

# *Searching for Spirituality*

## STUDY GUIDE

### VHS #5040

## **Introduction**

It is trite to say that most of us live our lives with constant pressures and complexities that seem totally at odds with what we think of as a spiritual life. Trite, but true. We are too busy with the real world--marriage, careers, children, business--to deal adequately with the spiritual questions.

But, as this series points out, it is the spiritual questions that make the difference in the way we live in the real world. So, the busier and more harried we are, the more we need to find an approach to spiritual living. And we need it in the middle of the very activity-filled life that seems to make a spiritual life difficult if not possible.

This video series helps to provide just the approach we need. Featuring Joan Chittister, of the Order of Saint Benedict, these videos act forth a timeless view of spirituality derived from the monastic movement of the fourth century. In her own words: "There are those who went sixteen, seventeen hundred years before us, with the very same questions we have. We call them the desert monastics. We dismiss them from an earlier, less pressured period. But as a matter of fact, that's not accurate. They lived at a time of social chaos as well as a crucial time in the development of Christianity." *Note: Constantine the Great won the decisive battle leading to the reuniting of the Roman Empire in 312. He believed that Christ intervened to make his victory possible. This marked the end of the persecution of Christians by Rome and the beginning of a very different chapter in the life of the Christian Church. It was also the time of Athanasius (300-37) and Augustine (354-430), both brilliant thinkers who strongly influenced Christian theology for all time, both of whom were powerful bishops in North Africa. It was the time of the great theological debate over the eternal divinity of Christ known as the Arian controversy.*

Joan continues, "They don't know who they are and they don't know what's going on and they don't know how to get themselves through it. So they retired to the desert, not to escape the world, but to wrestle with the questions of the world and with the demonic urges both within them and outside of them. The seeker in those days would say 'Father, give me a word.'"

This series explores ten of those words, giving us the opportunity to ask, "Do they have meaning for us?"

Joan points out that this tradition teaches "spirituality is concerned with how to live a full life, not an empty one. Real spirituality is life illumined by a compelling search for wholeness it is contemplation in the eye of chaos. It is life lived to the full."

“Spirituality is about coming to consciousness of the sacred. It is in that consciousness that perspective comes, that peace comes. It is in that consciousness that a person comes to wholeness.

“Abba Sisoës said, ‘Seek God and not where God lives.’ We live and breathe, grow and develop in the womb of God. And yet we seek God elsewhere...in defined places, on specific days, and with special ceremonies. But the life that is full of light knows God is not over there, God is here.”

## **About the Videos**

This series is based on Joan Chittister’s book, *The Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light*. The production team, working with Joan, selected ten key attributes of a Christian spiritual life and organized them in a five-session study. Then, in the studio, Joan, along with six other seekers, explored in depth the implications of these attributes. Each program in the series deals with two of the attributes. The purpose of the series is to provide some suggestions about a Christian spirituality as basis for discussion.

## **About the Study Guide**

This guide is arranged so that you can easily copy parts of it to use as handouts:

### For Handing Out Before Viewing

1. On page 4 is a biographical sketch of the leader in this series, Joan Chittister. Those in your group not familiar with her and her work might like to have some information in advance.
2. On page 5 is a glossary of terms used in the series.
3. An overview, starting on page 6 provides a brief preview of each program for those who might like to read or reflect on the ideas and the scripture before viewing the video.

### For Handing Out After Viewing

1. Pages 8-17 contain material to aid discussion. Each page provides an outline of a program to help viewers recall the main points made by Joan and to remind them of who said what in the discussion that follows (pages 18-19).

### About Using the Videos

These videos can be used by groups by individuals. If you are using the series with a group, the following suggestions may help.

1. Preview each video before showing it.
2. Try out the VCR and the TV to be sure they’re working.
3. Cue up the tape so that the UMCCom logo appears when you press the “Play” button.

### Possible Procedure for the Sessions

1. View the video in its entirety. Discuss. The program outlines that begin on page 12 will help viewers recall Joan's main points and the flow of the discussion.
2. Or, you may choose to view each program in two sections, stopping to discuss the first before moving on to view and discuss the second. Each program treats two aspects of spiritual life. For instance, Program one, "Seeing God in Others," contains two sections: (1) "Openness" and (2) "Love of the Stranger." The overview on pages 10-11 of this guide will make these topics clear for each program. This approach may require more time than viewing and discussing each program as a whole. Some groups may not want to consider expanding the series to 10 sessions.
3. The questions for discussion are suggestions only. Use them if they're helpful but don't feel that you have to interrupt a lively and productive discussion to get in all the questions.

#### Suggestions to Aid Discussion

1. Encourage the group to view actively. For example, they might note questions that occur to them while viewing or note points at which they strongly agree or disagree.
2. During discussions, don't be alarmed if there are pauses. Wait a few seconds before saying something to stimulate a response or asking another question.
3. Look for ways to include less talkative members, but remember that people should be allowed to participate at a level that is comfortable for them.

## About the Leader

Joan Chittister (Order of St. Benedict) is widely known for her penetrating wisdom and limitless compassion. She is executive director of Benetvision: A Resource and Research Center for Contemporary Spirituality. She is a social psychologist, communications theorist and has taught on all educational levels.

A member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, she is a widely published author and noted national and international lecturer. Her books include *A passion for Life: Fragments of the Face of God* and *There is a Season*, both of which received the First Place Book Award from the Catholic Press Association. Her most recent publications are *In Search of Belief* and *The Illuminated Life*, the latter of which inspired this series.

She attended the Fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing as a media representative for the *National Catholic Reporter* and is a regular columnist for that paper.

She holds a doctorate in speech communication theory from Penn State University and has been recognized by universities and national organizations for her work for justice, peace and equality for women in the church and society. She is an elected fellow of St. Edmund's College, Cambridge University.

## Glossary

Abba – Aramaic words for “Father.” “Papa” is another form of the word.

Amma – Feminine of Abba

Desert Fathers – Christians of the third and fourth centuries who retreated to the Egyptian desert to live more holy lives. An example is Anthony, who, in the middle of the third century sold all that he had, gave the money to the poor and went to live in the wilderness. Gradually others joined him and he organized them into a community.

Monasticism – The word comes from Latin and Greek and means “to live alone.” It typically refers to a religious establishment where monks live together in a simple lifestyle, subjecting themselves to a rigorous discipline of prayer, Bible reading, study, work and service. In Christianity, the movement appears to have begun in North Africa in the third and fourth centuries. Pachomius (292-346) has been called the originator of organized monastic life. He established a monastery in Egypt that housed as many as 3,000 monks. Monasticism developed more slowly in Western Europe. Martin of Tours (316-400), a soldier converted to the Christian faith and to the life of a monk, because one of the more successful leaders of the monastic movement in Gaul. Consecrated Bishop of Tours because of his holiness, he was mentor to the monk who later evangelized the Picts and Celts in Scotland and Ireland.

Protestant Christianity in general hasn’t been as aware of nor as sympathetic to the insights of the early monastics as has Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. But the practice of a disciplined spiritual life has been a significant part of Christianity from its beginnings. Even before the birth of Christianity, John the Baptist apparently lived an ascetic life in the desert. The Essenes were a kind of monastic Jewish sect that lived apart in a community near the Dead Sea. Jesus is reported to have gone into the wilderness for prayer and meditation after his baptism by John and before beginning his ministry. And throughout his ministry he withdrew from time to time for prayer and meditation.

Benedict of Nursia (480-543) – An Italian monk, founder of the famous monastery at Monte Cassino between Rome and Naples. He was the author of “The Rule of Benedict,” the most influential of all manuals for the conduct of life for monks living in community. The Benedict Order is still a large, vital, and influential order in the Roman Catholic Church.

Lectio - Latin, the act of reading. It means thoughtful, reflections reading- immersion in the lesson of scripture and “other holy books.” It is the practice of reading small passages daily and reflecting deeply on the meaning for me, here and now.

# An Overview of the Programs

## Searching for Spirituality

### 1. **Seeing God in Others**

#### **Openness**

*Now that you are willing to seek out the other, I'll tell you what the words mean.-  
Angel*

#### **Love of the Stranger**

*I must pray that my heart be pure toward them rather than they be changed  
because of me.- Amma Sarah*

Bible References: John 20:11-16; Luke 24:13-31; Matt 25:31-46

### 2. **Finding God in Daily Life**

#### **Dailyness**

*Every single day he made a fresh beginning. – Abba Poemen*

#### **Work**

*In these days, many take their rest before God gives it to them. - Abba Theodore*

Bible References: Genesis 2:15; Psalms 144:15

### 3. **Understanding Others as God Understands Us**

#### **Compassion**

*If I saw a brother sleeping (during sacred office )I would put his head on my  
knees and let him sleep.- Abba Poemen*

#### **Community**

*Since I have been living with others, the sun has never gone down seeing me  
angry.*

*-Abba John*

Bible references: 1 Corinthians 12:4-31

### 4. **Falling Into the Presence of God**

#### **Prayer**

*As water wears away rocks, prayer wears away hardness of heart. – Abba  
Poemen*

#### **Lectio, the Art of Holy Reading**

*Indeed, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said, “I do not know.” – Abba  
Poemen*

Bible References: Luke 18:9-14; Matt. 26:36-46; Mark 15:33-34; I Corinthians  
13:4

## **5. Receiving Others Kindly**

### **Humility**

*A dog is better than I am for he loves like I do, but a dog never judges.* – Abba Xanthius

### **Justice**

*Just as a lamp lights up a dark room, so the fear of God, when it penetrates the heart, illuminates, teaching all the virtues and commandments of God.* – Abba James

Bible References: Psalms 22:6; Micah 6:8; Luke 19:41-46; John 11:33; Matt20:1-16; Jonah 3:4-4:11

# 1. Seeing God in Others

## Openness

### Joan's Main Points

- Major insight in history of spirituality is that a sincere search for God leads us right back to life.
- If I'm not open to the wisdom of the world, I'm not open to the call of God.
- A spirituality disciple fasted for 70 weeks...angel said "When you sought meaning for yourself alone, there was nothing there. But now that they are willing to seek out the other, I'll tell you what the words mean.
- Until we find the word of God all around us, maybe the quest hasn't even begun.
- The Rule of Benedict instructs the porter (gatekeeper) to thank God for the stranger or the pilgrim.

### The Conversation

**Mary Katherine:** Mine came in the midst of radical closed-ness. (Story of woman being abusive to her child.)

**Joan:** Why did you say "May I help you?" when you were thinking, "Don't do that"?

**Mary Katherine:** The grace of God

**Joan:** Don't have real openness unless we learn from what we disapprove.

**Sonnye:** My issue of openness deals with my early homophobia. (Story of gay friend.)

**Joan:** What is openness?

**Lety:** Trying put aside biases, stereotypes, fears

**Robert:** Openness is also an act—opening the door or saying "May I help you?"

**Sonnye:** A willingness to let some of my stuff get out.

**Lety:** If you let stuff go, it makes room for something new that you weren't open to before.

**Sonnye:** One reason I moved to openness is I want people to be open with me.

**Joan:** Real conversation experience on openness. Amma Anna says I must pray that my heart be pure toward them rather than they be changed because of me. Had to be able to say: "Here is a homosexual, Communist, criminal. I must learn."

**Monica:** I think openness is very counter-culture. My education teaches me how to win arguments, not understand others.

**Robert:** Person I grew up with: he's worried about being right and I'm worried about being God's.

**Joan:** If the ultimate spiritual act is converting somebody else, are you open?

**Monica:** We draw lines to say who's in, who's out.

**Lety:** Some people think conviction goes hand in hand with intolerance.

**Joan:** Is openness tolerance?

**Sonnye:** If you're not in a good spot, openness really does leave you shaky.

## Love of the Stranger

### Joan's Main Points

- Talk about love of stranger
- The Greek word is xenophilia—love of that which is unlike me. Now what's going to happen to our faith?

**The Conversation**

**Vernon:** I think it makes us stronger. Story of new members starting a prison ministry.  
(Seven normal human beings walked in and blessed us.)

**Joan:** What about the one who is truly the other, your enemy?

**Monica:** Story of her rape and friend who helped her heal.

**Joan:** Wasn't he really the other? A man.

**Monica:** He made it so I couldn't hate all men.

**Joan:** We teach openness and we teach charity but hardly ever use language "to love the stranger," the one who can really teach us something new about ourselves.

## 2. Finding God in Daily Life

### Dailyness

#### Joan's Main Point's

- We don't memorize prayers, hymns, scriptures. Nor do we do much with traditional religious practices.
- The desert monastics had work and schedules.
- They believed that mindless work frees the soul for God.
- "Every day he made a new beginning."

#### The Conversation

**Joan:** What's your experience with routine?

**Vernon:** Need a discipline.

**Monica:** Easier to be physically disciplined than spiritually...routine makes me do it when I don't feel it.

**Robert:** Nothing in our culture supports [spiritual discipline].

**Joan:** Our novice mistress trained us to say a verse of the Psalms as we mopped the floor.

**Robert:** Friend who says, "Pray the words of the ancient prayer and listen for the prayer of God that rises in your heart."

**Joan:** Thirty years later, it's a bad day and I want to say so and what I hear is "Happy the heritage that falls to me."

**Mary Katherine:** Get caught in my spiritual disciple thinking it has to be extraordinary.

**Monica:** "I'll pray when I feel like it," is how I treat my relationship with God but my roommate, you're gonna be here whether I feel like it or not

**Lety:** "Pray when you don't feel like it."

**Joan:** Most of us grew up in more routines than we realize. Sunday church, Wednesday night Bible study, Lent, etc.

**Sonnye:** But it was dictated by somebody else. I ran away from the practices because they didn't seem to change anything. But now I do it when I'm driving, or stop on the side of the road. But it's my moment.

**Joan:** Vending machines God. We seem to think if we make the disciplines difficult, they're better and then people don't do them.

**Robert:** What it costs is time.

### Work

#### Joan's Main Point

- Work and why we do it may say something profound about our spiritual disciplines.
- Fine art of getting up and doing it everyday is itself a spiritual discipline
- We're commanded to till the garden.
- [Work] has nothing to do with sin.
- Our responsibility is to finish the creation that God started.

#### The Conversation

**Monica:** Sometimes I can find God in my work but sometimes I can't.

**Sonnye:** So much of my work is against what I think God wants me to be about.

**Mary Katherine:** We make work the measure of our worth. Idolatry.

**Joan:** What's happened to notion of finishing creation?

**Sonnye:** Story of black restaurant doorkeeper who smiled and prayed for customers who looked down on him. Better understanding of what it means to be connected to people I don't like.

**Joan:** Dailyness – Commitment not to run from responsibilities – is its own kind of spirituality.

- Work relates us to the rest of the world.
- The awareness that it is my contribution to the ongoing of creation may be a missing dimension in contemporary spirituality.
- Not romantic but maybe what makes creation in the end go 'round

### 3. Understanding Others as God Understands Us Compassion

#### Joan's Main Points

- Disciple says, "When a brother goes to sleep at prayers, should I pinch him to keep him awake?" Abba Poemen says, "I would put his head on my knees so he can rest."
- The rule says we should say prayers awake. Abba says, "Let him sleep." What's going on?
- What about the place of perfection in spiritual life?

#### The Conversation

**Lety:** Is there a spirituality of imperfection?

**Joan:** I have a notion it's called compassion.

**Monica:** Story of hurtful thing she was ashamed of and confessed to a friend who said, "So? You're human."

**Mary Katherine:** Resist word "perfection" "Wholeness" maybe.

**Joan:** Can you think of a time you did not have perfection but did have wholeness?

**Robert:** Story of Wayne who called when he was in trouble because he knew I had been broken.

**Joan:** Imperfection is the only grace you have. It's what relates you to the human race and binds you to God.

**Robert:** Favorite moment in the mass is when they break the bread.

**Joan:** If you're perfect, what claim do you have on God?

**Monica:** You don't need God if you're perfect.

**Joan:** I get e-mail from a man-clergy-suffering deeply. I wrote back, "You have never been closer to God."

**Sonnye:** It has to take place with others.

**Mary Katherine:** In the contest of relationship, wholeness is possible because of brokenness.

#### Community

#### Joan's Main Points

- When we talk about growing into God, we're talking about growing into wholeness.
- It only happens with other people.
- Abba John: "Since I have lived in community, the sun has never gone down seeing me angry."
- What greater wholeness is there than to know my brokenness?

#### The Conversation

**Robert:** "Wholeness" does not imply perfection. It implies "all-ness" and all includes my imperfection.

**Sonnye:** In community I see where I have contributed to the brokenness of others.

**Joan:** I didn't know racism until I {experienced} sexism.

**Sonnye:** And I couldn't deal with sexism because I might have thought you didn't want to deal with your racism.

**Joan:** I came to wholeness because I could understand exclusion. And then I understand racism.

**Sonnye:** I'm still in repentance.

**Joan:** Without community, is there compassion?

**Sonnye:** Only the community can call me into it.

**Robert:** You can get eaten alive demonstrating you are a sinner in a church crowd sometimes.

**Joan:** Religion sets moral standards. But when it is more intent on spiritual arithmetic than on building a community of compassion, you have people leaving the church to find spiritual.

**Monica:** I left the church I was at because I found out compassion.

**Mary Katherine:** Learned a lot about community trying to minister to a child molester.

**Joan:** It's whether or not the people who dealt with that broken person become more whole themselves.

**Robert:** "Blessed be God" for bringing a stranger.

**Joan:** There's no compassion without community and no community without compassion.

- It's in community that we're taught who we are, and are guided to be more.

## 4. Falling Into the Presence of God Prayer

### Joan's Main Points

- Probably the oldest issue in the history of spiritual life is the nature of prayer.
- Abba Poemen said: As water wears away hard rock, so prayer wears away the hardness of heart and gives us fear (awe) of God.
- Most of us were raised to pray to a God out there.
- If God is not up there, the spirit is right there; God is within me, showing me my life in a more spiritual way.

### The Conversation

**Lety:** More and more in the practice of making up my own prayer.

**Sonnye:** Remember those who spent first five minutes praising God, the next five humbling themselves, and the last 30 telling God what to do.

**Monica:** When I was raped, I stopped praying.

**Mary Katherine:** Stand with the baby and imagine the light.

**Vernon:** Only when I could talk to God in Vernon's voice that I learned what prayer is.

**Joan:** People are not on the verge of a real prayer life until Santa Clause-God has disappeared and the revelation comes that God has already given us what we need to get through life

**Robert:** No longer had to convince God. Could hold an image in my mind of a person in trouble.

**Joan:** What is the purpose of prayer then?

**Vernon:** God have mercy on me a sinner.

**Robert:** I've come to see prayer as a way of coming to attention for the presence of God in the world.

**Sonnye:** I want to hear what God is saying to me.

**Monica:** We expect you to change the situation toward righteousness and justice.

**Joan:** How do we stretch ourselves beyond the shopping list mentality? I argue that the function of prayer is to put on the mind of God.

### Lectio

### Joan's Main Points

- Abba Poemen gives a scripture and asks disciples "What does this mean?" Abba Joseph says, "I do not know." Abba Poemen says, "You see. Abba Joseph knows the way."
- At every moment of our lives that text will call something different out of us.

### The Conversation

**Robert:** Prayer is a mystery and there are different windows.

**Joan:** The Benedictine practice of thoughtful reflective reading of scripture is a wrestling with God that does change me. Can you name one scripture whose meaning for you has changed?

**Robert:** can you not stay with me one hour? .... I was gonna have a crisis moment when I would have to declare who I was. I've come to see it as, "Why can't you get up early and spend an hour with me?"

**Joan:** Pharisee and publican: Began to see the publican as myself, caught in a sinful system.

**Mary Katherine:** "Love is Patient."

**Monica:** "Why hast thou forsaken me?"

**Joan:** Is prayer possible without reading scriptures?

**Mary Katherine:** Context is vital to prayer, but could be community or tradition.

**Joan:** Monastics believed you had to have a scriptural context – the story of God's way with us through time.

**Monica:** Part of what prayer does, it connects us.

**Joan:** Is recognizing God's handiwork the fullness of prayer? Why did Jesus teach them parables? Maybe so we'd wrestle with them and apply them to our lives. Prayer is the ground of our spiritual life. It softens our heart.

## 5. Receiving Others Kindly

### Humility

#### Joan's Main Points

- In a culture obsessed with being number one, the tradition of humility is not always comfortable
- The desert fathers said, "A dog is better than I, for a dog loves like I do, but the dog never judges."
- Humility is at the heart of spiritual traditions in all the great religions.

#### The Conversation

**Mary Katherine:** I really struggle with this with my 5-year-old son.

**Sonnye:** How do you teach that humility is not weakness?

**Joan:** A note in each pocket: "I am a worm," and "For me the universe was made."

**Monica:** A real tight rope because of self-esteem.

**Joan:** Humility means different things to different people.

**Sonnye:** ...how I have humiliated others.

**Joan:** Feminism is recognizing the presence of God in yourself as a woman.

**Vernon:** I had to only have God's agenda.

**Joan:** Humility relates us to other people.

**Monica:** My pastor uses the term, "senior servant."

**Joan:** Why do you serve someone?

**Mary Katherine:** "God forgive us for the bread we offer."

### Justice

#### Joan's Main Points

- Saint Vincent de Paul said, "The poor will never thank you."
- We serve not those who need service but who deserve it because they are of God.
- It's the revolution of humility.
- The tradition links humility and justice.
- Humility shows me that I don't have the right to the best of everything, and I must walk quietly in the world.
- I must do the work of justice because God's justice has been violent.

#### The Conversation

**Sonnye:** Have to look at what we have done to people.

**Vernon:** "Love justice and walk humbly with your God."

**Sonnye:** "Jesus wept." I try to look at where Jesus is weeping this day.

**Joan:** But some will say a spiritual person must accept the will of God. Isn't there something [prideful] about not accepting the social situation?

**Sonnye:** A wife being beaten is not the will of God.

**Monica:** Jesus driving out the moneychangers.

**Mary Katherine:** How do you do it with humility?

**Joan:** We need all the uppity women we can get.

**Robert:** Mercy colors the tension between justice and humility.

**Monica:** Grace is getting something you don't deserve.

**Vernon:** I don't want justice. I want mercy.

**Joan:** I don't want Vernon's justice. But I'll take God's justice. I must give mercy because my justice is tainted.

**Monica:** Somehow at the end of the day, we all get the same thing.

**Joan:** Jonah doesn't want Nineveh forgiven. God says, "I am mercy beyond mercy."

**Sonnye:** Justice is trying to keep everybody on balance.

**Joan:** When we find God, we find the other. When we respect the other, we find another piece of God.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

### 1. Seeing God in Others

1. What in this program was most meaningful?
2. “If I’m not open to the wisdom of the world, I’m not open to the call of God.” Does this mean even to theories we disagree with?
3. Can we say, “Here is a homosexual person, I must learn”? What might we learn?
4. Does the concept of being open come into conflict with Jesus’ command to go into all the world?
5. How might the stranger teach us something new about ourselves?
6. Are we thankful when someone we don’t want to talk to knocks on the door?

### 2. Finding God in Daily Life

1. What in this program is most meaningful for you? What is most puzzling?
2. Undoing work just so you can do it again sounds like busy work. Can it have value?
3. What mindless work do you have? Does it free your soul for God?
4. What spiritual routines did you grow up with? List them.
5. Is something in your work against what you think God wants you to be about?
6. How does your work contribute to the completion of creation?

### 3. Understanding Others as God Understands Us

1. What do you want done if you fall asleep in church?
2. Talk about the difference between perfection and wholeness.
3. Imperfection...relates you to the human race and binds you to God.” Talk about it.
4. Have you encountered “spiritual arithmetic”?
5. “Wholeness is possible because of brokenness.
6. Do you agree there is no compassion without community?
7. What is community? What do these people think it is?

### 4. Falling Into the Presence of God

1. What do you think is the most important thing said in this program?
2. If you broke your leg, what would be your prayer? Really?
3. Monica says she stopped praying after she was raped. Was she angry with God? Do you blame her? Was God responsible?
4. Talk about how your image of God influences you prayer.
5. If the function of prayer is “to put on the mind of God,” what would that mean to you?
6. Does reading the Bible change you? Tell stories.

### 5. Receiving Others Kindly

1. What did you find most helpful?
2. Do you define humility differently after viewing this program?

3. When you do something to serve the poor, do you expect to receive thanks?
4. Talk about ways in which God's justice has been violated.
5. "Somehow at the end of the day, we all get the same thing." Could that be a restatement of what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God? What else might the parable mean?
6. If everybody—in the world—had "a proper piece of life," how would your life change? Or would it? Would that be God's justice?