

PREPARING FOR THE REFLECTION PAPER

(Please read the following pages carefully. A simple, but thorough process is outlined to help you get the most out of your reading. It will also help you write a reflection paper that will be quickly accepted by the Office so you can receive catechist certification credit.)

Catechesis for adults...must give an intellectually satisfying demonstration of the Gospel's relevance to life."

Sharing the Light of Faith, #46

When women and men take on the ministry of teaching the faith, it is necessary for them to study the nature and workings of faith seriously and thoughtfully. If they do not, there is a great danger they will not teach the Christian faith, but rather the religious neuroses or heresies they may have picked up from a parent, teacher, or their own experience. It is for this reason the Church has always established certain norms and criteria of training for those working in the ministry of catechesis.

How much training, and what kind, is the challenge for every catechetical and religious education curriculum. Priests, obviously, need more training than catechists in schools and PSR programs, and catechists clearly need more training than the average Catholic. Parents also need a firm foundation in the faith. The fact that many of them do not have this background make the job of all catechists more difficult, and makes it even more important for teachers of the faith to have a firm grasp of what Christianity teaches and how faith works in life.

After a certain number of classes and talks on theology, most adult catechists should have enough foundation to be able to do part of their religious formation in private study and reflection. The process described here provides that option.

The book you have chosen to read can open a door to greater understanding of God, yourself, others, and/or the 2,000-year-old mystery of the Christian faith. But to get the greatest spiritual benefit out of this book, you must approach it as spiritual reading. You cannot read it the way you would a John Grisham novel.

The following process, which is modified from the ancient monastic practice, will help you get the most out of the book you are reading. It will also help you organize your thoughts for the reflection paper you will write.

I. Making Your Reading a Spiritual Experience

Studying theology is ultimately about love -- love of God. In any human relationship we are eager to spend time with our friend, to get to know him or her well, and to become comfortable with his or her ideas and ways. Once we achieve this level of comfort, we should move naturally into just enjoying God's presence in our life, delighting in it as a child delights in sitting on a grandmother's or uncle's lap. But to do that we must learn a different language, for we obviously cannot communicate with God exactly the way we do with another human. This language is more subtle -- and also more profound -- than verbal speech. Monks of the Christian tradition have been looked on as the masters of this language of God. One of the practices -- Lectio Divina -- is the foundation for the process we are using in your book reading option for catechist certification credit.

There are four movements in the monastic art of using reading as an encounter with God:

1. Reading
2. Meditation
3. Prayer
4. Contemplation

This four-phase movement, with practice, allows reading to become part of a true communing with God. With this process, the reading you do becomes less of an intellectual exercise and more of an experience of prayer. In time, you will find your inner world reflecting on the metaphors and ideas of the book you have chosen. Your entire person will become drawn into the subject matter -- intellect, emotions, will, and especially imagination. With regular practice, the monks of all religious traditions tell us that this process will eventually spill over into other areas of your life. Reflecting on God will become as frequent and as natural as breathing.

II. The Process of Reading Your Book

A. First, find a regular time of day to do your reading. Start small, perhaps 15 minutes to a half hour a day. (Like practicing a musical instrument, it is better to do 15 minutes a day than 2 hours one day and nothing the next.) Find a place where you can be alone with God, even if it is the bathroom. Some people do their reading in a hot bathtub or a quiet corner of the basement. The important thing is to find a place where you will not be disturbed.

B. Second, read reflectively. Take your time with those passages that stir your emotions or make you think. Keep a pad of paper or your journal close by as you read and jot down the ideas that cause you the deepest pondering.

Why do you think these passages move you so deeply? Does a particular idea or metaphor stir up a memory from your past, or does it remind you of an issue you have not resolved in your own life? Does this idea resonate with your own experience, or does it contradict your experience?

C. Third, allow yourself a few minutes to consider quietly what you have read. Try to focus your attention sharply on particular ideas or images. Ask yourself what this idea means for you. How can it help you, or someone else, live a happier, more joyful life? If the idea disturbs you, what is the real cause of this concern? Does the idea or image challenge you to live your life in a different way? Does the idea or image upset your image of Jesus, God, or the Blessed Mother? Does it affirm you for who you are and what you do? Does it make you see the world or your own reality in a clearer light?

- D. Fourth, set aside these thoughts and questions and allow yourself to pray for a few minutes over the encounter you have had. Ask God for greater wisdom in all that you do.

Allow your prayer time to go in any direction you feel most comfortable. You may want to spend time in intercessory prayer or praise. Perhaps, a quiet repetition of the "Jesus Prayer" is more comfortable.

- E. Fifth, before concluding your reading/prayer time, spend at least one minute trying to empty your mind of all thoughts and distractions, and allow yourself to just "soak" in the experience you have just had with God. Imagine yourself an art lover standing before an exquisite statue or painting. You have just spend a brief amount of time DOING theology -- a noble pastime that is as old as the human ability to speak.

(Before you begin to read at your next arranged time, glance over your notes or journal entry from your previous period.)

III. Writing Your Reflection Paper

- A. The length of the paper is 3 to 5 pages.
- B. You can submit the paper up to 6 months after you have notified the Office of Education that you will be reading the book for catechist certification credit. Please make sure that this time-line falls within your renewal period.
- C. Although you have 6 months to write the paper, you may check out a book for only 1 month at a time.
- D. You are responsible for the book, while you have it, and will be asked to replace it if you destroy it or lose it.
- E. If at all possible, please type the paper; if not, write very legibly.
- F. Write the paper observing the rules of good communication: complete sentences, proper grammar, etc.
- G. Content of the paper:
 - 1. Organize your notes or journal entries on the book. If you have too many for a short paper, prioritize.
 - 2. Choose two or three ideas that you found most significant from the book.
- H. The structure of the paper should follow this general outline:
 - 1. Introduction (5-10 sentences)

State the ideas from the book that you found most interesting or challenging.

2. Main body of the paper (2-4 pages)

State whether or not you agree with the ideas from the book. (Take one idea at a time using the following format to develop your paper.)

- a. Do you agree with this idea or not?
- b. State the reasons for your agreement or disagreement. Marshall your argument with things you learned in other catechist certification classes, things you have read, things you were taught as a child, or you heard in a homily. As much as possible, try to include your source. Also use your own experience of God: i.e., what you have learned about God from life experience.
- c. What significance does this idea have for your own faith life:
 1. in the way you think about God; in the way you think about yourself.
 2. in the way you pray personally/at Mass.
 3. if this idea is true, would it affect the way you relate to other people? If so, how?
 4. if this idea is true, would it affect the way you relate to the environment? If so, how?
 5. if this idea is true, would it affect the way you spend your money and plan your life? If so, how?
 6. Does this idea seem to reflect your understanding of the Scriptures? What stories from Scripture seem to deal with the issues raised by this idea? (For instance, if the idea deals with issues of sexuality, it might remind you of Samson and Delilah, Ruth, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc.)
 7. If a child grew up believing this idea, how would he or she feel about God, the meaning of life, the purpose of their existence?
 8. Use 1-4 for the next idea.

3. Conclusion (5-6 sentences)

Would you recommend this book to another Christian trying to deepen his or her personal understanding of God? If so, how? If not, why not?