

Lessons about

GOD

That Kids Can See



Msgr. Dermot R. Brennan
Foreword by Timothy Cardinal Dolan

Pilgrim
Gospel Weeklies
FAITH FORMATION PROGRAM
for Parishes, Schools,
and Families
(Pre-K and Up)
Recommended Resource

Lessons about

GOD

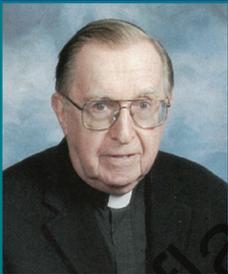
That Kids Can See

Enjoy sharing the stories of the Bible and traditions of the Catholic Church with the children in your parish with *Lessons about God That Kids Can See*. This is a perfect resource for children's Liturgy of the Word and other kid-friendly events within your parish or school.

Written by Monsignor Dermot Brennan from his wealth of ministry experience, the 40 lessons in this book reveal the meaning behind the sacraments, seasons, and Church teachings in fun and interactive ways. Each lesson includes background information on the topic or theme, a list of props and materials needed, and a script for the leaders to use.

Children young and old will be amazed by the innovative and inspiring spiritual messages of God's love that are revealed before their eyes. A topical index is included for quick reference to specific types of lessons needed.

These lessons could be used as homilies, in catechetical settings, and during family gatherings and retreats.



Msgr. Dermot R. Brennan (1930–2021) was ordained to the priesthood on June 2, 1956. From 1985 until his retirement in 2005, he was pastor of St. Patrick's Parish, Yorktown Heights, NY. He served in several parishes and high schools in the Archdiocese of New York. He also served as chaplain at the Julliard School of Music and for the Marist Brothers in the Bronx. Msgr. Brennan

headed the Liturgical Music Commission for the Archdiocese and conducted a 1,400-voice choir and 50-piece symphony orchestra for the 1979 Papal Mass in Yankee Stadium, celebrated by Pope John Paul II. A talented magician, he performed magic shows to serve as fundraisers for Catholic schools throughout the Archdiocese.

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Royalties from the sales of this book will go to the Msgr. Dermot Brennan Scholarship Fund at Camp Marist. This fund assists families in need to send their children to the two-week Catholic summer camp in New Hampshire. If you would like to donate to this fund, please send your donation to:

Msgr. Brennan Scholarship Fund at Camp Marist
Marist Brothers
Attn. Frank Pellegrino
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For more information about Camp Marist, visit www.campmarist.org.



Father Brennan at Camp Marist, 1968

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Foreword

At the funeral of Msgr. Dermot Brennan, a nephew recounted that he had been told that his uncle began to “seriously” think about the priesthood when he was in the second grade. Thus, the young Dermot went through his grade-school years with curiosity and fascination about Our Lord Jesus Christ and the truths He reveals to us through His Church.

Throughout the nearly sixty-five years of his priesthood, Msgr. Brennan was known in the Archdiocese of New York as an ever youthful and energetic priest who was passionate and very serious about communicating the faith to young people in a way that would awaken in them curiosity and fascination.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa once said, “Concepts create idols, only wonder grasps anything.” The lessons and activities devised by Msgr. Brennan, which he has preserved for us here, take advantage of the natural curiosity of children through visual aids and lively analogies in order to open their hearts to wonder before the Word of God. As you go through them, whether you are a teacher or a preacher, you may find your own childlike wonder coming alive and renewing you in your commitment to communicate the faith to the young.

At ninety years of age, only a few months before his passing, Msgr. Brennan gave a seminar on preaching to children at his beloved alma mater, St. Joseph’s Seminary in Yonkers, New York. Our seminarians were as struck by the energetic Msgr. Brennan himself as they were by his well-thought-out lessons and sage advice.

From second grade to age ninety, Msgr. Dermot Brennan had the heart of a child, a heart on fire with love for Christ. May the graces he received and has handed on to the Church continue to flourish though all who are helped by the lessons in this book; whether teachers, preachers, students or congregants, Jesus is inviting all of us to be beloved children of our Heavenly Father.

✠ Timothy Cardinal Dolan
Archbishop of New York

SECTION 1

SACRAMENTS

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2 You Are the Prophet!

(Baptism, Confirmation, Witnessing, John the Baptist)

One of the primary effects of our being baptized is that immediately after the water is poured on our head, the priest or deacon anoints us with the special oil we call *Sacred Chrism*. As he rubs this oil on our head, he declares that we are anointed priest, prophet, and king. This is a fact little referred to, yet all three roles are important to our Catholic life. We become sharers in the priesthood of Christ as members of the worshipping community. We follow Christ our King as He leads us to the Kingdom of Heaven. And along the way, under God's grace, we have the power to choose the way we will go; so we are, in a sense, king or ruler over our own lives. Our role of *prophet* is the object of this lesson.

props

When I first developed this lesson, there was only one prop: a picture of an old prophet. However, after presenting it once or twice, I decided to expand on it and added two more pictures: one of a contemporary boy and one of a contemporary girl. This may necessitate asking for help from someone in your parish who loves to draw. You need to draw (or have drawn) a picture of a prophet on a large sheet of poster board (22" x 28"). It should show just the head and shoulders and should be of a man who is old and with a long white beard (i.e., the traditional image we all have of prophets). It must be carefully drawn so that the face, when cut out in an oval (much like those images we stand behind for comedy photographs at amusement parks), will fit the size of an adult's head—yours! The face part is held in place by a couple of pieces of masking tape so that the oval can be easily removed when it is time for you to look through it. (Unless you can find the kind that does not stick permanently, invisible tape holds too well and

PROPHET



PROPHET



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will tear the poster board as you remove it. You might also try some lightweight press-on Velcro strips.) You may also want to reinforce the side of the picture with heavy cardboard so that the picture won't flop back and forth as you and the children hold it in front of yourselves. Another suggestion would be to use foamcore instead of poster board, but you will need a very sharp instrument to cut out the oval (I have used the small saw on a Leatherman tool).

As stated above, the other two pictures should be of a contemporary boy and girl in order to show that *they* are today's prophets. The construction would be the same as for the older prophet, except that the hole where the face will show should be a bit smaller so as to accommodate the face of a child. (See illustrations.)

The three pictures should be lying facedown, side by side on a table or on the altar until you want the children to see them. If you display them too soon, they could easily distract the children from your opening words and cause them to miss the message.

The Lesson

Begin by saying that just as the prophets of old were anointed with oil to show they were prophets, so we are also anointed at our Baptism, right after the priest or deacon pours the water on our head.

As a result, everyone who is here today who was baptized is a prophet! But what exactly is a prophet? He is *not* someone who foretells the future, although we almost always use the term in that way. Indeed, in many instances when the prophets made statements that were later fulfilled in either the Old Testament or New Testament, they were not aware of what they were foretelling. It is only when we look back that we can say, “That was foretold by Isaiah!” or by one of the other prophets.

What, then, is the role of the prophet? It is to *speak for God*. We are to tell other people what God wants us all to do, and then we must show them by doing it ourselves.

Here you show them the picture of the old prophet. Speak for a moment or two to review the role the prophets were called to play (i.e., not to predict the future, but to speak for God). Then recall that you were called to be a prophet when you were baptized. Then remove the masking tape from the back of the picture of the old prophet, and the oval will come away with it. Now you can hold the picture in front of you so that your face will appear in the hole. You thereby are pictured as a prophet as we so often depict one.

In this position, speak to the children about how you are a prophet every time you teach them about God and how He wants us to act, whether you are a priest or deacon preaching at Mass, a catechist or teacher teaching them in the school or faith formation program, or whenever.

However—and this is *very important*—remind them that you became a prophet when you were baptized! That means everyone here today who has been baptized has been called by God to be a prophet, too!

Here you ask for a boy and a girl (preferably no younger than fourth or fifth grade) to join you. As they approach, pick up the picture of the boy, show it to everyone, and hand it to the young volunteer. Do the same with the picture of the girl. Then ask each of

them to remove the face-oval from the picture (you may have to assist them with this) and to hold the picture so that his/her face shows through the hole.

Now it is time for them to act as prophets, so you announce that you will ask them questions, to which they are to give the answers they think a prophet should give.

(Note: This is one of the few lessons in this book that will benefit from preparing the “volunteers.” Try to have a brief meeting with the boy and girl beforehand, to go over the questions you will ask. It’s only fair that they be helped with the answers, especially if they are fairly young.)

When I use this lesson, it is often to provide answers to moral questions that children face every day. For example, after one of the children has assumed the position of prophet by holding the picture up so that he/she can see through it, you might ask, “Suppose someone in school asks you to give the answer to a question on a test. What do you think God’s prophet would say to that person?” Or, “Suppose some other child borrowed one of your toys and then, by accident, broke it. What do you think God’s prophet would say to that child?” Or, “Suppose someone asked if you had done something you were not supposed to do, and you were tempted to tell a lie so as not to be punished. What do you think God’s prophet would say to you?”

Similar questions and answers can be used according to the children to whom you are speaking. For a priest or deacon, if this is at a School Mass, you might confer with the principal or teachers to see if there are any issues that *they* would like you to deal with! (I have even used this device with middle schoolers and those preparing for Confirmation, to emphasize their future role as witnesses to Jesus and their faith.)

The purpose of this lesson, then, is to teach the children (and their parents!) that God has shown us the way we are to live if we want to please Him, and we are likewise to show that way to others. It is in telling and showing others the way to God that we use our power as prophets.

This lesson can also be used at special times such as Christmas and Holy Week/Easter with older children to test them on the many aspects of both great events that were foretold by the Old Testament prophets. This approach, which plays into the usual understanding of a prophet as one who foretells the future, is used in a more didactic

teaching setting. This also illustrates how such a prop can be used in more than one way. We have shown that girls as well as boys can be prophets; it has nothing to do with age or gender. This can be clearly shown by the fact that, although the “old man” image is one we all seem to have, the Scriptures show us that the prophets were of different ages (mention Jeremiah and John the Baptist as examples), and there were also prophetesses mentioned in both the Old Testament and the New Testament (Deborah and Anna, for example). The *main point* is that *all* of us—boys and girls, men and women—are anointed prophets and are thereby chosen by God to speak for Him both in word and in action.

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SECTION 2

SEASONS

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A Christmas Homily in Pictures

(Signs and Symbols of Christmas)

Every Christmas Eve in our parish, we had a very special Family Mass, which, of course, called for a special homily. There are a number of Christmas lessons in this book, so if you add this one, you will have enough to rotate from Christmas to Christmas for several years. I doubt the children will remember what you did a few years ago. Besides, if the homily “works,” then it deserves to be repeated. Moreover, there is a whole new group of children in place each Christmas that wasn’t there years ago. So here is another Christmas lesson.

This particular Christmas message accomplishes two goals. It defines eighteen objects or symbols used at Christmas, thus educating the children (and those adults present) as to how these came to be used. Secondly, as you remove each of the symbols from the boards, you reveal letters, which form words that deliver a most important message about Christmas and why we celebrate it. So, there are two parts to the lesson. In the first, you identify and explain the eighteen Christmas symbols or objects displayed. Then, in the second, you remove them to reveal the message.

Props

You will need two large pieces of white foamcore, 40" x 32".
On the first board print:

**THE BEST
REASON FOR
CELEBRATING
CHRISTMAS**

On the second board print:

**IT IS THE
BIRTHDAY
OF THE
LORD JESUS**

First Foamcore Board: Set a top and bottom margin of 3 1/2". Using a pencil, draw the following lines:

THE BEST—Left and right margins should be 6". The letters should be in boxes 4" high and 3 1/2" wide, with the *letters* only 3" wide. Space between the words should be 3".

REASON FOR—Left and right margins should be 2". The letters should be as above, with a 3 1/2" space between words.

CELEBRATING—Left and right margins should be 1". The letters should be as above.

CHRISTMAS—Left and right margins should be 3 1/2". The letters should be as above.

Second Foamcore Board: Set the top margin at 3 1/2", and the bottom one at 2". Using a pencil, draw the following lines:

IT IS THE—Left and right margins should be 4 1/2". The letters should be in boxes 4" high and 3 1/2" wide, with the letters 3" wide. Space between the words should be 3".

BIRTHDAY—Left and right margins should be 6". The letters should be as above.

OF THE LORD—Left and right margins should be 1". The letters should be as above, with 3 1/2" between the words.

JESUS—Left and right margins should be 5 1/2". The letters should be in boxes 5 1/2" high and 5" wide, with 1" between the letters.

For the sake of variety and to add emphasis to some of the words, I would suggest that on the first board the words THE, REASON, and FOR be written in black; BEST in red; CELEBRATING in blue; and CHRISTMAS in alternating red and green.

On the second board, write IT in black; IS in blue; THE in orange; BIRTHDAY in alternating red and green; OF in black; THE in blue; LORD in violet; and the letters of the word JESUS in red, blue, orange, green, and purple. Recall that the letters of JESUS are larger than all the rest.

Now that you have completed these two boards, the creation of the pictures that will cover them is next. You will need to draw and color eighteen different pictures, each in different quantities. The number for each picture will depend on how often the letter it represents appears on the two boards. So, for example, there is one picture of the Bible because the letter "M" appears only once; there are five pictures of the symbol for Mary because the letter "I" appears five times; there

are six pictures of an angel because the letter “R” appears six times, and so on.

With that scheme in mind, here are the pictures, the quantity for each, and the letter they are to cover: BIBLE - 1 - **M**; MARY - 5 - **I**; JOSEPH - 1 - **G**; ANGEL - 6 - **R**; STABLE - 4 - **O**; INFANT JESUS - 5 - **S**; SHEPHERD’S STAFF - 2 - **D**; STAR - 2 - **C**; CROWN - 2 - **F**; GOLD, FRANKINCENSE, and MYRRH - 2 - **L**; TREE - 4 - **A**; CANDLE - 3 - **B**; DECORATION - 2 - **N**; CANDY CANE - 1 - **Y**; SANTA - 5 - **H**; WREATH - 8 - **T**; HOLLY - 7 - **E**. The final picture is one of **BETHLEHEM**, a silhouette of the city, which should *completely* cover the name **JESUS**.

Note that the pictures in this chapter are in black and white, but you should duplicate their outline and then color them with bright colors. Some of these illustrations are found in Chapter 9: Angel, Infant Jesus, Star, Crown, Bethlehem; and Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh.

One of each picture should be drawn in color on a piece of white paper, 3 1/2" x 4". (Of course, only one Bethlehem picture is needed, on a larger piece of paper, 29" x 5 1/2".) Arrange these on pages to bring to a quick-print store to be copied. Then cut them out, and mount each picture on a piece of poster board. Now using one pushpin per picture, fasten each of the pictures over the letter it represents—as indicated above—until all letters are covered.

The Lesson

Have the two boards either hidden from view until you use them, but with the display side turned away from those gathered. Then when you are ready to use them, have two volunteers bring them forward and hold them up for all to see. The appearance of so many signs and symbols will instantly draw the attention of those present and lead to your going through them and explaining each one in order. Here are a few sample explanations:

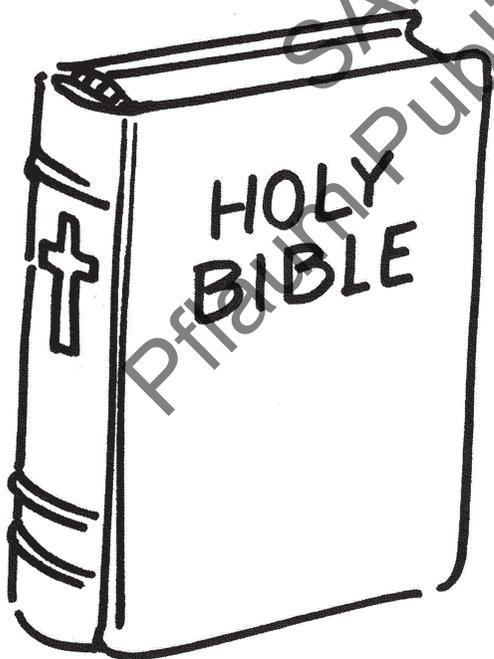
- The **wreath** is round for God’s endless love, is green as a sign of hope, and has a red bow as a sign of love.
- The **holly** is green for hope, has sharp points to remind us of Jesus’s suffering, and has red berries to recall the blood that He shed.

- The **candle** is a sign of Jesus as the Light of the World.
- The **candy cane** is a symbol of the Good Shepherd or of the shepherds at the stable. Reverse it and it is the letter “J” for Jesus: the white stands for His purity, and the red for His love.

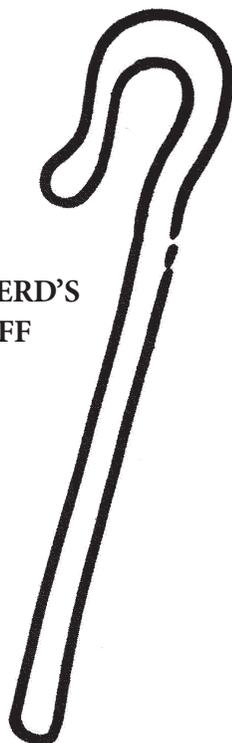
The rest are self-explanatory.

After reviewing the signs and symbols, begin to remove the pictures in the order they appear on the boards: all the wreaths (T), then the Santas (H), and so on, thereby displaying all of each letter. Both children and parents will be intrigued to see the words on the boards slowly form until the entire message is displayed, the Bethlehem picture being last. When all the letters are uncovered, simply stress the message.

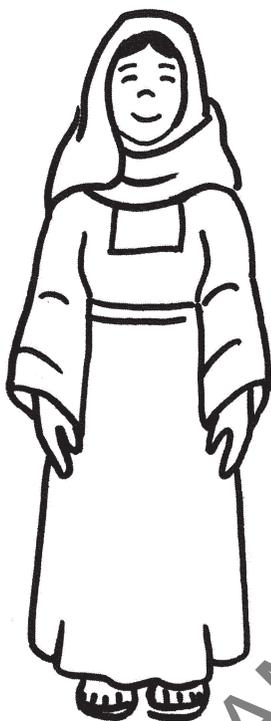
Note to homilists: *If it is the custom to have a Christmas pageant or tableau, set the scene for the members of the pageant to come forward and take their places. This can be done as you review the message on the two boards in a soft voice, creating an atmosphere of quiet. Then follow with a children’s Christmas song (sung by the children’s choir, if you have one), which should calm the kids down. Then send everyone back to their places, asking that they go in silence. If you ask in a nice, paternal tone, they will!*



BIBLE



**SHEPHERD'S
STAFF**



MARY



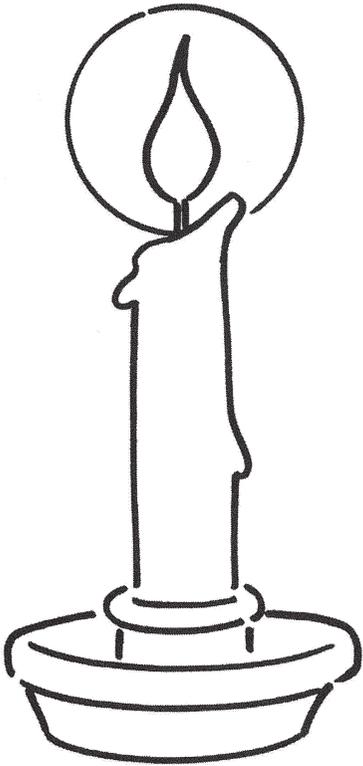
JOSEPH



WREATH



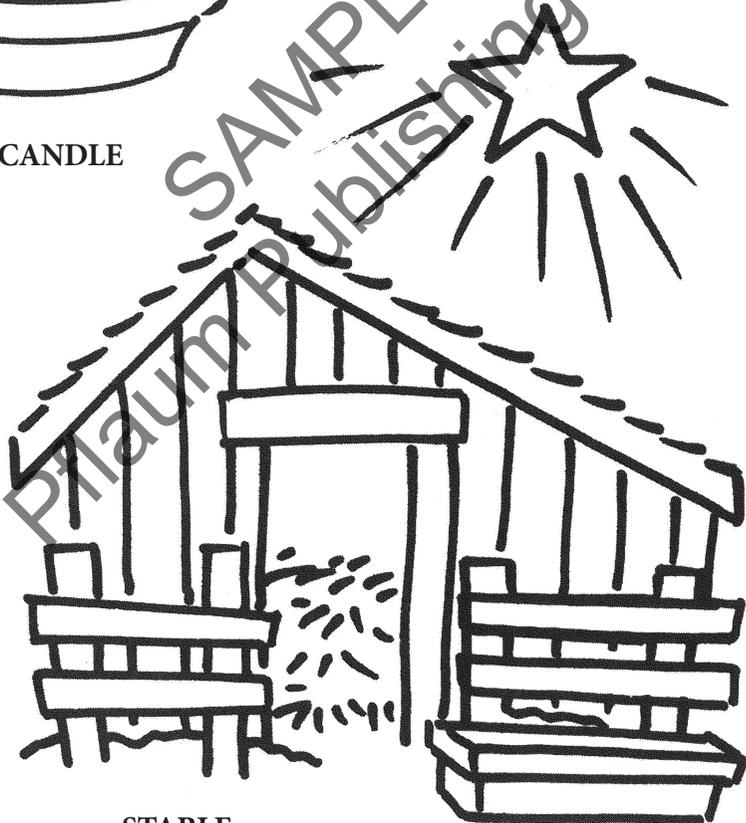
DECORATION



CANDLE



HOLLY



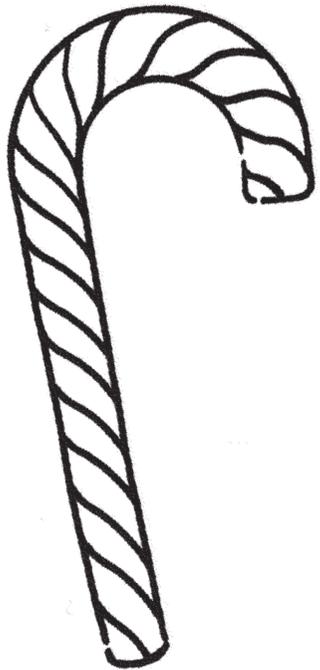
STABLE



TREE



SANTA



CANDY CANE

SECTION 3

**CHURCH
TEACHINGS**

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28 The Good Shepherd

(God's Love, Forgiveness, Worth of Individual)

I cannot claim authorship of this idea. Credit goes to Dick Hilliard, a layman who gave a seminar on children's homilies which I attended, at which he presented this idea and the one for Chapter 25, "The 'Begats.'" I used this presentation of the Good Shepherd parable several times and found it effective every time.

Props

All that are needed are ten pictures of the heads of sheep. (See illustration.) This image can be photocopied on white paper and then each picture mounted on green poster board, 10" x 13". You will also need a good thick branch or pole to serve as the staff of the "shepherd." There is some rehearsal needed, which can be done in ten minutes. It involves an adult male to act as the shepherd and one young boy to act as the lost sheep. The rest is done on the spot.



Rehearsal

Tell the boy that you will count the “sheep” five times. When you do it the fifth time, and send the “sheep” out to play, he is to hide at a place you designate at the back of the church/room. When the “shepherd” comes in search of him, he is to make the typical sheep “baa” sound so that the “shepherd” can find him.

The “shepherd” is simply to count the “sheep” as you instruct him during the talk and then, when one is discovered missing, to go in search of him, at first going in a direction away from his (the sheep’s) hiding place but ending up there to bring the lost sheep back to the fold.

The Lesson

Explain to the children that one of the most beautiful images of Jesus is that of the Good Shepherd. Ask them what a shepherd is. (If they are “city kids” and have not heard the Christmas story, they may not know.) Once this identity is established and you have introduced the gentleman who is to play the shepherd’s role, then proceed to ask ten of the children to come forward to be his sheep. As each child does so, hand him/her a picture of a sheep. When they all are assembled across the front of the sanctuary, ask them what noise a sheep makes. They will all say, “Baa,” and then you get on with the story.

“Once upon a time, there was a shepherd who took very good care of his sheep. Every morning before they went out into the fields, he would count his sheep. *(Ask the “shepherd” to do this aloud, counting from one to ten.)* Then he would send them out to play.” *(At this point, tell the children to move about the sanctuary (or presentation area) like sheep in the field, and they should be “baaing.”)*

“Every night the shepherd would collect his sheep, and before letting them go to sleep, he would count them again to make sure they were all there. *(Have the “shepherd” count them, again out loud, from one to ten.)* The next day he did the same thing.” *(Repeat the sequence. This time the children will feel a bit more “at home” in the space and probably wander farther, which is exactly what you want. If they don’t do it, encourage them!)*

“One morning the shepherd counted his sheep (*have him do it*) and sent them out to play.” (*Send the children out to do this. This time the boy that rehearsed the role should go down the side aisle (or the side of the room) to the designated spot and hide.*)

“That night he counted them again. (*This time the “shepherd” counts only nine and says aloud, “Nine.” So you ask him: ‘How many are you supposed to have?’ He replies, “Ten.” You say: ‘Then count them again.’ He counts them and again says, “Nine.”*) And so, the good shepherd had to go out and find the lost sheep.” (*At this point, the “shepherd” starts out into the church/room, heading away from the “sheep’s” hiding place, and calling, “Little sheep, where are you?”*)

“Then he heard the cry of the lost sheep. (*The boy should be “baaing.”*) He found him and carried him safely home. (*As you narrate this part of the story, embellishing it as you choose, the “shepherd” goes over to the hiding place, finds the “sheep,” places him on his shoulder or in his arms, and carries him back to the rest of the sheep in the sanctuary (or where the rest of the children are gathered.)*) All the other sheep were very glad to see the lost sheep, and they all slept safely that night.”

The acting out of this beautiful story can be very powerful. Don't be surprised if the children all applaud when the “shepherd” carries “home” the “lost sheep” (you might even cue them to do this) and some of the adults get teary-eyed. It is a beautiful moment and can make the love of God more visible than many pictures you have seen of the Good Shepherd.

Afterword

An outstanding person, priest, and disciple of Jesus, Msgr. Dermot Brennan was tireless in his ministry of helping people of all ages to grow closer to Jesus. Evangelization and catechesis were a central focus of his life's work as a priest. Over the years I have personally experienced Msgr. Brennan giving workshops to priests, deacons, directors and coordinators of religious education, catechists, and parents at our annual Catechetical Forums and Convocations in the Archdiocese of New York.

Msgr. Brennan had the rare gift of being able to reach people of all ages and of various ministries with his homilies. However, he took special delight in giving homilies that made the Scriptures come alive for children, homilies that in his own words, "kids can see." During his nearly sixty-five years as a priest, he spared no effort in doing this. Of course, everyone else present also learned to see, understand, and appreciate the Bible in new ways.

This book demonstrates his particular ability to touch hearts and minds, giving children an understanding of God through vibrant teaching and homilies on the Scriptures that the children would long remember. Msgr. Brennan understood how children learn, and he was determined to give them a lifelong love and understanding of the Gospels that would continue to impact their lives now and in the future.

It was a joy and a privilege for me to know Msgr. Brennan over many years. With a smile and twinkle in his eye, he continued tirelessly to spread the Good News. I have no doubt that this book will continue his mission and that in the Communion of Saints, we can count on his prayer for us as we continue to reach out to our children and youth with renewed evangelization and catechesis.

May he rest in peace and may each of us be faithful to giving lessons that kids can see.

Sr. Joan Curtin, CND
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magic by
Fr. Dermot Brennan
close-up and stage

