

Whether you are a pre-K classroom aide, a K–8 catechist, a high school catechist, children’s Liturgy of the Word leader, or a DRE, you are a catechetical leader, and the Church needs you! And in these uncertain times when things seem to change frequently, you become, even more, the face of Jesus to those you encounter as you lead your ministry forward.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged so many aspects of our lives and ministry. How we reach out to and connect with parishioners has changed, out of necessity and not choice. It can be a bit unnerving to be called to lead others through change, especially when so much of it is new to us.

As leaders of the Church, we are called to be the face of calm and hope in a chaotic and unsure time. But being an effective leader does not mean we have all the answers or that mistakes will not be made. It means that we are grounded, deliberate, and kind as we work through all the challenges. Being the kind of effective leader the Church needs today—professional or volunteer—starts within ourselves; we cannot lead if we are not confident and genuine. While the ideas presented here are not new, they require that we look within ourselves, reflecting on our understanding and attitude of being a leader. In this booklet we will explore some practical realities of being effective, including discipline, attitudes, self-growth, teamwork, and acceptance.

Chapter One

Discipline

MY MORNING PRAYER HAS BEEN TIED DIRECTLY TO MY MORNING RUNS FOR MANY YEARS. No technology, no music, just me and God. I feel connected to God as my feet pound the asphalt in a steady rhythm. When the COVID-19 quarantine hit, I was able to continue with my regular routine for a few months, but then things changed. Eventually, the daily run, and hence morning prayer time, turned into a couple of times a week. Meanwhile, I was trying to lead a team of catechists in uncharted waters, work with an office staff remotely, and figure out what next year might look like. I was ineffective and not leading well. I was not praying, exercising, or eating right.

After a particularly challenging week that seemed filled with never-ending disasters, I laced up my shoes and went for a run out of sheer frustration. It was the hardest run in a long time. Physically, I struggled because I had been slacking. Spiritually, I was frustrated and angry and let God know how I

was feeling. Eventually I was able to find a good stride with my feet, and my soul. God reminded me that he was there with me and that, together, things would be OK.

Those miles made me realize what was missing. I felt God tugging at my heart. That day I made the decision to get back to my routines and the discipline of a schedule. We all have times when we are not at our best, either physically or spiritually. Leading requires that we do not stay in that place but find the discipline to get back to a routine, in whatever form that is.

The word “discipline” can take us back to childhood and the unpleasant consequences of making a poor decision. However, discipline in relationship to leadership is different. It is more about self-control, a desire to ensure that we are putting our priorities in order. Discipline helps keep the important things in our lives from getting lost. There are several areas of discipline that are important in our leadership roles. Before we look at some characteristics we can all model, it is important to take a realistic look at ourselves through some self-reflection. Stop for a moment and ask yourself:

How do I define discipline when it comes to ministry? Do I feel that I am disciplined, and does that change based on my circumstances? Am I steadfast, or have I grown lax recently?

DISCIPLINE IN PRAYER

Discipline in our prayer life is key; our relationship with God is evident to those we serve. All our strength and courage come

from God, whom we can experience and draw upon through prayer.

What does your prayer life look like? Is it haphazard, or is it a foundation that is a part of every day? How was your prayer life upended by the global pandemic? Will it be upended when the next change comes?

Setting up a regular prayer practice will ground you in your day and ensure that prayer is not an afterthought. The discipline that is brought to prayer starts with recognizing that consistency is key both in time and place. If you already have that—wonderful! If not, take some time to look realistically at your schedule and find twenty minutes that you can set aside each day. Creating an environment that will not be interrupted by technology, work, and even family is a part of the discipline. Resist the urge to fill that time. Rather, find a practice that fits with you so that you are more committed and able to maintain a regular practice. There are many different forms of prayer that you could incorporate into your plan: reading the daily Scriptures, *lectio divina*, daily Rosary, journaling, quiet meditative prayer, daily examen, and the list goes on. Find what works for you and start there, but be sure not to stagnate.

As mentioned earlier, my morning run time is my prayer time. Over the last year, I have found myself worrying about the teens in our High School Youth Ministry program. They were dealing with so many things out of their control. I began praying specifically for each of the teens and their intentions. Each week, I chose one youth and then sent them a note

explaining that I am praying for them specifically. That addition to my prayer life this year has been lifegiving. As leaders, do you pray for those you serve as well as those doing the serving?

Jesus led by example. However, he did not simply say we need to pray. He showed us by taking time to be alone and pray. In the gospels of Luke and Mark, we read about Jesus taking that time (Lk 5:16 and Mk 6:45–47). Prayer can be an opportunity to take a step back, evaluate our situation, and allow God to be a part of our life. In times of chaos, prayer—especially for those in leadership positions—can be the link to a transition, to the next step. Regardless of what we are praying for, it takes discipline to wait for a response. Conversations and prayer are both two-way streets. Discipline challenges each of us to be quiet, to get comfortable in the uncomfortableness of silence, and to listen to what God is saying to us.

Whether meeting in person or on a digital platform, it is easy to fall into the habit of bypassing prayer and just getting started. It takes discipline to ensure that we begin everything with prayer. Modeling that commitment to prayer is essential to being an effective leader in the Church. It reminds everyone that God is a part of all we do—even if our prayer is virtual.

Learning to Pray Virtually » The virtual reality can certainly impact our prayer together. It is strange in many ways. The first time I opened with a prayer during an online small group, it was a disaster. There were mics that should have been muted, and people were unsure about what to do. Do they pray with me out loud, with or without a mic? Do they keep their eyes closed or open? After some discussion we decided how best to pray together virtually (and each group has come up with something different), and it has had amazing results. Hearing a group of elementary students praying the Our Father and Hail Mary together via Zoom with their mics on brought me to tears as I listened to their angelic voices. Having the discipline to do this every time is what makes us effective leaders.

OUR PHYSICAL SELVES

During the pandemic people created living-room gyms, started walking because they were bored, or found a yoga class online. These are fantastic ways to cope with the stress of quarantine and an upset to our routine, but will they continue when the immediate crisis passes? Parish ministry is dynamic and fluid, but that does not mean it is easy. Pivoting our ministry to new platforms, formats, resources, and even volunteers are a few of the stressors catechetical leaders experience. Physical

activity has been proven to reduce our stress. The danger of leaving it out because we suddenly feel too busy is real. What is your plan for one of those busy days? Can you work in a quick five-minute stretch if you spend a good bit of the day in your chair? How about a walk around the block for fresh air? Taking the stairs is always better than taking the elevator. All of these little things add up over the course of the day. They help you focus and lead effectively because you feel better.

Discipline in our eating habits has a direct effect on how productive we are. Schedules for many catechetical leaders are hectic, often requiring evenings and weekends. It can be a challenge to plan, prepare, and eat healthy meals and snacks. Taking time to plan grocery lists and meals will go a long way toward helping us feel our best and reduce stress.

For many years, our family has planned dinners on Saturday mornings for the following week. When we started this practice, our goal was to eliminate the constant question of what's for dinner. But in the chaos of the first week of COVID quarantine, we missed our planning session; the stress was palpable in our house, resulting in poor food choices and feeling terrible. The next week, the menu planning returned.

Some simple things that you can do to help with ensuring this discipline is ensuring that you have easily accessible healthy snacks. Fresh fruit and vegetables are always good options. Try some nuts in the evening, rather than an extra couple of cookies. Limiting alcohol use is also an important way to ensure that you have a healthy diet. This does not mean

that you should not eat chocolate or ice cream. As the old adage goes, everything in moderation.

Our physical bodies need time to rejuvenate and rest. Just as the quiet rest in our spiritual health is important, quiet rest is important for our physical health. Turn off the screens and give yourself time to unwind. A journal, or a pad of paper that you can jot the “to do list” on, will help eliminate your stress. Always ask: What am I grateful for today? What can I give thanks for today?

All of these things will help us perform at our best. That means being able to pivot with the changing times and to do it with grace and a smile. We lead at our best when we feel our best. Effective leadership does not just happen. It requires discipline, and as catechetical leaders the first place we find that discipline is in our spiritual health, followed by our physical health. It is essential to being an effective leader.

What can you commit to today that will help you become disciplined in what you do?