Chapter One

Life’s Transitions, Rites of Passage, and Culture

This chapter sets the stage for a deeper analysis of key transition times and rites of passage. We begin taking a deeper look by

→ telling the story of the old tree;

→ examining transition times and their relation to rites of passage. We consider fundamental attitudes and rituals, culture as a delivery system, changing cultural contexts, and stories and basic beliefs;

→ considering Jesus and Mary as our models;

→ seeing transition times as opportunities for faith formation.

Next, we review the main points of this chapter. Finally, we offer some discussion questions.
Take a Deeper Look

Broken, rotted branches lie at the foot of the once proud apple tree standing in the backyard. Thirty-five years ago, Stanley and Olivia Hater, my parents, bought this small twig of a tree at the local nursery and waited patiently for it to mature. Year after year, it grew and produced luscious apples to feed the family.

Several years ago, a large deer, attempting to get some of the lower branch apples, broke off a major limb. From that time on, the tree began a profound struggle for life. After a while termites took over the bottom of the tree, but the apples still came, as the tree gradually died.

Year after year, more dead branches fell off, and limb after limb turned brown and rotted. Eventually, the chain saw did its job on the dead branches until only one large limb made its way heavenward. This year, surprisingly, beautiful buds appeared on the remaining branches and, as the summer wore on, the apples grew to one inch in diameter. Then, just as mysteriously as apples appeared from the blossoms, they shriveled up and died. No matter how the tree tried, its deteriorating condition prohibited the apples from coming to maturity. Soon, the tree will die completely, following the universal law that there is a time for everything—a time to be born and a time to die.

The story of the tree is repeated by every creature that ever lived on this earth—plants, animals, and humans. All are engulfed by the cycle of birth and death. Everything is in transition, nothing stands still. There is morning and evening, sunrise and sunset, joy and sorrow, birth and death.
As pastoral ministers, family members, and friends, we are invited to take the wisdom gleaned from reflecting on the story of the old apple tree to ask how it can inspire us to minister more effectively. As we know, all people experience life tragedies and all go through hard times. The same tensions symbolized by the dying tree, and the eventual deaths of Stanley and Olivia, affect every person who loses a loved one, is beset with a serious sickness, loses a child through a miscarriage, or suffers other kinds of loss. As parish ministers we experience such events every day.

It’s easy, over time, to become immune to the sufferings that people experience when such things happen. This can never become the norm in parish ministry. If it does, we lose one of the most effective means of evangelization open to us. Take the following episode.

The parish ministers at St. Mark’s parish experienced tension among themselves. Several left, others had difficulty communicating with each other, and still others were not well. And yet, the needs of parish members did not end.

One morning the secretary received word that a man died and his family wished to have a Catholic funeral Mass. No one knew the family. The staff discussed the situation. The bereavement minister said that he was going out of town, so would not be available. The pastor planned to celebrate the Mass and funeral rites, but to do little more himself to minister to the family after the service.

One parish minister, Esther, was not comfortable with the plan. After work, she spoke to several parish friends. Next, Esther contacted the family, helped them with arrangements, and planned a reception at the parish afterwards. Her friends prepared food and drinks.
During the reception, the deceased man’s son thanked Esther profusely. He said, “You’ll never know how your kindness affected our family. We are very grateful.” Who knows how many family members and friends returned to the church because of Esther’s kindness!

The grieving family experienced a significant transition in their lives with the death of their father. The funeral Mass and reception marked an important rite of passage that helped them move toward eventual healing.

Throughout history, people have developed rituals to address such life transitions as birth, adolescence, marriage, sickness, retirement, and death. We call these rituals *rites of passage*. Considering them from a historical, communal, or personal perspective, however, is incomplete. We must see them within the larger perspective of life.

We are earth creatures, subject to the dynamics present in life itself. This was evident in the lives of Stanley and Olivia, who planted the apple tree. They gave it special care—watering, feeding, and pruning it. They grew old with the apple tree. Eventually, Stanley died and the apple tree lived on. For many years, Olivia cared for the tree, picked its fruit, and froze the apples for pies. She and the tree aged together and a special bond joined them. Shortly after Olivia died, the tree ceased producing fruit and deteriorated rapidly. Eventually, the tree also died.

The tree story shows that all life can serve as a meditation on our personal lives. The transitions occurring in nature remind us that we change at key life moments. As humans, we can know these changes, face them, and become better persons. Such tran-
sition times are opportunities for new and deeper kinds of awareness and growth.

Each transition invites us to probe life’s mysteries and see how God penetrates life’s veil to disclose new insights into who we are and why we are here. These are wonderful opportunities for us to reach out to joyful or suffering friends and neighbors, urging them to walk with hope on their unique life path.

Transition Times and Rites of Passage

Important life transitions, like birth, marriage, sickness, healing, death, and burial, are more than mere events. They are transition times in life and need to be ritualized by rites of passage which connect them to a deeper source of energy or power (G. Van Deer Leeuw, Religion in Essence and Manifestation, 1963, pp. 192-93). Consider, for example, the following parish episode.

Sean and Kim were nearly forty and wanted to have a child. Finally, after years of waiting, Kim became pregnant. It became an event for the parish leaders, for Sean ministered at Nativity parish as the music director. He and his wife were actively involved in several ministries in this wonderful, faith-filled community.

As the months passed, Kim began to have problems and was bedridden during the final month before giving birth. When the anticipated day came, the doctor informed them that the child was stillborn.

A rite of passage is a ritual enacted by a group to mark the passage of one or more people through a significant life cycle.

Arnold Van Gennup, Rites of Passage, 1960
The couple was devastated. So were their families and friends. Parish ministers wondered how to help them cope. It was decided with their approval to have a prayer service at their home and invite family and close parish members. The funeral Mass was to follow a week later.

At the prayer service, the couple had the opportunity to cry and celebrate with those they loved in the intimate surroundings of their home. Sean and Kim helped prepare the celebration of their child’s entrance into eternal life that day and during the funeral Mass in the parish church the following week.

After these two celebrations, Sean told me that, “The double celebration helped us see that grieving is not a once for all event. It doesn’t end with the celebration of a Mass. After the funeral Mass, most participants go off to their homes and workplaces, often forgetting that those who grieve are just beginning to experience the implications of their loss. The fact that our two celebrations were a week apart helped us begin the grieving process with a rite of passage in faith and continue it ritualistically at the funeral Mass.”

Kim reiterated Sean’s comments and wondered what it might have been like if they hadn’t celebrated with rites of passage at this traumatic time in their married life. As she said, “During this period, the support of the community, the prayers of the church, and our faith enabled us to experience a deeper healing power of God than any of us could have imagined possible.”

It is not sufficient to experience transition times and recall them later. They must be ritualized or celebrated to recognize their full significance:

➢ Parents experience a child’s coming into the world and ritualize this event with gifts, cards, and parties.

➢ Christians have a baby baptized.
People recognize the significance of marriage or graduation by experiencing the event and celebrating it.

Any significant transitional time, considered merely as an event without ritualizing it through a rite of passage, is empty and incomplete. This consideration contains three important notions.

1. A difference exists between the actual transition time, happening, or event (birth or death), and its ritualization or celebration through a rite of passage (baptism or a funeral rite).

2. A deep connection exists between the rite of passage (ritualizing a person’s going into the military or getting married) and a deeper source of energy. For ancient people the rite of passage helped connect the one experiencing it with an ultimate giver of energy (Van Der Leeuw, p. 27). In Christianity this is God. A rite of passage invites one into contact with this source of energy or power (the Trinity in Baptism) or gives an additional increase or loss of power (job loss or promotion). The energy or power is connected with God, not as the one who directly gives or takes it away (health and sickness), but as its ultimate source.

3. Rites of passage are always transitional or passing and involve a degree of uncertainty and vulnerability. Because of their transitory nature they point to an unchanging source, namely God.

We gain added insights into such transitional times from other cultures. The Chinese celebrate a custom known as passing through the gate repeatedly in a child’s early life (Van Der Leeuw, p. 193). It may occur yearly, less frequently, or when a child is sick. Those involved pass ceremoniously through a bamboo gate, a symbol of
life. The child’s birth is not considered a *definitive event*, if no one celebrates or ritualizes it (Van Der Leeuw, p. 193).

The wisdom gleaned from such rituals tells us that celebrating events like birth, marriage, or other transition times through rites of passage completes them by taking them beyond mere events and joining them to a deeper source of sacred power coming from God and mediated by a community. For instance, Christian rites of passage, like baptism or the Eucharist, which celebrate membership in Christ’s Body, are imbued with saving graces gained by Jesus on the cross.

The relationship between the *event* and its *celebration* helps us appreciate why it hurts if no one wishes us a happy birthday. This recognition helped the Dorswick children see why their mother was very happy when they gave her a surprise seventy-fifth birthday party.

*Rites of passage are important moments for the community and the individual.* They provide opportunities to increase or lessen responsibilities in a group (becoming a head nurse, returning to the classroom to teach, or retiring). At each significant life change, one’s energies and responsibilities shift focus. Ritualizing transitional times helps people begin or move on.

Rites of passage require ritual separation from a former life, acknowledgment of a profound happening, and integration into the next stage in community life (Theodore M. Ludwig, *The Sacred Paths*, p. 65, and Gerard Fourez, *Sacraments and Passages*).

Celebrating rites of passage helps a person separate from an old lifestyle and move into a new one (single to married, married to divorced). In this context, Margo, a divorced woman said, “Unlike the death of a spouse, the end of a marriage is largely ignored by the community.”

Since changing times afford new responsibilities, opportunities, and a closer connection with God, efforts must be made to relate to others according to the new state of life, not shy away from them or become isolated. Community rituals and celebra-
tions help people make important life transitions. Help from the wider community is essential.

Rites of passage intensify the tensions that exist through life. No language adequately expresses the built-in tensions that accompany difficult times. While words often are inadequate, rituals have real value, as indicated in the following episode.

When Stephanie, the mother of seven children, became seriously ill and was unable to speak, her husband and children kept constant vigil by her bedside. Visitors entering the room were struck by the love they shared with her. They held her hands, rubbed her forehead, and kissed her cheek. Their words expressed their love, but they did not say as much as their physical expressions of love. Their constant ritual of affection said more than their words conveyed.

Ritual manifestations, like holding a sick person's hand or giving a hug to a hurting person, connect with the tensions experienced by sick or grieving parties. Often, such actions address tensions more adequately than words. In sickness and death, words of regret may ring hollow, whereas sensitive actions may connect with the tension involved (Fourez, *Sacraments and Passages*).

A historical context can shed further light on the event and its celebration in rites of passage. When introducing a graduate course on Symbol and Myth, one professor, Dr. Robsmith, begins with early civilizations. Students learn from cave paintings, artifacts, and ancient records that rituals are universal. They also discuss rites of passage still practiced by some native tribes.

One ancient rite of passage formerly used by an African tribe initiated adolescent boys into adulthood. Adult males took the boys into the bush, painted them white, and put them in coffin-like boxes, symbolizing death to childhood and birth to manhood. The rite included screams and sounds, intended eventually
to dispel fear and allow the boys to face manhood with courage. Sometimes this rite lasted for weeks, as they fasted, eating only what was necessary to maintain their health.

The girl’s initiation rites were different. They usually began at their first menstrual period and lasted until the birth of the first child. A wise woman of the tribe mentored each girl, who remained in her family home. The emphasis in the boy’s and girl’s rites was on life—protecting tribal life in the case of the boys, and giving new life in the case of the girls.

After a class on rites of passage, Joe, an African American student in his early forties, told Dr. Robsmith,

Forgive me for smiling, but while I listened to you speak about African rites of passage, I heard something similar to what I experienced as an adolescent. Your descriptions reminded me of my experience. I was initiated into manhood through our tribe’s adolescent rites in the African jungle.

Soon after my initiation at fourteen, missionaries evangelized our village and our family converted to Christianity. I attended the mission school. There, I got a good education and eventually made my way to the United States. I will always be an African and intend one day to return to my village to care for my elderly father.

After Joe described his initiation rite, Dr. Robsmith better appreciated the power of such an event for the individual and the tribe. The lessons that Joe learned underlie his basic attitudes, even though he is now Christian and half a world away from his homeland.

We can learn from Joe the critical role that rites of passage play in culture, community, and personal life. This appreciation helps us see the challenges presented by Western societies, where rites
of passage have nearly disappeared or become secularized in the form of personal fulfillment in sex, money, and achievement. Joe’s story also challenges pastoral ministers to investigate ways they can celebrate key moments in the lives of their parishioners.

**Fundamental Attitudes and Rituals**

Why are rites of passage significant? Rooted in life, the endless cycle of coming and going, birth and death, success and failure are part of nature’s laws. They touch life’s creative energies.

To walk in harmony with life, we must move with the rhythms established by God for nature’s good ordering. The ordering of nature requires us to live according to creation’s laws. Plant, animal, and human harmony and the endless cycle of birth and death manifest these laws. From them, we learn fundamental attitudes concerning life, which root the dynamics inherent in every culture. Thus, for instance, the orientation of a child brought up in a religious environment (Jewish, Muslim, or Christian) differs from that of a child raised with no religious upbringing. United States citizens develop different attitudes from people in other cultures (e.g., Kenya, Borneo, or Japan). People in every culture learn ways of ritualizing their beliefs.

Ritual patterns are vital to human survival. We see them in seasons of the year, plant life, and animal migration patterns. We see them in human celebrations of birth, marriage, old age, and religious rituals.

Human rituals manifest basic attitudes and beliefs. Consider the priority that various cultures put on family life. Some non-Western people living in the United States remark how their commitments to family are deeper than that of their American
neighbors, who may go weeks without speaking to or eating with family members.

Contemporary secular rituals that stress money and affluence reflect functional values. When society secularizes core values, the concurrent rituals and life passages are secularized as well. This happens when we root happiness in material things rather than in love and sacrifice.

A contrast exists between attitudes toward the elderly in Western and non-Western cultures. The latter cultures respect the wisdom of older people. They seek their advice and encourage them to teach children about life’s values. This is clearly perceived in the following ancient African custom:

When a boy is old enough, his grandfather takes him into the forest outside of the village. Together they select a small tree for the grandson and plant it at the edge of the village. It is the child’s responsibility to care for it. As the child grows, the grandfather sits with him under the old man’s special tree. In its shade, he teaches the boy the secrets of life and recounts tribal stories. Here, the boy learns the values that really count, especially commitment to God, family, and tribe. The boy internalizes the meaning of these stories as he grows and cares for his own tree.

When the boy’s tree is mature, he has become a man. Eventually, his grandfather dies, the boy marries, has a family, and one day becomes a grandfather. In turn, he takes his grandson to the forest, selects a tree for the boy, and plants it. Like his grandfather before him, he now sits under his own tree, planted in childhood, and teaches his grandson the mysteries of life that his grandfather taught him. The cycle goes on, as each generation learns life’s wisdom from the elders, sitting under their tree.
This custom reflects the tribe’s respect for elder members. It provides a good sense of a civilization’s direction from its ritual patterns with older people. Contrasted with African rites of passage, some retirement homes reflect our own culture’s disjointed values.

**Culture as Delivery System**
Cultures are delivery systems for core truths people believe. Outsiders do not always understand a culture’s core message, because they do not understand the cultural values depicted or the rituals celebrated. An example of this occurred during a conference of Mexican people in a United States border town.

Over five hundred attended a session on Christian mission and ministry. The formal education of most participants stopped early in life, when they went to work in the fields. They attended the conference, eager to learn about their Catholic faith and how it related to life.

After the speaker concluded, an elderly man approached the stage and spoke to the presenter saying, “You did not give us United States theology. You spoke Mexican theology because you told stories. That’s the way we do theology.” Stories reflect core truths in his culture.

Mexican culture was evident also in an episode that baffled the speaker. During intermission, many women hurriedly left the room. The woman facilitator asked the speaker if he noticed them and what he thought of the exodus. The speaker answered, “I assume they left to attend to their physical needs or other commitments.” She said, “This is not the reason. To understand their action, you must appreciate their culture. The women are close to their families.
At the break, they hurried to the phone to call their families to make sure everything was okay at home and to inform them that they were fine.”

Then the facilitator asked the speaker if he noticed the seventy-five people in the back of the auditorium who talked during his address. He said, “Yes,” but said they were not a distraction. She apologized for not telling him beforehand that catechists were with them, translating his words for those who did not understand English.

The lesson of this episode applies to other cultures. People see life's meaning in light of their cultural norms. What they develop may be hard for others to appreciate. Some of their conclusions may be questionable, but they make sense to them. Today’s teenage culture often reflects a similar dynamic. While adults admire their zeal, energy, and positive contributions, they may not always appreciate a teenager’s music, dress, and lifestyle. Most adolescents offer hope for the future, even though some are misguided. Whatever their stance toward life, it usually makes sense to them.

Culture’s impact applies to a juvenile gang or a religious group’s activities. Gang initiations and various initiation rites indicate in different ways the importance of rites of passage in the cultures that practice them. This applies also to different approaches to freedom in Western and Muslim cultures. The inability to appreciate values present in another culture blocks the communication of core values.

**Changing Cultural Context**

Rites of passage celebrating core issues connect with universal human patterns. Such rites exist, irrespective of the culture. Cultures address birth and death differently. Early Jewish history does not reveal belief in personal immortality. Hence, Hebrew
rites of passage at death did not focus on personal survival in the afterlife, but concentrated on living on through descendants. By the time of the Maccabees, two hundred years before Christ, belief in personal existence in an afterlife began to take hold. When Jesus lived, the Pharisees held this belief, while the Sadducees denied it. Their beliefs affected their rites of passage dealing with death. Christians ritualize their beliefs differently from their Jewish ancestors in faith.

A recent example of change in cultural beliefs, with implications for rites of passage, can be seen the case of marriage and divorce in our country. Not long ago, marriage was the norm and divorce was rare (some states even outlawed it except in rare instances). “No fault” divorce didn’t exist. Today, marriage does not have the same definitive character, largely due to a significant rise in the rate of divorce. Marriage and divorce have taken on a different focus, calling for new ways to ritualize the movement from married to single life.

Pastoral ministers need to remember that some Catholics believe they cannot receive Communion after divorce. Sometimes, for this and other reasons, divorced Catholics drift away from the church. To help them at this difficult time, pastoral ministers need to consider setting up prayerful, pastoral sessions for the divorced. This can include rites of passage, celebrated in faith, to assist the divorced person in his or her continued journey with God and the Catholic community.

Society’s regard for women has changed as well. Before the feminist movement, most girls worked for a while after graduating from high school and then got married. When these women married and began having children, most quit their jobs and worked in the home. This was their normal passage into adulthood. Today, as we all know, many women graduate from college,
begin a career, and then marry. Often, they remain in the workforce even after children come.

Religious rites of passage can shift focus also. Formerly, many Catholic parents believed infants who died before baptism never entered heaven to see God. Consequently, they had their children baptized shortly after birth. Many Catholics no longer hold this belief. They put off baptism for months or years. Something similar has occurred with Mass attendance. In my childhood, we were taught that it was a mortal sin to miss Mass on Sunday without a good reason. Mass was the center of a Catholic’s Sunday. Today, many Catholics do not go to Mass weekly.

Rites of passage, once centering on spiritual realities, sometimes assume a secular focus. Parents, grandparents, and family members with deep faith celebrate baptism as a baby’s entrance into the new life of Christ. Others, not steeped in faith, regard it as a family, rather than a faith, event. For them, it has lost its spiritual meaning, significance, and power.

Stories and Basic Beliefs
The Kateri Native Conference of Canada invited Jim, a parish minister, to give several sessions at their pastoral gathering in Thunder Bay, Ontario. As the time approached, he sought more information about their expectations. The elder who invited Jim said, “Just tell stories.” Since the conference centered on family life, he planned to tell family stories but did not know how to arrange them. His cultural background was not the same as theirs. He asked the elder, “Should I begin with my stories? “No,” she replied. “We will begin with our stories, and then you tell your stories.”

As the conference began, Jim learned that his stories connected with theirs. Hearing their stories and listening to his was never a problem, for, like him, they place high priority on celebrating family and community stories through rites of passage. This conference provided Jim a firsthand understanding of how
native peoples ritualize fundamental beliefs through rites of passage. Past evidence of this is found in

- cave paintings, Egyptian tombs, and sacred Hindu books;
- Chinese art testifying to the need to celebrate life experiences, such as birth or marriage;
- native episodes depicting enemy conquest, spring planting, and fall harvest;
- Hebrew and Christian historical records reinforce the same experiences, as do rituals around the world.

Through the ages people's stories and rituals probed into nature’s mysteries. The cultures they describe vary, but the patterns underlying them are the same, for all deep stories go beyond cultural expression. As we consider the way culture ritualizes fundamental beliefs, we learn more by reflecting on major events in Jesus’ life. In so doing, his response can become a model for us to follow.

**Jesus as Model**

For Jesus and faithful Jews of his time, the Jewish culture served as a delivery system that taught them about God’s covenant with the Chosen People. Here, they learned the basic beliefs and practices of their faith. Jesus observed his Jewish faith faithfully. He followed the teachings of the Law and prophets. He was taught by Mary and Joseph to be a good Jewish boy and to attend the synagogue. There he learned the Torah and underwent the rites of passage prescribed in the Law.

Mary, his mother, must have been very proud when Jesus was circumcised shortly after his birth and then was brought to the Temple for purification as required by the Law of Moses (Luke 2:22). He continued his fidelity to the Law at his Bar Mitzvah and regular synagogue attendance and learned the Jewish ways by his fidelity to Jewish beliefs and practices.
Within the Jewish society, such rituals initiated him into life. As an adult, Jesus challenged the Scribes and Pharisees, not because he questioned the tenets of Judaism, but because their teaching sometimes deviated from the authentic interpretation of the Law. He pointed out how the teachings of the Scribes and Pharisees strayed from God's Law when his disciples ate the leftover grain from the field and he cured a man with a paralyzed hand on the Sabbath (Luke 6:1–5 and Luke 6:6–10).

When Jesus prepared for the Last Supper, he observed the Jewish precepts concerning Passover. The long-standing traditions of his forefathers remained intact as he celebrated this rite of passage with his friends and disciples. During the meal, Jesus took bread and wine, blessed them, changed them into his body and blood, and gave them to his disciples. This is the food of the new Covenant, making present for all time his flesh and blood poured out for humankind on the cross. At the Last Supper, Jesus gave us the Eucharist, the great sacrament of thanksgiving.

This simple act initiated a profound change in the way that his followers celebrated Passover, the great memorial of Judaism. From that moment on, this Jewish feast of freedom took on new meaning in light of Jesus’ death and resurrection. His paschal mystery ushered in a profound change in the beliefs and practices of the first Jewish Christians. Because of Jesus’ paschal mystery, some rites of passage once associated with Judaism changed in Christianity. This was evident as the church no longer required circumcision for Gentile converts and allowed Christians to eat pork and other meat that Jews consider unclean.

Jesus’ life reflected the fundamental attitudes of a faithful Jew who observed Jewish beliefs and practices. After his resurrection, early Christians rooted Jesus’ teachings into the soil of Judaism and developed appropriate rites of passage consistent with his message.
Faith Formation

Developing fundamental attitudes consistent with faith happens in a cultural context. This begins at home and is affected by one’s background and social context. The latter is especially significant in faith growth. Faith never develops in a vacuum but is influenced by family, friends, and social environment.

Generations ago, the church flourished in quasi-isolation from secular society. The latter’s relativistic and individualistic norms were not as strong as today. Fewer things competed for people’s time and talents. In this context, faith growth took a different focus than it does now. Today, for example, it’s difficult to get the whole family together, not to mention gathering them to attend Mass as a family, as reflected in Rebecca’s story.

When Rebecca began parish ministry as a director of religious education almost forty years ago, many families attended Sunday Mass together. She remembers two families in particular. Both sat in the front pews. One had eight children, the other six. They were never late. How many families come together to Mass on Sundays today? Sunday morning work, soccer, baseball, and other pressures make this difficult. How can a family grow in faith and appreciate the value of faith traditions if it places little priority on Sunday Mass, other Catholic traditions, and prayer?

Fundamental attitudes and rituals influence faith. Regardless of our responsibilities, regular patterns of prayer and religious celebration are necessary for spiritual growth. Few religious rites of passage affect us outside of those we choose for ourselves. Hence, it falls on us to develop a prayer life that moves us closer to God.
Reflecting more deeply in light of the story of the old apple tree, we review now the chief elements that this chapter has considered. They can be summarized as follows:

- The story of the old apple tree is lived by every creature on this earth—plants, animals, and humans. All are engulfed by the cycle of birth and death, for everything is in transition; nothing stands still.

- All life serves as a meditation on our personal lives. The transitions occurring in nature remind us that we change at key life moments. As humans, we can know these changes, face them, and become better persons. Such transition times are opportunities for new awareness and growth.

- Each transition invites us to probe life’s mysteries and see how God penetrates life’s veil to disclose new insights into who we are and why we are here.

- Throughout history, civilizations have marked transitional times with rites of passage.

- Important life transitions, like birth, marriage, sickness, healing, death, burial, beginning an important journey, entering into war, and making peace are more than mere events. They must be ritualized or celebrated to recognize their full significance.

- Difference exists between the actual transition time, happening, or event (birth or death), and its ritualization or celebration through a rite of passage (baptism or a funeral rite).

- The wisdom gleaned from such ritualization tells us that celebrating events like birth, marriage, or other transition times through rites of passage completes them by taking
them beyond mere events and joining them to a deeper source of sacred power coming from God and mediated by a community.

- Ritual manifestations, like holding a sick person's hand or giving a hug to a hurting person, connect with the tensions experienced by sick or grieving parties.

- To walk in harmony with life, we move with the rhythms established by God for nature's good ordering.

- Outsiders do not always understand a culture's core message, because they do not understand the cultural values depicted or the rituals celebrated. When cultural beliefs shift, rites of passage also change.

- Jesus’ life reflected the fundamental attitudes of a faithful Jew who observed Jewish beliefs and practices. After his death, early Christians rooted Jesus’ teachings into the soil of Judaism and developed appropriate rites of passage consistent with his message.

- Developing fundamental attitudes consistent with faith happens in a cultural context. This begins at home and is affected by one's background and social context. The latter is especially significant in faith growth.

As a group, talk about this chapter, using these questions.

- What does the story of the tree and the dead branches tell us about transition times that we experience? What value is there in connecting such natural events with human experiences?

- To what degree do people today appreciate various transition times in their lives? How many people ritualize them through rites of passage and see them as opportunities for faith growth?
Discuss the significance of ritual patterns. What do our ritual patterns tell us about life in general and faith in particular?

Why is *story* valuable in probing into the ways that God deals with us? What do our stories tell us about ourselves?

Cultures are delivery systems for the core truths that people believe and celebrate. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Explain its significance.

How do rites of passage connect with the Catholic faith? How do we liturgically celebrate various rites of passage?

Pick out several transition times described in this chapter and consider developing parish and family rites of passage surrounding them. What would you include and why?

Chapter Two examines the impact of culture and community on transition times and rites of passage. It follows naturally from the considerations of this chapter.