



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: Spiritual Practices for these Times (Part I)

In times of challenge and opportunity, it often is true that people deepen their spirituality. Small but significant practices have the potential to change, deepen and intensify the beauty and gift of life.

Often when we think of spiritual practices we think of morning prayer, reading and praying with Scripture, fasting, doing a work of mercy. These are vital and meaningful practices. At the same time, since we meet God in all the events, happenings, and practices of our lives, many things can be spiritual practices. A spiritual practice is an action that connects us to the presence of the sacred, to God. It grounds us in the present moment, bringing us into awareness of what is happening right now. A spiritual practice is simply an action or habit that

- gives us energy
- reminds us of what matters most
- connects us to God and the gift of life that God has given us

In my reading, prayer and spiritual practices, I thought that, perhaps, one of the formational things we, as parish and (arch)diocesan leaders can do is to share with others some ideas and encouragement to incorporate a new spiritual practice into their lives. This can be done through

- bulletins and e-newsletters
- the parish (or {arch}diocesan) website
- Zoom gatherings
- Snail mail mailings sent to homes, especially those who do not have internet access

I heard a retreat director say the other day that one of the things that will get us through these unprecedented times is to have at least one personal practice that we do each day. In the midst of these days, it brings the reality of control into our lives. Our parishioners might want to choose and make one of these practices a habitual, everyday practice.

What follows, then, are some quotes from various people – in their books, articles, or online blogs; following the quote is one idea of a way to live it as a spiritual practice. You might want to share these with your parishioners.



Ruth Wilson in *The Power of the Smile* (<https://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/2019/04/08/the-power-of-the-smile>) says:

“But is a smile appropriate in today’s troubled world? This question stops me in my tracks. I wonder, ‘Is it OK to be happy in a world filled with greed, environmental destruction, and other forms of violence?’

I then recall Mary Oliver’s words: ‘Happiness, if done right, is a kind of holiness.’ Yes, it’s OK to smile -- even necessary to do so. Just as smiling helps me stay physically balanced during my yoga practice, so smiling during times of anxiety helps me stay emotionally and spiritually balanced. And I believe this, too, has a ripple effect.”

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Intentionally smile today as you meet or cross paths with each person. With wearing your mask, let your look and eyes smile.



In *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary*, Macrina Wiederkehr reflects:

“Holiness comes wrapped in the ordinary. There are burning bushes all around you. Every tree is full of angels. Hidden beauty is waiting in every crumb. Life wants to lead you from crumbs to angels, but this can happen only if you are willing to unwrap the ordinary by staying with it long enough to harvest its treasure.”

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Spend time on your Sunday afternoon on a treasure hunt for the holy in your encounters and actions of the past week. Where did holiness shine through?

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In one of the poems in her book, *Glimpsing Glory: Poems of Living & Dying, Praying & Playing, Belonging & Longing*, Catherine Lawton reminds us that spiritual practices can be many things when we listen and watch:

“When I was a child, I
prayed like a child
to God above,
folding hands
closing eyes
repeating words
talking to Jesus.
Not knowing
the soft wind
whispering,
branches lifting
were also prayer.
When I learned
to listen with
Spirit-pierced ear
my prayers became
shorter but more
continuous.
Recently,
the gaze—
eye to eye
heart to heart—
blends praise
confession
lamentation
supplication
waiting
knowing
resting
in One.

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Pay attention to the short but more continuous prayers you pray. There are probably many; probably many times throughout the day that you are praying.



Jamil Zaki in *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*, remarks:

“As cities grow and households shrink, we see more people than ever before, but know fewer of them. Rituals that bring us into regular contact – attending church, participating in team sports, even grocery shopping – have given way to solitary pursuits, often carried out over the internet.”

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Is there someone in your neighborhood that you do not know? Bake them some cookies and have a physically distanced conversation as you introduce yourself and ask them about themselves.



In *Seek Treasures in Small Fields: Everyday Holiness*, Joan Puls reflects:

“When you walk, be aware of those who walk alongside you, behind you, before you, of those on whose efforts you now stand. We are surrounded, says the writer of Hebrews, by a cloud of witnesses.”

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Take time to be aware of all those who walk alongside of you. Let them know of your appreciation. If they have died, pray a prayer. Say a prayer of gratitude.



In an older book (1991) *Being Home: A Book of Meditations*, Gunilla Norris prays:

“The terrible fascinates.

This reading of the paper trains my fear.

I can feel it.

I want to know the disaster even as I recoil.

I am not separate from the deaths, the demands, and the dealings, the disasters, the deceits, the demagogues, and the diplomats.

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This is our incompleteness, our separation, our greed at work.
Let me own my part.
The world's hunger is mine.
The world's helplessness is mine.
The world's failure to love is mine.
Sober me to this connection in my life.
Let the news be printed on my conscience.
Help me bear it."

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Pray with Scripture in one hand and the daily news in the other. Choose one news item which you can do something about, e.g. letter to the editor, donation to a cause, a conversation with another, an in-depth study for clearer understanding, etc.



David Russell Mosley in the article, "How the medieval practice of stargazing can change your prayer life," in the October 2020 issue of *U.S. Catholic*, shares his experience:

"The beauty of the heavens moved me to praise God. This is often how I feel when staring into the night sky. I see those lights: We're told that so many of them burned out millennia ago and yet their light continues to reach us. But I'm not moved by just the beauty of their light. Their movements, the cosmic dance, also lead me to praise God. This must be part of what the psalmist meant when he said, "The heavens are telling the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1).

Foreordained since the creation of our galaxy, the Earth passed between the sun and moon that night. I nearly wept as I reflected on the God who made these planets, these once-called gods of the night sky."

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Lay in your backyard – or if it is too cool, sit or lay near a window – and watch the movement of the sky. Reflect on God who made the planets and stars that you see. Recall that I think we are made of stardust and that the stars themselves, along with everything else in creation, have been united to Christ in the incarnation, that all things exist for a reason - the chief of which is to give praise to God. Wonder about the future, not because the stars can tell us what is to come, but because to look on their vastness and innumerable is to see an analogy for the eternity that God intends to share with us.



In *Saints Are Now: Eight Portraits of Modern Sanctity*, John J. Delaney relates:

"It is not so much a question of where to look to find saints, rather it is merely the need to remove the blinders from our eyes, for saints are here in our age just as they have been for every age for the past two millennia."

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Read the stories of saints from various religious traditions. What are the qualities, virtues and characteristics to look for in the saints of our times?



Sarah Bessey remarks in her book, *Out of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith*:

"One soul is as valuable as thousands, millions. One soul is as important as ninety-nine, worth leaving behind everything to rescue. If there is one soul in your care, one face in your loving gaze, one hand you are holding, then you are still holding the world. The work you do today, the love you give and receive and lavish on the seemingly small people and tasks - all of these "little" things are tipping the scales of justice and mercy in our world. Everything we do from the mundane to the glamorous to the difficult and all points between can testify. I believe all of our lives are a proclamation."

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

At the end of each day, recall (and give thanks for) one thing you did for one person, however small you think it might be. (It probably wasn't to them.)



G. K. Chesterton wrote:

"At the back of our brains, so to speak, there is a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spiritual life is to dig for this sunrise of wonder."

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: In your morning prayer, focus on what element of your life. Give thanks. Throughout your day, be aware of and wonder at your astonishing existence.

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John Shea wrote in an article, "Have yourself a defiant little Christmas," in the December 2015 issue of U.S. Catholic (<https://uscatholic.org/articles/201512/have-yourself-a-defiant-little-christmas/>):

"Christmas arrives to find our health precarious, our careers, jobs, or vocations under stress, our finances dipping badly, our relationships in need of repair, and our society and world slightly insane. How can we celebrate Christmas in situations like these? Isn't the only realistic response anxiety and gloom?"

When the outer world is darkness, barrenness, and rejection, Christmas is a lesson in bringing forth and responding to the inner world of light, greenness, and love. Spiritual teachers think that since this inner world is rooted in a transcendent love, it is more powerful than all the attacks that emerge out of both our finitude and sinfulness. "I have said this that you might have peace in me. In the world you have tribulations, but cheer up, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Christmas cheer, when it is modeled on this passage from Saint John, engenders in us a gentle defiance to the tribulations of the world. Gentle defiance is not on the standard list of Christian virtues, but it is the Christmas gift that we all need to unwrap at one December or another."

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

- Place a candle and/or greenery in your home where you will see it often. Let it remind you of your light, greenness and love.
- When you find yourself reminded of the challenges that surround us, be defiant. Speak positively; look for the good; bring joy.



On Christmas Eve 1513, Fra Giovanni Giocondo, a Franciscan friar, wrote the following letter to his friend Countess Allagia Aldobrandeschi:

"I salute you!

There is nothing I can give you which you have not; but there is much, that, while I cannot give, you can take.

No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today.
Take Heaven.

No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present instant.
Take Peace.

The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, yet within our reach is joy.
Take Joy.

And so at this Christmastime, I greet you with the prayer that for you, now and forever, the day breaks and the shadows flee away."

TO LIVE THIS AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

In your Christmas cards, write a message of hope, affirmation, and peace to your family and friends.



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found in:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*
http://www.lifelongfaith.com/store/p25/The_Seasons_of_Adult_Faith_Formation.html and <http://www.lifelongfaith.com/2015-adult-faith-formation-symposium.html>