



 NCCL
Accompaniment
in Faith

PRACTICES + SKILLS FOR CATECHISTS & EDUCATORS

Video Guide

Creative Learning Methods & Activities: Teaching with Images

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Teaching with Images

Ideas from the Video Presentation

The great artworks of history hang in galleries. We pay to see them. We stand in front of them and feel something move in us that we cannot fully name. That is the power of images. They are always available for our learning. You just have to invite them in.

1. Sharing an Image to Start a Session

One carefully chosen image, open-ended, never obvious is an excellent tool not only at the beginning of a session but at different points along the way in the session. Share an image before introducing any content. Invite students to name what they see, what connections from their own life surface, and what they wonder about as they look at the image. This opens curiosity before explanation closes it.

2. Expressing Thoughts and Feelings through an Image

Spread a collection of photographs around the learning space and invite students to choose one that best describes their feelings or thinking about the learning. Which image best sums up where they are right now?

Imagine, for example, that your group has just explored the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes. Invite students to choose an image that best captures what was going on in the hearts and minds of the people gathered that day.

3. Choosing an Image as a Prayer Prompt

If students take turns leading prayer, they could choose an image to open with and share why they were drawn to it. Alternatively, invite each student to find an image of something they feel grateful for. The images can be placed in a circle and shared in silence, with the community responding to each one with a simple: "Thank you, God."

4. Praying with an Image

Some of you may be familiar with Visio Divina — a contemplative practice similar to Lectio Divina, but with an image rather than a text. The image is shared with the group, which then sits in silence before being invited to share at three separate moments.

The first round is typically: "I notice..." The second: "This is what I am now thinking or feeling..." The third: "I feel moved to..." For example, looking at an image of the Prodigal Son, one person might speak of sadness, another might notice how weary both sons look, and a third might say quietly, "I think there is someone in my life I need to forgive."

5. Contrasting Two Images

Use two contrasting images to explore transformation — a seed and a tree, an empty table and a feast, a storm and calm water. Invite students to reflect on what changed between the two, and what that change requires of the people in the story, or of us.

We take snapshots of our world on our phones all the time. We mentally take snapshots of moments in our minds. Images are already how we live and process experience. Let's make them part of learning!

Teaching with Images – Activity Examples

Activities for Children

Catholic art and sacred images have taught the faith for centuries — often to those who couldn't read. These activities invite children to look closely at sacred art, notice details, and let the image speak before explaining its meaning, building visual literacy alongside faith formation.

1. Looking Closely at the Nativity

Topic: A classic Nativity painting or icon

Setup

Display a Nativity image (a classic painting, icon, or simple picture book illustration) large enough for the whole group to see. Give children a full minute of silent looking before anyone speaks.

Noticing Questions

- What do you notice first when you look at this picture?
- Who is in the picture? Can you find them all?
- What do you notice about where everyone is looking?
- What colors do you see the most? Why might the artist have chosen those?

Hands-On Response

Give children their own simple Nativity coloring page or invite them to draw the scene from memory, then compare: What did you include that was in the painting? What did you notice you hadn't seen before, now that you've looked so closely?

2. Reading an Icon of the Good Shepherd

Topic: An icon or image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd

Setup

Show an image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (carrying a lamb, surrounded by sheep). Explain simply that icons are meant to be “read” slowly, almost like a window into a story, not just glanced at.

Noticing Questions

- What is Jesus doing with his hands in this picture?
- How does the lamb look — calm, scared, safe?
- What do you notice about Jesus's face or expression?
- If this picture could talk, what do you think it would say?

Hands-On Response

Invite children to pose like the shepherd or the lamb in the image (gentle, safe poses) and take turns describing how it might feel to be carried like that lamb. Close by asking: “When do you feel like that lamb, being carried and taken care of?”

3. Exploring a Stained Glass Window

Topic: A stained glass window image (from your own parish or a well-known example)

Setup

Show a photo of a stained glass window (ideally one from your own church, if possible) projected or printed large. If you can visit the church itself, even better — let children stand under the actual window and notice how the light changes it.

Noticing Questions

- What story or person do you think this window is showing?
- What do you notice about the colors and how light passes through them?
- Why do you think someone chose to put this image in glass, up high, instead of a regular painting?
- How does the window look different depending on the light outside?

Hands-On Response

Give children colored tissue paper and black paper frames to create their own simple “stained glass” image of a Bible story or symbol meaningful to them. Tape their finished pieces to a real window in the classroom so light can shine through, just like in church.

Why Engaging Sacred Art Works Well for Children

For centuries, sacred art taught the faith visually to people who couldn’t read — and children, still building their reading skills, connect with this kind of visual storytelling naturally. Slowing down to really look, rather than glancing and moving on, helps children notice details adults might miss and builds a habit of attentive, contemplative looking that will serve their prayer life well beyond the classroom.

Activities for Adolescents

Catholic art carries centuries of theological reflection, artistic choice, and even controversy. For adolescents, engaging sacred art can move beyond simple description into interpretation, comparison, and personal meaning-making — treating teens as capable of real critical and contemplative looking, not just passive viewing.

1. Comparing Two Crucifixion Images

Topic: How artists across history have portrayed the Crucifixion differently

Setup

Display two contrasting Crucifixion images side by side — for example, a serene Renaissance depiction (e.g., a calm, almost peaceful Christ) alongside a more visceral, suffering-focused image (e.g., Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece). Give teens a few minutes of silent, close comparison before discussing.

Noticing and Interpreting

- What is different about how each artist portrays Christ's suffering — body position, face, wounds, surrounding figures?
- What might each artist have wanted the viewer to feel or believe, based on these choices?
- Which image feels more true to what the Crucifixion was actually like? Why?
- Is there value in depicting the same event so differently across history?

Deeper Engagement

In small groups, have teens research the historical or theological context behind one of the two images (the artist, era, or intended audience) and present how that context shaped the artistic choices they noticed.

2. Reading Michelangelo's Pieta

Topic: Mary holding the body of Christ — grief, tenderness, and theology in sculpture

Setup

Show high-quality images of Michelangelo's Pieta from multiple angles. Let teens study it in silence for a few minutes, then ask them to describe (before any theological explanation) simply what they see happening.

Noticing and Interpreting

- Mary appears almost youthful here, despite holding her adult son — why might Michelangelo have made that choice?
- What does Mary's facial expression communicate — is it grief, peace, both?
- Why do you think this moment (Mary holding Christ's body) was chosen, rather than the Crucifixion itself or the Resurrection?
- What does this sculpture suggest about how God, through Mary, holds human suffering?

Deeper Engagement

Invite teens to write a short reflection or letter from Mary's perspective in this moment, or discuss: "Who has 'held' you in a moment of grief or difficulty? What did that look like?"

3. Interpreting the Sistine Chapel's Creation of Adam

Topic: The space between God and Adam's fingers — relationship, longing, and grace

Setup

Show a large, detailed image of Michelangelo's Creation of Adam, focusing especially on the space between God's and Adam's hands. Ask teens to look closely at just that detail before seeing the whole image.

Noticing and Interpreting

- Why do you think Michelangelo painted the fingers almost touching, but not quite?
- What might that small gap represent about the relationship between God and humanity?
- Compare Adam's posture and expression to God's — what does each communicate?
- Some art historians see the shape around God as resembling a human brain — if true, what might that suggest about how this moment is being depicted?

Deeper Engagement

Have teens discuss or write about: “Where do you feel that ‘gap’ between yourself and God right now — close to touching, or further away? What would it take to close that space?”

Why Engaging Sacred Art Works Well for Adolescents

Teens are developmentally ready to move past simple identification (“this is a picture of Jesus”) into genuine interpretation, comparison, and critical looking — skills that also serve them well outside faith formation. Sacred art gives teens permission to sit with ambiguity, aesthetic disagreement, and theological complexity without needing a single “correct” reading, and often opens personal reflection more effectively than direct discussion questions alone.