

MONNICA

CHECKLIST: WHAT YOU NEED

- Copies of the downloadable “622 service” and “Prayers & Thanksgivings” booklets
- Copies of the lesson handout
- Copy of the leader's notes
- OPTIONAL: Bibles (ESV or similar recommended)
- OPTIONAL: A white board, easel pad, or chalk board with markers/chalk
- OPTIONAL: Have notebooks on hand for teens to take home and use as prayer journals if they wish

ICE BREAKER: “GAME OVER OR TRY AGAIN” STORIES

This is a storytelling improvisation game. Have the teens sit in a circle. One person begins by holding a ball (or another object that can be thrown) and telling a story until they reach a point where a character in the story declares, “I give up” (variations are allowed, such as “we should just give up”). Then the first storyteller throws the ball to someone else in the circle, who must continue the story beginning with the words, “But then...” which signal a change for the better. The storytellers must alternate between directing the story towards giving up and hope to try again.

For example: (1) There was once a dog who set out to find a friend, but after an unpleasant encounter with a skunk he put his tail between his legs and decided to give up. (2) But then, along came a cat with absolutely no sense of smell and asked why the dog was so sad. (3) When the cat heard what had happened she just laughed and continued on her way, making the dog feel sadder than ever. This time he was really going to give up. (4) But then he remembered that his owners always seemed to know what to do, so he headed back home... (etc.)

DEPENDING ON YOUR GROUP, YOU MAY HAVE ONE LONG STORY OR SEVERAL SHORT ONES. FOR LARGE GROUPS, ENCOURAGE THE TEENS TO THROW TO SOMEONE WHO HASN'T HAD A TURN UNTIL EVERYONE HAS PARTICIPATED.

622: BEGINNING WITH PRAYER

Begin the formal part of the lesson by saying together the first part of the order for service for young people in the booklet, up to the middle of page 4.

AT THIS POINT IN THE LESSON, ASK IF THE TEENS SUCCEEDED IN DOING LAST WEEK'S CHALLENGE, HOW IT WENT, AND WHETHER THEY HAVE ANYTHING TO SHARE.

DISCUSSION: (DON'T) GIVE UP

As an introduction to the lesson ask the teens to discuss the following questions.

DEPENDING ON THE COMFORT LEVEL FOR SHARING IN YOUR GROUP, IT MAY BE EASIER TO HAVE THEM VOLUNTEER ANSWERS WITH ALL RESPONSES WRITTEN TOGETHER ON A BOARD.

- Why do people give up?
- Do you personally find it difficult to keep trying when things get hard?
- What are some goals that require persistence?

A few things worth pointing out (if they don't otherwise arise during the discussion):

- *People give up for many, many reasons. It could be that they are impatient and expect things to work out more quickly and with greater ease than they do. Sometimes people become overwhelmed with their own sense of inadequacy and lose hope in the possibility of success. An initial failure can also set us back, maybe even persuading us that we are wasting our time and energy or that what we are working towards isn't “meant to be”.*

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- *This is a great opportunity for a personal story! Most of us reach a point at which the desire to stop trying is a great temptation. If we manage to persist beyond the struggle, it may be because of personal tenacity, but more likely it is due to a strong personal motivation. For example, failing a test could make us want to give up trying to master a certain subject – unless passing the course is important to a long term goal of making it to university and launching a career.*
- *Most meaningful goals require effort to achieve. If you look at many success stories in science, technology, business, sports and even art, success was often ultimately made possible after a long, hard effort through many disappointments and failures. But building good relationships also requires being willing to stay in the game rather than making a quick exit when things get tough.*

THE LESSON: PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

Lessons 13-42 follow a slightly different format from previous lessons. The story of the saint being studied is interspersed with verses from scripture that provide added perspective. You may prefer to read the lesson text aloud together as a group, or ask the teens to read it silently to themselves.

“I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.”
(2 Timothy 1:12)

During the fourth century the empire underwent a drastic change in attitude towards Christianity. A century that began with persecution ended with the state having adopted Christianity as its official religion – the result of an edict issued in 380. Though Christianity was gaining in popularity during these years, there were many other religions and philosophies all around, as well as false teachings causing confusion and conflict within the Church.

Though it was a turbulent age for believers to navigate, it was also a time during which many great theologians and doctors of the Church were alive; opposing false teachings and providing direction to the faithful – saints like Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, and Augustine of Hippo.

“And Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”
(Luke 18:1)

Monnica lived in a city called Tagaste in what is now Algeria in North Africa. She was born into a Christian household, and while very young had to confront and overcome a tendency to drink too much. Monnica married young and the circumstances of her married life were difficult, but she was a devout Christian and a woman of great prayer. Monnica’s husband was not a Christian. He was a man with a violent temper and a habit of unfaithfulness. Over many years, Monnica prayed for her husband’s conversion, and just before his death her prayers were answered: he became a Christian and was baptized.

“Pray without ceasing.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:17)

At the age of 23, Monnica gave birth to a very gifted son named Augustine. Over the next three decades she would fast and pray fervently for the salvation of her son. Like many mothers before and since, she suffered

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the heartbreak of watching a beloved child stray from the faith she had taught him and into immoral living. Monica was not one to give up. She tried refusing to allow Augustine to live in the house. (This didn't last long). She tried arguing with him. (This lasted a bit longer). But through all her efforts, she *prayed*.

Augustine became an adult and fathered a son of his own (though unmarried). He avoided and was embarrassed by his mother's persistent concern, and still Monica did not give up. Augustine went to live in Milan (in Italy) where a great preacher of that time also happened to live. The preacher's name was Ambrose, and it was ultimately under his teaching that Augustine came to surrender his life to Christ. Monica was able to see her son baptized at the Easter Vigil in the church at Milan in 387. She felt that with this, her purpose had been accomplished and her hopes had been realized. Very soon afterwards, she became ill and died.

Many years later, Augustine wrote an autobiography in which he acknowledged the great value of his mother's persistence and prayers:

“Nevertheless, O God, You ‘stretched out Your hand from above’ and drew my soul out of the profound darkness... because my mother, Your faithful one, wept to You on my behalf... You heard her, O Lord, and did not reject her tears as they poured down and watered the earth under her wherever she prayed. yes, Lord, You truly did heed her prayers.”

*“Give her of the fruit of her hands,
 and let her works praise her in the gates.”
 (Proverbs 31:31)*

Monica's son Augustine became one of the greatest teachers of the Church. Yet at heart she was simply and wonderfully a Christian mother, fervent in prayer for her children to repent and turn to Christ. In both her suffering and in her devotion, she is a relatable example for parents of every place and age.

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: SAINT AUGUSTINE, BISHOP OF HIPPO, “CONFESSIONS”, TRANS. E.B. PUSEY | DAVID FARMER, “OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS” | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, “THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 1” | GERARD SAMPSON, “LAYMAN'S BOOK OF SAINTS”.)

Then ask the teens to respond to what they've just read. Here are some questions to help guide the discussion.

- Why do you think Monica kept persisting in prayer for her husband and son for so many years?
- During the many difficult years before her son's conversion, how do you think people inside – and outside – the Church would have regarded her?
- How was Augustine's attitude towards his mother different before his conversion and after it?
- What can we learn from Monica's example?

A few notes and reflections for reference:

- *Monica continued to pray for the salvation of both husband and son, long after many others might have given up. But Monica loved these men very much and earnestly believed that their salvation was the most important thing in the world, and it was the task which she felt she had been set, a purpose born of both faith and love.*
- *This is pure speculation! Monica's faithful friends may have encouraged her to place her trust in God and continue to carry her burdens to him in prayer, acting as the persistent widow in Jesus' parable. But chances are that others would have thought she should “know when to quit”. What's important to note is that the conversions of both her husband and son did not happen within a few weeks or months or years – but after decades of earnest prayer on Monica's part.*

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- *For many years, Augustine rejected his mother's efforts to call him to a life of faith and morality. He was embarrassed by her and avoidant. Perhaps some of us can relate to this. It was only later that Augustine came to regard his mother as the faithful, loving saint that she was, with gratitude for her persistent prayers on his behalf.*
- *The most important lessons that we can take from Monnica are persistence in prayer and tenacity in love, no matter how many set-backs tempt us to give up on the people that God has given into our care.*

DURING EACH LESSON, IF THE TEENS RAISE THEOLOGICAL OR BIBLICAL QUESTIONS THAT YOU DON'T FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT ANSWERING, SAY SO, BUT LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU'LL FIND THE ANSWER AND RESPOND AT THE NEXT MEETING.

PREVIEW: AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Take a brief moment to look at the at-home challenge together.

THE WEEKLY "AT-HOME CHALLENGE" IS TYPICALLY A SIMPLE ASSIGNMENT TO SPEND SOME QUIET TIME IN PRIVATE PRAYER. ENCOURAGE THE TEENS TO GET NOTEBOOKS THAT CAN BE USED AS PRAYER JOURNALS. ASSURE THEM THAT THEY WILL NOT BE REQUIRED TO SHOW THEIR JOURNAL OR THEIR PRIVATE PRAYERS TO ANYONE.

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE "FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES", WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer))

Review today's lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of Monnica that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you've chosen. Close your time of reflection with a prayer of gratitude for the witness of Monnica.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following collect.

O God Most High, the creator of all mankind, we bless thy holy Name for the virtue and grace which thou hast given unto holy women in all ages, especially thy servant Monnica; and we pray that the example of her faith and purity, and courage unto death, may inspire many souls in this generation to look unto thee, and to follow thy blessed Son Jesus Christ our Saviour; who with thee and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth, one God, world without end. Amen. (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A VIRGIN OR MATRON, P. 316)

CLOSING PRAYERS (622 AGAIN)

Close with any prayers that might be appropriate in the context of the discussion of the day.

AT THE END OF EACH LESSON, IF YOU FIND THAT YOU STILL HAVE LOTS OF TIME REMAINING, YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO TAKE SOME TIME TO EXPLORE THE "PRAYERS AND THANKSGIVINGS" SECTION IN THE BCP (PAGES 39-62, OR YOU CAN USE THE DOWNLOADABLE BOOKLET). AS YOUR GROUP MEMBERS COME ACROSS PRAYERS THAT THEY FIND RELEVANT, PAUSE AND PRAY THEM TOGETHER. IF YOU'RE PRESSED FOR TIME, YOU MIGHT CLOSE WITH THE THEMED PRAYER FROM THE AT-HOME CHALLENGE.

Then finish with the "Grace", the final prayer in the booklet.