

God is Always More: Many Ways to Image God

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One day a concerned mother took her young son to see the pastor of their parish. She courteously said to him, “Father, would you please listen to Billy say the Our Father. He’s got it all mixed up.”

So the helpful priest and Billy went into the office and Father asked Billy to say the Our Father. “Our Father, who are in New Haven, how do you know my name?” the little child began.

“Well,” said the mother, when the two emerged from the priest’s office. “Did you straighten him out?”

“No,” said Father. “Right now I wouldn’t change a word of the way he says the Our Father. His way shows that he understands two important things about God: first, that God is very near; second, that God knows him personally.”

Believer or not, pious or skeptic, reflective or flippant, young or old, we each carry within ourselves an image of who God is supposed to be, of what we believe God is responsible for, of who God is. Our image of God might not always be uppermost in our thoughts, but it influences everything:

- how we see ourselves
- how we understand our role and responsibility in the world
- how we pray
- what we think religion is.

Our ideas about and images of God are formed by many factors: our family, our prayer and worship experiences and participation in community life, the way we're taught, the things we hear others say to and about God, the limitation of language, etc.

As catechists, we are keenly aware that everything teaches. As catechists, we know that we have a wonderful and challenging responsibility in helping children and youth shape and deepen their image of God into an image that is wholesome, healthy, and whole ... one that calls forth and solidifies an intimate love relationship.

Images of God which we don't want to teach
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Perhaps a first step in helping others shape their image of God is for us, as catechists, to be aware of some of the images of God that are prevalent in society that can be warped or destructive of the image of God that is given to us by Jesus through Scripture. Do the following images of God reflect

- the Father in the Parable of the Forgiving Father (although we like to call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son)?
- abba - daddy (in a culture where Jews were forbidden to even say the name of God)?
- a God who wants only good things?
- a God who loves – not as a reward for good behavior but simply because God wants to?
- a God who is ready to forgive even before forgiveness is asked for?

A GOD WHO TESTS ... This image of God can be traced back to some of the most ancient interpretations of biblical accounts, such as Abraham and Isaac. Yet, lovers do not test one another. If they begin to test each other, it is an indication that all is not secure in their relationship. We have always known that we shouldn't tempt God. The inverse is also true. A loving God would not tease, test, or tempt us.

GOD THE DISCIPLINARIAN (or Law-maker or Police or Legal God) ... This God keeps an accounting of what we do. In many ways, this image of God can keep God at a distance from us. As we sometimes view police in our lives, this God will leave us alone as long as we obey the "thou-shall-nots."

GOD THE BUSINESS PERSON ... This God provides salvation in return for specified services (going to Mass, dropping something in the collection basket, caring for the less fortunate, etc.). This image can say to people, "If I do these good things, God will love me." This really misses the mark. God loves us - period. There are no qualifications. The reality is that when we experience unconditional love, our only response is that we want to be good, to do the good things (but not because we have a business pact with God).

GOD OF PRIZE AND PUNISHMENT ... This God is one that many people have grown up with. The motive for loving God is to gain the heavenly prize and avoid the punishment of hell. From the viewpoint of love – God's unconditional love – love is beyond reward and punishment. Love is beyond reward because a person loves for the

sake of the other, not for the sake of a prize. Love is beyond punishment because the fear (of punishment) all but renders love impossible.

GOD THE ASTUTE SAVINGS AND LOAN OFFICER ... This God is related to the

God of Prize and Punishment. This God – too prevalent in our culture – approves personal or national wealth. Have you ever heard: “We must be doing what God wants; look at our affluence (or “success” or “power” “or influence”).”

Perhaps you haven’t heard it in words, but do people’s actions at times “say” that?

GOD THE CEO OR STRATEGIST ... This vision is of a God who is making

“inside” arrangements for us, not for them. “God is on our side.” We can laugh about it when we wonder whose side God is on, which prayers God is listening to, when Notre Dame plays Georgetown, but it often happens in other - more serious - areas of our lives as one community. Do we convey the idea that God is “on our side” when we draw lines between groups of people and presume/act as though our way is, of course, the correct way?

In *The War Prayer*, Mark Twain says:

“If you would beseech
a blessing upon yourself, beware!
lest without intent
you invoke a curse upon a neighbor
at the same time.
If you pray for the blessing of rain
upon your crop which needs it,
by that act you are possibly praying
for a curse upon some neighbor’s crop
which may not need rain
and can be injured by it.”

That is still a minor example of a God who we want to take sides compared to the challenging image Mark Twain gives us in the remainder of his poem. (It is a must read for anyone serious about growing in faith and passing that faith on to others. *The War Prayer* by Mark Twain. Harper and Row, 1970)

GOD THE TORTURER ... No one would really attribute this title to God, but do we do it by the things we say, the things we believe? In struggling to find a meaning for suffering, we surmise that God must somehow be involved and is ultimately responsible for deformed babies, the death of young parents, car and airplane crashes, storms and earthquakes, etc. We try to console one another by saying, "It's the will of God." (I've always found it interesting that when things go wrong we give God the credit: It's an act of God." But in the good things that happen, humans give themselves all the credit: the majesty of a Beethoven symphony, medical advances, space exploration, etc.)

But a loving God wouldn't cause suffering. There are other reasons/causes for suffering: We live in a world of inflexible natural laws. We – and the world – are imperfect, on the road to perfection. The gift of free choice means that wrong choices can cause much suffering. The Psalmist (in Psalm 121) never says that his pain/his tragedy comes from God; but that his help comes from the Lord.

THE GOD WHOSE COMING WE CONTROL ... It is true that God will never force a relationship with us. God wants to be invited into all the parts of our lives. But, do we give a false notion of God when our prayers say: "God, please come and be with us?" God is with us; God is never far away from us. Our prayer needs to ask God's help to make us more aware / more alive to the presence of God everywhere.

This notion of telling God what to do also often comes through in our prayers of intercession. Many of our General Intercessions often sound like we're giving God good advice on how to run the world, rather than asking for God's strength and courage so that we can and will make a difference in the world.

GOD IN HEAVEN ... God is certainly in heaven, but if that is what our concentration is always about, we can make God very unapproachable. God is transcendent, all-knowing and all powerful, but God is also imminent, always close at hand. If our focus is always on God in heaven, angels and saints become a go-between in our relationship with God. Although the saints and angels have an important place with us in the Communion of Saints and the interconnection of all creation, our relationship with God needs to be very personal, one in which we are very comfortable without needing go-betweens.

Images of God that we are called to share

Several years ago octuplets were born to a Christian Nigerian couple in Houston Texas. They blessed their children with names which mean: God is great! God is beautiful! God thinks of me! God knows my way! God has my life! God is my strength!

God is my leader! and God is merciful! Wonderful images of God ... among those that we most certainly want to teach!

Images of God surround us everywhere (if we but look for them); the first place we go to as Christians, of course, is Scripture. Scripture abounds with multiple images of God. Use many of them; acquaint children/youth with various ones – because we will never fully capture the mystery, awe and wonder of God ... even if we use every image that humanity has ever thought of.

Some of Scripture's images of God are:

- Images taken from personal relationships: father, mother, husband, female beloved, companion, bridegroom, friend, suffering servant, protector
- Images taken from political life: advocate, liberator, king, warrior, judge
- Images in a wide array of human crafts and professions: good shepherd, dairymaid, farmer, laundress, construction worker, potter, sower of good seed, fisherman, midwife, merchant, physician, bakerwoman, teacher, writer, artist, nurse, metal worker, homemaker, woman giving birth, woman nursing her young, mother dedicated to child care
- Images from the animal kingdom: roaring lion, hovering mother bird, angry mother bear, protective mother hen
- Images from cosmic reality: light, cloud, rock, fire, wind, living water, refreshing water, life itself

As you introduce your children and young people to these myriad images, help them to see and experience a God who:

- is like a loving parent who regards each of us as beloved children

- is always near, always eager to be with us
- is personally concerned about what is going on in our lives
- is eager for us to be happy and to experience the fullness of life
- is infinitely patient with our shortcomings
- is infinitely merciful, always ready and eager to forgive
- is faithful and will never go back on the promises made to us
- is all powerful, the Creator of all things
- is eager to communicate with us, enlighten us, guide us, and share God's wisdom with us as we journey through life.

Things that Catechists Can do to help children deepen their image of God

1. Always mention God. That might seem as though it goes without saying, but when lessons focus on the Church, justice and peace, etc., do we connect them to God? We know that we're talking about that particular theme because of God and God's call to us. But don't take it for granted in catechetical sessions with our young people.

2. Don't talk about God from memory. Talk about God from your present day experience. Be willing to share your faith with those to whom you are ministering. Talk about your experiences of God, your beliefs in a God who loves unconditionally.

3. As mentioned above, help children to become familiar with the various images of God in Scripture. Encourage them to search some of these Scripture passages and describe the image of God that is presented: Psalms 104:5-8, Isaiah 64:7, Psalms 24:10, 1 Samuel 16:7, Isaiah 66:13, Ezekiel 34:16, Psalms 23:5, Psalms 36:7, Hosea 11:1-4, Isaiah 6:3, Isaiah 49:15-16, Genesis 33:22-32, 1 Kings 19:1-12, Isaiah 49:13-16, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 9:2-8, Luke 15:1-24, Acts 2:1-4, Jeremiah 31:10, John 10:1-21, Hebrews 13:20, Matthew 23:37-39, Matthew 7:7-11, Matthew 18:10-14, Psalms 22:9-10, Deuteronomy 32:11-13.

4. Help children to explore other images of God from history and from other cultures:

IMAGES OF GOD THAT WERE PREVALENT IN CATHOLIC HISTORY

DURING THE FIRST FOUR CENTURIES:

Creator, Father (of mercy, of the whole world, in heaven), Living God, Friend of the World, Mighty One, Searcher of Hearts, the One who knows the thoughts of all, Lord of Consolations, Height of the World, Eye of the World, Life of the World, Beloved, the One who dwells in hidden places, the One who understands, the One who spoke and the world was, Justice of the World, Home of the World, Rock of the World, the Holy One, the One who hears, Peace of the World, Strong One, Merciful One.

IMAGES FROM THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

This tradition has a litany of 99 names for God. They believe that the 100th name is never spoken.

IMAGES FROM THE AFRICAN TRADITION

Most frequently used: Creator, Great Mother, Supreme, Fashioner, Designer,

Distributor, Carver, Molder, Hewer, Excavator, Architect of the World

Ultimate Mystery: Alone the Great One, the Powerful One, Wise One, Shining One,
the One who sees all, the One who is everywhere

Friend: Greatest of friends, the One you confide your troubles to, the One who can
turn everything upside down, the One there from ancient times, the One who
began the forest, the One who gives to all, the Rain-giver

Highest of the Highest and the Unknown: Queen of Heaven whose glory shines in
mist and rainbow, the Great Spider, Great Spirit, Great One of the Sky,
Protector of the Poor, Guardian of Orphans, the Chief, the Fire, the
Almighty, Watcher of everything, Owner of everything, Savior of all

The One who ... who loves, who gives birth to the people, who rules, who makes
children, who embraces all, who does not die, who has not let us down yet,
who bears the world, who has seen many moons, who thunders from far-off
times, who carries everyone on her back, who is heard in all the world, who
blesses

5. Invite children to interview three people. Ask the question: what is your favorite name for God? Why?

6. Invite the children/youth to use their imaginations to image God:
 - a. Write similes: God is like the sunshine because _____; God is like scotch tape because _____; etc.
 - b. God is (a color) _____
God is (a season) _____
God is (an animal) _____
God is (a tree) _____
God is (a sound) _____
 - c. What adjectives describe God for you?
 - d. What verbs do you think of when you think of God?

7. Invite children/youth to work together to complete the following in as many ways as possible: We believe in God who _____. This can be used periodically during prayer because each time might surface different responses.

8. Encourage them to dream of new titles for God, such as: the God of Surprises, Grandfather/Grandmother God, God the Artist, Life-giver, Pain-breaker, etc.

9. Expose children/youth to many different people's feelings about God, such as Julian of Norwich's definitions of what God is for us:

“And God said: “This I am....

I am the capability and goodness found in fatherhood,

I am the sensitivity and wisdom of motherhood,

I am the light and grace that is all loving and right,

I am in All, I am the One in everyone.

I am what makes you want to love others,

I am what you will serve,

I am what the pure heart desires,

I am what your highest self intends.

I am your father, your mother, your sister, your brother; learn of my joy, live in my love, for that is what I am.”

10. Frequently invite them to reflect on their lives: Where did you find God this week?

When did you hear God this week?

11. There are marvelous children’s books which explore names and images of God:

- *God is like a Mother Hen and Much, Much More* by Carolyn Stahl Bohler (Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 1996)
- *Old Turtle* by Douglas Wood (Duluth, MN: Pfeifer-Hamilton Publishers, 1992)
- *Does God Know How to Tie Shoes?* By Nancy White Carolstrom (Grand Rapids, MI: W. E. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993)
- *Emma and Mommy Talk to God* by Marianne Williamson (HarperCollins, 1996)
- *In God’s Name* by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994)
- *God’s Paintbrush* by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993)

- *The Soft Secret Word* by Jane Aylott (Saccusunna, New Jersey: Winged Peoples Press, 1993)
- *Thinking about God* by Susan McCaslin (Twenty-Third Publications, 1994)

12. Explore with the children/youth who they are because of who God is. An anonymous poem says:

If He be Father
Then I be son or daughter

If She be creator
Then I be Her work of art

If God be love
Then I be-loved.

13. Explore various prayers with children. What does this pray-er (the person who is praying) believe about God?

14. Explore some of the wonderful liturgical music we have today. What is the image of God in each of these hymns? An ideal one to use is “You are the Presence” by David Haas (G.I.A. Publications, 1987).

15. Divide your groups into nine smaller groups. Give each group two Biblical passages:

- a) Matthew 18:12-14 and 2 Samuel 7:8-10
- b) Hosea 11:1-4 and Amos 2:6
- c) Luke 12:32 and Psalm 46:1-2
- d) Deuteronomy 32:18 and John 15:9-10

- e) Luke 1:76-79 and Deuteronomy 31:7-8
- f) Exodus 34:6-7 and John 15:1
- g) Luke 15:8-20 and Genesis 1:1-2
- h) Luke 12:27-30 and Amos 3:1-2
- i) Matthew 10:29-31 and Genesis 6:5-7

Based on the passages, invite the group together to choose words or phrases to complete:

God is like a man who _____.

God is like a woman who _____.

Then invite the group to combine the two ideas into one sentence: God is like people who _____ and _____.

May our exploring of images for God, help us all to pray: Gracious God, thank you for being so near ... for calling me as your own. (“Our Father, who are in New Haven. How do you know my name?”)

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