

Teaching Children the Lost Art of Being

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In today's world, there is a lot of emphasis placed on *knowing* and *doing* and not so much on *being*. In other words, we find ourselves focused on *what* we know and do and not enough on *who* we are. As catechists, we have the privilege of helping those we teach to develop a deeper understanding of who they are in relation to a loving God, in whose image they are created. One of the primary ways we do this is through leading reflective prayer (also known as meditation).

Reflective prayer/meditation is not something new. (I was once accused of teaching "New Age" practices by encouraging catechists to lead reflective prayer!) The Gospels tell us that Jesus often went off alone to pray; it doesn't say that he went off to "recite prayers." As important and enriching as it is to recite traditional prayers, we also need to learn the art of just resting in God's presence and meditating on or contemplating some aspect of God's truth, beauty, and goodness.

We sometimes think of meditation as something reserved for mystics and monks. Meditation, however, is simply prayer that focuses attention on God so that we can recognize his presence in our daily lives and respond to what he is asking of us. Reflective prayer (meditation) involves the imagination. Kids have great imaginations and, as a result, they love to pray in this way. Here are some tips for leading reflective prayer from my book, *The Catechist's Toolbox*:

Reflective prayer uses an approach inspired by St. Ignatius of Loyola. It invites us to pray by using the senses of imagination—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. We thereby create a setting in our minds: a welcoming place—whether it is a biblical setting or a place of our own choice—to enter into conversation with Jesus. St. Ignatius said that such conversation should resemble the way “one friend speaks to another” (*The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, 54).

As we share reflective prayer or meditation, we lead participants to use reflection and imagination, to engage in prayerful conversation with God, and to recognize his presence in their daily lives. Here are some basic steps for leading reflective prayer.

Getting Ready for Reflective Prayer—Invite the participants to focus on God’s presence. Establish a quiet, prayerful, and comfortable environment and mood to help them overcome distractions. This first step may take anywhere from three to five minutes. Consider the following as you join them in reflective prayer:

- **Encourage a Comfortable Posture**—If possible, move your participants to the prayer center and invite them to find a position in which they can be comfortable yet alert. If space is limited, invite them to get comfortable in their seats. Encourage your participants to close their eyes or to focus their attention on a symbol or a picture.
- **Invite Deep Breathing**—Take two or three minutes to help the participants to relax and breathe deeply. Ask them to rest their hands and to slowly and silently breathe in deeply and then breathe out gradually. Help them establish a rhythm to their breathing by having them count slowly to three as they breathe in, and asking them to breathe out as you count to three.
- **Use Reflective Music**—Reflective (instrumental) music can help by covering distractions and providing a soothing setting.

Leading the Reflective Prayer—Begin the reflective prayer with an invitation to reflect or meditate on an aspect of the theme that you are teaching—often a Scripture passage or a traditional prayer. Reflection time with your participants can range from just a few minutes to a quarter hour, depending on the age of your group and the circumstances.

- **Step-by-Step Directions**—Through a series of age-appropriate “directions” that you have prepared or are following from a resource (such as a book of guided meditations for children, teens, or adults), you invite your participants to engage their imagination and enter into a setting where they can encounter Jesus, dwell on his words, and converse with him.
- **Speaking Slowly and Pausing**—By speaking slowly and pausing for emphasis after each line of the reflection, you invite the participants to pray more reflectively.

Allowing Quiet Time with God—In closing, invite the participants to spend time in silence with God, while being aware of God’s presence. This is called contemplation. This last step may take anywhere from three to five minutes.

Silent Prayer—Invite your participants to rest in God’s presence. Allow one or two minutes for silent prayer, depending on the responsiveness of the group.

When introducing reflective prayer/meditation to children, be patient and take it slowly: our culture has not taught them how to remain still and quiet for extended periods of time, and they may “fight

it" at first because of their discomfort. Before long, however, they will begin to appreciate the richness that they will discover in the depths of their hearts where the Spirit resides! To introduce very young children to the practice of reflective prayer, be sure to look at this wonderful new resource, *Shhh...God Is in the Silence.*