

## 9th Grade: Discernment

### OPENING SCRIPTURE

5-7 min

Begin with short prayer and/or lead a meditation based on lesson's scripture.

*In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you."*

*But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

*But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God."*

*Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."*

- LUKE 1:26-38<sup>[1]</sup>

### REVIEW OPTION

8-10 min

Tie today's class to the previous vocation lesson or other classes you have been working on.

[1] Scripture taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition, available at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible>.

## DISCERNMENT

*In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you."*

*But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

*But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God."*

*Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."*

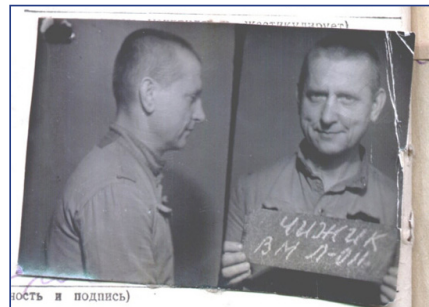
- LUKE 1:26-38<sup>[1]</sup>

### READING

#### WITH GOD IN RUSSIA: FR. CISZEK TAKES CHARGE.<sup>[2]</sup>

Fr. Walter Ciszek (1904-1984) was a Jesuit priest sent to work in Poland in the late 1930s. When the Soviet Army invaded, the priest was arrested as a "spy" in 1941. He was to spend five years in Lubyanka prison, where he would be tortured, kept awake, and interrogated, before being subjected to fifteen years of brutal slave labor in the freezing cold of Siberia.

After almost his first year in prison he was told what his sentence was. He knew that going to Siberia probably meant he



Fr. Walter Ciszek's prison photo.

would die and that there would be no appeal. Here he describes what happened after he was taken back to his solitary cell after the sentencing. Two days passed. He could have despaired; instead, on the third day, he decided to take charge of his life.

"I began to read Russian literature. I started with Tolstoy and read almost all his works. I established a new order of the day for myself; spiritual duties before noon, then read till dinnertime. Before dinner, I'd make my noonday examination of conscience and say the Angelus when the Kremlin clock chimed twelve. After the noon meal, I said my three sets of beads in Polish, Russian, and Latin, then went back to reading until it was time for the exercise period or the trip to the toilet. After supper, I'd say my evening prayers and hymns from memory, then back to the books again until it was time for bed.

"That was my daily order, and nobody bothered me for more than a year. Except for the occasional visits from the chief of the prison and the weekly health inspection and examination for parasites, I saw no one but the guards. I became, in effect, a hermit, alone with my prayer and my books. I even found myself forgetting how to talk! Occasionally I was almost tongue-tied in talking to the doctor, or the warden on his infrequent visits.

"Besides the daily twenty-minute exercise, I tried to keep myself active by polishing the floor twice a day. We were required to do this once a day at Lubyanka in any event, but while many of the prisoners gave it the proverbial lick and a promise, I really worked at it, just for the sheer joy of being active. The floors at Lubyanka

[1] Scripture taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition, available at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible>

[2] See Fr. Walter J. Ciszek, *With God in Russia* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997). Also visit [http://www.Ciszek.org/About\\_Ciszek.html](http://www.Ciszek.org/About_Ciszek.html) for more information.

VOCATION LESSONS | 9th Grade: Discernment

### READING

10-15 min

#### OVERVIEW:

Read and discuss excerpt from Fr. Walter Ciszek's *With God in Russia*.

#### GOALS:

Using this story as a springboard and recalling other stories from the unit, help students to develop a list of habits that are conducive to discernment, to a life lived well, and to holiness. After the reading and discussion, students can work on some personal goals and a plan of life to help foster the kind of prayer and habits conducive to discerning a vocation.

PREPARATION:

Review Ciszek story and other stories, time permitting. Notes are given concerning the various practices which helped people discern and live up to their vocations. Review these notes in the Information section (section 4), or simply make your own notes of good habits and practices to point out to the students. We include this story because Fr. Ciszek made a plain but practical plan of life in a time of extreme duress. It is inspiring to think what can be done even in difficult circumstances.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Have students read the story silently, or read it aloud. Then pose and discuss this question: “In order to be open to the will of God and use His time well, what kind of things did Father Ciszek do?”



DISCERNMENT

READING *continued*

were of good solid oak, which took a beautiful sheen. I'd dust the floor first with a soft rag, then rub in the wax, which came in big sticks, and afterward go over it with a heavy iron wrapped in cloth—and plenty of elbow grease—to polish it to a high shine.

“With all the time on my hands now, I also set about mending the clothes I had been wearing ever since I was arrested a Chusovoy. By now they were in bad shape...

*We had been sentenced to hard labor, but there was no reason we had to be depressed... We set out to make the best of it.*

“I stressed not only the spiritual side of life but the physical side as well. Every day I took at least forty –five minutes of calisthenics to keep my body as active as my mind was with the books. I kept myself and my clothes as neat and clean as I could, my room spotless. I was determined through all this long, enforced idleness to remain human and mentally alert and not to let the prison routine get me down... I knew nothing of the outside world, but I kept track of the time and the days, remembering all the feast days of the Church as best I could, celebrating them with special prayers that I remembered or made up.

“And I went at my course in Russian literature with a vengeance. Besides Tolstoy, I read Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Gogol, Leskov, and many of the works of Jack London, Dickens, Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller –and even Quo Vadis—all in Russian. I also read quite a bit of Russian history (126-128).”

For a few months another priest was imprisoned with him.

“[We] formed a little Jesuit community right in the heart of Moscow. First of all, after all these long years of being without the sacrament, we went to confession and made a manifestation of conscience. Then we made up a daily order for ourselves which was little different from that of any Jesuit community anywhere. We rose at 5:30 –as did everyone else in the prison –made a morning meditation and said Mass (i.e., the prayers of the Mass) before breakfast. Then we'd talk or work until time for our examination of conscience and the Angelus at noon.

“In the afternoon we said more prayers, including the rosary, in common. We'd say the Angelus again at six o'clock before

supper, then after supper make our evening devotions, taking turns giving one another points for the morning meditation. Morning and afternoon, during the times between prayer, we kept busy. We spent some time reviewing our theology studies together; we preached extempore sermons or gave lectures, criticizing one another –then we'd fall to laughing over similar criticisms or incidents in our earlier training.

“Occasionally we would turn to lighter diversions and impromptu skits. I was easily the comedian...

“There was nothing better than a joke to break the almost trancelike state of boredom that occasionally crept into the most active schedule in the midst of prison routine... We had been sentenced to hard labor, but there was no reason we had to be depressed... We set out to make the best of it (150-152).”

Fr. Ciszek was a heroic priest. He told his story in two books, *He Ledeth Me* and *With God in Russia*. In the latter book, we get a glimpse of the simple, daily habits Fr. Ciszek developed to keep himself sane, normal, open to the will of God, and able to carry out God's will. He had a plan of life which helped him learn and fulfill God's will in his life.



Fr. Walter Ciszek's upon his return home in 1963

He was absolutely forbidden at all times to engage in priestly activities. Later in the Gulag camps, he suffered extreme conditions of cold, hunger, surveillance, and threats. He worked more than sixteen hours a day and continued to hear confessions, offer spiritual counsel, give retreats, and say mass in secret whenever he could.

Fr. Ciszek's family and his brother priests thought he was dead, but in 1963 he was traded back to the USA for two spies. His sister, a nun, was there to greet him when he returned. He had been gone for almost twenty-five years. Today, people are gathering information for his canonization.

**CLASS DISCUSSION:  
“CREATING A SPIRITUAL  
PLAN OF LIFE”**

15-20 min

**OVERVIEW:**

Having read the Fr. Ciszek selection, lead a class discussion about developing a spiritual plan of life.

**GOALS:**

Each student will:

- Develop a basic model for life which helps him/her be open to learning and living his/her vocation. A life of prayer is conducive to doing God’s will, both while preparing for one’s vocation and while living it out.

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

Working in small groups, or as one large group, have students list examples of prayer practices which helped people in different vocations prepare for and live out God’s call in their lives.

If students need help pinpointing activities conducive to a strong spiritual life, we have included below some ideas and examples from stories you have read in this and past lessons. <sup>[3]</sup>

WORKSHEET FOR BUILDING A SPIRITUAL PLAN OF LIFE

<p><b>WHAT DO I ALREADY DO?</b> <i>Note which things you do already and think about ways you could do these things with more care and thoughtfulness. Use the space to take notes.</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Sunday Mass   <input type="checkbox"/> Mass during the week</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Eucharistic Adoration   <input type="checkbox"/> Benediction</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Regular Confession</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Daily mental prayer</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Prayers before meals <input type="checkbox"/> Morning prayers <input type="checkbox"/> Evening prayers <input type="checkbox"/> Aspirations <sup>[4]</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Devotion to Mary—Rosary, picture or statue of Mary, Angelus at 6 a.m., noon, p.m. <input type="checkbox"/> Devotion to Saints—reading about saints, special prayers to saints, saints’ pictures</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Spiritual Reading   <input type="checkbox"/> Scripture Reading</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Retreat <input type="checkbox"/> Learning more Catholic Doctrine <input type="checkbox"/> Penance</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Service—to families (including your own), to children, the unborn, the poor, the elderly, the sick, the church.</p>	<p><b>WHAT COULD I ADD THIS YEAR?</b> <i>Set 1 or 2 goals. Remember, it is better to aim for what is doable, than to aim too high and get discouraged.</i></p> <p><b>Goal 1:</b> By this date _____, I would like to . . .</p> <p>To reach this goal, I will . . .</p> <p><b>Goal 2:</b> By this date _____, I would like to . . .</p> <p>To reach this goal, I will . . .</p>	<p><b>WHERE DO I WANT TO BE IN MY PLAN OF LIFE BY THE TIME I AM 18?</b> <i>Set goal for what you want to have as part of your life at this long-term projection, and note how you will achieve these goals.</i></p> <p><b>Goal 1:</b> By this date _____, I would like to . . .</p> <p>To reach this goal, I will . . .</p> <p><b>Goal 2:</b> By this date _____, I would like to . . .</p> <p>To reach this goal, I will . . .</p>
---	--	---

[4] Quick prayer said during the day; usually attached to some reminder event like when an ambulance drives by, or when you pass a church or cemetery; any words can be said—your choice—“Have mercy on me a sinner” or “My Lord and My God.”

[3] Further reading for building a strong spiritual life can also be found in

- Jean-Baptiste Chautard, *Inner Strength of Active Apostles: How to Win Souls without Losing Your Own* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2003)
- Fr. Michael E. Gaitley, *Consoling the Heart of Jesus* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2010)
- Josemaria Escriva, *The Way, Furrow, the Forge* (Scepter Publications, 2001)
- Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*
- Peter T. Rohrbach, *Conversation With Christ: The Teaching of St. Teresa of Avila about Personal Prayer* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 2009)

1. Healthy human activity:

- A. Fr. Cizek’s story: In order to keep himself sane and human, he made sure to do active things: he did his chores as best he could; he cleaned his room and mended his clothes; he exercised; he read good books; he told jokes and funny stories and acted out skits with his priest friend. These are all good practices which help keep our body and soul normal and grounded. Add these to a deep prayer life and you will be in good shape, as Fr. Cizek was, to do God’s will.

2. Mass and Devotion to the Eucharist:

- A. Fr. Cizek’s story: When he was not able to obtain the wine or bread needed for mass he would say the prayers of the mass. When he could get the materials, he would say mass even though he knew he would be severely punished if he got caught.
- B. Marriage Lesson: Maria Goretti maintained a deep devotion to the Eucharist and received frequently.
- C. Religious Lesson: In the “Cristeros Families” story, Bishop Rodriguez tells how his father would organize secret masses if a priest was available, and at other times would himself lead the people in prayers from the Mass.
- D. Priesthood Lesson: St. Margaret Clitherow risked her own life to make sure she, her children, and her neighbors could continue going to mass.

3. Regular Confession:

- A. Fr. Cizek’s story: The very first thing he did as soon as another priest joined him was to make his confession and hear the confession of the other priest.

4. Daily mental prayer:

- A. Teresa of Avila wrote, “For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us” (Autobiography, 8.5). Mental prayer consists of conversation with God, sometimes based on Scripture or spiritual reading. It can incorporate these four kinds of conversations with God:
  - i. Sorrow for sin /Compunction, Examination of Conscience—reviewing the day and noting anything I did wrong or failed to do, and asking for forgiveness and strength to do better.

B. Examples:

- i. Fr. Cizek’s story: Every day he would examine his conscience around noon.
- ii. Marriage Lesson: St. Margaret Clitherow’s very last words were calling out for the Lord’s mercy.
  - Thanksgiving—thanking God for what He has done throughout time, for creation, and for any particular blessings He has given me or my loved ones.
  - Petition—asking God to help the Church, the Pope, families, priests, religious, the poor, the dead, my enemies, and for anything I need, especially His grace and mercy.
- iii. Religious Life Lesson: Mother Luisita prayed constantly for her sisters and the end of the persecution in Mexico.
  - Praising—praising God and telling Him I love Him for Who He is and What He does in history, the scriptures, and my own life.
- iv. Fr. Cizek’s story: he made sure to keep track of the Church calendar and celebrate the feasts by saying special prayers. We should also mark these feasts by doing something special.
- v. Religious Life Lesson: Mother Luisita’s letters are full of praise for God and how He has helped her and the sisters.

- C. It is also important to end prayer with a practical resolution of some good thing to do or say later that day or some bad thing to avoid. Fr. Cizek made a morning meditation involving these kinds of prayer every day when he was imprisoned. While the saints do not explicitly say they make resolutions, we often see them doing and saying things which must have been deliberate resolutions, not spontaneous spur-of-the-moment actions. Thomas More decided to stand up for marriage. Maria Goretti shared with her siblings. Resolutions can be small or big, but it is good to make sure prayer ends with a small specific commitment to pray, work on a virtue, or do good in some concrete way within the next 24 hours.

5. Other prayers throughout the day:

- A. Daily habits can be created such as prayers before meals, the Angelus, morning and evening prayers, Liturgy of the Hours. These are good small ways to keep our days on track.
- B. Fr. Cizek’s story: Every day he would say the Angelus at noon and again at 6 PM. He would say evening prayers and sing silently any hymns he could remember.



6. Devotion to Mary and the Rosary:

A. Examples:

- i. Fr. Cizek’s story: He made a point to say the rosary three times in the early afternoon.
- ii. Priesthood Lesson: Fr. Brochero brought an image of Our Lady with him to every home he visited.

7. Devotion to Saints:

- A. Examples: Marriage Lesson: John Fisher looked to St. John the Baptist to guide him when he was defending the marriage of Catherine of Aragon to Henry VIII.

8. Seeking good friendship and advice:

- A. It is very helpful to make sure we have good conversations and role models to encourage us in living a good life.
- B. Fr. Cizek’s story: his brother priest in the prison were a great consolation. They had a good time creating a priestly community in the cell, giving homilies to each other, having retreats or meditations, and praying in common. They did this as long as they could and it helped prepare them for the time when they would have to keep up a spiritual life alone.
- C. Marriage Lesson: Nathalia prayed for and encouraged her husband Hadrian to say strong. Thomas More and John Fisher were friends.
- D. Religious Lesson: Mother Luisita wrote letters to ask after her sisters and encourage them.

9. Spiritual Reading (especially the Bible), Retreats, and learning about Catholic Doctrine:

- A. Marriage Lesson: The words that move Hadrian in the story of Sts. Hadrian and Nathalia are taken from the Bible: “eye has not seen nor has ear heard what things God has prepared for those who love him.” The prisoners he watched being martyred were familiar with the scriptures, and in quoting this to Hadrian they changed his life. In the story of Philip Howard, Fr. Edmund Campion’s knowledge of the Catholic Faith and ability to explain and defend it moved Howard to become Catholic.
- B. Religious Life Lesson: Mother Luisita was in danger of arrest and even death, but took time in her letters to make sure the students would be able to make their retreat.
- C. Priesthood lesson: Fr. Brochero led parishioners on long journeys just to make a good spiritual retreat.

10. Penance:

- A. Small sacrifices help train the will to be strong enough to do God’s will later. In choosing penances it is recommended that you avoid things that would hurt your health or ability to fulfill family, school, and work obligations. St. Josemaria Escriva suggested penances like getting up without hitting the snooze button, or doing without snacks or sweets. Always ask a parent, priest, or other spiritual leader about a significant penance before starting it.
- B. Examples: Marriage Unit: Philip Howard offered the sufferings that he knew were coming to him to be joined closer to Christ, and wrote “Quanto plus afflictiones pro Christo in hoc saeculo, tanto plus gloriae cum Christo in futuro” – “the more affliction we endure for Christ in this world, the more glory we shall obtain with Christ in the next.” Although the story does not mention this, Thomas More and John Fisher both did penances, like getting up early in the morning.

11. Service:

- A. Service can take any form and makes life better for everyone around you. Try to find service obligations that harmonize with your family, work, and school obligations. It would not be a good service to guilt your parents into driving you to a place to serve the poor while you have to be told three times to do your family chore of dishes. Perhaps in these circumstances, the best service is to do the dishes, and do them well without being asked, for the sake of all the intentions you have and the glory of God.
- B. Marriage Unit: in the story of Sts. Hadrian and Nathalia, Nathalia and the other wives do anything it takes to be able to bring food, water, medicine and the Blessed Sacrament to the prisoners.
- C. Religious Unit: In the Cristeros Families story, Bishop Rodriguez tells how his father buried the dead even when they were threatened by enemy troops. Mother Luisita unfailingly aided the sick through her hospital work.
- D. Priesthood: Fr. Brochero cared for many people during the 1867 Cholera epidemic. He also helped build roads, schools, and improved communication.

After students finish hammering out some different aspects of a solid prayer life, suggest that they each put together a plan of life incorporating some of the different elements. A worksheet is provided for student use, or you can simply hand out blank paper and have students draw up a personal plan based on the discussion.

## CLOSING

5-10 min

Use the following page to discuss prayer with the students, or hand it out and go over it with them.

## HOMEWORK

Have students work on and finish their plan of life, to keep for personal use. In a following class, you could discuss what the process was like creating a plan of life.



## DISCERNMENT

### CLOSING

#### TIPS ON PRAYER

St. Teresa of Avila was a smart woman, a nun, a good writer, a lover of life, and a master of prayer. She struggled to know her vocation when she was young. She wrote: "Still I had no desire to be a nun, and I asked God not to give me this vocation; although I also feared marriage."<sup>[5]</sup> She was named a Doctor of the Church for what she taught about prayer, so she is a good model for anyone who wants to be open to God's will. Here's what we can learn from her writings.



1. **Prayer makes you normal.** Don't worry about how you will look to other people if you start a habit of prayer and virtue. St. Teresa of Avila would call that worry a definite temptation. She says, "If we turn from self towards God, our understanding and our will become nobler and readier to embrace all that is good: if we never rise above the slough of our own miseries we do ourselves a great disservice."<sup>[6]</sup>
2. **You don't have to be holy or good at prayer to pray.** God loves us the way we are now. The whole reason for praying is because we can always improve and be better than what we are right now, and God wants the best

for us. But it may be easy to think only holy people are privileged enough to talk to God. St. Teresa suffered this temptation; she stopped praying because she thought she was so bad. Later she saw what a clever trick of the Devil's that was. She says, "This was the most terrible trick the devil could play on me, under the guise of humility: that seeing myself so corrupted I began to fear the practice of prayer."<sup>[7]</sup> Prayer is for everyone, because God wants to have a close relationship with each person!

3. **Don't aim for nice feelings.** The point of prayer is to draw us to God. Sometimes this will feel sweet and holy; sometimes this will feel dry and boring. Believe it or not, both of these things are good! God uses these different periods to help us grow up and make us real, mature, trustworthy friends. Therefore, never use prayer as a way to get "consolation" or good feelings. Growth in love of God and holiness are signs of good prayer. St. Teresa writes: "perfection consists not in consolations, but in the increase of love; on this, too, will depend our reward, as well as on the righteousness and truth which are in our actions."<sup>[8]</sup>
4. **Never give up prayer.** No matter what happens to you, you will never be lost if you keep up a habit of prayer. St. Teresa wrote: "Whoever has not begun the practice of prayer, I beg for the love of the Lord not to go without so great a good.... if one perseveres, I trust then in the mercy of God, who never fails to pay anyone who has taken Him for a friend."<sup>[9]</sup>

Prayer leads to knowing your vocation and being able to live it out. Take heart! Building a habit of prayer is a battle; but with God's grace, you can win it! Learning your vocation goes hand in hand with the habit of prayer—that's how you learn it and get the strength to live it out.

[5] Teresa of Avila, "Autobiography," in *The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila*, Volume 1, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987), 3.2.

[6] Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, translation by E. Allison Peers, 1.2, paragraph 19. Available at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/SPIRIT/CASTLE.TXT>

[7] Teresa of Avila, "Autobiography," in *The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila*, Volume 1, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987), 7.1.

[8] Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, translation by E. Allison Peers, 3.2, paragraph 11. Available at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/SPIRIT/CASTLE.TXT>

[9] Teresa of Avila, "Autobiography," in *The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila*, Volume 1, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987), 8.5.