

Spiritual Nourishment for Teachers

BY SHEILA ROGERS GLOER

Whatever our teaching roles—classroom teacher, parent, aide, librarian, or volunteer—we can find inspiration in the four books reviewed here. They lead us to think in honest ways about and pray in a heartfelt manner for our students and ourselves.

Being a teacher is an isolating and lonely profession. That may sound strange to us because teachers are surrounded by other people during the entire workday. Yet consider that teachers make most decisions entirely alone. They reflect on how to improve their teaching on their own. When looking for new ideas they turn to textbooks and resources that they search by themselves. They enter the classroom early in the morning full of hope for a new day with lessons carefully planned, materials ready, and procedures posted. When the students arrive, the door is shut and the teachers are alone with their charges. The students all have individual needs, individual learning styles, and individual goals to achieve. This is a daunting responsibility, and most teachers face it by themselves. However, for Christian teachers who see teaching as a divine calling, God is always near to give guidance, patience, and the partnership with God and one another that teachers need to make it through the day with joy and peace. To Christian teachers seeking resources to help strengthen this relationship with God, the most experienced teacher of all, I would like to suggest four books for spiritual nourishment written with teachers in mind.

When I ask teachers around the country about the factors for successful teaching, most respond that the student-teacher relationship is one of the most important determinants of success in the classroom. In *A Teacher's Prayerbook: To Know and Love Your Students* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third

Publications, 1997, 56 pp., \$7.95), Ginger Farry reminds us to bring God into the relationship, for “in order to communicate with students on a heart level, God must be invited into the dialogue” (p. 1). She explores a range of classroom experiences—filled with joy, gratitude, sorrow, anger, doubt, or self-discovery—to which teachers will relate, finding that “it seems necessary to ‘pray the day anew’ reflecting on what is at the core of each experience” (p. 1). Her invitation to prayer is expressed through her own heartfelt prayers, which are written poetically like biblical psalms, followed by a brief reflection and a few questions of examen that focus on a particular challenge readers might face.

Farry offers no pious platitudes as she reflects honestly in “I Don’t Love Them Today,” but uses her sense of humor to accentuate the knowledge that God loves students even when they seem undesirable:

But I know that you care, Lord,
 they’re part of your plan,
 so I give you them NOW,
 just do what you can. (p. 46)

In “Surprised by Faith,” she reminds teachers that God’s nourishment can come from the students themselves. Speaking of one young person who is bright, quiet, and manly, she writes:

But just today,
 while we all prayed,
 my eyes flashed on his face.
 And when he threw a kiss to you,
 dear Lord, I felt your grace. (p. 9)

A few of Farry’s prayers give evidence of the parochial setting where she teaches—Msgr. McClancy Memorial High School, a Catholic school for young men in Queens, New York. Yet anyone who has the heart’s desire to take student relationships to God in prayer will recognize in this simple, insightful book of poetic prayer the universal truth concerning the presence of God in teachers’ relationships with students.



In the acknowledgements to *Prayers for Homeschool Moms* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003, 176 pp., \$14.95), Michele Howe writes, “my prayer is that this compilation of stories and prayers will reach every homeschooling mom exactly at her point of need, embracing her with hopeful encouragement and a sense of community” (p. xiv). In sections entitled “The Practice of Homeschooling,” “Teaching Day by Day,” “Character Development,” “Challenges and Choices,” and “The Perks,” Howe presents fifty-two meditations. Each one begins with a story of an experience of a homeschool mom,

offers a relevant Scripture passage and a prayer (written in the voice of the mom), and concludes with an inspirational quote from a speaker or author. Although a few of the stories seem unrealistically upbeat, one can still draw hope from their conclusion.

Many of Howe's scenarios about moms, families, and neighborhoods are not unique to homeschooling, but are tales of parenting and living in community to which anyone might relate. For example, in the story "Time for Tea" Maggie and her daughter Elise recognize that isolating ourselves in the neighborhood is not the way God calls us to live in community. Having heard angry voices coming from a nearby house and realizing she did not even know the neighborhood family's name made Maggie stop to think about 1 Peter 4:9-10: "Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another; as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." Maggie's prayer for forgiveness and help in changing her life to be a "sacrificial offering poured out for others" challenges not only the homeschool mom, but every person who seeks to live in community, demonstrating the love of God to neighbor and family (pp. 68-69).

In another story, "Trading Places," Melissa is struggling to find a published curriculum to help her teach Spanish to her children. When she discovers that Emily, a former Spanish teacher, has moved into her neighborhood, Melissa learns a lesson about self-reliance, submission to God's guidance, and God's provision of a community for her (pp. 18-20).

Howe's scenarios provide readers a few minutes of daily spiritual nourishment as they share her characters' lives, reflect on Scripture, and pray with them.



In the style of a daily devotional book for teachers, Vicki Caruana's *Before the Bell Rings: 180 Inspirations to Start a Teacher's Day* (New York: Howard Books, 2006, 308 pp., \$14.99) provides Scripture passages and short readings arranged to coincide with the flow of an academic year. Each entry concludes with an important thought to carry through the day and a prayer to minister to the teacher's daily struggles. The book's hardback binding and attached ribbon to mark the place help readers return easily to the next entry, which affords new hope and strength to begin a new teaching day.

Each devotional is like a daily chat with a friend who has walked the same road, offering insightful ways to bring rest and refreshment, while acknowledging the isolation and weariness that creep into a teacher's life. Indeed, Caruana is an educator who has taught at both the high school and university levels, and authored more than twenty books, including the best-selling *Apples & Chalkdust: Inspirational Stories & Encouragement for Teachers* (1998) and related products.

Caruana draws on her wide experience of the daily diversity that characterizes the public school arena—from the joys of “picture day” to keeping peace in the classroom, from teacher gossip to isolation and lack of community for the newest of teachers. She inspires not so much a sense of pride in one’s school, but of service to humanity, challenging her readers to “teach with the assurance that what you do does indeed make a difference” (p. 105).

Caruana is sensitive to how teachers may struggle to integrate their school experiences with their Christian faith. In “Odd Man Out,” for example, she writes humorously about how others may not understand the unusual joy one experiences in responding to a divine call to be an educator, including the joy a “called” teacher may feel in the “rhythm of the school day and even the smell of mystery meatloaf wafting from the cafeteria” (p. 60). Her final thought about how Christian teachers might not always feel like they fit in is a good example of the folksy encouragement in this book: “Today you may feel like you’re clumsily following a difficult set of dance steps, but remember you’re really following God’s exquisite lead. Lord, even if they gawk at me on the dance floor, they’ll certainly admire my Partner” (p. 61).



In *Morning Meetings with Jesus: 180 Devotions for Teachers* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2008, 270 pp., \$16.00), Susan O’Carroll Drake shares openly from her experiences of teaching in a challenging urban setting, transparently describing her days of fear, feelings of inadequacy, and questioning of her mission, even while she looks daily to Jesus as the master teacher. She concludes each devotional reading with a prayer, a challenge or focus thought, and a Scripture passage to study.

For example, in “On the Move” she tells of being literally “on the move” during her first

year of teaching, with no classroom of her own, but only a cart to carry her needed materials from room to room. She took comfort in the fact that Jesus was also a teacher on the move, who allowed his situation to bring him to those who needed him most. She does not say that she was “like Jesus,” but that “Jesus knows what it’s like to feel unsettled. He knows it is not where you are that counts, but who you are. God can use your frustrating situations

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for good, allowing them to mold you toward perfection and mastery.” Her prayer to God — “please help me push my cart today” — could be the prayer of all teachers (p. 39).

In another entry she describes a creative, yet potentially controversial, learning experience created for her high school anatomy class — a Friday evening field trip to the local morgue. “I know that my students are excited to culminate their anatomy/physiology unit with this hands-on experience,” she writes, yet she is filled with doubt for the success of the learning and the behavior of her students (p. 143). Her subsequent reflection on this trip brings hope to all who have ever doubted their own performance in the classroom: “We may doubt our effectiveness, our abilities, our calling, and even our God. Despite our doubts, God’s power and ability will always be with us. Strategically placed, uniquely prepared, and always accompanied by the great I AM, you have been sent to do great things” (p. 144).

“My experience in a somewhat challenging urban setting may not match your experience, but you may find this guide useful whether you work in a public, private, parochial, or home-school venue,” O’Carroll Drake writes. “Regardless of your mission, if you are a Christian teacher, you already know you need guidance, inspiration, strength, wisdom, and Jesus — a model worth emulating” (p. xv). This book speaks truth to Christian teachers who might feel alone in their calling, and brings a sense of hope, community, and spiritual nourishment for the teacher’s soul whatever her setting.



No matter what your teaching role — be it classroom teacher, parent teacher, teacher’s aide, librarian, or volunteer — you can find inspiration and nourishment in the pages of these books. As a homeschool parent, a teacher with impoverished students, a teacher in the suburbs or rural areas, or a teacher in a private school setting, you will find that one of these books is right for you. Whether you feel isolated or you have a supportive community, whether you have great mentors or you must make solitary decisions, these books can encourage and inspire you as you seek to fulfill your God-given call to teach. They will lead you to think in honest ways about and pray in a heartfelt manner for your students and yourself.



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