

INTRODUCTION

At a 2017 conference in St. Augustine, Florida, Bishop Felipe de Jesús Estévez spoke about growing up in Cuba, where the church was threatened by the Communist regime. In such dire circumstances, he said, the Vatican focused on two groups to ensure the survival of the church: the bishops and the catechists.

This book is meant for catechists in the broadest sense. Whether you are a parent or a priest, a Catholic school teacher or administrator, a teacher in a parish program, or a youth minister, there is something here for you. In whatever way you are called to share the faith and help form a new generation of Catholic Christians, I hope this book will help you in that ministry.

The particular theme of this book is respect. It is an elaboration of Jesus' call to love one another. At a time when bullying and cyberbullying are hurting so many young people, I hope that the ideas and activities in this book will help parents and teachers to shape young minds and hearts in ways that will reject bullying and embrace solidarity, community, compassion, and caring.

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Praying to a Caring God

*Can a mother forget her infant...?
Even should she forget, I will never forget you.*

ISAIAH 49:15-16

REFLECTION FOR CATECHISTS

There is no greater gift we can give a child than to bring that child into a loving relationship with God. Our word *creed* comes from the words for *I give my heart*. Christian faith is about giving our heart to God. Relationship, of course, implies conversation; and with God, that conversation is prayer. Our culture, though, gives distorted images of prayer that could lead students away from belief in a caring God. If, for instance, they learn that prayer is like sitting on Santa's lap and making wishes, they will be disappointed when God says, "No" or "Not yet." If they think that prayer is magic, and that by saying the right formula or by praying hard enough they will get exactly what they want, they will be disappointed. "God is not a magician," Pope Francis has said. As adults, we have come to this understanding of prayer, but it is not obvious. It needs to be taught. Otherwise, atheists

use the false understanding of prayer to “prove” to kids that “prayers aren’t answered” and “there is no God.” Giving our children a healthy understanding of prayer protects them from these assaults on faith.

APPROACHES

- Teach prayer as communication with God our best friend, who cares about every detail of our lives.
- Show students that God often answers prayer through people who are open to his will.

BIBLICAL ACTIVITIES

- Make fortune cookies with Scripture passages inside that express praise and thanksgiving to God. The Psalms are a great place to start.
- Reenact the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Be creative in what you use for bread and fish: donut holes, mini loaves of cornbread, Swedish Fish, Goldfish, etc. Most important, include in your script how Jesus told his Apostles to feed the crowd themselves. They didn’t think they had enough, but once they let Christ work through them, there was more than enough! You might mention the African proverb: when you pray, move your feet.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

- Play the Garth Brooks song “Unanswered Prayers” and discuss why Garth is happy. Lead students to understand that God always answers prayers, but not like a magician. There are no magic incantations that will compel God to

give us what we want. Instead, God sometimes says yes, sometimes says wait, and sometimes says, “No...I’ll give you something better. Trust me.”

- Tell the story of St. Paul’s “unanswered prayer” from 2 Corinthians 12:7–9. Explain that God is like a good parent who wants only what is good for us. Remember that God does everything out of love; and if something happens that is not truly loving, it is not God doing it.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILIES

- Avoid saying “We have to pray really hard for...” as if “results” are tied to effort.
- As part of your evening prayer, have each person recount where they saw Christ during the day. Also, how did we allow Christ to work through us to care for others?
- When you pray the Lord’s Prayer, teach what “Thy will be done” means. Give examples of accepting God’s will.

PRAYER

Dear Jesus, help us to spread your fragrance everywhere we go. Flood our souls with your spirit and life. Shine through us and be so in us that every soul we come in contact with may feel your presence in our soul. (St. Teresa of Calcutta)

two

People Care and We Say Thanks!

I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you.

PHILIPPIANS 1:3

REFLECTION FOR CATECHISTS

In her educational philosophy, Nel Noddings points to surveys in which students say nobody cares about them. As Christians, this should worry us. If students don't feel cared for, then we are not embodying God's very personal care for them. Noddings says that *being caring* is not enough; we must *create caring relationships*. This makes sense theologically too. God's care is always personal, always relational. It finds its clearest expression in this world through those who allow God to work through them, embodying God's unconditional love. In response, we say, "Thank you!" This gesture of gratitude completes the circuit of a caring relationship.

APPROACHES

- Teach that caring is daring! It is countercultural. Caring means putting people first, even when society says to put progress, profits, or popularity first. Caring involves an unselfish sacrifice of our time and energy.

BIBLICAL ACTIVITIES

- Ask students what they know about slavery. Do they know there are still slaves in the world today and that good people are working to free them? Then tell them about the runaway slave Onesimus. When St. Paul was in prison, he wrote a letter to Onesimus's master, Philemon, asking Philemon to free Onesimus. Use this story to discuss empathy, the Golden Rule, and ways empathy can be put into action to show we really care.
- Make faux stained glass windows to represent the Visitation. Discuss how Mary put empathy into action, emphasizing that Mary went "in haste" to visit Elizabeth and "remained with her about three months" (Luke 1:5–56), and also how Elizabeth showed gratitude. When someone does something caring for us, how can we let them know we appreciate it?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

- Make little care packages for the caring people in students' lives, filled with Hershey's Hugs and Kisses and bearing tags that say, "I can tell you care about me. Thank you!"

- Introduce older students to the idea that caring is sometimes social and political. In this sense, people care about us through *solidarity* with us. Care is demonstrated by working for a better world: e.g., abolitionism; or the labor, suffragette, and Civil Rights movements; or Sr. Helen Prejean’s anti-death penalty work, etc. Choose a class project to demonstrate your own care, not just in an interpersonal way, but as solidarity toward a better world.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILIES

- Many people take care of us through services that often go unnoticed. Help children to have “eyes to see” by modeling gratitude toward garbage collectors, janitors, police officers, waitresses and waiters, farmers, and others without whose work we would be inconvenienced or in real trouble.
- When you go to Mass together, teach your children that *Eucharist* is a fancy word for *Thanksgiving*. Catholics don’t celebrate Thanksgiving just once a year. No way! That’s not enough for all the good things God does for us. Every time we go to Mass, we are there to say, “Thanks!” to God, who always gives the best gifts.

PRAYER

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. (Luke 1:46–49)