



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

97 – January 2019

A Best Practice: Lenten Spiritual Journaling

As Bridget Theodoroff, pastoral associate at SS. John and Paul Parish, Washington, MI, read [GEMS #84](#) on spiritual journaling, an idea began to form for a future endeavor at her parish: why not invite parishioners – of all ages – to take a reflective Lenten journey through journaling.

Most people are just trying to get through the day,
never writing anything down,
never keeping track of their progress along the way;
never really knowing if they are doing all they can
to reach their goals, to drive their ambition.

But gifted people learn to get from the day.
They don't let a day end without picking up
some valuable experience, some emotional content,
some idea that may positively affect their future.

To get the most from the day,
to learn the most from a day,
you need to be able to reflect on the day.
And how can you reflect on a day unless you record it in history?

- Jim Rohn

Journals, especially spiritual journals, have been used throughout the ages. Some of the most well-known are:

- St. Therese of Lisieux: [The Story of a Soul](#)
- St. John XXIII: [Journal of a Soul](#)

- Thomas Merton: [The Seven Storey Mountain](#)
- Dag Hammarskjöld: [Markings](#)
- Henri Nouwen: [The Inner Voice of Love](#)

Lenten Journaling at SS. John and Paul

During Lent 2018 all parishioners were invited to a journey of journaling because a spiritual journal is a way of prayer by reflecting and writing on the reality of life in the light of our relationship with God. It captures the dialogue between the writer and our loving God. (A spiritual journal is not a diary capturing a chronological accounting of daily events. Rather, it's a reflection on one's thoughts and beliefs as they look into their heart and explore their intimate friendship with God.)

The parish provided a journal and a spiritual journal packet for each parishioner which contained:

- An image and scripture reading to focus each week of Lent
- Reflection questions (for all ages) flowing from the image and reading
- Tips for journaling
- Prayer and a suggested action (Each action item connected to the Lenten spiritual practices of fasting, almsgiving, and praying. People were invited, after engaging in the action, to take some time to reflect on it and write about it in the journal.)
- Directions for posting any pictures that connected to the image or reading for them on the parish Facebook page (People were also invited to share on the Facebook page any of their journaling reflections.)

Adults and teens received their journals and packets after all the liturgies the weekend before Ash Wednesday. The children in grades 1 through 6 received a packet designed specifically for them (in addition to the reflection questions contained in the adult packet) during the intergenerational, whole community faith formation program G.R.A.C.E.: Growing and Responding As Catholics Everyday.

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Tips for Journaling

In reality, there are no firm and fixed rules for journaling; each person needs to find what works best for them. Some suggestions and tips were given to the parishioners, especially for those who may have never journaled previously.

- Find a quiet place where you can be alone with God.
- Focus on one section of Scripture and one image.
- Take time to reflect on what you read or what image is “saying” to you.
- Wait and listen for God to move through you, granting you some insight.
- Ask for the Holy Spirit’s guidance.
- Start writing, don’t edit yourself ... just write what comes to you.
- Don’t be disappointed if your writing is not interesting or important or really deep. Trust that this is what you need to be writing at this time.
- Rest assured that God already knows what is in your heart; this is a clarification tool for you.
- If you get stuck, don’t get upset, put the journal aside and come back another time.

I write in a journal daily.
This extraordinary ritual has revolutionized my mindset,
transformed my heartset,
and generally influenced my life exponentially.

- Robin S. Sharma

An example from the adult journal (for Ash Wednesday)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Image: Ashes

(Post your photographs or drawings to Facebook Group “SSJP Lent 2018.”)



Ashes might conjure up, among other ideas, these thoughts:

- Life is fleeting
- When all is said and done, it’s all ashes; what then is important?
- We spend so much time dressing ourselves up, when in reality, we will all just become ashes; why do we spend so much time on appearances?
- Do we live like we know that one day we will be ashes?

Reflection Questions for Journaling

(If you would like to share any of your journaling reflections on Facebook Group “SSJP Lent2018,” please do.)

For Adults:

- In what ways am I a hypocrite? Do my beliefs and my life decisions clash?
- Do I act in order to receive public recognition, or do I act for the glory of God?

For Teens:

- Why would we get ashes on the day that we hear that Jesus cautions us against such appearances?

For Children:

- When we get ashes we are asked if we will follow the gospel. What are ways that we can follow the gospel every day?

Action: Social Sin

Sin is prevalent not only in our personal lives, but in some of the structures we make to order society. Some structures do not benefit the common good and keep people marginalized or in poverty. Notice one situation in your community that cries out for God’s justice. Make one call or write one letter to make a difference on behalf of the poor and marginalized in our society.

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Prayer: Gracious God, you knitted us in our mother's womb and know everything about us. Help us to move towards toward a more authentic faith life. Send the Holy Spirit to guide us in living a genuine faith rooted in Jesus Christ. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

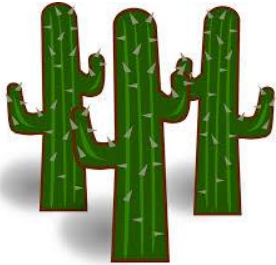
An example from the children's journal (for the First Sunday of Advent)

Scripture reflection: Jesus went into the desert to pray. But when he was there he was tempted to do things that he knew would not be right. Jesus prayed to God for help and angels came to help him.



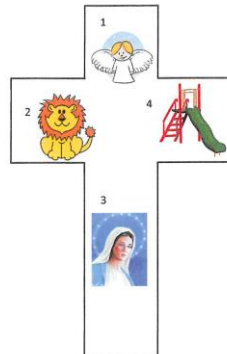
Questions for Journaling: What can we learn from Jesus when we are tempted to do something that we know is wrong?

God is with us on our journey through the desert. But sometimes things get in our way. On each cactus write something that gets in your way of following Jesus.



To discover one of the things that Jesus wants us to do, solve the puzzle. Look at the pictures in the cross. Print the first letter of each picture in the blanks below.

1 2 3 4 giving



When we do this in Lent, it means we help people who are poor or in need. Write or draw three things you could do for someone who is poor or in need.

Responses from a Few Participants

- Thank you for giving us this gift! I made my first reflective entry and wow!
- This journal encourages thoughtful reflection on God's Word. It makes God's Word relatable for all age groups. It helps conjure up thoughts, ideas, and actions. It has kept me moving on my faith journey in closeness to God.
- Journaling gave me some insight into myself and helped me to realize that I need to do more to let God into my everyday life. It made me think more about my relationship with God. I was a little reluctant to start journaling but once I got going I really enjoyed it. Thank you.

Surprises!

When Bridget Theodoroff (pastoral associate at SS. John and Paul who designed this endeavor) was asked if anything surprised her, she said: "What surprised me was that some folks who don't normally participate in formation opportunities or other parish functions stopped me after mass to let me know how much they were enjoying the journaling.

I was glad we gave the journals out to all parishioners, even if they didn't talk to me about it. It afforded people Lenten prayer opportunities that they might not normally have engaged in.

We tried to integrate the spiritual journaling process into other happenings during Lent – homilies, reflection questions on the screen before mass and in bulletin. We also had an evening to get together to discuss journaling. We had a Facebook page that some people posted with regards to the theme of the week."

You Might Want to Explore:

- <http://www.pauline.org/Pauline-Books-Media-Blog/ArticleID/2960/How-to-Keep-a-Spiritual-Journal-like-the-Saints-Did>

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GEMS Suggestions

- Is journaling helpful for you in your spirituality? If you've never done it, might this be a time to try and see how it works for you?
- Would this endeavor work in your parish? Would you do it for the entire parish or just one age group?
- What might you do for people who have never journaled before?
- Are there other techniques/methods you might offer to parishioners who are not attracted to journaling?
- What season of the year would be best for your parish to incorporate this experience?
- Have you had the opportunity to do something similar to this in your parish? We'd be glad to do an entire newsletter of various ideas ... so we would all benefit and have a treasure trove to draw from.



Adding New Luster to an Older Gem

In the [GEMS issues](#) on support and resources for grandparents, one of the suggestions included interviewing grandparents. Suggest these questions to your families/children to interview their grandparents:

- <http://www.aplaceformom.com/blog/2013-9-8-20-grandparents-day/>
- <https://www.thoughtco.com/fifty-questions-for-family-historyinterviews-1420705>
- <https://storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/>
- <http://www.jkhnelson.com/2013/life/37-questions-grandparents-parents/>



Golden Nuggets from You

"Janet, you have a wealth of ideas here! Thanks for all your GEMS issues. They are truly Gems. One idea you included in [GEMS #85](#) was to have parishioners take a photo of where they see God. We did that in summer of 2017. There is a bulletin board in our lobby and we posted a Psalm in the center and asked parishioners to take a photo of where they encountered God in June/July/August and tack it up on the board. We did not have as much participation as we had hoped but nevertheless, some people posted and it was great to see all the nature shots where folks felt God's presence.

- *Mary Campion, Pastoral Associate, St. John Chrysostom Parish, West Roxbury, MA*



Janet Schaeffler, OP
www.janetschaeffler.com
jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org

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>