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PRACTICES + SKILLS FOR CATECHISTS & EDUCATORS

Video Guide

Creative Learning Methods & Activities: Engaging the Symbols of the Faith

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Engaging the Symbols of the Faith

Ideas from the Video Presentation

Many Catholics say that what they would miss most if they left the Church is the richness of our symbols and rituals. That makes sense. Our prayer and our rituals are designed to engage all of our senses — every part of who we are. The sound of fire crackling at the Easter Vigil. The scent of incense rising at a funeral. The sight of darkness giving way to light at the simple flame of a candle. The feel of holy water as we bless ourselves entering the gathering space. The taste of the bread and wine of the Eucharist. We engage with God and with one another with all of who we are. Symbol is central to our identity.

1. Holding Two Types of Symbols Together

Sometimes the symbols we use are deliberately and intentionally religious — the Bible, ashes, the crucifix. At other times, the symbols are more subtle, rooted in the scripture story itself: rocks, bread, a road, a meal. Both matter.

2. Letting Children Interact with Symbols

Do not simply explain symbols to students — engage them with them. Let them become familiar. Hold conversations about how we care for holy things and why. The goal is not information about a symbol; it is a relationship with it.

3. Experiencing Symbols Rooted in Human Experience

When we look at the symbols at the heart of our sacraments — oil, water, light, bread, wine — it is clear how deeply they are woven into everyday life. Start with student experience as you explore them. If you are preparing for Ash Wednesday, have a bowl of ashes available for students to touch and smell beforehand. Practice making the sign of the cross on their hands rather than their foreheads — this is often a gentler place to begin, as some students worry that the ashes will be warm or will hurt them. Beginning with hands gives everyone a safe point of entry.

4. Creating Environments for Symbols

- Gather students in the room with lights on.
- Ask what darkness feels like.
- Then turn off the lights.
- Sit in silence for sixty full seconds. Really feel it.
- Ask quietly: what do you notice? What do you want?
- Then light one small candle. Say nothing. Let the room do the teaching.

5. Deepening with Repetition

This recipe works best when served slowly. Symbols deepen with repetition — return to the same ones across the year. Both kinds of symbol matter: the deliberately religious (crucifix, ashes, Bible) and the subtle scriptural (bread, a road, a meal). Do not choose between them. Our work is to build connections from the simple to the whole — until students begin to notice the presence of God woven through all of creation.

Let us nurture symbol-minded hearts — in ourselves and in our students. The power of symbol runs deep in our faith. When we tend it well, it opens a way of seeing the world that no textbook can offer.

Engaging the Symbols of the Faith – Activities

Activities for Children

Catholic faith is rich with sensory, tangible symbols — water, light, oil, bread. These activities invite children to explore sacred symbols with their hands and senses first, then connect what they notice to the symbol's deeper meaning, rather than starting with abstract explanation.

1. Exploring Water: The Symbol of Baptism

Topic: Water as a sign of new life and cleansing in Baptism

Setup

Set out a few bowls of water and let children touch, pour, and experiment with it (pouring from cup to cup, watching it splash, feeling it run through their fingers). Ask them simply: "What do you notice about water? What does it do?"

Making the Connection

After some open exploration, share that water is used at Baptism. Ask:

- What does water do that might remind us of what happens in Baptism (cleaning, refreshing, giving life to plants)?
- Why do you think the Church chose water, and not something else, for this sacrament?

Hands-On Response

Give each child a small bowl and let them practice pouring water gently over their own hand while saying a simple phrase like "I am washed clean" or "I am God's child." If appropriate, review or reenact the words and gesture used at their own Baptism.

2. Exploring Light: The Symbol of Christ

Topic: Light as a symbol of Jesus and the Baptismal candle

Setup

Dim the room and give each child a small flameless candle or flashlight. Let them experiment: turn it on and off, shine it into a dark corner, cup their hands around the light. Ask: "What do you notice about what light does in the dark?"

Making the Connection

Share that at Baptism, a lit candle is given as a sign that we carry the light of Christ. Ask:

- What happens to darkness when even a small light shines in it?
- Why do you think light is used as a symbol for Jesus?

Hands-On Response

Have children walk slowly in a line, each holding their small light, into a darker area of the room (a hallway, a dimmed corner) to physically notice how far a small light can be seen and how it helps others see too. Close by inviting each child to name one way they could "be light" for someone this week.

3. Exploring Bread: The Symbol of the Eucharist

Topic: Bread as nourishment and the Eucharist

Setup

Bring in a loaf of real bread (or have children help make simple flatbread earlier in the session, if time allows). Let children see it, smell it, and feel its texture before tasting a small piece (checking for allergies first). Ask: “What do you notice about bread? What does it do for our bodies?”

Making the Connection

Share that at Mass, bread becomes the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. Ask:

- Why do you think Jesus chose something we eat every day, like bread, instead of something rare or fancy?
- What does bread do for our bodies that might help us understand what the Eucharist does for us spiritually?

Hands-On Response

If possible, let children help break a loaf of bread together and share pieces with one another (echoing how the Eucharist is shared in community), then talk together about what it means that Jesus gives Himself to us as food for the journey.

Why Engaging Symbols Works Well for Children

Children understand the world first through their senses and bodies, not through abstract explanation. Letting them touch, pour, taste, and hold a symbol before naming its meaning honors how they actually learn — and it often produces richer, more personal insights than being told the answer upfront. These activities also build a lasting, embodied association between everyday sensory experiences and the sacred, which can deepen a child’s prayer life and sacramental understanding well beyond the classroom.

Activities for Adolescents

Catholic faith is rich with sensory, layered symbols — oil, fire, the cross, the color and season of the liturgical calendar. For adolescents, symbol-engagement can move beyond simple identification into deeper theological meaning, personal application, and even genuine tension — inviting teens to wrestle with what a symbol costs to live out, not just what it represents.

1. Exploring Oil: The Symbol of Confirmation

Topic: Sacred Chrism and being “sealed” with the Holy Spirit

Setup

Pass around a small dish of olive oil (or Sacred Chrism if available/appropriate) and let teens feel its texture on their fingers. Ask: “What do you notice about oil — how it feels, moves, and lingers on skin?”

Making the Connection

Share that oil has been used throughout Scripture and Church history to anoint kings, priests, and prophets — marking someone as set apart for a purpose. Ask:

- Why do you think oil — something that soaks in and lingers — was chosen over something that just sits on the surface, like paint?
- What does it mean to be “sealed” by the Holy Spirit, not just blessed once and done?
- If Confirmation marks you as “sent,” sent to do what, exactly — and are you ready for that?

Deeper Engagement

In small groups, have teens research and discuss other Biblical anointings (e.g., David anointed as king in 1 Samuel 16, or anointing the sick in James 5:14) and identify what all these moments have in common. Close with a personal reflection: “What do you think you’re being ‘sent’ to do in your own life right now?”

2. Exploring Fire: The Symbol of the Holy Spirit

Topic: Fire, Pentecost, and the cost of being set ablaze

Setup

Light a candle or small controlled fire source (or show a short video clip of fire) and ask teens to simply observe for a minute in silence: “What does fire do? What does it need? What is dangerous about it?”

Making the Connection

Share the Pentecost account (Acts 2:1–4) — tongues of fire resting on the disciples. Ask:

- Fire spreads, consumes, transforms, and gives off both light and heat — which of these qualities feels most like what the Holy Spirit does?
- Fire is also unpredictable and can be uncomfortable or even destructive — why might that be part of the symbol too, not just the warmth and light?
- What would it cost you to actually let the Holy Spirit “set you on fire” for something — socially, personally, in your daily choices?

Deeper Engagement

Have teens write (privately, not to share unless they choose) one area of their life where they feel called to more “fire” — more courage, conviction, or passion — and one area where that would be genuinely difficult or costly.

3. Exploring the Cross: Symbol of Suffering and Victory

Topic: The crucifix as a symbol that holds both suffering and triumph together

Setup

Provide several different images or physical examples of crosses/crucifixes (a plain cross, a crucifix with the corpus, an empty cross, a Celtic cross, an Eastern Orthodox cross). Let teens examine and compare them silently for a few minutes. Ask: “What differences do you notice? What might each version be emphasizing?”

Making the Connection

Discuss how the cross is simultaneously an instrument of execution and, for Christians, a symbol of victory and hope. Ask:

- How can the same object represent both the worst thing that ever happened and the best thing that ever happened?
- Why do you think Catholics wear or display crosses so visibly, rather than a more “comfortable” symbol?
- Is there a “cross” in your own life right now — something hard you’re carrying that you don’t yet see any victory in?

Deeper Engagement

In small groups, have teens design or sketch their own cross that reflects something true about their own life or struggle — not for display, but as a private reflection tool — and discuss (as much as they’re comfortable) what they included and why.

Why Engaging Symbols Works Well for Adolescents

Teens are ready to move past “what does this symbol mean” into “what does this symbol cost me, personally, to actually live.” Engaging sacred symbols at this depth respects their growing capacity for abstract and moral reasoning, while still grounding the conversation in something tangible and sensory. These activities work best when the catechist resists rushing to resolve the tension a symbol holds (suffering and victory, warmth and danger, being marked and being sent) — because sitting with that tension is often where the most honest faith engagement happens for this age group.