

INTRODUCTION TO ST. MARY'S CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Our initial goal is to create a database on our website of resources for the Christian Way of Life. Then we can begin to work.

What type of resources can you expect? For now, we are creating Word documents on certain subjects. And which might they be? We're looking at those subjects that help us follow the Way.

Christianity is not first a set of beliefs. First, it is a Way of Life. It was the enemies of the first followers of Jesus who first called them "Christians."¹ Amongst themselves, the first followers knew it as "*The Way*." Their community codes of conduct stated it as the very first point:

"There are two ways, one of life, the other of death, and between the two ways there is a great difference."²

The Way begins with *conversion*: accepting Jesus as our Christ, which means that for us Jesus is God's "anointed one."³

We transfer our *allegiance* from the world to Jesus.

Ideally, nothing in the world would now have our complete allegiance; everything now becomes qualified and governed by our prior allegiance to Jesus.

In reality, transferring our complete allegiance to Jesus takes a *lifetime*. Over time spent following Jesus on his Way, we grow in:

- (1) heightening *ethical behaviour*, and
- (2) deepening *spiritual wisdom*.

¹ *The Acts of the Apostles* 11:26.

² *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary*. Translated by Aaron Milavec. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Michael Glazier, 2003. The word *didache* means teaching/training in Greek. The *Didache* is the code of conduct of one of the first Jewish-Christian communities, written very early, possibly around 50 C.E., contemporaneous with the letters of Paul to the Hellenistic communities in Roman Europe.

³ *Acts* 10:38. In ancient times, kings were anointed with blessed oil to symbolize divine favour.

These are the twin drivers of *transformation and sanctification* as we learn to follow Jesus on his Way of Life.

(1) What are Christian ethics?

Christian ethics consists basically of living a healthy, simple, and compassionate life within a community of care such as our parish. Our ethics are based on the parts of our tradition closest to Jesus:

- the *ethical teachings of Jesus* in the gospels, primarily in the Sermon on the Mount;⁴
- the *codes of conduct* of the first Jewish-Christian communities;
- and the *virtue ethics* of the Christian tradition, which map onto the ethical teachings of Jesus.

(2) What is Christian spirituality?

Christian spirituality is the process of personal conversion away from self-centredness towards self-giving over a lifetime of growing allegiance to Jesus on the Way of Life. It consists of:

- gaining in *spiritual wisdom* through learning from our sacred scriptures, our Anglican tradition, and our reason;
- practicing a number of *the twelve spiritual practices* - some by ourselves, some with our parish, and some in community; and
- opening up to *the indwelling of the holy Spirit* - which works with us on transforming our shadow side and guides us to becoming whole persons capable of flourishing, self-giving, and sanctification.

There are two educational projects ongoing on St. Mary's website. The first recovers the calendar of saints and the second consists of aides-mémoire on ethics (how to do) and spirituality (how to be).

⁴ In the *Gospel of Matthew*, chapters five to seven. (My hope is to work next on a set of primers for the Sermon on the Mount.)

1. THE CALENDAR OF SAINTS

We started a weekly feature on the website in May 2020 called the “Saint of the Week.” The intention is to remind ourselves of the communion of saints, of which we are a part.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* explains it clearly:

“...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” (12:1-2a)

These weekly accounts follow the Supplement to the Book of Alternative Services’ Calendar of Saints called *For All the Saints: prayers and readings for Saints’ days*, by Prof. Stephen Reynolds.

I collate his biographical introduction, the readings and the collects, to which I add some internet links for further reading.

They take ten minutes (five to make tea and five to read) and make for good devotional reading. So far, we have posted 40 accounts of holy days, memorials, and commemorations.

The hope is that the calendar of saints would teach us about the historical “friends of God” and inspire us to persevere in our own race.

I also hope that we would relearn to commemorate those who have been friends of God to us in our personal lives and in the life of our church family. I look forward to conversations on how we could do so.

(pto: please turn over)

2. Aides-Mémoire on the Way of Life

We Anglicans rely on scripture, tradition, and reason for guidance on this life. The primers consist of teachings taken from this our solid “three-legged stool.”

I take a book from my shelves and then select extracts from it to provide a primer that introduces the topic, mostly in the writer’s own words. I try to make it as brief, clear, visual, and practical as possible. (Your mileage may vary!)

We put out roughly one a month. So far, the collection has the following introductions:

Christian Ethics

101: The Two Ways

This is the *code of conduct* of one of the first Jewish Christian communities.

102: Character and Virtues

An introduction to *virtue ethics* from the classical and Christian tradition.

103: The Four Cardinal Virtues

An introduction to the four most critical virtues: *practical reason, courage, self-control, and justice* (fairness).

Christian Spirituality

201: Mysticism – Consciousness of the Divine

A summary of an essay by the English Anglican mystic Evelyn Underhill, which surveys the *three stages of spiritual growth* over a human life.

202: Spiritual Wisdom from Scripture

A summary of the teaching of Abbot Nesteros - one of the 4th century Desert Fathers - on *reading the Bible to gain spiritual wisdom*.

203: Four Inward Practices

An introduction to the four inward spiritual practices – *meditation, prayer, fasting and study* – taken from Richard J. Foster’s classic book called *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*.

204: Four Outward Practices

An introduction to the four outward spiritual practices – *simplicity, solitude, submission and service* – from Foster’s book.

205: Four Corporate Practices

An introduction to the four corporate spiritual practices – *confession, worship, guidance and celebration* – from Foster’s book.

I hope this year to work on ethics primers on the Sermon on the Mount and spirituality primers on reading the Bible.

Here’s how I see the project unfolding. The good Lord willing and the creek don’t rise, of course.

As mentioned, the first goal is to create a database of resources for living a healthy, compassionate life following Jesus. I hope to have at least the basics in place by the end of 2021.

The second goal will be to help us integrate these resources into our congregational life. We hope to develop study guides and group

resources based on the primers and other materials to engage our parishioners. We will hopefully start that next year.

The third goal will be to help us communicate with outsiders on the Christian Way of Life. This will be where the rubber hits the road. Our Christian language (not our Way) is hopelessly out of date to communicate with secular people. The hope is that a process of creating educational resources on the Way of Jesus would help us find the language of today for the Christian Life.

I look forward to conversations on how we become more active learners and so flourish as a parish - the People of God on the Way of Life.

My thanks to Rev'd Anne, to Kim Labelle, to Antoinette, and to readers and commenters.⁵

⁵ Compiled for the Parish of St. Mary's, Russell, Gerrit Botha, February 2021.