

FINDING
YOUR
SPIRITUAL
DIRECTION *as*
a CATECHIST



Helpful skills and reflections
for personal growth

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	<i>iv</i>
INTRODUCTION	<i>I</i>
CHAPTER ONE A Joy Like Never Before	<i>3</i>
CHAPTER TWO Catholicism: The Faith I Love to Practice	<i>12</i>
CHAPTER THREE Life Is a Prayer	<i>22</i>
CHAPTER FOUR Free Will and God's Will	<i>34</i>
CHAPTER FIVE The Stories of Our Lives	<i>43</i>
CHAPTER SIX A Dynamic Duo: Trust and Surrender	<i>52</i>
CHAPTER SEVEN Forgiveness	<i>62</i>
CHAPTER EIGHT Dedicate, Dedicate, and Dance to the Music of God	<i>69</i>
BIBLIOGRAPHY	<i>75</i>

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INTRODUCTION

Finding your spiritual direction as a catechist is much like finding your spiritual direction as a dentist or a nurse, a lawyer or a carpenter, a computer programmer or a plumber, a spouse, a parent, a single person, etc. While each of us is unique and the context of each of our life situations will differ from that of all other people, there are certain spiritual principles that remain the same. I don't pretend to capture them all between the covers of this work; however, I think I have a bead on some of the most important ones.

I believe that you don't have to be a catechist in the formal sense of the word in order to enjoy and benefit from this book. The principles contained herein are important for anyone who wishes to grow in love of God, neighbor, and self. And who (other than God) knows! After reading this book you may decide that you have been called to officially become a catechist. Moreover, we each have opportunities every day to model catechetical principles by the way we live our lives.

What makes this book primarily for catechists has to do with how we apply these principles to our lives and to the lives of those we serve, whether they are children, teens, or adults. Being in a truly loving relationship is one of the most satisfying experiences of a lifetime. And no relationship is as important or as potentially satisfying as the relationship we cultivate together with our Lord. As catechists, we have the additional privilege of helping others

build a strong foundation for a life of love and service to God.

There is a wise saying, passed down through the ages: “You can’t give what you haven’t got!” In the pages that follow, I invite you to consider some important principles for a holistic, Christ-centered spirituality—a spirituality supported by a firm foundation in the Catholic faith. In the process, you will learn the importance of being passionate and joyful in your faith. You will be given opportunities to reconnect with your own sacred stories and to discover how those stories are impacted by the greatest story of all. You will be reminded, once again, what a wonderful tool our Catholic faith is for the purpose of building a strong and loving relationship with the Lord.

You will have a chance to reflect upon your prayer life and to sample prayer techniques based upon your specific interests and talents. You will discover ways to decrease personal anxiety while increasing the power of faith in your life. And no book on spirituality is complete without a section on the topic of forgiveness.

In the final chapter, we will spend some time together considering the grace and energy that come from the spiritual practice of renewing our covenant of love with God each day.

Throughout the book I use storytelling to set the topic and the tone for our exploration. My years of preparation for writing this book have taught me that everyone likes a good story and that nothing works as well as a good story to illustrate the power of a spiritual principle. It is my hope and fervent prayer that you will both enjoy and feel the power of God’s Holy Spirit in each of the stories. One of my favorite bishops, Bishop Robert Morneau of the Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin, is fond of saying: “Every good story is about conversion!” May these stories—all that they contain and all that they inspire—serve as blessings for your life and provide opportunities for growth and conversion while you strive to find your spiritual direction as a catechist!



CHAPTER ONE

A Joy Like Never Before

On my way to the office each morning I jump-start my day by stopping at a local fast food restaurant that brews particularly good coffee. Although the restaurant has a drive-through window, I usually park and go inside. This gives me the opportunity to greet a wonderful woman named Jasmine who works the counter on weekday mornings. She has a smile as wide as the sky, which she presents to everyone who approaches her. From my brief conversations with her, I have learned that she is a Christian. I'm amazed at how seamlessly she connects her faith in God with her unmitigated enthusiasm for life. She is one of the most obvious and effective "evangelizers" I have ever met. I've come to admire the way she effortlessly but powerfully witnesses the goodness of God to everyone she meets.

One morning I entered the restaurant and found a line of eight people ahead of me at the counter. There was Jasmine trying to defuse the anger of a man who was upset about the time it was taking to fill his order. She explained that with two of the cooks and a counter attendant out sick, she and the remaining cook were

tasked with all responsibilities. This meant that orders would not be filled as promptly or efficiently as usual. No apology or excuse would assuage the angry customer. He became obnoxious and took his rage out verbally on Jasmine. During his tirade, she never flinched or cowered. Perhaps more remarkably, she never attacked or berated him and never returned his anger.

When he received his order, he muttered angrily as he left the building. The next customer was apologetic as she sought to reassure Jasmine. Jasmine looked her right in the eye and said in a voice loud enough for all of us to hear: "It's OK, I'm all right. That man didn't give me my joy; I'm not going to let him take it away." Then she smiled that wonderful smile.

In that moment, Jasmine's unabashed joy, so obviously connected to the love she feels from and for God, made an impression on me—for life. My life has changed. My story became connected in a very special way to the story of God's love for us all. I will never forget Jasmine or her message for me.

For many years a battle has raged inside me. On one side, there is joy, joy that is fueled by the knowledge that God has blessed me with many gifts in my life, from the talents that I possess to the people I've met, the places I've seen to the possessions I've accrued. I have been born into and subsequently married into wonderful families. People love me—a good number of people—and I love them. On the other side of the "battle line" are guilt and shame. I feel guilty and ashamed because I don't always measure up. I don't always make good choices. I feel I have disappointed God and wonder how I could ever deserve God's love and respect.

However, I have come to realize that these periods of guilt and shame are holding me back from becoming my "best self," the person God has created me to be. That is not to imply that I should ignore my transgressions, those times when I fail to do what is

best in the eyes of God; however, I must learn to believe that God doesn't want me to dwell on or obsess over those moments. God wants me to learn from them, grow from them, and then return to focus on the unconditional love being offered to me. I am not being asked to earn my way into heaven. God's love and the many benefits of that love are to be understood as gifts, freely given, as part of a divinely loving relationship.

A number of wonderful people, including my parents, my wife, my daughter, various coworkers, my spiritual directors, and my "fast food friend" Jasmine, have continuously reassured me: "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, or any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 8:38–39).

I encourage you to read the previous paragraph once again. Read it slowly and reflect upon each line for a moment or two. While every line in Scripture is important, some carry more gravitas than others. For me, the two verses (above) are among the most important in the entire Bible. I say this with some authority, based on my personal experience and the experiences of many who come to me for spiritual direction.

Our Own Harshest Critics

At some point, almost every individual who enters into spiritual direction with me says something that indicates they are locked in a cycle of guilt or shame that keeps them from opening fully to the love that God has for them. In a way, this is a natural phenomenon. As human beings, we are accustomed to having conditions and limits spelled out for any relationship we enter. This is not necessarily a bad thing. For example, all contracts have specific conditions under which the contract will be valid. If those condi-

tions are not met, the contract may be contested. In personal relationships, conditions are generally stated or implied. For example, my friends will continue to be my friends as long as I continue to show an interest in their lives and don't seriously offend them or do something that would cause them grave danger. If one of those conditions is violated, the friendship may be jeopardized.

However, God does not have a "contract" with us. God has a covenant: a promise to love and care for us, no matter what we say or do. Even if we should turn our backs, the Lord will always be with us, inviting us to return to the relationship. When we begin to see God as the one who will never abandon us, who is our biggest fan, the only one who can and does love us without conditions or restrictions, we are set to begin the experience of a lifetime, the experience of feeling pure joy.

This joy transcends all boundaries and limitations. It is not based on material wealth or position, geographic location, cultural heritage, sexual orientation, age, career or any other distinction.

There is a moment in the musical *West Side Story* when Maria, singing the song "I Feel Pretty," beautifully captures the joy of being in love. Her love for Tony is transformative. In that moment she is ecstatic to be in love with such a wonderful young man, *and* she realizes that she is indeed beautiful. She loves and she is loved! Consider for a moment that we too are loved. We are loved by our very wonderful God: the one true God—Father, Son, and Spirit—who has created us to help build the Reign of God right here on earth. Isn't that amazing? Isn't that something to celebrate with great joy?

As catechists we are always challenged, in the best sense of that word, to live and to act out of that joy. Pope Francis advocates for such joy when he says:

The joy of the Gospel is such that it cannot be taken away from us by anyone or anything (cf. Jn 16:22). The evils of our world—and those of the Church—must not be excuses for diminishing our commitment and our fervor...One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, “sourpusses.” » *Evangelii Gaudium*

Gospel joy is one of the primary tools in both evangelization and catechesis. What often draws others to us, those who want to know more about us, is the quality of the joy that can only come from living a life in harmony with the Spirit of God. Moreover, that same quality is what keeps people, whether they are our friends or those we are helping to form in our catechetical sessions, coming back. Jasmine is a prime example. She is a living evangelist and catechist. Even on the coldest winter day, I am compelled to get out of my car and go into the restaurant to experience the sacred grace that she exudes. Her joy is a magnet that draws the grace inside me to the grace inside her. She is a gift from the Holy Spirit.

I begin this book with a chapter on joy because I believe it is a prerequisite for every catechist who hopes to be effective in delivering the message of the gospel to those they catechize. Deep and abiding love, especially when seen in the relationship you as a catechist have with the Lord, is an unmistakable sign that you have something wonderful to share with the student. Such love should inspire great joy! Moreover, it is an exquisite invitation to the student to “come and see” what the Lord has for her or him—that is: love beyond all comprehension and a joy beyond all measure.

Evidence for the Importance of Joy in Connection with Spirituality

In his book titled *Chasing Joy*, Fr. Edward Hays presents convincing evidence for the connection between joy and Christian spirituality. He proposes that when the presence of God saturates the totality of one's being, that should bring about "ecstatic joy" and "unflappable Conviction." God's desire to be infused into every cell of our bodies should "skyrocket us into bliss!" (pp. 48–50).

When our daughter, Laura, was in high school, she participated in a two-week mission trip to the Dominican Republic. In many ways, it was a life-changing experience for her. When I asked her to name her most profound "learning" from the trip, she said, almost without hesitation: "I was amazed by how joyful the people were. They didn't have all the fancy stuff that we have in the United States, but they had strong faith-filled families. They looked out for one another and cared for one another. They were very happy, and they welcomed us with open arms."

This is not meant as a criticism of the wonderful things that many of us are blessed to possess here in the United States, nor is it meant to suggest that physical poverty is a precondition for holiness or joy. However, it does demonstrate that true joy is not connected to material wealth but to values such as love and faith. We could not have taught our daughter this lesson as effectively as did the mission trip.

In *Chasing Joy*, Hays is careful to remind us that living a life of joy does not mean we will always feel happy or that our life will be free of tribulations and discomfort. It doesn't mean living in a state of perpetual bliss. What it does mean is simply that living in the embrace of God, with certainty that our best friend, the Lord, is always with us, can generally have such a calming and reassuring effect that we will sustain a measure of hope and joyfulness no matter the circumstances we face.

Moreover, Catholicism teaches that all of God's creation—the sun, the moon, the stars, our world and all who inhabit it—is sacred. We are surrounded by beauty. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius reminds us: “All the things in this world are gifts from God, presented to us so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily.”

In his book *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life*, Fr. James Martin, SJ, reveals the fruits of his fascinating research concerning joy and spirituality:

When I started to study joy, I was overwhelmed. It is an immense field of scholarly research. The theme of joy runs throughout almost all the major religions and spiritual traditions. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel express their joy to God for having delivered them from slavery. In the Gospels, Jesus often uses that very word as a way of expressing a goal of discipleship. Later, St. Paul encourages the early Christians to “rejoice always.” Joy is one of the traditional “fruits of the Holy Spirit,” that is, gifts from God given to build us up. Even if many religions don't seem particularly joyful, the religious literature on the topic is vast. » *Between Heaven and Mirth*, p. 24

A good friend introduced me to a profound statement by Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” I have seen this statement verified, time and again, in the lives of young (and not so young) adults with whom I have worked. In fact, I can honestly say that I have seen the fruits of this statement in my own life.

In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, the protagonist, a remarkable Scottish runner and Olympic medalist named Eric Liddell, is asked why he loves to run. His reply is both spiritual and profoundly joyful: “When I run, I feel His pleasure.” It’s a beautiful testimony to the loving relationship that Liddell has with God and to his tremendous joy in using his talent to give glory to the Lord.

Be cheered by the knowledge that, when problems such as student disciplinary issues, time constraints, or difficulty in finding resources threaten to rob you of the joy of being a catechist, Jesus (the Master Catechist) is with you, to give you courage, guidance, and joy.

I hope you are able to feel the pleasure that God receives from your ministry. Moreover, I pray that you feel tremendous joy—the joy that comes from knowing that you are using gifts that have been bestowed uniquely upon you in order to give honor and glory to God. Always remember that you are working to ensure that the gospel message will be cherished and lived for generations to come in those whom you catechize. And when challenging circumstances arise in your ministry or your life, remember the one who has given you your joy—to cherish and to share!

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- Choose one or two of these quotes about joy that you find particularly appealing. What is it about the quote that speaks to you?

“We must attract them by joy in order to lead them to its source, the Heart of Christ.” » ST. KATHARINE DREXEL

“A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.” » PROVERBS 17:22

“Rejoice always!” » PHILIPPIANS 4:4

- Recall a time when you felt great joy connected with some aspect of your spiritual life. It might have been during a catechetical session, a time of prayer, a sacramental celebration, etc. Pause to remember as many details about the experience as possible. What do you think contributed to the joy? What are you feeling and thinking as you recall the occasion? If possible, share this story with someone close to you—a family member, friend, fellow catechist, etc.
- Have you ever met someone who radiates the joy of the Lord? What do you feel when you are in the presence of that person? If you desired to become more like that person, what do you think you would need to do?

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

LUKE 15:1–10 • JOHN 16:22 • ROMANS 8:38–39 • ROMANS 14:16–17

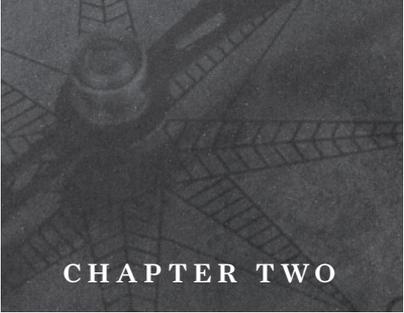
PRAYING WITH MUSIC *(available on YouTube)*

“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” | *Henry van Dyke, Ludwig van Beethoven*
(WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=EMY3IVDNZWE)

“Good to Be Alive” | *Jason Gray*
(WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=4OMFQJEA AVC)

“Alive” | *Natalie Grant*
(WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=W1GZOUNUN20)

“How Can I Keep from Singing?” | *Robert Lowry*
(WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=CNSCKKVEQNU)



CHAPTER TWO

Catholicism: The Faith I Love to Practice

A primary reason for my love of Catholicism is the way we are taught to view the world. Our faith is based on the principle that the world and all that is in it are gifts from God. Indeed, the world holds the seeds of the Kingdom/Reign of God. As Catholics we are called, by virtue of our baptism, to become what Pope Francis and others have called “missionary disciples.” This means we are to use the many gifts that we find in the world, as well as the gifts and talents that we possess within us, to help construct this Reign of God right here, right now.

The Reign of God is here with us but not yet complete. Our charge is to keep working, striving to bring justice and peace to all nations and all peoples. In Scripture, God has given us the model for our missionary work in the message and the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught us about love of God, neighbor, and self,