Spirituality in Practice 2027–2029

Embodied Imagination for Life and Liberation

September 10-15, 2027
January 8, 2028 ONLINE
April 28 - May 3, 2028

September 15, 2028 ONLINE
February 2-7, 2029

Mundelein, Illinois at the University of Saint Mary of the Lake Conference Center

Five-session Hybrid Model

The Academy for Spiritual Formation® THE UPPER ROOM

Curriculum Structure

Session 1 (In-Person)
- Course 1 - Spirituality and Scripture
- Course 2 - Spirituality and Justice

Session 2 (Online)
- Course 7a -Spirituality Embodied in Personal, Relational, and Vocational Life (part 1)

Session 3 (In-Person)
- Course 3 - Spirituality and Discernment
- Course 4 - Spirituality and Compassion

Session 4 (Online)
- Course 7b: Spirituality Embodied in Personal, Relational, and Vocational Life (part 2)

Session 5 (In-Person)
- Course 5 - Spirituality and Creativity
- Course 6 - Spirituality and Creation

Course Descriptions

Spirituality and Scripture

From the devotional reading of scriptures seen in the writings of the Early Church Fathers and Mothers, to the most recent revival of Lectio Divina, the Christian family has demonstrated the continuing importance of scripture in the spiritual life. In an era that privileges the intellect, it is important to recognize the distinction between informational approaches and formational approaches to sacred text. The purpose of this course is to explore multiple ways that scripture might be employed as a centerpiece of our spiritual practices, equipping and empowering participants to establish a regular discipline of reading and praying scripture in a formational way both individually and communally.

Potential topics and practices could include:

- Scripture and meditation
- Devotional reading, writing, or journaling
- Writing scripture-based poetry, hymn texts, liturgy
- Ekphrastic writing and art
- Lectio Divina and Lectio Liberatio
- Praying the Psalms and the role of the Psalms in Judeo-Christian faith
- Ignatian contemplation and the use of the imagination when engaging scripture

The hope is that participants come away having developed a relationship with scripture as living Word, allowing the text to work on them at the core of their being, shaping their lives to embody a Christ-like presence of justice, mercy, and love.

Spirituality and Justice

This course invites participants to explore the intersection of spirituality and social justice, recognizing that our spiritual journey and our commitment to justice are inextricably linked. The course seeks to guide participants in developing practices that help them embody God's love in their daily lives in ways that make God's justice real for all beings (including our more-than-human kin) because our liberation is dependent on one another. The course will explore ways in which personal and communal spiritual practices can awaken us to the realities of oppression and systemic injustice, while empowering us to respond and act in meaningful ways that give expression to the fierceness of God's love for the world.

Potential practices and topics covered may include:

- Trauma-informed body practices
- Self-examination and introspection
- Listening for and to the voices of the marginalized and ignored
- Abiding with pain, grief, and discomfort and embracing feelings of fear, rage, confusion, despair, and other oft-avoided emotions in ways that move us
- Expressing lament and speaking out
- Dreaming God's dream of beloved community, imagining and articulating God's preferred future, vision casting
- Attending to that which brings peace, joy, and a sense of aliveness that sustains us and keeps us engaged and trusting in a just God who desires equity for all

The hope is that participants will come away with a renewed sense of humility, purpose, and passion for social justice, and a range of practical tools and practices to help them stay grounded in God's love and their commitment to acting for the sake of love, justice, and equity.

Spirituality and Discernment

The purpose of this course is to explore multiple ways of listening for the Holy as we engage our lives and the world through individual and communal discernment. Discernment is a crucial aspect of the spiritual journey, enabling us to make wise decisions, to recognize and respond to the invitations of God, and to navigate the complexities and ambiguities of life with clarity and confidence. The course will approach discernment by addressing key questions such as: What helps us listen and cultivate "ears to hear"? How do we differentiate between discernment and decision-making or strategic planning? What does it mean to listen to our bodies and what wisdom and knowing is grounded there? How might we recognize holy invitation and vocation? How do we live with ambiguity, hold questions, and listen for the wisdom that speaks truth into our lives and the larger world? How is God inviting us to love the world, and what actions or witness might we take?

This course will draw on diverse traditions and perspectives to equip participants with the practical tools and insights they need to discern God's will for their lives and for the world. Potential topics and practices may include:

- Developing attentiveness and spiritual attunement
- Examen and cultivating self-awareness of one's own desires, motivations, and biases
- Journaling
- Mindfulness and body awareness
- Listening with scripture, with creation, and with the ancestors
- Discerning the signs of the times and the needs of the world
- Group Holy Listening and decision-making
- Clearness committees
- Group storytelling

The hope is that participants will come away with a deeper awareness of the Holy and greater confidence in their ability to respond faithfully to God's invitations and calls.

Spirituality and Compassion

This course delves into the heart of the spiritual path that Jesus lived and taught – compassion. Compassion is summarized in scripture as loving God, loving ourselves, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. It is a way of being that is rooted in knowing oneself as God's beloved on an experiential level and also that God's extravagant love and compassion extends to all of creation. That identity and image of God empowers us to relate to ourselves through a transformational self-compassion and gives us courage to embody a radical compassion toward others, including the suffering, the stranger, the outcast, our more-than-human kin, and even our enemies.

The purpose of this course is to explore how such compassion is cultivated and moved from the conceptual to everyday doing and being. Participants will be introduced to practices, techniques, and tools that may include:

- Deepening our capacities to experience God as a source of love
- Meditation, breath work, and somatic practices for transforming difficult emotions and internal driven-ness into grounded self-compassion
- Nurturing compassionate communication and connection with those in our daily lives
- Skills for empathic listening and being present with those who are suffering
- Remaining engaged with and embodying genuine compassion toward people who are difficult for us (i.e. – those with whom we are fundamentally opposed, those who engage in actions that are

offensive to us, and those we perceive as 'other') while maintaining personal power, appropriate accountability, and empathic care
- Compassion in the context of justice movements
- Honoring the benefits and challenges of compassionate living

The hope is that participants will come away more equipped to live in compassionate relationship with themselves, others, and the created world.

Spirituality and Creativity

This course invites participants to explore imagination and creative expression as integral to our humanity and identity as beings made in the image of God. The purpose of this course is to guide participants in developing practices that help them engage with their reality in a posture of imagination, visioning, possibility, and a felt sense of agency. The course aims to foster a deeper understanding of God as Creator and humans as stewards of that creativity or even co-creators, ending the arc of the program curriculum on a note of hope. The course may explore questions such as: What limits our imagination? How can we give ourselves and one another permission to embrace the reality that we are inherently creative beings? How can awe and wonder be encouraged and understood as religious experiences that open us to new behaviors?

Potential topics and practices may include:

- Play and pleasure as spiritual practice
- Cultivating spontaneity, improvisation, and letting go of control
- Spiritual expression and reflection through the arts, including visual art, music, dance, and film or theater
- Christian song and music as grounding practices in resistance and protest movements
- Prophetic witness, imagination, and moral visioning
- Recovering the capacity to dream through rest and unstructured time with no agenda
- Immersion in nature, connecting with the physical elements, and wilderness experiences that connect us to our vulnerability
- Storytelling, both sharing and receiving
- Embracing paradox and creative tension

The hope is that participants will come away with a renewed sense of creative energy and its connection to their spiritual lives, and practical tools and practices that help them cultivate a more imaginative and hopeful posture towards their reality.

Spirituality and Creation

The purpose of this course is to invite participants into a lived experience of kinship with God's creation, remembering that humans are integral parts of this more-than-human community, rather than separate from it. The course will explore ways in which personal and communal spiritual practices can awaken us to the sacredness of all creation and the interconnectedness of all things, while empowering us to learn from, cooperate with, and care for the natural world. The course seeks to ground participants in Christian theological and scriptural frameworks that undergird a worldview of reciprocity and interdependence with the more-than-human community. This should go beyond the traditional lens of stewardship to an understanding of the Christian vocation in relation to the more-than-human world as the context in which all discipleship is lived out. In conjunction with the "Spirituality and Creativity" course, this course encourages participants to engage pressing environmental challenges, especially the climate crisis, with a posture of imagination and hope.

Potential topics and practices may include:

- Cultivating gratitude, reverence, and awe in our relationship with creation
- Contemplative and embodied practices in nature, such as mindfulness, walking meditations, and forest bathing
- Repenting of our complicity in the degradation and exploitation of the natural world
- Practices for engaging eco-grief and eco-anxiety, including lament
- Understanding and engaging with the ecological worldview of Scripture
- Participating in projects and actions that promote healing, restoration, and sustainable living
- Honoring and engaging the wisdom and knowledge of indigenous peoples, and working in partnership with them towards a shared vision of creation care
- Practices of eco-sabbath and rest, including practices of simplicity, frugality, and sufficiency
- Exploring the connection between creation care and issues of social justice and equity

The hope is that participants will come away with a sense of loving relationship with the natural world and the divine presence within it, as well as practical tools and practices for nurturing that relationship and working towards a more just and sustainable world.

Spirituality Embodied in Personal, Relational, and Vocational Life

This course focuses on daily living—personal life, relational life, and vocational life—recognizing that all are interwoven. The content of the course should lean toward the practical over the conceptual, affirming that how a person embodies their spirituality is particular to each individual and there is no one right way. However, there are characteristics of the integrated spiritual life that can be cultivated and manifested in contextual ways.

The purpose of this course is to help the participants integrate what they are learning from the six courses that make up the two in-person sessions. The goal is to provide participants with practices, models, examples, and tools to imagine/envision what it might look like for them to embody their spirituality in the everyday context of their living and being. As such, this course is the thread that weaves through the entire curriculum and the experiences of this formational program so that the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts.

The faculty presenter for this course is in some ways a spiritual guide for the community, helping them to listen for the ways that the presence of Christ is being made real in their life. The hope is that participants will come away with a posture of humility and self-compassion (rather than performance) and a sense of groundedness amid the transience and unpredictability of life's journey.