

Rituals, Rites of Passage, and Blessings

Rites of Passage for Families with Youth

When I finally passed the ordeal of the written exam and driving test, I was elated to have my driver's license. The ultimate symbol of independence! Even though I didn't have my own car, at least I didn't need my parents to take me around anymore.

That evening our family celebrated my accomplishment. Although nothing special had been planned, the atmosphere around the dinner table was charged with excitement and anticipation. My mother, usually rather reserved, kept joking about all the errands I could now run for her. Taking my little sisters to and from swimming lessons and Brownie Scouts was not my top priority as a new driver.

My father, who had given me driving lessons, kept making "announcements" to warn the citizens of our town to clear the streets, for he could not guarantee the safety of this new driver. He kept going over to the phone pretending to call the radio and TV stations with his important civic "announcement."

My older brother was the only family member who showed little interest in my accomplishment. Perhaps he had not received the same attention eighteen months earlier when he got his license. Because he was the first, my parents were probably too nervous to joke about it the way they were doing with me.

By the end of the evening, both my parents, by way of a knowing look and a warm hand on my shoulder, communicated that they were proud and confident in me. The next morning my mother asked me to pick up a gallon of milk after dropping my sister at swim class. Then my whole family knew I was a driver.

My life changed that day I got my driver's license, and that night my family embraced my new self and initiated me into my new role. Without anyone acknowledging it, they celebrated this important rite

of independence with me. They made it okay to be different than I was before and yet still the same person.

Rites of Passage or Family Ritual: Is There a Difference?

Not all family rituals signify a rite of passage, and not all rites of passage (particularly for adolescents) are ritualized in the family. Families develop patterns, habits, and ways of absorbing all that life deals. To that extent, all families engage in ritual. Some families go a step farther and deliberately incorporate faith ritual into their daily living: meal prayers, evening blessings, Sunday worship, seasonal faith celebrations, and so on. These rituals provide order, security, and healthy predictability in an often disorderly life. They also provide a home-based faith context to life.

Rites of passage signify the periods of major change and transition in life. These events are key growth steps toward maturity. Because these experiences are foundational to maturity, the rites of passage will always occur, yet with an infinite variety of expressions and levels of intensity. Furthermore, they may or may not be explicitly ritualized in the family, youth group, or congregation.

Rites of Passage: An Opportunity for Faith Reflection

Rites of passage can be categorized by five primary experiences: birth, maturity, life commitment, death, and reconciliation. We can apply these categories to the entire life cycle of a family from birth to death. A relationship is "born" when two young adults meet and somehow they know there's more to this than meets the eye. Months or years later, they make a life commitment through marriage. From then on, all their major life transitions can be associated with one or more of the five areas.

During adolescence, growth toward maturity implies change. Families who celebrate rites of passage (whether knowingly or not) provide the forum for the life-change to be acknowledged, tried on, and embraced by all family members. The rite provides the outward experience for the inward change to become real.

Adolescence provides numerous opportunities for families to celebrate rites of passage. All the necessary ingredients are present: changes occur often and distinctly; life questions are loud and prevalent; identity and belonging needs are paramount; straightforward communication is difficult, lending value to symbol and ritual. Perhaps no other stage is riper for rites of passage than adolescence.

Many families celebrate rites of passage without realizing it. A change has occurred, and the family has somehow ritualized it, yet nothing is ever said. These are implicit rites of passage.

When I got my driver's license, no one in my family would have named that experience a "rite of passage," yet, in an informal, ritualistic fashion, they successfully moved me (and all of us) into a new stage of life. Afterward, nobody ever said anything about the change, but we all knew how to incorporate it into our lives. That's exactly the key to a successful rite of passage: it empowers the family or community to embrace the change of one member and somehow know how to carry on. In a ritualistic way, rites of passage transition the family into a new stage, allowing the system to rearrange its boundaries and find a new balance. They lessen the family's natural resistance to change.

Implicit rites pass without reflection. A family that does not reflect on the meaning and potential of change misses a key faith opportunity. Change always provides opportunity for faith growth. We can catch a glimpse of God's activity in our lives and how we might respond to it. Yet, for adolescents the moment passes quickly, and the window of opportunity fades fast. Personal, familial, and communal reflection on the experience of change leads to the discovery of deeper meaning and perhaps even God's guidance.

Not all spontaneous rites of passage lack the element of reflection. Occasionally, the experience is profound enough (for example, teenage pregnancy) to stop all family members in their tracks and cause them to search for God's grace. For some families, reflection and questioning naturally work their way into the process. Even if the rite itself was not planned or anticipated, some families hold a posture that allows them to reflect and see God's activity in their lives.

We should encourage families to be explicit in their rites of passage. Without being phony or contrived, they can embrace change in a deliberate manner, especially when youth ministry models good, simple, effective ritual that respects adolescent life while maintaining family integrity. Can youth ministry leaders focus programming activities around adolescent rites of passage (for example, graduation, first employment, driving, and so on, as well as spiritual growth through retreat experience, service projects, and Confirmation) that invite family participation or an extension of the celebration at home? Parents may be at a loss over how to ritualize their teen's life passages but will likely jump at the chance to participate at the teen's initiative. Can we give them ideas to take home?

These efforts can help teens and their families reflect on questions such as "What is God trying to show us through this experience?" If families are explicit with some of their life changes, they will also be in closer touch with those rites of passage that occur implicitly. They

will be less likely to gloss over some important life changes that family members experience.

Significant faith encounters sometimes provide a key moment of change, growth, and passage. A year or so after obtaining my driver's license, I had a faith experience that was a beginning step toward shaping my adult life. Unfortunately, my family was not as receptive to my newfound faith at age seventeen as they had been with my newfound independence at sixteen. I grew up in a "good Catholic family," so they were a bit wary when I started talking about my "personal relationship with Jesus." Oh, they acted supportive and said nice things, but from the very beginning, I was on my own for this life change. No rite of passage was celebrated around the dinner table. There were no well-meaning and "knowing" jokes. Perhaps they could not celebrate with me because I was moving into uncharted waters not yet experienced by anyone in the family. The result: even to this day, fifteen years later, my parents are not comfortable conversing with me about my faith and ministry. The point is that families need and benefit from these rites of passage just as much as the individual.

Sacramental Nature

The value of rites of passage goes beyond just facilitating change and transition. Rites of passage also provide sacramental moments for the family in their daily lives. These can be faith-enriching, catechetical moments when teens and their families recognize God's activity in their lives and respond to it.

Adolescent rites of passage mark times of change, transition, and maturity. Family rituals should not only address the teen's affective needs (feeling good and secure) but also set a tone for healthy searching, intellectualizing, and questioning. Adolescent rites of passage can be brief windows of opportunity for God's grace to explode in the life of the teen and his or her family.

The Challenge of Ritual with Adolescents

Youth ministry of the past focused much attention solely on teens themselves to the point of segregation from adults and children. This segregation has some advantages: creating a community of peers, providing activities that all can enjoy and relate to, speaking a common language, and so on. Yet when it comes to key rites of passage for teens, segregation is neither helpful nor desirable for teens, their families, or the entire faith community.

Peer-group isolation prevents growth. When teens confront their adolescent challenges and transitions, they need to be grounded by their history (childhood) and uplifted by their hopes for the future

(adulthood). They need to see folks who show them what has been and what is to come. Rituals of separation cannot provide these broad-range experiences. Also, too much segregation tends to put teens in a fishbowl-like situation for all around to see, a situation that in turn serves to bring out their most bizarre and unpredictable behavior.

Separation also hurts the family and the community. It communicates that the generations have nothing in common and nothing of value to say to each other, which is not true. Adolescents need intergenerational experiences of community. Even while experiencing the highly volatile issues of adolescence, they are still human and still have many of the same needs as all persons. Their maturity depends on meeting these common human needs as much as on meeting their specific developmental and social needs. Teens must be included in the normal life of the community and the family.

Full inclusion implies an understanding and acceptance of the particular adolescent needs as well. From an intergenerational viewpoint, how can we acknowledge and celebrate adolescent rites of passage? Just recognizing that most adolescent experiences are normal, developmental, culturally universal, and foundational to maturity will allow the adult population to see that adolescents are worth celebrating. These experiences need not be seen as abnormal, curious, or unique. Adults are challenged here to view adolescence through their own personal history and growth into adulthood. What was it like when you were a teen? Who were the folks who helped you ease into adulthood?

Experiences that trigger or complete adolescent rites of passage are not the same for all teens and their families. Yet some common experiences mark key points of transition and maturity. These may include such events as graduation, obtaining a driver's license, first date, first love lost, moving, new school, new car, first job, Confirmation, and so on. Parents and families should try to be aware of how these events impact the lives of their teens. It can be greatly beneficial for all to ritualize these times of change in the family. These are significant life events that need to be celebrated. These events open the door to new opportunities and new responsibilities. Celebrating and ritualizing them empowers all members to maintain their Christian purpose while adjusting to new status and roles. A few suggestions for family celebrations are appropriate here.

- Remember, the experiences of adolescents provide many opportunities to create and celebrate new ritual expressions and rites of passage as a family—if you are brave enough to seize them.

- If celebrating ritual moments is new to your family, start small. Choose an event or an occasion that marks a real turning point in your life as a family (first job, getting a learner's permit, and so on), and mark it with a simple but festive meal that includes a prayer or reading, reflection or story telling, and a short blessing. If your family has made a habit of ritual sharing, know that some of your "traditional" family rites will fall to the wayside during adolescence as your family grows and changes.
- Involve all family members in planning and celebrating the ritual event. Although the ritual may focus on an event of particular significance for one family member, the way you celebrate should remind everyone of the interconnectedness of family life.
- Celebrate adolescent rites in adolescent ways. Incorporate music, food, readings, stories, and so on that speak to adolescent life.
- Involve family friends in your ritual sharing. Invite key members of your extended family and your adolescent's special friends to take part. Hospitality is a treasured trait in healthy families.
- Keep the sharing and ritual simple and straightforward. If the events you celebrate are central to your life as a family, God's presence should not be too difficult to identify.
- Do not force participation. Schedule the celebration for a time that is convenient for all family members. Make the experience as attractive as possible. If a family member declines to take part, go ahead anyway.

The parish community can help a great deal in celebrating rites of life passage for adolescents. In a formal way, the parish can involve parents and family members in rites connected to graduation, confirmation, and so forth. Families then have a model that they can replicate informally. One Catholic high school involved parents in the commencement exercises by having them help distribute diplomas. This ritualistic involvement empowered many of those families to celebrate this key passage at home as well. It was already an event in which the whole family was participating.

The brief essays that follow offer different perspectives on how parishes and families can work in partnership to mark adolescence as a major time of passage for young people and for their families. More important than the specific approaches offered is the challenge for families and parishes to work together to create new ways of celebrating adolescence and its meaning for the family and the wider community.

Adolescent Rites of Passage

In most societies persons move from childhood to adulthood in a single transition. Rites of passage were established to aid that change in role and status. But in our society, where adolescence lasts for more than a decade, no single public rite has meaning, but the cultural need for passage from childhood to adulthood persists. Many have assumed or tried to make Confirmation fill that important social role, but Confirmation is not and never has been a rite of passage from one role and status to another. Confirmation is a rite of intensification, affirming the role and status previously established at Baptism. As such, it is conceivably a repeatable rite appropriate whenever one wishes to engage in it, aiding an individual to affirm and reestablish his or her role and status as a baptized person. Insofar as Confirmation can never satisfy the needs of an adolescent, people in our society during these years are left with a psychosocial void to be replaced by unhealthy rites of passage sometimes related to driving the car, engaging in intercourse, drinking alcoholic beverages or using drugs, and so forth.

A healthy rite of passage or transition has certain characteristics. The rite itself begins with a ritual or ceremonial separation from a person's current status and role, followed by a period of transition characterized by the experience of *liminality* (being betwixt and between), ordeal (leading to an experience of "communitas"), and formation (preparation for the new role and status). The rite ends with a second ritual or ceremonial that reincorporates the person into the community in his or her new status and role.

In most simple societies, a rite of passage for boys and girls aids their movement from childhood to adulthood, a process that involves a liminal ordeal of separation from the community and a program of enculturation or formation so that they may be fashioned into persons able to function as adults in the community. A society that lacks such rites becomes dysfunctional, and persons who do not have the experiences of such rites tend to manifest unhealthy behavior.

Our society badly needs to create a true rite of passage for adolescence, one that is very different from the childhood-to-adulthood rite of passage. The Church in its history has developed rites to meet life cycle needs. Today we need to create a new one for adolescence and separate it from Confirmation.

Alternative Rites of Passage for Adolescents

Adolescents in our culture and society require a rite of responsibility. The Church needs to celebrate a ritual or ceremonial in which boys

and girls who are in seventh or eighth grade or are twelve years of age are separated from childhood and officially inducted into the beginning of adolescence. The ritual might best take place on their birthday and would be seen as a rite for the individual, similar to the bar or bat mitzvah in the Jewish tradition. Parents would present their child to the community and pray a public prayer thanking God for taking away the full burden and responsibility of their child's faith and conduct, as well as asking for the graces needed to be present to and to support their child as he or she moves through adolescence into adulthood. The child would make a statement before the community, accepting the ordeal of learning to be responsible for her or his own faith and life. The community would give each child a gift, such as a Bible, to guide each one on the way. A sponsor, an adult other than the parents, chosen by the community and the child, would be presented and commissioned to be responsible for accompanying the child on his or her pilgrimage.

When the adolescent reaches twelfth grade, or eighteen years of age, the parish would celebrate a second ritual or ceremonial that separates the adolescent from adolescence and inducts the young person into the beginnings of adulthood. Again it would take place on a key birthday and would be an event that includes a sponsor who presents the young person to the community, summarizing the youth's preparation, accomplishments, and promise. The youth would make a statement on his or her readiness to assume responsibility for the youth's faith and life, and promise at an appropriate time in the future to renew baptismal vows and covenant, following significant preparation. During the service the young person would assume an adult role, such as reading a lesson in the liturgy, and perhaps choose a saint to emulate. The youth would be given a symbol of the saint's life, a charge to assume responsibility for personal faith and life, and prayers for the graces needed to do so. An appropriate party would follow.

During this eight-year period, a program—part personal and part social—would be developed to aid adolescents in assuming responsibility for their own faith and life. If we can give birth to such a rite and its related catechetical process, I suspect we will experience few dropouts during adolescence.

Quince Años: Celebrating a Hispanic Rite of Passage for Youth

The Quince Años (fifteen years) celebration marks the passage from childhood to adult life. Its roots can be traced to the native peoples of Latin America.

When Spanish missionaries arrived in Mexico in the 1500s, they found the Aztec and the Maya people practicing rich religious traditions. Life for the natives was sacred; their lives revolved around their gods, temples, and religious events. To find favor with their gods, they ritualized every critical stage of life from birth to death. One such ceremony was the initiation rite at puberty. This rite consisted primarily of separating the child from its mother, introducing the child to the sacred, and initiating him or her into a life of service to the community. The elements of such ceremonies varied from group to group.

Today, as in the days of the Maya, young people need the recognition and affirmation of adults as they search for their own identity. Adolescents, who are going through one of the most difficult periods of life, need significant people to surround them with love and care so that they can develop their self-esteem and believe in themselves.

One way that Latino people do this is through the celebration of a young person's life at age fifteen, the age at which an intense push toward adulthood begins. A well-planned Quince Años enriches not only the fifteen-year-olds but also their families and friends.

In preparation for the celebration—a Mass of thanksgiving—the young people and all the persons involved take formal instruction. Lessons include a brief history of the Quince Años tradition and the reasons for celebrating it. Participants also explore the idea that God is calling the young people to be prophets of their time, to articulate new ways of living the Christian values of the Gospel. The value of peer-to-peer ministry is also stressed. A study of the sacraments of initiation is a key part of the program, focusing on new ways for the young people to celebrate their Christian commitment. Most of them were baptized as infants; therefore, a fresh look at Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist helps them to be more aware of their dignity and their place within the family and the Church community. Far in advance of the Quince Años celebration is a day of recollection that concludes with a celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Finally, the day for Quince Años arrives. The Mass begins with a procession, at which time the youth may present the following gifts:

- **Birth certificate:** a symbol of gratitude to God and to their parents for the gift of life
- **Baptismal robe:** a symbol of their putting on the mind and the heart of Christ
- **Baptismal shoes:** a symbol of their walking in the footsteps of Christ and their willingness to walk with others so that they too may discover Christ in their lives and follow him
- **Baptismal candle:** a symbol of Christ, the Light of the World, inviting them to be a light for one another and for us

- **Confirmation recuerdo** (memento): a symbol of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which make them holy people of God
- **Crown:** a symbol of their sharing in the mission of Christ as priest, king, and servant king

The readings for a Quince Años Mass are carefully selected to emphasize the important role the youth play in their family and in their Church community. At the appropriate times of the Mass, the young people are called by name. One such time is after the homily when they are called to stand before the Christian community to renew their baptismal promises. After Communion they make an act of consecration to Our Lady of Guadalupe and offer a rose to Our Lady as a sign of their fidelity to Jesus, her Son. Before the concluding prayers, the parents give a special blessing to their son or daughter who is participating in the Quince Años celebration.

When the Mass concludes, a fiesta follows, with gifts for the youths. Essential to the fiesta are song, dancing, and food as family and friends gather to celebrate and thank God for the gift of their fifteen-year-old's life!

Orita: A Rite of Passage for Youth of African-American Heritage

Orita (oh-ree-tah), an African word that comes from the Yoruba tribe native to Nigeria, Dahomey, and Togoland, means "crossroads," the point where two ways converge. This converging of two meaningful alternatives that cry out for a person's loyalty is what choice is all about. The overall intention of the ritual is to help young men in the difficult passage to adult life and, particularly, to help them embrace the challenge of Gospel life in today's world. This rite can be adapted for young women.

Baptist minister Frank T. Fair developed the Orita ritual from African tradition for his son's sixteenth birthday. In Fair's vision, the recovery of individual moral discipline that is the focus of Orita can serve as a springboard to a concern for the future of the nation and the role the black community is to play. For African Americans and other minorities in the United States, it is "nation time," and there is a need to think in terms of a nation where all men and women have a stake. The Orita process described here was developed by the community of Christ the King Parish in Miami, Florida.

Requirements for the Orita ritual are meant to challenge the Orita pilgrims and ultimately to prepare them for adulthood. The pilgrims and their mentors and parents collaborate on a schedule for completing the requirements. This planning will determine the length of time

needed to enter into adulthood by means of this rite of passage, usually three months to one year. Requirements recommended by Rev. Fair are:

- an understanding of the black experience in America
- managing the family budget
- community service
- exploration of career and educational opportunities
- citizenship
- Bible study and reflection
- preparation for and execution of the Orita ceremony.

Personal contact by parish leaders and young adults who have taken part in the Orita process in recent years is the most effective approach to recruitment. Personal letters and an open invitation published in the church bulletin can also be helpful.

Letters were sent to the parents of each prospective pilgrim with an application form to be returned, indicating whether the prospect would participate. If so, prospect and parents were invited to a welcome meeting. Young men who had participated in the previous year's ritual were also invited to attend this first meeting and asked to bring their scrapbooks. Their parents were also invited. Meeting participants were encouraged to take part in the Orita process and advised of the program schedule and requirements.

During the second meeting, new pilgrims and their parents received program schedules and study guides to follow in fulfilling the reading requirements.

At the subsequent weekly meetings, the pilgrims became familiar with the Bible and discussed selected parables from the Gospels. A member of the congregation gave an uplifting spiritual lecture on following the teachings of the Scriptures to live as Christ wants us to live. Discussions also covered required readings from books such as *Up from Slavery*, by Booker T. Washington, and *The Souls of Black Folk*, by William E. B. Dubois, as well as progress reports about the pilgrim's individual preparations and communication with his parents and siblings.

Special topics and speakers at the weekly meetings included the family budget; the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; career explorations with a placement specialist; community service, with an experienced volunteer; and African traditional values, with a graduate student from Kenya. In addition, the pilgrims were required to speak on assigned topics at Black Heritage Week celebrations and to prepare food for homeless people as part of the parish's ongoing program.

To prepare for the ceremony, pilgrims and parents were involved together in ordering invitations and medallions, printing programs,

planning food for the reception, completing their scrapbooks and other exhibits for display at the reception, and preparing their addresses for the ceremony. A four-hour rehearsal covered all phases of the ceremony.

Celebrating the Orita Rite

Introductory Rites

- Musical prelude
 - Organ prelude
 - Congregational singing
- Opening procession
 - Congregational singing
 - Participants in procession: parents and families of pilgrims; pilgrims; bishop, priests, deacons
- Greeting and welcome by the pastor

Presentation of the Candidates

Pastor: Who is it that comes to the ritual of the Crossroads?

Pilgrims: It is, I, [insert name]. [Each pilgrim answers in turn.]

Pastor: Why do you come?

Pilgrims: We come because we are of the age of consciousness and have completed our assignments, and we desire God's blessing and the blessing of this religious community.

Pastor: Please stand. The pilgrims come to the ritual of the Crossroads because they are of the age of consciousness and have completed their requirements. Most importantly, they desire God's blessing and the blessing of this religious community. What do you say to this request?

All: Amen! Amen! Amen!

Liturgy of the Word

- Old Testament reading: Proverbs 4:20–25 (or Isa. 55:10–11)
- Responsorial psalm: Psalm 65:10–13
- Proclamation of the Gospel: Matthew 13:1–9
- Homily

Celebration of Maturity

- Invitation by the pastor to prayer:
Eternal God, in the process of becoming what we shall be, we pray that you will play an indispensable part in our life, for you are, indeed, the source of all our life. We have come to celebrate the beautiful years that these pilgrims have been allowed to live. While they are still in adolescence, we pray that they may examine critically where they desire to be in the next ten years and afterward. Grant that their hopes will be realized by helping others less

fortunate and by giving their support to worthy causes. Let them always strive to know and to do your holy will. Amen!

- Charge by the congregation

Do your utmost to present yourself each day to God with a clean heart, as a workman and with nothing to be ashamed of. Be sure to tell the truth at all times when you speak. Be sure to shun empty speeches that violate what is holy, for they will advance to more and more ungodliness. Regardless of the advance in technology, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

- Litany of desire

Pilgrims: Lord, we pray for understanding.

All: Lord, grant them understanding.

Pilgrims: Lord, we pray for wisdom.

All: Lord, grant them wisdom.

Pilgrims: Lord, we pray to live righteously.

All: Lord, grant them righteous lives.

Pilgrims: Lord, we pray for strength.

All: Lord, grant them spiritual strength.

Pilgrims: Lord, we pray for courage.

All: Lord, grant them courage to live a godly life.

Pilgrims: Lord, we pray for your sweet spirit.

All: Lord, grant them your sweet spirit to live a godly life.

Pilgrims: Amen!

- Challenges: brief words of inspiration and challenge are offered by a young adult, a mothers' representative, and a fathers' representative.

- Laying on of hands

The pilgrims kneel before the altar. They are blindfolded by their fathers to symbolize their unknown future. When the blindfolding has been completed, all family members, beginning with parents and grandparents, come forward and place their hands on the pilgrims' heads.

- Prayer of blessing (pastor or deacon)

Holy One, we give you thanks that you have led us by an inner light through the midst of darkness and on strange paths. We do not know what the future holds for these young men, but we know that you hold the future. Suffer no hurt, harm, or danger to overwhelm them. Let them make sensible choices so they will not become slaves to foolishness or deny the best development of their character. May they let Jesus Christ so dominate their lives that they will not be selfish, afraid, or negligent in the service of others. May they have unfaltering trust in you as you guide them through the trackless paths of moral decisions and pluralistic beliefs. May the

inner light guide them at midnight and through the swamps of conflicting ideologies.

- Presentation of medallions

Fathers now place medallions around the necks of their sons, who are still kneeling. Then pilgrims stand, and blindfolds are removed. A representative of the fathers addresses the pilgrims:

Representative: This medallion symbolizes the crossroads, the history, and the middle passage our ancestors had to make in slave ships. Do you promise to wear it well and make the best choices that you can make, never bringing shame on your head, on this religious community, or, above all, on your God?

Pilgrims: We do.

Representative: Should you marry and have a child, will you consider passing on this medallion to that child?

Pilgrims: We will.

- Address by the pilgrims

Each pilgrim gives a brief testimony concerning his experience of passage to maturity. The congregation will applaud each testimony and sing "Amen!"

- Pilgrims' prayer

All-knowing God, be with us in our finite search for good ideas. Stir us from unchallenging mediocrity that demands nothing of us in return. Help us fix our lives on a cause greater than ourselves so that we may save our souls. Let us delve into our ancestry so that we may feel a common cause with them in their strides toward freedom, justice, and human dignity. Father in heaven, grant us the intelligence to ask graciously the right questions so we may divide truth from fiction. Help us through discipline to arrive at the right answers to questions. O God, grant that in you we may find the power of self-reliance and self-help. Let us encourage brotherly and sisterly socioeconomic enterprises among our people. And this day, as we look into the future, let our reach exceed our grasp so that we may choose, at the Orita of life, what is noble and best. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen!

Concluding Rites

- Community challenge: Program chairperson offers brief words of challenge to all.
- Blessing and dismissal by the pastor
- Closing procession

A Graduation Celebration

Because graduation is the culmination of so much that is intensely personal, one family invented a tradition that has become significant for them, the *personal diploma*. This ritual or blessing can be done in the family, at a parish-wide celebration, or as a parent-graduate celebration at a special reception for graduates or within other programming.

Description of Diploma

The personal diploma began as something to complement the institutional diploma received by an eighteen-year-old son. In contrast to the somber black lettering on white parchment, this diploma was elaborately decorated with a colorful and intricate border that appeared at first to be a fruit-and-flower design but, on closer inspection, actually was interspersed with footballs, football helmets, and baseball mitts. The text, done in calligraphy, was long and personal. It celebrated four years of high school, including adolescent compulsions, successes, and failures. It touched on such things as driving, dating, and working, as well as math, music, English literature, sports, and special family times. Naturally, each graduate would deserve different commemorative details. This is how that first personal diploma began:

To our son, [name inserted], on his graduation on this, the 5th day of June, 19[year inserted], we present this diploma in honor of four rich, and sometimes arduous, years at [name of school inserted] High School.

As you collect this diploma and move on to the next stage of your development, we, your loving and proud parents, remember the vivid moments of these important years. . . .

The parents wrote the text themselves and found a local artist to design the diploma. It is beautifully framed and hangs in their son's room at college. This tradition is just the kind of personal and creative response that produces the warmth, satisfaction, and pleasure we all want in our families.

A parish youth ministry can develop a special program for families or parents to develop diplomas for their graduating high school students, using the description above, and then schedule a parish celebration of graduation. Instead of asking families and parents to gather, the parish youth ministry might consider developing a graduation kit (with instructions, materials, and sample designs) for families to use at home to create their own diplomas. Families would then bring the completed diplomas to the parish celebration of graduation.

A parish youth ministry could also make diplomas for graduating young people. The diploma might reflect the experiences of the past four years, the contributions of graduating seniors to the parish community, and the prayers and best wishes of the parish community. These diplomas could be conferred at a parish celebration of graduation or at an end-of-the-year banquet.

Graduation Blessing

Incorporate Scripture readings, prayers, and storytelling into your graduation celebration. Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 reminds us there is a time for everything—and that God is with us in all seasons. This passage can serve as a reminder of God's ongoing presence in the midst of change.

Develop a special prayer that expresses your thanks and your hopes for the graduating young people, or use the following:

Leader: [Insert name], you are a unique creation, a person blessed by God with life, a person called in love to grow and to share your gifts with others. We come together today to celebrate your accomplishments, to reflect on who you are for us, and to share our dreams for your future. May your graduation day be filled with happiness and joy. We rejoice in who you are for us as a family and as a parish community, calling to mind especially your gifts of [insert gift] and [insert gift]. *Family members or young people can be invited to share comments and stories here that speak of the uniqueness and giftedness of the graduate*

May God continue to bless you and to challenge you. May you always be surrounded by people who support and love you. May you grow more fully into the man or the woman that God wants you to be and that the world so desperately needs. We ask this today, in hope and expectation that God will continue the great things already begun in you. Amen.

Blessings for Young People

Blessing for Athletes or Athletic Events

This blessing could be used at the beginning of an athletic event or for all the youth who participate in athletic events throughout the year. This blessing asks that God protect the athletes from injury and that the athletes show respect for one another.

Leader: Lord, today we pray for all these young athletes. Send us your blessings as we pray.

Reader: A reading from Paul's second letter to Timothy (4:6–8)
Everyone joins hands, or the leader extends hands over the group.

Leader: Strong and loving God, we ask that you bless these athletes. Keep them safe from all injury, fill them with respect for other athletes, and give them endurance and strength. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Blessing of Throats for Youth in Choir or Theater

The following is an adaptation of the Blessing of the Throats on the feast of Saint Blase. Gather youth who are involved either in choir or in theater. This could be at the beginning of the school year, on the feast of Saint Blase (February 3), or right before a major performance.

- Choose a suitable gathering song.

Leader: Let us praise God our Creator and our Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be God forever.

All: Blessed be God forever.

Leader: Today we remember Saint Blase as we pray for the protection and health of the throats of these performers. Saint Blase was a bishop in Armenia in the fourth century. He is said to have healed a boy who was choking. Since the eighth century, Saint Blase has been venerated as the patron of those who suffer from disease of the throat. The blessing is a sign of our faith in God's love and protection.

Reader: A reading from the Gospel according to Mark (16:15–20)
Psalm 34 is spoken or sung.

Leader: With the confidence that God hears our prayer, let us ask God to bless us with health and protection.

Reader: Our response is "Lord, hear our prayer."

Reader: For all those who are suffering from sickness or disease, especially ones of the throat, that they be healed, we pray to the Lord.

Reader: For doctors and nurses and for all who care for our throats when we are sick, we pray to the Lord.

Reader: For those who are shy and have not yet found a voice to proclaim God's goodness, that they grow in confidence, we pray to the Lord.

Reader: For all our teachers, voice coaches, choir directors, and others who have helped us find our voices, that they be blessed with health also, we pray to the Lord.

Reader: For all those who seek the intercession of Saint Blase today, but in a special way those who will be performing, that their throats remain strong and free from illness, we pray to the Lord.

Leader: With confidence we call upon the Lord, saying . . .

All: Our Father . . .

- The leader says the following while touching the throat of each person with the crossed candles.

Leader: Through the intercession of Saint Blase, may God keep you safe from all illness of the throat. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Blessing for Lectors

Gather all youth lectors at the beginning of the school year or at the beginning of a new liturgical year (the beginning of Advent).

- Choose a suitable gathering song.

Leader: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Leader: Today we are gathered to pray for those people who serve the Lord by lectoring. When the Scriptures are read, God speaks to us and calls us to respond. The ministry of lector is important to the life of the Church because the reader proclaims God's living Word. We ask God to bless these readers and all of us who now listen to the word of the Lord.

Reading: A reading from Paul's second letter to Timothy (3:14–17)

- Psalm 19 or Psalm 119:9–12 is sung or spoken.

Leader: With confidence we pray to God and ask that God bless these readers.

Reader: Our response is "Lord, hear our prayer."

Reader: For the entire Church, that we may always listen to the Word of God and respond, we pray to the Lord.

Reader: For all who listen to the Scriptures, that they be blessed with peace, we pray to the Lord.

Reader: For all who carry the Word of God to those who have never heard it, that they be strengthened so that they may continue the work of evangelization, we pray to the Lord.

Reader: For our readers, that they proclaim the Word of God with confidence and love, we pray to the Lord.

Leader: Let us all pray together . . .

All: Our Father . . .

- Invite the congregation to extend their hands in blessing.

Leader: Creator God, we thank you for these young people who have committed themselves to proclaiming your word. Bless them and strengthen their faith as they proclaim your word. Give them courage so that they may read with conviction and boldness. We ask this through Jesus, our brother. Amen.

Leader: May our loving God bless all of us and keep us safe until we come together again. Amen.

- Conclude the service with a suitable song.

Blessing for Birthdays

This blessing could be used on a youth's birthday or at the end of each month to bless all who are celebrating a birthday during that month. The blessing could be given whenever you celebrate birthdays at your parish, right before cutting the cake.

Leader: Lord, today we pray for [insert name or use "these young people"], who celebrate(s) another year of life. We pray for your blessing upon [insert him, her, or them].

A reading from Paul to the Philippians (1:3–11)

Reader: We thank you, Lord, for having given us life.

All: And praise your holy name.

Reader: We thank you, Lord, for our parents who have watched over us.

All: And praise your holy name.

Reader: We thank you, Lord, for our friends and companions.

All: And praise your holy name.

Reader: Let us now pray together . . .

All: Our Father . . .

Leader: Loving God, you are the source of all life, and on this special day we come before you. We give you thanks for the gift of [insert name] (or, these young people). Bless them on their birthday. May they always know that you gave them life, that you are with them in each breath they take, and that you will lead them into a future of hope. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Blessing of the Keys

This blessing is for youth who have just received their driver's license or have just gotten their first car. Along with the blessing it imparts, it seeks to impress youth with the fact that driving is a serious responsibility.

Option: Print the closing prayer on a card, and give one to each young person.

Leader: Lord, today we pray for all these young drivers. Send us your blessing as we pray.

Reader: A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew (16:18–19)

Leader: When we hear about someone getting the keys to something—like a city—we think of prestige, privilege, or power, but we don't always remember that being given the keys to something is an awesome responsibility. A car is not a toy. It is not just transportation or a way to have fun. If used irresponsibly, it can kill. So today, in addition to blessing the keys, we will invite you to take a driver's pledge.

- The leader invites all to put their keys down in front of them or hold them up. The leader extends hands over the group.

Leader: Loving Creator, we ask that you bless these young drivers. Keep them safe from harm; fill them with respect for the law and courtesy for others on the road. We ask this in your name. Amen.

- The leader invites the young drivers to pray.

All: Lord, help me to show my appreciation for your precious gift of life by always driving with care . . .

to show my love for others by being courteous to them . . .

to show my respect for your Law by respecting the laws of the road . . .

and to show my gratitude for my own life by never driving when I could be harmful to myself or others. Amen.

(The services have been adapted from *Families and Youth: A Resource Manual*, edited by Leif Kehrwald and John Roberto [New Rochelle, NY: Don Bosco Multimedia and The Center for Ministry Development, 1992], pages 224–234. Copyright © 1992 by Salesian Society/Don Bosco Multimedia. All rights reserved. Used with permission of The Center for Ministry Development and Salesiana Publishers. Contributors included:

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- *Developing Alternative Rites of Passage for Adolescents*, by John H. Westerhoff III
- *Quince Años: Celebrating a Hispanic Rite of Passage for Youth*, by Angela Erevia, MCDP
- *Orita: A Rite of Passage for Youth of African-American Heritage*, by Nettie Cook-Dove)

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