

Prayer Works
for Teens
Book 2

Prayer Works
for Teens
Book 2

Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart

Saint Mary's Press
Winona, Minnesota
www.smp.org



Genuine recycled paper with 10% post-consumer waste.
Printed with soy-based ink.

The publishing team included Robert P. Stamschror, development editor; Rebecca Fairbank, manuscript editor; Holly Storkel, typesetter; Rick Korab, Punch Design, cover designer; Maurine R. Twait, art director; pre-press, printing, and binding by the graphics division of Saint Mary's Press.

The inside illustrations are by David Chang and Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart.

The scriptural quotations identified as NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved.

The scriptural quotations identified as TEV are from Today's English Version. Second edition copyright © 1966, 1971, 1976, 1992 by the American Bible Society. All rights reserved.

The scriptural quotations identified as INT are from the Inclusive New Testament by Priests for Equality. Copyright © 1994 by Priests for Equality. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

All other scriptural quotations in this book are freely adapted and are not to be interpreted or used as official translations of the Scriptures.

The excerpt on page 18 is from *The Tree That Survived the Winter*, by Mary Fahy (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), no page. Copyright © 1989 by Mary Fahy. Used by permission of Paulist Press.

The legend on page 23 is adapted from *Inspiration from Indian Legends, Proverbs, and Psalms*, page 59, compiled and edited by R. L. Gowan. To order, contact Ray or Marian Gowan, P.O. Box 1526, Rapid City, South Dakota 57709.

The information about the Hoca on page 33 and the story on page 34 is from *Watermelons, Walnuts, and the Wisdom of Allah and Other Tales of the Hoca*, by Barbara Walker (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1967), pages 9 and 27–28. Copyright © 1967, 1991 by Barbara Walker. Used by permission of the author.

Copyright © 1997 by Saint Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publications, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1318, www.smp.org. All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce only those materials intended for distribution to the program participants. No other part of this book may be reproduced by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

Printing: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Year: 2005 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97

ISBN 0-88489-433-9

Contents

Introduction to *Prayer Works* 7

Leaves 13

Short Prayer 14

Medium Prayer 17

Long Prayer 20

Family Component 23

Nuts 29

Short Prayer 30

Medium Prayer 32

Long Prayer 34

Family Component 40

Four Elements 45

Short Prayer 46

Medium Prayer 48

Long Prayer 50

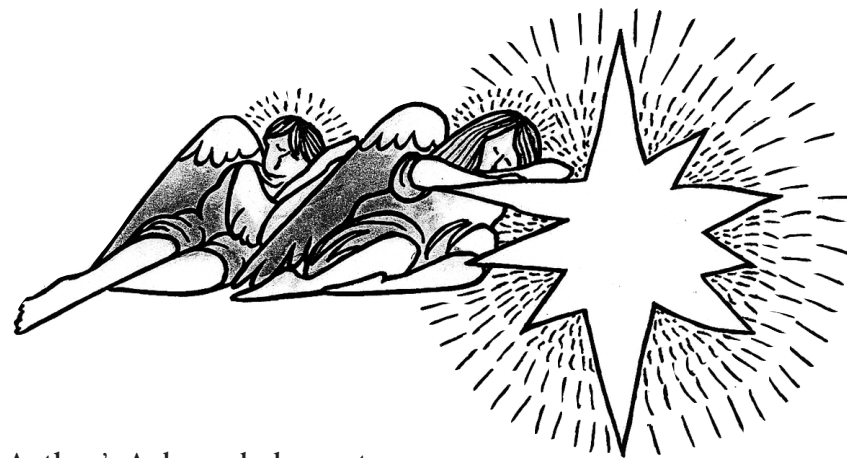
Family Component 56

Index of Scriptural Passages 61

Index of Themes 63

This book is dedicated to
David L. Chang
1958–1994

David, you gifted me with imagination and spirit.
You stretched my religious boundaries
to help me form new images for faith and worship.
You taught me to see all of life as art and service,
and to see all of prayer as exploration and discovery.



Author's Acknowledgments

Thank you, Ralph, for exploring prayer (and life!) with me in so many creative ways. And thank you for resurrecting an entire chapter from the secret caves of computer storage when I unintentionally deleted twelve hours of work with the push of a single button.

Thank you, Mom, for the joy you share in my ongoing work. The best part of being an author is having such a delightfully proud mother!

Thank you, Bishop Lawrence McNamara, for appreciating my work, for supporting me during all my writing projects, and for giving me the opportunity to serve the youth and adults in the Diocese of Grand Island.

Thank you, Lilleth Chang, for keeping in close touch with me since David's death, and for going through all of David's artwork in search of whatever might fit the needs of *Prayer Works*. Your son was amazing. So many of us miss him deeply and look to that glorious day when we will see him again.

Thank you, Bob Stamschror, for your critical eye and your challenge toward excellence. Knowing you has made me a better writer and a better person.

Thank you, Bishop Ken Untener, for being a major influence on my spiritual formation, my ministry, and my life.

Introduction to *Prayer Works*

Prayer works. It really does. Or does it?

Does it work for you? When you try to put together a meeting or an event, what's the hardest part to plan? the icebreakers and games? the theme presentations? the small-group discussions? the large-group activities? or the prayer time?

If you're like many youth ministers, the prayer time is the most difficult to plan. Why? Is it because prayer really *doesn't* work, or because it's really challenging to find ways to pray that are suitable and meaningful for teenagers?

You probably wouldn't be involved in ministry if you truly thought that prayer doesn't work. So, more than likely you just need some help finding ways to pray with young people that connect with who they are and what's important in their lives.

Perhaps you also need a renewed sense of what to expect from teenagers. For instance, if you use the same worship experience with a peer ministry team of high school seniors at a leadership training retreat, and then with a group of seventh graders at an all-night movie lock-in, can you expect the same degree of involvement and prayerfulness? Probably not.

Sets of Prayer Experiences

Here's what *Prayer Works* offers. Each of the four books includes three sets of prayer experiences. Each set consists of four prayer formats: a short prayer, a medium-length reflection prayer, a long ritual prayer, and a family prayer. Every prayer set focuses on a different image or object. The three focus objects in this book are leaves, nuts, and the four elements.

To find out what the focus objects are for the other books of *Prayer Works*, check the back cover of this book. And while you're checking, note what comes at the end of this book. You'll find that the prayers for all four books are indexed by Scripture citations and themes.

The prayer experiences in each book are easy to lead, but you will need adult volunteers to help you with many of them.

Short Prayer

The short prayer can stand by itself, or it can be the introductory prayer at an event that will include an additional prayer or two with the same focus. The short prayer is perfect for that situation

when you want to start off with some sort of prayer, *but* . . . —“*but* everyone doesn’t know one another yet,” “*but* teenagers will be feeling awkward and it probably won’t be too prayerful,” “*but* it can kill your event to get too involved too soon with anything deep or complex.” You probably know what I mean.

So this first prayer is short and sweet. It reminds us of our connection to God, quiets down the participants, focuses them, and gets them ready to begin. *But* it isn’t so long or cumbersome that the young people start getting restless.

Medium Prayer The medium-length prayer can stand by itself, or it can be the second prayer in a series of two or three prayers that you lead at an event or class. It is a faith-sharing prayer that involves self-reflection using Scripture passages or comments, reflection questions, and a conversation with a partner or small group. This prayer has an accompanying handout that contains the Scripture passage(s) or comments and the reflection questions. Directions for using the reflection part of the medium prayer follow. The directions are customized to apply to three different types of groups.

Self-Reflection and Sharing with a Small Group

If you have a group of fewer than fifteen teenagers who know one another well, give everyone a copy of the reflection handout, found at the end of the prayer set. Direct them to listen while the Scriptures and comments are being read, and then to jot down some thoughts or feelings that are triggered by the reflection questions. Naturally, you will always have some folks who aren’t “jotters” or journalers, and there is no need to pressure them to write if they don’t want to. But giving the participants time to reflect quietly, whether it is in their head or on paper, is very helpful if faith sharing is expected in the group.

One effective way to use this reflection method is to have volunteers read the different sections of the handout. For example, if the handout is arranged in this order—Scripture passage, comments, and questions—then one person reads the Scripture passage, a second person reads the comments, and a third person reads the questions, pausing after each question so that everyone (including the readers) can reflect and jot down their thoughts. That pattern would be repeated for the next set(s) of Scripture passage(s), comments, and questions.

Using different voices for different sections of the handout will help everyone listen more carefully. It’s easier to listen when different people alternate reading, as long as every reader speaks with a clear, confident voice that can be heard and understood.

Allow everyone to share verbally with the group. This can be done in a random, spontaneous, whoever-is-ready-to-share-can-share method. Or it can be done with an ordered, go-around-in-a-circle-and-share method.

Often the focusing object (for example, a nut) can be used as a turn designator for this type of prayer. When it’s time for sharing, you, as the prayer leader, pick up the object first, offer your reflections, and then pass the object to the next person to do the same. Or, after you pick up the object and offer a reflection, you place it back in the center of the group and whoever else is ready to share can pick up the object and start sharing.

By the way, not only does the focusing object make an excellent turn designator, it also does a fine job of helping people forget that everyone is watching them. It can be awkward for some people—especially teenagers, but adults as well—to talk to a group when everyone is looking at them. Having an object to fiddle with can distract them from that awkward feeling and help them feel more comfortable.

The prayer experience can be ended with the closing reflection included in the prayer set or with any spontaneous words you think are appropriate.

Self-Reflection and Sharing with a Large Group

If you have a group larger than fifteen and don’t want to separate the young people into smaller groups for the process just described, you can change the dynamics of this experience by not distributing the reflection handout to everyone. Instead, tell everyone to find a partner to share with. Call on designated readers to read the Scripture passage(s), comments, and questions from the handout. As each question is read, the partners can share with each other. You might direct the young people to switch partners periodically if you are trying to build community in your group. Or you might direct them to keep the same partner if you are more concerned with developing fewer but deeper relationships. End the prayer experience with the closing reflection or words of your own choosing.

Self-Reflection and Sharing with a Journaling Group

If you intend to have the group write in a journal, have the Scripture passage(s), comments, and questions from the handout already written on a chalkboard, piece of poster board, or overhead projector. Everyone can then write the questions in their journal, respond to one or more of them, and then join a journaling partner for a faith-sharing walk. Because this type of sharing disperses the group, it doesn’t always work well to end the activity with a closing reflection, but that’s up to you as you plan your event and assess your group’s needs. Sometimes you might want to regather and close as a unified group; other times you might want to let the partners’ sharing flow into a break or meal and have no official closing.

Long Prayer The long prayer can stand by itself or serve as one in a series of two or three prayers at an event or class. This prayer involves more creativity and ritual than the short and medium ones. It is difficult

to describe or summarize because it varies so much from prayer set to prayer set. The long prayer, as its name suggests, usually takes the most time, but it depends on your group and the situation.

Here are examples of the processes in some of the long prayers in the four books of *Prayer Works*:

- ♦ In book 1, the long prayer with the rock image focuses on the strength and permanence of virtues and principles. It involves painting words on actual rocks.
- ♦ In book 2, the long prayer with the nuts image focuses on the importance of God in a life of many choices. It involves creating a faith carrier out of a jar of rice and walnuts.
- ♦ In book 3, the long prayer with the four seasons image focuses on the seasons and repeating patterns in our life. It involves a prayer journey to four different environments.
- ♦ In book 4, the long prayer with the puzzle image focuses on the puzzle of sin and on finding our peace (as well as our piece) in a reconciliation service. It involves working with puzzle pieces.

Family Component

The most unique aspect of *Prayer Works* is the family component. So often families have no idea what their teenage members do at parish events and retreats. But *Prayer Works* gives you an easy way to involve parents and siblings in the prayer experienced by the teen. Two items make up the family component: a family handout and a sample letter for families.

Family Handout

Each set of prayers includes a handout containing a family faith-sharing prayer. The family handout is modeled after the medium prayer handout, but the teenager does *not* need to have experienced that prayer for the family handout to be effective. The family handout includes directions and questions designed for use in family settings. You can photocopy the handout and use it in one of the following settings:

A gathering of families after a retreat or long event. End a youth retreat or other event with a family meal. Invite all the parents, brothers, sisters, and whoever else may share your young people's homes with them. After the meal, invite several young people to get up and share about parts of their prayer experience by telling stories, doing skits, or showing examples of what happened.

The families can then share their answers to the questions on the handout. Even young children can participate in answering most of the questions. In this way, the families not only have some idea of the kind of experience their teenagers had but also share in the experience itself.

A separate gathering of youth and families. Hold a reunion for the teens who participated in an event or retreat, and invite all their family members to attend. Or just have a gathering for the young people you work with and their families. In either case, after a

meal, do an activity that involves storytelling or skits related to the event in which the prayer was used, or just distribute the family handout and move the family groups into conversation using the faith questions.

A bulletin or parish newsletter insert. Use the family handout as a bulletin or parish newsletter insert. This is a wonderful way to spread the good news about what young people in your faith community are doing. Write a brief article about the event in which you used the related prayer forms with the young people. Include other folksy details about where you were, the history of the event, or some of the related activities. Explain that you are providing this family prayer handout as a service to *all* families, whether or not they had a teenager who attended the event, and that you hope it helps spread the kind of spirit the parish's young people experienced at the event.

A personal letter and take-home handout. Send a personal letter home to the parents of the participants, highlighting parts of your group's event or retreat, and thanking them for making the family arrangements that were necessary for their teenager to attend the event. A sample letter for families (described below) is included at the end of each set of prayers for you to use as a guide in composing your own letter.

A follow-up mailing. A few days after the meeting or event, mail the family handout to the parents of the young people who attended, along with a letter of explanation.

Sample Letter for Families

At the end of each set of prayers, a sample letter for families is offered for possible use with the family prayer handout. Be sure to customize the letter to match the prayer and the setting in which it was used. And be sure to personalize the letter by using the names of the young people and parents. If you do not have access to a computer to make this feasible, then you could ask a few volunteers to type up the letters for you. Simply supply the basic text, with a list of the names and addresses of the young people and their parents. You'll find this extra effort goes a long way.

Benefits of the Family Component

If you are hesitant about including a family component in your plans, please consider the benefits. If you get to know your young people's families, the young people will be more apt to come to future events because their parents will feel a greater attachment to you and your parish. The parents will be more likely to call on you in an emergency because they have developed trust in you, and they will also be more likely to say yes when you need volunteers. Besides, taking care of family needs and helping families develop their faith is a wonderful way to improve the lives of your young people. So how can you go wrong? That's a winning combination!

Prayer Works for Youth Leaders, Parents, and Peer Ministers

Don't worry about how to pull off these prayers—each one is simple to do and has already proven successful with teenagers. And the instructions are very specific and easy to follow, which makes it possible for peer ministers, parents, and youth leaders to run the experiences. For instance, material that is to be presented aloud to the group is highlighted with a black rule at the left margin. Teen leaders who are looking for prayers to facilitate will like these because they get the participants involved. Moreover, the prayers in each set have the same format, and that makes it easy to add icebreakers or related activities with a similar focus.

If the teens can do it, so can you. All you need is a little faith. So relax. Remember, prayer works. It really does.

Prayer Set 1 *Leaves*



Short Prayer

Themes ♦ celebration
♦ hellos and good-byes

Background Information This prayer uses leaves as a sign of celebration and reminds us how nature introduces the comings and goings of leaves in spring and autumn with explosions of color. For trees, and for people, hellos and good-byes are usually significant.

Preparation

Supplies a basket or tray of leaves—more than one leaf per participant
 a table (the actual table you are sitting around, or a small tray table in the middle of the room)

Setting This prayer can take place almost anywhere, with the participants arranged in almost any position. They can sit around a meeting table, on the floor, or on couches and chairs spread out around the room. They can even stand. Because the prayer is so brief, it doesn't require a distraction-free environment. As long as the participants can hear the words and see the speaker, the prayer can be effective.

Ask the participants to each bring a leaf, or gather an assortment of leaves yourself. If you gather the leaves, place them in a basket or tray and set them on the table in the center of your prayer space.

Expectations This prayer works equally well with junior high youth, senior high youth, and adults. Everyone is familiar with saying hello and good-bye, and most people have seen trees that change with the seasons, even if they live in very hot or very cold climates. The prayer is short, to the point, and sets the mood to go forward into your meeting, event, retreat, class, or other gathering.

Procedure If the participants have each brought their own leaf, ask them to come forward and place it on the table. If you have gathered the leaves, then ask each participant to choose a leaf from the basket or tray of leaves and put it on the table. If you are already sitting around a meeting table, you can accomplish this by passing the basket or tray of leaves around and asking each participant to pick one and then set it on the table.

Once all the leaves are in place, proclaim the prayer in a clear and confident voice. If you have an active and restless group, you might first ask them to quiet themselves in order to become more aware of the presence of God.

Prayer 1. First, read the following prayer:

Today is the day our God has made!
Let's be happy and rejoice today!
Blessed are we when we come in the name of God!
Blessed are you from the house of God.
God has given us light; God has given us this festive day.
Let us lay leaves and boughs on the altar and praise God!
We thank you, God, because you are so good.
Your compassion and love go on and on forever.
(Adapted from Ps. 118:24–29)

2. Next, deliver the following commentary:

We have placed our leaves on our altar, and we are ready for the day our God has made. So it is right that we should rejoice and be happy today as we gather together to do God's work.

3. Continue with the following reflection on leaves:

In the springtime, when the buds first come out and certain trees explode with pink and white, it delights our spirit to know that the cold winter months are behind us.

In the summer, when trees are filled with leaves, we can stand beneath a tree, look up, and not even see the sun because of all the leaves—thick, full, and green.

Then in the autumn, the trees change again. They burst with brilliant shades of orange, yellow, red, and even purple. They seem to be most alive and beautiful right before they fall off and die.

Of course, during the winter we see the bare skeletons of trees. They almost seem to shiver in the cold, as the chilling wind howls and blows right through them.

But the leaves keep coming back. And every year their arrival in the spring and their departure in the autumn is announced with vibrant color and excitement.

Like leaves, our hellos and good-byes are usually marked with color and excitement. Think of someone you care about whom you haven't seen for a long time. Isn't it wonderful when you finally see them again? Don't you usually hug them joyfully?

Isn't it difficult when they go? We always want to be there to say good-bye and share another hug, because the good-bye is the last thing we will share with them before that next hello.

Even the hellos and good-byes of a regular school day are significant. If you see one of your friends in the morning and don't get a hello, you feel left out. If one of your friends sees you leaving in the afternoon without even waving good-bye, you feel abandoned.

Hellos and good-byes are important. And so is the time between those hellos and good-byes.

Right now our group is between its hellos and good-byes: we have already come together, and we haven't left yet.

So let's make the most of this time together.

4. Next, read the following prayer:

Fascinating God,
 whose marvelous imagination created leaves
 that grow and change color
 and delight us through the seasons,
 be with us today.
 Thank you for this glorious time together,
 thank you for the chance to be happy and rejoice.
 Bless all of us, as we go about doing your work,
 in between our hellos and good-byes.
 Amen.

5. Conclude with the following reminder:

If there is someone here you haven't said hello to yet, now is your chance! We don't want anyone to feel left out.

Medium Prayer

Themes ♦ emotional health
 ♦ spiritual health
 ♦ vitality

Background Information

This prayer focuses on our need for vitality, comparing the lifelines of leaves to the lifelines of people. If we want to be fully alive, emotional and spiritual lifelines are as important as veins and arteries.

Preparation

Supplies a basket or tray of different kinds of leaves
 a cross, candle, or other objects symbolic of Christian worship
 copies of handout 1-A, "Leaves and Life"
 optional: cassettes or CDs of soft instrumental music and a cassette or CD player

Setting

How you arrange the prayer participants depends on the size of your group. Very small groups can sit around a table, in a circle on the floor, or in chairs. Larger groups can be spread out around the room. Set up one central focusing area, either in the middle of the table or the middle of the room. Place in the focusing area a large basket or tray of different kinds of leaves and a large candle, cross, or other objects symbolic of Christian worship. Play soft instrumental music in the background, and lead the prayer in or near the focusing area.

Expectations

This prayer is better suited for senior high youth than for junior high youth. The themes are a tad more mature than some of the other prayers in this manual. However, a small group of junior high youth, or an enthusiastic junior high group, should do fine with it, especially if you have several adult helpers and if you reduce the *individual* meditation time. Be patient with junior high youth. They seem to catch on to the point of this reflection *after* they've begun to discuss the questions with adults. Then they go with it.

Procedure

Opening Reflection Explain to the participants that they will be spending some time thinking about leaves and life, and about how the two are connected. To begin the prayer, read the following reflection or ask a volunteer who is an excellent reader to do so.

1. Set the context for the story with the following words:

The Tree That Survived the Winter is a story about a tree coming to grips with the pain of the long, cold months, and the feeling of being abandoned by the sun to endure the winter alone. This is a conversation between the tree and the sun.

2. Next, read the following excerpt from the story:

The sun's glow only intensified and the message was repeated. "You have survived the winter because you are very much loved."

"Loved?" She hesitated, not wanting to challenge the statement but needing to be reassured.

"It's true," replied the sun, "that there were days when the clouds seemed to separate us, but I was really there, even when you couldn't see me. And those days when I was visible but remote—when you couldn't feel my warmth—those were the days when I sent a concentration of light. Why, there were even times when I gave you light and snow at the same time so that my brightness would be reflected up at you as well as shining down. Those were the days when you thought the glare was too strong, the light was too bright. You were seeing more than you wanted to see. Remember?"

The tree stood dumbfounded.

The sun continued. "The chills and ice and bitter cold have toughened your timber to just the right degree, for you needed to be strong to carry the fruit that will appear on your branches. If I had stayed too close all winter, you would not have grown this strong. In fact, you could not have become at all what I hoped and dreamed you would be. But now—just look at you!"

A blush of pink coursed through her petals. The tree stood speechless.

... "You have believed," sparkled the sun. "You have always believed, and that is what enabled you to grow. For had you not kept faith with me in the center of your being, you could not have blossomed into you." (Fahy, *The Tree That Survived the Winter*, n.p.)

3. Summarize the point of the story in the following words:

This tree having faith in the sun is like us having faith in God. Trees and their leaves go through cold and windy times, as well as warm and sunny times. As people, we too go through harsh and bitter times, as well as warm and easy times. Our faith in God and our connection to others is what helps us weather the storms and come out of them all right—even better than before.

Self-Reflection and Sharing

Use handout 1–A, "Leaves and Life," for self-reflection and sharing. This part of the prayer can be done with small groups, large groups, or journaling groups. Details for using the handout with each of these types of groups are included in this manual's introduction, on pages 8–10.

Closing Reflection

If a meal is to follow the self-reflection and sharing, you could announce ahead of time that the meal will begin right after the self-reflection and sharing and thus the group will not have a formal gathered closing.

If you are going to have a closing reflection, the Scripture passage on handout 1–A is offered as an option. You can either read it yourself or ask a volunteer who is a good reader to do so.

You could instead end the self-reflection and sharing with words of your own, or ask the small groups or prayer partners to end their time together with spontaneous prayer. Use whatever seems most fitting for your group, your setting, and your time schedule.

Long Prayer

- Themes**
- ♦ the blessing of cultural diversity
 - ♦ our uniqueness and preciousness to God

Background Information This prayer focuses on the diversity of leaves and the diversity of people—how each leaf and each person is unique, having distinct gifts and characteristics.

Preparation

- Supplies**
- a large basket or tray of leaves—more than one leaf per participant
 - a candle, cross, or other objects symbolic of Christian worship
 - optional*: cassettes or CDs of soft instrumental music and a cassette or CD player

Setting Your room needs to be a comfortable size for the number of people in your group. The group can sit around a table, on the floor in a circle, or spread out around the room on couches and easy chairs.
Place in the focusing area a large basket or tray of leaves and a candle, cross, or other objects symbolic of Christian worship. Encourage silence or play soft instrumental music.

Expectations This prayer works well with motivated high school youth, even with groups as large as thirty or forty, if several adults are present. But if you are planning to do this prayer with junior high youth, or with senior high youth who don't want to be there, then you need a smaller group (eight to twelve participants), or you need to break up your large group into several smaller groups, each with several adult helpers.

Procedure

Call to Prayer Say something like the following to bring everyone together in the spirit of prayer:

In the name of our glorious Creator God, whose imagination dreamed up the beauty of our trees, bushes, and plants, I welcome you to this time of worship. We turn to this wonderful, affectionate God to hear words of comfort and love.

Scripture Reading Have an excellent reader proclaim these words:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
.....
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you.
.....
Do not fear, for I am with you.
.....
“bring my sons from far away,
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”
(Isa. 43:1–7, NRSV)

..... I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.
(Isa. 49:15–16, NRSV)

Leaf Ritual Lead everyone through the leaf ritual in the following way.

1. Begin with this introduction:

God knows each of us as a precious, unique, individual child that is loved, honored, and cherished.
There are billions of people in the world, and God knows each of us by name.
And the world includes many different people—so much diversity. There are Africans, Asians, Europeans, South Americans, and American Indians. There are married people, single people, and divorced people. There are stepsisters, half brothers, godmothers, and grandfathers. There are heterosexuals and homosexuals. There are infants, school children, teenagers, twenty-somethings, and thirty-forty-fifty-sixty-seventy-eighty-ninety-somethings. How does God keep track?
Each of us is a precious, unique, individual child of God that is loved, honored, and cherished.

This basket contains a lot of leaves. The world is full of different leaves—so much diversity. There are maples, oaks, elms, chestnuts, firs, pines, spruces, and palms. There are tropical, woodland, and mountain trees. There are coniferous and deciduous trees. How can we keep track?

Each leaf in this basket is a unique creation of God.

We will be passing the leaves around the circle. When the basket comes to you, select one leaf and hold on to it.

2. Pass the basket around. Be ready to encourage individuals to move more quickly if they are taking too long to find the “perfect leaf.” When the basket comes back to you, remove the remaining leaves. Continue leading the participants through the process with these or similar words:

Examine your leaf, look for its unique traits. Look over its color, the shape of its edges, the length of its stem, the pattern of its veins. Get to know your leaf as an individual creation of God.

I will pass the basket around again. When it comes to you, put your leaf back. The basket will come around one more time after that, and you will be asked to find your own leaf again—the one you originally held in your hand and examined, the one whose uniqueness you discovered the first time the basket was passed.

3. Pass the empty basket around the circle so that everyone can put their leaf in it. When the basket returns to you, gently scramble the leaves so that their order is no longer the same. But be careful not to damage any of the leaves. Pass the basket in the same direction again, so that the first person to have placed his or her leaf into the basket is also the first person to remove his or her leaf from the basket. Continue the process with these or similar words:

As you looked through the leaves, you might have discovered that no leaf is perfect. Every leaf is beautiful, but each one has imperfections. Some are torn, some are uneven, some have holes, some are bent, some are colored with blotches. But all of them are wonderful. I think God wants us to understand that we don't have to be perfect in order to be wonderful.

Together all the leaves on a tree can do what the tree needs to have done. Together all of us can do what our group needs to have done. Sometimes it helps the group if we all see the unique traits of each member. So we're going to take that opportunity now and have a brief group sharing.

As we go around the circle, please tell us one thing you can offer the group—a gift or talent you have. Also tell us one thing you need from the group—an area in which you are not so strong. And as we hear about the gifts and needs of our group, let us remember that we don't need to be perfect in order to be wonderful.

4. Begin the sharing yourself, as an example for the group. Be brief. After everyone has shared, move on to the blessing, in step 5.

Blessing Read this story, which contains the blessing:

A legend in the Sioux tradition explains why leaves turn color in the autumn.

Many, many moons ago, when the world was young, the grass and flower folk were enjoying the beautiful summer weather. But as the days went by, the weather became colder and colder.

The grass and flowers grew sad, for they had nothing to protect them from the sharp cold. Just when it seemed that there was no hope for living, the Holy One who created all things came to their aid. The leaves of the trees were told to fall to the ground and spread a soft, warm blanket over the tender roots that were about to freeze. To repay the leaves for their kindness, the Creator gave them one last bright array of beauty.

That is why the trees take on their pretty farewell colors of red, gold, and brown each year during Indian summer. Then the leaves turn to their task of covering the earth with a thick rug of warmth.

Most people want to be useful. Like the leaves in this old Sioux legend, they want to be of service. (Adapted from Gowan, ed., *Inspiration from Indian Legends, Proverbs, and Psalms*, p. 59)

May God bless our group as we follow the example of the leaves, looking for ways to be useful and to serve those created by the Holy One. Amen.

Family Component

Details for using the family component are included on pages 11–12 of the introduction to this book. Here are a list of the supplies you will need and a reminder of the settings in which the family component can be used.

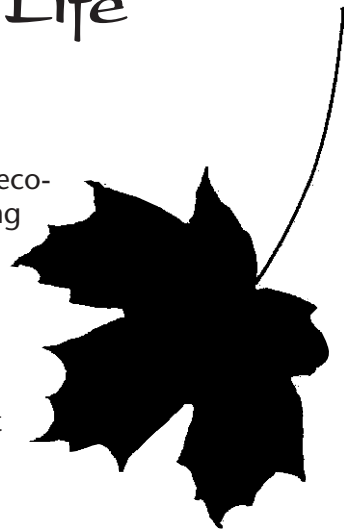
Supplies handout 1–B, “Leaves and Family Life”
 sample 1–A, “Sample Letter for Families”

Settings ♦ a gathering of families after a retreat or long event
 ♦ a separate gathering of youth and families
 ♦ a bulletin or parish newsletter insert
 ♦ a personal letter and take-home handout
 ♦ a follow-up mailing

Leaves and Life

Comments

Leaves are a big part of our celebrations. We decorate with evergreens at Christmastime. We bring in plants and flowers for weddings. We tend gardens all spring and summer, and we grow ivy up our chimneys and brick walls. We wear flowers in our hair, or pin boutonnieres on our jackets for prom night. We jump in leaf piles in autumn. Our life would be dull without all that foilage.



Question

- ♦ When have you enjoyed leaves?



Comments

When leaves are alive, they are soft, flexible, and yielding. Once they are pulled away from their source of life, they become brittle, unbending, and fragile.

People who are flexible and yielding are full of life. When people become rigid, brittle, and unbending, they lose some of that life.



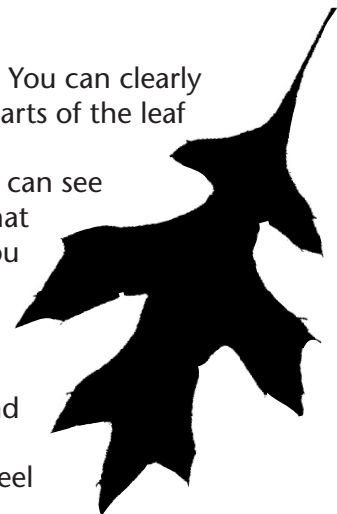
Questions

- ♦ When have you felt full of life?
- ♦ When are you flexible, yielding, and open to others?
- ♦ When have you been rigid and unbending? How did this attitude affect your ability to enjoy life? What happened to cause your rigid attitude?

Comments

When you look at a leaf, you can see its lifelines. You can clearly observe the veins that bring its life juices to all parts of the leaf and keep it healthy and fresh.

When you look at your hand and wrist, you can see your own veins. You know that your blood is what brings life to all parts of your body and keeps you healthy. Emotional lifelines, however, can be harder to identify.



Questions

- ♦ Who are the people that keep you healthy and happy?
- ♦ Who or what brings you life and makes you feel fresh?



Comments

Trees seem to die in the winter. All the leaves are gone, and nothing is left but a skeleton that looks old and lifeless. Yet the leaves return in the spring, as beautiful as ever. It seems to be a miracle, but we always trust in the sun. We believe that the warm weather will come again. And it always does.

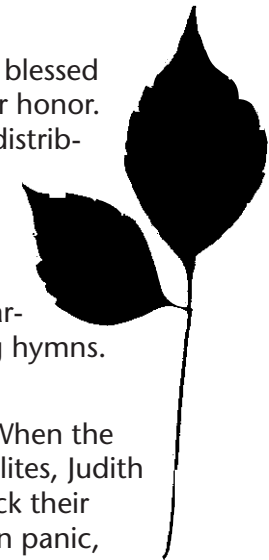
Questions

- ♦ Have you ever felt lifeless? If so, what happened to help you bounce back and feel renewed and fresh again?
- ♦ When tough times come, do you have faith in God? Do you trust God as easily as you trust the sun? Why or why not?

Closing Reflection

All the women of Israel gathered to see her, and blessed her, and some of them performed a dance in her honor. She took ivy-wreathed wands in her hands and distributed them to the women who were with her; and she and those who were with her crowned themselves with olive wreaths. She went before all the people in the dance, leading all the women, while all the men of Israel followed, bearing their arms and wearing garlands and singing hymns. (Judith 15:12–13, NRSV)

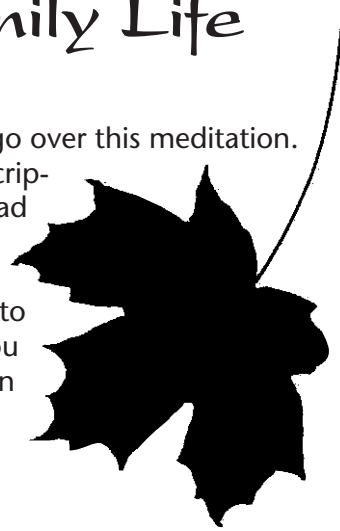
The woman described in this passage is Judith. When the massive Assyrian army was going to destroy the Israelites, Judith went to their camp all by herself and managed to trick their general, Holofernes, and kill him. The Assyrians fled in panic, and the Israelites were saved! Judith led the Israelite people in a tremendous victory celebration with prayer, dancing, and singing. They celebrated with garlands and wreaths of ivy leaves and olive leaves. Thousands of years ago, leaves were already being used for significant occasions.



May the leaves we see today and every day, be a constant reminder to us of our God, a God of joy, celebration, and blessing. Amen.

Leaves and Family Life

As a family, you might sit down together and go over this meditation. One family member could read the opening Scripture reading, another family member might read the explanation that follows, and others could take turns reading the other comments and questions. Then you could share your answers to the questions, along with any other insights you may have. Keeping a leaf on or near the kitchen table for a while might remind your family of your reflection time together and of your commitment to faith.



Opening Scripture Reading

All the women of Israel gathered to see her, and blessed her, and some of them performed a dance in her honor. She took ivy-wreathed wands in her hands and distributed them to the women who were with her; and she and those who were with her crowned themselves with olive wreaths. She went before all the people in the dance, leading all the women, while all the men of Israel followed, bearing their arms and wearing garlands and singing hymns. (Judith 15:12–13, NRSV)



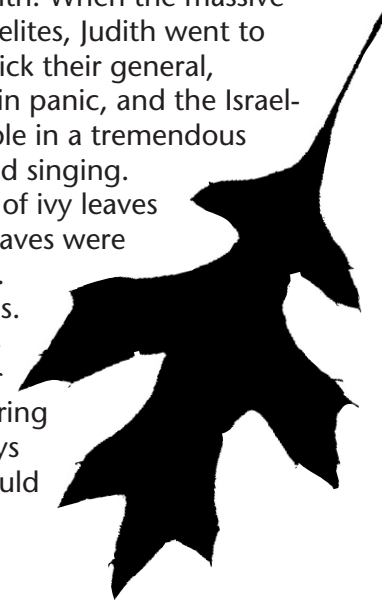
Comments

The woman described in this passage is Judith. When the massive Assyrian army was going to destroy the Israelites, Judith went to their camp all by herself and managed to trick their general, Holofernes, and kill him. The Assyrians fled in panic, and the Israelites were saved! Judith led the Israelite people in a tremendous victory celebration with prayer, dancing, and singing. They celebrated with garlands and wreaths of ivy leaves and olive leaves. Thousands of years ago, leaves were already being used for significant occasions.

Leaves are a big part of our celebrations. Families decorate with evergreens at Christmastime and bring in plants and flowers for weddings. Family gardens are tended all spring and summer, and ivy grows up the chimneys and brick walls of many homes. Our life would be dull without all that foliage.

Question

- ♦ When has your family enjoyed leaves?



Comments

When leaves are alive, they are soft, flexible, and yielding. Once they are pulled away from their source of life, they become brittle, unbending, and fragile.

Families who are flexible and yielding are full of life. When parents, sons, or daughters become rigid, brittle, and unbending, they lose some of that life.

Questions

- ♦ When have you felt full of life?
- ♦ When have you been flexible, yielding, and open to others in your family?
- ♦ When have you been rigid and unbending? How did this attitude affect your ability to enjoy life? How did it affect the other members of your family? What do you think happened to cause your rigid attitude?



Comments

When you look at a leaf, you can see its lifelines. You can clearly observe the veins that bring its life juices to all parts of the leaf and keep it healthy and fresh.

When you look at your hand and wrist, you can see your own veins. You know that your blood is what brings life to all parts of your body and keeps you healthy. Emotional lifelines, however, can be harder to identify.



Questions

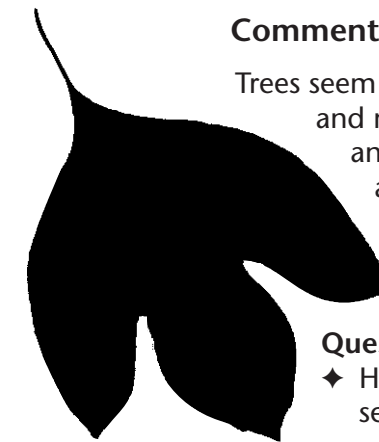
- ♦ How does your family help keep you healthy and happy?
- ♦ What family practices or customs bring life and make you feel fresh?

Comments

Trees seem to die in the winter. All the leaves are gone, and nothing is left but a skeleton that looks old and lifeless. Yet the leaves return in the spring, as beautiful as ever. It seems to be a miracle, but we always trust in the sun. We believe that the warm weather will come again. And it always does.

Questions

- ♦ Has your family ever been through a time that seemed lifeless? If so, what happened to help your family bounce back and feel renewed and fresh again?
- ♦ When tough times come, does your family find faith in God? In what way?
- ♦ Do you trust God as easily as you trust the sun? Why or why not?



Sample 1-A

Sample Letter for Families

Dear _____,

It has been a pleasure having _____ with us. Thank you for making all the necessary family arrangements so that he/she could be with us. It was truly a gift from your family to our parish community.

During our time together, we focused on leaves as symbols of our need for vitality, comparing the lifelines of leaves to the lifelines of people. In fact, we shared a prayer experience based on leaves. You might ask _____ what she/he thought of the experience.

Enclosed is a family-based version of the reflection prayer we used. I encourage you to take some time during or after a family meal to go through the questions and discuss them as a family. You could even spend some time sharing stories from your childhood. Keeping an arrangement of leaves on your kitchen table for a while might serve as a reminder of the uniqueness of each family member. These are just a few ideas to help you get in touch with _____'s experience with this prayer.

If you have any questions about our programs, or if any of your family members would like to become more involved with our parish in any way, please don't hesitate to call me. I wish your family great peace and joy.

Sincerely,
