

Perseverance is the difference between a passing religious experience and the journey of one who, like St. Paul, finishes the course of life well. God's grace and power must begin it all and will continue to lead and sustain us through it all.

- How do I experience God's grace and power sustaining me on this journey?



Journey of Faith



In Short:

- Conversion is a lifelong process.
- God's grace and our perseverance are needed for spiritual growth.
- Having doubts and questions are normal parts of the faith journey.



Mountaintops and Valleys

"The soul of one who serves God always swims in joy, always keeps holiday, and is always in the mood for singing."

St. John of the Cross

You may be feeling what St. John of the Cross described. You may also be experiencing other feelings:

- "I felt such a spiritual high during the Easter Vigil. But now everything else seems so... ordinary again."
- "I feel like I've 'graduated.' I guess I don't have to keep coming to these RCIA sessions."
- "I feel kind of confused. I spent so much energy preparing for initiation. Now what do I do?"
- "I really love my new faith but I still have questions. The more I learn, the more I realize I still need to learn."

Peak experiences don't last, even for the apostles. Read about Jesus' transfiguration in Matthew 17:1–9. Peter wanted to stay in this mountaintop experience, but they had to come down from the mountain and get back to the daily grind. Witnessing Jesus' suffering and death caused those special feelings to disappear.

Even though we won't remain in a high state of religious experience all the time, God still walks beside us. When we need to be reassured that God is with us, the Church is there. Prayer, God's word, Mass, the sacraments, our faithful friends—these are all reminders of God's daily presence in our lives.

Conversion: A Lifelong Process

Welcome! You're now a fully initiated member of the Catholic Church.

The Easter Vigil is only the beginning of a commitment to a lifelong discovery and living out of the Christian message. The next stage of the RCIA process is called *mystagogy*, a Greek word meaning "mystery." In the early Church, the community used the fifty days from Easter to Pentecost to explain the mystery of the sacraments celebrated at Easter.

This period is a time for *neophytes* (newly baptized) and those who have come into full communion with the Catholic Church to gain a deeper understanding of God's word, the sacraments, and what your new commitment means for your life. You'll continue to gather for prayer and exploration of Catholic Christianity with a redirected focus—from *learning to living*. You'll be invited to participate more fully in the life of the parish so that your faith may continue to be nourished—and the faith of the community may be enhanced by the witness of its newest members.

- What feelings do you have now that you're a full member of the Catholic Church?



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Ongoing Conversion

The key to this next step is ongoing conversion. At its root, *conversion* means "to change or turn around." Conversion is the ever-present call to grow in faith and to live out that faith. It means deepening our relationship with God and our fellow Christians.

The first step in the conversion process is to turn to Jesus Christ, accept him as our Lord and Savior, and choose to live the life of faith in the community of God's people. This first step, this first turning toward God, is called *initial conversion*. It may be a moving experience, a dramatic moment, one that jars us to the depths of our souls. Or it may happen gradually over a period of years.

Conversion is an ongoing process that requires perseverance and the gradual and continuous redirecting of our lives toward God. Bit by bit, our lives are steered closer to what God wills for us.

Initial conversion needs time, space, and opportunity to sink roots into the rich soil of our lives. Like any living thing, the life of faith requires the right atmosphere to grow and bear fruit. Even Jesus' closest friends and followers grew in their understanding of the Messiah.

The two sons of Zebedee, James and John, asked their mother to intercede for them so that they might sit at Christ's right and left hand in his kingdom:

"Jesus said in reply, 'You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?' They said to him, 'We can.' He replied, 'Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.'"

Matthew 20:22, 26–28

James and John were looking for a warrior king who would rally the people, gather an army, and drive the Romans from their land. Contrary to their expectations, Jesus revealed himself as the "suffering servant" (see Isaiah 53), one who came to serve. As Jesus' apostles, they were being called to this work, and it wasn't what they envisioned.

It was better, fuller!

- What were your expectations of Jesus and the Church? Did any of these go through changes?



Conversion Is Lifelong

In the eighteenth century, St. Alphonsus Liguori, an ambitious young Italian lawyer, lost a complicated case. He had been duped, and his whole world collapsed. He stormed out of the courtroom saying, "World, I know you now."

A few weeks later, after a dispute with his domineering father, he walked into a church and heard a voice: "Alphonsus, give yourself to me." He went up the street to the church of Our Lady of Ransom and placed his sword, the symbol of his nobility, on one of the side altars.

This dramatic conversion wasn't the end. Three years later, Alphonsus was ordained a priest. He was vacationing with four other priests on the Amalfi Coast when a sudden storm forced them ashore. They made their way to a mountain hermitage. Overwhelmed by the poverty of the goat herders nearby, Alphonsus dedicated himself to the poor people of the country district. The death of his mentor, Bishop Falcoia, later led Alphonsus to take on the role of leader.

Conversion is a lifelong process. Saint Alphonsus Liguori shows us that. We will each experience many moments of grace and conversion. We'll be changed to the degree we respond to God's grace and our ongoing call to conversion.

- Describe a recent experience that was a moment of conversion for you. How did you respond to this call to conversion?



All Is Grace

Saint Paul writes: "God is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work."

2 Corinthians 9:8

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux said, "All is grace." If you belong to Jesus Christ, then it's all good. It's all grace.

Grace comes the day we bury a husband or care for an ailing mother. Grace is there when we're raising our children. Grace shows up when we lift our voices and sing our favorite songs. Grace finds us when we care for someone else's children, teach them, and love them. And grace is there when we meet another car at a blind intersection.

Grace is God working in us, through us, and with us so that we can live the life of Christ always and everywhere. It's not a one-time shot in the arm.

Grace is found in the nitty-gritty daily living of the faithful Christian who doesn't give up. It's a gift that flows from baptismal waters into the deepest roots of our souls. It shows up when we need it and to the degree we need it so we can weather any storm.

Anything that draws us closer to God and helps us live out our calling, anything that keeps us close to God...that's grace.

I thought I'd have it all figured out by now...

If you thought you'd have it all figured out by now but don't, welcome to the club! It would be virtually impossible for a thinking, active Catholic to sail through life without questions and doubts. It's part of the faith process. Remember, Jesus didn't dump the apostles because they had doubts or because they couldn't understand everything right away.

Faith is faith precisely because we *do not know*, yet *still believe*. Recall Jesus' words to Thomas after the resurrection:

"Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

John 20:29

Faith thrusts us into a lifelong and ongoing relationship with God. Even people engaged in intimate human relationships wonder at times. But a couple can actually grow closer, their love deeper and more mature, after struggling through their doubts. Our doubts can be catalysts to a deeper relationship and closer union with God.

When we face moments of doubt, there are things we can do to remain faithful:

- Get answers from reading Catholic books or from a spiritual director or faithful Catholic.
- Witness to our faith in spite of doubts.
- Intensify our search for understanding through prayer, reading Scripture, and reception of the sacraments.
- Act on our belief and let time and God take care of our doubts.

We can ignore the grace or respond wholeheartedly. God's initiative and invitation aren't what's lacking. We're chased "down the nights and down the days" as described in Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven*.

- When and how have I felt God's pursuit of me? How have I responded?



As Community Members and Citizens

Finally, laypersons touch the lives of friends, extended family, and the community in unique and deeply personal ways.

"The effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which one lives is so much the duty and responsibility of the laity that it can never be performed properly by others."

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity
(*Apostolicam Actuositatem*), 13

Getting Ready

The laity are most effective as disciples if we're educated and updated in our faith. We can seek out formation opportunities to form us more and more into God's divine image, as a potter forms clay into vessels. Authentic Christian formation takes place within the context of a believing community, usually the local parish, which is centered on the Eucharist, other sacraments, good preaching and teaching, social outreach, and community involvement.

Laypersons may share personal concerns, insights, and inspirations in small groups or seek individual spiritual direction. All adults can grow spiritually through praying regularly, studying Scripture, and reading good books written by respected authors about faith or the spiritual life.

Getting Involved

It's time to take your place alongside other members of the Church community for daily service of the kingdom of God. It's time to get involved and put your faith into action. Some people get involved in Church programs; others bring their faith to secular involvements. Some join groups; others prefer to make a difference as individuals.

- How is God calling me to get involved in my local parish?
- How is God calling me to put my faith into action at work or within the larger community?



Journey of Faith



In Short:

- The lay (nonordained) faithful are essential in the life of the Church.
- The laity help serve the kingdom of God.
- Laypeople live out their call to holiness in the world of family, work, and community.



The word *layperson* once connoted being a passive recipient of the faith while the ordained priesthood and those in the consecrated life (vowed religious sisters and brothers) were viewed as having an active role in dispensing and passing on the faith. The role of the laity in today's Church is anything but passive.

A layperson is an adopted child of God (Romans 8:15), a sister or brother of Jesus, and an heir to God's wealth of grace and life eternal, called to serve God's kingdom here on earth.

The Role of the Laity

Each of us is tremendously important to God's plan for the world. Drawing on the graces received at baptism, members of the *common priesthood of the faithful* serve God's kingdom. God marks all Christians as children of God, empowering us to act in Christ's name as priests, prophets, and kings.

"But you are 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises' of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

1 Peter 2:9

As *priests*, laypeople offer worship to God, especially by participating in the eucharistic liturgy. As *prophets*, we speak the word of God and witness to the life, teachings, and saving actions of Christ. As *kings*, we profit from the authority and power of God to continue Christ's ministry of service and love to all people.

"While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace—a life of faith, hope, and charity, a life according to the Spirit—the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians."

CCC 1547

"No part of the structure of a living body is merely passive but has a share in the functions as well as life of the body: so, too, in the body of Christ, which is the Church."

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity
(*Apostolicam Actuositatem*), 2

- How do you feel called to participate in the Church community?



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A Shared Work

Though the ordained priesthood is unique, bishops, priests, and deacons work in collaboration with the laity. Christ sends the laity into the world to transform the values of society and individuals into those of the kingdom of God, to minister as he would minister.

Before his passion and death, Christ prayed for all his disciples, present and future:

"They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world. Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world."

John 17:16–18

Christ identifies his disciples with himself. As a body, we're united with the Father to the same degree the Son is united with the Father and the Holy Spirit in perfect unity.

Each member of Christ's body works in harmony with the rest and is indispensable.

Laypeople go into the world:

"bearing consistent witness in their personal, family and social lives by proclaiming and sharing the gospel of Christ in every situation in which they find themselves."

On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Nonordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of the Priest

"Lay believers are in the front line of Church life; for them the Church is the animating principle of human society. Therefore, they in particular ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church."

Pope Pius XII, Discourse, February 20, 1946; see also CCC 899

- How do or can you share the good news of Jesus in the particular circumstances of your life?



Doing God's Work in the World

While we're all called to holiness as a universal vocation, we're each also called to a particular vocation. The priesthood of the faithful includes celibate religious, married, and single persons, each with special gifts and opportunities to serve. Each is called to develop the qualities and talents given by God.

"Love is...the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.... Christian revelation recognizes two specific ways of realizing the vocation of the human person in its entirety, to love: marriage and virginity or celibacy. Either one is, in its own proper form, an actuation of the most profound truth of man, of his being 'created in the image of God.'"

Pope St. John Paul II, On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (Familiaris Consortio), 11

The whole world is full of opportunities to do God's work. One might consider working in "the more important fields of action, namely, church communities, the family, youth, the social milieu, and national and international levels."

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem), 9

- How are you living out your vocation to love?



As Married Couples and Parents

Husbands and wives are called to help their spouse and children along the path to sainthood. Their primary responsibilities are focused on family life; other kinds of service to the Church come second.

"Christian husbands and wives are cooperators in grace and witnesses of faith for each other, their children, and all others in their household. They are the first to communicate the faith to their children and to educate them by word and example for the Christian and apostolic life."

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem), 11

As Single Adults

While being single is considered a state of life, not a primary vocation—exclusive and enduring—like marriage, priesthood, and consecrated life, we all share in the fundamental call of Christians to love. Our belonging to God and our call to holiness isn't dependent on marital status.

We find models of Christian living in Scripture. Jesus was single, as were Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and others. Saint Paul saw value in his single status and encouraged others to use their gifts within this state of life:

"Each has a particular gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. Now to the unmarried and to widows I say: it is a good thing for them to remain as they are, as I do."

1 Corinthians 7:7–8

As Workers

Our daily work offers us opportunities to glorify God through the use and development of our talents and our witness to God's love. The ways in which Christian laypersons perform their daily chores can be powerful witnesses to the grace of God.

"In the pilgrimage of this life, [they]... generously dedicate themselves wholly to the advancement of the kingdom of God and to the reform and improvement of the temporal order in a Christian spirit."

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem), 4

Sharing Christ in the workplace is a sensitive issue since Christian charity demands we respect the beliefs of others. We don't force Christ on others: Christ invited people to believe in him and let the Spirit do the rest. But there will be times when an explicit explanation of the life and work of Jesus Christ may be in order.

In the workplace, there are always opportunities to pray for the needs of fellow workers. Through prayer, God can open hearts to the reception of God's healing.

- When have you shared your faith at work? How was it received?



As Church Members

While liturgical ministries such as lector, cantor, and extraordinary minister of holy Communion are important, they're no more important than service to shut-ins, setting up the hall for parish socials, or serving refreshments.

Some laypeople are called to perform tasks that assist priests in serving the needs of the community. Some use their gifts in parish or diocesan administration, pastoral ministry, chaplaincy, bereavement ministry, or faith formation.

"There are innumerable opportunities open to the laity for the exercise of their apostolate of evangelization and sanctification."

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem), 6

The Gift of Tongues

After the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost, Peter and the other apostles were able to communicate God's good news so that people from every land could understand. The gift of tongues is expressed in the language of love and compassion. We communicate these things when we express our appreciation, admiration, and encouragement to others.

"And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim."

Acts 2:4

"What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops."

Matthew 10:27

Possible Ministries

- Leading a committee
- Promoting parish events
- Serving as a lector

- What other ministries rely on the gift of good communication?
- I use the gift of communication when...



The Gift of Interpreting Tongues

We must listen for God's voice in everyday life. Jesus said:

"But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear."

Matthew 13:16

"For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of [Jesus] Christ."

2 Corinthians 4:6

"You have the anointing that comes from the holy one, and you all have knowledge."

1 John 2:20

Possible Ministries

- Comforting the grieving
- Welcoming new people in the parish
- Working with alienated Catholics

- What other ministries use the gift of listening?
- I use the gift of listening when...



- How might I use the gifts God has given me for building up the Church?



Journey of Faith



In Short:

- Gifts of the Holy Spirit are manifested in the lives of the faithful.
- All spiritual gifts are to be used in loving service.
- We each must discern, develop, and share our spiritual gifts.



gifts through baptism. As with other gifts, it's impossible to fully appreciate and make use of our spiritual gifts until we've opened them. These gifts are to be used out of love for and in service to one another. We don't choose our gifts; God bestows them on us through the work of the Holy Spirit.

"So that she can fulfill her mission, the Holy Spirit 'bestows upon [the Church] varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her.' 'Henceforward the Church, endowed with the gifts of her founder and faithfully observing his precepts of charity, humility and self-denial, receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is on earth the seed and the beginning of that kingdom.'"

CCC 768, citing Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), 4–5

Your Spiritual Gifts

"There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes."

1 Corinthians 12:4–11

God has given each Christian two important gifts: the gift of faith in Jesus Christ and the gift of one or more special abilities. These gifts are to be used to unify the body of Christ and to promote the growth of God's kingdom. We receive our spiritual

Let's explore some possible spiritual gifts and consider which ones God has given to us. Once we've discerned our gifts, we'll be better equipped to develop and share them within the Church community and beyond. This sharing of gifts is vital for each individual Christian as well as to the Church as we embrace and carry out our mission of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Gift of Wisdom

It's said that wisdom comes with age, but it's not automatic. Wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit that's attained through having an open mind, learning from experience, knowing human nature, and knowing that God is alive and active in our world. It changes the way we live.

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"But the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity."

James 3:17

"Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show his works by a good life in the humility that comes from wisdom."

James 3:13

Possible Ministries

- Counseling others formally or informally
- Starting a support group for the grieving, the divorced, or others
- Participating in small faith groups

• What other ministries require the gift of wisdom?

• I express the gift of wisdom by...



The Gift of Knowledge

We all have knowledge we can share with others. The important thing isn't how much knowledge we have but how we express it and share it for the benefit of others.

"We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God. And we speak about them not with words taught by human wisdom, but with words taught by the Spirit, describing spiritual realities in spiritual terms."

1 Corinthians 2:12–13

Possible Ministries

- Leading a Bible study group
- Teaching children in parish faith-formation classes
- Teaching adult-literacy classes

• What other ministries use the gift of knowledge?

• I express the gift of knowledge when...



The Gift of Faith

The gift of faith can seem ordinary because it's something we're all supposed to have. But Jesus told us we can move mountains with a true gift of faith:

"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Matthew 17:20

Possible Ministries

- Contributing money to help the parish or community
- Working in a food pantry or homeless shelter
- Participating in a parish prayer group

• What other ministries use the gift of faith?

• I sense the gift of faith when...



The Gift of Healing

When we think of healing, we may think of miracles that defy explanation. But anything we do to lift a depressed spirit, bring a smile, or touch a hurting heart is also healing. When Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha had died,

"Many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother."

John 11:19

Possible Ministries

- Visiting shut-ins
- Transporting those in nursing homes to Mass
- Taking Communion to shut-ins and those in nursing homes

• What other ministries use the gift of healing?

• The Holy Spirit gave me the gift of healing when...



The Gift of Working Mighty Deeds

Mighty deeds aren't necessarily big in the eyes of the world. Sometimes small acts done with great love and trust in God are the mightiest of all.

"[Jesus] noticed a poor widow putting in two small coins. He said, 'I tell you truly, this poor widow put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood.'"

Luke 21:2–4

Possible Ministries

- Serving refreshments at parish functions
- Cleaning and maintaining the church
- Repairing the homes of the poor or elderly

• What other ministries use the gift of performing mighty deeds for others?

• I demonstrated the gift of mighty deeds when...



The Gift of Prophecy

Prophecy for the Christian isn't foretelling the future. Prophecy is living according to God's values and announcing them in situations where they don't appear to be present.

"No prophecy ever came through human will; but rather human beings moved by the holy Spirit spoke under the influence of God."

2 Peter 1:21

Possible Ministries

- Joining a parish social justice group
- Making your parish accessible and welcoming for those with disabilities
- Speaking out when those around you misunderstand or misrepresent the Catholic faith

- What other ministries use the gift of prophecy?
- I experienced the gift of prophecy when...



The Gift of Discernment of Spirits

It's easy to write off hostile or critical people. But discernment of spirits means we see everyone as a child of God with gifts to share. We seek God's perspective and ask ourselves what God would want us to do.

"Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God....You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, 'Abba, Father!'"

Romans 8:14–15

"Through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus."

Galatians 3:26

"God our savior, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth."

1 Timothy 2:3–4

Possible Ministries

- Serving on the parish council
- Working on parish finances
- Seeking volunteers for projects

• What other ministries use the gift of discernment of spirits?

• I experienced the gift of discernment of spirits when...



Helps for Discernment

1. Living a God-centered life: If the basic orientation is material gain, friendship, attainment of power, or pleasure, all of our choices will be made out of this orientation. Jesus' basic orientation was different.
2. Personal knowledge of God and God's ways: The primary way to come to a knowledge of God is through prayer and meditation on the life of Jesus.
3. Reflective living: Regular periods of reflective silence in the presence of God help us grow in self-knowledge and see those areas in which we're controlled by our needs, compulsions, and attachments.
4. Genuine openness to God: We may be locked into a narrow understanding of God and his ways. We want to truly recognize God in the person of Jesus and not settle for a version of God that's a product of our imagination.
5. Self-knowledge: We need to be in touch with our thoughts, feelings, and actions. We need to be aware of excessive needs and attachments that diminish our inner freedom to say "yes" to God.

• How might regularly including God in my decision-making change my life?



Journey of Faith



In Short:

- Discernment is a decision-making process in which we seek God's will.
- Saint Ignatius of Loyola offers a seven-step discernment process.
- We must all practice discernment as part of our growth in the faith journey.



"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you."

John 14:16–17

The Holy Spirit leads us into the truth and helps us discover and walk God's path for our lives. But the Holy Spirit isn't the only voice that seeks to guide us in life. Many other voices call out to us, seeking to attract us and influence us to walk in a particular direction.

Discernment

Should I marry Chris? Have I chosen the right career? Should I become a lector or a cantor? When it comes to making decisions, many of us would like to call God and say:

"I don't know what to do right now. If you'd just point the way, that would be great."

- How do you usually make decisions? Do you follow your head or your heart? Do you write down options or ask the advice of others?



- What other voices influence your decisions?



The decision-making process (often called **discernment**) can be complicated by our lack of self-knowledge, lack of inner freedom, and desire to manipulate God into saying "yes" to what we want. Yet, with the Holy Spirit on our side and a willingness to learn—through reading, talking with mature Christians, and trial-and-error—we'll begin to recognize and discern the voice of God.

Divine guidance is available to us. As Christians, we believe the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts, giving us a sense of God's will for our lives. Before he left this world to return to his Father, Jesus promised us the gift of his Spirit. He told his disciples:

No foolproof paths lead us to certainty concerning God's will in a particular situation, but some guidelines can help us grow in our ability to perceive and discern God's will. Saint Ignatius of Loyola offers some in his *Spiritual Exercises*. As we grow in the art and gift of discernment, we'll develop a method that works best for us.

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Seven Steps of Discernment

Here are seven steps that are based on the guidelines of St. Ignatius of Loyola:

1. Determine the question.

We start by clearly stating what we're trying to decide. For example: *Should I change careers? Should I end this relationship? Should I join this ministry in my parish?* Throughout the process, we ask God to reveal his truth and give us the inner freedom to carry it out.

2. Gather information.

We reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative, being as creative as possible. There may be more options than just quitting or continuing a job or relationship. Perhaps it's possible to continue in a job or relationship but work toward (or even demand) some definite changes.

We write down the pros and cons of each alternative and take into consideration the effect each alternative may have on our relationship with God, family, or others.

We consider how each alternative fits into the rhythm of your life. God sometimes invites us to a task that's completely different from the way things have always been. If that's what God is doing in our life, we need to recognize that our special abilities and life experiences are in some way a preparation for this new calling.

We identify potential obstacles: *What excessive needs, attachments, or compulsions might prevent me from hearing God's word and doing it? To what extent am I attached to an alternative? How free am I to embrace another direction if I believe it's God's will for me?* Recognizing and admitting obstacles to our inner freedom requires honesty, courage, and patience.

- What needs or attachments might keep you from seeking God's will in this decision?



We seek out a good counselor. Saint Ignatius tells us that the devil loves secrecy, whereas God blesses openness. The Bible advises us to "seek counsel from every wise person, and do not think lightly of any useful advice" (Tobit 4:18). It's important to seek the input of a wise spiritual director or friend who knows us well.

3. Pray about the options.

The heart of Christian discernment is the act of bringing the available options to prayer and seeing which option gives us the greatest sense of God's presence, peace, and joy.

"Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will, all that I have and possess. You have given all to me, Lord, I return it. All is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me."

From the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola

As we pray, we consider if we want one option more than the others. If we do, we ask: *How willing am I to let go of that option if it seems God's calling me in another direction?*

Sometimes, we aren't truly free to move in another direction because of attachment to a particular choice. In situations like this, we need to pray for the grace of inner freedom.

True inner freedom means that we're detached enough from every available option to be free to walk down any path God may call us to walk. It may take weeks or months to come to that point of inner freedom. Ideally, we won't choose an option until we're truly detached.

This part of the discernment process is the most important and challenging. It isn't easy to sincerely say, "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done." Having attained a degree of inner freedom through grace, we pray about the various options available, noting our inner reactions and feelings about each.

We imagine living out a particular alternative. The option that consistently fills us with the presence of God's peace and joy over a period of time is most likely God's will.

It may surprise us to know that our truest self desires God's will. It's the false, sinful, and unredeemed self that doesn't believe God's will leads to true freedom and happiness.

Saint Ignatius suggests we consider these questions:

- What advice would you give to another person faced with this same situation?
- Imagine yourself on your deathbed looking back over your life. What do you wish you had chosen in each situation?
- Picture yourself standing before God at the Final Judgment and consider what decision you would then wish to have made.



4. Make a decision.

At some point, we need to make a decision. We go with the option that gives us the most peace in prayer.

If we experience no real peace about the options, we may either postpone the decision or choose the least troublesome option. We shouldn't decide when in doubt, and, if time permits, we continue to pray until we experience peace.

We're aware that the option chosen may not always be the most attractive one or the one we most desired. Sometimes we may feel led to choose an option with tears—for example, to return to a marriage situation that in the past caused much pain. Such initial tears of sadness, however, often give way to tears of joy.

5. Live with the decision.

Once we come to a decision, it's good to live with it for a while before we act on what we decided. This is particularly important if we have a tendency to be impulsive. We ask the Holy Spirit to give us the power and courage to act on what we believe to be God's will for our life.

6. Act on the decision.

This step can be the most difficult because it may involve giving up something to which we're still quite attached. We ask the Holy Spirit to give us courage to act on what we believe to be God's will for our life.

7. Seek confirmation of the decision.

If the choice we make bears good fruit, we can be sure we acted in accord with God's will. That's not to say that there won't be struggles or times we wonder if we made the right choice.

Knowing we made a sincere effort to seek God's will is enough. Discernment is an art learned through trial and error. God doesn't demand that we always discern perfectly; he asks only that we seek his will and act on what we discern.

"Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you."

Deuteronomy 30:19–20

Awaken Your Desire for Holiness

- **Pray.** There's never any substitute for prayer. Ask God to create in you a desire for holiness, for God and his kingdom, a desire strong enough to start you on your own path toward holiness. This is one request God will surely answer in the affirmative!
- **Take Action.** Take some definitive action toward desiring holiness. It could be a public announcement to your friends, breaking a bad habit, giving away something that's too important to you, making a change in your lifestyle or the way you do your job. Whatever it is, do it openly to provide momentum to your desire, to feed and strengthen it.
- **Ponder.** Ponder the advantages of holiness: blessedness; blissfulness; joy; peace; release from fear and worry; freedom to love and be loved without hindrance.

Make two lists.

1. List the difficulties you're facing now: fear; anxiety; conflict with your spouse, a grown child, or a coworker; confusion of priorities; worry about job or finances.
2. List the benefits holiness offers in the face of your difficulties: peace, security with God, at-oneness with self and others, clarity of purpose and direction, freedom to love, confidence and trust in God's care.

Choose holiness!

- How can I feed my hunger for wholeness and holiness?
- How will I overcome the obstacles that keep me from embracing a life of holiness?

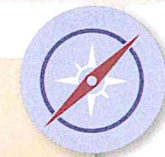


Journey of Faith



In Short:

- All Christians are called to holiness.
- Growth in holiness is a lifelong pursuit.
- We can overcome obstacles to holiness with the Holy Spirit's help.



"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."

Matthew 22:37

- How would you define holiness?
- Who in your life comes to mind when you think of the word holy? Why?



Our Call to Holiness

We may squirm uncomfortably at the word *holy*, thinking it applies to our grandma, our parish priest, the pope, or Mother Teresa of Calcutta—but not to *us*. Here's a helpful equation to remember: *holy* ≠ *perfect*.

When Jesus calls disciples, he invites everyone to "the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [*Lumen Gentium*], 40). Becoming holy means that we're in process, growing in intimacy with Christ.

All who are attracted to Jesus Christ have the grandest challenge and opportunity possible: *to become like Christ*.

Jesus said, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). Yet he offers no instant course in righteousness (holiness). Jesus assures us that holiness can be ours, that blessedness is promised. We have only to desire it. But we must desire it with *all* our hearts, souls, and minds:

All Are Called to Holiness

The Hebrew and Greek roots of the word *holiness* indicate *separateness* and a life that's *set apart* for God. The spiritual progress of one pursuing holiness is marked by an ever-more intimate union with Christ.

A theme running throughout the Second Vatican Council was Christ's call of *all* to a holiness that could take many forms. Whether one is a Carmelite sister or the mother of five, the Spirit provides the grace to accomplish this ultimate, wholehearted fulfillment.

Jesus is made visible in every human being, enlightening all who come into the world. Anyone who pursues good, truth, and beauty is seeking God, who is the source of these things. In each person's unique path to holiness, individual gifts and strengths play a large part.

Yet our holiness isn't solely because of anything we've done or any reward we've earned. The source of our holiness is Christ who sanctified us.

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"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him...to be holy and without blemish before him."

Ephesians 1:3–4

- What seeds of holiness do you see in yourself? What can you do to nurture those seeds for growth?



Me? A Saint?

In the New Testament, the word *saint* is often a synonym for *Christian*. Christians are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to be part of his holy people, to be *saints* (see Romans 1:6–7). In the epistles, Christians are often referred to as "the saints" in a given area.

The saints recognized (canonized) by the Church grew in holiness through the grace and mercy of God. Their perfecting, or sanctifying, took time and effort.

Loving God above all things and living a life centered on Jesus and the kingdom he preached is possible for each one of us. A saint says, "If I, with all my problems, can do it, with God's help, so can you."

The saints grew as we must grow. Somewhere within them they wanted holiness, and they wanted it very much. Their desire occupied their minds and changed their feelings and thoughts. Their desire was an active force in their daily activities. So they gained holiness and found the blessings of joy and peace that come with it.

Perhaps we need to stop thinking of the saints only as dead people who were perfect. God calls us to become saints, too. It may help us to think of saints as "sinners who keep on trying."

The challenge of the saints is to grow to our fullest Christian humanness. None of us is called to be more than human; but we certainly aren't called to be less. That's what sainthood is about—becoming fully human and our best possible selves, the persons God created us to be.

"Strive...for that holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

Hebrews 12:14

"This is the will of God, your holiness."

1 Thessalonians 4:3

- Why do many of us downplay our inner goodness?
- How might you shine your light more brightly if you realized you might be the only Bible some people will ever read?



Renewing Our Hearts and Minds

Jesus repeatedly tells us that it's our inner thoughts that matter, not just our external actions. The external is always powered from within:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You cleanse the outside of cup and dish, but inside they are full of plunder and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, cleanse first the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may be clean."

Matthew 23:25–26

If we truly want holiness, we'll fill our thoughts with it. We'll ponder its beauty. We'll long for its results. We'll encourage every thought that leads toward holiness. When holiness is our desire, it will become embodied in our everyday living.

If our minds and lives are cluttered with things that either don't lead us toward holiness or actually lead us away from it, holiness will have little room to grow.

Using the body as a powerful figure of speech (not to be taken literally), Jesus tells us to rid ourselves of everything that stands in the way of our pursuit of holiness:

"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away....And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away."

Matthew 5:29–30

- Name something that gets in the way of your desire for holiness.



Goodness doesn't force itself upon us. Sometimes, we must purge things that become distractions in this journey to personal sanctification. When we take a trip, we want to get to a particular place. But if we take every side road we see along the way, we may never arrive. The same is true of our path to holiness. If we meander through all the distracting paths of life, we may miss the path that will lead us to the joy God desires for us.

"All holiness consists in the love of God; but the love of God consists in conformity to the will of God; therefore, all holiness consists in conformity to the will of God."

St. Alphonsus Liguori

- What do you have on your schedule this week? How can you turn those events into opportunities to grow in holiness?



The Narrow Gate

Jesus didn't tell us that becoming holy would be easy. He emphasized that it's difficult—so much so that many don't choose to reach for it:

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few."

Matthew 7:13–14

Somewhere within each of us, there's a tiny opening. It's hidden, but there's a way to find it. That way will be rough, but we can traverse it. Through that opening is wholeness of life, fullness of loving, fullness of peace, fullness of joy. We can have it. It's our birthright as children of God.

We can find the way and get past the obstacles of the clutter of our inner selves. We can follow the path from the opening into life. That path isn't wide and obvious, but it's there. It begins right where we are at this moment. It's peeking out from beneath and around the boulders of our distractions, mistakes, and sin.

No circumstance can keep us from holiness if we choose to enter by way of the narrow gate! For many adventures, we might need money, equipment, freedom from family responsibilities, physical stamina, or something else we don't have. But for holiness, we need only desire it and accept the help of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised:

"Whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you....Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete."

John 16:23–24

- In what way can the path to holiness be an adventure?



Practicing the Virtues

Living the virtues means practicing the **Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy**.

Corporal Works of Mercy

- Feed the hungry.
- Give drink to the thirsty.
- Clothe the naked.
- Shelter the homeless.
- Visit the sick.
- Visit the imprisoned.
- Bury the dead.

Spiritual Works of Mercy

- Instruct the ignorant.
- Counsel the doubtful.
- Admonish the sinner.
- Bear wrongs patiently.
- Forgive offenses willingly.
- Comfort the afflicted.
- Pray for the living and the dead.

- How do/can I model or reflect the virtues in my life?
- Which of the works of mercy is calling me to action?



Journey of Faith



In Short:



- God’s ways are manifested in the lives of those who practice the virtues.
- There are both human virtues and theological virtues.
- The greatest of the virtues is love (charity), which orders all the other virtues.

A virtue is a good habit, an ongoing “and firm disposition to do the good” (CCC 1803).

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.”

Hebrews 12:1–2

Living the Virtues

Habits are patterns of behavior or thought. We’re all too familiar with bad habits; we may even call them vices. **Virtues** are nurtured attitudes and efforts to do good and give the best of ourselves. They aren’t merit badges to be earned and worn to prove our goodness. Rather, they’re dispositions that shape us into the people God created us to be.

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Philippians 4:8

Virtuous people freely choose to cooperate with the grace of God. Catholic Tradition distinguishes between human, also known as moral or cardinal, virtues and theological virtues. **Human virtues** are acquired through our human efforts. They “govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct” (CCC 1804). **Theological virtues** are gifts from God, who is “their origin, motive, and object” (CCC 1812). Both the human and theological virtues are characteristics of followers of Christ.

The Human (Moral or Cardinal) Virtues

Prudence

The prudent person examines a situation closely, considers all options, and chooses the option that leads toward the greatest good.

Sometimes people mistake prudence for excessive caution or restraint. However, the prudent person is prepared to make the right decision when the time arrives. Furthermore, prudence is judged not simply on whether the action produces some good (the end) but also whether that choice, in its whole context (including the means), is the best possible action.

Prudence guides and steers the other virtues by setting boundaries and standards that lead to right judgment.

Justice

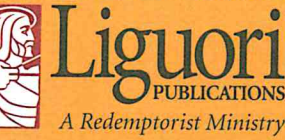
Justice is right action or right relationship. It directs us to consistently and firmly give what’s due to God and neighbor. There will always be some inequality, inconsistency, or disharmony in our human relationships. Perfect justice will come from God at the Final Judgment.

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Some people think being just means giving the same to everyone, dividing things equally. Others think justice means giving people what they've earned. Payment based on merit is appropriate, yet Jesus told a parable of a vineyard owner who went out at five different times of day to hire workers. At the end of the day, he paid all the workers a full day's wage. The workers who had worked all day were outraged to receive the same daily wage as those who had worked less. They couldn't comprehend a master who responded with generosity, a generosity that goes beyond mere recompense (see Matthew 20:1-16).

- When has one of your children (or a sibling) needed something different than the other children?
- When have you felt that your employer was unfair to you when dealing with a fellow employee? Is it possible the appearance of favoritism was a matter of meeting the needs of an employee in a unique way?

Fortitude

Fortitude enables us to endure difficulties in our pursuit of the good with courage and purpose. While prudence and justice guide the reasoning process, fortitude and temperance help us follow through.

Fear or self-doubt may tempt us to abandon action, our family might oppose our commitment to social justice, or peer pressure can sway us from choosing what's right. In all instances, however, the person of fortitude will persist in pursuing the good.

- When have you been tempted to choose poorly because of fear or peer pressure?

Temperance

A key word for temperance is *balance*. Temperance deflects the excessive attraction of human pleasures and provides moderation in exercising one's passion. It provides balance in the use of goods and gifts and "ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable" (CCC 1809).

Temperance asks us to measure carefully our use of created goods, not to avoid them entirely. The Gospel calls us to the reasonable use of material goods, money in particular. A lack of balance often leads to consumerism, materialism, and amassing possessions while missing life's deeper purpose.

Understanding temperance as moderation or balance is especially important when we're dealing with emotions, which are critical in the moral life. They spark the initial movement toward the good. Yet, they must be measured, channeled, and ordered toward the good.

- Name a temptation or challenge you face regularly. What is a small step you can take to reduce its power over you?

The Theological Virtues

The theological virtues originate in God, are effective under his direction, and have him as their destiny. Authentic human good and union with God go together. We can experience a degree of contentment in this life, but genuine happiness comes through union with God.

The journey toward union with God can't be made on human effort alone. The virtues help us find our way home to the Father, but we'll continue to bump up against the limits of human frailty and sin. Faith, hope, and charity move us out of ourselves and help us grow in holiness and practice the moral virtues.

"To ask about the good...ultimately means to turn towards God, the fullness of goodness."

Pope St. John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, 9

Faith

Faith enables us to believe in God and hold as true all that he has revealed. It allows us to acknowledge God's existence and fall in love with God who first loved us.

As a gift, faith must be received and nurtured. No one becomes faith-filled upon acknowledging God's existence or reciting a creed. Since faith is about friendship with God, it's sustained and strengthened in proportion to our efforts to build personal relationship with God. Faith grows as we make time for Christ and as we encounter the community of believers who make up the Church.

There are two main consequences of faith:

- A *good moral life*. Our image of God is false if we think we can believe in God and not have concern for others. There's a necessary link between believing in God and right moral action.
- A *spirit of evangelization*. It's difficult to keep good news to ourselves. We want to share good news so that others may share our joy. The same dynamic is at work within the faithful. They share the good news of salvation in Christ with others.

Faith prompts not only a spirit of humility and gratitude but also of determination to become who God has created us to be.

- What impact has your growing faith had on your life so far?



Hope

Hope is born of confidence in God's presence and activity in the world. Hope instills a joyful longing for the coming of God's kingdom. Hope that God will bring to completion the good work begun in us helps us to courageously pursue the good.

"[Hope] keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude. Buoyed up by hope, he is preserved from selfishness and led to the happiness that flows from charity."

CCC 1818

Charity (Love)

Charity is "the source and the goal of [our] Christian practice" (CCC 1827). Created from Love itself, we are made for love. It orders all the other virtues because it's the goal toward which they all strive. Charity involves receiving God's love into our hearts and loving God and neighbor in response.

Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote that to love someone is to make their loves and concerns our own. Jesus says, "As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (John 13:34). With so many contemporary notions of love, the witness and love of Jesus provides the reference point for the way we are to love. The Lord asks us to love "even our enemies, to make ourselves the neighbor of those farthest away, and to love children and the poor as Christ himself" (CCC 1825).

"So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

1 Corinthians 13:13



Saintly Role Models

If our children want to be athletes, musicians, or artists, we encourage them. We buy instruments or equipment and sign them up for lessons or a team. We introduce them to good role models within their area of interest.

The need for good examples or role models is also important in the area of Christian living. For this purpose, the Church encourages devotion to the saints. To enkindle a desire for Christian greatness, read to children about the lives of the saints. These models of virtuous living will encourage children to put the same virtues into practice in their daily lives.

Choose a family "saint of the week" and find creative ways to emulate and celebrate that saint. Imitate Mother Teresa's care for others by visiting the sick or making cards for shut-ins. Imitate Francis of Assisi's love of nature by building a backyard bird feeder or taking a prayer walk in the woods. An Italian saint's day might be celebrated with an Italian dinner (or a Spanish dish for John of the Cross or French pastries for Thérèse of Lisieux).

Saints offer more than just their example. Explain that we belong to a special club, the communion of saints. As members of this club, children can call on those already in heaven to pray for them and help them every day.

God's love can be found right in our homes—around the kitchen table, in the family room, at the backyard barbecue.

- When have you felt God's presence in your family? What can you do to promote this awareness?

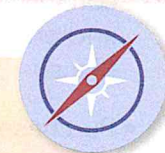


Journey of Faith



In Short:

- The family is the "domestic Church."
- Parents are their children's first and most important teachers of the faith.
- Families can grow in faith through family rituals and traditions.



Family Life

We naturally want what's best for the children in our family. Society's messages can lead us to think that fame, power, physical beauty, financial security, perfect health, success, wealth, and influence are what's "best" and most desirable. While each of these things has its perks, we likely see deeper and more lasting value in internal characteristics such as patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, self-respect, compassion, tolerance, integrity, and honesty.

It's our job as adult family members, through our love, care, influence, and example, to lay the foundation that will encourage a child to develop these deeper and more lasting characteristics.

That's why the Catholic Church puts so much emphasis on the importance of family life. A happy and stable family provides the kind of atmosphere in which a child learns to relate to others: to care, share, love, and forgive.

- What do you hope the children in your family will learn from you? Why?



First Teachers of the Faith

It's within the family that children learn they're loved and accepted. This forms the basis of their image of themselves, their relationships with other people, and their relationship with God.

Parents are their children's first and most important teachers. In this role, they are never off duty. Everything they do and say rubs off on their children and has an influence for good or bad. The way they speak, treat others, cope with disagreements, and show tolerance and forgiveness are all very important.

"The family is...the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children."

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), 11

"Education in the faith by the parents should begin in the child's earliest years. This already happens when family members help one another to grow in faith by the witness of a Christian life....Parents have the mission of teaching their children to pray and to discover their vocation as children of God."

CCC 2226

- In what ways did your parents or other significant adults serve as role models for you? What are some of the main lessons you learned from their example?



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Building a Christian Framework

In today’s world, it’s challenging to bring up a family within a Christian framework. The values of a consumer society are often opposed to the values of Jesus Christ. Difficult sacrifices may be required. At times, we may feel under pressure because we can’t keep up the standard of living we’d like or give our children all the things they want. But we have a much greater gift to give: the love, security, and life/faith lessons of a happy home.

Here are some ways we can pass on our faith to our families:

Scripture Storytelling

Just about everyone loves a good story. Notice how people’s posture changes at Mass when the priest or deacon starts the homily with a story. Some will sit back, relax, and expect to enjoy and be engaged. Others may lean forward as a sign of their interest. Stories are powerful tools for making a point in a way that’s memorable and enjoyable.

Children love stories, too—both hearing and telling them. Young listeners are entertained, enlightened, and inspired; imaginations are awakened, and a bond forms between listener and storyteller. No wonder Jesus so often taught with parables!


Breaking Scripture into simple stories can give children a personal image of Jesus. By selecting stories from the Mass, we can also encourage them to listen more attentively at Mass. We can study the readings to find the “story element” and re-present it in a child-sized package. Making it “their story” is an important step in a **catechesis** that establishes them on their faith journey.

Mass Helps

Mass isn’t an easy activity for most children—or their parents! Little ones can get restless, and older ones can become bored. Here a few tricks that might help:

- Practice Scripture storytelling at home.
- Stop by church for a show-and-tell visit. Kneel together for quiet prayer before you leave.
- Before Mass, talk to your children about coming up with their own special petition and encourage them to bring it to Jesus at Mass.
- Purchase a Mass book for each child. For younger ones, choose a book with pictures to help them follow along visually.
- Show children how to make the sign of the cross with holy water when you enter the church.
- Choose a pew near the sanctuary so they can see what’s going on. It’s hard to be holy while staring at people’s backs.
- Give younger children money for the collection. Older ones should give their own. Explain how the Church uses their money. Help them identify ministries they care about.
- Take small children with you when you receive Communion.

- What is your experience of sharing your faith with a child?
- How might you offer support to parents of young children at Mass?



Moments That Matter

The hectic pace of today’s society cries out for time to be quiet with God. But with homework, Church involvement, jobs, school, and sports activities, when can busy parents fit it in?

Bedtime

A widowed mother of four finds her moment at bedtime. Her children sit on her bed while they read together. Then they pray a decade of the rosary with emphasis on the story behind the mystery. After adding personal prayers, it’s a kiss and off to bed.

Mealtime

For larger families with teenagers, dinner may be the only together time. To make it a special moment, slow down the mealtime blessing. Light a candle, perhaps read a short passage from the Bible, and have a child offer the blessing.

A divorced father may choose Sunday morning for his moments. The morning might begin with a big breakfast and discussion about the Gospel reading, liturgical season, or upcoming holy day. Some Sundays, they may go out for lunch and talk about how they see God at work in their lives.

Anniversary of Baptism


Families may celebrate the anniversary of a child’s baptism. Bring out photos, the baptismal candle, and the white garment. Talk about who was there, how you celebrated, whether the child cried or slept through it all. Give the child a small present such as a rosary, prayer book, a saint prayer card, or medal to mark the day as special.

Forgiveness

Children learn to offer, seek, and accept forgiveness within the family. Parents must model this for their children—through openly admitting fault, offering an apology, and asking for and offering forgiveness. Reminding children of God’s and their parents’ great love and desire for reconciliation will help them internalize this important reality of our faith.

Make time for the sacrament of reconciliation. Go as a family and pray for each other and for forgiveness of family hurts. Celebrate afterward by going to the park or having cake and ice cream.

- What are some of the key learning moments from your own childhood? What did you learn about yourself, others, the world, and God as a result?




Family Prayer

Family prayer time helps children make God central to daily life. Our prayer is an ongoing dialogue with our loving God. Whether memorized or spontaneous, the dialogue of prayer must be practiced, modeled, and encouraged.

Establish a family prayer plan. Begin with a moment of silence. Help children connect with God. When we share a spontaneous prayer such as “Thank you, God, for being with Jonathan during his test today,” we make a quick connection with God for our children.

Opportunities to make our children more aware of God’s presence can happen naturally. Encourage them to invite God to be with them as they study. Send them off to school with a blessing. At bedtime, ease their fears by assuring them of God’s constant care. (If nighttime fears are a big concern, teach them the Guardian Angel Prayer.) By bringing everyday feelings and events to God in prayer, we help children recognize God’s continual presence and create occasions for the God-child relationship to grow.

- How comfortable are you with praying with members of your family? Why?



Step Five: Make the Good Better

The fifth step involves taking what's positive in our society and putting it at the service of the gospel. Culture must "be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel" (EN 20). This is our Christian responsibility and is now your responsibility as well. We must do what we can to see that advances in medicine are used at the service of life and not for abortion or euthanasia; to make certain tax dollars that support a massive defense establishment are used to maintain peace in the world; and to find ways to move our economic system toward benefiting members of our society and the world that depend upon us.

What's good in our culture can become better when touched by the transforming power of Christ's good news. People still hunger for love, affection, and salvation. They still crave the good news of Jesus Christ. That's why the Second Vatican Council said we should face the modern world with joy and hope, with the optimism of the transforming gospel.

• What are some ways our culture supports the dignity of human life, the sacredness of marriage, the beauty of God's world?

• How might God be calling you to make that good thing even better?

On your own or with a group, create a list of questions you think others may have about the Catholic faith. Include questions you had about the faith before becoming Catholic. Pick one or two questions and research the answers. Use lesson handouts, your notes, the Bible, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and any other resources you have access to. If you don't find an answer by the end of this session, keep searching.

• Describe one area of your life where you really could make a difference to others.

• How can you serve as an example of Christ?

Journey of Faith

In Short:

- A relationship with Jesus is fundamental to conversion.
- We are called to share the good news.
- The Church prepares us for the mission of evangelization.

Evangelization

"One day at lunch, a group of us started talking about religion. I started challenging Margaret, who was Catholic. I thought I knew what Catholics believed. Margaret very patiently explained what Catholic beliefs really are. Years later, I remembered what she said."

"I'd been going to a Catholic church for a couple of weeks but felt out of place so I just sat by myself. One day, a woman introduced herself and helped make me feel like I belonged."

"After my brother became Catholic, he sent me a lot of books by Merton, Chesterton, and others. I just put them on a shelf. One day years later, I started to read those books, and they made sense."

In each example, a Catholic was evangelizing. We've all encountered people like them, people who witness to the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Evangelization is something God calls all the baptized to do. As Pope Francis wrote in the *Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)*, "We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize" (EG 266). Evangelization becomes part of us, part of who we are, so much so that we sometimes evangelize without even realizing we're doing it.

• Did another person help introduce you to the Catholic faith? Describe your encounter with this person.

What Is Evangelization?

Evangelization comes from the Greek for "to bring or to announce the good news." To evangelize means to testify and proclaim the mystery of God's salvation of humanity in Christ Jesus.

Evangelization involves much more than bringing the gospel to people who've never heard the good news. It also means bringing Christians to a deeper awareness of Jesus Christ and his love for them. Through evangelization, *hearers* of the word of God become better equipped to become *doers* of the word. Thus, evangelization forms the basis for all ministry within the Church.

Evangelization is a concept as old as Christianity itself. Christ's last words to us before ascending into heaven were about evangelizing:

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"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

Matthew 28:19–20

For someone to become a disciple of Christ, it helps if they have a relationship with a person who has already embraced the good news and is a member of the Church. That can make a crucial difference.

- Who has been that person in your life?
- Can you begin to see how you might become that kind of person for another?



How Do We Evangelize?

Here's a five-step plan for evangelization based on the teachings of Pope Paul VI in *On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi)*. All quotations in this lesson not otherwise cited are from this document.

Step One: Witness Christ

Our first step in becoming evangelizers is to live lives that **witness** our faith in Christ to those around us. Pope Paul VI pointed out that "Modern [people listen] more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if [they do] listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (EN 41).

The positive witness of a loving, caring, and forgiving Catholic is the strongest method of attracting people to Jesus and the Church. Love is our most powerful argument for conversion. It will lead others to Jesus Christ.

- In what ways may you be called to share the good news of Jesus' love for those around you?



Step Two: Share Our Faith

The second step in evangelization is explaining the teachings of Christ in terms of what it means to be Catholic. Silent witness isn't enough, for "even the finest witness will prove ineffective...if it is not explained, justified...and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus" (EN 22).

Jesus was the greatest witness that ever lived, yet his witness wouldn't have reached us if he hadn't ceaselessly explained what salvation means for daily life. His Sermon on the Mount, parables, and dialogues with people show us how to share what we believe.

Many Catholics are hesitant to evangelize. Bible studies, adult faith formation programs, and small faith-sharing and prayer groups are all great opportunities for sharing our faith. These activities increase participants' confidence and comfort in explaining and sharing Catholic teachings. The more a Catholic studies and understands the Bible, especially in a community setting, the more active that Catholic will be as an evangelizer.

- What activities might help you become a better evangelizer?



"The person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize others....It is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn" (EN 24).

Step Three: Offer the Option for Love

Pope John Paul II told America's youth on a visit to the United States, "I propose to you the option of love, which is the opposite of escape. If you really accept that love from Christ, it will lead you to God" (Mass on Boston Common, October 1, 1979).

This is the third step in evangelization, the core content of our sharing: "To evangelize is first of all to bear witness, in a simple and direct way, to God revealed by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit" (EN 26).

The best way to do this is on a person-to-person basis. People attract people. Love begets love. Faith in action becomes love, and love takes the shape of service. The greatest service we can give is to offer Christ's invitation to salvation from death and sin through a life of love, justice, and mercy.

- With whom might you be called to share Jesus Christ? A spouse? A friend? A child? A coworker?



Evangelization = Love

Pope Paul VI reminds us that to evangelize is to love. He notes three signs of love in the process of evangelization:

1. Respect for the religious and spiritual situation of those being evangelized.
2. Concern not to wound the person, especially if that person is weak in faith.
3. Effort to transmit not doubts and uncertainties arising out of improper study and incomplete knowledge, but certainties that are anchored in the word of God (see EN 79).

Step Four: Challenge Our Culture

Our Catholic witness should affect the values of our society, causing us to be countercultural when necessary. Evangelization involves "affecting and...upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation" (EN 19).

Jesus challenged the hypocrisy of those who planned to stone the woman accused of adultery. He spoke against the powerful who would lay burdens on the poor. He condemned religious leaders who reduced the faith to minor practices and "neglected the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity" (Matthew 23:23).

Jesus asks us to bring the gospel to bear on our society, to speak up on behalf of the poor and the homeless, to strengthen the place of marriage and family, to raise our children with a spirit of peace, and to hold dear the virtue of forming nonviolent societies. We cannot segregate our religious life from life in our culture, for the hidden energy of the gospel has the power to transform culture.

- To which of these areas of the culture might the Holy Spirit be calling you to assist in a work of gospel transformation?

