Lord is my Shepherd.” Many of my readers will be familiar with the tune, but I have discovered one brave catechist willing to post it for all to hear (thank you, Allison!).⁵ On days when I struggle to trust God with every single detail of my life, I sing it in my heart until I gain peace of soul. May it become a refrain in your heart especially when trust seems most difficult.

The Lord is my Shepherd. I’ll walk with Him always.
He knows me and He loves me. I’ll walk with Him always.
Always. Always. I’ll walk with Him always.
Always. Always. I’ll walk with Him always. ◆

Notes

1. Sr. Mary Michael Fox, OP, *Following God’s Pedagogy* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2023).
2. Text: Psalm 23; Marty Haugen, b.1950, © 1986, GIA Publications, Inc.
3. Jacques Philippe, *Searching for and Maintaining Peace: A Small Treatise on Peace of Heart*, trans. George and Jannic Driscoll (New York: Alba House), 4.
4. *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena* found in *Searching and Maintaining Peace*, 26.
5. Allison Brown, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEtYCYaDepg>. The CGS SoundCloud also posts a version: <https://soundcloud.com/user-212926206/the-lord-is-my-shepherd-ill>.

SISTER MARY MICHAEL FOX, OP, is a member of the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia (Nashville). She serves as a catechetical consultant and is the author of *Following God’s Pedagogy: Principles for Children’s Catechesis* (LTP, 2023).

The CGS Atrium:

A Space That Fosters Liturgical Participation

Susan Jett

One of the benefits of implementing the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) approach to children's faith formation is that adult catechists are also formed spiritually as they accompany the child and wonder together over the mysteries of our faith. The indirect and comprehensive aim of the atrium (the prepared environment for CGS) is to nurture a personal relationship with Christ, our Good Shepherd, allowing him to lead his sheep to more abundant life with him through giving them access to "full, active, and conscious participation" in the liturgy (*Sacrosanctam concilium*, 14). Indeed, the atrium is a space which fosters greater participation of children (and adults) in the liturgical life of the Church.

During a press conference in 2020 to present the *Directory for Catechesis* (DC), Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, prophesized, "There is urgency in carrying out a 'pastoral conversion' in order to free catechesis from some chokeholds that prevent its effectiveness."¹ He challenged Church leaders to "de-school" catechesis and to implement methods of religious formation that maintain the unity of the mystery, embrace silence, and guide us in our work of contemplating the mystery of God while promoting "personal freedom as the fruit of the discovery of the truth" and allowing for an encounter with the person of Christ.² The archbishop's message is a sign of good news for the CGS community and others in the Church who desire to enact this evangelizing vision of catechesis. One need only look to the thirty-two characteristics of CGS³ to find a reasonable model for responding to the directives put forward in the *Directory*, thus enabling our children to grow into the fullness of the Catholic faith not only through the process of religious instruction, but especially through encountering the mystery of the risen Christ in Scripture and liturgy.

The "de-schooling" of catechesis is a hallmark of CGS. The prepared environment of a CGS atrium is more of a retreat center than a classroom. The themes of the presentations offered to children correspond with the liturgical seasons and progressively unfold according to the rhythm of the church year. Each level of the atrium is designed for a specific period of human development, and the space is created to serve the children's developmental and spiritual needs.

To illustrate the structure of the CGS environment as a catechetical space that promotes full participation in the liturgy, we can take a closer look at a Level I atrium for three-to-six-year-olds:



The prayer table with the enthroned Bible occupies a central place in the atrium.

CGS programs typically begin the catechetical year about eight weeks before Advent and celebrate the close of the year at Pentecost. From their first day in the atrium, the youngest children come to recognize the space as a place of beauty, order, and silence that has been set apart for their personal work of prayer and coming to know the mystery of God. During the introductory weeks of the catechetical year, children are oriented to the rhythm and life of the atrium through practical life exercises of grace and courtesy, controlled movements, care of self, and care of the environment. Practical life work is one of the distinctive features of the Level I atrium and reflects the Montessori foundation of CGS. These exercises provide opportunities for the child to develop the psychic powers of concentration which are essential for prayer and meditation. Practical life also fosters the independence to freely choose and successfully complete the progressively unfolding work in the atrium.

Since three-to-six-year-olds have a need for movement, order, and sensorial exploration, the space is designed accordingly. There are concrete materials which are ordered on work trays and placed on shelves using a top to bottom, left to right order corresponding to the progression of the work. The work of the child begins with the preliminary work of practical life and flows into the unfolding mysteries of the risen Christ which are celebrated in the liturgical life of the Church. The materials in the atrium are not didactic tools for the adult, but an aid for the child's prayer and personal work of contemplating the mystery of God in the Scriptures and liturgy. The concrete materials reflect the essential doctrine that is discovered through the child's personal work with the materials, and the Holy Spirit is

Liturgical Ministries | Environment



The model altar invites children to become familiar with the sacred items used at Mass.

their one, true teacher. Gianna Gobbi, cofounder of CGS, describes the catechetical materials as

indications of the hidden reality of God. They are concrete helps to know the language, times, and places of the mystery of God. The child will make the mystery his own according to his own nature, his own capacities, and his own personal rhythm of learning. With due respect for the differences, we can say that materials do what liturgy does. Our relationship is established through sensible objects, respecting a fundamental human exigency.⁴

While it would not be feasible to describe the scope of the Level I presentations within the context of this article, below are some examples which highlight the CGS atrium as a space that helps children participate more fully in the liturgy as the source and summit of our faith:

- There is a communal procession to celebrate the beginning of the catechetical year and to prepare the prayer table and enthrone the Holy Bible in its proper place of prayer. As the liturgical year unfolds, there are communal processions to change the prayer cloth and celebrate the mysteries of God that are unfolding throughout the liturgical seasons of the year.
- The Holy Bible is enthroned on the prayer table and conveys its importance and sacredness as the gift of God's Word for us. There is a taper candle next to the Holy Bible which is lit to proclaim the light of the world that is with us to give more and more of his light and love to our lives. Little by little, the children come to God's Word and receive more and more



The baptism material invites children to contemplate our participation in the life of the risen Christ.

of God's light as we contemplate and encounter the mystery of God in the atrium as well as the liturgy.

- The model altar material helps the children come to know about the things they see at Mass. It is carefully prepared with most beautiful articles for Jesus' most sacred meal. There is a crucifix set on the table and candles are lit to remind us that Jesus has died and is risen and is with us in a most particular way at Mass. When we go to church, we look for these articles which are even more beautiful because the Mass is where Jesus is truly present.
- The gestures of the Mass materials educate the children to read the liturgical signs and invite them to ponder the eucharistic mysteries we encounter in the Mass.
- The Parable of the Good Shepherd material proclaims our covenantal relationship with Jesus, and the Eucharistic Presence material proclaims the mystery of the Good Shepherd's eternal covenant with his sheep in Eucharist.
- The Last Supper materials proclaim the Eucharistic mystery that we encounter in the Mass.
- The Liturgy of the Light proclaims that Christ has died and is risen. The paschal candle is a sign of the eternal light and life of the risen Lord that is stronger than death.
- The Baptism material proclaims that Christ has died and is risen and shares his risen life with his sheep in the sacrament of baptism. The articles of baptism are signs of the gifts we receive from the risen Jesus. ♦

Notes

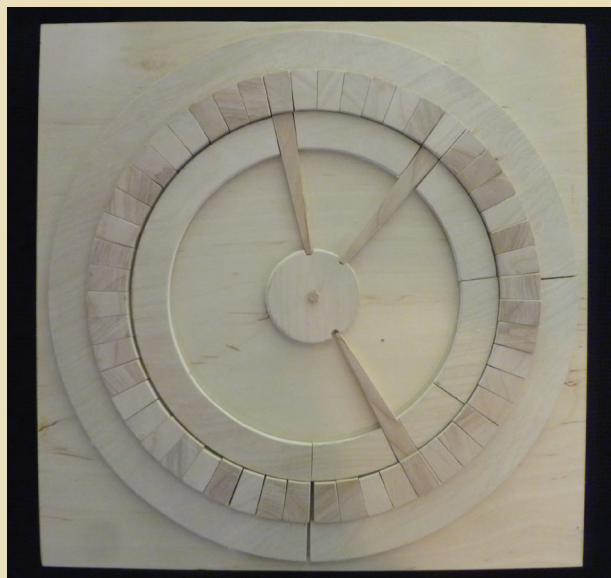
1. Archbishop Rino Fisichella, "Press Conference to Present the *Directory for Catechesis* Prepared by the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization," Holy See Press Office, Rome, April 25, 2020, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/06/25/200625c.html>.
2. Archbishop Rino Fisichella, "Press Conference to Present the *Directory for Catechesis*."
3. "The Characteristics of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd," CGSUSA, <https://www.cgsusa.org/the-32-points-of-reflection/>.
4. Gianna Gobbi, quoted in Tina Lillig, ed., *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Essential Realities* (Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 2004), 55.

SUSAN JETT is a formation leader certified in levels I, II, and III of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. She currently serves as a level I catechist at St. James the Less Parish in Highland, Indiana.

Doing Good Work

Don Martin began creating materials for Catechesis of the Good Shepherd when his wife was first setting up an atrium at their parish over twenty years ago. From its small beginnings, Don's work has expanded to a full-time business supplying materials for atria in the United States and abroad. He relishes the challenge of finding new ways to craft materials that are sturdy, cost-effective, and beautiful—all the while meeting the requirements outlined by CGSUSA. His works provide children a hands-on way to experience and learn about God and can be viewed at www.TheCatechistsHusband.com.

DON MARTIN | THE CATECHIST'S HUSBAND



Worship Meeting Agenda

(Editor's note: These agenda items provide a listing of possible topics to consider at the next parish liturgy committee meeting. Select the topics that will guide your preparations in the months ahead.)

PREPARATION

- Invite committee members to read Jayne Porcelli's "Preparing a Welcoming Environment during the Catechumenate," in this issue. Members should be prepared to reflect on the question "How do parishioners understand their role in attracting and welcoming new Catholics to the Church?"

BEGIN WITH PRAYER

- Obtain a small loaf of rustic bread to add to a prayer table prepared for this meeting. Ask a lector to proclaim John 6:27–40. Ask "What does the 'living bread' mean to you?" Allow two minutes of silent contemplation, then invite any spoken responses from the group. Pray the Lord's Prayer together, and conclude with the summons "May we all become what we eat!" followed by a communal "Amen."
- Begin with a devout sign of the cross. Provide a copy of the Prayer to the Holy Spirit (<https://www.usccb.org/prayers/prayer-holy-spirit>) and recite together or use the Prayer to the Holy Spirit (used at the sessions of the Second Vatican Council) in the *Book of Blessings*, p. 191.
- Ask a volunteer to read aloud *Sacrosanctum concilium* 26–30. Allow two minutes of silence to consider these words. Conclude by reciting three Hail Marys.

EVALUATE AND PLAN

- Review the parish's liturgical ministries and current participation levels. Ask ministry leaders what is needed in terms of ministry education, encouragement, leadership development, or skills reinforcement. Express gratitude to ministry leaders for their service, and record and implement any suggestions they may offer for improvement.
- Discuss what is needed to help the art and environment team to "green" the worship space during the summer months of Ordinary Time. Support efforts to investigate new banners or greenery to be used in the sanctuary, and encourage the use of flowers harvested from a parish garden (if applicable).

ANTICIPATE AND PREPARE

- The Tenth National Eucharistic Congress (July 17–21, Indianapolis, Indiana) aims to awaken greater love for and belief in the Eucharist. Insert several petitions into the Universal Prayer for each weekend Mass during July. Pay special attention to asking the Holy Spirit to inspire, encourage, and direct the parishioners to deeper understanding and love of the Eucharist. Ensure that the outcomes of this important revival are communicated to parishioners.

- Create a parish liturgical calendar. This can be on the agenda for the current meeting or a separate meeting where the calendar is the sole focus. Invite a parish member with facilitating skill to lead this effort. Plan what needs to be celebrated and honored in the liturgical year ahead.

- Discuss and evaluate: How are the children in the parish being served liturgically? What more might be needed? Direct Ann M. Garrido's article, "Preaching at School Masses: Six Tips for Sharing the Word of God with Children," in this issue, to the priests or deacons who are responsible for homilies with children. Share discussion results with catechetical leaders and catechists for follow up.

- Invite committee members to acquaint themselves with the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. This issue of *Pastoral Liturgy* is an excellent source for adult education about this catechetical method that integrates childhood development and religious formation.

- July is the month of the Most Precious Blood. Encourage parishioner participation, if needed, in receiving the Eucharist in its "fuller form." Review *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 281 and 282.

SENDING FORTH

- Recite together two decades of the Rosary, and ask the members to finish this Rosary in the coming week, for the general intentions of those who have not yet returned to regular Mass attendance.
- On August 15, we celebrate the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In anticipation of this holyday of obligation, read the collect and the prayer over the offerings from the Vigil Mass, using *The Roman Missal*. Sing together "Sing of Mary, Pure and Lowly" (PLEADING SAVIOR) (available with lyrics at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JCfO2-mchA>).
- Begin with the sign of the cross, followed by proclaiming Luke 1:46–55, the Magnificat of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Listen prayerfully to the song "Magnificat" (James J. Chepponis © 1980, GIA Publications) found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9LXefzbUkU>. End with a group "Amen."

PATRICIA J. HUGHES, DMIN, has directed the office of worship for the dioceses of Grand Rapids and Dallas.

At www.PastoralLiturgy.org

Find and share this article with parish staff and the liturgy committee at <http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/resources/WorshipMeetingAgenda.pdf>.

Preparing a Welcoming Environment during the Precatechumenate

Jayne Porcelli

I often wonder what our Sunday worship might look like to an outsider. If someone who is not familiar with the Catholic faith were to come into our parish—be they young, middle aged, or older, from our country and culture or from another—what kind of welcome would they find when they walk through our doors? As pastoral ministers, our task is to help parishioners understand that this is a question that all sitting in the pews need to take seriously. Here, we look at some concrete ways that the parish and initiation team can work together to foster a welcoming environment for newcomers to the faith.

SHOW HOSPITALITY

Welcoming others and showing hospitality is the responsibility of every Christian. In the letter to the Hebrews, we read: “Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.” (Hebrews 13:2). A few centuries later, St. Benedict wrote, “Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ.” While we are grateful for those who serve on parish initiation teams, the fact is that every parishioner is responsible for working together to create a welcoming environment for those who may be looking to explore our faith.

Begin the process of forming the assembly for their role in extending hospitality to newcomers by inviting them to think about their own experience of coming to Mass on Sunday. How and when do they arrive at church? Do they come early enough to give themselves a few minutes to settle in before Mass starts? After they have had a few minutes to reflect and settle before Mass begins, share that the next step is for them to look around. Do they notice anyone they have never seen before? If so, invite them to consider walking over and greeting them.

When a young person or stranger walks into the church for the first time, the first impression is critical to their future engagement. Whether they stay or return depends on whether they feel welcome. We do not want anyone walking away feeling that no one cared or bothered to notice them. Build empathy among your parishioners by having them consider what it’s like to be a newcomer. Remind them that it takes a lot of courage to



While greeters carry out an important ministry, all parishioners should see themselves as ministers of welcome within the worshipping assembly.

walk into a place where you know no one. Invite them to imagine how it might feel to be greeted warmly at this moment. What a difference that would make!

Another easy way that parishioners can foster a welcoming environment within the church is to consider where they sit at Mass. Do parishioners sit at the end of the row, or do they move into the middle of the bench? Point out that no one likes to have to climb over someone to get to an empty space in the middle of the row. By intentionally moving to the middle of the pew—rather than sitting on the end of a row—parishioners can offer a simple, nonverbal cue, welcoming others to sit next to them. And if someone should find their way to the empty space next to a parishioner at the open edge of the pew, invite them to offer a smile or simple welcome to make guests feel even more at ease.

CREATE A SAFE SPACE

The initiation journey officially begins with the precatechumenate or inquiry period. In this stage of the process, the role of the inquiry team is to offer people a safe place to explore their questions about Jesus, Scripture, and the Catholic faith. It is a time to



Photo by Jon Tyson (Unsplash)

During the precatechumenate, initiation teams work to create a welcoming, nonjudgmental space for all inquirers.

share our story and listen to those who are searching for a deeper relationship with God.

An essential aspect of creating a safe space for inquirers to explore faith is to set aside any preconceived notions or judgmental attitudes that we may have. The role of the inquiry team is not to determine whether someone is worthy or good enough to be Catholic. Often, we don't realize that we have deep-seated ideas about what is right and wrong and about how people are to live that might affect how we treat inquirers in those very important first days. Those who are just beginning to look at the Catholic faith do not know our rules or traditions and might not share our understanding of what is right and wrong. It is crucial that we listen with a nonjudgmental and open mind and heart as we hear their stories of struggle and searching.

In this stage of the initiation process, initiation teams ought to adopt a "no strings attached" attitude, meaning that inquirers are free to come and go as they wish. During this stage, inquirers are trying us on for size, searching to see if our faith fits them. As a member of the inquiry team, it is not our job to convince them to be Catholic—that is the job of the Holy Spirit. Our role is to present our tradition and practice in as honest and real a manner as possible and to offer them the prayerful support and space to discern where God is calling them.

EXPLORE QUESTIONS

So what might inquiry sessions look like? They should take place in a relaxed setting, with comfortable seating and some options for coffee and snacks, or whatever works in your space and time frame. Inquirers might gather once a month over coffee to talk about what is on their mind and heart. Many times, inquiry groups meet weekly. Parishes are free to adopt a schedule that works for their inquirers. What is essential is that initiation team members work to build relationships with inquirers and help them feel welcome within the Christian community.

Often, inquirers come with questions, and when they do, their questions should guide the conversation. Other times they don't. When faced with individuals who are inquiring but don't have the language needed to ask the questions inside of them, it's good to explore the tried-and-true "big life questions." Those might include questions like: What is the meaning of life? What do we think about the afterlife? Why is there suffering in the world? What is confession about? What do Catholics teach about Mary and the saints? As well as questions about the Bible, and so on. Having an inquiry team member present a general overview and follow up by asking a few open-ended questions often sparks conversation and raises new questions for the inquirers.

ASSEMBLE A DIVERSE TEAM

Another important thing to consider is how diverse your inquiry team is. When an inquirer begins the process, do they see anyone else in the room who may look like them in terms of age, race, and so on? This is another significant way to help inquirers feel comfortable. If an inquirer is a young man looking to talk about his fledgling faith, will he feel understood by a group of older women? Maybe he would, but if the team consisted of a group of men and women of varying ages, he might more likely gravitate toward someone who shares his life experience.

Inquiry teams should also be trained to work with inquirers with different education levels, and to handle all sorts of questions, from basic to complex. In the same inquiry group, I have had some inquirers who were brilliant and others who just squeaked by in high school. This is a challenge for the team; we want to honor and value everyone, even as their questions and life experiences can be so varied. Sometimes the challenge may be for inquirers to learn to trust and listen to their heart as well as analyzing our traditions and truths. One young man said after he was received into the Church: "I thought I knew everything about what it meant to be Catholic, but I only knew what I read in books. I needed this time to live and experience what it meant to be Catholic to fully say yes to what God was calling me to."

AVOID INSIDER TALK

In imagining what a good inquiry session would look like, it's helpful not only to think about what we want to do, but to remember what we want to avoid. For example, we don't want to use insider language. In any organization there are words, phrases, and concepts that we presume everyone understands because we all speak the same language. Our Church is no exception—we have lots of words and concepts that we presume

others understand. When talking with inquirers, be sure to carefully explain whatever terminology is used so that they start to feel comfortable with and gain a working knowledge of our vocabulary and traditions. Outside of practicing Catholics, most people wouldn't know what we meant if we referred to Vatican II. Consider that we also have multiple words to describe a single reality: for example, the Church's celebration on Sunday can be called "Mass," "Eucharist," or "Liturgy." What other examples of insider language can you think of? One person on your team might be tasked with listening to presentations and ensuring that we stop and explain words as we go along.

Additionally, when working with inquirers, we want to avoid "airing all our dirty laundry" as my mom used to say. Lifelong Catholics often see our Church with clear eyes. We know our sinful history and have experienced our share of pain and hurt because of the brokenness of the human dimension of the Church. And yet we also know that the Spirit continues to lead and guide us. Our inquirers will have their own questions about what they have seen and heard about Catholics. They don't need to hear us gripe about what we don't like about our leaders or the institutional failings of the Church. We don't wear rose-colored glasses, but we shouldn't trash-talk our parish or our community, either.

Another practice team members should avoid is speaking only with those they already know. On Sundays and at inquiry sessions, it's so important that team members go out of their way to reach out to newcomers. It's too easy to stay in our comfort zone and only talk to our friends. If a team member is talking with a friend when an inquirer walks in, the team member should bring the inquirer over and introduce them to their friend and make them feel included in the conversation.

Finally, those who have the responsibility of preaching at the Sunday liturgy (priests and deacons) ought to keep inquirers in mind as they prepare their homilies. As the Sunday liturgy is often the first place that inquirers go to get a sense of the Catholic community, preachers will want to ensure that their preaching is top-notch and welcoming—even for those who are outside the Christian fold. Preachers might even consider intentionally referencing visitors in their homilies from time to time: "There might be some who are here today who aren't sure they believe all of this stuff. We're glad you're here, and we hope this community can help you wrestle with the questions you have about life and faith," or "Even if you're new to faith, Jesus invites you to come and see . . ."

LISTEN ATTENTIVELY

A favorite question to ask an inquirer as we meet for the first time is, "So what's going on in your life that you decided now was the right time to come ask about the Catholic Church?" The stories I hear in response to this question speak to God's incredible love and generosity. God uses all our life experiences, our pains, our sorrows, our joys and wonder to reach into our hearts and whisper gently (or for some of us, not so gently), "I am calling you. I want you for my own. Come follow me."

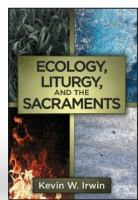


Simple refreshments, a comfortable environment, and a listening ear are key elements of hospitality during the precatechumenate.

Members of the parish inquiry team have the great privilege and grace of walking with inquirers at the very beginning of their faith journey and of helping them to learn how to listen more closely for the voice of God in their lives. Of all the qualities most essential to this work, it's not having all the answers that matters most, but rather, having an open and loving heart that desires to help others feel comfortable as they discern what God is asking of them. In offering the gift of heartfelt hospitality, inquiry team members might very well be "entertaining angels" for their parish. ♦

JAYNE PORCELLI recently retired from ministry after more than forty years serving in parishes.

Liturgical Catechesis | Book Reviews



ECOLOGY, LITURGY, AND THE SACRAMENTS

Kevin W. Irwin
Paulist Press, 2022

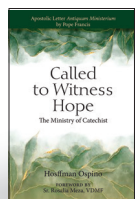
978-08091-5519-4

“Liturgy does not ask us to forsake or shun the world. Rather, liturgy engages the world at a deep level based on reverence, contemplation, and awe of all that exists,” wrote Kevin W. Irwin in the introduction of *Ecology, Liturgy, and the Sacraments*. Drawing heavily on Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato si’*, Irwin develops this statement in this thoughtful and meticulously researched text that unites ecology with liturgical and sacramental studies. Irwin’s deep love and knowledge of Catholic liturgy is evident on every page.

Irwin focuses specifically on the celebration of Baptism, Eucharist, and the Liturgy of the Hours, and engages each through an ecological hermeneutic. He writes that worship is “primal and earthy” and raises up the many ways that Catholic liturgy is enriched by and shaped by elements of “our common home.” Our communal worship reflects both the goodness of the Creator and the interconnectedness of creation. For Irwin, “ecology is liturgy and liturgy is ecology” (197), and liturgical worship draws us into reverence for all life, appreciation of the sacramental world we call home, and humble awareness of our place in it.

While Irwin’s area of expertise is Roman Catholic worship, he devotes an entire chapter to contemporary ecumenical teachings on creation and ecology.

Pastors, preachers, liturgists, religious educators, and Catholic leaders in the field of ecology will find in Irwin’s book a well-organized resource for understanding the connection between ecology and liturgy.—*Rhonda Miska is the director of communications at St. Timothy Church in Blaine, Minnesota.*



CALLED TO WITNESS HOPE

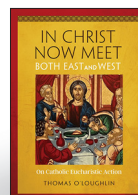
Hosffman Ospino
Paulist Press, 2023

978-08091-5603-0

Called to Witness Hope: The Ministry of the Catechist is a short and useful book about catechetical ministry. The book contains three elements, the first being the apostolic letter *Antiquum ministerium* by Pope Francis, in which he officially institutes the ministry of the catechist. With the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops currently working on guidelines for this ministry in the United States, one hopes that these efforts will result in renewed attention and support for this critical ministry in the Church. The letter is followed by a commentary by Archbishop Rino Fisichella. He writes with energy, providing clear direction on the top priorities for formation of catechetical ministers today.

The third section of the book is an extended reflection on the ministry of catechesis by Hosffman Ospino. His descriptions of divine pedagogy and of the five tasks of catechesis are concise and comprehensible for all engaged in the ministry. Finally, his reflection on a commissioning ceremony for catechists could easily be used by catechetical leaders to lead a similar service within the parish setting.

Overall, the content makes the book more suited to pastors, catechetical leaders, and bishops. This book would be particularly helpful for use in preparing a day of reflection or a formation series for parish catechists. All in all, there are some wonderful nuggets to be mined and shared with anyone hoping to form Christians in the faith.—*Catherine Crino is the retired director of religious education at St. Emily Parish, Mount Prospect, Illinois.*



IN CHRIST NOW MEET BOTH EAST AND WEST

Thomas O’Loughlin
Liturgical Press, 2023

978-08146-6875-7

While other books published during this time of Eucharistic Revival seek to explain Church teaching on the Eucharist, Thomas O’Loughlin’s book *In Christ Now Meet Both East and West: On Catholic Eucharistic Action* leads readers to reflect on the ways the Eucharist calls us to live in communion with our brothers and sisters.

Exploring the Eucharist through the experiential lens of sharing a meal, O’Loughlin calls our attention to the innate social dimensions of Eucharist: the food that we eat is produced through the labor of others, and meals are often eaten together with others. Given the innate connection between meals and the wider community, eating is never purely a secular activity, for God is present wherever people gather.

Connecting his reflection to Jesus’ table fellowship in the Gospels, O’Loughlin concludes that “any eucharistic renewal must be first and foremost a renewal in the way we carry out this activity in union with our sisters and brothers, the whole Church of God” (43). O’Loughlin calls us to move beyond the theology of Eucharist to allow the celebration of the Eucharist to change how we live with our brothers and sisters in daily life.

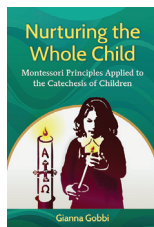
Finally, O’Loughlin guides us through a Eucharistic liturgy, noting that we do not gather in a church but as a Church. In drinking from the same cup, we all share in the mission of bringing Christ’s presence to our brothers and sisters. This book would be an excellent read for adult formation groups or worship commissions within the parish.—*Randall R. Phillips, STD, St. Blaise Parish, Sterling Heights, Michigan.*

PARISH PICKS



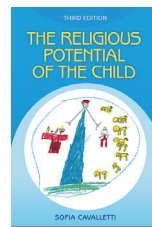
Vida en la Vid
Rebekah Francisco
Rojcewicz
Catechesis of the
Good Shepherd
Publications, 2023
978-1-61671-740-7

A key resource for those serving in the Level II atrium for Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, *Vida en la Vid: El Camino de Gozo Continúa* explores the journey that catechists and children have made with Jesus the True Vine. Also available in English as *Life in the Vine: The Joyful Journey Continues*.



Nurturing the Whole Child
Gianna Gobbi
Catechesis of the Good
Shepherd Publications, 2024
978-1-61671-780-3

In *Nurturing the Whole Child: Montessori Principles Applied to the Catechesis of Children*, Gianna Gobbi (cofounder of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd) helps catechists learn to apply Montessori principles in their ministry with children. A must-have resource for catechetical leaders.



The Religious Potential of the Child
Sofia Cavalletti
Catechesis of the Good
Shepherd Publications, 2020
978-1-61671-518-2

The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children by Sofia Cavalletti describes the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS), a Montessori-based method that focuses on the child's journey to God. It is essential reading for anyone desiring to learn about CGS.

Q: Our parish is planning a celebration of the anointing of the sick. Who should be invited to come forward?

Q&A

A: First, how wonderful that you are offering this ministry! Whether in the context of Mass or not, the communal celebration of the sacrament is encouraged by both the ritual book, *Pastoral Care of the Sick* (99), and by *Sacrosanctum concilium* (27).

If you will be celebrating anointing in the context of Mass, you may want to consult the May 2013 issue of the Newsletter from the Bishops' Committee on Divine Worship. The article there covers which prayers and readings ought to be used in light of the third edition of *The Roman Missal*.

It is good to remember that *Sacrosanctum concilium* calls for the sacrament to be celebrated "as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age" (73) and not to wait until death is imminent (see PCS, 13).

The introduction to the current rite puts it this way: "Great care and concern should be taken to see that those of the faithful whose health is seriously [periculose] impaired by sickness or old age receive this sacrament" (8). The footnote is instructive. The Latin word *periculose* was translated as "seriously" (rather than gravely) in order to avoid both undo restrictions on celebrating the sacrament and its indiscriminate use. Those eligible for the sacrament include the following:

- Those facing a serious acute health crisis, including surgery for a serious reason (10).
- Those suffering from a chronic or debilitating illness, including mental illness (53), especially if it is worsening (9).

- Elderly persons, if they are seriously ill or if they have become "notably weakened" by old age (11). Old age, by itself, is not a reason to be anointed.

- Likewise, disability, in and of itself, is not a reason to be anointed. The United States Bishops, in their revised Guidelines for the Celebration of the

Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities (CSPD) state: "Since disability does not necessarily indicate an illness, Catholics with disabilities should receive the anointing of the sick on the same basis and under the same circumstances as any other member of the Christian faithful" (34).

What about children? The Introduction of *Pastoral Care of the Sick* notes that "sick children are to be anointed if they have sufficient use of reason to be strengthened by the sacrament" (12). Note that a numerical age is not given. If there is any doubt about whether a child or an adult with developmental or cognitive disabilities has reached the use of reason, they ought to be anointed (PCS, 12; CSPD, 34).

In addressing individual situations, a "prudent or reasonably sure judgment, without scruple, is sufficient for deciding on the seriousness of an illness" (8). That is, we are not the health police. Especially in the context of a communal celebration of the sacrament, we are going to need to trust the individuals who are presenting themselves for anointing. Our task is to catechize (13) beforehand, both over time and in the immediate lead up to the communal celebration. Then, if we are to err, to do so on the side of conferring the sacrament. ♦

**Please send all Q&A questions to:
PastoralLiturgy@ltp.org.**

Deacon Francis L. Agnoli, OFS, MD, DM^{IN}, is the director of liturgy and deacon formation for the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa.

Relying on God's Grace

From the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time through the Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, our Gospel readings are drawn from the Bread of Life discourse in John's Gospel. Through these readings, we are reminded that Jesus gave his flesh and blood to us to be our spiritual food and drink. Without this spiritual food, we have no life within us. Indeed, this heavenly nourishment is necessary for us to live the demands of the Gospel, which unfold before us in the Scriptures during the remaining weeks of this season of Ordinary Time.

The reflections on each Sunday's readings in this article are followed by citations from documents and our tradition that connect to the readings. These provide perspectives to aid your understanding and application of the readings to your parishioners' lives. The questions under Liturgy and Life may be discussed among staff or the liturgy commission or inserted into the bulletin for reflection. The petitions of the universal prayer may be used at Mass or during staff or liturgy committee meetings. Finally, you may find it valuable to end your meeting or reflection on the readings with the concluding prayer.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME **Readings**

Our readings begin with the worries of the Israelites, who find themselves out of their element. Despite their desires to be their best selves in relationship with God, they are city people now in the Sinai wilderness, wondering what they have done. They question what the future may hold.

In the Gospel, John prepares us for the Bread of Life discourse by gathering those who witnessed the sign of the miraculous feeding of the crowd (6:1–15) and are now wondering about whether Jesus had crossed the sea by another miracle. Jesus' opening challenge to the crowd's superficiality insists that they work for food that endures for eternal life—nourishment that the Son of Man gives. The crux of this food's true gift is in the future. Facing the question of authentic faith in God's continual presence, Jesus further challenges them to be nourished by believing in the One sent by God.



In the Gospel for the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus declares that he is the Bread of Life.

The next stage opens with the crowd asking Jesus for a sign. As John often indicates, these crowds and religious leaders are locked into a closed system of religion. They affirm what God has done for them through Moses and show no inclination to look elsewhere. Jesus challenges them to transcend that limited understanding and seek the “true bread” that God continues to give from heaven. The crowd again intervenes, leading Jesus to identify himself as the true Bread of Life. He is the one sent by God, who comes to do the will of God, to draw all who believe in him into eternal life both here on earth and hereafter in heaven.

Liturgy and Life

- (1) How have you experienced God's providence in your life?
- (2) What helps you to trust God in difficult circumstances?
- (3) How has the Eucharist been a source of spiritual nourishment for you?

Connections to Church Teaching & Tradition

In our first reading today, the Israelites grumble against Moses and Aaron, accusing them of having led the people into the desert to die of famine. In response to their hunger, the Lord provides bread from heaven. This bread sustained their life on earth and foreshadows the Lord's gift of the Eucharist that sustains us

for eternal life. Indeed, “the Eucharist enacts our passage from death to life” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1542). All who eat of it will never die but will have eternal life.

Through our reception of the holy Eucharist, we receive a share in God’s divine life and are bound together with all those who are one with us at the table of the Lord. By giving us his Body and Blood as nourishment, Christ “enables us to participate in the divine life that unites the people of God” (CCC, 1325). Thus, we become part of a people—the family of God—who have been given eternal life sharing in this sacrament.

Universal Prayer

As believers in the one God sent, we lift up our voices in prayer.

That priests, deacons, and religious will be strengthened in their vocations, we pray: **Lord, hear us.**

That nations will come together to care for those suffering due to a lack of food, education, or other resources, we pray: **Lord, hear us.**

That we might be filled with humility and gratitude at the presence of Christ in our lives, we pray: **Lord, hear us.**

Concluding Prayer

Loving and gracious God,
turn us away from the vain
and perishable works we would do to glorify ourselves;
lead us to your Son and let us make faith our life’s work.
Let the Son of Man feed us with the bread of life;
let his resurrection fill us with the hope of life everlasting.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Readings

In John’s Gospel, Jesus is engaged in his “Bread of Life discourse” to gathering crowds following his Galilean signs at Passover. This festival celebrates God’s power and presence among the Israelites during the Exodus and Sinai covenant. Covenantal symbolism ensues as Jesus presses his audience to be open to God acting in him now just as God acted in the past.

Jesus now proclaims, “I am the bread that came down from heaven” (John 6:41). He embodies God’s gift of manna in the Sinai wilderness. The crowd questions how Jesus makes such claims when they know his origins. Jesus then reveals himself as the one who makes God known. Who Jesus is, and what he does to bring others to life, is possible because God is “the Father who sent me” (John 6:44). Because of Jesus’ origins in God, he alone, much more than manna, makes God known and gives life both here and hereafter. Those who believe in Jesus, the Bread of Life, will not perish as did the manna and those who lived by it.

For Israel, the manna stopped when the people of God took possession of their land, but a new “bread from heaven” continued: the Law of Moses. Jesus insists that he is the “true” bread from heaven. He does not annul God’s former gift but brings it to completion. He perfects God’s gift to Israel in the Sinai covenant and gives life to all who partake of his offer of himself.

Liturgy and Life

(1) How has God brought you comfort and consolation during a difficult time? (2) When have you experienced God’s goodness? (3) How has Jesus revealed his identity as the “living bread” in your life?

Connections to Church Teaching & Tradition

Today’s readings continue Jesus’ Bread of Life discourse in John 6. In response to the crowds’ murmuring and disdain for Jesus’ statement that he is the “bread that came down from heaven,” Jesus reaffirms that he was sent by the Father. In fact, “Jesus is the only one who can reveal God to others because he has seen him and knows him” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 151). Jesus can reveal the Father because he is one with him. In another place in the Gospels, Jesus says that to see him is to see the Father (see John 14:9).

In his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul II invited us to contemplate the “Eucharistic face” of Christ—which reveals the face of God to us—and is therefore the source from which “the Church draws her life” (7). By receiving the Eucharist, we receive God himself. By his very presence, we have access to the wellspring of grace from which the Church’s ministries and life is sustained and nourished. Thus, the Eucharist has rightly been called the source of the entire Christian life, and we are encouraged to avail ourselves frequently of this gift as we journey through this life.

Universal Prayer

The Lord fills our every hunger and so we offer to him the needs of our world.

That we as the Body of Christ will freely give of ourselves as sacrifice for the continued salvation of the world, we pray: **Hear us, O Lord.**

That politicians will be bold in their promotion of life, justice, and the dignity of all, we pray: **Hear us, O Lord.**

That the kindness and compassion we show to our neighbor might be a reflection of the Holy Spirit within us, we pray: **Hear us, O Lord.**

That the faithful departed will live forever in the kingdom of God, we pray: **Hear us, O Lord.**

Preparing the Season



Photo © John Zech

The psalm for the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time invites the assembly to reflect on God's goodness.

Concluding Prayer

Loving God,
you created us and breathed life into our flesh.
Teach us, and we will listen;
lead us to your Son and eternal life.
Enfold us in this great mystery;
unite us as one as we follow your Son's command,
who gives us his body as the bread of heaven.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Readings

John narrates the conclusion of Jesus' Bread of Life discourse, which he delivers during Passover. The festival celebrates God's power and presence among the Israelites during the Exodus and Sinai covenant. Covenantal symbolism has, thus, permeated Jesus' teaching as he challenges his audience to recognize God acting in him now as God has always done.

When the crowd grumbles about Jesus' origin and his ability to speak of it, he responds by further claiming his heavenly origin: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." He then undertakes a new tactic by speaking about eating the bread he embodies, leading to a eucharistic application of all that was

taught so far. Jesus claims his flesh is the living bread, the perfection of God's gift of manna in the wilderness. Using ceremonial imagery of eating and drinking the Eucharistic meal—and offering himself as that meal—Jesus challenges both crowds and disciples to be open to the ongoing revelation of God in him and eternal relationship with him.

Such talk of eating Jesus' flesh generates horrified responses. Jesus presses even further: he establishes the Son of Man, sent from the Father, whose flesh and blood sustains life, as the one in whom they abide forever. Jesus concludes the discourse in a synagogue in Capernaum by symbolically pointing to the Eucharist as their true encounter with the broken Body and the spilt Blood of Jesus. Here they are called to believe in the revelation of God through Jesus, leading to eternal life.

Liturgy and Life

(1) How do you feel knowing that God invites us to feed at his table? (2) How does the Eucharist help us grow in wisdom? (3) What has deepened your understanding of the Eucharist and its power in your life?

Connections to Church Teaching & Tradition

Today's Gospel reading invites us to reflect on the doctrine of the real presence. When confronted by the confusion and questioning of his listeners, Jesus reiterated that the bread that he

would give them was truly himself. As Pope John Paul reflected in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, “When for the first time Jesus spoke of this food, his listeners were astonished and bewildered, which forced the Master to emphasize the objective truth of his words: ‘ . . . unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life within you.’ This is no metaphorical food: ‘My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed’” (16).

Jesus’ promise to provide his own flesh and blood as spiritual food is fulfilled at the Last Supper and every time we celebrate the liturgy: “At the Last Supper . . . Our Lord instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of His Body and Blood . . . those who participate in it through holy Communion eat the flesh of Christ and drink the blood of Christ and thus receive grace, which is the beginning of eternal life. . . . ‘The man who eats my flesh and drinks my blood enjoys eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day’” (*Mysterium fidei*, 4–5). In receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord, our union with the Lord is strengthened and we become partakers in his divine life. Thus, the Eucharist sustains us on this earth and is a foretaste of eternal life.

Universal Prayer

Paying attention to the brokenness of our world, we offer its needs to God.

That a renewed devotion to the Eucharist will take hold in the Church, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

That those who are persecuted for their faith in Jesus may be sustained by the Bread of Life, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

That we who receive the Body and Blood of Christ may be strengthened for our daily lives, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

That the faithful departed may we welcomed at the eternal table of the Father, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

Concluding Prayer

Lord Jesus, Lamb of God,
from your holy blood poured out in sacrifice
comes resurrection and eternal life.

May we know your mysterious presence in Eucharist;
may the new covenant be ever present in our hearts,
freeing us from sin and bringing us to life everlasting.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Readings

In his final act as prophetic leader of God’s people, Joshua brought the tribes together to renew the Sinai covenant. This action formed a league that was crucial for creating a unified people. When he recites Israel’s history, Joshua begins with

God’s ancestral promises and culminates with a decision. Sinai’s first commandment is reiterated in terms of service. God has already chosen Israel; Israel, as a tribal confederation, must now respond with their choice for God. By reaffirming the Sinai covenant, the people of this new generation render themselves participants in that same relationship.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus has challenged the crowds to the very limits of their religious worldview. The enormity of the progression of Jesus’ public challenge is reflected in the responses to it. Many disciples now falter: “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” (John 6:60). In rejecting Jesus, they assert that Moses, manna, and the Torah exhaust all possibilities for God’s action and presence in their lives.

Jesus then challenges the Twelve directly. This is the first time that Jesus’ inner circle of twelve disciples is identified, and their number is mentioned three times, both in the context of acceptance and in Judas’ ultimate rejection. Recognizing that Jesus is “the Holy One of God,” essential to authentic believing, Peter takes this initial lead and responds on behalf of the disciples by making a public confession of their growing belief in and determination to follow Jesus.

Liturgy and Life

(1) How are you being invited to choose to serve God at this moment in your life? (2) How has God shown you his goodness in the past week? (3) How has Jesus been a source of surety when your faith has been challenged?

Connections to Church Teaching & Tradition

In today’s Gospel, Simon Peter confesses that Jesus is the Holy One of God. This profession of faith by Peter comes in response to Jesus’ miracle of the multiplication of the loaves (see John 6:1–11) and his teaching. Thus, “his works and words . . . manifest him as ‘the Holy One of God’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 438). Each time we approach the Lord’s table to receive holy Communion, we are invited to make a profession of our faith in Christ, for we too have heard his words (proclaimed in Scripture) and seen his works (in our lives). To receive the Lord worthily requires not only freedom from serious sin, but also that we confess him as Lord.

Each and every person must make a personal act of faith in Christ. The Gospel tells us that in response to Jesus’ teaching on the Eucharist, “many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.” (John 6:66) Jesus then turns to his remaining disciples and asks, “Do you also want to leave?” (John 6:67). “The Lord’s question echoes through the ages, as a loving invitation to discover that only he has ‘the words of eternal life’ and that to receive in faith the gift of his Eucharist is to receive the Lord himself” (CCC, 1336).

Universal Prayer

Placing our trust and hope in God, we pray.

That clergy and lay leaders may be strengthened in their call to serve, we pray: **Graciously hear us, O Lord.**

Preparing the Season

That elected officials may protect the needs of the people they represent through the creation of just laws, we pray:

Graciously hear us, O Lord.

That those who are ill and in need of healing be restored in mind and spirit by the love of those who care for them, we pray:

Graciously hear us, O Lord.

That our community may recognize Christ in their neighbor and friend, we pray: **Graciously hear us, O Lord.**

Concluding Prayer

O God,
you call us to place our trust in you
and serve you all our days.
Guide our hearts and minds
so that we may be attuned to your voice and respond in faith.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Readings

The title *Deuteronomy* is derived from the Greek words *deuteros* (second) and *nomos* (law) and indicates that this book is a second telling of the “law,” (a translation of the Hebrew word *torah*). The book presents Moses’ final teaching to the Israelites gathered on the plains of Moab. By reviewing their history, Moses prepares them to reenter Canaan, land promised them by God. He counsels them to keep the Lord’s commandments. The rest of Deuteronomy details the statutes and ordinances, which concern ethics and how to act in community in covenant with God.

The remaining readings take the first as foundational and detail what behavior right relationship with God engenders. Psalm 15 refers to walking the walk we talk in how we behave and treat others. The letter of James discusses how our action must be grounded in love and in the truth of our tradition. James, more than any other New Testament author, exhorts us to action: to live out our faith in what we do in this world.

Mark culminates this teaching in a dynamic reinterpretation of Torah. Jesus and his disciples engage Pharisees, teachers of the Sinai covenant, in a question about proper behavior. Jesus takes the opportunity to address empty ritual. By contrast, he teaches that we must work toward manifesting the kingdom of God on earth.

Liturgy and Life

(1) What is your relationship to the commandments of God? How are they a source of guidance and wisdom in your life? (2) What good gift have you received from God recently? (3) How is holiness about more than compliance with rules? What else is needed?

Connections to Church Teaching & Tradition

The Scripture readings today invite us to consider the connection between justice and the observance of God’s commandments. The purpose of God’s laws is not merely their external observance; to fulfill the requirements of the law has less to do with whether we wash our hands properly (to use the example in today’s Gospel), and more to do with whether we show a loving and just response to our neighbors. The Church is called to bear witness to this inner logic of justice that is at the heart of God’s commandments, and it can only do so if she is continually challenged and transformed by them: “[The Church] recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just. . . . Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church herself” (*Justicia in mundo*, 40).

This witness that the Church is called to give—lives transformed by living according to God’s laws—is an essential part of the Church’s mission. As we are converted to live more justly, we can then address systems and structures of injustice with integrity. By living in this manner, we will effectively preach the Gospel of God through our actions and draw others back to God and the wisdom of God’s laws. “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation” (JM, 6).

Universal Prayer

As members of God’s family, we lift our voices to our Father:

For the lay leaders in our parishes, that they may be strengthened to live as disciples, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

For those whom we have entrusted with governance, that they may be open to the message of the Gospel, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

For those without hope, that they may be nourished by the Word of God, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

For all members of our community, that they may recognize their baptismal call and witness the love of God, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

Concluding Prayer

Almighty God,
you have washed us clean through the waters of baptism
and renewed our spirits.
Pour out your grace upon us
so that we may be strengthened in faith
and witness your love to the world.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Readings

This week's readings are powerful calls to attend to those who are the most marginalized in our societies. All four selections indicate that God is particularly interested in and concerned for those who need God most, what the Church has deemed God's "preferential option for the poor." Isaiah sends comfort to those who find themselves living in fear. Water, the power over which the Scriptures assign to God alone, symbolizes God's sustaining the faithful in even the direst situations this world might impose. Psalm 146 likewise extols God's justice for the oppressed.

James' letter to the early Christian communities is known for his challenge to the rich. In our passage he focuses on God's impartiality in welcoming people from all social strata into relationship. He further suggests that the marginalized in this world are especially close to God. They are rich in faith and equal heirs in the kingdom of God. This message is especially powerful in a particularly hierarchical and classist society.

Mark continues this sort of teaching in his Gospel account of Jesus encountering a man limited in both hearing and speaking in the Gentile region of the Decapolis. Jesus, like the scriptural teachings about God, shows partiality for neither class nor ethnicity as he interacts with one who needs him and has been brought to him in faith.

Liturgy and Life

(1) What signs have you seen of God's action in your life? (2) How are you being invited to let go of distinctions and to embrace the marginalized in your community? (3) Imagine Jesus saying, "Be opened!" to you. What is this new openness that he is inviting you to?

Connections to Church Teaching & Tradition

Today's readings reveal that God has a special love and compassion for the poor. The Church is called to embody this same love for the marginalized; in fact, it is a constitutive part of her ministry: "Love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to [the Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel" (*Deus caritas est*, 22). The tradition of the Church is clear that this ministry is central to who we are as Church.

Given the great importance placed on care for those in need, the Church is engaged in many charitable works, which she claims "as its own mission and right" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 8). While the Church leads charitable efforts at the national and international level through organizations such as Catholic Relief Services or Caritas International, parishes are also called to provide for the needs in their local community. "Parishes should be measured by our help for the hungry,



The Ephphatha Rite, celebrated during infant baptisms, finds its origin in the Gospel for the Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time.

the homeless, the troubled, and the alienated—in our own community and beyond" (*Communities of Salt and Light*). Whether by supporting efforts in their local parish or through individual contributions to charitable causes, every Christian is called to contribute generously to assist those in need. "The Fathers . . . of the Church . . . taught that people are bound to come to the aid of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods" (*Gaudium et spes*, 69). All believers have an obligation to contribute generously and sacrificially to alleviate the suffering of others in need.

Universal Prayer

We turn to our Father in heaven and pray:

That the Church may be a place of welcome for all persons, we pray: **Gracious God, hear our prayer.**

Preparing the Season

That those who serve our communities may recognize the contributions of all members of society, we pray:
Gracious God, hear our prayer.

That refugees may find a permanent home, we pray:
Gracious God, hear our prayer.

That all individuals may discover the love of God, we pray:
Gracious God, hear our prayer.

Concluding Prayer

God of compassion,
you are the true judge of what is good and evil.
Free us from the temptation
to pass judgment on ourselves and others,
so that we may live more fully as your sons and daughters.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Readings

The prophet Isaiah begins our readings by modeling the powerful results of listening to God, even when we least expect to hear his voice. If we open ourselves while amid conflict, God's counsel may become apparent. This revelation could be direct and clear but, far more likely, it will come in some unexpected manner embedded in our culture. As the psalmist declares, the souls of those who heed the voice of God are freed from death, but our lives must be committed, in the name of the Lord, to the living.

In his letter, James' most famous declaration that faith without works is dead has been contentious in the tradition. Some even suggest that James contradicts our most prolific New Testament author, Paul. But this is not so. When Paul speaks of works, he refers to keeping the Torah prescribed in the Sinai covenant. Christians are now justified by faith, not by works. When James speaks of works, he refers to active efforts for social justice. Both authors agree that these goals are essential to authentic faith.

The turning point of Mark's Gospel comes when the question that has pervaded the first half of the text is finally answered: Who is Jesus? After detailing popular speculation, Peter speaks on behalf of the disciples and calls Jesus the messiah Jesus accepts this title, then immediately begins to redefine what it means to be the messiah by foretelling his suffering at the hands of the authorities, and his vindication. This is difficult to hear, but Jesus challenges us to heed God's plan.

Liturgy and Life

(1) Why is the Christian journey one of self-emptying, rather than glory? What might God wish to teach us through this path? (2) What does it mean to have a living faith? (3) What cross is Jesus inviting you to carry in following him today?

Connections to Church Teaching & Tradition

Today's readings invite us to reflect on the human experience of suffering and invite us to greater trust in God. "Our experiences of evil and . . . suffering can shake our faith. . . . It is then we must turn to the witnesses of faith: to Abraham . . . , to the Virgin Mary who . . . walked into the 'night of faith' in sharing the darkness of her Son's suffering and death" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 164–165). Inspired by the witness of those holy men and women who have gone before us, we can strive to imitate their trust in God and find strength to endure our own trials and tribulations.

Even more importantly, today's Scriptures tell us that Christ willingly embraced suffering (on our behalf). In doing so, he gave us an example to follow, and imbued human suffering with new purpose: "By suffering for us he not only gave us an example so that we might follow in his footsteps, but he also opened up a way. If we follow this path, life and death are made holy and acquire a new meaning" (*Gaudium et spes*, 22). When we unite our sufferings to those of Christ, our sufferings participate in his redeeming work.

Universal Prayer

Taking up our cross and following Christ, we pray:

That the Church may be an example of love and service to the world, we pray: **In your mercy, hear us O God.**

That elected officials may seek justice and peace, we pray:
In your mercy, hear us O God.

That those who are poor in spirit may receive joy and hope, we pray: **In your mercy, hear us O God.**

That our communities may become filled with life and energy, we pray: **In your mercy, hear us O God.**

Concluding Prayer

Lord Jesus,
your passion and death showed us the way to the Father.
Help us to take up our cross each day,
and guide us on the path to eternal life.
Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Readings

The Book of Wisdom speaks in the voice of the ungodly as it calls us to put the just one to the test. Although sarcasm is at play here, such discernment nonetheless remains relevant in our time. True wisdom would have us prove the intentions and abilities of those who make promises—especially if they include greatness and luxury. The psalmist confirms that God is our helper and defender. God wants us to be our best selves, but that may not be what the prevailing culture extols either popularly or politically.



Photo © John Zich

In the Gospel on the Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus says to receive a child in his name is to receive him.

James affirms that jealousy and selfish ambition lead to disorder, but justice and uprightness cultivate peace and community. Wisdom is indeed pure and merciful and combats inconstancy and insincerity. Therefore, we must seek wisdom and work for the common good to receive the strength and passion to empower our diverse vocations.

Mark's Gospel recounts what interpreters often call the second passion prediction. Jesus gave the first in Mark 8 and the third and final prediction will come in Mark 10. Here, Jesus expands on his initial teaching about his impending sacrificial death and resurrection with a concern for his disciples' understanding. They don't get it, so he explains by using the metaphor of a child. If you receive the least—like a child—it is as though you receive Jesus, and if you receive Jesus, it is as though you have received God. Such childlike openness allows us to accept God working in our lives in unexpected ways—sometimes in sacrifice and other times in resurrected vindication.

Liturgy and Life

(1) Have you ever been persecuted for doing what was right? When? (2) How are you called to cultivate peace this week? (3) What does servant leadership look like in your life?

Connections to Church Teaching & Tradition

Jesus' words are clear: the way to greatness is not through self-aggrandizement, but through service. "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Taking these words to heart, Christians throughout the world have sought to embody the servant-leadership shown by Christ. Even the Pope, who holds the highest office of the Church, is known by the title "Servant of the servants of God." Speaking of the call to servant leadership, Pope Francis said, "Let us never forget that that authentic power is service, and that the Pope too, when exercising power, must enter ever more fully into that service which has its radiant culmination on the Cross. . . . He must open his arms to protect all of God's people, the weakest, the least important, those whom Matthew lists in the final judgment on love: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison (cf. Matthew 25:31–46)" (*Homily for the Inauguration of his Pontificate*).

The primary virtue needed to respond to Christ's call to servant-leadership is humility. Without a spirit of Christ-like humility, all the works that we do in the service of others is in vain. As St. Augustine said, "Unless humility precede, accompany, and follow every good action which we perform, being at once the object which we keep before our eyes, the support to which we cling, and the monitor by which we are restrained, pride wrests wholly from our hand any good work on which we are congratulating ourselves" (*Letter*, 118, 22).

Universal Prayer

Humbling our hearts before the Lord, we pray:

That ministry leaders may serve with wisdom and purity of heart, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

That governments may enact laws protecting the dignity of the human person, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

That those imprisoned may discover healing and reconciliation, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

That we may set aside our pride and recognize the contributions of others, we pray: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

Concluding Prayer

Most merciful Father,

you recognize when we allow human emotions and actions to separate us from you.

Draw us back to you,

and restore us to fellowship so that we may be a peaceful people.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Preparing the Season



The psalm on this Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time invites us to find joy in God's precepts.

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Readings

The book of Numbers gives instruction on being open to God working in the world even in and among unexpected people. Today's text introduces Joshua, a key figure in the development of the Israelites. But here Joshua is still learning. Moses teaches that God works as God wills and expresses his desire that we were all prophets. A prophet is one who speaks for God in human language to human beings.

The psalmist concurs in his own way. God's law (Torah) is perfect in its wisdom, especially in its prescriptions for our treatment of one another. James expounds upon this when he gives his harshest condemnation of the rich. In his experience, the rich are focused only on their own gain in this life. They store their treasures at the expense of employees who struggle to get by. James declares their reward to be limited while the faithful have much more for which to hope.

In Mark, Jesus teaches that all those who share the Good News must be accepted and lauded. He further explains that true models are those who give freely and do not prevent others from seeking right relationship with God. The consequences for those who lead people astray are dire. Jesus as Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, wants all to encounter God in truth.

Liturgy and Life

(1) How have you experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life? (2) In what areas of society is the Church called to offer a prophetic witness today? (3) What does today's Gospel tell us about the level to which we should be willing to go to avoid sin?

Connections to Church Teaching & Tradition

In the Letter of James, we hear that the community has favored wealth over the common good, storing up riches while depriving workers of just wages. James chastises them, saying, "That corrosion will be a testimony against you; it will devour your flesh like fire." *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* directs that just living characterizes the Christian's life. The document, written by the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace, states: "In her teaching the Church constantly returns to this relationship between charity and justice. . . . The Council Fathers strongly recommended that . . . 'what is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity'" (184).

The apostles wished to obstruct another group from driving out demons in Jesus' name. Jesus, however, saw that only good could come from others doing his work on earth. "There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me," he says. *Gaudium et spes* explains that the Church benefits from the good that others do in the various realms of society, stating: "Whoever contributes to the development of the human community . . . is also contributing in no small way to the community of the Church" (44).

Universal Prayer

Following Christ, we bring before him our needs.

That the Church may serve as a mediator of reconciliation among peoples, we pray: **Christ, graciously hear us.**

That the world be freed from hatred and division, we pray: **Christ, graciously hear us.**

That victims of violence, terrorism, and abuse may discover healing in God's love, we pray: **Christ, graciously hear us.**

That we may work for peace in our families and communities, we pray: **Christ, graciously hear us.**

Concluding Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
your name is powerful,
and calling upon it makes your presence known.
May we be filled with the courage
to speak your name in times of joy, sorrow, and trial.
Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

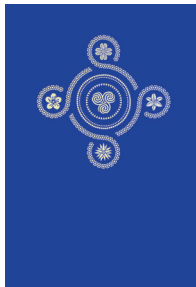
SHERRI BROWN wrote the Scripture reflections, which were excerpted from *At Home with the Word 2024* (Liturgy Training Publications, 2023). The citations in Connections to Church Teaching and Tradition have been excerpted from *Scripture Backgrounds for the Sunday Lectionary, Year B: A Resource for Homilists* (LTP, 2017). The petitions in the universal prayer and the concluding prayer have been adapted from *Daily Prayer 2024* (LTP, 2023).

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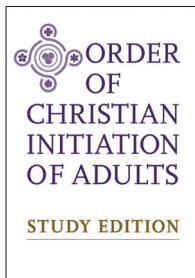
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Nicholas Black Elk

Mary Beth Jambor

In 1997, I spent a week on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, leading over eighty young people and chaperones on a service trip working on home repair projects for residents. In the middle of the week, we met with a group who taught us about their Native American spirituality, about the Great Spirit and their spiritual connection to creation. They demonstrated their traditional dance and invited us to join them. I was struck by the richness of their spirituality and surprised at its similarities with my Catholic faith. After my experience at Pine Ridge, I read *Black Elk Speaks* by John Neihardt. While the book taught me about Black Elk and his life as a Lakota medicine man, I only recently learned of his life and ministry as a Catholic catechist.

A member of the Oglala Sioux tribe, Nicholas Black Elk was born around 1863. At a very young age, he was given a holy vision that guided him throughout his life. As a medicine man, his tribe recognized him as a traditional healer and spiritual leader. The early years of Black Elk's life took place during the height of the Sioux wars between the Sioux tribes and the United States government. He fought in the battle of Little Big Horn, where the Sioux warriors prevailed, and he witnessed the massacre of over two hundred of his people at Wounded Knee.

After the massacre in 1890, Nicholas lived on the Pine Ridge Reservation. While married to a Catholic, he remained committed to his role as a Lakota medicine man. Yet he began to sense the holiness of the Jesuit missionaries. In November 1903, a boy was seriously ill. The family was desperate and called on both a Jesuit priest and Black Elk. The priest arrived in the middle of Black Elk's healing ceremony and threw Black Elk out. After he regained his composure, the priest invited Black Elk to join him on the journey back to the Holy Rosary Mission. Two weeks later, Black Elk asked to be baptized. After a year of instruction, Black Elk was baptized on December 6, 1904, taking the name Nicholas.

Filled with passion for the Catholic faith, Nicholas Black Elk learned to read and write English so that he could deepen his knowledge of the faith. He quickly developed a thorough grasp of Sacred Scripture. Only three years after his baptism, Nicholas Black Elk was recognized by the Jesuits for his zeal for the faith and was appointed to the position of catechist. He was about forty years old.

Nicholas Black Elk worked closely with the Jesuits. As a catechist, he took the place of the priest when one was not available. Nicholas Black Elk's ministry included teaching the faith, visiting the sick, burying the dead, leading Scripture services, preaching, and baptizing. He became known for his ability to memorize and quote Scripture, dynamic preaching, and modeling a life of holiness. He used a pictorial catechism called the "Two Roads" to explain the "sacred red road" of faith in Jesus Christ. His ministry also included missionary trips to other reservations and spanned over forty years. He is credited with bringing four hundred people into the Roman Catholic Church and baptizing them.

Nicholas Black Elk integrated his Lakota culture into his Catholic faith. Many have called him an "apostle to the Lakota people." As Bishop Robert D. Gruss of the Diocese of Rapid City said to the bishops at their General Assembly on November 14, 2017, "The Church's special recognition of Black Elk's saintly life will provide the Indian faith-community, and peoples everywhere, the example of a very special person whose presence to others is worthy of imitation. As a model, he showed how Native American culture could enrich the Body of Christ, integrating the two traditions, thereby bringing a richness to both." ♦

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