

January 2022



# CATECHETICAL REVIEW

## Encountering **GOD** in Prayer

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**Teaching  
Teens to Pray**

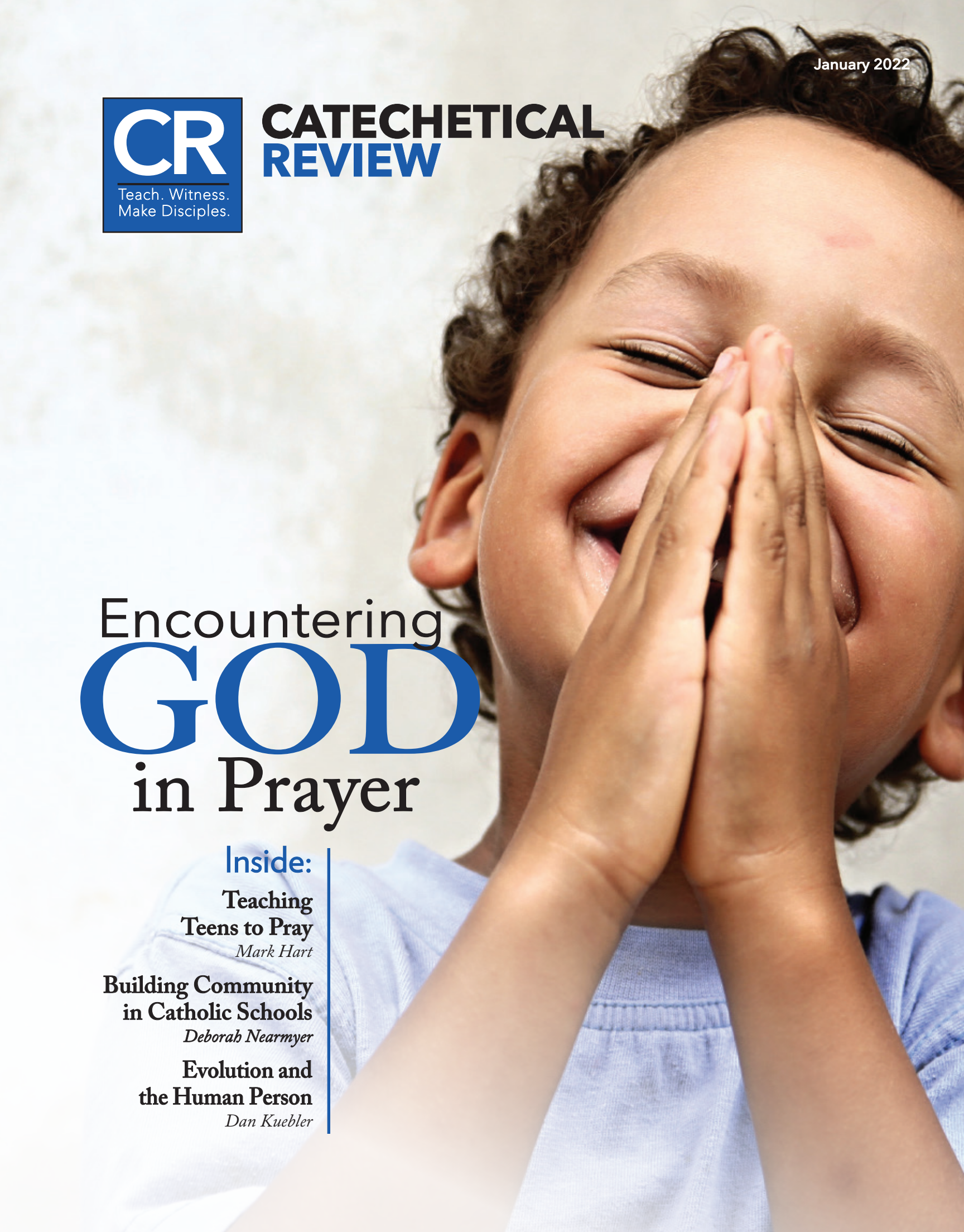
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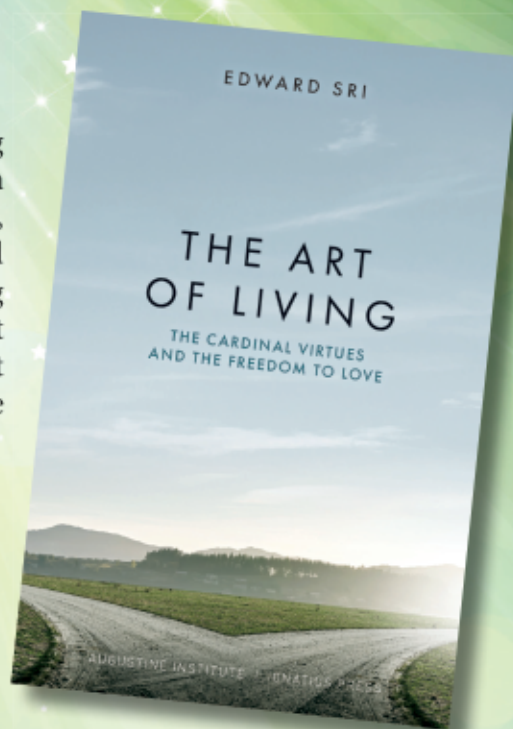
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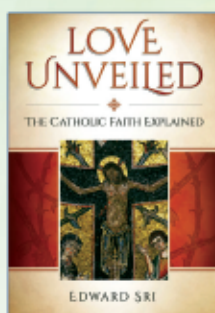
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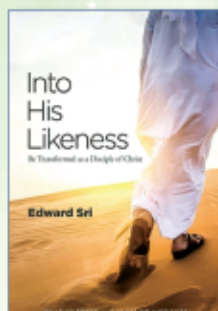


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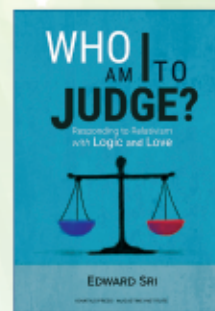
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# The Spiritual Life and Our Missionary Potential

By James Pauley

There have been some very good books written in the past few years centered on helping parishes to become mission-focused. One of the best of these is a ninety-page book published by the University of Mary, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*. Monsignor James Shea, in his preface to the book, describes a fundamental cultural shift of recent decades that is dramatically accelerating. We are living in an era of transition away from the relatively comfortable confines of a Christendom-oriented relationship with culture to a new and much more challenging environment. A Catholic (or Christian) way of seeing the world is finding itself increasingly at odds with many of the values and priorities of larger society. Of course, this is not new news. Msgr. Shea argues, though, that the Church must now shift from Christendom-oriented ways of doing things to missionary approaches more appropriate to reaching those who are uninterested in the possibilities of life in God. And this new mindset will be more akin to that of the Christian missionaries of the first centuries than to those living in the Catholic-friendly cultures in which many of our grandparents lived.

Here is the central challenge: today's Catholic parishes must become adaptive, pivoting away from the way things used to be done in a Christendom-oriented Church. We need new competencies in communicating the Gospel in this new missionary context. Msgr. Shea puts it this way:

We are dealing with the first culture in history that was once deeply Christian but that by a slow and thorough process has been consciously ridding itself of its Christian basis. Our society is full of many—including those baptized and raised with some exposure to faith—who believe that they have seen enough of Christianity to see that it has little to offer them. We are therefore not attempting to make converts from pagans; we are attempting to bring back to the Church those knowingly or unknowingly in the grasp of apostasy, a different and more difficult challenge. C. S. Lewis once described this difference as that between a man wooing a young maiden and a man winning a cynical divorcée back to her previous marriage.<sup>1</sup>

This movement from Christendom to apostolic mission is also a pivot that must be made by catechists. The Church has emphasized now for five decades that catechesis must be carried out in an evangelizing way. Many have written extensively on what such a shift in approach would look like (including the very limited author of this editorial). Considering catechetical approaches that are properly aligned with the new societal reality is critical. I believe, though, that the greatest landscape-shifting

change needed on the part of catechists is in our capacity to give authentic witness to a life of communion with God in Jesus. In other words, we must be, ourselves, drawing on a deep reservoir of prayer. Many catechists today are familiar with John Paul II's teaching that "the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that the only way such an objective becomes possible, in either our current or future circumstances, is if catechists are able to teach and guide others from the position of their own prayerful intimacy with Jesus.

Beginning a new year, then, we can ask ourselves: how highly do we prioritize our own prayerful encounters with God?

The most important wisdom we can draw upon as we face deeper cultural challenges is the exact same truth Jesus shared with those first catechists gathered around him at the Last Supper. Knowing well the challenges they would face after Pentecost, he said: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

Our prayerful communion with the Blessed Trinity is important to our own Christian life. And it is the most essential ingredient if our catechesis is to be fruitful. As John Paul II once wrote: "Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way."<sup>3</sup>




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Dr. James Pauley is Professor of Theology and Catechetics and author of two books focused on the renewal of catechesis: *An Evangelizing Catechesis: Teaching from Your Encounter with Christ* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2020), and *Liturgical Catechesis in the 21st Century: A School of Discipleship* (Liturgy Training Publications, 2017).

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> University of Mary and Msgr. James P. Shea, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age* (Bismarck, ND: University of Mary Press, 2020), 2–3.
- <sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, no. 5.
- <sup>3</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 91.

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# Reaching Out to Jesus in Prayer

By Teresa Hawes

## What Is Prayer?

When we hear the word prayer, often we think of vocal prayer, using words either handed down to us burnished by the voices of generations or the words that spring up spontaneously from the heart. Prayer takes many forms, however, and all of them are means to seek God and respond to his love, for, “whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him.”<sup>1</sup> This encounter may well happen beyond words, with gestures or in silence.

## The Power of Faith

The response to God’s thirst that touches Jesus, which he praises<sup>2</sup> and which establishes a contact that seems to move him or even allow him to act,<sup>3</sup> is faith. “To those who turn to him in faith, he grants what they ask.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast, we find that little faith earns a reproach,<sup>5</sup> and lack of it, mysteriously, seems at times to hinder Jesus’ action.<sup>6</sup> Faith is the attitude Jesus awaits: it is what opens the door of our lives to his action and draws it down: “Prayer to Jesus is answered by him already during his ministry, through signs that anticipate the power of his death and Resurrection: Jesus hears the prayer of faith, expressed in words (the leper, Jairus, the Canaanite woman, the good thief) or in silence (the bearers of the paralytic, the woman with a hemorrhage who touches his clothes, the tears and ointment of the sinful woman).”<sup>7</sup> Faith moves Jesus to act.

## Mark 5:24-34: a Model of Efficacious Faith

Among all these models, there is one person’s efficacious faith that stands apart. When Mark recounts the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage,<sup>8</sup> we see that faith has a deep, seemingly involuntary effect on Jesus. Let’s have a closer look at this episode to follow her example and glean how to touch Jesus at the very core, so to speak, to truly encounter him whatever form our prayer may take and whatever our subjective experience during prayer may be.

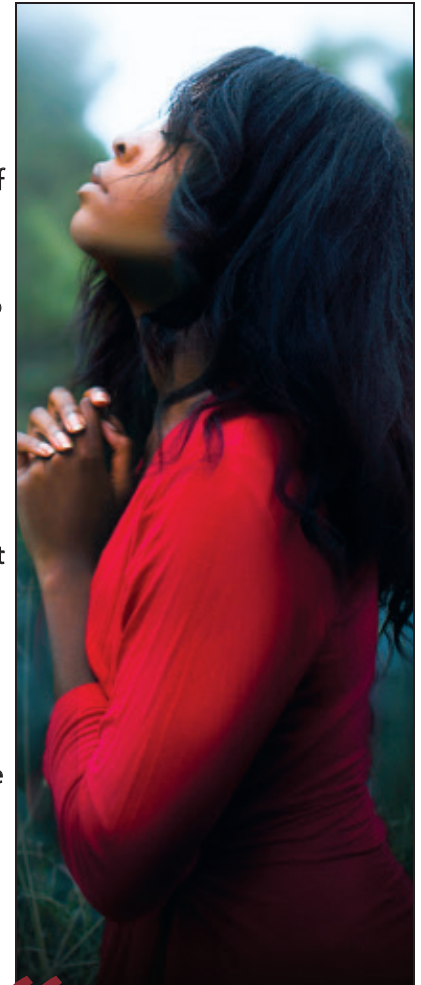
This woman’s illness has separated her from the community. She is legally unclean, and her presence could render others unclean as well. Yet she has heard of the healings Jesus has accomplished. There could be severe consequences for her leaving quarantine, and nonetheless she goes out into the street, joining the crowd surrounding the group of disciples, the sometimes-bodyguards of Jesus. Her ears have brought her information, and she has decided to look for Jesus. There is hope. Her eyes are seeking him out; she journeys with outstretched arms to

touch his garments.

“Prayer is the movement of our whole self, our person, toward God.”<sup>9</sup> She has used her body, the senses of hearing, sight, and touch, as well as her arms and legs, to get to Jesus. We learn from this woman that we must go to him with all that we are, body and soul.

She does touch his garments with her fingers, but she also reaches Jesus on a much deeper level: “If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well.”<sup>10</sup> He felt a power had gone out of him. “It is faith that touched Him; it pierced Him like a sword, and drew forth power from Him.”<sup>11</sup> “She felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.”<sup>12</sup> The woman’s faith has provoked a response on the level of his divinity. Jesus had not seen her; in his human will, he had not intended to cure her. Her faith “made” him cure her, as it were. Her act of faith drew the healing power out of him, literally behind his back.

When he turns and asks who touched him, his disciples think his question is ridiculous given all the people jostling them.<sup>13</sup> However, Jesus insists because “perceiving in himself that power had gone forth from him,”<sup>14</sup> he wants to know who has done this. By calling her “daughter,” he articulates a bond between



*“Prayer is the movement of our whole self, our person, toward God.”*

“An act of faith allows the whole human person to be in communion with God.



them, publicly confirms this healing, and returns this woman, who has suffered and been ostracized for twelve years, to normal life.<sup>15</sup>

### What Has Happened?

We may see this woman's encounter with Jesus as a prototype of how we are called to reach out to God with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love that are given to us in our baptismal grace. Our grace, participation in God's very life, makes it possible for us to touch God every time we reach out with faith enlivened by love. "An act of faith allows the whole human person to be in communion with God. There is no difference in nature between seeing God in Heaven and faith on earth."<sup>16</sup> Here is how Blessed Father Marie-Eugène describes this reality:

God is a flaming blaze, a fire, a fountain, an ocean. When I make contact with God through faith, we can compare that to fire: I place my hand in fire, it burns me; I place it in water, it gets wet. What I receive when I touch God through faith is divine life. The living God, the life of God inundates me.<sup>17</sup>

When we reach out and touch God in faith, he cannot *not* respond by giving us his life. The woman felt that she had been healed. We may not feel anything at all. Our impressions do not change the reality: the contact with God through faith is certain.<sup>18</sup> It does not depend on our perception of it. Blessed Father Marie-Eugène continues:

It may be that we do not obtain the particular temporal favor we have asked for, but we receive something much better, because we are divinized by contact with God. That is the essence of prayer: this contact with a living God, a God who reacts not like a simple inanimate being, but like a *living person*, with a thrill of joy, with the gift of Himself.<sup>19</sup>

May the audacious courage of this woman, whose faith reached Jesus in the core of his being and provoked her healing, help us to believe in the power of our faith and encourage us to get to Jesus no matter what, giving him the joy of loving and healing us.

Teresa Hawes currently lives in Vermont and teaches high school Religion, having worked in Catholic education for forty-one years. She also facilitates retreats and workshops on prayer in the Carmelite tradition. She is a professed member of Notre Dame de Vie Institute.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (reg text) 2560.
- <sup>2</sup> Matthew 8:10; 15:28; Luke 7:9.
- <sup>3</sup> Matthew 9:2; 9:22; 9:29; Mark 2:5; 10:52; Luke 5:20; 7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42.
- <sup>4</sup> CCC, 548.
- <sup>5</sup> Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20; Mark 4:40; Luke 8:25; 12:28.
- <sup>6</sup> Matthew 13:58; Mark 6:5.
- <sup>7</sup> CCC, 2616.
- <sup>8</sup> Mark 5:24–34
- <sup>9</sup> Bl. Marie-Eugène of the Child Jesus, O.C.D., *Where the Spirit Breathes* (New York: Society of St. Paul, 1998), 53.
- <sup>10</sup> Mark 5:28.
- <sup>11</sup> Bl. Marie-Eugène of the Child Jesus, *Where the Spirit Breathes*, 66.
- <sup>12</sup> Mark 5:29.
- <sup>13</sup> Mark 5:31.
- <sup>14</sup> Mark 5:30
- <sup>15</sup> See George Martin, *Bringing the Gospel of Mark to Life* (Ijamsville, MD: The Word Among Us Press, 2007), 119.
- <sup>16</sup> Roselyne Deglaire and Joëlle Guichard, *Fifteen Days of Prayer with Father Marie-Eugène of the Child Jesus, Carmelite founder of Notre-Dame de vie*, trans. Teresa Hawes (New York: Society of St. Paul, 2009), 35.
- <sup>17</sup> Bl. Marie-Eugène of the Child Jesus, unpublished document quoted in *Fifteen Days*, 36.
- <sup>18</sup> Saint John of the Cross: "Faith alone . . . is the only proximate and proportionate means to union with God." *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), bk. 2, ch. 9.
- <sup>19</sup> Bl. Marie-Eugène of the Child Jesus, *Where the Spirit Breathes*, 67. See also his chapter "Faith and Supernatural Contemplation," in *I Want to See God*, trans. Sister M. Verda Clare, C.S.C. (Chicago: Fides Publishers Association, 1953).

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# Mental Prayer and the Rosary Beads: A Method of Prayer for the Laity

By John Bergsma

**I**nterior, conversational prayer with God—which the Catholic spiritual tradition customarily terms “mental prayer” to distinguish it from “vocal prayer,” which is recited audibly—is a key spiritual discipline without which there is little prospect for growth in holiness for the baptized believer. Therefore, catechesis about the role of mental prayer in the spiritual life and the techniques or methods of mental prayer is an urgent necessity in our age and every age.

## The Meaning and Importance of “Mental Prayer”

The term “mental prayer” is traditional but can be misunderstood in contemporary discourse because the term “mental” can suggest “rational,” “speculative,” or “intellectual.” But that is not the meaning at all. Mental prayer is the prayer of our heart, our soul. It is interior conversation, communion with God in the center of our being. The traditional idea of mental prayer corresponds closely to what the *Catechism* calls “meditation” (2705–2708) but with practice and spiritual maturity can grow into “contemplation” or “contemplative prayer” as well (2709–2719). “Mental” only denotes external silence as opposed to vocal recitation; “meditation” and “contemplation” are different interior acts of the mind and soul that take place in such silent prayer.

Many great saints and spiritual writers have emphasized the importance of mental prayer. St. Ignatius of Loyola is reputed to have quipped, “Holiness is impossible without it.” St. Teresa of Ávila is well known for her emphasis on mental prayer, as most of her *Autobiography* is devoted to discussing the stages and challenges of such prayer and her own experience of growth in it. For Teresa, such prayer was a nonnegotiable of the Christian life: “He who neglects mental prayer needs no devil to carry him to hell. He brings himself there with his own hands.” Such a statement may seem harsh, but Teresa is not saying that God punishes the person who neglects prayer by sending them to hell. Rather, prayer maintains and grows the love of God in one’s heart, without which our love of God grows cold and we lose the desire to choose heaven—which is the fullness of God’s love—and we begin to desire God’s absence, which is hell. St. Josemaría Escrivá with his characteristic pithiness writes: “A saint, without prayer? I don’t believe in such sanctity. If you are not a man of prayer, I don’t believe



in the sincerity of your intentions when you say that you work for Christ.”<sup>1</sup> And “If you abandon prayer, you may at first live on spiritual reserves . . . and after that, by cheating.”<sup>2</sup>

## Challenges to the Practice of Mental Prayer

Nonetheless, even many Christians who are convinced that mental prayer is a necessity of the Christian life do not find the practice easy. Distraction and wandering thoughts constitute a major problem, as many find that as soon as they enter into the period of quiet that they have set aside to speak to God, their mental discourse gets attracted to problems and stresses anticipated in the rest of the day, and five or ten minutes quickly speed by without any real conversation taking place with God. Common solutions for distraction include bringing a spiritual book to one’s time of prayer and using it as food for conversation with God: reading a few sentences, then speaking about them to God for a few moments, and returning to the book whenever thoughts wander. Journaling, too, is a frequently recommended practice, as the act of “writing a letter to God” can often help to focus one’s thoughts. In the remainder of this essay, however, I wish to share a very



simple method for mental prayer that I have used frequently over the past twenty years. I have found it very helpful to combat distraction and persevere in prayer, even in situations where such perseverance may be necessary, due to family and work obligations and the pressures of the day, to pray in distracting circumstances, like driving or riding in a plane.

### The Rosary Beads: An Aid to Mental Prayer

The method I recommend makes use of the beads of a standard rosary to help keep one's thoughts focused and progressing through the different postures of conversational prayer. It has long been recognized that there are certain modes of discoursing with God, and four of these encompass most of the interior acts that make up mental prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. This order is easy to remember as it forms the acronym ACTS. Furthermore, there is a spiritual logic to it: as we enter God's presence, it makes sense to first acknowledge his greatness (adoration) and then our own unworthiness (confession). Then we strengthen our faith by recollection of God's goodness toward us (thanksgiving), which prepares our soul to ask in faith for that which we (and others) still need (supplication).

The beads of the rosary are used to stay recollected, remember one's place in the stages of prayer, and help ensure a balance of time between these four different interior acts, all of which are important for a "balanced diet," so to speak, of mental prayer.

### The Prayers for Each "Decade"

On the first decade of the rosary, one formulates ten aspirations of adoration to God. There are many things that may inspire these aspirations: the beauty of nature, the awe-inspiring attributes of God in himself, God's self-gift in the sacraments, and the mighty deeds of God in salvation history are all suitable for inspiring the heart. It should be remembered, though, that adoration is praise of God for *who he is*, and thus distinct from thanksgiving, which is praise of God for *what he has done*. There is a connection and overlap between the two, but nonetheless it is worth attempting to keep the distinction. By our term "adoration" we are encompassing the elements the *Catechism* distinguishes as blessing, adoration, and praise (see 2626–28, 2639–43). It is important to acknowledge that the excellence, virtues, and perfections of God inspire us to praise him for and in himself, quite apart from anything he has done for us.

On the second decade of the rosary, we can formulate ten acts of confession. Confession is a subset of what the *Catechism* describes as "petition" (2629–33)—it is the petition for forgiveness. Confession is an essential component of prayer, and there are several famous examples of prayers of confession in Scripture, notably Ezra 9, Daniel 9, and Psalm 51. This decade gives us the opportunity to perform a brief examination of conscience, asking the Holy Spirit to help us to recognize and acknowledge where, when, and how we have failed to love and obey God, as well

as other areas of weakness or failing that may not constitute sin—because they lacked our conscious consent—but put us in danger of sin or made us less effective in fulfilling our vocation and duties of state. Usually, it is not difficult for me to think of ten sins to confess! But on rare occasions when I get stuck, I find it helpful to identify moral weakness or need and ask God for extra grace to overcome those challenges.

On the third decade of the rosary, one can formulate ten acts of thanksgiving, one on each bead. Thanksgiving is an often-neglected aspect of mental prayer, but scriptural teaching on prayer stresses the need for it (see CCC 2637–38). St. Paul says, "In everything, by prayer and supplication—with *thanksgiving*—let your requests be made known to God" (Phil 4:6; cf. Eph 5:20) and the Psalmist urges, "Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving" (Ps 95:2; cf. 100:4; 107:1; etc.). Indeed, thanksgiving for God's saving acts in the lives of individual believers (Ps 107) and his people as a whole (Ps 136) make up the content of many important Psalms, which are the "school of prayer" for God's people. Not only is thanksgiving to God an act of justice—because we owe him a debt of thanks for all his blessings—but it also strengthens and encourages our faith as we remind ourselves of the various unmerited blessings and answers to prayer God has given us. Just thanking God for the gift of my spouse and each of my children could easily take up this entire decade, so I intentionally vary my thanksgivings also to include smaller,

more recent and specific ways that God has demonstrated his goodness to me. This decade always goes by very quickly!

The final two decades can be spent on supplications. Supplications are requests for God's help (see CCC 2629–33). This is certainly a necessary and legitimate aspect of prayer, and the Lord's Prayer itself teaches us that our most basic and humble needs are legitimate subjects for prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Mt 6:11). But supplication can also tend to dominate our prayer, especially when we are young in the interior life, which is a reflection of our natural self-focus. That is why it is good to reserve supplication to the end of the process of prayer, after we have adored, confessed to, and thanked God.

It is possible to formulate twenty acts of supplication, or one can divide the two decades into requests for one's own needs and then intercessions for others (CCC 2634–36). Our needs as well as the needs of the Church and the world tend to be so great and numerous that it is never difficult to fulfill these twenty aspirations!

### Making Mental Prayer Part of Our Lifestyle

My own experience has been that using the rosary beads to guide my mental prayer in this way typically consumes fifteen to twenty minutes. Again, I find it helpful when it is necessary to do my prayer in the car or when traveling, because distractions arise (a crying child, an erratic driver), but after the distraction passes, the physical presence of the rosary in my hand reminds me to continue praying, and the position of my fingers on the beads helps me resume in the place where I left off.

A good target for laity can be to practice mental prayer twice a day, in the morning and afternoon, for fifteen minutes each. I would not recommend using this rosary-bead method for more than one of these sessions—one's other time of mental prayer during the day could be free conversation, meditation on a book, journaling, or quiet listening. There are, after all, other things that need to take place in mental prayer besides the movements summarized by ACTS. Sometimes a particular challenge or issue in one's interior life requires one's focus for one or more entire sessions of mental prayer, as one "talks it out" in the presence of God. Also, listening, being attentive to the movements of the Holy Spirit within one's heart, is an important aspect of prayer (the *Catechism* classifies this under "contemplative prayer"), and the rosary-bead method does not explicitly devote time specifically to this, although my own experience has been that movements of the Holy Spirit do come in my soul as I am formulating the aspirations that make up each decade, and sometimes these movements inspire a "digression" in prayer as I am led to converse with God about a particular topic. However, when that "digression" is over, the beads are still there to enable me to continue through the other dispositions of prayer, ensuring that I have a "well-balanced diet" in the interior life—not omitting thanksgiving while over-emphasizing supplication, or spending the whole time in adoration to the neglect of confession, etc.

Prayer is, of course, not ultimately a matter of technique or method but a relationship with God. No one method suits all people and all situations, and within our own life of prayer it is good to foster variety and participate in the many forms offered to the Christian believer: liturgical prayer, vocal prayer, and various forms of meditation and contemplation. Keeping all that in mind, with a clear conscience I recommend to you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, this humble method using the beads of the rosary that I have found so helpful as a lay person seeking to maintain an interior conversation with God on a daily basis in the midst of all the distractions of family life and other obligations. My hope and prayer is that you, too, will find it helpful!

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#### Notes

- 1 Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, par. 107, 109.
- 2 Escrivá, *The Furrow*, par. 445.

#### Photos:

Rondae Productions and Tima Miroshnichenko, Pexels.com;  
Dorian Cochrane, Unsplash.com



# “The Body of Christ” & “Amen”

## What They Mean and What We Are Saying

By Fr. Jeffrey Lewis



**W**hen a man gets married, the last thing on his mind on his wedding day is a little, two-word phrase that he will utter probably every single day (and several times a day) for the rest of his life. Two simple words that, probably, he never would have expected to say so frequently. And those two words are, of course, “Yes, dear.” (And if you guessed that those two words were “I’m sorry,” then you also are correct!)

Now, why I mention these words is because the same is true for me, and indeed for every man who gets ordained to the priesthood. There is a phrase that, prior to my ordination, I never really gave much thought to, but it is something that I have found myself saying at least a thousand times a week so far in my priesthood: “the Body of Christ.” With every single Host that I distribute at Mass or for visits to the sick or homebound for Holy Communion: “the Body of Christ.” As priest, I definitely say these words several hundred times each weekend, more than any other phrase spoken during the entire Mass, more than any other phrase that I might say during the entire week.

### *Corpus Christi: “The Body of Christ”*

Each year, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ. *Corpus Christi*: “the Body of Christ” in Latin. Of course, every Mass is a special celebration of the Body of Christ because every Mass is centered on the Eucharist. But for the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi*, the Church, in a particular way, invites us to be especially mindful of this mystery of faith, to embrace more fully the sublime magnificence of that which is the centerpiece of our religion, the very heart of Catholicism.

When we come forward to receive Holy Communion, we bow our heads in reverence to the gift that we are about to receive. Some people genuflect before receiving. Some people even fall to their knees in order to receive in the holy posture of kneeling. And if we receive Holy Communion on the tongue, then we open our mouths like helpless infants seeking to be fed; if we receive on the hand, then we hold our hands up like helpless beggars hoping for some charity, presenting the open hands like holy thrones upon which Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, will be seated when we receive him. “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” These words we say together, and they are the final words we speak before coming forward to receive the Lord. Because indeed, we are not



worthy to receive him. But he permits himself nonetheless to be received by us because it is only by his grace—and our words and actions done in faith in our response to his grace—that we are *made* worthy.

And this is pure gift, pure grace. We can do nothing to earn this, nothing to merit this, nothing to make ourselves worthy, only that we receive this precious gift in a state of grace and with proper disposition of heart and soul—humbly, worthily, and well.

Behold, the pierced One. Behold, the Lamb who was slain. Behold, the Suffering Servant, and the risen and glorified, majestic, and triumphant Lord. Behold, the Body of Christ.

### **Amen: “Yes I Believe; So Be It”**

Now, there is *another* phrase, a single word, in fact, that the congregation who receives from the altar the Sacred Body of Christ will say probably as frequently as the faithful will say anything for the rest of their lives: “Amen.” With every prayer that we pray: “Amen.” With each prayer that is said by the priest at Mass, our holy response: “Amen.” And every time that we are given “the Body of Christ,” we answer boldly, faithfully, and with immense joy: yes, I believe, so be it. “Amen.”

But do we believe, *really*, that this tiny, tasteless Host truly is the Body of Christ? Because it is just so hard to believe this! Our faith tells us that this is so. And our minds try to tell us that this is so. And we make it a sheer act of the will to place our belief and trust in God’s solemn promise that this is so. But our senses tell us something else again: this looks and smells and tastes like bread!

And so, it is hard enough really to mean it when we say, “Amen,” as we come forward to receive the Body of Christ, and it gets even harder! That is because every single time when we say, “Amen” (with our every prayer, our every response to a liturgical action, our every reception of the Body of Christ at Holy Communion), we are saying, “Yes, I believe,” to every single thing that Christ and his Church infallibly profess and teach to be the truth. Every aspect of our faith (no matter how complex or convoluted we might suppose it is), every detail of morality, and in every instance of our earthly lives (yes, even the awkward, personal, private, and no-big-deal things in life) are how we say, “Yes, I believe.” If Christ and his Church profess it and teach it to be true, and if we say, “Amen,” as we come forward to receive the Body of Christ from his Church at Holy Communion, then what we are saying is this: “I believe and *profess* all that the holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God.” No ifs, ands, or buts. No finagling our way out of it if there is something that sticks in our craw—no merely saying the

word without actually believing it or putting it into action in the lived reality of our daily lives. Because if we falsely say “Amen,” then, yes, I guess we can fool the bishops, priests, and deacons, and we can fool the catechists and teachers, and we can even fool ourselves into some ill-begotten notion of a false belief. But we cannot fool God.

### **Conclusion**

“The Body of Christ.” Such a powerful phrase! Because it speaks a powerful truth, and it is the truth. This is the Body of Christ! Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity. The God who created the heavens and the earth and all their wondrous array, the God who made everything out of sheer nothing, the God who deigned to make each of us in the image and likeness of himself—the *imago Dei*. This is the same God into whom mere tasteless bread wafers are transformed. The same God whom neither heaven nor earth can contain but who wills to be contained, in his utter fullness, in humble bread. The same God who gave himself to us on the Cross for our redemption, who gave himself to the grave for our salvation, and then who rose again and ascended into heaven for our justification. The same God, Jesus Christ, who, again and again and again, gives himself to us at Holy Communion, that he may be one in us and we one in him. “One body, one spirit, in Christ.”

Yes, Lord, I believe; help my unbelief. And if, O Lord, this is so, and if this is true, then so be it. “Amen.”

May it be, then, that the Body of Christ will strengthen us in our belief and understanding of our Catholic faith, our Catholic morals, and our bold and joyful witness to God’s glorious majesty, for the salvation of souls. And may it be that our “Amen” would be a resounding affirmation of all that the holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God, now and forever.

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Photos:

Jacob Bentzinger, [Unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com); Josh Applegate, [Pexels.com](https://pexels.com)

# The Science of Evolution in Light of the Catholic Understanding of the Human Person

By Dan Kuebler

A powerful narrative exists within the popular culture that the advancements of modern science pose an existential threat to religious belief. This narrative, popularized by many influential authors, argues that scientific discovery is gradually upending the stranglehold Christian “superstitions” have held over the popular imagination. Nowhere is this apparent conflict more evident than in the field of evolutionary biology. For example, Christians maintain that we are made in the image and likeness of the Creator, yet many advocates of evolutionary theory claim humans are a meaningless twig on the evolutionary tree of life.

This view holds such force that Pope Benedict XVI felt compelled to state in his inaugural Pontifical homily that “We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, it may seem that Pope Benedict’s statement assumes that there is some inherent conflict between the science of evolution and the Catholic faith. However, to read it in such a way is to take him out of context. Benedict was concerned not about the science of evolution but rather the philosophies that attempt to reduce the human person to a mere “casual and meaningless product of evolution.” Regarding such atheistic evolutionary philosophies, Pope Benedict stresses their inherent incompatibility with the Catholic understanding of the human person, a concern voiced by many of his predecessors.

## Evolution and Catholic Theology: A Search for Understanding

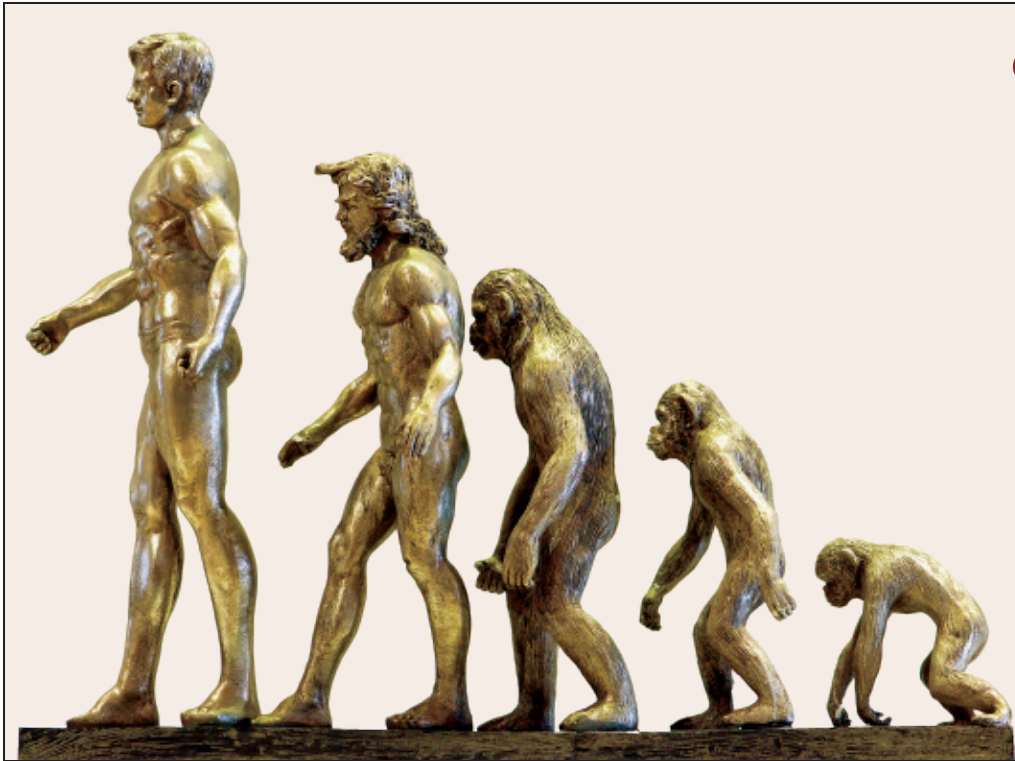
In terms of the science of evolution, though, Benedict explicitly does not view it as inherently incompatible with the Catholic faith. Rather, he sees a natural complementarity between the science of evolutionary theory and a Catholic understanding of creation. In a published series of homilies he gave in the 1980s, Benedict stated: “We cannot say: creation or evolution, inasmuch as these things correspond to two different realities.

[The Genesis creation account] does not in fact explain how human persons come to be but rather what they are. . . . And, vice versa, the theory of evolution seeks to understand and describe *biological* developments. To that extent we are faced here with two complementary—rather than mutually exclusive—realities.”<sup>2</sup>

For Benedict, an investigation into the biological connection man has to other organisms in no way diminishes *what man is*. Likewise, the understanding that humankind is the only earthly creature fashioned by God in the divine image is a reality that can enlighten and focus our scientific studies regarding the evolutionary emergence of mankind. This synergy is articulated in the *Catechism*, which states, “Our human understanding, which shares in the light of the divine intellect, can understand what God tells us by means of his creation though not without great effort and only in a spirit of humility and respect before the Creator and his work.”<sup>3</sup>

It is important to recognize that this “spirit of humility” that the *Catechism* mentions operates in both directions. Scientists who expect evolution to explain man in his entirety are destined to fail to understand “what man is,” while theologians who wish to shoehorn the scientific evidence into a literal reading of Genesis 1 are destined to construct an impoverished theology. Both are asking too much of their respective disciplines. No discipline is able to capture the full scope of reality; rather, they all complement each other in the search for the Truth. There is not one truth as revealed by science that can then trump truth as revealed by theology. Rather, there is one Truth that all disciplines investigate in their own limited manner using their own limited methods and competencies. As John Paul II stated in an address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, the knowledge gained via science and theology “both come from the same Source and are to be brought into relationship with the first Truth.”<sup>4</sup>

As such, any apparent contradiction between, for example, evolution and Scripture stems either from the fact that we do not properly understand the meaning of the scriptural text or we have overstated or dismissed the scientific evidence. In fact, the unity of knowledge is a promise that scientific inquiry, if pursued diligently and “in a spirit of humility and respect



“We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God.”

before the Creator and his work,”<sup>5</sup> will reveal truths about the world that complement what has been revealed to us through Scripture regarding God, creation, and mankind. It means an honest, competent investigation into evolution, done through the proper use of human reason, will lead us toward God rather than drag us down toward atheism.

### Evolutionary Science and the Emergence of the Human Body

Within this framework, it is worth examining the scientific evidence for the evolutionary origin of humans. However, in any such effort it is important to emphasize the limits of a strictly scientific explanation. Because man is a spiritual being with an immaterial soul, the science of evolution cannot explain man in his entirety. It can, however, explain the emergence of man’s material body for, as Pope Pius XII stated in *Humani Generis*, it is within the competence of evolutionary science to inquire “into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter.”<sup>6</sup>

While the field of human evolution is constantly changing with the continual discovery of new evidence, researchers have identified that a multitude of intermediate hominin fossil forms have existed over the past six to seven million years. (Hominin fossils are those fossils that are more similar to modern humans than to modern chimpanzees.) By and large, these hominin fossils are found in the temporal sequence one would expect if the modern human body had indeed evolved from other hominins. For example, there are at least seven different species ascribed to the genus *Australopithecus*. All of these fossils having been found exclusively in Africa from 4.5 to 2 million years ago (MYA). They display brain sizes similar to modern chimps but appear to have been relatively adept at bipedal locomotion based on their skeletal qualities.

Our genus, *Homo*, is thought to have evolved from one of the *Australopithecus* forms roughly two MYA. This was followed by the development of different forms classified in the genus *Homo*, including *Homo erectus*, that migrated out of Africa and settled throughout the Middle East and East Asia. A variety of *Homo* species such as *Homo ergaster* and *Homo heidelbergensis* remained in Africa and gave rise more recently to *Homo neanderthalensis* and modern humans. These are only a fraction of the advanced hominin species that have been found, but it is interesting that they are largely found in a temporal sequence that is consistent with the evolutionary development of the modern human physical form.<sup>7</sup>

### The Emergence of Man: Passage into the Spiritual Realm

What then of the human rational soul, that divine spark that sets us apart from the rest of God’s creatures? Given the immaterial nature of the soul (it does not evolve from matter and is immediately created by God), an evolutionary explanation is not available. As St. John Paul II points out, “The moment of passage into the spiritual realm is not something that can be observed in this way.”<sup>8</sup> However, science is not completely silent on the matter, as John Paul II goes on to state that “we can nevertheless discern, through experimental research, a series of very valuable signs of what is specifically human life.”<sup>9</sup>

These “very valuable signs” he is referring to can be found in the archaeological record, a record that suggests humans capable of symbolic rational thought have been around for quite some time. For example, roughly one hundred thousand years before the present, artifacts that are indicative of creatures capable of symbolic thought—jewelry, engravings, and hafting techniques (the attachment of blades to handles)—began to make sporadic appearances at sites in Africa and the Middle East. This

sporadic emergence gave way to a major increase in human cultural artifacts around forty to fifty thousand years ago as cave paintings and three-dimensional fertility carvings. Musical instruments began to appear at numerous European, African, and Indonesian sites. While it is difficult to reconstruct their entire behavioral repertoire, it seems certain, given the associated artifacts, that the individuals living around fifty thousand years ago (and most likely those living one hundred thousand years ago) were humans endowed with a rational soul.<sup>10</sup> As a result, any understanding of the emergence of man must take into account and explain our deep history.

## Conclusion

The fossil intermediate forms; the history of symbolic artwork, jewelry, and complex tools; as well as the sharing of the same genetic defects in specific genome locations with other primates cannot be easily swept away without failing to “understand what God tells us by means of his creation.”<sup>11</sup> But it is equally true that an evolutionary account of the emergence of man’s body cannot be used to sweep away the Catholic understanding of the human person. The fact that man’s body evolved does not imply that man is nothing more than a material being. Likewise, the evolutionary origin of the human body does not necessitate doing away with the belief that humans are created in the image and likeness of God, that humans are a unity of body and spirit. Nor does such an understanding deny the reality of original sin, that we have fallen and turned from God. There is nothing in the science of human evolution that demands such rejections. In fact, the fossil and archaeological records are not fine grained enough to reveal the specifics regarding when the first creatures made in the image and likeness of God emerged. While the archaeological record can give us some guidance on the possible timing, what exactly transpired at the dawn of humanity will likely remain forever hidden behind the veil of time. Pope Benedict summarizes the situation eloquently:

The first Thou that—however stammeringly—was said by human lips to God marks the moment in which spirit arose in the world. Here the Rubicon of anthropogenesis was crossed. . . . This holds



fast to the doctrine of the special creation of man; . . . Herein lies the reason why the moment of anthropogenesis cannot possibly be determined by paleontology: anthropogenesis is the rise of the spirit, which cannot be excavated with a shovel. The theory of evolution does not invalidate the faith, nor does it corroborate it. But it does challenge the faith to understand itself more profoundly and thus to help man to understand himself.<sup>12</sup>

“we can nevertheless discern, through experimental research, a series of very valuable signs of what is specifically human life.”

While there is much collaborative work to be done by Catholic scientists and theologians in furthering our understanding of what it means to be human, successfully meeting this challenge requires bearing in mind two critical points. First, there is nothing in the science of evolution that is inherently contradictory to the Catholic understanding of creation, nor to the Catholic understanding of man as created in the image and likeness of God. Secondly, any discussions, if they are to be fruitful, must proceed from a place of deep humility and respect toward God and his creation.

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## Notes

- 1 Benedict XVI, “Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI” (April 24, 2005).
- 2 Benedict XVI, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, O.P. (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1995), 50. Emphasis added.
- 3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 299.
- 4 John Paul II, “Address for the 50th Anniversary of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences” (October 28, 1986), no. 4.
- 5 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 299.
- 6 Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, no. 36.
- 7 For a brief, easy-to-read overview of hominin evolution, see: H. Pontzer, “Overview of Hominin Evolution,” *Nature Education Knowledge* 3, no. 10 (2012): 8.
- 8 John Paul II, “Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences: On Evolution” (October 22, 1996), no. 6.
- 9 John Paul II, “On Evolution,” no. 6.
- 10 For a brief, easy-to-read overview of early human cultural evolution, see S. Wurz, “The Transition to Modern Behavior,” *Nature Education Knowledge* 3, no. 10 (2012): 15.
- 11 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 299.
- 12 Benedict XVI, “Schöpfungsglaube und Evolutionstheorie,” in H. J. Schultz, ed., *Wer ist das eigentlich—Gott?* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag KG, 1969), 232–45, quoted in the foreword to *Creation and Evolution: A Conference With Pope Benedict XVI in Castel Gandolfo*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 15–16.

Photos:  
Pixabay.com



# Favorable Dynamics for Catechizing Boys

By Francisco (Paco) Gavrilides

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to give a catechetical instruction to the seventh- and eighth-grade boys of my parish. Now, I was the Homiletics professor at Sacred Heart Major Seminary and instructor of several other courses offered by the Seminary. My style of teaching leaned more toward following a carefully ordered outline for my presentation, after which I would elicit questions and provide time for discussion.

These eight boys, however, were active and undisciplined, and in no condition to listen to a lecture. Intuitively, I immediately changed my style of teaching to a lively and very animated one. I weaved in some stories and involved them in reading some texts. The change in style helped, but their response to the lesson was still rather tepid. Then something unexpected happened.

## Posing the Right Challenges

I posed a question to them as to how they would try to preach the Gospel to young people in today's world. As soon as I presented to them a challenge, a specific situation to resolve based

upon what they had heard and learned, their interest went way up. I served as a guide and kind of coach for keeping them on track in the discussion. Suddenly, I was hearing creative ideas, strong opinions, and some boys challenging the other boys. The class came alive, and a new mode of teaching the boys emerged.

Let me offer another illustration. My son invited to our home a group of eight of his male friends, around the ages of fifteen to sixteen years old, and all from his homeschooling setting. They had decided to watch a movie together and then critique it. I was at the other end of the basement in my office, out of their sight. When the movie ended, they began to evaluate the movie and try to come up with a united understanding of what they thought of it. Nobody was leading the "discussion," but everybody was fully engaged in giving their opinion. I found myself listening to them without being seen in order not to inhibit the conversation. What most impressed me was the seriousness and earnestness they all had in trying to find the truth, the answer. Even at that age, these boys could search for and grasp truth and learn from each other.

These two experiences and some other subsequent situations have convinced me of a remarkably simple but important



insight that could serve us in the ministry of catechetics for boys. The insight has to do with leaning into the natural inclinations of boys, who want to actively engage and respond to the material they are receiving as quickly as possible, thus finding a way of meaningfully doing something with it. Catechesis should capitalize on boys' orientation to action and to pursuing results by designing activities that would invite them to make a response. For example, after teaching on the importance of boldness, one could arrange for them to give their personal testimony at a facility for troubled boys.

## Taking Stock of Gender Differences

In many instances, the style of catechesis offered in parishes tends to be much more suitable for girls than boys. A passive-receptive mode of setting forth content seems to be quite agreeable to young girls. In some circles, there can be a tendency to catechize using techniques such as reading, journaling, and watching videos, which set the tone of class time. I am the first to say that these techniques have their value. However, for boys between the ages of thirteen and eighteen years old, that catechetical style is too passive, and the boys react to it negatively.

Much has been written about the testosterone level of boys and how it causes them to be aggressive and desirous of demonstrating physical prowess in one way or another. I have become increasingly more convinced of the wisdom of our working with the natural makeup of our boys in catechesis—rather than seeking to tame it—and channeling it toward the good and their benefit. We live within a culture where gender confusion and propaganda are swirling around us and causing an immense amount of stress and anxiety. As teachers of the faith and upholders of biblical teaching on questions of gender and God-ordained differences, we must reinforce the God-given distinctions between boys and girls, and this can be done even in our classrooms.



Sammie Chaffin and Patrick Case. Unsplash.com

I am not proposing that *all* catechesis must be carried out according to gender. However, I do strongly suggest that there be more forethought expended to creating environments and dynamics that favor the maximum positive response in those we are teaching. Most educators and psychologists will concur that young girls are much more verbally assertive than boys, up until the late teens when this ascendancy begins to shift. I believe we owe it to our young men to create favorable environments for them to feel safe emotionally and psychologically.

I would suggest that, whenever possible, we plan to have men teach and mentor teen boys in the critical years between thirteen and eighteen years of age. If the catechists for boys must be female, because of necessity, I suggest that there be sufficient attention and orientation given to these catechists as to the more suitable dynamics that enable a fuller and freer participation of the boys in the class.

## Providing a Favorable Environment and Teaching Style

It shouldn't come as a surprise that certain topics and the approaches to them can vary as we catechize boys and girls. It isn't so much the topic as it is the discernment of what environment most favors successful teaching and free-flowing discussion afterward. Boys are eager to learn and even actively participate in discussion, but only so far as they perceive that the environment in which they are in is a safe one, and that they won't be shamed or ridiculed for their ideas. The catechist could set up some of the class time for the boys to try to work through a challenge to the Gospel, together with the instructor as their coach, referee, and guide. The catechist's role would be to keep the conversation on track, encouraging and praising good thinking and acknowledging their efforts. What the catechist shouldn't do is to shy away from correcting poor thinking or logic, or correcting bad theology, if that is the case. Both of these are teachable moments. The boys must sense the confident leadership of the catechist. Redirecting conversation, affirming the good that is being expressed, and moving them to their goal will be perceived positively by the boys who are learning how to participate effectively in discussion. The focus on jointly resolving a problem is a very stimulating and motivational experience for them. Young men relish dynamic teamwork.

## Male Teamwork in Catechetical Ministry

In a local parish in my area, a men's group was discussing how they might do ministry together in the parish. They decided that they wanted to work with boys in middle school by catechizing them. They worked in teams of two and led the boys in the class. Their efforts proved to be a great success. The tone that they set with the boys was a combination of a no-nonsense approach and a lot of creative activity in how they went about transmitting their material—games, film clips, quizzes, outdoor activities, etc. Not only was the catechesis good for the boys, but it was also very rewarding for the men.

Many years ago, a book was written by Lionel Tiger entitled *Men in Groups*.<sup>1</sup> Tiger elaborated on the natural and historical dynamic of male bonding. Much of what his research showed



is useful for thinking practically and pastorally about how to work with boys most effectively so that they respond with interest and enthusiasm to tasks or “missions” that are given to them. The men in the parish fraternal group operated from this unspoken premise in the way they catechized the boys. We would do well to foster more of this kind of participation—mature men serving young men—in our catechetical programs.

## God Speaks to the Heart

In catechizing boys, we shouldn't lose sight of their “response from the heart” to God. Teen boys can and will respond to a direct invitation to know and commit themselves to Christ. The “hard wiring”—the spiritual DNA of each one of us—is clearly determined by the Lord for the sake of union with him, and boys are no exception.

There are several factors that encourage their right response to God. One of them is the witness of authenticity coming from the teacher, mentor, or catechist who is leading the group. The catechist's authenticity establishes his credibility among them and disposes them to take more seriously his words and orientations. Both the character of the catechist and the sincere interest he has in the boys affect how he will be received.

Another factor is the use of the appropriate mode or style. An uncomplicated exposition of who Jesus is and what the benefits are to those who truly follow him sets the right tone for boys to respond to the invitation to follow him. The truth about who Jesus is and who he can be for them is compelling. An appeal to the truth of Jesus as a potential real friend who can be taken at his word can be more convincing than an excessive number of arguments about him.

Direct, straightforward confession and testimony to Jesus also can serve as the catalyst for moving young men to give

Christ a chance. This testimony includes, of course, that of the adult catechist, but also that of their peers. When peers who are mature and strongly grounded in the faith give their testimony, they validate the fact that the Lord Jesus can be a positive reality for the others as well. These Christian peers serve as a platform for the others to take courage and take the plunge into accepting Christ as Lord.

Before involving boys in discussion of deep truths, we must lead them into a place where they can take the “deep dive” of surrender to Christ. This is not at all an impossible task, but it is a very necessary one.

I want to close with a final thought about catechizing boys. The serious lack of fathering in families of all races here in the United States often means that boys simply lack male role models of Godly catholic men in their lives. One promising way to meet a genuine need of our catholic boys today is to provide them with these strong men of faith who can lead them to Christ and demonstrate the truth that faith and manliness are perfectly compatible.

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Note

<sup>1</sup> Lionel Tiger, *Men in Groups* (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 2004).

Photos:

Sammie Chaffin and Patrick Case, Unsplash.com; Pixabay.com

# Beauty Is Necessary for Catechesis

By Caroline Farey

There are many small ways by which beauty can be brought into one's catechesis easily and simply, even if finding beautiful images or music are not one's forte. The new *Directory for Catechesis* urges us "that every form of catechesis . . . attend to the 'way of beauty.'"<sup>1</sup> Beauty was mentioned in a single footnote in the *Directory* of 1997. In the *Directory* of 2020, however, it is noted as one of the essential criteria for catechesis (DC 175) and even as a "source" of catechesis (DC 109); yet few catechists or resources give beauty its due place.

The catechizing power of beauty was especially brought to the fore by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, but they each took up the insight of Pope Paul VI, who famously said "This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair."<sup>2</sup> Too many in today's world are sinking into despair and the most popular remedy is "fun" rather than beauty. Fun is fleeting, even though it has a proper place, while "a thing of beauty is a joy forever."<sup>3</sup> Catechists need to trust more in the deeper, quieter power of beauty as a "voice" by which God in his love reaches the heart.

A key problem is that the secular worldview has led most people to believe that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, that beauty is only one's personal opinion. The *Directory* helpfully provides criteria for discernment of what is *true* beauty, which it distinguishes from what is "apparently beautiful but empty, or even harmful, like the forbidden fruit in the earthly paradise (cf. Gn 3:6)" (DC 108). In other words, beauty is objective; there are criteria for discerning it so that we can train the eyes of our minds towards it. The criteria given are from St. Paul: "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil 4:8; cf. DC 108).

Let us "think about these things" for the resources we find, the rooms and spaces we use, our presentations, our invitations, and our language. How often do we use the words "beauty" and "beautiful" for God, the faith, and the things pertaining to the Christian life? A person's modesty, honesty, wisdom, forgiveness, reception of grace, the goodness, kindness, and courage of the saints, every fruit of the Spirit (Gal 3:22), "a life of fidelity to the Gospel"<sup>4</sup>—these are, and need to be, called beautiful. The *Directory* speaks also of that which is "[gratuitous], free of functionalism" as well as of "order and harmony" (DC 106).

Many argue that teenagers engage best via the kind of graphics, music, language, and concepts taken from the fractured, post-modern, functional, soundbite world around them. The *Directory* tells us otherwise.

Most insistently, the *Directory* proposes using the great Catholic historical and artistic heritage. This heritage is found at its zenith in the fifteenth century at a height of maturation of Catholic Christian culture. Art of the fifteenth century tends, therefore, to be some of the most profoundly beautiful, richly depicting scriptural truth. By 1517, the Protestant Reformation had begun, and the arts reacted in consequence.

There are powerful catechetical reasons given in the *Directory* for using the Catholic cultural artistic heritage. First, "It transmits the Christian vision of the world" (DC 105), a vision that is beautiful rather than ugly, whole rather than fragmented, aiming at excellence rather than portraying brokenness, depicting goodness rather than sin or degradation. It also tends to reveal an ecclesial and eucharistic vision of creation and redemption.

Secondly, beauty develops and preserves the "faculties of contemplation and observation which lead to wisdom."<sup>5</sup> Often, the ancient artworks do not appear understandable or beautiful to the modern mindset. We need to learn contemplation by practicing it on something that gradually reveals its meaning, its depths, its richness. Such art is not immediately understood or grasped and cannot be judged by an immediate, superficial impression.

Is the faith beautiful for you? Do you pass it on as something *beautiful*, honorable, just, true, good? Using beauty as a guide "leads those who are catechized toward the *beautiful* gift that the Father has made in his Son" (DC 109).

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Dr. Caroline Farey has been training catechists for twenty-five years and currently runs the online course "Foundations of the Faith for the New Evangelisation" at [www.theannunciation.org.uk](http://www.theannunciation.org.uk). Each unit demonstrates teaching through beauty.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2020), no. 108 (hereafter cited in text as DC), quoting Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 54.
- <sup>2</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Message to Artists," 1965.
- <sup>3</sup> John Keats, "Endymion," bk. 1, ln. 1.
- <sup>4</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 168, quoted in DC 84.
- <sup>5</sup> Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 56.

# The Angelus

## Jean-Francois Millet, 1857

Linus Meldrum

One of the most famous Catholic paintings of history is the humble work of art titled *The Angelus* by Jean-Francois Millet. This painting might be considered unique in that it has been viewed as inspired fine art by some and purely sentimental illustration by others. What is in this image that stirs the aesthetic imagination for some and is dismissed by others as a simplistic work of religious nostalgia? Importantly, how does it incarnate the subject of prayer?

Jean-Francois Millet was born in Grechy, France on the Normandy coast October 4, 1814—the feast of St. Francis—and was baptized Jean for his father and Francois for St. Francis. His peasant upbringing was instrumental in his development as an artist. He saw simple, natural living as virtuous and those who practiced it as noble. His letters are filled with recollections of his childhood experiences in his Catholic family. His father and grandmother were especially influential in shaping his way of seeing life and nature, guiding his vision toward trees and flowers and even blades of grass as worthy of his attention. An important recollection Millet shared with his friend and biographer, Alfred Sensier, is that his grandmother saw religion and nature as intertwined, and that anything in nature that was beautiful, terrible, or inexplicable seemed to her the work of the Creator. This view deepened Millet's interest in the daily events of farm and village life as worthy subjects of immense value. He saw the rural peasant life as filled with rich joy, extreme challenges, and the marvels of nature, including human nature.

After a brief career as a portrait painter, Millet moved to Paris and attempted a vocation as an urban artist with little success. On a trip back home he married, but his wife, Pauline, soon died of tuberculosis. A widower at age thirty, he began a relationship with Catherine Lemaire and, after four children, they were wed in a civil ceremony. The end of their life together marks their relationship with a sense of ongoing conversion: after thirty years of marriage and nine children, they were joined in the Sacrament of Matrimony two weeks before Millet's death in 1875.

Millet returned to Paris but had little success being accepted into the annual Salon exhibitions at the Academie des Beaux Arts. After a cholera outbreak, he and his family moved in 1849 to Barbizon, a village near the Fontainebleau

forest thirty-five miles from Paris. He was to reside and work there for the rest of his life. But his vocation in Barbizon started slowly. He spent his mornings as a farmworker, then painted in the afternoons in his cottage. Eventually, his reputation did grow in Paris, especially with his most famous work, *The Gleaners*, a celebrated painting of three peasant women picking up the scraps of grain after the harvesters have passed.



When one encounters the artwork of Millet, now or in his own time, a first impulse is to indeed regard it as “low” subject matter. That is, there is often not much going on in the image. But for Millet, one way to immortalize and ennoble his characters was to make them epic archetypes. There is no important historical moment being depicted. The characters are not famous and are certainly not “portraits” in the conventional sense. Faces are often left unseen or minimally described. This tends to offend the sensibility of the viewer who appreciates art that describes every detail, especially in the human figure. The images are also not obviously religious. But a deeper reflection on his subjects will draw out the spiritual meaningfulness of the moments being shown. The images are about the universal human experience of dwelling in the Creator's garden.

*The Angelus*, painted in 1857, was commissioned by an American collector who, upon seeing the final work, decided against purchasing it. Originally, Millet had planned the title *Prayer For the Potato Crop*. When the collector chose not to buy it, Millet added a distant church and steeple and retitled the painting. Millet completed the painting while remembering that while working in the fields, his grandmother would never fail, on hearing the bell ringing, to make everyone stop and say the Angelus prayer. The singularity of this particular moment is one of the striking features of the work. The world has become still and the stage has been set for the drama of prayer. The praying figures of a man and a woman are placed with familiar complements—a digging fork and a barrow. The man digs; the woman gathers and carries. This







archetype grounds the image as an eternal union of both marriage as well as *ora et labora*, prayer and work.

The time of day is twilight, so the evening bell marking Vespers is ringing. The landscape, although vast and empty, is rich in a particular type of color that twilight provides the viewer when the sky is still full of light after the sun sinks below the horizon. At that mysterious time of day, color blooms in saturated hues without the distraction of strong cast shadows. This radiance of color is particular to this time of day. The Latin word *claritas* is offered by St. Thomas Aquinas as a signal attribute of transcendent beauty. The word is often translated as “radiance.” However, the conventional definition of *claritas* is “brightness.” But are radiance and brightness the same thing? In his landmark essay “Beauty in the Light of Redemption,” Dietrich von Hildebrand uses radiance to describe the “. . . beauty acquired by the soul through humility.”<sup>1</sup> Radiance has many possible features, one of which is luminescence: the emitting of light by something, without being caused by or producing heat. All of these nuances of the term radiance, including von Hildebrand’s description, seem to fit the illuminated world of *The Angelus*. Not only does the twilight world of the painting quietly gleam, but the peasants in prayer emit a radiant humility.

There is a quirk in the story of Millet. He was constantly being portrayed as a Socialist who used his artwork of impoverished lower-class peasants to shame the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, Millet denied any interest in political content in his art. His humble approach to image-making was much simpler. He wanted nothing more than to portray the beauty found in the daily lives of the village. Sensier confirmed that Millet’s understanding that man must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow was an immutable destiny which none could change. Indeed, when one contemplates the stark composition of *The Angelus*, it can be seen as a

*He wanted nothing more than to portray the beauty found in the daily lives of the village.*



typological reference to Adam and Eve struggling to prosper on the barren earth after departing Eden.

Millet upset the standards for depicting peasants in art in the nineteenth century. Running counter to the conventional French taste for jolly bumpkins or pretty country girls in a romantic setting, Millet chose to get down to earth and show us the reality that transcends superficial romance. These peasants are committed to work that is virtuous and worthy of respect. In a letter to Sensier he writes:

There are people who say that I see no charms in the country. I see much more than charms there—infinite splendors. I see as well as they do the little flowers of which Christ said: “I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” I see very well the aureoles of the dandelions and the sun

spreading its glory in the clouds, over the distant worlds. But none the less, I see down there in the plain the steaming horses leading the plow, and in a rocky corner a man quite worn-out, whose “han” has been heard since morning, and who tries to straighten himself and take a breath for a moment. The drama is surrounded with splendor.<sup>2</sup>

Not only were the Impressionists keen admirers of Millet, but his work went on to greatly influence Vincent van Gogh, the Post-Impressionist, who called him “Pere Millet,” Father Millet. And though van Gogh never met him in life, he actually copied many of Millet’s paintings as would a student of a master. While it may take time to develop an appreciation for the simple images of Millet, a careful study will reveal much more. You have choices: you can see Millet’s everyday men and women as unknown, yet noble, characters, or you can admire his Pre-Impressionist painting style, or you can reflect on his humble religious content. I suggest choosing all of them and reaping the aesthetic and spiritual rewards of stopping to pray the *Angelus* in the radiant glow of twilight.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Dietrich von Hildebrand, “Beauty in the Light of Redemption,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 78–92, at 78.
- <sup>2</sup> Julia M. Cartwright, *Jean Francois Millet: His Life and Letters*, (1896; repr., St. Clair Shores, MI: Scholarly Press, 1972), 240

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Commons.Wikimedia.com



## The Lord's Relentless Pursuit after My Own Heart



“*I’ll give it all to you,  
All the brokenness  
in me, every part  
of it—it’s yours.*”

I was born and raised Catholic, with a family who went to Church every week. I also went to Catholic schools, so the faith was constantly around me. Yet, growing up, I just wanted to fit in. I wanted to be popular, I wanted people to talk about me like they talked about the other girls. And all my life, I always felt like I was going to have to try harder to get people to like me because I wasn’t pretty like the other girls. I got teased a lot for what I looked like—it was always something in the back of my head in everything I did. Not good enough, not thin enough, not pretty enough. So, I told myself since people weren’t going to like me for what I looked like, I had to make them like me for something else. I let my friends make all the decisions, decide who we liked and didn’t like, who I’d invite to my birthday party, what I’d post on Instagram, and everything else. And I had this idea in my head that once I got them to like me for what I’m not, I could go back to being the real me and then they’d like me for that too. What I didn’t know back then is when you stand on the edge of a cliff, the longer you stand there, the more comfortable you become. And once you’re comfortable with being on that edge, it’s that much easier to fall.

When I finally got what I wanted, and I had the “in,” I was ready to go back to the real me. But I didn’t even know who the real me was anymore. I had become so concerned with fitting in with the bad influences that they were what I had become. Day after day, I just couldn’t understand why I didn’t feel any better than when I didn’t have any of this. And I remember sitting in my room and asking God, why can’t I be happy? Why were these things enough for everyone else and not for me?

The summer after my eighth grade year, I went to a Christian sleepaway camp. This was something I did every year, so it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary, but there was one talk I heard that week that still resonates with me today. The presenter asked us two questions. The first one was, are there things that you’re known for that you wish that you weren’t? And the second question was, are there things that you’re not known for but wish that you were? I sat there thinking, wow, if I’m being honest, my answer to both of those questions is a definite yes.

He continued to say to us that so often what we want to be known for are the things of the world. Physical beauty, popularity, getting good grades, wearing the best clothes, whatever; but the most important and valuable thing that you can be known for is being a child of God. And when you let God into your heart, it shines through you and people will see it. I didn’t know how to accept that. Because my entire life, before this moment, I had said to God, “no, I don’t want it.” I had told God that I would rather choose gossiping and being someone that I’m not over accepting God into my life, the life he gave me. So, in that auditorium at camp, I got down on my knees and said, “God, I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing or who I am anymore. And I’m not sure what else to say, but I’ll give it all to you. All the brokenness in me, every part of it—it’s yours.”

I remember feeling a big flood of peace wash over me, and I just knew that this is what I was meant for, what we were all meant for: to be in relationship with the God who created us with so much love and care. In that moment, on the floor of my camp auditorium, I gave God what I could because it was all I had to give. And what I gave him has made a world of difference in my life. God took my small “yes”, and turned it into the most beautiful decision of my life.

Analisa Cardin — Flanders, NJ

Photo:  
Toa Heftiba, Unsplash.com

# Offering to Children the Gift of Prayer

By Lani Bogart

“Prayer is first of all a gift from God; in fact, in every one of the baptized, ‘the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words’ (Rom 8:26).”<sup>1</sup>

**O**ur habit as Catholics is to begin our prayers with the Sign of the Cross—itself a gift we’ve received from Christ and the Church. By this ancient sign, we ground our prayer in the Holy Trinity, who was revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Because prayer is a gift, our work as catechists isn’t so much to teach children their prayers as it is to help them discover for themselves the gift of prayer and how they can receive it more fully.

Sofia Cavalletti, catechist and co-founder of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, cautions that adults ought not “impose our own prayer guidelines on children. We risk leading them on a path that is not theirs. We risk extinguishing the spontaneous expression of their relationship with God and give rise to the idea that *when we pray, we say certain fixed things, without necessarily adhering to them within ourselves. We could separate prayer from life in children.*”<sup>2</sup>

Ms. Cavalletti identifies a problem I have observed in my interactions with Catholic school children through the years. Having memorized their prayers and attended liturgies without having encountered Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God’s intimate love for them, they often perceive prayer, indeed the entire subject of religion, as boring. In my experience, this contrasts with the openness of the children in our parish religious education programs who come with little or no instruction on prayer. They are more likely to be curious about who Jesus is and how they can know him.

## The Prayer of the Little Child

Catholic parents and catechists ought to grow in our understanding of the depth of the relationship between the smallest child and God. As we deepen our awareness of the mystery of God at work in the child along with the child’s response, we are better able to offer what they desire instead of what we think they need.

Christ hinted at the truth that children are participants in his kingdom when his disciples asked him, “Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, ‘Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever

humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me” (Mt 18:1–5).

According to the text, the child simply did what Jesus asked. The Scripture does not record any words she may have spoken, but it’s safe to assume that the child trusted Jesus and was happy to be placed by Christ in the midst of the disciples.

In this passage, the child demonstrates to us the humility of a trusting and obedient response to Jesus’ call, a worthy example for all.

Catechists throughout the world witness this humble trust evident in the children we catechize. As children are introduced to the person of Jesus Christ and his loving care for them, they respond with their own version of prayer.

In the beginning of the fourth pillar of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, a catechesis on prayer, we see a quote from one of the most childlike of saints, Thérèse of Lisieux: “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”<sup>3</sup>

St. Thérèse recognized that she could pray by turning her eyes toward heaven because she possessed the childlike humility also evident in preschoolers who intuit that they can pray with their whole bodies. How many little ones have we seen impulsively hug a statue of Mary? Young children joyfully sing alleluias and other simple songs of praise while their bodies move from sitting to standing to sitting again, or they happily move in choreographed motions appropriate to the song.

Little ones may not naturally look for prayers to memorize, but they do quickly absorb any prayers that are oft repeated in their hearing. Without suggesting that it is the only way to pray, it’s good to frequently repeat the words of prayers that are part of the treasury of the Church, especially the Our Father, which was taught to us by Jesus (Lk 11:1–4, Mt 6:9–14) and has been prayed through the centuries by the whole Church. This all-encompassing prayer, when offered suitably, can never be exhausted. As Cavalletti proposes, it is appropriate to “offer the following words to the littlest child . . . Our Father who art in heaven—Thy kingdom come.”<sup>4</sup>

Young children are attuned to the reality of life as gift. When allowed time and space for reflecting on a truth from Sacred

Scripture or the liturgy, or on something beautiful from creation, children from eighteen months to about nine years old are uninhibited in their expressions of gratitude and thanksgiving to God. They may not always communicate their gratitude with words. Some may prefer to draw a picture or sit in silence, but when they do speak, they often express short phrases of thanksgiving or gratitude.

Children are also capable of receiving the gift of silent prayer. In our noisy world one of the greatest gifts we can offer them is assistance in slowing down and entering into the full silence of a beautiful sacred space.

A word of caution here, the imposition of silence by the catechist or parent is entirely opposed to the full silence wherein dwells the Triune God. Silence, like prayer, is to be offered as an invitation. When children are invited to discover for themselves the gift of silence, it will bear the fruit of joy that accompanies the reception of silence in all God's children. It's helpful to highlight silences in the Mass and point out how God waits for us in the silence to come close and receive his love in the secret places of our heart.

### If Older Children Find Prayer Boring

What can be done to help older children who seem to be bored by the very idea of religion? How can we lead them into prayer? Is it too late for them? Absolutely not!

Perhaps they think of prayer as boring. Maybe their experience of it is! Let's explore with them why they may feel bored. We might offer them these words from a man known for his childlike honesty, C.S. Lewis: "Well, let's now at any rate come clean. Prayer is irksome. An excuse to omit it is never unwelcome. When it is over, this casts a feeling of relief and holiday over the rest of the day. We are reluctant to begin. We are delighted to finish."<sup>5</sup>

Follow up by offering context for the quote and helping them to understand that prayer can be even more valuable when not accompanied by comforting feelings of God's closeness.

We can also help them consider how much in the world around them with its commercial interests manipulates their emotions. Contrast this with a God of love who simply awaits them in silence and will never manipulate or deceive them.

In everything, we watch and listen, adjusting according to their needs while offering solid catechesis from the Catechism, Scriptures, the magisterium, and liturgy.

### Praying with the Scriptures, Songs, and Saints

As soon as children can read, they can be introduced to praying with the Scriptures. We know from the Catechism that God speaks directly to each heart through Scripture. "And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve . . . the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for their soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life."<sup>6</sup>

Children have a right to the spiritual nourishment Scripture provides. Resources are available for helping children understand the ancient way of prayer called lectio divina. I find Katie



Bogner's printable resources on praying lectio divina with children particularly helpful for elementary schoolers.<sup>7</sup>

Another favorite form of prayer is singing. It's good to include music from the liturgies of the parish when appropriate, but we need not limit our choices to those used at Mass. Choose beautiful, Christ-centered music appropriate for a time of prayerful preparation before class begins or to help quiet hearts and minds as we enter into prayer in the classroom.

Let's not forget the prayers of the saints. We can encourage devotion to particular saints, asking for their intercession, and offer to the children prayers that the saints prayed.

Perhaps most importantly, we must nourish our own lives of prayer. Faithfulness in prayer strengthens our hope that we will receive the gift of final perseverance in prayer where we'll be forever united with the Triune God.

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Lani Bogart, M.A. mentors catechetical leaders in the Diocese of Phoenix, where she teaches at the Kino Catechetical Institute. Recently retired from parish work, she enjoys spending time with her deacon husband and their five grown children and eight grandchildren.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2020), 86.
- <sup>2</sup> Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child* (Oak Park, IL: Archdiocese of Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 120 (emphasis mine).
- <sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 2558
- <sup>4</sup> Cavalletti, 131.
- <sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, 1992), 112.
- <sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 131, quoting Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, no. 21.
- <sup>7</sup> See Katie's resources on lectio divina at <https://www.looktohimandberadiant.com/2020/02/lectio-divina-with-kids-printable.html>.

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David Beale, Unsplash.com

# No Family Is an Island

## The Necessity of Community Living

By Andrew and Coreen Wagenbach

**F**amily life is formed by the decisions made in the first years. Will we use NFP? How many children will we have? How will we educate our children? Will we pray daily? Will we go to Mass every Sunday, no matter how difficult it is? What will be first priority: sports, activities, vacation, a successful career, or something else? What movies will we watch? What will be the place of technology in our home? What kinds of lifelong friends do we want our children to have?

We believe that a life in Catholic community with other families is necessary today. We want to share with you a few insights from our own experience of helping form a strong Catholic community within our parish.

### A Child's Genuflection

How much can be known by watching a child genuflect before Mass? As a fresh-out-of-college, newly married couple with a baby, we felt that you could tell a substantial amount by this very simple action. Sunday after Sunday, we would notice a handful of families who guided their young children in the loving act of greeting their Heavenly Father with a reverent sign of the cross and knee to the ground. After a few months we summoned the courage to invite these families to our small home for a potluck dinner and a walking rosary on a warm spring Thursday evening. Over the following few months, these original six families invited others, and we became a group of twelve.

In our naiveté, we assumed these couples were more or less at the same spiritual place that we were, but looking back, the chasm was much wider. Some were still using birth control. Others were willing to skip Mass when it was not convenient. Only a few prayed every day or regularly studied their faith. Most would not say that their Catholic faith was the deciding factor in how they lived, and nearly all had never witnessed or been part of authentic Catholic community life. But all of them were showing up to Mass with their small children. They were desiring something more and were willing to say yes. Within the next couple of years, this group of twelve families eventually multiplied to over thirty families and included almost every young, regularly attending family in the parish. What began as a family

potluck dinner and prayer at our house two Thursday evenings a month has grown over the past eight years into a yearly marriage retreat, men's and women's Saturday retreats three times a year, a Tuesday night study group, two yearly cocktail parties for adults, and many other events. What began as a few families who genuflected turned into a thriving active group of families who pray daily, live an authentic Catholic faith, and now cannot imagine turning their back on what they have experienced.

### We Are Made for a Life in Communion with Others

The Catechism tells us that "There is a certain resemblance between the unity of the divine persons and the fraternity that men are able to establish among themselves in truth and love. Love of neighbor is inseparable from love for God" (CCC 1878). God created us to live in community, just as God continually lives within the community of the Holy Trinity. We need others in order to love and be encouraged, but also to be stretched and grow.

Families need each other to raise children well. When a Catholic community culture is formed, a norm of life that includes daily prayer, growth in virtue, and liturgical living permeates the day. A parent can answer a child in truth: "we are not the only ones; we are all living this way."

With strong Catholic community, we can know those with whom our children are playing. We know who to vacation with and to choose as godparents. As married couples, when things are difficult, we know that we will be encouraged by other families to push through, to forgive, and to grow. When we are sick, a job is lost, or tragedy strikes, we have a community to surround us, pray for us, feed us, and help us in bearing our burdens.

### Building Community: Where to Start?

Over the years, we have been asked many times, "How can we start a similar young family's group?" We do not have an elaborate plan or magical program. Instead, we followed some simple steps that anyone can do.

The first step is to pray for community. God desires to send friends into our lives—and he wants us to invest in others so that we might form community in our ministries and parishes. Often those he sends are not the people we would assume he would send, and they don't frequently show up the way we thought.

If we would have had a checklist of the “perfect” Catholic family, very few of the families who are now our friends would have made the cut. Of course, we wouldn’t have made the cut, either!

The second step is to edge out of your comfort zone and invite. Friendship begins with an invitation. After all, Christ called to the disciples with words of invitation: “Follow me” (Mt 4:19). Doing this ourselves will require a leap of faith and a willingness to live uncomfortably. But just as with the disciples, the rewards are eternal and worth the difficulty. Consider first inviting the natural leaders in your community or those who are asking for more community. They can help make a list with you of people to invite. You will see that this approach will draw more people than you ever could with a flier or email blast.

Third, create a joyful atmosphere and eat together. There is power in sharing a meal. After all, Christ ate with his disciples, and he gives us the Eucharistic Meal to participate in with others. Each of us has a different personality and gifts to share. For us, it was fancy cocktail parties for the parents, liturgically themed food for the family dinners (Mexican for Our Lady of Guadalupe, etc.), beautiful touches like flowers and tablecloths, and a walking rosary. But your choices and stories will be unique, and so will the people you help form into community.

The crucial fourth step for community life to be authentic is that we always include prayer. This is a non-negotiable. There will be times it feels awkward to pause for a time of substantial prayer (at least fifteen to twenty minutes) in the middle of a cocktail party or with screaming kids running underfoot. But this time of prayer is essential. Praying together is what sets our time as a community apart from all the other meetings and gatherings. It bonds us and is the real purpose of our community. In our group, we began with a walking rosary and, over time, each family took a turn leading, sharing their specific spiritual life with others. Each family can be asked how they feel most called to lead prayer. We can offer them ideas, resources, and locations for prayer.

The final step is that there is always room for another person. This group generosity and openness can be a hard principle when things are going well. We selfishly want to keep it for ourselves. And, when things are difficult, we feel we can’t bear the burden of one more new person. But it’s important to always maintain an atmosphere of welcoming whomever God sends. An open heart is important.

Once you experience full Catholic community, it is hard to imagine life without it. From this small group of six families, many



other communities have been formed. Some people had to move away and have found new families to form community with. Others came to our events and then started groups in their own parish. One of the couples who was using contraception went on to have three more children. The wife even changed practices as a nurse practitioner after taking a stance to no longer prescribe birth control. We know that the human heart longs to walk this journey with others. Helping others form community in which they can thrive, grow, and from whom they can receive support is one of the greatest gifts we can help give to those we serve in ministry. Community life is always possible. There is someone out there who lives nearby and who is willing to take the next step if asked. Open your home, open your heart, and ask.

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# A Half Century of Progress: The Church's Ministry of Catechesis

## Part One: International Catechetical Study Weeks (1959–1964)

By Monsignor John Pollard

**Editor's Introduction:** The last one hundred years have seen significant developments in how the Church has understood the nature of her catechetical mission. There has been both a movement toward the past and a movement toward the future: a desire to recover the dynamism seen in the teaching of Christ and the catechesis of the early Church as well as an eagerness to help catechists meet new challenges by thoughtfully engaging contemporary insights. Three catechetical directories have been written, as well as summaries from numerous Study Weeks and official documents, through which we can trace a compelling description of how the catechetical mission might be best carried out. Monsignor John Pollard,

a man who has served as a prominent catechetical thinker, presents this helpful series detailing the trajectory of how the Church has articulated her catechetical mission to make disciples. We hope you enjoy this series.



**E**ven before Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council, the Church was wrestling with the challenge of remaining relevant in a rapidly secularizing world. This sense was felt among Church leaders, theologians, catechists, and the lay faithful in general. Within the fields of catechetics and liturgy, a renewal and reform movement began to surface that saw value in bringing catechetical and liturgical leaders from different parts of the world together to share their experiences of proclaiming the Gospel and celebrating the rites of the Church within the cultures of their respective countries.

In the history of the modern catechetical movement, the series of six International Catechetical Study Weeks that were held in Nijmegen, Holland (1959); Eichstätt, Germany (1960); Bangkok, Thailand (1962); Katigondo Seminary, Uganda (1964); Manila, Philippines (1967); and Medellin, Columbia (1968) appear now, over fifty years later, to have been significant directional moments in the renewal and reform of catechetics. When taken together, the resolutions, conclusions, and summaries of these six International Catechetical Study Weeks constitute an important element of the framework within which catechetics has evolved before, during, and after the Second Vatican Council. Especially in the days before Vatican II, there seemed to be heightened worldwide interest in global concerns, diversity within the Church, and the Church's coexistence in the world with both other Christian and non-Christian religious traditions. The International Catechetical Study Weeks directly involved the participants with these concerns precisely because they were international in scope and missionary in focus.

The International Catechetical Study Weeks were, in no small measure, the result of the entrepreneurial spirit and theological expertise of Johannes Hofinger, SJ a student of Joseph Jungmann, SJ. Hofinger had been a missionary in Northern China from 1941–1949 and a professor in the regional seminary there. When China's communist revolution

forced him to leave, the seminary relocated to the Philippines, where he co-founded the East Asian Pastoral Institute with Alfonso Nebreda. From the position of assistant director of that Institute, Hofinger organized six meetings in which he gathered catechetical leaders from across the globe for the purpose of study and dialogue. He served as the general secretary for all the Study Weeks, edited the collections of the papers delivered during these events, and oversaw their publication. These experiences became known as International Catechetical Study Weeks. The outcomes of these Study Weeks directly and substantially influenced the deliberations of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. Some of the participants in the Study Weeks also participated in the discussions of the Council, some as bishops, others as *periti* (experts), formal observers, or various staff members to the Council Fathers. Hofinger himself served on one of the preliminary committees working on the draft of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Some of the themes discussed during the International Catechetical Study Weeks can be found in several Council documents: *Ad Gentes*, the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy; and *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.

In addition to their influence on the Second Vatican Council, some of the dominant themes discussed during the Study Weeks were later incorporated into other official Church documents. The participants in the Medellin Study Week, for example, requested that the conclusions reached there have an impact on the development of the *General Catechetical Directory* (1971) that was being prepared at that time. Several of the themes that surfaced in Medellin can be found in that directory. In addition, the Study Weeks' general concern for social justice was taken up by two meetings of the Synod of Bishops, the first on evangelization in 1974 and the second on catechesis in 1977. The resulting apostolic exhortations, Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and Pope John Paul II's *Catechesi Tradendae*, respectively, incorporate several conclusions suggested at the Study Weeks.

The International Catechetical Study Weeks were by definition international in both the composition of the participants and the scope of their programs. This meant that national, linguistic and cultural differences dramatically influenced the respective agendas, methods for proceeding through the agendas, and the final reports of the Study Weeks. What was discussed, why it was discussed, and how it was communicated to the world depended on the diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, and economic perspectives represented at the Study Weeks. Mixing representatives from first, second, and third world countries at each of the Study Weeks ensured their global character and sometimes produced unpredictable results.

The International Study Weeks also had a missionary character. While each of the Study Weeks developed characteristics of a missionary catechesis specific to its own situation, all of them seemed to assume the fact that the catechetical apostolate is part of the wider pastoral mission of the Church and, therefore, is fundamentally a missionary activity. The paradigm of a believing community inviting nonbelievers to hear the Word of

God proclaimed, to celebrate that proclamation in liturgy, and to live what the rites signify in community can be found in the discussions at each of the Study Weeks. A preoccupation with the theme of conversion, the adaptation of the message of the Gospel to various cultural settings, and seeing the catechumenal process precisely as missionary outreach are also strains common to each of the Study Weeks.

Part of the influence of the six Study Weeks on the catechetical apostolate is their consistent awareness of the historic authenticity of the gospels and the particular circumstances of individual people in specific settings. This awareness of historicity, woven through the documents of the Study Weeks, can be traced through the evolution of modern catechetics right up to and including the promulgation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

The seeds of the "remarkable moment" in the history of catechetical renewal and reform that has stretched now over fifty years can be found in the International Catechetical Study Weeks. A brief look at each reveals the strong theological and pastoral foundation that has supported that renewal and reform.

### Nijmegen (1959)

In 1959, Father Hofinger invited a large number of missionaries—including a cardinal, thirty bishops, eighty priests, and scholars from many universities—from all around the world to a conference in Nijmegen, Holland. The purpose of the gathering was for a week of concentrated study on the role of liturgical adaptation as it affects the missions and the role of the missions as they affect liturgical adaptation. In the days before the Second Vatican Council, the liturgy was perhaps the most pressing pastoral issue facing not just churches in mission lands but parishes in churches that had been established for centuries. The participants in the Study Week were concerned with the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, incorporation of native customs in the rites of the Church, and the celebration of the sacraments within distinct cultures, as well as the proclamation of the Gospel to those who have never heard of Christ.

The format for the Study Week adopted the traditional schema of the presentation of papers by several experts, formal responses by varied conference participants and open discussions. Father Hofinger gathered many of the papers, responses, and discussion notes together so that the proceedings from the Study Week could be published and distributed as widely as possible. *Liturgy and the Missions: The Nijmegen Papers* records the results of the first International Catechetical Study Week.<sup>1</sup>

### Eichstätt (1960)

Just a year later Father Hofinger organized the second International Catechetical Study Week in Eichstätt, Germany. The theme of this gathering was "Catechetics and the Missions." It brought face-to-face proponents of the German school of kerygmatic catechesis developed primarily by Hofinger's mentor, Josef Jungmann, and the French school of symbolic catechesis, or catechesis of the four signs, developed principally by Joseph Colomb.

Kerygmatic catechesis asserts that the foundations of catechesis are Sacred Scripture and the early liturgical life of the Church. The *kerygma*, narrowly speaking, is the preaching of Christ and the Twelve Apostles, the proclamation of the basic Gospel message. Kerygmatic catechesis springs directly from the content of Christ's preaching and teaching and that of his apostles. The kerygmatic approach to catechesis places the fundamental proclamation of the Gospel message at the very heart of catechesis. The person of Christ and his basic teachings and those of the apostles constitute the energizing center of kerygmatic catechesis. It promotes the primacy of the Christian message and its need for a thorough revitalization reflective of the apostolic period.

Symbolic catechesis, on the other hand, represents a more developmental approach to learning. It seeks to relate the sym-

bols of human events and experience with the symbols of faith. It asserts that faith is the acceptance of God present in signs and symbols that reveal him, emphasizes the primacy of human experience within the catechetical process, and proposes that the goal of catechesis is a living and dynamic faith.

Many of the papers presented at the symposium encouraged a deeper appreciation of the influence of local culture on the proclamation of the Gospel and the consequent and necessary adaptation of the Gospel message within various cultures. The speakers emphasized the notion that native cultures already bore the seeds of faith and should be seen as fertile soil for the Word of God. One presenter, Cardinal Valerian Gracias of Bombay, a leading Catholic thinker and later a Council leader, described the role of missionary catechetics to "break the charms of paganism, to lay the foundations of a new life in Christ in the new Christians and to plant Christianity in every member in such a way as to build for future generation."<sup>2</sup>

Once again, Hofinger gathered the proceedings of the Study Week, edited the presentations, responses, and notes and published them in 1961 as *Teaching All Nations: A Symposium on Modern Catechetics*. The volume contained twenty-eight articles by experts in missionary evangelization, catechesis, and liturgy. Hofinger summarized the conclusions that were formally articulated at the Eichstätt Study Week. Several catechetical experts termed the Eichstätt Study Week "a landmark in the history of modern catechetics."<sup>3</sup> It reinvigorated kerygmatic catechesis and outlined the principles for a renewal of catechesis. Its insistence on careful planning in catechesis and an organized presentation of the Christian message were two of its themes that influenced the *General Catechetical Directory* (1971). Much to the satisfaction of the French school of "symbolic catechesis," included in its final report were the four signs: "Catechesis embraces a four-fold presentation of the faith: through liturgy, Bible, systematic teaching and the testimony of Christian living."<sup>4</sup>

### Bangkok (1962)

The third International Catechetical Study Week was held in Bangkok, Thailand in 1962. Its theme was "Mission Catechetics."

While the official record of this Study Week was prepared by Alfonso Nebreda,<sup>5</sup> Theodore Stone, a participant from the United States, recorded a description of the state of catechesis at the time that he said was, remarkably, the common understanding of all the participants. It's a lengthy citation, but quite an important summary for the time and the circumstances of an international study day.





A primary concern of the participants was to summarize succinctly the leading characteristics of the catechetical apostolate. Only with such a foundation could they proceed to a determination of the special principles guiding the approach to the non-Catholic. The leaders who gathered at Bangkok came to unanimous agreement concerning the goals and principles of the catechetical apostolate. They formulated these leading characteristics in the following way:

- 1) **Basic Idea.** Modern catechetics considers the catechetical apostolate as a mission imparted by the Church to participate in Christ's proclamation of the good news of salvation. The whole of catechetics is to be inspired and regulated by this basic idea.
- 2) **Aim.** The aim of the catechetical apostolate is not knowledge as such, but living faith—a faith which responds to God's call (message).
- 3) **Message.** The emphasis is on content more than on method. With regards to content, modern catechetics emphasizes a concentration on the central theme of God's love, accomplished in Jesus Christ (dead, risen and living in His Church), presented as a Gospel (good news)-oriented life.
- 4) **Method.** The main lines of method are to follow the dynamics of faith: to present the religious facts (God's saving deeds) in connection with life situations and real needs; to unfold their religious meaning; to stimulate a personal response to this call of God in Christian living. As such, method is a handmaid, but an indispensable one. In all its phases it needs thorough adaptation to those who are catechized.
- 5) **Fourfold Presentation of the Faith.** Genuine catechetics requires the sound equilibrium of a fourfold presentation of the Faith: through liturgy, Bible, systematic teaching and the testimony of Christian living. Systematic teaching is not to be begun before the age of ten or twelve, and even then needs to be completed by and thoroughly informed with biblical and liturgical catechesis.
- 6) **The Catechist.** Because the teacher of religion is Christ's spokesman and witness, the teacher is more important than the textbook. He must first assimilate the message personally. He must build up his religious life from the message in harmony with professional training.
- 7) **Textbooks.** Textbooks are in the service of the teacher and the pupils. Good texts are required which take into account the development of present day theology. Outdated texts cannot be modernized by mere modifications and revision.

Modern catechetics, therefore, is basically a spiritual, theological and pastoral renewal, not just a methodological and psychological improvement.

After summarizing the leading characteristics of the catechetical apostolate, the participants carefully studied and analyzed the process of religious instruction for non-believers. In this process they distinguished three stages: 1) pre-evangelization; 2) evangelization; 3) catechesis proper.<sup>6</sup>

The catechetical renewal well underway at the time of the Bangkok conference was driven by shifts in theological and pedagogical developments. The notion of "pre-evangelization" was introduced during this Study Week. The experiences of missionary catechists in the field and those in urban centers in what many termed the "post-Christian world" seemed similar. Catechetical work focused on preparing the ground for the

proclamation of the Christian message in both arenas. Adapting the Gospel to the special needs of various cultures was understood to be inherent in the catechetical process. Attending to the special circumstances of the person being catechized meant that effective catechesis needed to be more anthropological in its orientation than it had been traditionally.

The anthropological approach to catechesis emphasized encountering people where they are and adapting the Christian message to the particularities of each situation. It required a step back, in a sense, to discover a prior stage in the presentation of the Gospel. This prior stage was termed "pre-evangelization" and its focus on the exploration of personal experience and values was essentially anthropological. The Study Week gave added impetus to what has come to be known as the anthropological phase of catechetics. It represented a change from the concern about the content of catechesis to a concern about the subject of catechesis. Theodore Stone describes the important relationship between anthropology and pre-evangelization:

The guiding principle of pre-evangelization is anthropocentric, because we must start from the non-believer and carefully respect his situation. This means taking the other seriously, his person, his conscience, his truths—even though these be fragmentary. It requires being alert to the non-believer's current interests and cares. The Study Week used the phrase "positive apologetics" to describe this: Positive apologetics proceeds from a true understanding and appreciation of whatever is good and acceptable in a man's culture. It consists in taking due consideration of the man with whom we speak, and in removing the personal concrete obstacles which prevent his ready acceptance of the kerygma (message).<sup>7</sup>

In summary, the first three International Catechetical Study Weeks explored the major challenges of those days before the Second Vatican Council: the relationship of the liturgy to catechesis, catechesis in missionary settings, and the most effective methods for handing on the faith to future generations. The next article in this series will explore the findings of the final three Study Weeks.

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#### Notes

- 1 Johannes Hofinger, *Liturgy and the Missions: The Nijmegen Papers* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1960).
- 2 Johannes Hofinger, *Teaching All Nations: A Symposium on Modern Catechetics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 22.
- 3 Berard Marthaler, *Catechetics in Context* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1973), 26.
- 4 Hofinger, *Teaching All Nations*, 134.
- 5 Alfonso Nebreda, "East Asian Study Week on Mission Catechetics: 1962," *Lumen Vitae* 17 (1962): 721.
- 6 Theodore Stone, "The Bangkok Study Week," *Worship* 37 (1962): 185–86.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 186–87.

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Denis Perekhrest, Pexels.com

# Catholic Sexual Morality:

## The Call to Live and Love as Embodied Persons

By Donald P. Ascii

*Catholic sexual morality does nothing more than ask us to be true to ourselves in the sense of our true dignity rather than merely our individual desires in the moment.*

Over the past few years, the findings from surveys done by the Pew Research Center and Gallup polls have consistently painted a dismal, disturbing, and almost depressing picture of how Catholics in the US view the teachings of the Church in the area of sexual morality. According to these sources, the vast majority of Catholics surveyed say that they dissent from the truths of our faith on almost every issue within sexual morality.

For me, these reports are not only distressing but also somewhat bewildering because they do not match my own experience from the past twenty-five years of presenting the truth of God's plan for human sexuality to thousands of people from all walks of life. In my own work, I have seen the majority of people respond enthusiastically and with a sense of relief and satisfaction to the truth of Catholic sexual morality, especially when it's grounded in the teachings of Pope St. John Paul II and his monumental catechesis on the theology of the body (henceforth TOB).<sup>1</sup>

All of this leads to some obvious questions. Have those who claim to reject Catholic sexual morality ever heard it proclaimed authentically or ever understood it accurately? Are they rejecting Catholic doctrine on human sexuality or some distorted caricature of our faith? And perhaps more importantly for us, what can we do to help ensure that people are encountering the beauty of God's plan for human sexuality and hearing it proclaimed in the most personally appealing and most intellectually meaningful way?

In this series of articles, I will share what I have found to be the most important and most attractive truths from TOB to focus on when proclaiming Catholic sexual morality, beginning here with the basic outlook and fundamental reference points provided by TOB. In the subsequent articles, I will apply all of this to specific moral issues.

### **Sexual Morality and the Gospel: Good News for the Human Heart**

Unfortunately, many people imagine Catholic sexual morality through the lens of a deceptive and cliché caricature that portrays it as an oppressive set of arbitrary rules imposed on us by God or the Church. According to this false narrative, Catholic sexual morality requires people to renounce their freedom and repress their desires regarding what they want to do with their bodies in order to conform to an outdated and oppressive mentality, all while making them feel bad about themselves for the things they do wrong. Ultimately, this caricature of Catholic sexual morality casts it in a wholly negative light as the "bad news" about being Catholic by reducing sexual morality to a list of rules stating all the things that you won't be able to do with your body.

TOB counteracts this false narrative and sets the foundation for an effective presentation of Catholic sexual morality by proclaiming sexual



morality in terms of the Gospel—the Good News in Jesus Christ—and by focusing on the freedom found in living according to the truth about our human dignity. Rather than oppressive rules imposed on us by some higher authority, Catholic sexual morality emerges from the Gospel as the truth of our own humanity and dignity, the truth that will liberate the deepest and most noble desires of the human heart and lead to the greatest freedom imaginable. Catholic sexual morality is all about freedom because it is all about truth, and it is the truth that sets us free. Moreover, since it focuses on the truth of our own humanity, Catholic sexual morality does nothing more than ask us to be true to ourselves in the sense of our true dignity rather than merely our individual desires in the moment.

Of course, just as the Gospel gives us access to the truth through reason enlightened by faith, Catholic sexual morality should be presented as revealed truths that break through the darkness of sin and rise above the weakness of fallen humanity. Throughout TOB (and his other teachings), St. John Paul II continually directs his audience to the “perennial truths” of our human dignity and vocation to love in contrast to distortions and falsehoods that enter into the “historical” state of man through original sin. He relies heavily on the maxim that “Christ fully reveals man to himself” to highlight the pivotal role of Jesus as the source of these truths about humanity and our lofty vocation. In these terms, the sexual morality of TOB proclaims the truths of a divine plan for humanity that transcends any culture (rather than ideas left over from outdated patriarchal or puritanical mentalities) and that can serve to evangelize and transform any culture (which does make it seem in conflict with modern mentalities that align with the so-called culture of death).

While calling us to live in accord with the truth of our own humanity found in the divine revelation that culminates in Jesus Christ, the Gospel concentrates on the heart of the person (think, for example, of the hardness of heart referenced in Mt 19, or the adultery in the heart referenced in Mt 5, or the emphasis on the heart in Mt 15). In this biblical meaning, the heart designates the deep interior recesses of the human soul where truth resides and from where good and evil enter our

lives. Likewise, rather than merely adjudicating bodily actions, the sexual morality of TOB concentrates on the heart of the person and the thoughts and desires and vivid experiences that tell the story of each human heart. These inner movements of heart are the constant focus of St. John Paul II, and the sexual morality of TOB concentrates on how profoundly and intensely the truth of our humanity revealed in Jesus penetrates our hearts and shapes desires and how we live that truth in our bodily actions. In other words, far from being an attempt to police anyone’s body, Catholic sexual morality channels all its efforts into cultivating purity of heart.

Christological to its core, in order to explore the story of the human heart, TOB famously follows the lead of Jesus by harkening back to the beginning of humanity in creation and by aspiring to the glory of the future world of the resurrection. In other words, the most fundamental paradigm provided by TOB consists in the way it presents the truth of our humanity and the inner life of the heart through the lens of salvation history, taking us from creation beyond sin to the glory of the resurrection. Adopting that fundamental paradigm, the sexual morality of TOB asks whether the human heart is experiencing the truth according to the standards set by the mystery of creation and the mystery of redemption or according to the distortions and degradations of the patterns set by original sin and the effects of concupiscence.

Since salvation history culminates with redemption in Jesus, authentic Catholic sexual morality proclaims a vision of humanity redeemed in Christ and signals the vast potential of the human heart when given over to the powers of redemption in Jesus Christ. It proclaims what we are capable of when empowered by something beyond ourselves and proclaims that we are capable of far more than our sinfulness initially suggests to us. In that respect, Catholic sexual morality seems confrontational and demoralizing only to those who cling to the standards of fallen humanity. In itself, Catholic sexual morality is an extremely hopeful vote of confidence in the human heart and a set of high expectations that acknowledge the power of God over sin and death.



As a major theme of TOB, St. John Paul II repeatedly emphasizes that in our encounter with Jesus we should feel “called and not merely accused” when we examine the inner movements of our hearts. Obviously, we know that we are called to conversion in our following of Jesus because this stands at the center of the Gospel. That means we are called to renounce the ways of life suggested by the limitations of human sinfulness and take up the newness of life made possible by the empowerment we have in Jesus. From that basis, Catholic sexual morality enjoins us to make what St. John Paul II calls a “self-critical examination” of our hearts by which we discern how much in our sexual lives reflects the reality of redemption and how much panders to the limitations of human sinfulness, so that we can renounce the latter to embrace the former. In other words, while it never asks us to repress true and good desires but rather foster and increase them, Catholic sexual morality does require us to renounce disordered desires lest they suffocate the noble desires that we are trying to liberate. Within that dynamic there resides a profound process of self-discovery through self-control.

*As each human exists as the substantial unity of body and soul, we must regard the body as a constitutive part of who each human is rather than being something that each person possesses.*

### Living and Loving as Embodied Persons

More than anything else, TOB is truly a theology of the human heart in the ways outlined above. Why, then, do we even call it the theology of the body rather than the theology of the heart? TOB focuses so intensely on the *body* precisely to explore the human heart because it operates with the basic conviction that nothing so genuinely and dramatically tells the story of the human

heart as much as the experience of the human body, especially the sexuality expressed in the body. How we experience the body in its maleness and femaleness, what we think and desire when we encounter the body, most dramatically reveals the inner workings of our hearts and shapes the inner life of the person. So too, then, the critical examination of our hearts can focus on our experience of the body as a major part of our response to the Gospel call to conversion. Inevitably, any sexual morality based on the Gospel will amount to living out the great commandment to love, but the criteria provided by TOB enables us to clarify what true love looks like in the sexual sphere.

St. John Paul II focuses on the biblical revelation of the interaction of man and woman (Adam and Eve in Genesis, the Bridegroom and Bride in the Songs of Songs, and the Husband and Wife in Ephesians) to develop the basic idea that the state of the human heart in the various phases of salvation history expresses itself in the experience of the body. For TOB, the focal point of all this interaction concerns the experience of the body in terms of its human dignity, which means having the dignity of a person created as *Imago Dei*. The sexual morality of TOB, in turn, simply proclaims that sexual activity in and through the body must affirm that truth of our being persons created as *Imago Dei*. This basic reference point offers a host of criteria for the critical examination of the heart that sets us on the path to purity of heart, and these same criteria also emerge as the highly effective ways to present Catholic sexual morality.

The term “person” has a certain theological origin (from the doctrines of the Early Church regarding the Trinity), and in TOB the notion of human personhood aligns with that theological origin by emphasizing how each of us exists as an utterly unique and irreplaceable “someone” with inherent worth. “Person” also refers to the inner life of the heart lived on the basis of the powers of the soul and thus highlights the spiritual dimension that stands at the core of every human being. TOB further emphasizes that in being persons we are superior to all the other visible creatures on the earth and can therefore only be likened to God and never reduced to the level of the animals. In being like God, human persons are also other-centered and made for love in the form of communion, just as God exists as a Loving Personal Communion. At the moral level, this means that humans must never be reduced to mere material objects (*something* rather than *someone*) or to some instrumental value in fulfilling desires and thus must never be used rather than loved.

TOB develops all its teachings on the body through this meaning of personhood by emphasizing how the body expresses the person and makes the person concretely present in the world. As each human exists as the substantial unity of body and soul, we must regard the body as a constitutive part of who each human is rather than being something that each person possesses. All the truths of the person sketched above now extend to the body, meaning that the body is someone unique and irreplaceable with inherent worth, most fully understood through its connection to the inner life of the soul, and never to be reduced to the level of the animals. It also means that, in order to uphold the personal dignity of the body, all our actions toward and through the body must avoid objectivization and use on the basis of an instrumental understanding of value.

From seeing the oneness of the body and person in each human, we can go beyond how the body shares in the dignity of the person to how the person shares in the truth of the body. In other words, what is true of the body is true of the person, and in this way the body serves as a sign of the person. A critical question for the human heart now centers on this integration of the body and person and how well we identify with the body as persons. For example, we must go beyond the idea that the body of a woman is fertile to the greater truth that *the woman herself is fertile*. In this way we can establish a deep link between the person and the truth of the body such that in order to be true to the person we must be true to the body expressing that person. On the other hand, dominating, manipulating, or altering the body in ways contrary to its own truth (such as negating its sexual complementarity or eliminating its fertility) would amount to violating the truth and dignity of the person expressed in the body.

According to TOB, the proper experience of the body also includes recognizing how the body exists as “a sign of the person” because it functions in such a way as to bring our minds to truths beyond itself, signaling the presence of a person and by its own truth revealing truths of that person. While the body may exist as this sign of the person in all its materiality, for TOB the sexuality of the body does this in a preeminent manner, and herein lies the special dignity and value of the body in its maleness and femaleness. TOB summarizes this preeminent meaning of the sexuality of the body in what St. John Paul II calls *the spousal meaning of the body* and the language of the body.

The spousal meaning of the body holds a central place in the TOB presentation of the fundamental connection between the truth of the human person and the inner life of the heart. The spousal meaning of the body refers to how the body of the person conveys the core truths of personhood. In those terms, the spousal meaning of the body refers to how the body, specifically in its sexuality, proclaims “here is someone utterly unique with inherent worth who has been created for love in the form of self-gift and communion” (what St. John Paul II calls spousal love). The language of the body takes up the fundamental truths of the spousal meaning of the body but relates to their expression in action. Through the language of the body, dignified sexual actions have a symbolic meaning that speaks the truth that someone has inherent worth and deserves love in the form of self-gift and communion. When sexual actions maintain their integrity they maintain this fundamental proclamation, whereas disordered sexual actions speak a message that contradicts or erodes the truth of the spousal meaning of the body. Morally good sexual actions are those that sincerely proclaim, “You are someone irreplaceable with inherent worth made for love.” Disordered sexual actions corrupt that message and falsely suggest instead, “You are something replaceable with instrumental value made for use.”

## Conclusion

The sexual morality grounded in TOB asks us to concentrate on what we are saying to each other and about each other (and about ourselves) by our sexual actions, with the biggest question being whether or not we are speaking the truth of the personal dignity of the embodied human person as opposed to falsehoods that contradict that dignity. At the same time, by



its focus on the heart of the person, this sexual morality asks us to acknowledge what we really think and feel and desire about each other as embodied persons and to admit whether we really do intensely experience the personal dignity and inherent worth of the body. Taking things to a deeper theological level, it asks us to admit whether or not we have the inner freedom to act in accord with the personal dignity of the body—whether or not we are slaves to our disordered desires and demoralized by them. Ultimately, it asks us whether the sexual lives of our hearts have been renewed by the powers of redemption in Jesus so that we have the power to love one another as he has loved us.

Reflecting back on those who claim to not adhere in faith to this sexual morality, it can make us wonder if these truths at the core of TOB are what they don’t believe. Do they not believe that each human is an embodied person created as *Imago Dei* with inherent worth? Do they not believe that we each deserve love in the form of a total and irrevocable self-gift? Do they not believe that we can have the freedom to exercise the self-control necessary to master our passions and discover our true selves? Do they not believe that we have been empowered by Jesus to love each other with enough sacrificial love to uphold each other’s dignity no matter the cost?

Perhaps they don’t believe these things, which would tell us where we need to start in our efforts to help them. But perhaps they simply do not realize just how much of the Gospel really is at stake in the realm sexual morality. Perhaps they need us to do our part to show them.

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### Note

- <sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006).

### Photos:

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# Creating a Tender Place for the Human Soul to Flourish

## Building an Acts 2:42 Community

By Deborah Nearmyer

**O**n the first full day of school, I found myself energized about the opportunities and enthusiasm that filled our hallways. I had visions of beautiful moments for our community as we were able to be a bit more “normal” after a tough year of COVID and quarantines. That evening, however, just before falling asleep, I received a phone call that one of our junior students had been involved in a fatal car accident. My heart plummeted as the text messages began to blow up my phone. Shock and grief were sweeping through our school families as the news spread and hearts broke.

Simultaneously, though, a beautiful phenomenon began to emerge. Our nearby parishes were inundated with teenagers flocking to adoration chapels. Parents were accompanying their kids as they knelt together in front of the Blessed Sacrament, praying rosaries and chaplets while holding each other up. They were on their knees before the Lord and their hearts were being nurtured by Christ himself. I was comforted to know that in this time of tragedy, a communal muscle memory kicked in, and we lived as a people rooted in Acts 2:42, “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.”

I have served on senior leadership teams at a parish, a camp, and a school that have each used the Acts 2:42 template to create dynamic Catholic communities. Community flows out of the core human desire to be known and loved. Blake Mulvaney, our former superintendent, would say each year, “Every student has one question on the first day of school: will my teacher care to know me and love me?” Whether at a parish, camp, or in a school, each staff member is needed to create an Acts 2:42 culture.

The economy of salvation works best in small, personal encounters, and the primacy of grace is often best discovered in quiet, contemplative times of reflection. Big schools, camps, and parish schools of religion often struggle to provide small, personal encounters with Jesus Christ and opportunities for deep fellowship with like-minded believers. It is equally hard to provide quiet, contemplative times of reflection over the big questions that teens wrestle with. But it is necessary. An Acts

2:42 culture cannot be actuated effectively by the theology and campus ministry departments alone. Coaches, administrators, teachers from every *discipline*, support and maintenance staff, and most importantly the students themselves must be guided into leading and reinforcing these opportunities for ongoing conversion. We have found that creating a Christocentric culture that is steeped in living out the pillars of communal life laid out in Acts 2:42 builds deep Catholic community.

### Teaching of the Apostles

We believe that Catholic teachers in each of their disciplines must be missionary disciples if we are to have authentic Catholic wisdom prevalent in our school. We know that students admire and emulate what their coaches, teachers and sponsors value because “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”<sup>1</sup>

The people we hire and those we fire are paramount to the success of the mission. Teachers, coaches, counselors, sponsors, and support staff have great influence on our young people. If our adults cannot or will not witness the love of Christ in their life, are they a fit for a Catholic school, parish, or ministry staff? We cannot afford to hire accomplished educators or staff if they are not first and foremost disciples of Christ, ready to give an account of his love in their life. We must strive to create a culture of witness. It is an ancient practice, and we cling to it because sharing our stories and telling others about how the love God has poured out on us is how faith is passed on. It is not, however, a professional practice of most teachers. Teachers have been trained to instruct and run a classroom, which is of course important. But more importantly, they need to give witness to their relationship with their living creator and allow students to do the same.

In order to jump-start this witnessing, we established several key opportunities for every teacher to share a testimony through particular prompts with their classes throughout the school year. For example, we celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception by sharing a story or devotion to Our Lady and how she has moved them closer to Christ. We create time in professional development to model this. We help staff write and practice sharing their testimony with one another before shar-

ing with students. Our students look forward to these witnesses, and after several years of hearing them, our seniors asked if they could share their own witness. Today our teachers not only write a testimony to share with their students, but also work with a senior leader to help them write and share their testimony. Students begin reflecting on their own lives looking for the presence of God. Inevitably, they find him and then begin to recognize the Lord more and more. They begin to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit and Jesus' voice. Likewise, faculty and staff witness talks are carried into our overnight class retreats, our monthly Eucharistic Adoration nights, and before all school masses, creating a culture where sharing the way God blesses us now even happens during our lunch table conversations.

### The Communal Life

There is a beautiful catechesis around the Greek word *perichoresis*—the inner movement of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—that teaches us how we are invited into the communion of these three persons in one.

There is a temptation to build community around a program of service projects, team building, and esteem-building activities that are divorced from that divine movement that is the very source of freedom, belonging, and confidence, a relationship with Jesus Christ. We must resist this reductionistic impulse.

Christocentric Community Systems shrink the adult-to-student ratio by including not just teachers but also non-teaching staff as mentors and trusted adults. These smaller environments can provide times for contemplation and reflection as well as one-on-one time for a student to have the listening ear of a mentor who is checking in on their physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.

A culture of listening, reconciliation, and prayer are keys to conversion. Knowing that each of us is created to be known and loved, we must teach the art of listening and practice listening to one another. Listening is imperative to learning and passing on the faith. Taking the time to teach and practice the skills of listening leads to space where others feel loved and safe. This creates a favorable environment for conversion and learning.

### Breaking of the Bread

Jesus cooked fish for his apostles, fed the five thousand, and celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples. Eating together matters! In addition to daily Mass, we meet weekly as an entire faculty and staff to break bread, unpack the Word of God, share our thoughts and stories about how he is working in our lives, and to pray together for one another and our school community.

There is a great cost to building and maintaining community. Time is a precious commodity. It has taken an unrelenting boldness on the part of our administrative team to prioritize daily Mass and our weekly faith formation time. In holding this time sacred, we have experienced great growth in our understanding of the teachings of the Church, gone deeper into the Word of God, and learned to love and support one another as the adults who hold up the community. Students know Thursday morning is time just for faculty and staff and that they can take tests and get help from teachers another



time. This weekly gathering in small groups has changed our staff community. We know each other, we wrestle with Church teachings together, we share creatively how to teach from a Catholic worldview in each subject, and we share our hearts with one another. This experience has rolled over to our students, and we see them meeting in the chapel to pray, going to Reconciliation and laughing together during lunch.

### Prayers

St. Augustine says, "Our hearts are restless until the rest in you." Knowing how tender the hearts of adolescents are, a primary pursuit of a Catholic school and formation is to provide divine rest for students. We do this by teaching them to pray and to find intimacy with the Lord through Eucharistic amazement, personal conversations, and sacraments. It is in prayer, personally and communally, that we are threaded together in the heart of Jesus. The prayer life should be dynamic and take many forms in a community's daily rule of life.

Living Acts 2:42 manifests itself as a vibrant Catholic community. God desires the teaching of the apostles, communal life, breaking of the bread, and prayer for parishes, camps, schools, and each part of his Body. Being those who have the privilege of forming tender hearts, let us not hinder the children, but bring them to the feet of our Lord in a community that treasures them.

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Note

<sup>1</sup> St. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41.

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# Teaching Teens to Pray

By Mark Hart

How to change a flat tire. How to turn off the water to an overflowing toilet.  
How to manage money, create a budget, and balance a checkbook.  
How to perform the Heimlich maneuver or CPR in an emergency.

**T**hese are all invaluable life skills that every parent ought to add to their list of “important lessons to impart upon our children.” Sadly, however, if one were to poll most Catholic parents, “how to pray” would likely not even crack their top ten list.

Why is that, exactly?

Perhaps prayer is seen as a “given,” something more “caught than taught.” Possibly some parents never learned how to pray themselves and feel ill-equipped to hand on practical insight into such a personal venture. Maybe some parents feel this lesson is better left to the “professionals” like the pastor, religious sister, parochial theology teacher, or parish youth minister. Or maybe—just maybe—it’s because prayer is an ever-elusive act that most agree is important but few feel worthy or capable of properly teaching the next generation.

Now, enter the modern teenager. They are screen savvy, tech obsessed, and in constant need of stimulation. Generation Z (or iGen) identifies and processes information at a rapid rate but ironically has a more difficult time focusing for long periods of time. As attention spans decrease and the desire for optical and mental stimulation heightens, is it any wonder why something as timeless and serene as prayer is not typically held in high regard with the modern adolescent?

If parents and catechists don’t make teaching and modeling prayer a priority, the risks and dangers for the next generation will be catastrophic. If primary (and secondary) catechists don’t hand on this essential facet of the faith, who will do so? The increasing rate of atheism, agnosticism, and disaffiliation with organized religion (all of which we are currently witnessing in Gen Z) is only going to widen if we who are charged with leading them into a personal relationship with Christ and his Church are not strategic, intentional, and timely about how and what we share.

So what is the million-dollar answer? What is the “quick fix” when it comes to teaching the modern teen to pray? The bad news is that there is no quick fix. There is no “7 Minute Abs”

solution when leading young souls into a deeper relationship with the Lord. However, the good news is that there is an answer to this question. It just takes time and a multifaceted approach.

After spending the past twenty-five plus years toiling in the vineyard of youth ministry, I’ve had to adjust and pivot countless times as I’ve failed more than I’ve succeeded. So, I offer the following suggestions as time-tested and effective.

## It’s a Both/And

Is prayer “caught” or taught? The answer is yes; prayer is both caught and taught. It’s a both/and not an either/or supposition. Pope St. John Paul II once remarked on how he learned to pray, offering this reflection: “After [my mother’s] death and, later, the death of my older brother, I was left alone with my father, a deeply religious man. Day after day I was able to observe the austere way in which he lived . . . his example was in a way my first seminary, a kind of domestic seminary.”

The great saint and former pontiff went on to recall watching his father kneel beside the bed, daily, and offer prayers to God. For St. John Paul II, a rhythm of prayer was modeled for him, not merely taught to him. We youth ministers can tell our teens about the importance of prayer but if we really want them to develop a prayer life, they must see us praying frequently—beyond the Mass. They ought to see our reverence in our communion bow and genuflection, sure, but it should be evident before and after youth group in spontaneous and meaningful moments.

## Less Is More

For people not accustomed to working out, a new gym membership can mean a great deal of soreness and might even become demotivating over time. If muscles are not warmed up and the stamina isn’t built gradually over time, the pain and frustration may lead them away from the gym and the healthier lifestyle they crave. The same can be true of prayer. For teens who are not accustomed to praying or who don’t currently count prayer



as part of their everyday “language,” long prayer services and practices, whether on retreat or at a youth group night, can be overwhelming and demotivating. In this way, less really is more. Great depth can be achieved through five minutes of prayer or ten minutes of worship as a group. Prayer does not—out of the gate—have to look like an hour of adoration or ninety minutes of prayer and worship. As leaders, you can build up to that, but help your young people cut their teeth in shorter bursts of prayer first and get their “prayer legs” underneath them over time.

The “less is more” concept is also true of utilizing Sacred Scripture. Yes, it’s the inspired Word of God and, yes, it is always beneficial to expose people to holy writ but if you are teaching the Parable of the Prodigal Son, for instance, don’t feel the need to read the story in its entirety. Perhaps focus in on just the younger brother and the father and leave the older brother for another day. Another way to work on this concept of “less is more” is to paraphrase and summarize the beginning of the story in your own words and pick up the story being told with the climactic or most notable moment. You may not be sharing as many verses or words, but the ones you do share will assuredly carry a stronger and longer impact in the hearts and minds of those listening.

### Till That Soil

Speaking of adoration: if you desire reverence, you must ensure relevance (the same can be said of Mass, frankly). Many times as catechists we look at the liturgy and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament as no-brainer “home runs.” “Just get them to the Eucharist,” I’ve heard many times, and this statement is true to a certain extent. While Jesus has great power to work miracles, without the proper catechesis teens will continue to lack reverence at Mass and zone out during longer periods of adoration. The more we can teach about the moments and movements of the Great Sacrament, the more engaged the teens will become within it. By extension, the more we can prepare the modern teen’s heart for an encounter with Jesus, the more meaningful those moments of eucharistic intimacy truly become.

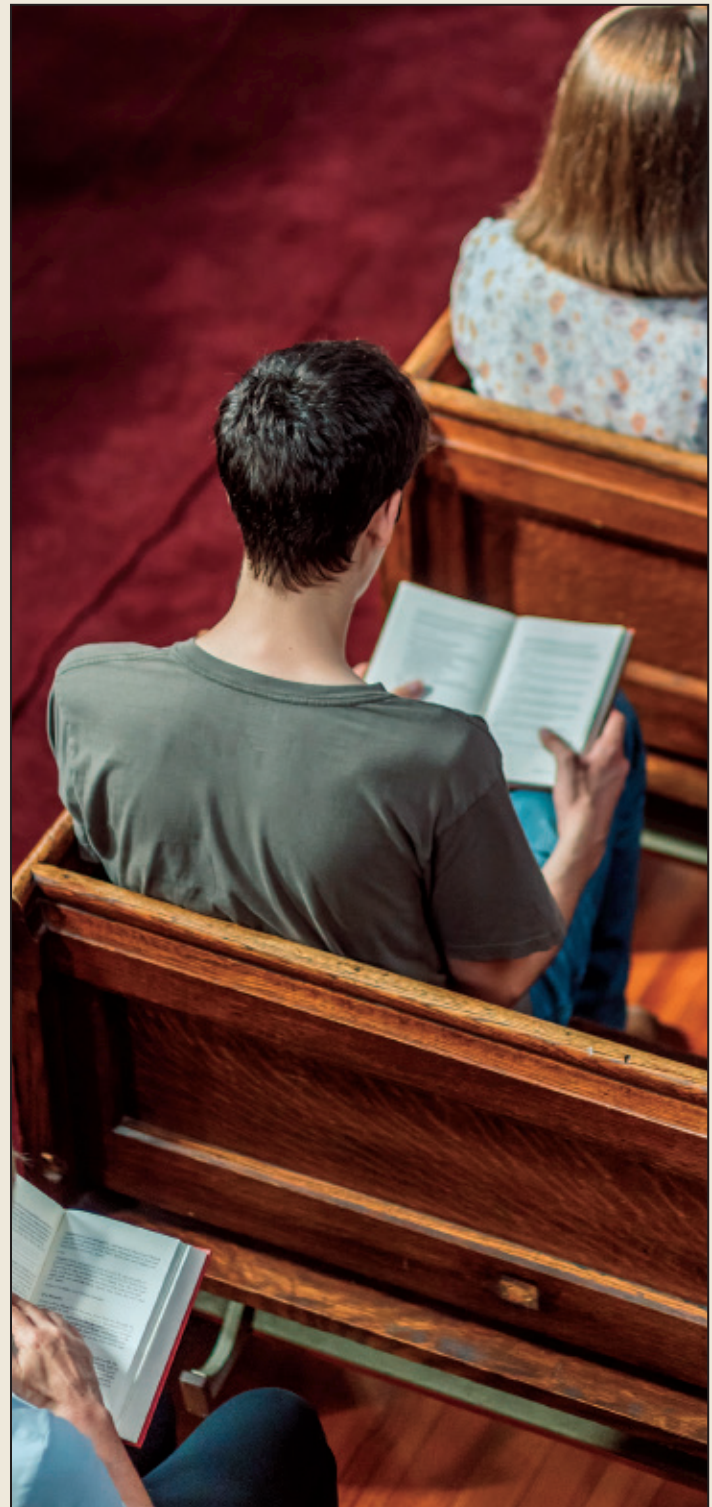
Avoid the temptation to light the candles and process out with the monstrance, thinking that all the teens (new and non-Catholic teens, especially) will just be overwhelmed by God’s grace. Grace builds on grace, yes, but how many teens even understand what grace is? The more time we can take to explain Christ’s true presence and why the objects and prayers of our sacraments are significant, the better chance our teens have of discovering the sacred and entering into the mystery. Don’t just cast the seed; take time to till the soil of their hearts and minds.

### Return to the Classics

We are so blessed as Catholics to have such a rich history of prayer, and we must take advantage of all of the prayers of our Church. That being said, before you hand teens that rosary and pamphlet outlining the order and mysteries, they need to be introduced to the great and rich context that surrounds this profound prayer. Teach them about the Blessed Virgin Mary, explain to them the significance of intercessory prayer, offer them an explanation of meditation, and present to them the biblical events they are likely not all that familiar with. Utilize visuals when praying a rosary. Go online and find images of the

mystery that you can put up on a screen or copy and share as handouts. Gen Z lives within a visual culture and they will enter more deeply into the rosary if they are offered more to work with mentally.

To offer a specific example of a way in which you can provide this context: before I teach teens to pray a rosary, I like to spend at least a couple sessions on the Lord’s Prayer and the Hail Mary. I intentionally walk them through each prayer line by line, unpacking both the obvious and subtle meanings and





background. Many teens struggle with the Our Father because of their own father wounds, so taking the time to unpack this perfect prayer from the Perfect Prayer is a gift that will last young Catholics a lifetime. Likewise, a line-by-line tour through St. Luke's inspired prose will take the Hail Mary from being a nice, formulaic prayer to a deep dive into the Blessed Mother's Immaculate Heart.

### Introduce Them to New “Friends”

Do your teens understand the power at their disposal in the communion of saints? By introducing them to intercessory prayer, you will not only open up a new world to them (ethereally speaking) but you will also teach them two invaluable principles: that of thoughtfulness and a heightened awareness of the Mystical Body of Christ. Many teens don't pray with the saints because they are not exposed to the lives of the saints outside of picking a saint name during their Confirmation prep. Begin by asking them how you can pray for them on a regular basis, and do not end a one-on-one conversation with a teenager without asking this ever-important question. The more they begin to see your thoughtfulness and care and your belief in the efficacy of intercession, the more open they will become over time to asking the holy ones who have gone before us to pray with them. They will begin to appreciate patronages and pay attention to feast days and, eventually, seek the very sainthood we are attempting to unleash within them. Don't merely recount miraculous stories and inspiring tales of saintly virtue; make it an interpersonal and consistent part of your relationship with each teen and the Spirit will take it from there.

### Empower, Empower, Empower

How many opportunities do you give your teens to lead a prayer? Not necessarily up in front of the group but within small groups? If they're not comfortable leading a prayer, that's alright, but how often do you ask each for a petition prior to you leading a prayer? Something as simple as warning them ahead of time that they are each going to offer a prayer request aloud both breaks down the wall of awkwardness or discomfort prevalent in so many teens (middle schoolers especially) but also goes a long way in normalizing this form of “communication.” Don't forget that for most teens prayer is not a second language . . . it's more like a fourth or fifth language, especially if they don't pray at home as a family. Additionally, most teens are really not comfortable in their own skin when on the church campus or in a prayer setting. The more small moments we can empower our teens to speak up and open up in a prayerful setting, the more dividends will be paid over time when you ask them to lead prayer in a small group and, eventually, in the large group.

While none of these practical examples are watershed insights, I would argue they are essential to remember for any parent or catechist. The life skills (like turning off water or knowing how to perform CPR) we model and teach and attempt to unearth in Gen Z will hopefully set them up for life, to be sure, but teaching them to discover their interior life—to make that most important journey from their head to their heart—and to really pray . . . that is a skill that sets them up for eternity.

The disciples bid Jesus, “Lord, teach us how to pray” (Luke 11:1) . . . and he did. When we teach people to pray, we act as God acts. There is no greater gift you have to give. Because prayer does not “help” our relationship with God; prayer is our relationship.

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Mark Hart serves as Chief Information Officer and Executive Vice President for Life Teen International. A graduate of the University of Notre Dame and a twenty-six-year veteran of youth ministry, Mark is a best-selling author of over twenty books, a daily radio host on SiriusXM, and an award-winning writer and producer. One of the most sought-after speakers serving in the Catholic Church today, Mark's humor and passion for Scripture are known the world over. A master catechist, Mark also serves as a marketing consultant, book editor, and speaking coach, as well as a Research Fellow for the St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology. Mark and his wife, Melanie, have three daughters (Hope, Trinity, and Faith) and one son, Josiah. They live in Phoenix, Arizona.

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