

DISCIPLESHIP

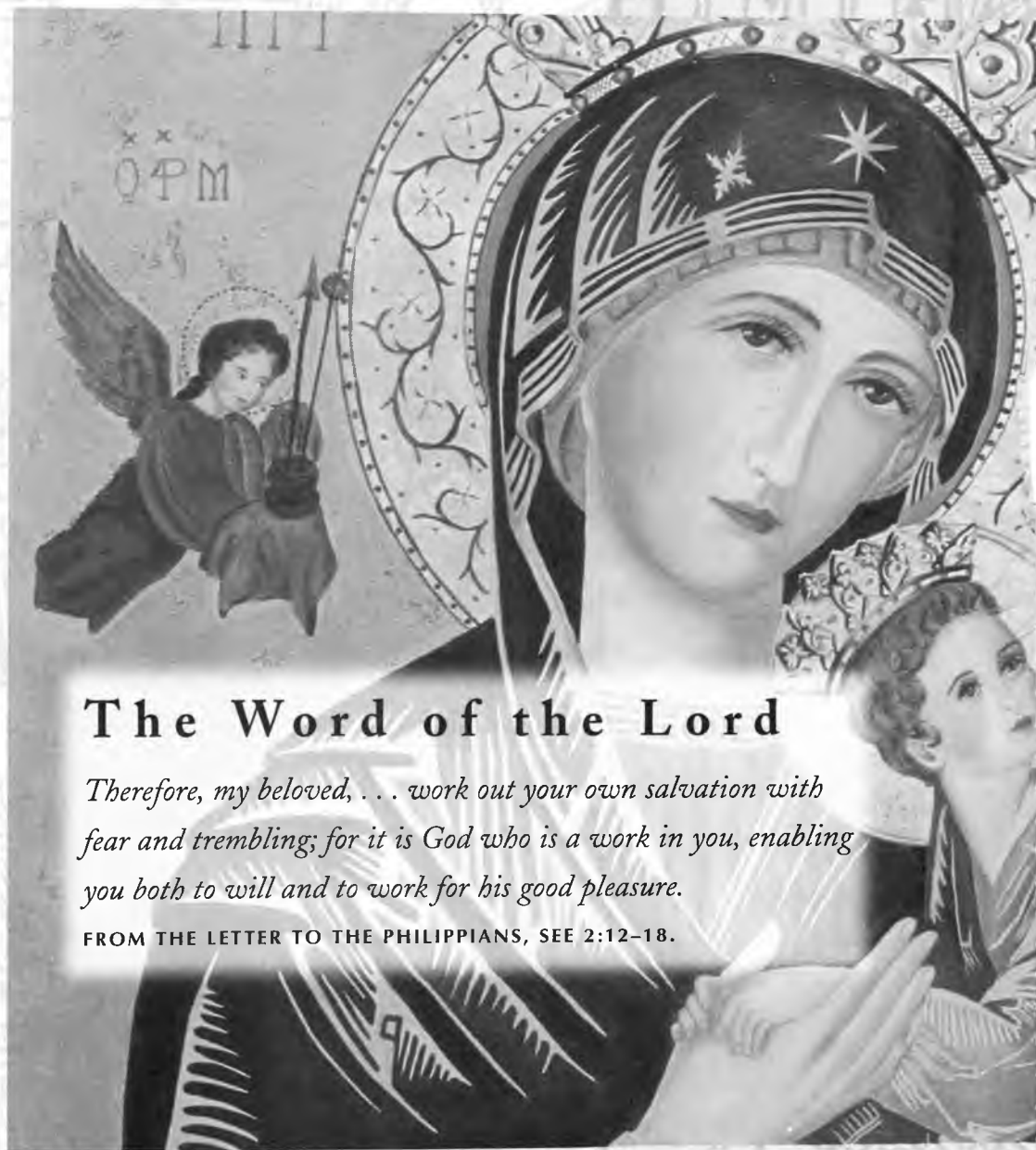
CHAPTER OVERVIEW

- *The call to discipleship*
- *Call to sainthood*
- *The perfect saint: Mary*
- *Virtues*

The Word of the Lord

Therefore, my beloved, . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is a work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

FROM THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS, SEE 2:12–18.



Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

Let Us Pray

I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long. . . .

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the LORD their God,

who made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

who executes justice for the oppressed;

who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

the LORD loves the righteous.

The LORD watches over the strangers;

he upholds the orphan and the widow,

but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The LORD will reign forever,

your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD!

PSALM 146:1-2, 5-10



THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

discipleship

being a learner; for Christians, the vocation of following Jesus

Write it down

Each day that you spend on this chapter, reading or discussing, write down your experiences and your reflections. Try to identify the challenges and joys of discipleship in your life.

Then do this

Interview a person whose Christian example you admire. Ask the person to tell you about the challenges and joys of being a Christian. Write a reflection after the interview.

The first several chapters of this book reminded you of how special you are to God—that you are loved dearly and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be a sign of God's kingdom. The story of your life is the story of your response to God's love. In the Sacraments of Christian Initiation—Baptism—Confirmation—Eucharist—the Catholic Church celebrated your call to **discipleship** in Jesus Christ. As a member of a community of faith, you have grown and matured as you have learned to follow him.

Christian discipleship is an experience of life made possible by a personal encounter with Jesus. As a disciple of Jesus Christ, you are a learner, but the teaching you've received from your earliest years is more than shared information. You have "learned" who Jesus is for you; you have learned to follow his way. You have received a very special invitation. And you truly have good news to share with others—the good news of God's love. You have found the source of your wholeness and happiness.

Jesus called his first followers to a change of heart. And he called them to take responsibility for being signs of the reign of God. They were to be the seed of that community which would continue proclaiming God's kingdom through the centuries.

As Jesus called the first disciples amid their everyday occupations, so he calls people in every age to be partners with him in bringing life and wholeness to the world—in the home, in the workplace, and, yes, in the classroom and on the play field—wherever people go.

To a great extent, Western societies are founded on a Christian value system. You were most likely born and raised in a family for whom Jesus and his way were accepted as given facts. You probably learned your prayers and received your first understanding of God from your parents and other family members. Your parents enrolled you in religious education classes or sent you to a Catholic school. Over the years, you have learned a great deal about Jesus. Hopefully you have developed a personal relationship with Jesus—and have become his disciple. Hopefully you have claimed your faith.

You've been called to discipleship. Discipleship with Jesus is born, not out of a search for knowledge, but out of the need for life. And Jesus doesn't wait for you to reach a certain level of maturity or wholeness before he calls you. He calls you where you are—in your imperfection and neediness. He comes to you, calls you, and gives you the faith, the strength, the desire, and the courage to follow him.

Whoever heeds instruction
is on the path to life. . . .

Proverbs 10:17a



Living as a disciple of Jesus

The way Jesus has touched your life truly does make a difference—both to you and to those whom you meet. Your personal encounter with Jesus blesses you with a wholeness which affects the way you live. As a disciple, you know the challenge of trying to live in a Christian way.

It isn't always easy to seek God's reign, nor is it always clear how you are to live a Christian life in the world. Learning from Jesus and his community of believers, you seek a true sense of self in being a son or a daughter of God.

Just as the people of Israel followed God, who led them through the desert toward the promised land, so every disciple must follow Jesus toward life in God. This isn't just a matter of learning *about* Christianity and obediently accepting the rules and regulations of your Church community. It's mainly about staying close to Jesus, sharing his life and his destiny and sharing his free and loving obedience to the will of his heavenly Father.

Following Christ is the foundation of Christian morality and conscientious decision making. As you seek to grow in your ability to make good decisions, the Holy Spirit will guide you, especially through your community of faith.

As disciples of Jesus today, we live in a world in which many things compete for our allegiance. We often experience conflicts of interest as well as conflict within ourselves. The battle to be faithful to one's true self is often lonely and scary, but Jesus succeeded—and so can we! He remains with us in his Holy Spirit to help us.

*A true Christian may be almost defined as one who
has a ruling sense of God's presence within him [or her].*

John Henry Newman

Then do this

The text mentions the importance of our families in helping us be disciples of Jesus. Together reflect on your experiences.

1. Make a list of the ten most important characteristics of a Christian parent. Give a reason for each characteristic.
2. In small groups discuss your lists and compare your reasons.

Discipleship as invitation

God wants people to share in the life of God. So God gathers us around his Son. The Church is this gathering; it is the seed of God's kingdom on earth. Christ is at the heart of this gathering. Through words and signs that point to the reign of God and by sending out his followers, Jesus calls all people to gather around him.

Everyone is called to God's kingdom.

The kingdom was announced first to the Israelites, but it is for all people. We enter it when we accept Jesus' good news of salvation. Those who are poor and lowly, that is, those who have accepted it with humble hearts, belong to the kingdom of God. Sinners though we be, all are invited into the kingdom of God.

See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #s 541–545.

1. When did you first become aware that you were invited to be part of God's kingdom?
2. How is the Church a sign of the kingdom of God on earth?
3. Why does a person have to be humble and recognize his or her neediness to enter into the kingdom of God?
4. What do you need to do to enter more fully into God's kingdom?

Prayers of St. Ignatius of Loyola

*Receive, Lord, all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my whole will.
You have given me all that I have,
all that I am,
and I surrender all to your divine
will, that you dispose of me.
Give me only your love and
your grace.
With this I am rich enough, and
have no more to ask.*

*Dearest Lord, teach me to be
generous.
Teach me to serve you as you
deserve,
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to head the wounds,
to labor and not to seek to rest,
to give of myself and not to ask for reward,
except the reward of knowing that I am doing your will.*



Optional activities

1. Write your own prayer along the lines of these two.
2. Find a prayer written by a saint. Lead the class in prayer, using the saint's prayer as your beginning.
3. Find out something about the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Write a paper or prepare a class presentation on his life.

*One can never pay in gratitude; one can only pay "in kind"
somewhere else in life. . . .*

Anne Morrow Lindbergh

REVIEW

1. What is a disciple?
2. What does a disciple of Jesus do?
3. What is the foundation of Christian morality and conscientious decision making?

Where discipleship leads

Jesus' call to you is to seek after God even if those around you are not involved actively at the moment in the same search for fullness of life. If you are faithful to your calling as a disciple of Jesus, you find yourself in conflict with people who choose a direction in life that takes them away from God. To follow Jesus involves some tension; it isn't always easy.

Walking with Jesus, you learn that you don't create or achieve your goals by your own effort alone. God is always sharing the gift of grace with you—God's own life and help. As a true disciple of Jesus, you must live not just to make your life better or more comfortable, but to be welcomed into the fullness of God's kingdom. Right now you may catch only an occasional glimpse of what lies before you, but in Jesus you see where the path of discipleship leads—to true life.

The Church believes that Christ, who died and was raised for the sake of all people, can show humankind the way to its proper destiny. The Church also believes that the key, the center, and the purpose of the whole of history is to be found in its Lord and Master, and that beneath all that changes there is much that is unchanging, much that has its foundation in Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever!

When Jesus calls you to follow him as a disciple, he doesn't promise an easy life. There is no ready-made blueprint. You do, however, know that Jesus leads to fullness of life. Your life's purpose is found in Jesus. During his ministry, Jesus risked reputation and acceptance. He also risked his life that you may live.

He demanded that the way to God be free from obstacles like personal gain, monetary profit, or comfortable religious practices. He insisted that the way to God is found in prayer—an openness of mind and an eagerness of heart to know God and do his will. With Jesus, you will have opportunities every day to know and to do God's will. Every day you will have opportunities to give witness to your faith.

Although few Christians today face physical **martyrdom**—giving one's life for one's faith—all Christians are called to live what they believe. All Christians should be like Christ—at home, in school, at work, at play. In the end, that's what Christian discipleship is—being like Christ.

Then do this

Put a classmate “on trial” for being a Christian. What evidence can you produce to prove that the person is guilty of being a true disciple of Jesus?

Write it down

1. Identify the kinds of situations at school and outside of school in which you find it challenging to really be like Jesus. Reflect on the list and pray about it.
2. Do you find yourself supported by your friends when you try to give good Christian witness? How can you strengthen that support?

Then do this

Work in small groups to create and present a five-minute skit on how a student in your school can be a disciple of Jesus.

martyrdom

giving one's life for one's faith

Martyrdom

Martyrs give the highest witness to the faith; they are witnesses to the death. Martyrs give witness to Christ by offering their lives as testimony to the Christian faith. The Church has very carefully collected and maintained the records of those who have given their lives in witness to the faith. These “acts of the martyrs” form “the archives of truth written in letters of blood.”

See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #s 2473–2474.

1. How is the Church “built on the blood of martyrs”? What does that mean?
2. How are all Christians called to be witnesses to Christ? What does that mean?

Write it down

What religious symbol is especially meaningful to you? What are the reasons for this?

Talk about it

1. What are the challenges of being a Christian disciple? What are the joys?
2. Why does the world need dedicated Christian disciples?
3. Even today in some parts of the world, young people are sometimes persecuted for being Christian. How would you respond if you were denied a job, laughed at, or jailed because you were a Christian?

Then do this

Make a poster using newspaper and magazine clippings; show situations in which Christians are called to witness to their faith. Explain your poster to the class.

The disciple's mind and heart must be given over to the way of the Master. The disciple tries to not become sidetracked in pursuing the way of God. Being a disciple of Jesus means that sometimes you will be in situations where you need to point out to others—even people in your own family, peer group, or local community—obstacles which block their way to God.

Discipleship with Jesus Christ can be risky. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross. To be a disciple of Jesus is to embrace that same cross and to know that you too share in its promise. The heaviest cross we carry is the need to be true to ourselves before God.

As Christians we live under the sign of the cross. Throughout the centuries the cross or crucifix has been a sign that those whose homes or places of worship it marks are disciples of Jesus. You make the Sign of the Cross with holy water as you enter a church, and you recall your Baptism into Christ. You begin and end your prayers with the Sign of the Cross. The cross or crucifix is placed on the burial casket of the Christian—a powerful sign that the cross is the way to life forever with the risen Lord.

There is a power in the cross; when you bear it, you follow in union with the Crucified One. Paradoxically, the cross leads to life.

*We, the Christian community, assemble to celebrate the memory
of the martyrs with ritual solemnity because we want to be
inspired to follow their example, share in their merits,
and be helped by their prayers.*

St. Augustine



The martyrs of Uganda

Courageous to the end

In the late nineteenth century, many European Christian Churches sent missionaries to Africa. One Catholic missionary group, the White Fathers (the color of their robes) established a mission in Uganda. Mwanga, the son of the king, attended the mission school, but he was an indifferent student given to pleasure-seeking.

When the king died in 1884, eighteen-year-old Mwanga became king. His poor education embarrassed him when he found that the Christians in the court could read and write. Feeling threatened by the Europeans moving into the area, Mwanga was easily convinced by his advisors to rid the country of Christian leaders.

Mwanga's search for pleasure led him to abuse alcohol, to use mood-altering plants, and to indulge in homosexual practices with young men in his court. Some of the pages and their leaders were Christian and refused Mwanga's advances, as they were instructed to do by the missionaries. The Catholics in the group included Charles Lwanga, Joseph Mkasa, Denis Sebuggwawo, Mwafu, and Kizito (who was only thirteen).

In 1886 the Christians in the court were put to death, some of them by being slowly roasted over a fire. Many were stacked on a pyre and set afire. One of the executioners commented: "There was not a sigh, not even an angry word. All we heard was a soft murmur on their lips. They prayed until they died." Other influential Christians in the country were also killed. But then an internal rebellion prevented Mwanga from completing his plan to kill all the Christian and Muslim leaders in the country.



Twenty-two Catholics honored under the title "The Martyrs of Uganda" were declared saints in 1964. A shrine in their country is built in the shape of a pyre, and their story is carved on the doors of the church. The first time a pope visited Africa was 1969; during the visit Pope Paul VI made a pilgrimage to this shrine.

Optional activities

1. Find out more about the martyrs of Uganda. Share the information with the class.
2. Research the Catholic Church in Africa, perhaps by contacting a missionary group that works there. Share your findings with the class.
3. Read the story of a martyr, and write a reflection on the story.

Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die.

G. K. Chesterton

REVIEW

1. What kind of life can a disciple of Jesus expect to have?
2. What is martyrdom?

CALL TO SAINTHOOD

In an earlier chapter, you learned about the importance of the Catholic Church's liturgical calendar. That calendar revolves around two major feasts—Easter and Christmas. The Church's liturgical calendar spans 365 days, just like the normal annual calendar, but the “year” spreads over those days in a different manner. In addition to the major feasts and Sundays of the year, there is another part to the liturgical year, called the *sanctoral calendar*.

saint

a person of heroic virtue; a person who by the grace of God lived a life of great faith and Christian witness

Write it down

Where did you get your image of a saint? Is it true-to-life? Explain.

If you look at a typical Catholic calendar, you will notice that a specific Christian event or person is noted on many of the dates. For example, the calendar box for August 4 reads “St. John Vianney;” October 4 reads “St. Francis of Assisi,” and October 15 reads St. Teresa of Avila. These are days the Catholic Church sets aside to prayerfully reflect on the Christian witness of holy men and women whose lives the Catholic Church has determined to be worthy of canonization. These are the canonized **saints** of the Church.

Canonization

Remember learning earlier about the word *canon*? It was a word used in connection with the books of the Bible being guides of faith. It's what we measure our lives by.

In addition to Scripture, there are men and women from our Christian history whose lives have become recognized by the Church as a measure for our walk of discipleship and who are now with God. These are the **canonized** saints of the Catholic Church. The Church offers them to us with the assurance that the imitation of their lives will lead us to God.

In simple words, the Church “names someone a saint.” The Church recognizes or affirms that God's presence has been uniquely and wonderfully shown—for our benefit—in the lives of these people.

We are called to be saints. Every Christian is called to follow the way of Jesus and show God's love to others; that's what holiness is. Have you ever thought of yourself as a saint?

A saint isn't someone who runs around all day with his or her hands folded in prayer. Despite the pictures you have seen, a saint doesn't attract attention with a heavenly glow around his or her head. Saints don't float through crowds with their feet six inches off the ground.

There's a more realistic way to look at saints. The saints were ordinary people who by the grace of God lived lives of great faith and Christian witness. They came from all walks of life. Some were married; some were priests and religious. Some were rich; some were poor. Some were young; some were old. Some were politically powerful; others were not. Some were athletically talented; others not. Quite a mix!

canonize

to officially name someone a saint

Write it down

Do you want to become a saint? Why?

*Everyone cannot become a genius,
but the path of holiness is open to all.*

St. Maximilian Kolbe

The communion of saints

communion of saints

all the faithful, living and dead—on earth and in heaven—united by the saving love of God

heaven

the life after death in which people experience God's life and love forever

purgatory

the state of purification for those who have died

hell

the state of eternal separation from God

In the Creed we proclaim our belief in the **communion of saints**. This sense of communion is fundamental to our understanding of being a community of faith, a Church. God's grace and saving love unite the faithful in a single family, in a single communion. God's grace and saving love make us holy, make us saints. Do you realize that you belong to this communion of saints? Yes, this communion includes all the faithful: the living and the dead—the few who have been canonized saints by the Church and all the dead whose faith is known to God alone.

Even in our imperfection and sinfulness, God seeks to unite us in the communion of saints. Even though it is our personal responsibility to grow in holiness, no one makes himself or herself perfect in this life. We all die imperfect—needing to be saved, to be made whole, by the grace of God. We who die in God's grace and friendship, but are still imperfect, are indeed assured of our eternal salvation. The Catholic Church teaches that to the extent necessary after death, we undergo purification, so that we can achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of **heaven**.

The Church gives the name **purgatory** to this state of final purification. In this state of being, God makes us perfect, uniting us in the communion of saints. No one knows what purgatory is like or how long this state of being-made-perfect lasts. We have to be careful about describing purgatory as a *place* where people suffer. It's a state of being, not a place.

Those who are outside the communion of saints for all eternity are those who are in a state of being called **hell**. Our God of love doesn't condemn people to hell; they get what they themselves have chosen in life. No one wakes up one day to suddenly find themselves there; hell doesn't come as a surprise. If any persons are in hell, it is because they have consciously and freely chosen to alienate themselves from God and his goodness during the course of their lives. Their hell began on earth and continues for all eternity.

As wild as our imaginations may run about what hell is like, the chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God. It is in God alone that we find the life and happiness for which God created us and for which our hearts long. That's why telling someone to "Go to hell!" is such a curse—and a very unchristian thing to say. How can a disciple of Jesus wish someone to be separated forever from the saving love of God?

You need not fear that you may automatically or blindly go to hell for committing sin. But you are still responsible for your actions. God calls you to a constant conversion of life which moves you away from sin. No one is predestined to go to **hell**—in fact, quite the opposite is true! But if you constantly refuse God's call—choosing self over others and trashing the goodness of creation—then you choose your own alienation, your own hell. Those who persist to the end in their rejection of God get what they freely choose: the eternal punishment of hell.

*More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of.*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

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Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The intercession of the saints

Many people have a special devotion to the saints, and often to one or two saints in particular. There may be personal reasons for this. Perhaps they were named after a saint. Perhaps they have chosen a particular saint as a patron at the time of Confirmation. Perhaps there is something about the life or profession of a particular saint that is especially inspiring.

Because we believe that these holy men and women now live fully with God, we Christians can ask for their *intercession*, that is, their help, in nudging us to become better disciples of Jesus. When we pray to the saints, we don't pray in the same way we pray to God. When we ask for a saint's help, or intercession, we actually are asking them to intercede with God for us. We join our prayers to God with the prayers of the saints to God for us.

Your destiny as a disciple of Jesus is to be a saint. You are called to be one with Jesus, who leads you to eternal life. The path to that union is not separate from your personal life history. The path to sainthood always leads through your life now to life forever in the fullness of God's kingdom. In following that path, don't look for the extraordinary; rather, find God in the ordinary life you live. Whether you are at school, at home, at play, or at work, you tread on holy ground—where saints gather!

*For you are a people holy to the LORD your God,
the LORD your God has chosen you out of all peoples on earth
to be his people, his treasured possession.*

Deuteronomy 7:6



Talk about it

1. What does it mean to belong to the communion of saints?
2. How can praying for the intercession of the saints help you?
3. What is the purpose of purgatory? Why does it make sense?
4. How does a person choose hell?

Write it down

1. What do you need to do to remain a faithful disciple of Christ?
2. How can you make the following practices more a part of your life?
 - personal prayer
 - communal prayer
 - Scripture reading

Sharing the stories of the saints

During her childhood Dorothy Day lived in a poor neighborhood of Chicago, and it was there she first met Catholics. Years later she reflected on that experience; in the following she wrote about one of those Catholics and her influence on Dorothy.

The Harrington family also lived in that block of tenements, and there were nine children, the eldest a little girl of twelve. She was a hard-working little girl, and naturally I had the greatest admiration for her on account of the rigorous life she led. . . Often [Mary] was so tired that we just stretched out on the long back porch, open to the sky. We lay there, gazing up at the only beauty the city had to offer us, and we talked and dreamed.

I don't remember what we talked about, but I do remember one occasion when she told me of the life of some saint. I don't remember which one, nor can I remember any of the incidents of it. I can only remember the feeling of lofty enthusiasm I had, how my heart seemed almost bursting with desire to take part in such high endeavor. One verse of the Psalms often comes to mind: "Enlarge Thou my heart, O Lord, that Thou mayest enter in." This was one of those occasions when my small heart was enlarged. I could feel it swelling with love and gratitude to such a good God for such a friendship as Mary's, for conversation such as hers, and I was filled with lofty ambitions to be a saint, a natural striving, a thrilling recognition of the possibilities of spiritual adventure.



Optional activities

1. Debate: The ambition to be a saint is a natural striving.
2. List ten saints with whom you are familiar along with the quality for which each is famous or a quality of the person that is meaningful to you.

Then do this

Interview people in different ways of life on how they live out their Christian vocation. Summarize the interviews and share the summary with the class.

I am trying to learn to recall my soul. . . and lift my heart to the Blessed Mother and the saints, since my occupations are the lowly and humble ones, as were theirs.

Dorothy Day

REVIEW

1. What is the communion of saints?
2. What is heaven? Purgatory? Hell?
3. What is the destiny of a disciple of Jesus?

THE PERFECT SAINT: MARY

During its long history, the Catholic Church has offered the people of the Church an example of the true disciple: the mother of Jesus. In this woman from the village of Nazareth in northern Israel, we find the perfect example of a person who was open to God's will and was willing to let God work through her, to be an instrument of God's salvation.

Even after two thousand years, we still don't know very much about the historical Mary. Much of what people believe about Mary has come to us through the devotional life of the Church. You have seen statutes and many pictures of Mary. Perhaps you have watched movies of the life of Jesus, which, of course, begin with his conception and birth; the stories begin with Mary's response to God.

Every once in a while throughout history, people have claimed that Mary appeared to them and gave them special messages for the welfare of all God's people. These experiences are very personal. Even if they involve more than one individual, they are what the Church considers to be **private revelation**. That means that even when the claims are true, they are not essential for your Christian faith.

Scripture and God's self-revelation in Jesus are **public revelation**; that is, they are part of open, public human experience, directly available to everyone. There was nothing secretive or selective about God's revelation. Its focus was not special knowledge or messages. That revelation, moreover, culminated in the gift of God's very self to us in Jesus.

The Catholic Church is very cautious about **apparitions**. After lengthy investigation and healthy skepticism, the Church may declare that it is permissible for members of the Church to be "followers" of a particular devotion to Mary.

It does not say that anyone *has to* believe in or follow the personal, private experience of any other believer. Christians believe that Jesus is the source of our salvation and that discipleship with him will lead us to salvation and the fullness of life. Any devotion to Mary ought to assist us on this path, not lead us into another path.

Then do this

Draw a picture of the way you imagine Mary. Share your drawing with the class.

private revelation

personal messages from God

public revelation

Scripture and God's self-revelation in Jesus

apparition

visions or appearances of Jesus, Mary, or a saint claimed to be seen by an individual or a small group

In honor of Mary

At the annunciation scene in the Gospel according to Luke, Mary says this: "... all generations will call me blessed" (1:48). These words are reflected in the constant tradition of the Christian community in giving Mary, the mother of Jesus, a very special place of honor. The Church's devotion to Mary is an important part of Christian spirituality. From early in the Church's history, Mary has been honored as the Mother of God.

The Catholic Church's devotion to Mary is not adoration and worship, which are properly given only to the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But proper devotion to Mary can help us adore and praise God. The feasts of Mary and other forms of prayer directed

to her, the Rosary, for example, are expressions of this devotion. When we reflect on the life of Mary, we see in her an example of the Church's "pilgrimage of faith" and the goal of that journey.

See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #s 971–972.

1. How is Mary the icon or reflection of Jesus for the Church?
2. What is the Rosary? How can this prayer strengthen your Christian life?
3. What part of Mary's life do you find most inspiring?

Devotion to Mary and the saints

Devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, or to any other saint, can be given a three-fold test:

- Does the person honored in this devotion reflect the nature and qualities of God, as revealed in the Old and New Testaments?
- Do this person and this devotion lead us to a more Christ-like life?
- Do this person and this devotion unite us more closely with the rest of the Church?

Talk about it

With what devotions to Mary are you familiar?

If a devotional practice fails one of these points, it should be avoided. Alleged appearances of Mary aren't authentic, for example, if they frighten people or if they tell us that God is ready to unleash his anger and vengeance on a sinful world. We know that God the Father didn't send Jesus to destroy, but to offer forgiveness and reconciliation. A proper devotion to Mary is rooted in her humanity, in the down-to-earth quality of her life and her willingness as a daughter of God to open her life and heart to God.

Marian devotion must be attentive to the cries of the poor.

Mary T. Malone

An ancient Marian hymn

The following hymn is sung in the Greek Church on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Its author is unknown, but it has been referred to as the most beautiful and profound ancient Marian hymn in all of Christian literature.

*Hail, O space of the spaceless God;
hail, O gate of the sublime mystery.
Hail, O message unsure to men without faith;
hail, O glory most certain to those who believe.
Hail, O sacred chariot of the One above the Cherubim;
hail, perfect dwelling of the One above the Seraphim.
Hail, O you who reconciled opposites;
hail, O you who combined maidenhood and motherhood.
Hail, O you through whom transgression was erased;
hail, O you through whom Paradise was opened.
Hail, O key to the kingdom of Christ;
hail, O hope for the ages of bliss.
Hail, O Bride and Maiden ever-pure.*

Optional activities

1. Search a parish hymnal for songs honoring Mary. If possible, obtain a recording of each to play in class. Talk about the message of the hymn.
2. Ask ten people to share with you their favorite title for Mary. In class combine the lists to create a litany honoring Mary. Make copies of the litany and pray it together and privately.

Qualities of Mary

Here are some important factors about Mary's life which should inspire your own spiritual journey as a disciple of Jesus.

Mary's humanness

Mary was born like any one of us. She wasn't a mythical goddess or female divinity. Her parents traditionally are identified as Joachim and Anna. According to the Catholic Church, what is unique about her conception is that she was not conceived with original sin like the rest of humanity. And, from the very first moment of her existence, Mary was free from the effects of original sin, namely concupiscence or any tug toward selfishness and sin.

The Catholic Church teaches this in the doctrine of the **immaculate conception**. Actually this teaching of the Church says more about Jesus than it does about Mary: When Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary, she had already been prepared by God's grace to be a worthy "vessel" of the Son of God. Mary is truly "full of grace." She was never separated or alienated from God by selfishness and sin. Mary was redeemed from the moment of her conception.

immaculate conception

Mary's conception free from original sin, redeemed from the moment of her conception

Her ordinariness

Mary grew up in the little village of Nazareth. A Jewish maiden, she carried out the typical tasks of a Jewish woman. She knew her prayers, and, without a doubt, she celebrated the Passover and other Jewish feasts. Like many others in her faith tradition, she longed for the coming of the messiah and the salvation of God's people. She knew her history and the meaning of daily work and of suffering.

Perhaps her family arranged her marriage to Joseph, one of the village carpenters. This engaged couple was most likely only in their mid- or late teens, the marrying age at the time.

Her trust in God

Just when her fondest dreams were beginning to unfold, Mary was asked by God to be the mother of the Savior. Luke's Gospel pictures an encounter with Gabriel, an angel messenger from God. This maiden said "Yes" to God and allowed the Word of God to become incarnate in her womb.

The Church celebrates this event as the **annunciation**—that moment when the Word of God came to live not just *with* us, but as one *of* us. Mary trusted that God would use her, a simple small-town maiden, to bring about his plan of salvation.

annunciation

the visit to Mary by an angel, who told her that she was to be the mother of the Savior

Her constant faithfulness

While little is known about the life of Mary, we certainly know that she gave birth to Jesus and reared him in the Jewish faith. On occasion, she appears in the Gospel stories, but never as an equal partner with Jesus in the salvation of the world. She remains always in the background, pointing others to her son. She is a faithful mother, still there in the end when her crucified son hangs on the cross. When even his chosen twelve abandoned him, Mary remained at his side.

Her sharing in the faith community

Mary was present among the disciples when the Holy Spirit came upon them on Pentecost Sunday. She was part of the early Church, the assembly of the Lord chosen to give witness to the world of its new and full life in Jesus, her risen Son.

Her ultimate destiny

The Catholic Church teaches that, at the end of her life, Mary was assumed into heaven, body and soul (spirit), where she now shares in the gift of resurrected life with her son, Jesus. Where she has gone, we hope to follow. Our hope is based on the promise of resurrected life made to all who die in Christ.

Honoring Mary

All Christians should hold Mary, the mother of Jesus, in special esteem, giving her a special place of honor. This doesn't mean that Christians have to approach God through her. Because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Christians have free and direct access to God in the most intimate and trusting way. Mary, however, should not and cannot be removed from the history of salvation. She is the mother of Jesus.

And since Jesus was the Son of God, she is also the Mother of God.

Every statement about Mary made by the Church is actually a statement about the uniqueness and the wonder of God's redeeming love made known in Jesus, her son. We don't have to approach God through Mary, but we cannot understand Jesus without meeting and coming to know his mother.

The more we relate to Mary as a real human who has a real human history and who lived a real life in real time and place, the more we come into contact with the mystery of God's love. She is the perfect disciple—an open instrument for God to use in bringing about the kingdom. As the perfect disciple, Mary also is God's special gift to you as you too seek to become a follower of Jesus, her son.



REVIEW

1. Who is the perfect saint?
2. What is the difference between private revelation and public revelation?
3. What does the term *immaculate conception* mean?
4. How is Mary honored in the Church?