

Help your kids encounter God in nature

Since ancient times, the natural world has been one of the ways that people come to know about God and experience his wisdom and glory (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #32, 299; *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* #487). Many of the saints, too, lived in harmony with the natural world and had special friendships with animals as a consequence of their closeness to God.

Unfortunately, the practice of reflecting on God using the natural world as a sort of “icon” for the divine has been neglected by many Christians who are put off by the secular practice of treating nature as the only way of encountering God, along with the tendency of New Age spirituality to divinize nature. But ignoring the ways that we can encounter the presence of God in the natural world cuts us off from an important part of our tradition, not to mention a way of experiencing God’s presence with a sense of awe, wonder, and joy.

Here, then, are five ways of praying with nature.

1. Bless and praise God for his creation

Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers contains several blessings and prayers related to nature; see the Blessing of Animals, the Blessing of the Products of Nature, and the [Canticle of the Sun](#) (Prayer of Saint Francis). The Bible also contains numerous songs of praise inspired by creation. A few examples include:

- [Genesis 1:1-2:3](#)
- [Genesis 9:8-13](#)

- [Psalm 104](#)
- [Psalm 148](#)
- [Job 38-39](#)
- [Daniel 3:52-90](#)

Teens might also explore the [poetry of Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins](#), particularly “The Windhover,” “Pied Beauty,” and “God’s Grandeur.”

2. Make nature your *Lectio divina* “text.”

Follow the method of meditative prayer known as *Lectio divina*, using the natural world around you as a “text.” For the first step, spend time “reading” your environment by either actively exploring it or by being still and quietly observing. (Search for “nature sit spots” online for details on the growing “sport” of quietly observing the natural world from a single location.) Share your observations with one another: What did you see? What did you hear? Then move through the other steps of *Lectio divina* to prayerfully meditate on the meaning of what you “read.” See [Lectio Divina for Kids](#) for more about this prayer practice.

3. Use the examen to look for God’s presence in the natural world

Use the Ignatian [Daily Examen](#) to reflect on how you encountered the presence of God in the natural world. This is a great activity to try at the end of the day around a campfire (after s’mores, probably). Even simply asking the question is enough to bookmark the concept for kids.

4. Collect a bouquet for your prayer space

Collect flowers, pine cones, pebbles, shells, feathers, or other natural objects that show God's glory and present them to God (or the Virgin Mary, or one of the saints) in a spirit of gratitude by placing them in your [Home Oratory](#).

5. Read the stories of saints who befriended God's creatures.

The next time you are sitting around the campfire, read the story of a saint whose love of God was expressed in his or her love of God's creation. [Saint Francis of Assisi](#) is an obvious example, but Ethel Pochocki proposes other animal- and nature-loving saints in her kid-friendly [Once Upon a Time Saints](#) series: [Comgall](#) (friend of swans and mice); [Felix](#) (friend of spiders); [Hubert](#) (protector of deer); [Kentigern](#) (brought a bird back to life); [Martin de Porres](#) (veterinarian and friend of animals, especially mice); [Melangell](#) (protector of wildlife, especially rabbits); [Pharaildis](#) (friend of animals, restored a dead goose); and [Rigobert](#) (befriended a goose). And that's just a small accounting; you can add to the list St. Blase, who befriended bears, wolves, and lions, and St. Kevin, who is supposed to have befriended an otter, a blackbird, and even the trees; St. Hildegard, a skilled botanist; and even St. John Paul II, who as a priest took young adults on camping trips as a spiritual retreat. Indeed, St. [Bernard of Clairvaux](#) said, "What I know of the divine science and holy scripture, I learnt in the woods and fields"—a sentiment echoed by many other spiritual masters.

If you tell your kids these stories, incorporate the saint into a prayer of gratitude for the beauty of God's creation.

Talking points: Meeting God in the natural world

Use your time outdoors to share the Church's teaching about the environment with your children. Here are some talking points:

► **We can encounter God in nature.** As noted above, the Church is clear that the natural world is one of the ways that people come to know about God and experience his wisdom and glory (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #32, 299; *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* #487).

► **We still need the Church.** Your older kids might ask: "If we can encounter God in nature, why do we need the Church? Why can't nature be our church?" It is important for them to understand that the Church isn't just another human organization; rather, it is both a sign of our communion with God and the unity of the human race, and the means by which our union with God and other people is accomplished (*Catechism* #775). Catholics say that the Church is the sacrament of Christ—the means by which Christ is physically manifested in the world, and by which he continues his saving work. So even though the beauty of the night sky or the mystery of life unfolding in a stream might lift our minds to God, it is only in the Church that we are saved from the power of sin and death (see *Catechism* #846-847).

► **God intends creation for our good.** Our faith teaches us to treat our natural environment within the context of God's overall plan of salvation (*Compendium* #451). God intends the created world to serve the good of human beings, who are the "summit" of his creation (*Catechism* #343). The Church rejects any view that values the environment as much as or more than human beings, or makes creation into a sort of god. We are called to care for creation in part to preserve it for the benefit of all human beings, including future generations

(*Catechism* #2416).

► **God calls on us to respect creation for its own sake.** The Church also rejects views that reduce the natural world to something to be manipulated and exploited (*Compendium* #463). Creation has its own intrinsic value, for the simple reason that God made it and called it “good” (Genesis 1); God loves and cares for each of his creatures (*Catechism* #342), so we should, too.

Learn more

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #[282-301](#), [337-349](#), [2415-2418](#)
- *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, “[Chapter Ten: Safeguarding the Environment](#)” #451-487
- [Blessing of the Animals](#): Contains the traditional blessing of the animals, as well as Scripture references to care for animals, and St. Francis’s sermon to the birds.