

Mary, Mother of Jesus

Learning Objectives

The Mary learning session guides learners of all ages to...

- Encounter Mary as Mother of Jesus, Mother of God, and Mother of the Church in the liturgical celebrations of the key moments of her life.
- Discover how the Church celebrates Mary in the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, the Annunciation, and the Visitation.
- Incorporate the witness of Mary's life into everyday Christian living by reflecting on her openness to God's will and her courage to speak with strength.

Session Overview

Part 1. (40 minutes)

Gathering

Part 2. (20 minutes)

All Ages Learning: Remembering Past Lents

Part 3. (90 minutes)

In Depth Learning Experience

- Option 1. Whole Group Format: All participants remain in the same room.
- Option 2. Learning Activity Centers Format: Participants rotate through selected activities in the same room or in separate rooms.

Part 4. (15 minutes)

Sharing Learning Experiences

Part 5. (15 minutes)

Closing Prayer Service

Design Options for In-Depth Learning

Option 1. Whole Group Format

This format guides the entire assembly through each of the learning experiences. You might choose this format if you have:

- a large physical space with good acoustics/sound system and furniture to comfortably accommodate the learners
- a competent large group facilitator/master of ceremonies able to provide clear directions and to manage the dynamics and energy of a large group
- a group of leaders who feel comfortable moving through the assembly offering assistance, or a large enough team of table leaders to have one leader work with each table group
- a learning topic that lends itself to everyone learning the same thing at the same time, but in different ways, in the same space

Facilitation Tips for this Format:

Guide small groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups.
- Where needed, small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Option 2. Learning Activity Centers

The Learning Activity Center Format provides structured learning activities at a variety of stations or centers in a common area. Learning activity centers are self-contained learning experiences, focusing on a specific topic or theme. They include brief presentations by the facilitators, interactive and experiential activities, group discussion and sharing. Each center can utilize a different learning method, such as drama or role play, creative arts, prayer, ritual, film, games, demonstrations, exhibits, and music.

One of the best ways to envision a Learning Activity Center Format is to imagine visiting a children's museum or one of the Epcot pavilions at Walt Disney World in Orlando. You will find a variety of interactive, experiential exhibits, media presentations, and staff-facilitated learning activities.

Learning Activity Centers can be used with all age groups. They can be developed for an intergenerational audience or for particular age groups, such as families with children or adolescents or adults. Learning Activity Centers can also be utilized in the families with children learning program within the Age Group Format.

Scheduling

Learning Activity Centers are designed to be conducted within a 20-30 minute timeframe. Depending on the session design, this will allow three or four learning periods to be offered during the In Depth Learning Experience.

Here is a sample schedule with four rounds of learning centers:

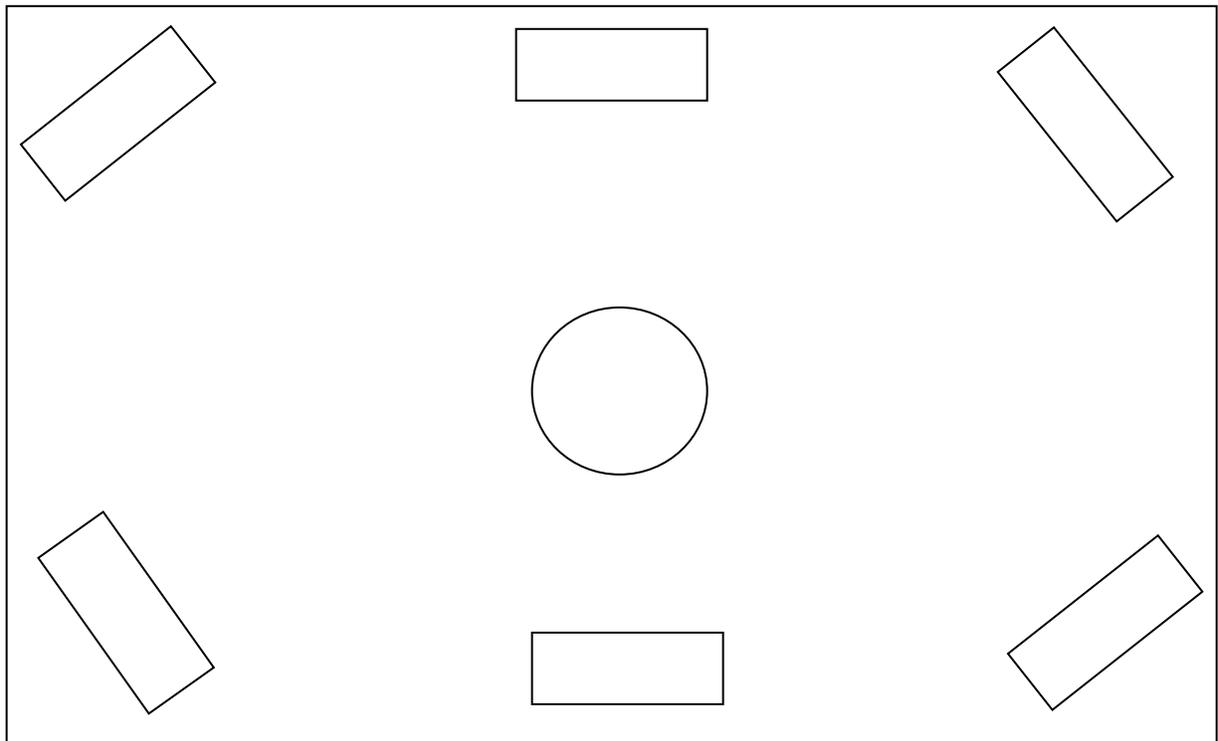
- 6:00 Hospitality and Dinner
- 6:30 Part 1. Gathering and Prayer
Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience
- 6:50 Round 1: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:15 Break (move to next center)
- 7:20 Round 2: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:45 Break (move to next center)
- 7:50 Round 3: Learning Activity Centers
- 8:15 Break (move to next center)
- 8:20 Round 4: Learning Activity Centers
- 8:45 Part 4: Presenting the Home Activities (no small group sharing)
Part 5: Closing Prayer

Here is a sample schedule with three rounds of learning centers:

- 6:00 Hospitality and Dinner
- 6:30 Part 1. Gathering and Prayer
Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience
- 7:00 Round 1: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:25 Break (move to next center)
- 7:30 Round 2: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:55 Break (move to next center)
- 8:00 Round 3: Learning Activity Centers
- 8:25 Break (gather in intergenerational groups)
- 8:30 Part 4: Sharing Learning Reflections and Home Application
- 8:50 Closing Prayer

Organizing the Activity Centers

There are two ways to set up activity centers: one large room, or multiple break-out rooms. If you arrange all of the learning centers in one large meeting gym or church hall, set-up the centers around the outside of the room (see example). The center space can become a storytelling center with a carpet or chairs for children to sit. The example below shows six different learning centers plus the storytelling center. You may still need separate rooms if you have a learning center that focuses on prayer (worship space) or shows a film (meeting room).



Keep in mind the following when organizing in one room:

- Make sure there is adequate space between learning centers so that people are not interrupted by the activity at other centers.

- Set-up each learning activity center with tables and chairs (or carpeted floor space) for participants to listen, discuss, and create. Children and teens can use the floor, but adults will need chairs.
- Assign each learning center a number and post the number on the wall and floor at each center.

If you arrange learning centers in multiple rooms such as meeting rooms, classrooms, church hall, gym, worship space, assign one learning center to each space. This format resembles a conference where people move from room to room for each session. Place the learning center name outside each room and develop a list of centers with locations, and a map if necessary, so that people can easily find the correct room.

Organizing Groups

Once you have determined how many learning centers you will offer, you can organize participants accordingly. If you offer four learning centers, you can organize the participants into four groups of equal size and assign each group a specific sequence that they will move through the learning centers. Assign a number to each learning center and an alphabet letter to each group, then describe how they will move through the centers: Group A: 1-2-3-4; Group B: 2-3-4-1, Group C: 3-4-1-2, and Group D: 4-1-2-3. If you offer three learning centers, there would be three groups rotating among the three learning centers. Keep families together in one group.

If you offer more than three or four learning centers, allow people to choose the learning centers they are going to experience. Remind them that if a particular center is crowded, they can move to another center and then return to their first choice in another round. Families with children should stay together because the activities require parents to work with their children.

Staffing

Each center is facilitated by a team of facilitators/catechists who guide the participants through the activity plan. The teaching team facilitates the overall learning plan for the center: making presentations, guiding learning activities, organizing discussions, and so on. The number of team members needed depends on the complexity of the activities and the number of participants at a learning center. Teams should have at least two or three people, but some centers will require five or six people. Older adolescents can also serve as members of the teaching team, and are especially valuable in facilitating creative activities and dramatic presentations.

To present the focus of each learning activity center, ask the teaching teams to present a very brief overview of what they will be doing in each center. Give each participant the list of learning activity centers with short descriptions, a schedule and the locations of the centers.

Materials Needed

Gathering

- Name tags
- Community building activities

All Ages Opening Learning Experience

- Handout: Opening Prayer Service
- Bible
- Marian holy cards

In-Depth Learning Experience

- Paper and pencils
- Poster board
- Markers and crayons
- Scissors
- Glue
- Old magazines
- Bibles
- Handout: *Mary in Mark and Luke*
- Newsprint
- Wrapped gifts (gifts are pictures of things from magazines)
- Handout: *Mary's Gifts*
- Handout: *My Gifts*
- Newspapers (Catholic and secular)
- Handout: *Visitation Reading*
- Handout: *Magnificat*
- Yarn
- Masking tape
- Blank paper

Closing

- Handout: *Closing Prayer Service*
- Holy water bowls
- Bible
- Meditative music with a Marian theme
- Candle(s) and matches

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering (40 minutes)

Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Ask people to make a name tag. (See below for instructions.)
- Distribute the Home Kit for the session, including any handouts participants will need for the session. (You can also distribute handouts for the In-Depth Learning program at the beginning of the activity.)
- Invite people to share a meal; depending on time of day, the program may end with a meal instead.

Welcome

Welcome the participants to the program and introduce the theme of the session.

1. Group Formation

In the Whole Group Format, organize people into intergenerational small groups of approximately eight people OR organize table groups of families with children, adolescents, and adults. If you organize into intergenerational groups, participants will remain with their group for the entire program. Ask all members of the same family to sit together in these intergenerational groups. Each group should have as many of the following categories as possible: family (parents, children, teens), young adults, adults without children, and older adults. If members of the same family are intergenerational—children, teens, parents, and grandparents—keep them together in one group, but always be flexible; teens may want to have their own tables.

2. Opening Prayer Service

Preparation

Choose a Marian hymn to include in this prayer service, along with the Gospel reading from the Marian event you are preparing for. Assign reading parts.

Invite everyone into a moment of silent reflection before you begin the prayer.

Leader

Use these or similar words to introduce the prayer service:

Mary means many things to many people. She is a great mystery of our faith. While it is an essential part of Catholic faith to honor Mary and her indispensable role in God's plan for our salvation, how we honor her varies from community to community and from person to person. Some will honor her by praying the rosary. Others will honor her by attending mass on Marian holy days. Still others may honor her by reflecting upon her as she is presented in the gospels, and others may simply carry on personal conversations with her as they rest in her unassuming presence much like they do with their own mothers. Today I invite you to begin your prayer by bringing to mind your own mother. Think about the woman who brought you into this world. Perhaps she is here with you. I'd like to ask you to bring her to your attention by saying her name out loud at this time.

(Pause while participants name their mothers. You may have to encourage this by letting them know that it's okay for them to speak at the same time others are speaking. The goal is for each person to say the name of her/his mother out loud.)

Continue with these or similar words: Each time we say the name of our mother, we recall many memories of her. Depending upon who we are, those memories might be positive or negative or, more likely, a mix of both. The point is that we've had a deeply personal experience of this woman and that experience leaves us with many, many thoughts and feelings. We have another mother whose name is Mary. She is the mother of Jesus, our brother. By adoption, she is our mother. Let's face it. Our earthly mothers are not always perfect, but we have a heavenly mother who loves us perfectly. She loves us and wants to help us in our journey of faith in her son, Jesus. She wants nothing more than to give Christ to us and to give us to Christ. Like our own mothers, we can get to know her personally. We can get to know Mary through the Bible, through the stories of others, and through prayer. Let us turn to God in prayer through the intercession of our mother, Mary.

Song

Play an appropriate song with a Marian theme. It is best to choose a song that you will use in an upcoming Marian liturgy.

Gospel Proclamation

Proclaim the gospel reading that will be used in the Marian liturgy for which you are preparing.

Intercessions

Our response to the intercessions will be:

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Reader One: We pray for all mothers in the world, that they will learn from Mary to be open to God's will no matter where it leads them. We pray to the Lord.

All: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Reader Two: We pray for all fathers in the world, that they will love and support the holiness in their wives as Joseph did for Mary. We pray to the Lord.

All: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Reader Three: We pray for all children in the world, may they grow in wisdom, age, and favor before God and their communities as Jesus did under the loving care of his mother, Mary. We pray to the Lord.

All: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Reader Four: We pray for our parish family, that we will model our love for each other after the love of the holy family: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. We pray to the Lord.

All: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Closing Prayer

Loving God, you chose to enter the world through the body of a woman. You chose to be loved and cared for by an earthly mother. What a blessing it is for us to have a God who knows the ways of family life. We thank you for choosing Mary as our mother who gives us comfort by praying for us unceasingly as an expression of her great love for us, her earthly children. May each of us come to know her and to love her as you know and love her. We ask this prayer in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience: Sharing Our Marian Sacramentals (20 minutes)

Preparation

- Contact participants in advance and ask them to bring a holy card, statue, painting, or some other Marian sacramental to the session.
- Invite your core team to bring a Marian sacramental to the session.
- Divide participants into groups based on how many people brought Marian sacramentals with them so that those who have brought something are equally divided among those who have not.
- Have extra Marian holy cards available for anyone who does not bring a sacramental.

Activity Plan

Use these or similar words to introduce the activity:

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has meant many things to many people and many cultures over the centuries. We know her as Our Lady of Grace, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of Lourdes, The Blessed Mother, The Blessed Virgin, The Mother of the Church, and The Mother of God, to name a few of her titles. There are many feast days throughout the Church year associated with her such as the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God on January 1st; the Annunciation on March 25th; the Visitation on May 31st; the Assumption on August 15th; the Birth of Mary on September 8th; Our Lady of the Rosary on October 7th; and the Immaculate Conception on December 8th.

Many of you brought with you a Marian sacramental, a statue, a picture, or something else that means something to you. I invite you to take a few moments to share with the people at your table what you brought and what it means to you. If you did not bring a sacramental, we have a holy card for you and we will begin by explaining the image on the holy card.

After you have distributed and explained the image on the holy card, allow time for people who brought sacramentals to describe what they brought and what it means to them. Use these or similar words to conclude this activity:

Clearly there are many ways to understand Mary and her role in our lives and in the Church. Today we will focus our learning on the feasts of the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, the Annunciation, and/or the Visitation (announce only the feast days you will learn about). We will use our sacramentals again in the closing prayer today.

Part 3. In-Depth Learning Experiences (90 minutes)

Whole Group Format Outline

Learning Experience One (30 minutes)

The Immaculate Conception (All ages) OR The Assumption (All ages)

Learning Experience Two (30 minutes)

Mary in Luke (All Ages)

The Annunciation (All Ages)

Learning Experience Three (30 minutes)

The Visitation (All ages)

Learning Activity Center Format Outline

1. The Immaculate Conception or The Assumption (All ages)
2. Mary in Luke (All ages, but best for adolescents and adults)
3. The Annunciation (All ages)
4. The Visitation (All ages)

Learning Experience: The Immaculate Conception (30 Minutes)

Whole Group: Families with Children, Adolescents, Adults

Learning Activity Centers: Families with Children, Adolescents, Adults

Materials

- Handout: *The Perfect Life* (one copy per person)
- Handout: *The Fruit of the Womb*
- Paper and pencils
- Poster board
- Markers or crayons

Preparation

- Duplicate copies of the handout *The Perfect Life* (one per person)

Activity Plan

1. Introduce the learning experience with these or similar words:

The Immaculate Conception is a feast day that we celebrate every December 8th to recall our belief that Mary was conceived without sin in her mother's womb. The Immaculate Conception was defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854. The common understanding of the relationship between human beings and sin is that we experience sin, we suffer because of it, and Jesus' love saves us from sin and suffering. Mary is distinguished from all other human beings in that she was protected from suffering the scourge of sin even before she could experience it. We are redeemed from sin; Mary was protected from all sin.

Mary, conceived without sin, is a model for human perfection. The Immaculate Conception gives us an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be a perfectly fulfilled human being.

2. Distribute copies of the handout *The Perfect Life* to each participant.
3. Invite each participant to complete the four statements on the handout either by drawing a picture or by writing a sentence or two. All participants are invited to describe what they would have, what they would do, who they would be, and where they would go if they had the perfect life.
4. Give participants time to share their perfect lives with each other.
5. Use these or similar words to discuss Mary's perfection:

Mary lived the perfect life. We believe in the Immaculate Conception, which means we believe that Mary was conceived without sin. Mary was a flawless human being. If we were to describe Mary using the same parameters we used to describe our own perfect lives, here is what we might come up with:

- Mary would have.... We don't know what Mary would have because the Bible never describes any of her possessions. I suppose possessions don't have much to do with a perfect life.

- Mary would do.... We don't know the fine details of Mary's activities. We do know that she attended a wedding once, so she probably enjoyed a good time now and then. We do know that she got married and had a son. We do know that Mary praised God in prayer.
- Mary would be.... The Bible presents Mary as a woman of deep faith and strong conviction. She trusts in God completely, and she is a bold voice for God's justice for the poor and oppressed.
- Mary would go.... Mary went on journeys to support her pregnant cousin and to protect her young child from a violent king. She also traveled with her family and friends to the festival in Jerusalem.

6. Divide participants into groups of three or four. Invite them to share about how their "perfect lives" compare with the sinless life of Mary.

7. Give paper and pencil to each participant. Invite each participant to write a haiku about Mary's Immaculate Conception. Remind them that a haiku is a poem with three lines. The first line has five syllables, the second line has seven syllables, and the third line has five syllables. Here is a sample haiku about Mary as our mother:

Mary is mother
The mother of Jesus Christ
Mother of the Church

If some people have trouble getting started, you could suggest that the first line be "Immaculate one."

8. Alternative for Younger Children: Younger children may not be capable of creating a haiku. Give parents of younger children a copy of the handout *Fruit of the Womb* to guide them through an activity that will help the children to appreciate why Mary was conceived without sin.

9. Invite participants to share their haikus as they write them on the poster board. Children can display their fruit-of-the-womb trees.

10. Close by praying the Hail Mary together.

Learning Experience: The Assumption (30 Minutes)

Whole Group: Families with Children, Adolescents, Adults,

Learning Activity Centers: Families with Children, Adolescents, Adults,

Materials

- Old magazines that can be cut up
- Poster board
- Scissors
- Glue
- Old magazines
- Markers or crayons
- Two pieces of fruit (one that is fresh and one that is visibly rotten)
- New American Bible (1 Corinthians 15:54-57)

Activity Plan

1. Use these or similar words to introduce this learning experience:

The Assumption of Mary is celebrated on August 15th. The earliest celebrations of this feast date go back as early as the 6th century. The teaching on the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven was defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950. The teaching states that Mary, when she had completed her life on Earth, was assumed body and soul into heaven.

Mary's assumption indicates to us that there is some kind of physical dimension to heaven. Her body was united to God and her assumption is also a promise that we too will unite with God, body and soul, in heaven at the end of time. If our bodies and the physical world in general are good enough to unite with God in heaven, then there must be something pretty important about our bodies and the physical world. The assumption calls us to honor Mary in her physical existence and to honor the best of physical existence here on Earth.

2. Divide participants into groups of four. Give each group a poster board, glue, markers or crayons, and old magazines.
3. Instruct each group to write at the top of the poster the following phrase: The Assumption Affirms the Beauty of Creation.
4. Introduce the Corinthians reading (step 7 below) with these or similar words: Mary's body was protected from physical corruption as a sign that sin did not touch her life.
5. Ask the participants if anyone can explain what the word corruption means. (Facilitator note: Corruption means that something is rotten.)
6. Show the participants the two pieces of fruit. Explain that one is good and the other is rotten or corrupt. Ask a child to point to the fruit that has been touched by corruption. The corrupt fruit probably has an odor. Allow some participants to smell the corrupted fruit.

7. Read 1 Corinthians 15:54-57. (NOTE: The word corrupt is only used in the New American Bible translation.) Tell participants that this reading is taken from the vigil mass for the Assumption.

8. Introduce the poster activity with these or similar words:

Our reading tells us that corruption or a corruptible frame is a sign of death and sin, but incorruptibility is a sign of Christ's victory over sin and death. Mary's body was incorruptible as a sign of Christ's great power. There are many signs of corruption and victory in our world. The assumption of Mary calls us to identify and destroy signs of corruption and affirm signs of victory. Take some time in your small groups to make a poster that shows both physical corruption and physical victory or beauty. Draw a line down the middle of the poster board and place the signs of corruption on the left and the signs of victory on the right.

(Facilitator note: signs of corruption might include war, poverty, wasted resources, and so on. Signs of victory might include: people helping others, community revitalization projects, countries that have made peaceful resolutions through their civil wars, universal health care, and so on.)

8. Give the groups time to complete their posters.

8. When the posters are finished, give the groups time to share them with each other and display them on the wall.

10. Close with the following prayer:

All powerful God, you raised the sinless Virgin Mary body and soul into heaven. May all of creation one day follow Mary in bodily fulfillment. May all signs of corruption be wiped away from our lives so that goodness and beauty will fill your creation and give you glory. Amen.

Learning Experience: Mary in Luke (30 Minutes)

Whole Group: Families with Children, Adults, Adolescents

Learning Activity Centers: Adults, Adolescents

Materials

- Bibles
- Paper and pencils
- Handout: Mary in Mark and Luke
- Newsprint
- Markers

Preparation

- Duplicate copies of the handout Mary in Mark and Luke (one per person)
- Distribute markers and newsprint to each table group

Activity Plan

1. Introduce the learning experience with these or similar words:

Luke's gospel gives us more information about Mary than the other two synoptic gospels. We will spend some time learning how Luke's community contributed much to the Church's high esteem for Mary, the mother of Jesus. But, before we look at Luke's portrait of Mary, we'll first do a brief study of Mary in the gospel of Mark.

Mark's is the oldest of the four gospels, and Luke had access to Mark's gospel as he developed his own. We will begin our study of Mary in Luke with a passage about Jesus and Mary in Mark. It's a passage that Luke used and developed.

2. Invite everyone to read Mark 3:31-35.

3. Divide participants into groups of three or four and say these or similar words:

Mary's role is minimal in Mark's gospel. This reading suggests that there may have been some tension within Jesus' family. In your small groups, develop an imaginative scenario that might explain why Jesus would say something like this when his family approached him as they did in this reading. Write a few sentences about what might have led up to this situation. Here are a few things you can consider as you develop your scenario:

- Joseph is dead and has left the family business to Jesus.
- Family ties are very strong in ancient Mediterranean society.
- Widowed women rely upon their sons for financial support.
- Jesus has gone out on his own as a traveling preacher and healer.
- The extended family and others have been gossiping about him quite a bit (see Mark 3:20-21).

4. Give the groups about five minutes to work on this.

5. Invite each group to share their scenario.

6. Give each family/person a copy of the handout Mary in Mark and Luke. Remind the participants that Luke (written approximately 15 years after Mark) had Mark's gospel in hand when he composed his gospel. In most cases Luke expanded on what Mark had written. In this case, Luke subtracted from Mark.

7. Invite participants to consider this question: What do you think is happening in Luke's community that would cause Luke to delete some of Mark's material regarding the mother of Jesus? (Facilitator note: Esteem for Mary seems to be increasing in the Christian community as Luke's gospel is being developed.)

8. Say these or similar words:

Luke's gospel not only seems to include Mary among those who hear the word of God and do it, but it also holds Mary up as a woman of great faith, one who hears God's word and does it, as we will see in the next reading we explore from Luke's gospel.

9. Invite participants to open their Bibles and read Luke 1:26-38. There are many aspects to the word of God as Mary is hearing it in this passage. Invite participants to write down or imagine in their own words what Mary is hearing from the angel.

10. Invite participants to share what they have written with others at their tables. Suggest to participants that Mary is esteemed not just because she can hear God's word but also because she does God's word. Invite participants to respond to these question:

- How will Mary live as a result of hearing this word of God?
- What will the social consequences be for Mary because she hears the word of God?
- How might the angel's words sustain her through these consequences?

11. Use these or similar words for transition:

We do not learn about Mary for Mary's sake, we learn about her for our sake. Mary is often described as a representation of the Church. Mary said yes to God and received the presence of Christ within her and then shared the presence of Christ by giving birth to him. We, the Church, are called to be like Mary. We are called to accept the presence of Christ within and among us. We are called to birth the presence of Christ into the world with the same courage that Mary had.

12. Invite each table group to write the following phrase at the top of the newsprint: Our Parish Gives Birth to Christ. Invite each table group to list on the newsprint the ways that their parish accepts and gives birth to the presence of Christ in the community.

13. When all table groups are finished, give them time to share their results with each other.

14. Close by asking each participant to consider how he/she participates in bringing Christ to the world through this parish community. Ask each participant to quietly consider what he/she can do to be more deeply committed to bringing Christ into the world with the same courage that Mary had.

Learning Experience: The Annunciation (30 Minutes)

Whole Group: Families with Children, Adolescents, Adults

Learning Activity Centers: Families with Children, Adolescents, Adults

Materials

- Bible
- Magazines
- Wrapped gifts
- Handout: Gift or Curse?
- Handout: Mary's Gifts
- Handout: My Gifts
- Pencils

Preparation

- Use the handout Gift or Curse? to prepare for this learning experience. You will need one gift per participant. Wrap the cards in gift wrap, but make sure you know which gifts are for each age group. If you have a lot of participants, you may want to just put the gift pictures in small envelopes to save some time.
- Photocopy the handouts Mary's Gifts and My Gifts (one per person)

Activity Plan

1. Use these or similar words to introduce this learning experience:

Mary was a gifted woman. The greatest gift she ever received was the gift of Jesus conceived in her womb. Jesus was also the greatest gift she ever gave. When we reflect upon the gift of Jesus coming into the life of Mary, we notice that he was a source of great joy for Mary, but he was also a great challenge for her.

2. Introduce the gift-receiving activity with these or similar words:

I have a gift for each person here. Some of you will really like the gift you receive; others may not be so happy with their gift. The thing that makes all of these things gifts is that they are being given to you freely. What you do with the gift, especially the more challenging gifts, determines whether or not the gift can lead you to joy.

3. Distribute the gifts to each participant.

4. Invite the participants to discuss in the table groups how their gift might be both a source of joy and a challenge for them.

5. After each participant has had a chance to discuss his/her gift, invite participants to share what they heard in their small groups with the larger group.

6. Use these or similar words to introduce the annunciation story:

Listen to the story of the annunciation. Notice how the angel tells Mary to rejoice because she is receiving a great gift from God, but he also tells her not to be afraid because she has every reason to fear what this gift will bring her. This gift would be a joy and a challenge.

Read Luke 1:26-38.

7. Invite participants to discuss the following questions in their table groups: How is the gift of the annunciation a source of joy for Mary? How is the gift of the annunciation a challenge for Mary?

8. Give time for participants to report what they heard in their small group discussions.

9. Distribute the handout Mary's Gifts.

10. Use these or similar words to introduce the second reading of Luke 1:26-38:

I'm going to read the story of the annunciation again for you. This time I invite you to respond to the questions on the handout while I read the story. I'll give you some extra time after I'm done reading to finish recording your thoughts in words and/or pictures. Read Luke 1:26-38.

11. After the reading, facilitate a discussion about Mary's gifts. Give participants a chance to share and discuss what they put on the handout Mary's Gifts. [Facilitator note: Here are some thoughts to consider: Mary received the physical gift of pregnancy. Bearing a son in ancient Mediterranean cultures was a very important way for a woman to be esteemed in her community. Mary had a courageous personality. Pregnancy outside of marriage would be a great challenge in her culture. Mary had the spiritual gift of openness to God's will. She trusted that God would take care of her in the face of great challenges.]

12. Give each participant a copy of the handout My Gifts. Invite participants to complete the handout My Gifts. Encourage participants who know each other to work together to identify their gifts. Remind them that gifts are freely given to them, but it is often difficult for us to see our own gifts. It is helpful to have others help point out our gifts for us. Encourage participants to claim the gifts that they have. There is nothing conceited about claiming one's gifts because the gifts have been freely given; we have done nothing to earn them.

14. Close this session with these or similar words:

There is one other thing that is noteworthy about the annunciation that helps us to understand the nature of gifts. Mary did not ask for the gift of Jesus to come into her life. This was a gift that was simply given to her. We often get into the habit of asking for gifts for birthdays or for Christmas. Perhaps we should be more like Mary and learn to want the gifts we receive rather than try to get the gifts we want. One of the keys to happiness in life is learning to deal with what you receive from life. We often don't get to choose what comes our way, but we are always free to choose how to deal with what comes our way. Imagine how happy you would be if you could learn to want what you get rather than always trying to get what you want. Mary received with an open heart. Let us ask God for the grace to receive all the gifts that come our way with an open heart whether the gifts are happy gifts or challenging gifts.

Learning Experience: The Visitation (30 Minutes)

Whole Group: Families with Children, Adolescents, Adults,

Learning Activity Centers: Families with Children, Adolescents, Adults

Materials

- Newspapers (Catholic and secular)
- Handout: *Visitation Reading*
- Handout: *Magnificat*
- Yarn
- Masking tape
- Blank paper
- Crayons

Preparation

- Prepare three readers for the reading of the visitation story using the handout *Visitation*.
- Collect many newspapers, both Catholic newspapers and secular newspapers.
- Make large signs on poster board with the following phrases (one sign per phrase): God is merciful, God scatters the thoughts of the proud, God brings down the powerful, God lifts up the lowly, God fills the hungry, God sends the rich away empty, God makes things fair. (This final sign will be for families with young children).
- Photocopy the handout *Magnificat* (one per person).

Activity Plan

1. Introduce this learning experience with these or similar words:

The story of the visitation of Mary in Luke recounts her journey to visit her pregnant cousin, Elizabeth while Mary herself is carrying Jesus within her own womb. Mary and Elizabeth greet each other and Mary proceeds to praise God with a prayer that has come to be known as the Magnificat. It is a prayer that is prayed every evening by Catholics around the world. This prayer is consoling to some and disturbing to others; it all depends upon whether you belong to the “haves” or the “have-nots”.

2. Do a three-part reading of Luke 1:39-56. Use the handout *Visitation Reading* as your script.

3. Distribute a copy of the handout *Magnificat* to each participant. Invite all the participants to pray the *Magnificat* together.

4. Facilitate a discussion that explores how Mary proclaims a God who is deeply concerned about social inequities. God seems to want more mercy, less pride, the destruction of the powerful, the uplifting of the lowly, and a proper distribution of wealth.

5. Young children have a very keen sense of what is fair and what is unfair. You can help younger children to understand the action of God that is proclaimed in the Magnificat by facilitating a discussion about fairness, using the following question and comments: What do we mean when we say that something is not fair? At your tables, take a moment to identify a couple of unfair situations in our community, or in our schools or in our world in general.

Close this discussion by assuring the participants that these unfair situations are not what God wants. [spoken text] God wants everyone to be treated fairly. Our next activity will help us to see these unfair problems and their solutions more clearly.

6. Use these or similar words to introduce the activity:

We consistently hear stories in the news and in our community about the very things that Mary expresses in the Magnificat. There are phrases from the Magnificat on poster boards on the wall. We are going to take some time to find stories and pictures in our newspapers that help to illustrate the concerns and the solutions to the concerns that are expressed in the Magnificat. When you find a story that fits with one of the phrases on the wall, cut out the story, tape it to the wall, and tape a piece of yarn that connects your story to the Magnificat phrase.

7. Invite each table group to find a story/illustration that matches each of the phrases on the poster board. Ask each group to be prepared to summarize why they chose their particular stories.

8. Young children can draw illustrations that fit the news stories. Families with young children can also focus on things in the news that are unfair and place their stories and pictures by the God-makes-things-fair poster, or families with young children can focus on writing their own stories about what is unfair in our community or in our schools. They can draw and color pictures that illustrate these situations, and they should also be encouraged to brainstorm and display creative ways to solve the unfair situations.

9. After each group adds their stories/illustrations to the Magnificat web, give group representatives time to present their summaries.

10. Close this learning experience by praying the Magnificat again. You may also want to play a musical version of the Magnificat.

Part 4. Sharing Learning Reflections (15 minutes)

Advanced Preparation

- Determine what each group will bring back to the large group or to their small group to share as a result of their learning.
- Determine how each group will share their reports or projects so that they “teach” the other groups about the event and theme.

Whole Group Sharing and Reflection

The whole group sharing experience provides an opportunity for each age group to share something they have learned with the entire group. If the session has been conducted in intergenerational groups ask participants to remain with their group. If the session was conducted in the age group format, ask people to rejoin their intergenerational groups from the All Ages Learning Experience OR ask family members to rejoin their own family and individual adolescent and adult participants to stay with their age groups from the In-Depth Learning Experience.

First, ask the participants to share what they learned in a small group setting or by inviting participants or groups, representing families, teens, and adults, to share projects or reflections with the entire group.

Second, present the following information using the words below or your own words:

Think of everything we have done in this session to learn about the Easter Vigil. Take a few minutes to reflect on what you have learned in this session:

- What is one thing you learned about Mary that you did not know before?
- What do you look forward to experiencing at the Marian celebrations this year?
- Why do you think Mary is so important for us as Catholics?

Part 5. Closing Prayer Service (15 minutes)

Preparation

- Invite all participants to hold their Marian sacramentals for the closing prayer.
- Place small bowls of holy water in the front of the room for as many blessing stations as you need. (You will be calling all participants forward to bless their sacramentals.)
- Get a recording of some meditative music with a Marian theme such as an Ave Maria or a Magnificat.
- Lower the lights and light a candle or several candles if desired.

Materials

- Holy water bowls
- Bible
- CD/Tape player
- Meditative music with a Marian theme
- Candle(s) and matches

Prayer Service

Leader

Let us close our session in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Leader

Mary is the mother of Christ, and the Church is the body of Christ. As members of the body of Christ, Mary is our spiritual mother. She is always with us offering consolation, guidance, encouragement, and grace to love her divine son more deeply each day. Let us pray that we will be open to her love and concern for us.

Reader

Read John 2:1-5.

Leader

“Do whatever he tells you.” These are the last words that Mary speaks in the gospels. “Do whatever he tells you.” This sums up the mission of Mary’s life. Her goal is to turn people’s hearts toward Jesus, her son. Nothing pleases Mary more than leading people to Jesus. Nothing pleases her more than seeing you and me follow in the ways of Jesus. All authentic devotion to Mary ends with a deeper relationship with Christ.

We now call each of you forward to have your Marian sacramentals blessed.

Start the meditative music.

As each participant approaches a minister, the minister sprinkles some holy water on the sacramental and says the following blessing: May the loving heart of Mary, our mother, turn your heart toward the heart of Jesus. Amen.

Leader

Please join me in prayer. Hail Mary....

We pray that Mary, our mother, will intercede for us and attain for us the blessings of almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.