

“The great gift of this book is that it has been written by someone with decades of parish and diocesan experience. Its conversational style draws the reader in and encourages effective habits among RCIA team members and parish communities. In Part One, Kapitan lays a firm foundation with an authentic vision of the RCIA, substantiated by the church’s documents and liturgical texts. Chapter Four offers an impressive history of the church’s major catechetical texts and the methods they have endorsed. In Part Two, he examines common errors in parish practice, yet offers practical solutions and effective catechetical preparations based upon Scripture. Throughout, he cites ‘helpful resources’ for every issue, including annotated bibliographies. This book should be mandatory reading for all who journey with catechumens and candidates.”

— Rita A. Thiron, Executive Director, Federation of Diocesan
Liturgical Commissions

“Eliot’s genuine concern for and love of the RCIA comes through in this work. With its blend of personal witness, teachings of the church, and very practical suggestions and models, this text would benefit any parish’s initiation ministry. You will come away from it not only with the inspiration to want to do better for those who participate in the RCIA, but also equipped to do so. Thank you for this wonderful gift!”

— Matthew Miller
Director, Office of Worship
Diocese of Evansville

“Eliot Kapitan’s considerable experience, knowledge—and love—of the RCIA come to bear in *Unfolding the Mystery of Christ*. The vision he presents is at once faithful to the church’s mission of forming disciples of Jesus Christ and a challenge to delve more deeply into the catechetical process. I am especially grateful for the practical strategies he offers and I look forward to using this book to inspire catechists in my diocese!”

— Jonathan F. Sullivan
Director of Parish Ministries, Services, and Catechesis
Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana

“Informational. Inspirational. Practical. Eliot is so knowledgeable about all aspects of the RCIA and explains formation in a way that can be understood and appreciated by the novice to the seasoned catechist. This is a resource that I will return to again and again. All will want this book in their library.”

— Sue A. Huett
Director, Department of Pastoral Services and Office of Worship
Diocese of Belleville

Unfolding the Mystery of Christ

Sunday by Sunday Formation of Catechumens

Eliot Kapitan



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kapitan, Eliot, author.

Title: Unfolding the mystery of Christ : Sunday by Sunday formation of catechumens / Eliot Kapitan.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "A resource giving readers and RCIA teams an ordered method for preparing the Period of the Catechumenate using the Sundays of the liturgical year as the basis of the formation plan for catechumens and candidates"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019041950 (print) | LCCN 2019041951 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814665558 (paperback) | ISBN 9780814665800 (epub) | ISBN 9780814665800 (mobi) | ISBN 9780814665800 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Catholic Church. Ordo initiationis Christianae adultorum. | Initiation rites—Religious aspects—Catholic Church—Study and teaching. | Catechetics—Catholic Church—Study and teaching. | Catechists—Handbooks, manuals, etc.

Classification: LCC BX2045 .I553 K37 2020 (print) | LCC BX2045 .I553 (ebook) | DDC 268/.82—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019041950>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019041951>

Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 102

In the course of the year, moreover,
[the church] unfolds the whole mystery of Christ
from the incarnation and nativity to the ascension,
to Pentecost
and the expectation of the blessed hope of the coming of the Lord.

**Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year
and the General Roman Calendar, 1**

Holy Church celebrates the saving work of Christ
on prescribed days in the course of the year with sacred remembrance.

Each week, on the day called the Lord's Day,
she commemorates the Resurrection of the Lord,
which she also celebrates once a year in the great Paschal Solemnity,
together with his blessed Passion.

In fact, throughout the course of the year
the Church unfolds the entire mystery of Christ . . .

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 1

The rite of Christian initiation presented here
is designed for adults [including children of catechetical age]
who, after hearing the mystery of Christ proclaimed,
consciously and freely seek the living God
and enter the way of faith and conversion
as the Holy Spirit opens their hearts.

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 75

The catechumenate is an extended period
during which the candidates
are given suitable pastoral formation and guidance,
aimed at training them in the Christian life.

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Acknowledgments

With Thanks

- . . . to Sue Huett (Diocese of Belleville), Matt Miller (Diocese of Evansville), and Todd Williamson (Archdiocese of Chicago), who dreamed of ways to unfold the mystery of Christ;
- . . . to my colleagues in the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, Region VII, who collaborated on projects and prayers to foster the presence of Christ in liturgy and life;
- . . . to the many team members and participants of the North American Forum on the Catechumenate who fostered a rich and compelling grasp of Christian initiation;
- . . . to catechumens and candidates, their sponsors and godparents, and the faithful of countless parishes who embraced the paschal mystery;
- . . . and to Jackie Kapitan, whose support and prayer helped to make this book possible.

Introduction

Formation Begins with Sunday

The church has a measured way for unfolding the mystery of Christ. It occurs over time by teaching, community life, prayer, and service. It begins early in the Christian home. It continues through the school years. It is enriched in adulthood, in every age, Sunday after Sunday, until we see God face-to-face in death.

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

In the course of the year, moreover, [the church] unfolds the whole mystery of Christ from the incarnation and nativity to the ascension, to Pentecost and the expectation of the blessed hope of the coming of the Lord. (102)

Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the General Roman Calendar

Holy Church celebrates the saving work of Christ on prescribed days in the course of the year with sacred remembrance. Each week, on the day called the Lord's Day, she commemorates the Resurrection of the Lord, which she also celebrates once a year in the great Paschal Solemnity, together with his blessed Passion. In fact, throughout the course of the year the Church unfolds the entire mystery of Christ and observes the birthdays of the Saints. (1)

2 *Unfolding the Mystery of Christ*

Because this is the long-cherished method for the faithful in Christ, by means of a weekly encounter with the fullness of Christ, the church also requires this same plan for the formation and training of catechumens, those seeking to live the Christian life in more complete ways with the grace of the initiation sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist.

In many places, this thorough plan has collapsed by varying degrees to one of less intensity, shorter time, fewer catechists, more information delivery than anything else, and less involvement with the faithful of the parish and the diocese.

For those who have worked in this initiation ministry for a time, who has not heard the following?

Seekers Who Say:

- I do not want to/cannot spend a long time at this.
- This has to be done before the wedding.
- It will please my (future) in-laws.
- I don't want to do anything in public.

Team Members Who Say:

- I will work at this from fall to spring, but not in the summer. I need some down time.
- I will come to the sessions when I can, but additional monthly team meetings are not possible.
- I will not/cannot go to workshops or ministry training sessions, either here in the parish or in the region.
- I do not have the RCIA book. I really do not need my own copy of the ritual text. I have not opened the book.
- It is important to keep everyone together, doing the same things at the same time.
- For those who miss a session, we have to provide make-up classes so they can stay on schedule.

- We have this small group of sponsors to use over and over because they know what to do.
- Our team of ten is now only one or two. I am/we are doing the best I/we can.

Pastors and Staff Members Who Say:

- I have a lot of other things to do. I have to be more efficient with this one ministry among many others.
- I know how to do this with a sixteen- or twenty-week teaching plan that has been used over and over. I know it works. It gives them what they need.
- We can catch up on missed classes during Lent even after the Rite of Election.
- Because lay parishioners do not have a thorough academic training, I will do all or most of the teaching.
- You, Deacon, because of your academic formation and degree, have everything you need to be in charge of the RCIA. You do not need additional formation. You do not need a big team.
- The church only gives us an ideal. It is okay if we do not achieve it.
- The diocese only makes this work more difficult.

As an active participant in parish, diocesan, and regional work with Christian initiation and all of liturgy, I have heard all these complaints and expectations—and more as well.

These concerns are further complicated by some trends. Over the past twenty years or so, money is tighter, full-time catechumenal ministers on parish and diocesan staffs have been given added duties or reduced to part-time or volunteer status, diocesan and regional training is less frequent or ceased altogether, and adult learning methods and suitable catechetical methods are not always a regular part of diocesan formation curricula.

Ministers feel these pressures. Regrettably, however, giving into these pressures ultimately leads to not trusting the church. Not trusting the church's method. Not trusting the church's agenda. Not trusting the church's honored practice of reading the Bible and tradition by means of the *Lectionary for Mass*. Not trusting the biblically based way of praying. Not trusting Sunday and the liturgical year.

Additionally, these behaviors lead to trends that are of great concern.

1. A period of the catechumenate that is so short—far less than the minimum one full liturgical year—that the necessary norms for formation laid out in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) 75–105 (Canada, 75–104) cannot be fully addressed.
2. This closely held ministry approach of only a few people neglects the baptismal duty of all the faithful to engage in discipleship formation (RCIA 4, 9).
3. This hurried attempt at formation has ministers and parishes abandon the ancient method of formation, Sunday by Sunday, with the treasured resources of what are now the Lectionary and Missal and ritual music and the church's tradition.
4. This collapsed attempt at formation asserts that we know how to do this; my method is better; the church gives us an ideal toward which we strive (and probably not achieve) but not a mandate or duty.

But the truth is this: The church's tradition and ritual book provide a norm and not a mere ideal. They present a standard and a vision to which parish and diocesan ministers must attend. It is their duty—a duty that respects the right of seekers and catechumens to the suitable formation in the Christian life desired by the church. The norm for initiation is achievable. It is possible with time, attention, and resources.

Too much is at stake. We must regularly remind ourselves of the Christian initiation vision. Although information about Christ and

Christianity is important, formation as a Christian and conformation to Christ are central.

**Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism:
The Rite of Christian Initiation***

A norm . . . has nothing to do with the number of times a thing is done, but it has everything to do with the standard according to which a thing is done . . . To the extent possible, the norm must always be achieved to some extent lest it slip imperceptibly into the status of a mere “ideal” all wish for but are under no obligation to realize. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 108)

The *Code of Canon Law* defines the length of a year in the section on computation of time. It is 365 days. The norm “accommodated to the liturgical year and solidly supported by celebrations of the word” (RCIA 75) is thus 365 days, 52 weeks. It is not just a liturgical season or two. It is not just an academic or school year.

Code of Canon Law

In law, a day is understood as a period consisting of 24 continuous hours and begins at midnight unless other provision is expressly made; a week is a period of 7 days; a month is a period of 30 days, and a year is a period of 365 days unless a month and a year are said to be taken as they are in the calendar. (can. 202 §1)

This, plus the fourteen-year pastoral experience with Christian initiation, led the bishops for the United States to affirm this norm in their 1986 National Statutes for the Catechumenate (which is binding for all US dioceses; see the accompanying box). The Apostolic See confirmed the statutes as conference law in 1988. The law

is this: the minimum span of time for the period of the catechumenate is a whole year, reaffirming that formation is accommodated to the liturgical year specified in RCIA 75. All these statutes are found in Appendix III of the US edition. There may be rare exceptions for a shorter formation plan but only as a request to the diocesan bishop, who may grant it for cause, on a case-by-case basis (see RCIA 331; Canada, 307).

Note in this norm the use of the word “minimum.” The necessary discernment concerning conversion to Christ, that is, falling in love with him who loved us first, may take *more* time (see RCIA 76). It usually does.

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults,
Appendix III (US) National Statutes
for the Catechumenate

The period of the catechumenate, beginning at acceptance into the order of catechumens and including both the catechumenate proper and the period of purification and enlightenment after election or enrollment of names, should extend for at least one year of formation, instruction, and probation. Ordinarily this period should go from at least the Easter season of one year until the next; preferably it should begin before Lent in one year and extend until Easter of the following year. (6)

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

Exceptional circumstances may arise in which the local bishop, in individual cases, can allow the use of a form of Christian initiation that is simpler than the usual, complete rite (see 34.4). (331; Canada, 307)

Two Parts of This Book

In part I of this book, “Forming the Faithful in Christ,” I lay out the normative way the church forms the faithful. I then make the

case that since this is the way we, the baptized, are shaped into Christ, it is the suitable way for forming catechumens seeking baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist.

This is hard work. This is important work. Attempts at suitable adaptation of a rite, sometimes, can lead us to stray too far from norms intrinsic to Roman Catholic liturgy. To make it easier to review key texts, citations from related primary sources are printed in boxes within the text to connect the reader to key values, central beliefs, and required norms.

Part II, "Steps for Preparing a Week during the Period of the Catechumenate," presents an ordered method for preparing the period of the catechumenate week by week, season by season, liturgical year by liturgical year with recommended resources. Although there are books available with ready-to-use session plans (not all of which are of equal value), they should not be the starting point much less the only sources for this ministry.

Part I.

Forming the Faithful in Christ

With the advent of the reformed English editions of *Christian Initiation*, General Introduction (CIGI), in 1969 and 1973, *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) in 1974 and 1985 (with adaptations for the United States in 1988 and for Canada in 1987), and *Rite of Baptism for Children* (RBC) in 1970, it was not uncommon for church members to assume that the fourfold training and formation of catechumens—suitable catechesis, community life, prayer and liturgy, and living the apostolic life (see RCIA 75)—were either totally new or recovered from ancient ways of doing catechumenal formation.

The church, however, has always embraced these methods, even when not explicitly named. In any apprenticeship process, both within and outside church life, new members are formed in the fundamentals by those members already involved in the effort. These members teach and form by what they believe and know and practice.

In part I, therefore, we will review the ancient and traditional ways the baptized, the faithful in Christ, have been and still are shaped and formed in ongoing ways. We will also look at practical connections between this ancient pattern of formation and the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*.

Chapter 1

From the Very Beginning

Story: Becoming a Grocer

My father was a grocer in a small town in South Dakota. All the children worked in the store. I started with the simple tasks of taking out the trash and sweeping the floor after school. Later, I learned to bag and carry out, first by helping one who knew how to do it. Over time, I came to know who wanted boxes or sacks, how heavy or light to pack, and how to load the car.

I learned to stock, rotate, and facedown jars and cans by watching and working with my dad in the first aisle. This included efficient organization of my part of the back room. I learned to prepare and care for produce by the coaching of my older brother. Dutch taught me how to slice meat and wrap packages. I learned to wait on trade first at the cash register and then on the telephone.

This did not happen all at once. It occurred over time, years, in fact.

Becoming a Christian

The Acts of the Apostles describes the early experience of the church. After Peter's Pentecost preaching results in the baptism

of three thousand into Christ, chapter 2 concludes with a description of the common life:

They devoted themselves
to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life,
to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers . . .
All who believed were together and had all things in common;
they would sell their property and possessions
and divide them among all according to each one's need.

Acts of the Apostles 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

It is telling that we hear this proclamation on the Second Sunday of Easter in Year A. In some places, we may hear it every Easter season since the Year A set of Sunday readings may be used whenever the period of postbaptismal catechesis or mystagogy is celebrated, even outside the usual times (RCIA 247; Canada, 237).

We also may hear this description of the common Christian life in these celebrations:

- Ritual Masses for the Institution of Acolytes (*Lectionary for Mass*, 786)
- For the Blessing of Abbots and Abbesses (LM 807)

- For the Consecration of Virgins and Religious Profession (LM 812)
- For the Dedication or Blessing of a Church or an Altar (LM 818)
- Masses for Various Needs and Occasions, For the Holy Church (LM 828)
- For Religious (LM 853)
- Votive Mass for the Most Holy Eucharist (LM 977)

These occasions have common threads. They are gatherings of the church to pray for persons who act for the benefit of the church, for members of the church, and for the whole church and the repeatable sacrament of the Eucharist.

When we listen to this Scripture today, we uncover a pattern of formation. It is a pattern established from the very beginning of Christian life. All who believe are shaped by four things:

1. the teaching of the apostles;
2. the common life;
3. the breaking of the bread and the prayers, that is, Eucharist and daily praying;
4. and being together and sharing according to each one's needs.

All who believe struggled together to be holy. In so doing, they looked like Christ, they behaved like Christ, they became like Christ.

For the first three centuries of the church, in places where following this way was illegal, house-based ministry played an essential role in church life. It modeled Jesus's own ministry with apostles and disciples. Formation took place in secret sometimes, in public at other times. This teaching, however, was not done with chalk boards, handouts, or manuals. It was done person-to-person, often within the small group. It was done with believers sharing with seekers. It was done by sharing faith and witnessing faith,

even unto death. It was done with careful discernment to test faithfulness to this Christ-based life of both seekers and practitioners. It was done as the faithful way of living in the world.

The New Testament is replete with stories of house churches. Read of the house churches of Mary, Lydia, Prisca and Aquila, Nympha, and Philemon (Acts 12:12; 16:40; Rom 16:3-5; Col 4:15; Phil 1-2). Read the lives of the early martyrs.

These examples stress that changed lives “win” new converts. These examples care less about information delivery and more about transformation of life by formation and conformation to the dead and risen Christ. The apostolic and early church stressed life over curriculum. Ministry leaned into the spiritual gifts and baptismal charisms for the good of all. Everyone was involved in some suitable way.

They took to heart and to action the words of Jesus we recall in every Mass: “Do this in memory of me.” Not only did it entail the breaking of the bread and the eating and drinking at the table of the Lord, but it also included breaking open the word, breaking open lives, and pouring them out in apostolic works.

From the very beginning, Christians did this with devotion, with rapt attention, with constancy. They did it, not alone, but together. It lasted over centuries, not always in exactly the same ways but always with the same intention of faithfulness to Jesus Christ. We do this still. Sunday by Sunday. Week by week.

Practical Tips

In *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis reminds us of our call to holiness in today’s world. This is our path—holiness. Do not be afraid of it, he tells us. Attend to Christ and his church, he tells us. “Rejoice and be glad,” he reminds us. This is in harmony with “The Universal Call to Holiness” taught some fifty years earlier by the Second Vatican Council (see *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 39–42). It would be helpful to read both side by side.

We can become more like Christ by attending to the fourfold method outlined in the Acts of the Apostles. Behavior is key. Here are some examples, suggestions, and practical tips.

**Vatican Council II,
Dogmatic Constitution on the Church**

It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in whatever state or walk of life are called to the fullness of christian life and to the perfection of charity, and this holiness is conducive to a more human way of living in society here on earth. In order to reach this perfection the faithful should use the strength dealt out to them by Christ's gift, so that, following in his footsteps and conformed to his image, doing the will of God in everything, they may wholeheartedly devote themselves to the glory of God and to the service of their neighbor. (40)

Be Holy at Home

Look for times and ways in daily life to be conscious that Christ is present and living among us.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family home is rightly called "the domestic church," a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtue and of Christian charity. (1666)

When our son was little, we looked for ways to be Christian at home in addition to daily prayer at table and bedside. For example, we used the Advent wreath, the Christmas crèche, a box for money and household items for those in need. When away from home, we walked the church building (sometimes *during* Mass with this

restless child) and told the stories in the windows and statues and poor boxes. We hung around with other families with small children and similar beliefs.

We could be holy at home, but we also knew we could not be holy alone.

Be Part of Small Groups

Trust the house church experience of the early days. Look for smaller groups, even for the short term, in which to share the faith experience. Faith life is enriched there in ways that cannot happen in the large group setting. Both are needed; both are important.

My own life is filled with participation in many small groups for prayer, study, faith sharing, and support. During my first church job, the Second Sunday gathering was a diverse group of single and married people—a college student, high school teacher, Goodwill executive, parish director of religious education, retreat giver, and retired priest.

During my first parish job, the staff began each day with coffee and conversation, followed by prayer in various forms, and lunch. There was also corporate homily prep on Tuesday and a staff meeting on Thursday.

Later, the theology study group met once a month to pore over a chosen book to sharpen our grasp of belief and faith for more effective diocesan ministry.

Later, my wife and I met for two years with four couples and one single woman for prayer, conversation, and mutual support.

Later, I poured myself into my parish catechumenal ministry as one of thirteen volunteers. In addition to grappling with the vision and tasks for initiation in a year-round format, it helped me to fall in love with weekly attention to Sunday's readings and prayers in richer ways than any previous parish or diocesan ministry.

Later, the members of the "beloved department," in my final years of diocesan ministry, enriched my life—and all of us—with monthly meetings for prayer with faith and life sharing, corporate study, and common work on overlapping concerns. This spilled

over into hallway conversations, smaller interoffice projects, and collaborative efforts of greater intensity that would not have been possible without the fruits of the monthly gatherings.

The learning: no one group lasted throughout my entire life. The various groups came and went because of attending to need and grace and being the right people at the right time. Look for these vital aspects: prayer, accompaniment, presence, and collaboration. Look for people who hunger to live the Christian life in fuller ways—even imperfect people, which we all surely are—in imperfect ways.

Be Active in Adult Formation

Neither confirmation nor graduation ends our Christian formation. Look for gatherings in the parish or region or online to foster thinking, pondering, and growing in faith. Do not be afraid to read something spiritual or theological. I have a friend who stops reading novels in Advent and in Lent to give over more time to foster her faith life.

Our parish-based Growing in Faith Together (GIFT) program plunged parishioners into wrestling with the paschal mystery during a weekend retreat. In monthly gatherings of those who took part in a weekend, members were fed with prayer, discussion, food (of course), and all manner of conversation before and after the end and start time. This extended into other activity, both on and off the parish campus.

Be Charitable and Just

We cannot be Christian without doing for others in ways suited to our abilities and responsibilities. We can surely give to the various civil and church collections for special needs, but we can also look for simple and complex ways to put our hands and feet to mercy works.

I shoveled my elderly neighbor's sidewalk without asking. I would tell her when she would gently chide me, not only am I

(still) healthy enough to do it, but also it recalls with gratitude the one who did it for my mother in a faraway town.

Our parish regularly gathers goods for the local food pantry, cooks for the Bread Line, delivers for Meals on Wheels, participates in Habitat for Humanity builds, and opens the Parish Center for non-parish charity efforts.

Chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel tells us the story of the Judgment of the Nations, the great divide of the sheep and the goats. It began then and continues today our necessary concern for doing works of mercy. Here is the list expanded by the US bishops and by Pope Francis.

Corporal Works of Mercy

- Feed the hungry
- Give drink to the thirsty
- Shelter the homeless
- Clothe the naked
- Visit the sick
- Visit the prisoner
- Bury the dead
- Give alms to the poor
- Care for our common home

Spiritual Works of Mercy

- Counsel the doubtful
- Instruct the ignorant
- Admonish the sinner
- Comfort the sorrowful
- Forgive injuries

- Bear wrongs patiently
- Pray for the living and the dead
- Care for our common home

Helpful Resources

Give Us This Day: Daily Prayer for Today's Catholic. Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, twelve issues annually.

Contains Mass readings, prayers, and reflection for each day plus a simple setting for Morning and Evening Prayer; the Order of Mass; brief articles; suitable songs and various religious art.

Pope Francis. Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate: On the Call to Holiness in Today's World.* March 19, 2018.

Pope Francis invites us to "rejoice and be glad," reminding us of our Christian call to holiness, the most attractive face of the church. He invites us to look for the saint next door, helps us to reflect on the words of Jesus in the Beatitudes and Matthew 25 as ways to shape holy lives, and cites specific ways to be holy in today's world.

Anything that will foster small group prayer, faith sharing, conversation, and transformation. Resources with faith life discussion questions are especially helpful.