



CATECHUMENEON

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Quarterly

Prayer and the Catechumenate

Father Jim Dunning, of blessed memory, founding director of the North American Forum on the Catechumenate, was a fount of wisdom for those in the catechumenate ministry. One of his oft-repeated quotes was “Thou shalt not do unto others what thou first hath not done unto thyself.” This was his way of making sure that we weren’t asking more of those seeking entrance into the Church than we were ourselves willing to undertake. I found myself recalling this quote while I was assembling this issue of *Catechumeneon Quarterly*.

Prayer is central to the Catholic Christian life; an important part of our task in the catechumenal ministry is to expose our charges to the active prayer life and help them make it their own. In our feature article, Susan Timoney wisely proposes a gradual approach that doesn’t overwhelm the catechumens. She offers a path, rooted in the spirituality of St. Teresa of Ávila, that suggests different forms of prayer appropriate to each of the stages of the catechumenate. As I read her article, I began to hear Father Jim whispering in my ear, “Thou shalt not do . . .” and realized that this issue of CQ needed to address nurturing the prayer life in catechumenal team members as well, for we ministers must first practice what we preach.

Mary Ehle’s *Pastoral Reflection* on spiritually nurturing the catechumenate team strikes just the right tone. Team members are busy people, and we can often take our prayer life for granted. Mary Ehle reminds us that without proper spiritual grounding, we will become empty vessels incapable of providing the sustenance (or the example) needed by catechumens just learning to pray. And she provides helpful advice for maintaining healthy spiritual practices.

In the *Best Practices* section, Kathy Kuczka shows how to celebrate a Liturgy of the Word as part of your catechetical sessions, a primary means for grounding catechumens and team members alike in the regular practice of prayer.

And as a gift to team members, we call your attention to Joyce Ann Zimmerman’s inspiring book *Silence: Everyday Living and Praying* to help in deepening their experience of everyday prayer. The excerpt provided extends an invitation into exploring the sacred.

It is my hope that these brief offerings will motivate you to “do unto thyself” in a life-giving way, so that you can “do unto others” with confidence and grace.

In Christ,
Michael E. Novak
Editor
Liturgy Training Publications



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Forming Catechumens to Center Their Lives on Prayer

SUSAN TIMONEY

(This article was previously published in the May–June 2020 issue of *Pastoral Liturgy*.)

Introduction

Well, believe me; and don't let anyone deceive you by showing you a road other than that of prayer.¹

St. Teresa of Avila was direct when speaking with her sisters about the necessity of prayer in the life of a consecrated woman. She was forthright that there was no other path. Her words are equally pertinent to any conversation about the place of prayer in the formation of catechumens. The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) calls people to encounter Jesus Christ and come to know him in the Word, sacraments, and community. As catechumens open their minds and hearts to a call to conversion, they discover their truest selves in relationship with Christ. It is prayer that opens the heart to conversion and prayer that enables a relationship with God to grow, mature, and nurture the faith of God's sons and daughters. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, prayer is “a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God” (2558).

Christian initiation teams may want to consider whether the time spent praying and learning about prayer in their parish's process reflects its importance in the life of a Christian. From my decades of experience with Christian initiation, I could only honestly say that parishes often fall short in relating to catechumens the centrality of prayer in the Christian life. Many Christian initiation teams have the best of intentions to commit more time to prayer but may feel the pressure of all the content about prayer that needs to be conveyed. There are introductions to and the practice of the traditional vocal prayers of the Church. There is some practice of *lectio divina*. There are retreat experiences and invitations to adoration, parish missions, and evenings of recollection. Books and articles about prayer, containing collections of prayers and guidelines for daily prayer, are generously shared. All of this is important. Beginners must learn about prayer and learn how to pray. In the context of the spiritual life, this integration of knowledge and practice is the work of formation. What is often lacking in the Christian initiation process is a plan for how to form catechumens for a life of prayer.

Teaching Beginners to Pray

No one offers more help for developing a plan for teaching prayer than doctor of the Church St. Teresa of Avila. In *The Way of Perfection*, she places learning how to pray at the center of the sisters' lives. Prayer, Teresa insisted, is the most essential element of consecrated life. The wisdom of her teaching is that the com-



Praying through the Mass accentuates the celebration of liturgy as itself a prayer.

ponents of a rich life of prayer are the same for all the baptized in any state of life. For the purposes of this essay, St. Teresa is the right guide as she teaches how one's prayer matures in the integration of vocal, mental, and contemplative prayer. Rather than thinking of prayer as a progression from simpler forms to more complex practices, she helps us understand how the practice of these primary forms of prayer, prayed individually and communally, foster the integration of mind and heart in the person at prayer.

Before discussing integrating these forms of prayer into formation, it is valuable to possess working definitions of the types of prayer. Vocal prayer is prayer that is prayed in words, giving outward expression to what is felt interiorly. Mental prayer is silent prayer that moves the mind and heart to a deeper realization of who God is and who we are. It prepares the heart for the communion that can be experienced in prayer. Contemplative prayer is a deeper experience of this communion, which is a gift from God. Teaching catechumens to pray is forming the mind and heart of the catechumen for communion with our Lord.

During the Christian initiation process, priority should be given to the prayers that shape the Church's liturgical life and prayers that are deeply rooted in the Catholic spiritual tradition. Scripture, particularly the psalms and the Gospels, should be the foundational text of formation. Scripture introduces participants to both liturgical prayer and to the language of one's personal prayer. Teresa says of Scripture, “It is always good to base your prayer on prayers coming from the mouth of the Lord. . . . I have always been fond of the words of the Gospel and found more recollection in them than in very cleverly written books.”²

The Precatechumenate

“You search me, Lord, and you know me.”

In the pre-catechumenate, the Christian initiation team encounters both people who have no relationship with Jesus Christ and people who may have a serious relationship with our Lord but who are

seeking something more. Common to both experiences is a heart awakening to a call to conversion. Why not begin with making the gift of a Catholic Bible to the inquirer? Ask how familiar they are with the Bible, and acquaint them with it. Draw attention to the psalms, particularly Psalms 27, 100, and 139, which speak to God's love for us and how the beginner at prayer comes to know God in a deeply personal way.

In this stage, it is not too early to help the inquirer feel comfortable sitting silently in the presence of God. Teresa instructs her sisters, "Represent the Lord himself as close to you and behold how lovingly and humbly he is teaching you."³ Encouraging the inquirer to sit in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament helps the inquirer become comfortable with silence as a prayer in and of itself. It is learning how to waste time with God! Encouraging inquirers to take advantage of churches with open doors and the practice of popping in and making a visit is a powerful way to help them understand the gift of the Real Presence.

The Sign of the Cross also fits well here, as inquirers begin to explore life in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In praying the Sign of the Cross, the inquirer begins to become more conscious of always being in the presence of the One who loves us. It is the beginning of learning what it might mean to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 17). Feeling that presence of God enables prayer to become a conversation with a friend.

Prayer in the Catechumenate

"How precious are your designs, O God,
how vast the sum of them!"

The period of the catechumenate lends itself to almost every kind of prayer experience. It is an appropriate time to teach and practice the vocal prayers of the Catholic tradition. With St. Teresa as our guide, we are reminded that vocal prayer joined to recollection enables "the soul to collect its faculties together and enters within itself to be with its God."⁴ To this end, it is important to introduce vocal prayers such as the Glory Be, Our Father, Hail Mary, and Magnificat with an explanation of their source and meaning. Learning how to pray contemplatively with these prayers makes the experience formational. Introducing the Magnificat through the practice of *lectio divina* is an example of forming the mind and heart in prayer. Praying with St. Francis of Assisi's prayer inspired by the Our Father is also a teaching tool for the practice of recollection.

Through praying the Liturgy of the Hours during the catechumenate, catechumens will be shown how to think and pray with the mind of the Church. The Liturgy of the Hours introduces the universal nature of the Church and a Church that is always at prayer. Praying Morning Prayer, if meeting on Sunday morning, or Compline, if meeting in the evening, can fit easily into a typical meeting schedule.

Many teams offer a "walk-through" of the Mass during the early days of the catechumenate as a way to help catechumens enter into the celebration of the liturgy more fully. In this spirit,

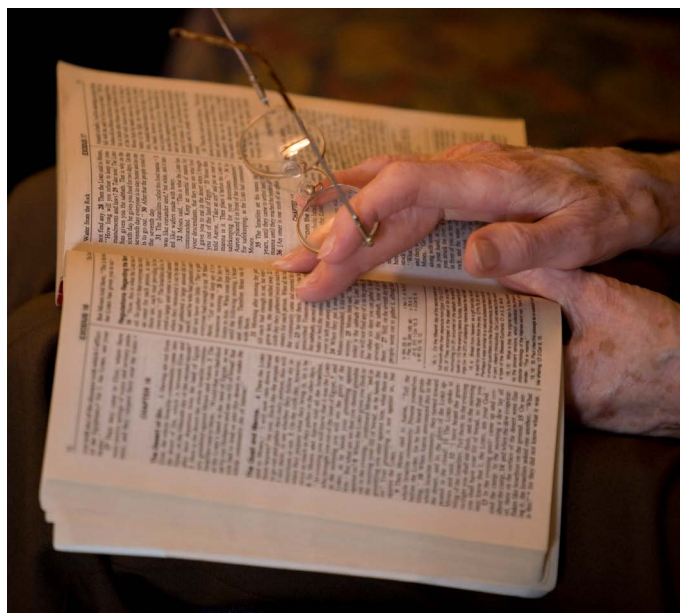


Photo © John Zich

Scripture, particularly the psalms and the Gospel, should be foundational in forming a prayer life.

praying through the Mass accentuates the celebration of liturgy as itself a prayer. Familiarizing catechumens with the scriptural sources and the relationship of the Collects to the readings and liturgical seasons helps them attune their ears and heart to the practice of communal prayer.

The daily examen, a prayer practice from the Ignatian tradition, finds a place here. It enables the catechumen to begin to see the pattern of the Holy Spirit moving in his or her life. Seeing the way the day has unfolded through God's eyes not only affirms the nearness of God but also strengthens belief in the idea that God has a plan for our lives as he draws us ever closer in an embrace of love.

Period of Purification and Enlightenment

"I will instruct you and show you the way
you should walk, give you counsel with my
eye upon you."

In the season of Lent and the final days leading up to the celebration of the Easter Vigil, the focus of prayer turns toward the realization of our sinfulness and the great gift of God's mercy. In this period, introducing the Act of Contrition and examination of conscience will teach the elect how to pray for forgiveness and seek reconciliation. Teresa of Avila focuses on the nearness of Christ rather than the judgment of Christ. "If you grow accustomed to having him present at your side, and he sees that you do so with love and that you go about striving to please him, you will not be able—as they say—to get away from him; he will never fail you; he will help you in all your trials; you will find him everywhere."⁵

Because the period of purification and enlightenment falls in the season of Lent, speaking to the practice of fasting and abstinence as a tool for prayer is timely. As an expression of a

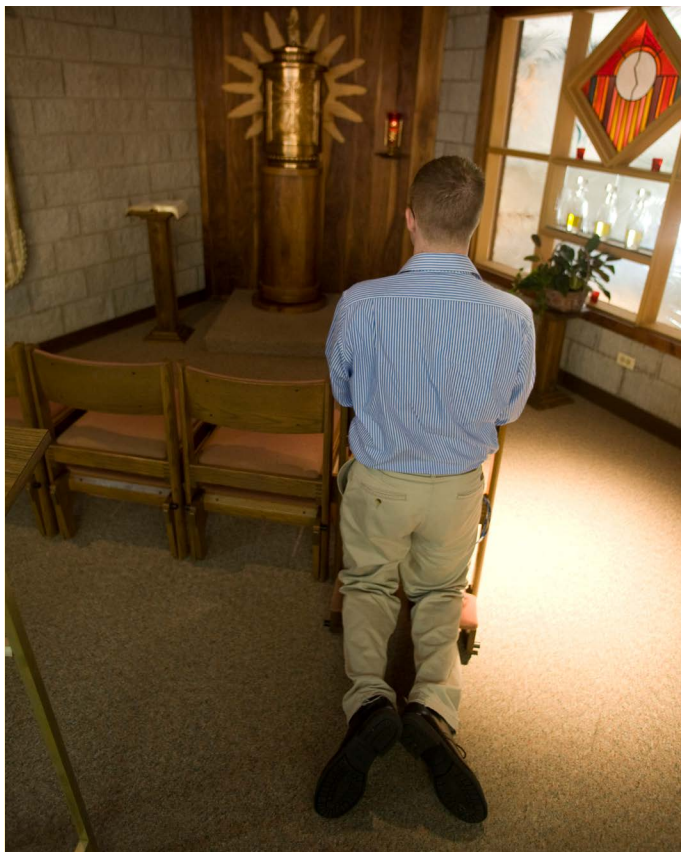


Photo © John Zich

As early as the precatechumenate, people can be encouraged to spend time quietly with God.

desire to grow in holiness, fasting invites the catechumen to reflect on what it means to hunger—in the spiritual sense—for holiness. Fasting and abstinence help focus the mind and heart on God and to give up those things that are extraneous to life with God or are simply a distraction.

During this period, the presentations of the Creed and the Our Father hold a pride of place. Having been welcomed by the bishop of the local church during the Rite of Election, the Creed is presented during prayer on Holy Saturday. The Creed is the gift to one prepared to profess his or her faith, entering into full membership in the Church. It is a sign of readiness to become an active participant in the Church's mission of evangelization. The Our Father may have been prayed often, but the presentation of the prayer at this time emphasizes the intimacy of the elect with God, who is Father. Inviting the elect to reflect on how their prayer life has deepened, how they have come to know the Lord more intimately, affirms the transformational nature of the Lord's love.

The Period of PostBaptismal Catechesis

“Serve the Lord with gladness, Come before him with joyful song.”

The practice of contemplative prayer reflects the beauty of this period of formation. In the reception of the sacraments of initiation, there is a newfound wellspring of grace to nourish the prayer

life of the neophytes. St. Teresa would be the first to say that one does not learn how to pray contemplatively; rather, true contemplation is God's grace acting in us. It is a gift from God. Contemplative practices are those forms of prayer that emphasize silence and the ability to free our mind from distraction so as to rest in the presence of God. Examples of contemplative practices are meditating on a sacred image or object or sitting silently and fully focused on Jesus. St. John Vianney explains it as a “gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus, ‘I look at him and he looks at me.’”⁶ Contemplation is a sign of a maturing prayer in the sense that one can move from the spoken or written word to silence. The person at prayer senses the movement of the Holy Spirit within and understands God is filling the heart and soul with grace.

A Friend at Your Side

St. Teresa desired that her sisters understand prayer as the pathway to experiencing a deep intimacy with Jesus. To the extent that the prayer on their lips led to a surge of their hearts, they were progressing in the “way of perfection.” Is this not the desire of every Christian initiation team member? One of the most gratifying experiences of the period of mystagogy is hearing neophytes speak of how close they feel to our Lord. Often, they use the language of the joy of a new friendship. This is the sign that, indeed, a real relationship with the Risen Christ is forming. What will sustain it and enable it to grow is the strength of the formation process—that is, the realization that prayer forms and practices are means for developing a relationship that is meant to continue to grow and change. Prayer ought not be thought of as a daily practice simply to be completed in a Catholic way. Teaching prayer during the Christian initiation process becomes formational when it is intentional in helping catechumens form a friendship with our Lord.

Notes

1. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection* (study edition), ed. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 2000), 231. All following quotes from this work are taken from this edition.

2. *The Way of Perfection*, ch. 21.3.

3. *The Way of Perfection*, ch. 26.1.

4. *The Way of Perfection*, ch. 28.4.

5. *The Way of Perfection*, ch. 26:1.

6. John Vianney, *The Meditation of the Curé D'Ars*, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2715.



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Spiritually Nurturing the Catechumenate Team

(This article is excerpted from one published in the November 2012 issue of Catechumenate.)

Mary A. Ehle

Jesus schooled his disciples in the ways of nurturing. They—along with the multitudes that heard Jesus’ words in his sayings and parables, witnessed his miracles and healings, and received food from his hands—learned firsthand the meaning of nurturing as he did. Jesus prepared them for a life of nurturing others in the Way. His is the model of nurturing we embrace today as we care for, form, and feed catechumenate ministers through the Word and sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

For many of us, catechumenate ministry is only one aspect of our busy lives. Sometimes the only downtime we have is in the car as we drive to and from work, run errands, or shuttle children back and forth from their events. This time, though, can also provide an opportunity to reflect on the daily events in our lives. How do they relate to the Scriptures? To the celebration of the sacraments? How do they connect with our catechumenate ministry? Where is God in all that we do, say, and encounter in a day?

Integrating all aspects of our lives is critical to sustaining our spiritual energy as we form others in the faith we profess. If our faith practice is a Sunday-only event or a particular date and time for a catechumenate gathering, our faith and ministry will have the tendency to become merely obligations. To prevent this from happening, it is important for catechumenate team members to develop daily spiritual practices that nurture and sustain. These will differ from person to person. Some will find daily Mass, the Rosary, and weekly adoration of the Blessed Sacrament nurturing. Others will be sustained by Morning and Evening Prayer, gathering in small groups with other parishioners to reflect on the Scriptures, or setting aside time for silence each day to simply be in God’s presence. Others are wholly and completely “doers” and will be nurtured by going into the world to serve those in need of food and shelter. In doing so, these catechumenate ministers return to their initiation ministry deeply fulfilled because they have followed Jesus’ example in extending love and charity to the poor.

Where an individual catechumenate team member finds nurturing does not matter. What matters most is the spiritual support and encouragement received. One of the many roles of the director of the catechumenate process is assisting his or her team members in discovering and naming how they will be sustained in their service. Doing so will help them get in touch with their internal motivation for serving in this ministry.

Formal spiritual direction is no longer just for clergy or lay professional ministerial staff. Catechumenate ministers understand the need for ongoing spiritual formation, since that is the work they do with catechumens. Some might find having a spiritual director beneficial. Catechumenate directors can serve their teams well by leading them to appropriate spiritual direction resources—for individual spiritual direction, group spiritual direction, or retreats.

As catechumenate ministers, we know that all disciples are on a lifelong faith journey. We also know that Jesus always nourishes us in the Eucharist, feeding us on the journey. Its celebration never ends. Remember, in the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, there were leftovers, and not just a small amount of leftovers—twelve wicker baskets full! The life of abundance in Christ Jesus is the happy life to which God calls us as catechumenate team members and to which we have the privilege of leading others. In this life, we can “rejoice and be glad” (Matthew 5:12).



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What does a celebration of the Liturgy of the Word look like in a catechetical session?

(This is an excerpt from an article published in the July 2011 issue of Catechumene.)

The RCIA calls celebrations of the Word of God “foremost.” This is because catechumens’ primary formation will stem from the Word of God. We see this hinted at in the Rite of Acceptance with the optional presentation of a Bible, or Book of Gospels, and the prayer that accompanies the signing of the lips: “Receive the sign of the cross on your lips, that you may respond to the word of God.” The very word catechumen means “hearer,” so the catechumene will be about hearing and responding to God’s Word.

The rite distinguishes between various celebrations of the Word of God. Some are held especially for the catechumens (and candidates). Others are held as part of the Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Eucharist, and still others are held in conjunction with catechetical instructions.

The purpose of celebrating a Liturgy of the Word is primarily to reinforce or “implant in their hearts” the catechetical formation they are receiving, to help them experience different prayer forms, and to teach them the signs, celebrations, and seasons of the liturgy.

The Shape of the Rite

The rite envisions a simple Liturgy of the Word, beginning with a song and continuing with one or more readings from Scripture, a responsorial psalm, a brief homily, and concluding with a minor rite such as a minor exorcism, blessing, or anointing. In this way, the catechumens will become familiar and comfortable with the rhythm and structure of the Liturgy of the Word.

The rite has certain criteria for choosing readings. They are to be selected for “their relevance to the formation of the catechumens” and “accorded with the liturgical season.” So choosing the readings will depend on that session’s topic and on the liturgical season. For example, a session held in the weeks before Pentecost might focus on the Holy Spirit and could include one or two of the numerous readings that speak of the Holy Spirit from the Acts of the Apostles and/or the Gospel. A session held near the feast of the Baptism of the Lord might center on vocations and include any reading that reflects being called by God. The other criteria for choosing readings depend on which minor rite might follow

the Liturgy of the Word: an exorcism, a blessing, or an anointing.

Pay particular attention to the responsorial psalms. Sing them! It is the only time in our liturgy that the Word of God is sung. We sing them because they were meant to be sung, and we pray them because Jesus prayed them. They are a rich part of our prayer tradition and form a tapestry that weaves the gamut of human emotions, from heart-wrenching anguish to euphoric joy with a yearning for God’s presence.

Be sure to model the ritual well. Since these celebrations should reflect what happens at Mass, use the same postures as at Mass. Stand for the opening song, sit for the readings, stand for the Gospel. Use a lectionary to proclaim the readings. Use a substantial lectern from which to proclaim. All of these details will help enhance the experience of celebrating the Word.

Though not specifically mentioned, the celebration presumes a presider, lector, and perhaps a homilist, if the presider doesn’t give the homily. Choose people who have the gifts to carry out these roles. More often than not, it will be the catechist for that particular session who can link his or her instruction with a specific reading or two and a reflection.



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Searching for best practices? Email training@ltp.org if you have a question you would like one of the Catechumeneon team members to answer.

For Your Ministry

Silence: Everyday Living and Praying

Joyce Ann Zimmerman, CPPS

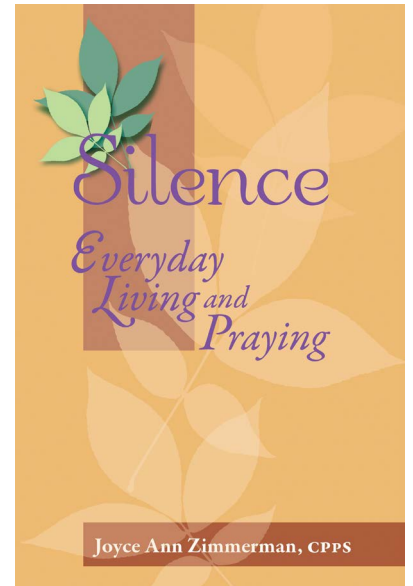
It's not often that we think about silence or its importance in living healthy, balanced, and productive lives. We especially need silence if we are to deepen our spiritual lives. This book understands the sacredness of practicing silence and explores how we can learn to incorporate it into both our prayer and everyday lives.

Much more than a commentary on silence, this book invites readers throughout the text to stop, ponder, and be silent. It includes both reflection content and practice exercises for exploring how silence might become an everyday habit.

Silence: Everyday Living and Praying is the perfect resource for:

- Theological reflection groups
- Adult faith formation groups
- Members of liturgy committees
- Pastors and deacons
- Pastoral associates
- Liturgists and directors of music
- And anyone looking to bring silence into their lives

Sample pages ➔



What people are saying . . .

"In our fast-paced world, this book invites us to put down the cell phone, turn off the MP3 player, and still our bodies, minds, and souls to experience silence. Take the time to pray and reflect your way through this book—even in small increments. In the end you will know the need for and crave the inner silence in your life."

—Jill Maria Murdy
Director of Liturgical Ministries
Adrian Dominican Sisters
Adrian, Michigan

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Second Consideration: Seeking the Sacred

When I was a small child, walking into a Catholic church was an awe-inspiring experience. From my pint-size perspective, the building was as huge as the heavens themselves. Even when empty, in the silence the church still echoed loudly with the humble heartaches and joyful praises of generations who had gathered there. We were taught not to talk in church (nor would we have even thought it—the building and people mediated something which caught our attention), and we knew in church we stepped into the presence of God and touched the sacred. When the building filled with people waiting patiently for the service to begin, there was still deep, echoing silence. Somehow even the coughing and fidgeting of the multitudinous assembly settled into a cocoon of peace and expectation. Not even a multi-voiced choir or majestic pipe organ could smother the beckoning silence. Silence and sound together knit us into one heart and voice. There was real art to this rhythm—a conscious making of something beautiful from the silence and sound of being together for the common purpose of worship. We knew something sacred was about to happen. Rather than seeking the sacred, it sought us. As a child I wasn't always conscious of the sacred while in church; admittedly, my mind was often elsewhere during the services. But over the years the silence formed me and nourished me nonetheless.

Thinking of the sacred naturally turns our thoughts to religious places, holy people, and God-filled experiences. Even so, this is hardly our only experience of the sacred and sometimes not even our most profound. Consider the thundering silence which pierces us between the notes of taps being played at a military funeral when a lifetime of service and sacrifice is packed into this flickering, intervening time. This, too, is an encounter with the sacred. Or another common, communal experience: what is it that we do when we observe a moment of silence in memory of someone or some event, for example, when on September 11 we pause midmorning to remember what happened in New York City, Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC? What happens during those slow moments of the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery? Carried far beyond a person or event, these moments of collective and silent encounter with the sacred give relief to grief (or expression to joy) and enkindle resolve and courage. We seek these moments because only in the silence do we salve and savor our unleashed emotion. Thus, there are two kinds of sacred: the Sacred *which seeks us* in divine encounter and the sacred *we ourselves seek* in powerful times of collective memory.

The word *sacred* comes from the Latin *sacer* and, as with most words, consulting a Latin dictionary opens up numerous possibilities. “Sacred” refers to



SILENCE: EVERYDAY LIVING AND PRAYING

the holy or to that which is consecrated and dedicated; further, “holy” refers to the pure, virtuous, blameless. Two worlds open up here. First, we hold sacred that to which we are committed (consecrated, dedicated), that in which we have a stake, that which motivates us to single-mindedness in thought or purpose. Second, we hold sacred that which we perceive as wholesome and innocent (pure, virtuous, blameless). The two worlds clearly are mutually engaging. Although we might be single-minded about something which is harmful to us (for example, any addiction), in general we consider sacred that which is both absorbing and beneficial, unique and good.

All of us have our “sacred cows.” For some, it might be Sunday football (or basketball or golf). For others it might be Saturday shopping. For still others it might be singing happy birthday even when no one can hold a tune. Most of us have family traditions which we hold sacred, even in this age of the lament of the breakdown of the family (let alone of the extended family). We might grab meals on the run most of the time, but when it comes to the big holidays or holy days (for example, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Passover, Fourth of July, Fast-Breaking at the end of Ramadan), we have a natural sense that for the celebration to be full we must join with others outside our immediate family in order to make the festivities fuller. Perhaps this is why we miss departed loved ones at these times—we’ve always had grandma and grandpa over at Thanksgiving, and now there is an emptiness because a comfortable and expected tradition must take on new parameters.

We also use sacred in other everyday contexts (sometimes using the language “thus and so is sacrosanct”). We sometimes joke that the harried parent only has one sacred place—the bathroom. We hold values sacred—as citizens of a democracy, we defend our right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; our right to free speech; our right to self-govern. We hold actions as sacred—a kiss, for example; and if a kiss is insincere, we feel betrayed; no wonder for us Christians Judas’ kiss is a particularly poignant way for Judas to give a betraying sign of identity (see Matthew 26:48). We hold words as sacred—one’s name, for example, which is so intimately connected with self, with who one is. No wonder we get upset when someone calls us by another name or by a derisive name.

In all these instances of experiencing the sacred, we are drawn to that in which we have a stake, that which makes a difference for us. The sacred both focuses us, rallies us, and gives us insight into a new world of possibilities. A story illustrates this.

When I was in the lower grades in elementary school, I didn’t like my name. I wanted to be “Nancy,” the most popular name at that time. It was only years later when my mother and I were reminiscing one day that I heard how I



got to be named Joyce. I was born while my father was overseas, near the end of World War II. In fact, I was born about a month before peace was signed with Germany. Mother said she knew then that the end was near and that Dad was safe and would come home. So she named me “Joyce” because she was so overjoyed at Dad’s imminent return. From that moment onward, my name became very sacred to me. I perceived myself in a whole new way, and became aware that my very existence bundled up for my mother the grief of separation, the horrors and mortal dangers of war, and the overwhelming joy of reunion and safety. With the revelation of this sacred story, I became a different person, and this new self-perception opened up new possibilities for how I would choose to live each day. I was particularly confirmed of this new self-awareness one day around my birthday when I paid the bill at a restaurant after Sunday brunch. Taking my change and thanking the cashier, she looked at me and said, “You have a beautiful smile.” I didn’t take the time to tell her the real origin of my smile: the joy of who I am and how I came to be named.

Now let us approach the sacred from a different perspective. Here, the sacred “is an absolute reality . . . which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real.”⁶ For historian of religion Mircea Eliade, the sacred is a “mode of being.”⁷ By describing the sacred in this way, we are able to go beyond the sacred as something we hold dear (although we do that as well), to something beyond ourselves, which transcends ourselves. This takes us to the world of mystery and spirit.

An aphorism which has been circulating for a long time is that “a mystery is not a problem to be solved but a life to be lived.” To a strictly scientific mind set, everything unknown can be approached as a problem—given enough time and research, we can find the answer. Problems are hurdles to be overcome. This attitude actually works often in our favor and is important for dealing well with many aspects of our lives. For example, we all await the day when we will have cracked the problem of how to cure cancer or AIDS.

Other aspects of our lives, however, are diminished if we treat them as mere problems to be solved. For example, if an engaged couple approaches getting to know each other as a problem, the marriage is in trouble before the vows are ever exchanged. Knowledge of the other simply as a problem implies that eventually one can know everything there is to know about the other. This simply leaves open the door to confine, control, abuse the other—or at least to get bored with the other. On the other hand, if we approach the other as a mystery, there is always room to discover new things about the other and we know the other can never be exhausted. No matter how long a couple lives together, there will always be something new and fresh to discover about the other. Perhaps one reason a



SILENCE: EVERYDAY LIVING AND PRAYING

couple married for fifty or more years begins to act alike and sometimes even look alike is that they have appropriated to themselves their knowledge of each other and made it their own, but have become unattached to the knowledge itself (and so are unaware of how alike they are) as they look for ever new discoveries.

Mystery always contains a richness and depth which can never be exhausted. The “inexhaustibleness” of mystery is what transcends us, what we call sacred, and what transports us into the world of spirit. Today there is renewed interest in spirituality (a way to live by a set of values or norms), and for good reason. In a society where so many of us have so much, we long for that which we cannot easily purchase or have. We long for that which we do not control, but for what is of inestimable value which instead helps us blossom as persons.

Spirituality always requires something of us—its cost is nothing less than *kenosis* (the discipline of self-emptying). Here is where sacred, art, and silence all come together. In *kenosis* we form the habit of projecting ourselves into the beauty of self-transcendence, and by doing so stand not only in silent awe before our selves, but also before the world in which we live. In *kenosis* the deepest sense of who we are becomes at hand in the stark reality of at-handness, available for anyone who dares to stop and see. We are who we are. Even with our imperfections and foibles, the human being is a work of art, one who shares in the sacred.

Finally, let’s speak of the sacred specifically in terms of the divine. Now the mode of being of the sacred is manifested in the utter transcendence and absoluteness of the divine creator God. While we use the words *transcendence* and *absoluteness* to refer to God, the remarkable thing about our God is that the Divine One is still immanent, always desiring to relate to us, to teach us virtue and good living, to coax us into the faith and hope which draws us out of ourselves toward eternity itself. It is precisely the play between divine transcendence and imminence which spurs our desire to encounter the sacred.

The Hebrew word for the presence of God is *shekinah* and usually refers to God’s presence in the Temple, but God’s presence is sometimes very at hand for humans. Moses experienced it in a burning bush. Isaiah had a vision of “the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty” and exclaimed that he is a sinful, doomed man, for “my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:1, 5); in the presence of the Divine, Isaiah is cleansed and receives his prophetic mission. Peter, James, and John experienced Jesus’ appearance at the transfiguration changing to “dazzling white” who “appeared in glory” (Luke 9:29, 31). The glory and majesty of God for believers is so desirous that we seek the sacred presence precisely in order to transcend ourselves. When we lose ourselves in the sacred, we become more than ourselves.



The call of every believer is to be a mystic, one initiated into the *shekinah* of God. As Hugo Rahner proposes, “The . . . mystic . . . is one who sees through visible things and perceives the inexpressible that lies beyond.”⁸ The mystic, therefore, is one who is practiced in recognizing God’s theophanies (God’s self-revelation, which is more at hand than we sometimes like to admit) and moves beyond the at-hand to the power and potential revealed. Any experience of the sacred is essentially a mystical moment.

The Judeo-Christian, Muslim, and other religious traditions all have their share of recognized mystics. As interest in spirituality has grown, so has interest in the classical mystics. Feminists have made household names out of Julian of Norwich and Hildegard of Bingen. Scant attention has been paid, however, to how every seeker of the sacred is truly a mystic.

The mystic, through contemplation and *kenosis*, surrenders self to the mystery of divine love, mercy, and goodness; and in losing (surrendering) self, finds a new self. Unlike the great mystics of the world religions, our own mysticism is more fleeting, less predictable, and (usually) less intense. This makes these experiences, however, no less mystical.

All of us at times have known deep within ourselves an immediate experience of God which left us in awe, joy, and wonder. Seeking the sacred encourages us to pause long enough to recognize these experiences as a gift of intimate Divine Presence. Frequently we recognize mystical moments at emotionally charged times: being washed with comfort during intense grief at the death of a loved one, having an overwhelming sense of peace in the midst of a family crisis, hearts leaping with joy at the sight of a spectacular sunrise or sunset. More challenging is to recognize mystical moments—an overwhelming sense of God’s presence—even during the simple routine of our everyday lives.

No matter what our approach to or understanding of the sacred is, there is always an absoluteness and transcendence about it because we know it exists apart from ourselves and is pure gift. Surrendering ourselves, the sacred possesses us and opens us to heretofore unimaginable riches. The sacred takes what God created as *very good*, and makes it even better.





Reader Response Interlude

- Examples of daily sacred moments
for me are . . .
- I am aware of myself as a sacred
person when . . .
- My mystical experiences of the Divine
Presence have taught me . . .



Training and Events Calendar

In-Person Events

An Introduction to the OCIA: The Vision of Christian Initiation Ministry

Wednesday, February 7, 2024 | St. Charles Borromeo Parish, Sicklerville, NJ

Hosted by the Diocese of Camden

An Introduction to the RCIA: The Vision of Christian Initiation Ministry

Saturday, June 8, 2024 | St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish, Las Vegas, NV

Hosted by the Archdiocese of Las Vegas

Una introducción al RICA: La visión de la iniciación cristiana

Saturday, June 8, 2024 | St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish, Las Vegas, NV

Hosted by the Archdiocese of Las Vegas

An Introduction to the OCIA: The Vision of Christian Initiation Ministry

Saturday, September 14, 2024 | Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, Atlantic, IA

Hosted by the Diocese of Des Moines

Una introducción al RICA: La visión de la iniciación cristiana

Saturday, September 14, 2024 | Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, Atlantic, IA

Hosted by the Diocese of Des Moines

For more information or to register for any of these events:

<https://catechumeneon.org/events>

National Gathering on Christian Initiation® (NGCI 2024)

July 31–August 1, 2024 | Loyola University Lakeshore Campus, Chicago, IL

For more information:

<https://www.NGCI.org>

Virtual Workshops

Catechumeneon Digital Institute

Incorporating Unbaptized Children into the Parish Religious Education Program

Thursdays, January 25, February 1 and 8, 2024

1:00–2:30 p.m. ET / 10:00–11:30 a.m. PT

Presented by Rachel Espinoza

Cost: \$45 per computer

Order Code: VWCIREP

Easter Retreat for Liturgical Ministers: Living as Priest, Prophet, and King

Sunday, April 28, 2024: for Music Ministers

Monday, April 29, 2024: for Lectors and Readers

Tuesday, April 30, 2024: for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

7:30–9:00 p.m. ET / 4:30–6:00 p.m. PT

Retreat led by Stephen S. Wilbricht, csc

Cost: \$15 per person

Order Codes: VWERMM, VWERLR, VWEREM



Host a Catechumeneon Event

We invite you to consider hosting a *Catechumeneon* training event for Christian initiation ministers in your diocese or region. Whether in English or Spanish, LTP will assist you in coordinating all aspects of an in-person or virtual event.

Participants will:

- explore the vision of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults;
- learn skills needed for effective ministry; and
- spend time in prayer and fellowship.

To foster diverse learning needs, training events include:

- dynamic presentations by well-trained initiation ministers;
- opportunities for group discussion and personal reflection;
- stories that illustrate effective ministry;
- videos to share the wisdom of seasoned ministers;
- song and art to engage the imagination; and
- hands-on skills training.

Ritual celebrations are included (during in-person events) to demonstrate the transformative power of liturgy.

Planning is as easy as 1, 2, 3

1. Choose Your Topic

We have over 50+ presentations ready to go. Topics include:

- An Introduction to the RCIA
- Implementing a Year-Round Catechumenate
- Called to Serve: The Deacon's Role in Christian Initiation
- The Minor Rites of the RCIA
- Precatechumenate and the RCIA: Developing a Plan for Your Parish
- Discernment in Christian Initiation

Request the full list of topics or suggest your own . . .

2. Choose Your Format

Participants can come together or join from the comfort of their home or office.

- Virtual Event
- Digital Institutes
- Virtual Workshops™
- Catechumeneon Live! (Zoom-based conversations)
- In-Person Events
- 1-, 2-, 3-day Gatherings
- Clergy Convocations
- Diocesan Formation Days

3. Choose Your Date and Time

Work with an LTP liturgical training consultant to prepare all aspects of your event.



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For more information, contact **Michael Ruzicki, Training and Events Manager**, at training@ltp.org, 773-579-4900, ext. 3531, or visit www.Catechumeneon.org.

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