

INTRODUCTION

A recent Facebook post reminded us: “It takes six to eight pallbearers to lift you up when you’re deceased. Imagine what you could accomplish if you had six to eight people lifting you up while you are living.”

We do! Whether it is our parents and family, our past teachers and catechists, various mentors, supportive friends or colleagues, faith-filled parishioners, or caring neighbors, people have lifted us up throughout our lives—and they continue to do so.

As Catholics, rooted in the awe-inspiring reality of the communion of saints, we know we are “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1). As catechists in today’s church, we have the assurance that we are surrounded by those who have lived, experienced, and shared the word of God throughout the centuries by their words and their lives.

What support, empowerment, and challenge that gives us! We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, sharing the Good News. We are standing on a firm and fervent foundation. The awareness and experience of that gives us incredible support. Our task is to build on what we’ve been given, for even our gifts can often be traced back to the creativity, generosity, and foresight of others.

Thank God that we are a community, a communion of saints! In the words of African American mystical scholar Barbara Holmes, “I am connected to the past and the future by the ligatures of well-lived lives, the mysteries of ‘beyondness,’ and the memories and narratives that lovingly bind and support me.”

In the following pages, you will meet canonized saints of the church from throughout the centuries; those who, in more recent times, are on the path to canonization within the church; and a litany of many who have recently gone ahead of us who may not be in the official canonization process but through their holy, selfless, committed lives have prepared the way for our journey in catechetical ministry today.

You are probably familiar with some of them; others, perhaps, you've never heard of.

Isn't that exciting! We are surrounded by so many on whose shoulders we stand.

We enter this journey of reflection in gratitude, in awe, and with deep commitment, echoing the words of Joan Puls in *Seek Treasures in Small Fields: Everyday Holiness*: "When you walk, be aware of those who walk alongside you, behind you, before you, of those on whose efforts you now stand. We are surrounded, says the writer of Hebrews, by a cloud of witnesses."

Wonderings to Ponder and Live Today

- As you read a few words about each person, how do they inspire you? What do they teach you?
- Which one(s) are your favorites? Why? Who else would you add?
- How will you use their lives of inspiration and dedication to do something today: to go deeper, to try new things, to imitate something they did?

Pray a prayer of appreciation (especially before and after each of your catechetical sessions) to these saints and mentors, invisible but real presences who accompany you on your spiritual journey.

St. Angela Merici

FEAST DAY: JANUARY 27

Angela Merici, an Italian religious educator and founder of the Ursuline Sisters, was bold in responding to people's needs.

At 20 years of age, Angela became concerned that many young girls had no education. Wanting to respond to the needs of families by providing solid Christian education for future wives and mothers, she opened her home and began to teach. She felt called by God to invite other women to devote their lives to the religious formation of young girls.

In 1524, during a journey to the Holy Land, Angela became blind. She enthusiastically continued her trip as if she could see. Traveling home, her sight was restored while she was praying in the same place where she had become blind. Angela believed that the message was to never shut her eyes to the needs she saw—to never shut her heart to God's call.

Deciding to make her little group more formal, in 1535 Angela organized twelve women dedicated to catechetical work. Four years later, the group had increased to twenty-eight. She formed them into the Company of St. Ursula (patroness of medieval universities and venerated as a leader of women).

This was different from other women's religious orders that existed then: single women consecrated to Christ, living in the world rather than in a monastery, believing it was important to teach girls in their own homes with their families.

This first teaching order of women in the church was recognized only after Angela's death, when her Rule was approved by Pope Paul III in 1544, making the Ursulines an official religious community of women with a teaching ministry.

An Inspiring Mentor for Us Today

St. Angela's life calls us to be bold, never blind to people's needs. What are the needs of today? As catechists, we have the unique opportunity to touch lives: the lives of our learners and their families. All we do influences not just today but their lives in the years to come.

In her brief Rule, Angela nudged her companions to obey "divine inspirations that you may recognize them as coming from the Holy Spirit." When you see the needs of our learners and are prompted to respond (even with what may seem to be insignificant words and actions), recognize them as nudgings from the Spirit.

Wonderings to Ponder and Live Today

- Our ministry is not just to our learners but also to their families. How do you let parents/families know that you care about them?
- What bold steps do you take to nurture the faith of every family member?
- How do you get to know the life circumstances and needs of your learners and their families? How often do you call them (just to tell them you're thinking of them) or invite them to your sessions (and talk with them afterward)?
- What are the many ways that you connect God's story to your learners' life stories?
- What gift of the Holy Spirit would strengthen you to be a little bit bolder?

Black Elk

In November 2020, the U.S. bishops gave their support to the sainthood cause of Nicholas W. Black Elk, a 19th-century Lakota catechist who introduced hundreds of Lakota people to the Catholic faith.

During the 1860s, Black Elk was born into a lineage of medicine men, growing up participating in indigenous religion. A healer and visionary at a young age, he became curious about Christianity. His curiosity led him to watch and study.

During a Lakota healing ceremony for a boy's healing in 1904, Black Elk met a Jesuit who invited him to study Christianity. Black Elk was baptized Nicholas William on December 6, the Feast of St. Nicholas.

In 1907, the Jesuits appointed him a catechist because of his enthusiastic curiosity and excellent memory for learning Scripture and church teachings. He traveled widely, preaching and telling stories, writing pastoral letters in Lakota with Bible verses on good Christian living that newspapers published for people to read.

His life was integrated, intertwining his heritage as a Lakota medicine man and his call as a Catholic catechist. He used both his pipe and his rosary on a regular basis while praying, and he participated in eucharistic liturgies and Lakota ceremonies.

An Inspiring Mentor for Us Today

Black Elk could be named many things: a modern mystic, a catechist, a bridge builder. For us today, we are reminded that he did all these things—faithfully and passionately—because of his inquiring curiosity. Curious people ask questions, read, and explore. They actively seek information and life's varied experiences and are willing to meet challenges and broaden their

horizons. They are not shy about asking questions and delving deeply into the mysteries and truths of life.

The very vocation of catechist calls each of us to a life of faith-filled, wonder-filled curiosity. A limitless inquisitiveness about people (especially our learners and their families), all of God's world, and the Holy Mystery of our God leads us to discover, celebrate, and share the faith, hope, and love that God showers on us, our learners, and the world.

As we live out our call to echo the Good News and challenge of Jesus' life, new questions and wonderments will always emerge, filling us with the peace, strength, and eagerness to grow in our faithful relationship with God and share our God-experiences by the way we live and catechize.

Wonderings to Ponder and Live Today

- What are you curious about when it comes to life and faith? How might you find new answers and experiences?
- If you committed to learn something new every day about our faith, about God's created world, what might you watch for or search out?
- Use "I wonder..." questions with your learners (rather than just what, when, and where questions).
- When your learners raise a question, try asking for their thoughts before answering.
- Use open-ended stories. Ask your learners for their opinion on how stories might end, encouraging them to think of many possibilities.

Blesseds Daudi Okelo and Jildo Irwa

FEAST DAY: OCTOBER 20

In 2002, St. John Paul II celebrated the beatification of 16-year-old Daudi Okelo and 12-year-old Jildo Irwa, catechists who, in 1916, traveled into a region of Uganda to teach the faith to the local people.

Daudi and Jildo, members of the Acholi people of northern Uganda, were born into pagan families. Educated by the Comboni Missionaries, they were baptized in 1916. Daudi became a catechist the next year, with Jildo as his assistant, as they strove to serve especially the poor.

Each day at dawn, they beat the drum to call the catechumens to morning prayer. They taught the prayers and the catechism's answers. At sunset, they gathered the villagers for common prayer and the rosary, closing with a Marian song. They also visited the nearby small villages to meet with the children who were busy during the day helping their parents look after the cattle or work in the fields.

Daudi was described as a young man of peaceful and shy character, diligent in his duties as a catechist and loved by all. He never got involved in tribal or political disputes, which were fairly frequent at that time. Jildo, with a lively and gentle nature, was quite intelligent. He knew how to entertain the children with village games and joyful gatherings. Always available, he was loved by everyone and admired for his duties as assistant catechist.

People who opposed the new religion took advantage of the socio-political unrest in the area to stop the preaching of the

gospel. Daudi and Jildo were hounded, threatened, ordered to give up their activities, and finally speared to death.

Inspiring Mentors for Us Today

These two young catechists inspire us in our ministry today in many ways. Certainly, they are courageous models of a challenge we don't face: giving their lives rather than abandoning their ministry of catechesis. By fearlessly moving to a place outside their own ethnic clan, they are a sign of the catholicity and unity of the church. Having just celebrated baptism and confirmation, they realized that to be a Christian means to share one's faith; they started their work as catechists at once.

They remind us, too, that people are never too young to begin sharing and echoing the Good News. They also model for us the power and strength of ministering together.

Wonderings to Ponder and Live Today

- Is there a young person in your parish whom you could invite to be a catechist helper with you—or to do one-time things, such as music or service leader?
- What are some ways you can collaborate with other catechists in your parish: planning together, sharing resources, team teaching, inviting older learners to adopt a younger learner, and so on?
- Just as Daudi and Jildo moved outside of their clan, how might you and your learners connect with learners in other parishes in your diocese or in other places around the world?
- How might you help your learners learn about Catholics throughout the world?

St. Catherine of Siena

FEAST DAY: APRIL 29

Catherine was born in Siena, Italy, in 1347 as the Black Death was ravaging Afro-Eurasia. She was the twenty-fifth child in her family (although half of her brothers and sisters did not survive childhood).

From an early age, Catherine wanted no part of marriage but planned to devote herself to God. She became a Third Order Dominican when she was 18 and spent the next three years in seclusion and prayer. When she felt called by God to help others, she combined her contemplation with action. She visited the poor and sick in their homes and in the hospital. Her activities quickly attracted followers who helped in her mission to serve others.

Catherine was soon drawn into more active involvement in the religious struggles of the time. The Great Schism split Christendom between two, then three, popes. Catherine traveled, calling for reform of the church and for people to love God totally. Her influence with Pope Gregory XI played a role in his decision to leave Avignon and return to Rome. He then entrusted her with many missions of brokering peace deals during a time of conflict between the Italian city-states, which was rare for a woman at this time.

Physical travel was not the only way in which Catherine influenced people. She composed over four hundred letters, her Dialogue (conversations she had with God), and prayers. These works were so influential that she was declared a Doctor of the Church.

Catherine's letters are considered one of the great works of early Italian literature. In addition to writing to her friends, she wrote to popes, Blessed Raymond of Capua (her confessor), the

kings of France and Hungary, the queen of Naples, and numerous religious figures. Her beginning letters were mostly encouragement and teaching for her followers but then began to address the day's challenges, begging for peace and reform of the church.

Twenty-six of her prayers also survive, mostly composed in the last eighteen months of her life.

An Inspiring Mentor for Us Today

There are many ways that Catherine is a model for us today: her intimate relationship with Christ; her belief that holiness is the journey of life; her work for church unity; her courage to speak truth.

Perhaps, though, as catechists today, we might imitate Catherine in a very practical way: by writing—letters, composing prayers, keeping a journal of our faith life.

Wonderings to Ponder and Live Today

- Do you keep a journal of your faith/life experiences—your conversations with God? Might you begin to keep a journal of the God-moments in your catechetical ministry?
- Have you ever written down your prayers, especially your prayers for your learners and their families? Have you shared these prayers with them? Give it a try.
- Take time throughout the year to snail-mail a letter to each of your learners, affirming them and reminding them of God's unique care for them in their interests and needs.
- Do you stay in touch with your past learners through periodic letters of support, inspiration, and prayer? If not, is this something you could do?