



Introduction

How this journal series began...in a circle of women...

Participating in a women's group can change your life. It changed mine. One spring I signed up for a journaling program for moms. About a dozen women—many of us began as strangers—met each week for twelve weeks. We read scripture, journaled about our lives, and shared personal stories and beliefs. Some women were in the midst of transitioning from working full time to staying at home with young children. Some had suffered recent losses: loved ones who died, job layoffs, struggling relationships. A few were healing from other life-changing events. Some were in a great place in their lives. We had women who were new moms, single moms, young and old, all looking for a deeper connection with God, fellowship with other spiritual women, and a way to formally give time and attention to their own needs as women and mothers.

When we finished our session, we wanted more. So we began a book study group. Each week we read a chapter in the book and talked about how our faith affected our daily lives. Still, we wanted more. It seemed the more we met, the closer the friendships, the deeper our faith, and the more easily we began to see our faith manifested in mornings with

our children and other aspects of life. It also increased our desire to do more for our community. We formed a women's ministry focused on fellowship, faith sharing, and outreach. Our group soon expanded to include many women from all walks of life, all wanting to hear from and share with other women our real-life experiences and challenges. We wanted to inspire each other to deepen our faith and support each other as we put our spirituality to work in all aspects of our lives. That desire is what initiated this journal series.

A series of journals

The *Circle of Catholic Women* program is a series of journals. Each journal has a similar format to other journals in the series, with eight chapters (seven topics and one reflection). The series is non-sequential so you can start with any journal in the series. The format allows an individual or group flexibility for participating and offers some variety season to season for those who attend multiple or consecutive sessions.

In *Journal One*, we reflect on our communication with God through prayer as well as listening to how he is calling us to serve. We share our recognition of Jesus in others and ways we pass along special celebrations of his love. We also consider how our faith plays out in our personal lifestyle decisions, especially ways we use our financial gifts and ways our body and soul can feed each other for a balanced lifestyle.

The journal topics are presented within the context of the Catholic faith. You could discuss these topics based on any religion. But as Catholic women we wanted to better understand what the Catholic Church was asking us to believe.

Having the Church (or anyone else) tell you what to believe is not what creates belief. Life experiences—both joyful and sad, divine messages, relationships with the people around you, being faced with decisions that go in a direction other than the teachings—that

is what strengthens faith and defines your beliefs. So while there are references to what the Church believes, I encourage you to question how that belief plays out in your life. It doesn't mean you'll pick and choose which beliefs you'll call your own, but it does mean you'll look deeper to understand why you believe and how that belief affects your thoughts and actions.

For example, the Catholic Church believes there is a heaven, an afterlife. My husband, Bob, died of cancer at age 38. If someone had asked me about heaven before he died, I would have said, sure I believe in heaven. But it didn't go much deeper than that thought. After Bob died, I had all sorts of questions about heaven and what I really believed. Could he see me? Hear me? Intervene on my behalf? Was he watching our child grow? Does time exist in heaven? Does every good and decent person go there? Would we still be married in heaven? Suddenly, I needed to go much deeper in my faith than simply believing in an afterlife.

In the same way, I began to reflect on other areas of my faith. Not because I didn't believe, but because I wanted to better understand what I did believe. The questions in this journal might prompt you to ask about official Church teachings, talk with your priest, read more about the topic in the Bible, seek out the perspective of other women, or reevaluate how you live your faith. Many discussions won't have a right answer. Explore the deeper, uncomfortable level. Honest, personal reflection is part of what helps us better understand our faith in the context of everyday life, so we can put our trust in God and respond to his call.

How to use this journal

Circle of Catholic Women is designed to prompt journaling and reflection by individual women, followed by sharing and discussion in a group setting. The purpose is to deepen your understanding of your faith and build fellowship with other women as you inspire each other to live your faith in all aspects of your daily lives.

Your circle of women can choose to use the journal in a variety of settings. For example, you can select two journal topics for a half-day retreat, four topics for a month-long weekly series, or the entire journal in an eight-week session, with a weekly meeting on the same day and time each week.

For the most meaningful group discussions, each person should read and journal about the topic before the group meeting.

Tips for personal journaling

Find a time and place where you can read and reflect with few interruptions. If you try to read the night before your meeting while helping a child with homework or watching a television show, you are cheating yourself of time for you. Make two or three appointments with yourself during the week for quiet reflective time. Don't try to complete the whole week's journey in one sitting. Questions are grouped together so you can reflect on and write about one portion of the week's topic at a time.

Be honest with yourself when you answer questions. Know that whatever you journal about, you have a choice whether or not you want to share it with the group. When you are going through the topics the first time, it is for your own understanding of your beliefs, your questions, and your desires. Don't think about or worry about group sharing when you are doing your personal journaling.

Feel free to use the margins to answer different questions if you feel moved to talk about the topic in a different way. The journal prompts are there only to help you think about different aspects of the topic. You do not have to answer all of them. Write about what moves you, what you have questions about, what frustrates you or causes you to more deeply reflect on the impact of your faith on your daily life.

When meeting as a group

This journaling program is flexible to allow a group to share with or without a facilitator. A few suggestions:

If possible, meet as a group before you begin the program, for example, the week before an eight-week session. Introduce each other. Use ice breakers to help everyone learn a little about each other. Hand out the books and talk about the format of the program, how the group will be facilitated, the schedule, and general expectations. Answer questions. Help everyone feel comfortable that this will be a personally rewarding experience in an environment of compassionate trust.

For each meeting, create an atmosphere that encourages spiritual connections. Sit in a circle or around a table where each person can see the others. Light a candle. Consider setting the table with an object related to the day's discussion topic. Minimize distractions by closing the door to the room, moving children to a childcare room, and turning off cell phones.

Open with a prayer, poem, or music. You can use the opening provided in the journal or use a passage, poem, or song brought in by a member of your group.

Agree that you will not share someone else's personal story outside the circle unless you have that person's permission. By keeping personal stories within this trusted circle, you provide a safe place for everyone to share and grow.

As you go through the journal together, don't feel you need to discuss every question. Often personal stories will be reflected over a set of questions. One way to open up the discussion is to share overall feelings about the topic you reflected on and wrote about that week. Did the topic evoke any strong feelings? Was it comfortable or difficult for you? Are there any questions you especially want to talk about or hear from other women about? At the end of each chapter are suggested group discussion questions. As you journal, if there is a topic or question you especially want to discuss, make a note in the group discussion section.

If, during your group discussion, a topic or set of questions takes you on a tangent, go with it. Let the Spirit guide you. Sometimes those side conversations are rich with personal experience and divine messages. Decide beforehand how your group prefers to transition from these side discussions, such as assigning a time keeper who can gently bring you back to the main topic at an appropriate time.

Depending on the number of women in your circle, try splitting up the group into small groups of two to seven women for part of the meeting. Sharing responses in more intimate small-group or one-on-one conversations allows more women to share with each other and to develop close relationships. Use creative ways to randomly select small groups, such as drawing Uno cards and gathering in tables by card color. When you come back together in the larger group, you can volunteer to share comments that your small group felt might benefit everyone to hear.

Keep to the amount of time your group has agreed to allot for the meeting. Our group meets for 1-1/2 hours. Having a set amount of time shows respect for the commitment you've each shown to make this circle a priority in your busy schedules. It also helps you plan out enough time to talk about the aspects of the week's topic you really want to share.

Leave a few minutes at the end of each gathering to share resources and get feedback on how the sessions are going. Close with a prayer.

To encourage friendships within the circle, set up ways for women to connect before, during, after, and in between meetings. For example, at each meeting, have a theme for name tags; ask each person to write a favorite movie, book, or hobby on her name tag and sit near someone with similar or opposite favorites. Sit next to a different person each time you meet. Draw names after each meeting and later in the week call the person whose name you drew.

Tips for facilitators

Decide ahead of time how your group discussions will be facilitated. Depending on the size of your group, the personalities of your participants, and your meeting surroundings, you might prefer to have a primary facilitator who organizes the meetings and leads the discussions. You might need a team of facilitators to lead several small group discussions. Or your group might prefer to have different volunteers sign up to facilitate each week or to have no formal facilitator. If you want facilitation guidance beyond the suggested questions at the end of each chapter, please see the separate facilitator guide for this journal. (*Circle of Catholic Women—Journal One: Facilitator Guide* includes a step-by-step plan for setting up your circle program and leading the meetings for each topic; additional options and summary questions for the final reflections chapter; and retreat ideas.) Whichever method of facilitation you choose, explain the process to your group ahead of time so everyone understands and is comfortable with the approach. In general, facilitators will want to:

- Be prepared. Complete your own journaling and look over the discussion questions ahead of time.
- Set a positive and welcoming tone. Encourage everyone to let go of their distractions or other worries so they can fully engage in the present discussion. Invite all participants to share their experiences, thoughts, and questions. Help each person feel welcomed and encouraged to participate but not pressured.
- Review the guidelines for meeting as a group, such as keeping conversations confidential within the group in order to create a trusted environment. Ask everyone to be mindful that all sharing is personal and that each story should be honored and respected.
- Help keep the group reasonably on topic and on time. Guide the discussion and timing to cover all topics your

group is expecting to talk about within the overall allotted time. If the discussion takes a slight tangent, go with it and see where the Spirit guides you. At the appropriate time, gently refocus the group back on topic.

- Listen without judgment. Remind participants that you aren't here to solve each other's problems, but to let each woman be heard who wants to share and to provide a supportive environment for that sharing. It's okay to acknowledge someone's joy or pain, but avoid advice or opinions. Listening is as important as being heard. Be open to silence. Be open to truly listening in a way that you may reflect on it later for your own growth and learning.
- If one person dominates a conversation or has trouble bringing her thoughts to closure, gently thank her for sharing and explain that due to time constraints, you'd like to invite others to share. As facilitator, remember that it is not your role to dominate either; you are there to guide the discussion and allow everyone who wants to share to have the opportunity to do so.
- Keep the conversation inspirational and respectful. Recognize that some topics will be fun while others may generate deep emotions. Be aware of times when someone may need a moment to collect her thoughts or composure. As facilitator, be sensitive to the potential need for a short break.
- About ten minutes before closing, let participants know that you are near the end of the discussion time. Guide the group toward last reflections or comments before closing with a prayer. Thank everyone for participating and encourage them to reflect on this time spent together before beginning the next journal topic.

- Be open to suggestions for changes to the format or facilitation. What works well for one group may be different from what works for another.

Personal reflection following the group meeting

At the end of each chapter is a set of questions to encourage further reflection. After you've discussed the topic as a group and before you begin journaling about the next topic, take some time to reflect on what you experienced. How did the group's discussion and your own journaling move you? At the end of the journal, there is an opportunity to reflect on your overall experience and to discuss as a group anything you want to share from your weekly reflections. This reflection time is often the most important for women. It's the time when you begin to understand how the Spirit is guiding you through this experience, a time when you can purposely assess where you are on your spiritual path and how you can bring your faith into action in your daily lives.

The labyrinth

The cover of each journal incorporates a labyrinth; at the center is a circle, a special place of reflection and renewal. Walking a labyrinth is a journey of self-awareness, enlightenment, and peace. Unlike the maze of our daily lives with all its choices and unexpected turns, a labyrinth has only one path to the center and back. It allows us to completely focus and meditate and find our own center. There is something unique and sacred about being at the center of a labyrinth:

“To enter the center of the labyrinth is to enter the belly of the soul where the darkness illuminates the light.”

Book of Reflections, the guest book of the Labyrinth Project of Connecticut

Whether we walk it on our own or with others, there is a blessing in perspective gained:

“I walked the labyrinth feeling others’ joy and sadness as well as my own, and understanding that I didn’t have to fix the others’ pain or add to their joy, only validate and allow their feelings.” *Book of Reflections*

My hope is that your experience within your circle of women will be similar to walking a labyrinth.

May God bless you on this journey!