

# **in Touch** with the **Word**

Lectionary-Based  
Prayer Reflections

*Advent, Christmas,  
Lent, and Easter*

**Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart**



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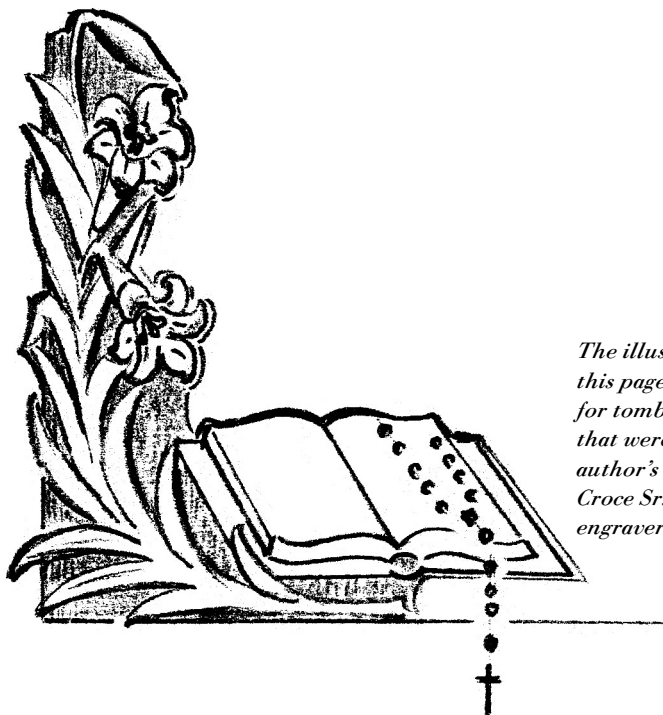
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To my parents and godparents, who taught me to pray and share my faith:

To Dad: You listened to my prayers every night at bedtime when I was a child, you listened to my philosophical and theological ramblings when I was writing papers in college, and you are still listening.

To Mom: You never tired of a little girl's conversations about what missionaries do, and if angels still appear, and what heaven is all about, and how to know what God wants us to do; it seems our conversations today aren't all that different.

To Uncle Carl and Aunt Ginny: May I become for my own goddaughter the example of lived faith that you have always been to me.



*The illustrations on this page are sketches for tombstone carvings that were drawn by the author's uncle, Carl M. Croce Sr., a sculptor and engraver.*

# Contents

Introduction . . . . .	9
------------------------	---

## *Advent*

First Sunday of Advent A-B-C . . . . .	17
Second Sunday of Advent A-B-C . . . . .	26
Third Sunday of Advent A-B-C . . . . .	35
Fourth Sunday of Advent A-B-C . . . . .	44

## *Christmas Time*

Midnight Mass . . . . .	55
Feast of the Holy Family A-B-C . . . . .	58
Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God . . . . .	67
Epiphany . . . . .	70
Baptism of the Lord . . . . .	73

## Lent

First Sunday of Lent A-B-C . . . . .	79
Second Sunday of Lent A-B-C . . . . .	90
Third Sunday of Lent A-B-C . . . . .	99
Fourth Sunday of Lent A-B-C . . . . .	108
Fifth Sunday of Lent A-B-C . . . . .	117
Passion Sunday A-B-C . . . . .	126

## Easter Time

Easter Sunday . . . . .	139
Second Sunday of Easter A-B-C . . . . .	142
Third Sunday of Easter A-B-C . . . . .	150
Fourth Sunday of Easter A-B-C . . . . .	158
Fifth Sunday of Easter A-B-C . . . . .	167
Sixth Sunday of Easter A-B-C . . . . .	176
Seventh Sunday of Easter A-B-C . . . . .	186
Pentecost Sunday . . . . .	194

# Introduction

Did you ever go to Mass on Sunday, listen to the Scripture readings, and then promptly forget what they were all about or how your life relates to their message? Does this sound familiar? Even though you may have listened to a homilist who connected the word with you and challenged you at that time, what about the week before the Sunday Scriptures or the week after? How can you anticipate and prepare for the word? How can you stay in touch with the word that was heard?

This book is a resource designed to do just that—to help you prepare for the Sunday Scripture readings and to help you stay in touch with the word.

## Using This Book

Using *In Touch with the Word* is a simple procedure. First, decide which Sunday's readings you are going to share. If it is Friday afternoon, you might want to reflect on the readings for the next Sunday so you can be more prepared for the upcoming liturgy. If it is Monday morning, you might want to remember the readings you heard on Sunday so you can stay in touch with that word the rest of the week. Next, turn to the page for the Sunday you have in mind. There you will find reflections, questions, and a prayer based on that Sunday's readings.

### The Sunday Scripture Readings

The Scripture readings for each Sunday of the year are found in a book called a lectionary. The Sunday readings follow a three-year, A-B-C cycle that continues to repeat itself. The readings in the A cycle highlight the Gospel of Matthew. The readings in the B cycle highlight the Gospel of Mark. The readings in the C cycle highlight the Gospel of Luke. (If you are wondering about the

Gospel of John, don't be concerned. John doesn't really get the short end of the stick! His readings are woven throughout all three years on special days that seem to need that "John" touch.)

The church calendar year consists of the seasons of Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter, plus Ordinary Time. This book covers the seasons of Advent and Christmas time, Lent and Easter time—the seasons most emphasized in church programs.

Most of the Sundays in these seasons have three sets of readings, one for each cycle. For example, readings are given for the first Sunday of Lent A cycle, the first Sunday of Lent B cycle, and the first Sunday of Lent C cycle. In this case each Sunday also has three sets of reflections, one for each cycle. If you are not sure what cycle the church is in at a given time, the dates for each Sunday cycle are given in the lectionary.

Some dates have only one set of readings—for instance, Christmas and Easter have the same readings for all three cycles—the readings you hear in year A will be the same as those you hear in year B and year C. There is only one set of reflections for those dates as well.

You will note that the Scripture readings are not reprinted in this book. It would make the book too big and too expensive. You will need either a lectionary or a Bible to read one or more of the Scripture readings as part of the prayer reflection. However, a capsulized version of each Scripture reading is provided.

One of the Scripture readings has an open bullet (◦) next to it. This indicates which reading will be most focused on in the reflection and which one you might want to read as part of the reflection.

### **Theme**

A summary of a central theme of the readings is also offered. You may want to use it to set a context for the reflection questions that will initiate sharing of and reflecting on the word.

## **Reflection Questions**

The reflection questions for each Sunday address audiences in three categories: adults, teenagers, and children. However, feel free to cross categories in the use of the questions whenever it is appropriate.

### **Focusing Object**

For each set of readings, you will find a suggested focusing object. Using a focusing object in these prayer reflections is not mandatory, but it is helpful, especially with teenagers and children. It is a visual, hands-on reminder of the readings and their message. For example, anticipating or recalling the meaning of the passage about our relationship with Jesus being like a vine and its branches is much easier and more vivid if a plant with a stem and branches is present when reflecting on the reading of that passage.

The focusing object is handy for facilitating the prayer reflection and sharing. For example, after the Scripture reading is proclaimed, the facilitator asks one of the reflection questions for everyone to think about and share their thoughts. Then the facilitator picks up the focusing object and begins the sharing. When finished, the facilitator passes the object to the next person who is ready to share.

The focusing object can be passed around a circle so everyone knows when their turn is coming, or it can be passed randomly as people become ready to share. A large group does better sitting in a circle and passing the object around in order. In a small group—one that fits around a table where everyone can reach the middle—anyone who is ready can pick up the object, share, and replace it for the next person who is ready to take a turn. Also, using the object makes it obvious when a person's turn has ended—no one has to guess. If someone just wants to offer a one-word response, or even remain silent, the focusing object is simply handed to the next person.



The focusing object is more than a reminder or a turn-designator. It is also an effective way to reduce the self-conscious feeling many people get when they are expected to share with a group of their peers. Persons handling an object and looking at it tend to relax and forget that a roomful of people is watching them. People who are relaxed and comfortable do a better job of sharing. This is true of adults, teenagers, and children!

After everyone has had a chance to share, the object comes back to the facilitator who ends with the “Closing” or any other words she or he feels would be appropriate. The focusing object can stay on a kitchen table or a classroom shelf all week, acting as a reminder of God’s word and the people’s response.

### **Closing**

A closing is provided for each prayer reflection. It consists of a poem or reading that ends the reflections with an inspirational touch. You will notice that the closings come from a variety of cultures and each culture adds a rich spiritual tradition to the prayer reflections.

### **Indexes**

Each Sunday’s prayer session is indexed by focusing object and by theme in the back of this book.

## **Settings**

### **Parish**

**Parish staffs, councils, and committees** usually want to start their meetings with some type of prayer. Prayer based on Sunday’s readings is a great way to help the group relate to the parish liturgy, connect with the message of the Sunday readings, and start the meeting off on a spiritual plane.

**Homilists** can benefit from this resource by looking at the message through the eyes of adults, teenagers, and children. This can provide a springboard for the type of insights needed to be

**Youth  
Groupings**

pastoral, effective, and challenging to the assembly of mixed ages that typically gather for Sunday and feast day liturgies. (Actually sharing the reflection questions with adults, teenagers, and children and listening to their responses each week provides even better feedback for a homilist!)

**Liturgy planning groups** will find this book helpful. Members with different degrees of liturgical experience and understanding can read the theme summaries, share the questions, and get a feel for the flow of the Scriptures. The suggested focusing object can also remind the group to investigate the possibilities of symbolism in the physical environment of the worship space.

**Prayer groups and small Christian communities** will find *In Touch with the Word* very helpful, especially if the groups include families with children of different ages.

**Youth ministers** will find the prayer reflections in this book a simple way to prepare a youth group or team for the readings they will hear the following Sunday or feast day and to help them stay in touch with the readings they heard the previous Sunday. At the same time, the reflections call attention to the major seasons of the church year. The prayer process in the reflection works equally well with junior high teens or high school teens.

**Parish religious education teachers and catechists** meeting with a class once a week can use this resource to relate to the Sunday and feast day readings. Sending a note home each week encouraging parents to discuss the readings with their children at the dinner table or at bedtime, perhaps with a similar focusing object, is a good way to weave a family connection into a parish religious education program.

**Religion teachers in Catholic schools** looking for a way to connect students with their parish community will value this resource. Anticipating

## Families

or recalling the Scriptures read at the parish liturgies will help students stay in touch with their parish community.

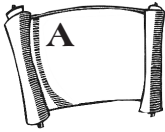
**Busy families** will find that using *In Touch with the Word* at home is a great way to make liturgical worship more relevant for their teenagers or younger children. Using the prayer reflections does not take long and is easy to do. Best of all, it helps the family as a whole connect with what is said at Mass and remember it throughout the week. Parents may find their teenagers more likely to share prayer if they are doing it “for the sake of their younger brothers and sisters” than if they think they are doing it for themselves!

**Parishes with family-based programming** can use this resource in several ways. If the parish supplies families with resources to be used at home, every family can receive a copy of *In Touch with the Word* to use on their own. If families gather regularly at the parish for a scheduled activity, the sharing process can be incorporated with the program. If family groups meet in cells or units, they can be provided with copies of this book and suggestions for how it can be used in the context of their meeting.

Whether you work with adults, teenagers, or children in a parish, school, or home setting, you will find that being in touch with the word is easy with *In Touch with the Word*.

# Advent

A decorative graphic featuring a lit candle with a flame and radiating light rays on the left, and a pine branch on the right, both integrated with the text 'Advent'.



# First Sunday of Advent



## The Plowshare

### Scripture

- *Isaiah 2:1–5*. We shall turn our tools of war into tools of peacemaking and tilling.
- *Romans 13:11–14*. Let us cast off deeds of darkness and revel in deeds of light.
- *Matthew 24:37–44*. We must always be ready; we don't know when we will be judged.

### Theme

The time is here for us to prepare for the coming of Jesus—for his first coming in Bethlehem and for his final coming at the end of time. Both comings encourage us to reject sin and the ways of darkness, and to embrace goodness and the ways of light. To become ready for the coming of Jesus is to turn our destructive habits into constructive habits.

### Focusing Object

A hoe or other gardening tool

### Reflections

For  
Adults

An organization called Swords to Plowshares (P.O. Box 10406, Des Moines, IA 50306) sells plowshare pins. Each pin is a tiny metal replica of a sword that has been twisted into the shape of a plow. It is made from the metal of a scrapped U.S. Air Force F-84 Thunderjet fighter plane, a twentieth-century sword. The card that



holds the pin reads, “Waging Peace: Today, there is a deep need for widespread, nonviolent action for peace, because the alternative is unthinkable.”

Our world has become so violent that blood and gore entertain us on prime-time television and in movies, and children’s handheld video games award points for killing and decapitating the “enemy.”

- Do you contribute to the acceptance of violence in today’s society? How?
- Do you contribute to the effort of waging peace? How could you do more?
- How is your life different when you take seriously the call to walk in the light and cast off the ways of the darkness?

For  
Teenagers

Heaven is surely the place without war and tools of destruction. Why can’t earth also be such a place? Why can’t swords and spears and tools of war and violence be turned into plowshares and pruning hooks and tools for growing things and cultivating life? It would be the best way to get ready for Jesus.

- Name some personality traits that could be thought of as “swords and spears,” such as gossiping or using sarcasm and put-downs. Are there “swords and spears” in your personality?
- How can you cultivate spiritual life and growth in your own personality?

The world seems to be getting more violent. Our country has so many murders each day that all of them do not even make the news. Hearing that a human being killed another human being is “no big deal”! We see it all the time on television.

- Why has the world gotten so violent?
- What do you think are the contributing factors to the attitude that violence is an acceptable way to respond to conflict?
- How can a group of young people concerned about violence affect their neighborhood or school?

For  
Children

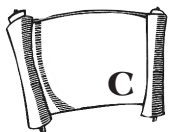
Nobody likes to be hit. But for some reason, some boys and girls start hitting when they don't get their way or when they can't have what they want.

- Have you ever been hit by another boy or girl at school or in your neighborhood? How did you feel? What happened?  
Sometimes when people are angry, they feel like throwing things or hurting someone. It's okay to *feel* mad enough to want to hurt someone, but it's not okay to actually hurt them.
- How do you handle your anger? How do you help yourself calm down?
- Because hurting someone on purpose is never a good choice, what are some good choices you can make when you are angry?

Closing

Praise to the Lord  
of all creation,  
Glory to God  
the fount of grace;  
May peace abide  
in every nation,  
Goodwill to all  
of every race.

*(One Hundred Graces)*



# First Sunday of Lent



## The Desert

### Scripture

- *Deuteronomy 26:4–10.* Yahweh took us from slavery in Egypt, through the desert, to a new land.
- *Romans 10:8–13.* We who believe in Jesus and speak of Jesus will be saved.
  - *Luke 4:1–13.* Jesus spends forty days and nights alone in the desert.

### Theme

Jesus knows what it is like to be in the desert and to want God's help. He had his own desert experience, being tempted by the devil, feeling alone and isolated, and needing strength and faith. It happened to the Hebrews, it happened to Jesus, and it happens to us. Desert experiences can be retreats for us if we use them as a way to get closer to God.

### Focusing Object

Sand

### Reflections

For  
Adults

The path to a closer relationship with Yahweh, our Creator, is the faith journey of every human being. The Holy Spirit is every human being's instigator of that journey and its guide. Even though Jesus is fully divine, Jesus is also fully human. So why does Jesus have to go on such a





For  
Teenagers

desert journey to get closer to God? Jesus *is* God. Wouldn't that mean he was going on a journey to get to himself? Isn't that what all of us do when we need to get closer to God, too?

- Where do you go to seek Yahweh, our creator? How do you become closer to the One who made you? How do you get closer to yourself? What happens on the journey to yourself? How do you know you are traveling in the right direction?
- When were you in a “desert experience”? When have you found yourself feeling alone, isolated, and in need of strength? When have you struggled in your journey back to Yahweh? When have you had a “waiting room time” for you to sit it out in the desert and be patient, and hope for the rich fertile awareness of God’s presence to return?

The Hebrews were not happy with their slavery in Egypt. But they were not thrilled with being isolated in the desert land, either. In some ways, that was worse. But Jesus actually chose to retreat into the desert land. He followed the guidance of the Holy Spirit in his life and ended up in the desert for a long time.

- Have you ever felt as if you were in a desert, alone and isolated—escaped from an old place perhaps, but not yet arrived at a new place? Which was worse—the place you had escaped from or the desert place? Why? What moved you to get on with your life journey in order to actually arrive at the new place? Or are you still in the desert? How do you know?
- Jesus retreated to the desert because the Holy Spirit led him there. Has the Spirit ever led you to a place that ended up being a desert? Did you ever do “the right thing” and end up alone and isolated? What happened? Were you surprised? angry? at peace? How does the bareness of desert-life give way to the rich fullness of growth-life?



- Is there anything good about a desert experience? Without other distractions, all you have is yourself and God. In that situation, is it easier or harder to get closer to God?
- Is it possible to become more in touch with God and not become more in touch with yourself? Why or why not? How does being in touch with yourself help your relationship with God? How do you get in touch with yourself?
- Jesus stayed alone in the desert for forty days. The Bible tells us that he did not eat any food all that time. How hungry do you think he became? How would you feel if you tried to stay in a desert that long without eating? What would you say to Jesus if you found him in the desert?
- Do you ever play at a beach or in a sandbox? Do you like to play in sand? What is it like? What do you do in the sand? How does dry sand change when it gets wet? What can you do with wet sand that you cannot do with dry sand? What does dry sand do that wet sand does not do? Is it more fun if you can use water with the sand? Why or why not? Is it messier? What is the best part about playing in sand?
- Potting soil is special soil that makes plants grow better. If you planted some flowers in a sandbox and other flowers in rich, dark, potting soil, which flowers do you think would grow? Why do you think so? Have you ever planted flowers in sand? in potting soil? What do you think the potting soil does that the sand cannot do?
- Not many plants can grow in the desert sand, but some can. Do you know what kinds of plants grow in a desert? Do you know what kinds of animals might live in a desert?

## Closing



How strong and good  
and sure your earth smells,  
and everything that grows there.

Bless us, our land,  
and our people.

Bless our forests with mahogany,  
wawa and cacao.

Bless our fields  
with cassava and peanuts.

Be with us in our countries,  
and in all of Africa,  
And in the whole world.

*(Peace on Earth, a prayer from the Ashanti  
people of Africa)*

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“One of the unique characteristics of this book, along with reflections on the lectionary readings, is the inclusion of a focusing object. Besides lending insights into the Scriptures, the focusing object trains people to see symbolically. In doing so, it enhances the ability ‘to see more than meets the eye,’ to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, the sacred in the secular.”  
**Dr. Maureen Gallagher**, Archbishop’s Delegate for Parishes, Diocese of Milwaukee, Wisconsin

“Lisa-Marie is definitely ‘in touch’ with the needs of young people and families—and how they approach the Word of God. *In Touch with the Word* will not only help various generations in praying the Scriptures, but will also assist homilists in making the Word come alive in their preaching.” **Thomas N. Tomaszek, MEd, MTS**, Director, Spectrum Resources, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and consultant to the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry’s Prayer and Worship Project Team