

Introduction to *God with Us: Exploring the Living God with Ages 3–5*

WELCOME

The Church, “In the course of the year . . . unfolds the whole mystery of Christ from his incarnation and nativity through his ascension, to Pentecost and the expectation of the blessed hope of the coming of the Lord” (Sacrosanctum Concilium 102 § 2; CCC 1194).

God with Us brings the liturgy alive for the youngest members of your parish community. Each weekly session challenges children with age-appropriate, doctrinally sound explanations of the Lectionary readings and the Catholic faith. Interactive reflections and engaging activities make liturgy-based learning vibrant and accessible for children as they learn about the Catholic faith for the first time in a formal setting.

Although catechesis is ideally a year-round process, the reality is that many programs have a fall to spring cycle. In recognition of this fact, CTL begins each year in the fall, and includes year-round sessions at all age levels.

As part of the *Celebrating the Lectionary* series, this multi-dimensional resource was created collaboratively by faith formation experts, Scripture scholars, liturgists, and theologians in order to allow all parish members to engage with the liturgy at their own level without diminishing the depth of meaning and content. Complete with a variety of activities, interactive reflections, crafts, and take-home materials, the sessions can easily be tailored to meet your individual group’s needs and interests. The sessions cover the entire year, from September to August, meaning there are weekly sessions for the nine-month school year and the summer months.

Using *God with Us*, you will embark on a personal journey of faith as you encourage the children in your group to do the same. You will be challenged to grow in your own understanding of our Catholic beliefs and to take on the responsibility of a spiritual role model both in your sessions and in your daily life.

CATECHESIS AND GOD WITH US

New this year: *Celebrating the Lectionary* now includes Session Plans for all Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation!

God with Us, like all of the age-appropriate packets of *Celebrating the Lectionary*, serves the faith community’s catechetical tasks of helping its members of all ages to know, celebrate, and contemplate the mystery of Christ (*General Directory for Catechesis* 74). *God with Us* does this by blending different forms of catechesis, such as the exploration of Scripture in light of the liturgy, teaching, and Tradition of the Church; the application of the liturgy, Scripture, and Catholic teaching to our times; and the formation of families in the context of the Catholic faith.

The catechesis in *God with Us* is liturgical in nature. Centered on the Lectionary readings for Sundays and Holy Days, the session plans incorporate catechesis on liturgical and sacramental actions, liturgical symbols and rites, and the liturgical year. *God with Us* leads the children and their families to a deeper appreciation of the liturgy and their active role in it by encouraging them to continue on the path of conversion to Christ through both prayer and catechesis. Through the children and parents formed by *God with Us* and other *Celebrating the Lectionary* materials, the liturgy comes to life in the world; those who have been evangelized become evangelizers (*National Catechetical Directory* 17D and GDC 58)!

Based on the principle that all members of the faith community are involved in their own journey of ongoing conversion to Christ, the themes, focus statements, and focus passages for each Sunday and Holy Day are the same for every packet within *Celebrating the Lectionary*. Whether parishes or schools use the material for one age level or multiple age levels, or whether the sessions happen at the same time or different times, the identical themes, focus statements, and focus passages allow for conversations about the liturgy, the Lectionary readings, and Church teachings to occur in families, among small faith communities, and across generations in the parish community. Ultimately, liturgy is brought to life, the desire for ongoing catechesis is recognized, and communion with God is deepened in the lives of children and adults.

FAITH DEVELOPMENT AND CHILDREN 3–5 YEARS OLD

Children ages 3–5 love to explore all that life has to offer. They use their senses to taste, touch, feel, see, hear, and smell the gifts of the world around them. Their hearts willingly trust and love others. Their minds are filled with imaginative thoughts. The session plans in *God with Us* are written to address these children where they are at in their physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development with the intention of engaging them as whole people.

At every age, faith is a free gift from God to which we freely respond. With faith and through our relationships with our family, friends, and Church, our relationship with God develops and deepens. God himself is a communion of persons in relationship—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who calls us to himself. Children 3–5 years old develop their relationship with God primarily through the use of their imaginations. Based on experiences in their family life and in the world around them, they develop images and ideas about God. Positive, welcoming families and experiences of the world nurture in children images of God as loving, kind, trustworthy, and compassionate. Negative experiences that involve breeches of trust, fear, guilt, or a lack of love, lead children to imagine that God does not love them and in fact, is someone to fear.

The pedagogy in *God with Us* takes the active engagement of children in the session material as one of its core principles. Activities are intended to be tactile and fun, and to provide the opportunity for the inquisitive nature of the children to express itself. The sessions also present an opportunity for the children to begin to learn how to reflect on Scripture readings and Church teachings at an age-appropriate level. Through prayer, song, Scripture, Church teaching, and activities, *God with Us* aims to develop in the children a sense that the goodness of God is truly with them, in the world around them, and in the Church as we celebrate the Sundays, Holy Days, and other solemnities and feasts of the liturgical year.

PRAYER AND GOD WITH US

For children and adults of all ages, prayer involves the raising of the mind and heart to God. Prayers can be offered in praise of God, in petition to God, in thanksgiving, and in intercession for others. Prayers are also either private or public. When the children in your group pray at the beginning and end of each session, it is a form of public prayer. Carried out consistently in each session, this time at the beginning and end of each session will become one the children expect and look forward to. Liturgical music is an integral part of this prayer and helps connect the children to the parish community's celebration of the liturgy.

During the prayer at the beginning and end of each session, you are much more a prayer leader than a catechist. You will not be conveying knowledge to the children, but will be evoking a sense of the presence of God in and around them. To do this effectively, you will want to let go of the details of the session to come or the session just completed, and center yourself in God. This will enable you to be a channel for God's grace. Through your example, the children will learn to center themselves in God.

Each Session Plan in *God with Us* includes a Gathering Prayer and Closing Prayer. These prayers are adapted from the Gathering Prayer and Closing Prayer in the Prayer Services found in the *Program Guide*. If your age group participates in a Gathering Prayer or Closing Prayer along with other age groups, you might choose not to use the prayers in your classroom. Or, you might choose to adapt them by simply using the Sign of the Cross and a shorter spontaneous prayer as you open and close your session. You may choose to use the prayer as given or adapt it to better meet the needs of the children in your group. Occasionally, suggestions are given for how to integrate an activity from the session into the Closing Prayer. Though a session might often seemed rushed at the end because time in running out, it is important that you take the time to refocus the children, at least for a brief moment, in order to conclude with prayer. Use the Closing Prayer as given or ask the children to contribute their own prayers based on the focus of the session. No matter which prayers you choose, always remember the goal of prayer is a deepening of yours and the children's relationship with God, so that you and they might sense the God who is always with them.

MUSIC AND GOD WITH US

Music plays an important role in good liturgical celebrations. Music evokes a sense of the transcendent God in both children and adults. The words of liturgical music give voice to what we believe and help draw us closer to God the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Melodies combine with the words to bring us in touch with our thoughts and feelings about God, others, self, and the world around us.

The liturgical music suggestions in *God with Us* are appropriate for children 3–5 years old. They were chosen to introduce these children to the liturgical music, both traditional and contemporary, that is sung in many parishes and Catholic schools. The goal is to develop consistency between the music sung in faith formation sessions or Catholic schools and that sung in Sunday liturgy. These music suggestions are available from major liturgical music publishers.

God with Us gives four liturgical music suggestions for each session, two for the Gathering and two for the Closing. As the leader of the session, you have a number of options for the use of music. You might choose one song for the beginning of the session and one for the closing. Or, since children are comfortable with repetition, you might choose the same song for both. Prior to a particular season of the liturgical year, you might plan the music you will use and decide on two or three songs that you will use throughout the season. Doing so will help the children connect with and attribute meaning to the season.

Often an entire hymn or song is too much for 3–5 year olds to learn. When this is the case, you can simply teach them the refrain and then, during the prayer, repeat the refrain a number of times. Ask the children what the words mean. Invite them to make connections with your parish's celebration of the Sunday or Holy Day liturgy during which the song might have been sung.

If you or an assistant are able to lead the music yourself, that is ideal. Live leadership of hymns and songs in faith formation sessions mirrors good liturgical practice in the Sunday assembly. Another option would be see if any of the children's parents is a cantor or belongs to a parish choir and ask him or her to lead the music for the session. When it is not an option to have the music led "live" in person, check with your director of faith formation or liturgical music to see if a CD of the music is available. You might also check iTunes to see if the suggested music is downloadable. If the suggested music is not sung in your parish or school community, you might check with the director of liturgy or liturgical music for other appropriate choices.

USING GOD WITH US EFFECTIVELY

The Scope and Sequence chart is available in the *Program Guide* and online at www.LTP.org. Ask your director of faith formation for a copy or download one from the Web site.

See the end of the Introduction for a concise list of the documents and their abbreviations.

Before the Session In preparation for each session, you will want to read through the following:

- *Scope and Sequence*: The Scope and Sequence chart gives the date, liturgical day, theme, focus passage(s), focus statement, and the age-appropriate doctrinal points of each session. Take special note of the focus and theme and reflect on how they tie into the overall direction of the season.
- *Season Background*: The Season Background provides in-depth information on the seasons of the liturgical year, solemnities, and feasts, as well as an overview of the seasonal Scripture readings. This information gives you historical and critical background to rely on as you lead your sessions.
- All of the Scripture readings for the Sunday or Holy Day liturgy.
- *Scripture Background*: The Scripture Backgrounds contain commentaries on all of the readings and, when appropriate, make explicit connections to the day's theme. They offer a sidebar with doctrinal connections to the readings. These connections come from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and other key Church documents. One or more of these doctrinal references informs each session.



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Once you have read all of the preliminary materials, plan for your session. Read through the week's Preparation Page, Session Plan, Catechist Sheets, and Activity Sheets. While reading through these resources, do the following:

- Reflect on the meaning of the focus in relation to the overall trajectory of the season.
- Review the Session Plan and decide how you are going to tailor it to your group. Select the activities that you will be using, and make notes in the margins of other resources such as the Church documents that you plan on using or information that you plan on mentioning, such as information from the Scripture Background.
- Read the Preparation Page for information on what you need to do before the session. Any items that you may need to bring with you are printed in bold. Pay careful attention to the materials that you will need for the activities that you have selected to do.
- Use the “Materials Needed” space in the margin to make a list of everything that you need to bring with you to the session. You may want to cross or check off items as you put them in your car or bag so that you are sure that you have everything.

A sample pack of Color Activity Sheets is provided with *God with Us*. This year, the Color Activity Sheets provide a fun, exciting way to experience and learn about the Apostles' Creed, the Our Father, and the seasons of Advent and Christmas. Order copies for all the children in your group online at www.LTP.org.

Display the Bilingual Color Posters (available online at www.LTP.org) of the Apostles' Creed and Our Father in your room or use them in conjunction with the Apostles' Creed and Our Father Color Activity Sheets to help the children learn these prayers.

During the Session Use the Session Plan to lead the following activities:

- *Gathering:* As the children begin to arrive, direct their energy toward interactive tasks such as a group conversation, playing or coloring, or helping you with simple classroom tasks such as setting up the prayer center. Have each child find his or her nametag. Once everyone has arrived, focus attention by taking attendance, celebrating birthdays, and leading the Opening Prayer ritual. Begin the prayer with the Sign of the Cross, which you may need to teach the young children during the first few sessions. Then, use the prayer text given as a guide for the Opening Prayer.

- *Introducing the Word:* These activities prepare the children to listen to the Scripture reading by helping them to focus on ways in which it relates to their lives.
- *Exploring the Word:* Reading the focus Scripture reading from the Lectionary or Lectionary for Masses with Children or using the Catechist Sheet provided, introduce the children to the focus reading in a way that is interactive and interesting to them. Pay particular attention to the Church Teaching section, which includes an explanation of the focus doctrinal connection for the session. We encourage you to put this in your own words and not simply read it to the children. Use the interactive reflection questions or activities to help the children better understand the Church Teaching.
- *Integrating the Word:* During this part of the session, you will use creative and fun activities, games, and guided reflections to reinforce the Scriptural message and focus of the session.
- *Closing:* End each session with a brief and quiet moment of reflection in which you pray to God and thank him for your time together. Use the text for the Closing Prayer as a guide for your own prayer.

After the Session Use the following tools to help yourself and the children in your group to live the liturgy throughout the week to come:

- You may elect to send some worksheets, activities, or completed crafts home with the children, explaining to their parents that they are to be used as a reminder to keep the focus Scripture reading in mind all week long.
- You might occasionally ask the children at the beginning of the next session what they did during the previous week to live as Jesus taught us based on the focus from your last session.
- Use the After-Session Reflection Questions to guide your own spiritual journey and behavior. The first after-session reflection question is intended to help you evaluate the session and your experience of how it went. The second after-session reflection question is meant to assist you in reflection on your own faith journey as you continue to serve as a faith formation leader with the children.
- Reflect on both what seemed to be readily understood by the children and what engaged the children in interesting and exciting ways. Ask yourself also what seemed to be difficult for them to understand or boring for them. Use your conclusions to inform your plans for the next session. Go to other catechists or your director with any questions.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR YOUR SESSION

- *Setting Up Your Space:* Arrive at least 30 minutes early in order to set up your room. Set out nametags and all prepared materials. Arrange the furniture according to your needs. Bring materials to cover desks and tables to keep them clean during crafts and snack time. If you use a “borrowed” classroom or other parish or school space, be sure to clean up after yourself, erase blackboards or marker boards, and return all of the furniture to its original position.
- *Creating a Prayer Center:* Set aside a space for a prayer center. See the weekly Preparation Page for seasonal ideas. Cover a small table, sturdy box, or counter with a cloth of the liturgical color for the season (as indicated on the Preparation Page). Add a Bible or Lectionary, candle, and crucifix or cross. Depending on the time during the liturgical year and the content of the session, add a symbol of creation or a liturgical symbol, such as flowers, harvest foods, a Rosary, an Advent wreath, or a saint statue. Have matches or a candle lighter handy. Instill in the children the importance of this small ritual, as it will show them the importance of ritual in establishing our Catholic identity and help them make a connection between the faith formation session and the Sunday or Holy Day liturgy.

- *Welcoming the Children:* Your session starts as soon as the first child arrives. Welcome the children by name and help them to find their nametags. Engage them in a simple activity as soon as they arrive to foster a quiet, reflective mood and to focus on what is to come. You might provide crayons and paper, ask some pre-session reflective questions, or encourage the children to help you serve the group by setting up the prayer center or distributing materials. You might want to have some soft music playing in the background as children arrive.
- *Parent and Volunteer Involvement:* Involving parents and volunteers in your group will be a tremendous benefit for everyone involved. If you feel that you could use an extra set of hands during your sessions, solicit some help (parents, youths preparing for Confirmation, and elders are good people to ask). Before soliciting volunteers, however, be sure to check with the director about parish and diocesan requirements for volunteers who work with children.
- *Family Considerations:* Learn about your group members' families and be sensitive to differences of ethnicity and race, socio-economic background, language, religions practiced by other family members, and nationality. Be considerate of single-parent families and familial issues or concerns such as illness or death that may be occurring. Teach the children how their faith can help them through times of sadness and how, as members of a community of faith, we can offer encouragement and support to one another in happy and sad times.
- *Multi-lingual Considerations:* You may find that some of the children in your group do not have English-speaking parents. By providing bilingual take-home materials, you can involve these parents in their children's faith formation. CTL provides many Spanish/English resources that you can use, including *The Word to Go/La palabra para llevar*. Contact your director of faith formation if you feel that your group is in need of some bilingual materials or other language-related support.
- *Adapting for Special Needs:* If you have a child with special needs, take time to learn about the situation from his or her parents or guardian. Be cooperative and understanding as you work as a team with them and your director. When preparing your sessions, adapt activities to include the special needs child or children without drawing undue attention to them. You may need to leave space for wheelchair access, or make a quiet space with activities or toys for a child who cannot remain seated. In some cases, you may want to explain a child's special needs to the rest of the group, and tell them how they can help. Be sensitive about redirecting any comments, stares, or gestures that might make the special needs child uncomfortable. Remind your class that God makes each person with special talents and needs and loves everyone equally.
- *Establishing Consistency:* A consistent routine helps children to know what is expected of them and stay focused and on task. Establish routines with your class that are repeated each week. Be sure to write down your routines in case you ever need to use a substitute catechist.
- *Discipline:* The words "disciple" and "discipline" come from the same Latin root, *discere*, which means "to learn." Keep this in mind as you work with your group—discipline should always be instructive rather than punitive. Always let children know that it is the action, not the child, that is unacceptable, and explain what the right course of action might have been in the situation. Follow your parish or school discipline policy if the action requires a more formal punishment. Communicate ongoing problems verbally and in writing to the director of the program.
- *Affirmation:* All persons, especially the youngest of children, desire encouragement and support when they do something well. Offer a positive word when a child responds to a question with an insightful comment or correct answer. Be generous with your compliments as the children work on craft projects and cooperatively participate in activities.

The *Word to Go / La palabra para llevar*, bilingual weekly handouts, can be ordered from Liturgy Training Publications at www.LTP.org.

KEEPING GOD'S CHILDREN SAFE

As adults who work with children and care for their spiritual, emotional, and physical needs for the time in which they are with us, we are morally obligated to provide a safe and nurturing environment for them. As a catechist or assistant who leads the sessions in *God with Us*, it is necessary for you to participate in the training required by your diocese and to cooperate with the mandated background screenings before you undertake your ministry. If you recruit other parents or adult volunteers to help with particular sessions, check with your director of faith formation or school principal regarding the conditions under which they might work with the children. Doing so helps ensure the sessions run smoothly and, most importantly, that God's children can develop their relationship with him in a safe environment.

LIVING THE LITURGY TOGETHER

You may feel some anxiety as you prepare to lead or assist in your first session. You may ask yourself: Do I know enough about my religion to share it with others? Do my sins or shortcomings make me unqualified to perform this ministry? Many lay people who serve the Church ask themselves these questions. Remember that Jesus taught us that anyone who does good works in his name is serving as his disciple (Mark 9:38–43, 45, 47–48). By virtue of our Baptism, we are called to embrace our service in the Church according to the gifts and talents God has given us. Love and serve the Lord in your faith formation ministry without feeling you need to be perfect in all you say and do. As you grow in your relationship with God each and every day, you can build upon your successes and learn from your failures in the sessions with the children.

As you approach the task ahead, remember that you are not alone. Among the many resources available to you are other catechists, the director of faith formation, members of the clergy, fellow parish members, and your friends and family. Rely on these people to help you to explore your faith, serve the children in your group, and brainstorm session activities. You may want to invite the other catechists to set aside a time before each session to meet briefly to share challenges and successes and to pray as a group.

By taking on this ministry, you are embarking on a journey of faith along with the group that you will be leading. This is a tremendous opportunity for you to actively explore your beliefs and celebrate Catholic traditions as you take on the role of a faith formation guide using Jesus Christ as your model. By attending Sunday Mass, praying the liturgy, actively participating in it, absorbing the depths of its meaning, and then approaching each day with a prayerful mindset, you will be given the opportunity to truly live your faith more deeply.

We at Liturgy Training Publications invite you to share your successes and concerns with us. We welcome your feedback on *God with Us* and hope that you will take the time to help us make this resource even better. Please email us at ctl@ltp.org.

Doctrinal Connections Key The following is a list of documents that are referenced in the connections to Church teaching and tradition section on the Scripture Background pages. A Scripture Background page appears before each session in *God with Us*. Full texts of the following documents can be found in *Vatican Council II, The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Flannery, ed.), on the Vatican Web site (www.vatican.va), on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Web site (www.usccb.org), or online by typing the English or Latin title into a search engine.

AA: Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*.

AG: Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes Divinitus*.

BLS: United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, *Built of Living Stones*.

CGTM: United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*.

CCR: United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, *Called to Compassion and Responsibility*.

CCC: Interdicasterial Commission for the Catechism of the Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

CL: Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*.

CKS: United States Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue, The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries.
CSDC: Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church.
CU: Synod of Bishops, Convenientes ex Universo.
DCE: Pope Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est.
DH: Second Vatican Council, Dignitatis Humanae.
DPPL: Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy.
DM: Pope John Paul II, Dives et Misericordia.
DV: Pope John Paul II, Dominum et Vivificantem.
EM: United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, Encuentro and Mission.
EN: Pope Paul VI, Evangelii Nuntiandi.
GS: Second Vatican Council, Gaudium et Spes.
GMD: United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, Go Make Disciples.
JPSS: Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible.
LG: Second Vatican Council, Lumen Gentium.
MC: Pope Paul VI, Marialis Cultus.
NDC: United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, National Directory for Catechesis.
NA: Second Vatican Council, Nostra Aetate.
NMI: Pope John Paul II, Novo Millennio Inuente.
OHWB: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Our Hearts Were Burning.
RP: Pope John Paul II, Reconciliatio et Paenitentia.
RH: Pope John Paul II, Redemptoris Hominis.
RM: Pope John Paul II, Redemptoris Mater.
RMi: Pope John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio.
RCIA: Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.
SCST: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Sharing Catholic Social Teaching.
SRS: Pope John Paul II, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis.
SS: Pope Benedict XVI, Spe Salvi.
SNL: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Strangers No Longer.
TMA: Pope John Paul II, Tertio Millennio Adveniente.
EE: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, To the Ends of the Earth.
USCCA: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, United States Catholic Catechism for Adults.
UUS: Pope John Paul II, Ut Unum Sint.
VS: Pope John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor.
No abbreviation: Pope John Paul II, Day of Pardon Homily.
No abbreviation: Pope Paul VI, Message for the 1976 World Day of Peace.

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