

See Joy in God's Creation

PSALM 65:5-13

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GOAL

Youth discover what the Bible says about God's presence in nature and recognize how this awareness leads to deeper joy in their lives.

- A Art
- AM Active/Movement
- AT Abstract Thinking
- C Conversation
- CT Concrete Thinking
- D Drama
- G Game
- M Music
- QC Quiet/Contemplative
- S Service
- T Technology
- X Extra Prep

Note: bit.ly addresses are case-sensitive.



PRAYER

Holy God, help me to see and savor your presence in each person who will gather in this space today.

THIS SESSION

Even in the best of times, a thousand ordinary things can distract us from the joy we find in God's presence. We can get caught up in the immediate demands of life—ordinary routines or unusual challenges. Our attention simply drifts from what we know is important. At times, we grow so accustomed to the gifts we've been given, like our family and friends, that they become familiar and overlooked. Other times, we're distracted by whatever novelty appears on the screen in front of us, and we move through our day like zombies, numbed by stress or stagnation. Faith invites us to break this routine and *savor joy in God's glory*—to notice, with intention, God's presence in our midst.

THE BIBLE STORY

Psalm 65 urges us to pause and consider how the natural world is a testament to, not only God's act of creation at the beginning of time, but also God's continuing presence on earth. The psalm's present-tense verbs describe a God actively engaged with the ongoing work of ocean tides, rainfall, and crops springing forth from fields. Scripture compels us as inhabitants of God's creation to stop, take notice, and find joy in the beauty and wonder of God's presence that is being made known in the world around us.

CONNECTIONS WITH YOUTH

In 2020, researchers at the University of Adelaide reviewed 186 studies from around the world and discovered a global increase in anxiety and depression among children and adolescents. While multiple factors are believed to have contributed to this increase, many studies noted that time spent in nature ("green time" versus "screen time") offered significant psychological benefits. Some studies even suggested that just displaying pictures of nature could have a positive impact without ever having to leave home.¹

This session encourages youth to consider how engaging with nature has the potential to not only improve mental health but also strengthen faith by experiencing God's presence and joy in the world around them.

SESSION PREPARATION

- "What Distracts Us?" (p. 6): Prepare a sheet of newsprint with the question "What distracts us from God?" across the top of the sheet. Post the newsprint in your space for youth to see when they arrive. Save this newsprint for use in session 4.

Depending on the options you choose:

- "Thinking Forward and Looking Back" (p. 7): Obtain the *Practice Joy* infographic poster (bit.ly/FMInfographicPosters, Year 1 Set).

1. Elisa Black, "Green Beats Screens for Kids' Wellbeing," Sept. 7, 2020, bit.ly/FMGreen.

GETTING STARTED

- Newsprint
- Sticky notes
- Markers

WHAT DISTRACTS US? C AT

Before youth arrive, post a sheet of newsprint in your space. At the top, write the question: “What distracts us from God?”

Welcome youth as they enter and offer each of them several sticky notes and a marker. Invite them to respond to the question on the newsprint you’ve posted by writing one answer on each sticky note. Once they are finished responding, have them place their sticky note on the newsprint.

After youth have finished responding, gather as a group and invite participants to examine the responses and consider the following questions:

- ➔ Do you notice any patterns or themes in these responses? What are they?
- ➔ Do you think youth face the same kind of distractions that adults face? What are some similar distractions? What distractions might be different?

Explain that, in today’s session, the focus will be on seeing and savoring God’s presence in nature and how this helps us experience God’s joy.

- Bibles or copies of Philippians 4:4–6

SCRIPTURE AND PRAYER QC

Explain that you will be opening each session with a time for Scripture and prayer to prepare youth for your time together. Provide each participant with a Bible or a copy of the Scripture text. Ask for three volunteers to each read a verse from Philippians 4:4–6. After reading, pray this prayer or one of your choosing:

God, we are grateful for a space that is set apart for us to quiet all the distractions in our lives and focus on you. Help us to truly seek your presence here with us today. May your Spirit fill our hearts, open our minds, and give us fresh eyes with which to see the world. Amen.



INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

Choose one or both options.

- Copies of Resource Page 1



Teaching Tip: Because this session focuses almost exclusively on God’s presence in nature, consider spending at least part of the session outdoors.

THE BEAUTY OF THE EARTH M

Tell youth about the background of the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth.” The lyrics were written in 1864 by Follitt S. Pierpoint as a response to the beauty he witnessed in the created world around him. Distribute copies of Resource Page 1 to participants. Show the YouTube video “For the Beauty of the Earth – Georgetown Music Ministry” (bit.ly/FMBeautyEarth, 4:22), and have your group listen to the hymn and note slight differences. After listening or singing, invite youth to consider the following questions:

- ➔ What feelings do you think the composer of this song was trying to express?
- ➔ Have you ever experienced a moment out in God’s creation that made you feel this way? How would you describe that feeling to someone else?

Note that, in some musical settings of this poem, the lyrics read, “Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of joyful praise,” while in others (such as

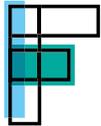
Glory to God, #14) the lyrics say, “. . . this our hymn of *grateful* praise.” What a reminder that joy and gratitude for God’s presence in our lives go hand in hand!

THINKING FORWARD AND LOOKING BACK

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Practice Joy infographic poster

Share the *Practice Joy* infographic poster and give participants a few minutes to get acquainted with it. Explain that they will see this poster at each session and discuss the current session’s focus as well as review past discussions and how they relate to the infographic. Invite youth to focus on the images and quotations that reflect today’s theme “See Joy in God’s Creation,” and ask them to imagine what this session will explore.



FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

Choose one or both options.

DRAWING THE SCRIPTURE

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Copies of Resource Page 2
 Colored pencils or markers

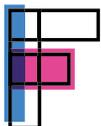
Distribute colored pencils or markers and copies of Resource Page 2 to each participant. Allow youth to spread out in your space. Read each verse of Psalm 65:5–13 aloud from each version and, as you read, invite them to circle or underline the words and phrases that they find most important. Once finished, prompt youth to choose one of the verses that caught their attention and illustrate it on the back of their Resource Page. Give participants enough time to complete their drawings, then ask for volunteers to share their artwork and have youth guess which verse is represented.

SCRIPTURE SLIDESHOW

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Copies of Resource Page 3
 Internet-connected devices

Form groups of three. Distribute copies of Resource Page 3. Using the Scripture texts on the Resource Page, assign each group a set of verses from Psalm 65:6–13. Invite participants to use one device per group (a smartphone, tablet, or computer) and the websites listed on the Resource Page to find an image that illustrates their verse. Once each group has found their image, ask for a volunteer to read each set of verses in order while another volunteer shares the chosen image with the group. (If you have the capability, consider displaying the images on a larger screen for the entire group to see as the psalm is read.)



FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Choose one or both options.

JOY OF THE DESERT

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Internet-connected device

Invite youth to share what first comes to mind when they think of the desert. After several suggestions, note that we rarely associate the desert with joy. Instead, we think of deserts as wastelands, wilderness, and barren. Share with youth that, throughout Scripture, God meets individuals in the desert and shows them how joy is to be found even in unlikely places. As a group, show the YouTube video “Life cycle, Rose of

Jericho resurrection plant time lapse” (bit.ly/FMRoseOfJericho, 3:01). As you watch, read aloud Psalm 65. After watching, ask youth to consider how this video helps us understand the joy about which the psalmist writes. Discuss how God makes God’s self known in the desert.

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- Internet-enabled device
 - Copies of Resource Page 4

BLESSING OF THE ANIMALS



If your church has held a Blessing of the Animals service, then discuss the most recent service with your youth. If not, ask youth if they are aware of such a service or have participated in one at another congregation. Show the YouTube video “Annual Blessing of the Animals Held at Cathedral of Saint John the Divine” (bit.ly/FMBlessingAnimals, 2:00). After watching, discuss how youth see the legacy of St. Francis living on today in the Blessing of the Animals ritual. Ask how animals might give us unique insight into the ways God is present with us in the world.

Share copies of Resource Page 4 and invite youth to recite the Peace Prayer of Saint Francis together. Challenge participants to consider how St. Francis’s joyful relationship with animals and nature may have brought him a greater sense of peace. How does seeing animals as part of God’s joyful act of creation change our relationship with them? What does the presence of animals in our lives teach us about God’s love?



PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Choose one or more options.

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- Newsprint
 - Markers

SCREENTIME VS. GREENTIME



Form two groups: a *screentime* group and a *greentime* group. Offer each group a sheet of newsprint and markers, then ask them to brainstorm the positive and negative effects of either screentime or greentime in their lives and the lives of their peers. Once each group has compiled their lists, post the newsprint in a place visible to everyone in the group and ask for volunteers to share each group’s responses. Then discuss the following questions:

- ➔ When does screentime take away from experiencing God’s presence and joy in our lives? Does greentime have any of the same effects? Why or why not?
- ➔ What advice might you offer a friend trying to find a better balance between screentime and greentime? How might encouraging this balance help strengthen this friend’s understanding of God’s presence in their life?

SAVORING GOD’S PRESENCE IN NATURE



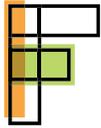
Invite youth to take a walk outside and allow them 10–15 minutes to roam without using phones or other tech. Encourage youth to be attentive to the sights, sounds, and textures around them. Urge them to try and be intentional about experiencing God’s presence in their surroundings. Gather all participants together and discuss what it was like to look and listen for God in nature. What were the challenges? Were there any unexpected surprises? How might joy increase in your life if you were to spend 10–15 minutes in nature, without any technology, every day?

PRESERVING GOD'S CREATION

S AM

Find a space that your group can easily walk to in order to pick up litter and trash. Invite youth to find a partner, and give each pair a trash bag and a pair of gloves. Have groups spread out. Challenge each pair to not only pick up trash but also take note of what attitudes might have led someone to place their trash on the ground instead of properly throwing it away. If you have time, gather together and separate out any recyclables from your collected litter. Have a brief discussion about how stewardship of the environment honors God's presence in the world. Invite youth to consider how they can experience joy by being good stewards of God's creation.

- Trash bags
- Gloves



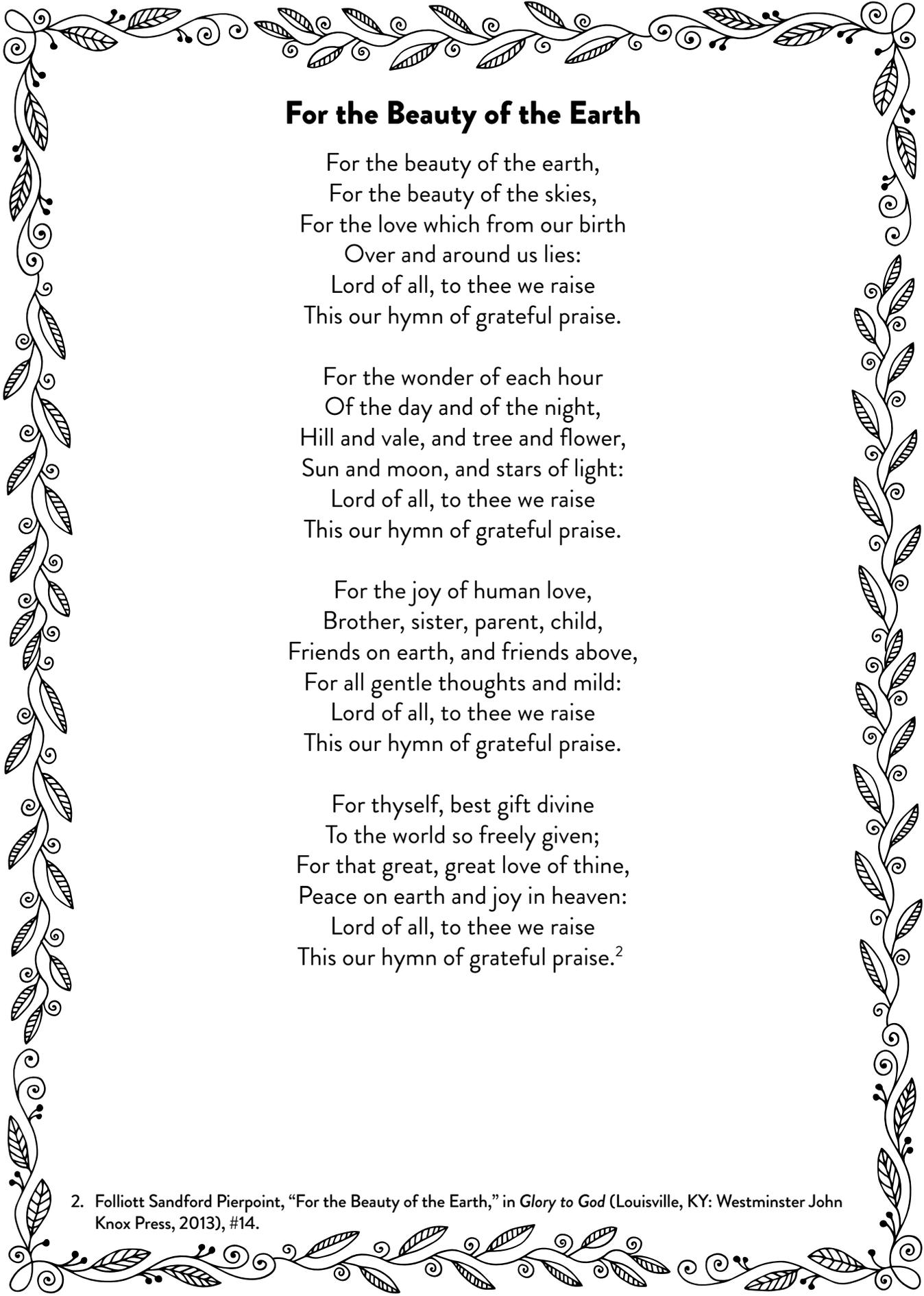
FOLLOWING JESUS

SAVORING GOD'S PRESENCE IN THE WEEK AHEAD

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Ask youth to think of one moment in their daily routine that they will use to intentionally engage and savor God's presence this week (riding the bus, brushing their teeth, etc.). Have them suggest to one another ways they might remember to do this (*form accountability partners within your group, set an alarm on their phones, ask their youth leader to send a text reminder at some point in the week*). Invite volunteers to share how they will use part of their routine this week to find joy in God's presence. Close with the following prayer or one of your choosing:

Creator God, as we go from this place out into a busy world, help us to find moments to pause and reflect upon the beauty of your creation and the joy it inspires within us. Amen.

A decorative border of stylized leaves and vines surrounds the text. The border is composed of repeating patterns of leaves and swirling vines, creating a frame around the central content.

For the Beauty of the Earth

For the beauty of the earth,
For the beauty of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.

For the wonder of each hour
Of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale, and tree and flower,
Sun and moon, and stars of light:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.

For the joy of human love,
Brother, sister, parent, child,
Friends on earth, and friends above,
For all gentle thoughts and mild:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.

For thyself, best gift divine
To the world so freely given;
For that great, great love of thine,
Peace on earth and joy in heaven:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.²

2. Foliott Sanford Pierpoint, "For the Beauty of the Earth," in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), #14.

Psalm 65:5–13 (NRSV)

By awesome deeds you answer us with
deliverance,
O God of our salvation; you are the hope
of all the ends of the earth and
of the farthest seas.

By your strength you established the
mountains;
you are girded with might.
You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples.

Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are
awed by your signs;
you make the gateways of the morning and
the evening shout for joy.

You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.

You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

Psalm 65:5–13 (*The Message*)

All your salvation wonders
are on display in your trophy room.
Earth-Tamer, Ocean-Pourer,
Mountain-Maker, Hill-Dresser,
Muzzler of sea storm and wave crash,
of mobs in noisy riot—
Far and wide they'll come to a stop,
they'll stare in awe, in wonder.

Dawn and dusk take turns
calling, "Come and worship."
Oh, visit the earth,
ask her to join the dance!
Deck her out in spring showers,
fill the God-River with living water.
Paint the wheat fields golden.
Creation was made for this!
Drench the plowed fields,
soak the dirt clods
With rainfall as harrow and rake
bring her to blossom and fruit.

Snow-crown the peaks with splendor,
scatter rose petals down your paths,
All through the wild meadows, rose petals.
Set the hills to dancing,
Dress the canyon walls with live sheep,
a drape of flax across the valleys.
Let them shout, and shout, and shout!
Oh, oh, let them sing!

Psalm 65:6–13

6–7: By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.

8–9a: Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy. You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water;

9b–10: you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.

11–12: You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy,

13: the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

Suggested websites to find images for this activity:

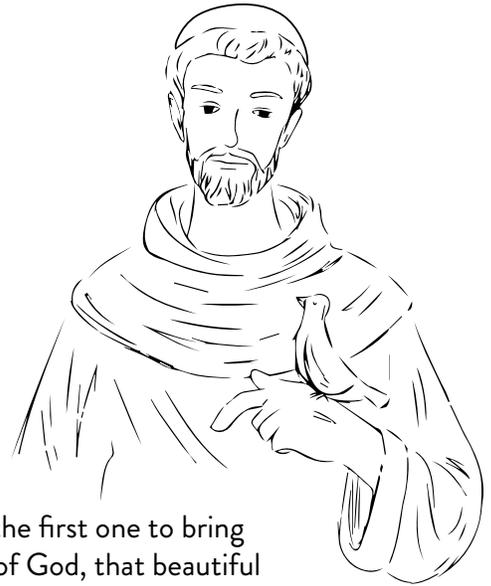
Unsplash: bit.ly/FMUnsplash

National Geographic Photography: bit.ly/FMNature

National Park Service Photo Gallery: bit.ly/FMParks

Who was St. Francis?

St. Francis of Assisi was born in Italy in 1181. A lover of nature, especially animals, the joy St. Francis found in the created world around him wasn't just a feeling; it was one of the ways he understood God to be present in the world.



From the YouTube Video (bit.ly/FMBlessingAnimals):

“He was very much aware of the beauty of God’s creation and really was the first one to bring that message to the people: that God could be seen—that beautiful light of God, that beautiful love of God—could be seen in all things. Not just the human person but the four-legged and the two-legged and the winged and the finned.”

—Patty Welch, Chaplain of Cathedral School at The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York, NY

Peace Prayer of Saint Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

○ divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.³

3. “Peace Prayer of Saint Francis,” Loyola Press, www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/traditional-catholic-prayers/saints-prayers/peace-prayer-of-saint-francis/.

