

W H I T E P A P E R

Sacred Noticing

*A Contemplative Practice in the Christian Tradition:
Catechetical Connections for the Contemporary Church*

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines how Sacred Noticing—a contemporary contemplative practice developed by Michael J. Cunningham, OFS, D.Min.—integrates with the core themes of Christian catechesis and biblical spirituality. Drawing upon the author’s own research and teaching, and supported by direct quotation from the accompanying book, this paper demonstrates that Sacred Noticing is not an innovation imposed upon Christian faith, but an accessible synthesis of deep catechetical themes: the Great Commandment, the Beatitudes, the Fruits and Gifts of the Holy Spirit, sanctification, and the Imago Dei. A concluding section addresses a gap frequently noted in contemporary Christian formation: the absence of practices that bridge interior transformation with embodied, daily life. Written for pastors, spiritual directors, lay educators, and retreat leaders across Christian traditions, this paper offers theological grounding for formation leaders across the breadth of the Christian tradition.

I. Introduction: The Practice Is New. The Components Are Not.

Across the Christian tradition—Catholic and Protestant, contemplative and evangelical, liturgical and charismatic—there is a growing hunger for practices that carry faith from Sunday morning into the texture of ordinary life. People want to love God not only in designated moments of

prayer but in the difficult conversation, the unguarded morning, the moment before a reactive word escapes. They want to be formed, not just informed.

Sacred Noticing answers this hunger. Sacred Noticing is a three-movement contemplative practice rooted in centuries of Christian tradition, developed through decades of contemplative practice, retreat leadership, and teaching within the Franciscan and Centering Prayer traditions. Its core rhythm is:

NOTICE · PAUSE · RESPOND

Each movement carries theological depth. Together they form what this paper describes as a 'relational disposition'—not a technique to be mastered but a way of being present to God, self, and neighbor in the ordinary moments of every day. Crucially, these three movements are not sequential steps to be performed in linear order; they function together as one flowing practice—a single contemplative act that becomes, over time, a habitual way of inhabiting all of life.

“Sacred Noticing is not merely a prayer form or meditation method—it is spiritual awareness in action. This distinction matters profoundly. A technique can be applied mechanically, turned on and off, confined to certain times and places. A relational disposition, a way of being, permeates all of life.” — The Practice of Sacred Noticing

This paper traces the catechetical connections between Sacred Noticing and the core themes of biblical Christianity. Its purpose is specifically theological: to locate the practice within its contemplative and catechetical inheritance, and to demonstrate to formation leaders where it connects to existing frameworks of Christian teaching. The full description of the practice itself—how to begin, how to deepen, how to apply it to the particular circumstances of a life—is the work of the accompanying book.

II. What Is Sacred Noticing?

The Three Movements

Sacred Noticing is a complete contemplative method for transforming what this paper calls the 'spiritual footprint'—the lasting presence we leave in every encounter. The practice unfolds through three integrated movements.

Notice

The first movement cultivates a quality of conscious, non-judgmental attention to the present moment—what the tradition calls *prosoche*, or attentiveness of the heart¹. The practitioner learns to notice the inner landscape (emotions, assumptions, reactive impulses) and the outer situation without immediate categorization or judgment. This draws on the Celtic Christian understanding of 'thin places'—moments where the veil between the sacred and the ordinary becomes transparent.

Jesus himself commends this quality of attention: "Consider the lilies of the field" (Matthew 6:28)—an invitation not to anxious planning but to open, curious seeing. This is what Sacred Noticing trains as a daily habitus². See also Psalm 46:10 ("*Be still, and know that I am God*") and 1 Kings 19:12, where Elijah encounters God not in wind or fire but in the 'still small voice'—a sound that can only be heard when the noise of reactivity subsides.

Pause

The second movement creates what the practice calls 'sacred space'—an intentional gap between stimulus and response. Drawing on the Centering Prayer tradition's emphasis on interior receptivity, the Pause is a moment of relinquishment: releasing the automatic, reactive patterns that would otherwise govern a response, and creating interior openness to wisdom, grace, and the Holy Spirit.

¹ *Prosochē* (Greek: προσοχή): A classical Greek term meaning attentiveness or heedfulness, adopted by the early Desert Fathers and Mothers as a central practice of interior watchfulness. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995), traces how *prosochē* functioned as the foundation of ancient spiritual practice—the perpetual, vigilant attention of the mind to itself and to the present moment. In the Christian tradition it becomes the precondition of compunction, discernment, and contemplative prayer.

² *Habitus* (Latin): A stable, acquired disposition of the soul that inclines a person toward characteristic patterns of perception, judgment, and action. Thomas Aquinas develops the concept extensively (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, qq. 49–54): virtues are habitus that orient the person toward their proper end. Sacred Noticing aims at cultivating a contemplative habitus—not a set of techniques but a formed disposition of attentive, receptive, wise engagement that becomes, over time, a second nature.

Paul's counsel in Philippians 4:6–7—*"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds"*—describes precisely what happens in the Pause: a relinquishing of anxious control and an opening to divine peace.

Respond

The third movement translates contemplative awareness into 'heart-centered, wise action.' It is not merely a calmer version of what the practitioner would have done automatically—it is a genuinely different quality of action, oriented toward the genuine good of the whole situation.

"The practice does not ask you to set aside special time for contemplation separate from daily life. Instead, Sacred Noticing sanctifies ordinary moments, transforming routine activities into opportunities for sacred encounter. Morning coffee becomes a contemplative practice. Walking to your car becomes a moving meditation. Difficult conversations become thin places where wisdom can break through." — The Practice of Sacred Noticing

Ephesians 4:15 captures the goal of the Respond movement: *"speaking the truth in love"*—a conjunction that requires both wisdom (knowing the truth of the situation) and the interior freedom to communicate it lovingly rather than reactively. See also James 1:19: *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."*

The Contemplative Lineage

The lineage from which Sacred Noticing draws is made explicit here, and equally clear is that this is a distinct synthesis—not a blend of these practices:

- **Franciscan Spirituality:** Recognition of the sacred in all creation; Francis of Assisi's radical attentiveness to God's presence in every creature and moment
- **Celtic Christianity:** The theology of 'thin places' where heaven and earth intersect; the sacredness of ordinary, bodily, earthly life. As used here, this draws on the early medieval Christian tradition of Ireland and Scotland—the monasticism of Columba, Brigid, and the Lindisfarne community³—rather than on later popular appropriations of the term
- **Centering Prayer:** Creating interior space for divine presence; extending that receptivity into daily life

³ On the scholarly grounding of this tradition: John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (HarperCollins, 1997) is the most widely read contemporary retrieval of Celtic spiritual theology, particularly its understanding of the soul's intimacy with the natural world and the nearness of God in ordinary life. For historical scholarship, see Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World, and God in Early Irish Writings* (Continuum, 2000), and Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, *The Mountain Behind the Mountain: Aspects of the Celtic Tradition* (T&T Clark, 1993). The 'thin places' concept is deeply rooted in early Irish and Scottish Christian monasticism: Columba, Brigid, and the Lindisfarne community understood certain locations—and certain moments of encounter—as places where the boundary between the visible and invisible world becomes transparent, a conviction Sacred Noticing extends from geography to the whole of ordinary life.

- Lectio Divina: Applied by Sacred Noticing not only to Scripture but to all of life as a text to be read contemplatively
- The Desert Tradition: Insights about resistance, inner observation, and the spiritual importance of not being ruled by reactive impulses

As this paper's title states: 'The practice is new. The components are not.'

III. The Great Commandment: Sacred Noticing as Embodied Love

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these. — Mark 12:30–31 (NIV)

The Great Commandment is, for Jesus, the interpretive center of the entire moral and spiritual life. Everything else hangs on it. Yet for most Christians, it functions more as an aspiration than a practice. We affirm that love is the goal; we are less clear about how to embody it in the actual texture of daily encounters.

The theological relationship between Sacred Noticing and the Great Commandment is best understood through a clarifying distinction: the Commandment is the what—the goal toward which Christian life is oriented. Sacred Noticing provides the how—the practical, embodied means by which that goal is pursued moment by moment.

Loving God Through Presence (Notice)

The Notice movement aligns directly with loving God with all your mind. Franciscan spirituality teaches that God is present in all creation, including the ordinary, messy, and mundane moments of daily life. To cultivate genuine attentiveness to what is actually present—rather than operating on autopilot, projection, or fear—is to practice a form of love for the God who inhabits all moments.

Romans 1:20 affirms that *"since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities... have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made."* The Notice movement trains the practitioner to actually see what has always been there. The contemplative tradition has consistently taught that distracted, reactive living is not spiritually neutral; it is a form of inattentiveness to the presence of God.

Creating Space for Grace (Pause)

The Pause addresses what Christian theology has long identified as one of the central challenges of moral life: the gap between knowing what is right and actually doing it. Paul articulates this in Romans 7:19—*“For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”* The problem is not a lack of knowledge but the power of reactive, automatic, and wounded patterns. The Pause creates sacred space between trigger and response—the moment where the practitioner moves from being governed by fear and habit to being available to God's wisdom.

Loving Neighbor Through Wise Action (Respond)

The Respond movement addresses the second half of the Commandment directly. Central to this paper is the concept of the 'spiritual footprint'—the quality of presence one leaves behind in every interaction.

“Your spiritual footprint doesn't end with the immediate people you touch. Those people carry your influence on others, who carry it further still. The ripples keep spreading in ways you'll never see or measure. That one moment of genuine presence, that single choice to respond from love rather than fear, continues its work long after you've forgotten the encounter.” — The Practice of Sacred Noticing

This is the Great Commandment made visible: not as a principle but as rippling consequence. It calls to mind Jesus's words in John 13:35—*“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”* The Respond movement makes discipleship tangible in each specific encounter.

Sacred Noticing and the Great Commandment

Sacred Noticing Movement	Great Commandment Dimension	Theological Function
Notice	Love God with all your mind	Attentiveness to God's presence in the present moment
Pause	Love God with all your soul	Relinquishing ego-driven control; receptivity to grace
Respond	Love your neighbor as yourself	Wise, heart-centered action; leaving a loving spiritual footprint

IV. The Beatitudes: A Map for the Contemplative Life

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. — Matthew 5:3–9 (NIV)

The Beatitudes have been interpreted throughout Christian history as promises, descriptions, virtues, eschatological blessings, and dispositions of the Kingdom of God. What they share across these interpretations is a vision of a particular kind of spiritual consciousness—one characterized by humility, receptivity, suffering presence, mercy, and peacemaking. This is precisely the terrain that Sacred Noticing cultivates.

Poverty of Spirit and the Notice Movement

'Blessed are the poor in spirit' is traditionally interpreted as the recognition of one's total dependence on God—an inner emptiness that creates space for divine grace. This is not self-deprecation but a particular quality of receptivity: the willingness to approach each moment without presuming to already know what is there. The Notice movement in Sacred Noticing requires exactly this posture.

“Sacred Noticing reveals that you are not separate from the sacred—you are how the sacred knows itself in this moment, through these eyes, in this ordinary, extraordinary life.” — The Practice of Sacred Noticing

This insight is only available to the poor in spirit—those who have emptied themselves of the assumption that they already know what they're looking at. It echoes the kenosis of Philippians 2:7⁴, where Christ 'emptied himself'—the same self-emptying that makes genuine seeing possible.

Mourning and Deepened Sensitivity

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' (Matthew 5:4) has been interpreted by Christian teachers from Augustine to Thomas Merton as a willingness to remain present to the world's brokenness rather than anesthetizing oneself against pain. It is theologically significant that Sacred Noticing increases sensitivity to both beauty and suffering:

“As awareness increases, so does sensitivity. You will notice more beauty than you dreamed possible. You will also feel more acutely the suffering around you. This increased sensitivity is not a flaw but a feature—it marks genuine spiritual development.” — The Practice of Sacred Noticing

⁴ Kenosis (Greek: κένωσις, 'emptying'): From Philippians 2:7, where Paul describes Christ as having 'emptied himself' in taking on human form. In the mystical and contemplative tradition, kenosis names the inner posture of self-emptying receptivity that creates space for divine presence. Thomas Keating's Centering Prayer method is explicitly structured around this kenotic gesture—the repeated releasing of one's own thoughts, feelings, and preferences as a form of consent to God's action.

Rather than treating this heightened sensitivity as a problem to solve, this paper presents it as the spiritual fruit it is. The Beatitude promises that this encounter with suffering is not abandoned but held in divine comfort.

The Pause and the Kingdom 'At Hand'

Several Beatitudes describe a consciousness of the Kingdom of God as present reality, not merely future promise. This 'Kingdom consciousness' involves an integrated awareness that perceives the sacred breaking through ordinary life. The Pause movement is designed to create the conditions for exactly this perception—opening the practitioner to the sacred in the midst of the ordinary.

Luke 17:21—*“the kingdom of God is in your midst”*—is not a future promise but a present description. The Pause is the moment in which that present Kingdom becomes accessible: when we stop reacting long enough for what is already true to become visible.

Peacemaking and the Respond Movement

'Blessed are the peacemakers' and 'Blessed are the merciful' define the outward legacy of a contemplative life—what this paper calls the spiritual footprint. The Respond movement is explicitly oriented toward this kind of outward fruit: actions that arise not from reactive woundedness but from wise, heart-centered awareness.

Matthew 5:16 echoes this: *“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”* The spiritual footprint is not self-promotion; it is the inevitable overflow of a life properly oriented toward God. Sacred Noticing offers a daily, embodied practice for that orientation.

V. Fruits and Gifts of the Holy Spirit

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. — Galatians 5:22–23 (NIV)

Christian theology distinguishes between what we produce through effort and what is given as grace. The Gifts of the Holy Spirit equip the believer for discernment and service; the Fruits are the observable evidence of a life surrendered to the Spirit's work. Sacred Noticing relates directly to both.

The Practice as a Catalyst for the Fruits

The Fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—are not produced by trying harder. They are the result of a life increasingly aligned with the Spirit's movement. Sacred Noticing creates the conditions for this alignment by interrupting the reactive patterns that prevent the Spirit's fruit from becoming visible.

"Here's what I've learned through years of teaching this: Sacred Noticing attracts people who want behavioral change but delivers spiritual transformation that can't be reversed once you genuinely engage it. Once you begin truly seeing, you cannot unsee. Once you taste the wisdom available in the pause, reactivity loses its grip. Once you experience conscious response, automatic patterns lose their power." — The Practice of Sacred Noticing

- **Peace and Patience through the Pause:** When practitioners interrupt automatic, fearful, or angry responses by creating a 'yellow light moment,' they open interior space for what Paul calls the peace that 'surpasses understanding' (Philippians 4:7).
- **Gentleness and Self-Control through Non-Judgmental Awareness:** The Notice movement trains practitioners to observe their inner responses without harsh self-judgment—a self-compassion that becomes the interior root of gentle treatment of others (see Colossians 3:12–13).
- **Love as the Quality of Response:** The Respond movement's goal is action arising from integrated awareness rather than unconscious reaction—what Paul describes as 'speaking the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15).
- **Faithfulness in the Ordinary:** Sacred Noticing makes every moment potentially sacred. This is a contemporary expression of what Brother Lawrence called 'the practice of the presence of God'—and what Colossians 3:17 commands: 'Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.'

The Practice as a Means for the Gifts

The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit (Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, Fear of the Lord—drawn from Isaiah 11:2-3) are understood as habitual dispositions that make a person receptive to the Spirit's prompting. Sacred Noticing functions as a practical exercise in developing this receptivity:

- **Wisdom and Counsel:** The Pause and Respond movements train practitioners to ask, 'What does this moment actually need?' rather than defaulting to habitual patterns—a lived practice of inviting divine Counsel into specific situations (Proverbs 3:5-6: 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding').

- Knowledge and Understanding: The Notice movement trains what the mystical tradition calls the 'spiritual senses' – the capacity to perceive the deeper truth of a person or situation beyond its surface appearance (1 Corinthians 2:10–12).
- Fortitude: Sacred Noticing requires the courage to remain present with discomfort, ambiguity, and pain rather than escaping into reactivity. This is a habitual form of the Gift of Fortitude—and what Paul means by 'I can do all this through him who gives me strength' (Philippians 4:13) not as triumphalism but as grounded endurance.
- Piety and Fear of the Lord: Rooted in Franciscan spirituality's reverence for the sacred in all creation, Sacred Noticing cultivates a habitual sense of awe—recognition that every moment is held within the life of God (Psalm 19:1: 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands').

Sacred Noticing: The Spirit's Gifts and Fruits

Sacred Noticing Stage	Theological Connection	Associated Gifts / Fruits
Notice	Contemplative Awareness	Gift of Knowledge; Gift of Understanding; Faithfulness
Pause	Receptivity to Grace	Gift of Wisdom; Fear of the Lord; Peace; Self-control
Respond	Integrated Wise Action	Gift of Counsel; Fortitude; Love; Kindness; Gentleness

VI. Sanctification: Ongoing Transformation in the Spirit

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.
 — 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV)

Sanctification—the process by which believers are progressively transformed into the likeness of Christ—is affirmed across Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions. All traditions agree that this transformation is not instantaneous, not self-produced, and not merely intellectual. It is a lifelong process, worked in the believer by the Holy Spirit, that progressively reorients the whole person—mind, will, emotion, body, and habit—toward God.

Sacred Noticing is understood here as a path of ongoing transformation rather than a technique for managing behavior. This distinction is theologically important: behavior management addresses the surface of action; sanctification addresses the person who acts.

Addressing the Root, Not Just the Fruit

Christian spiritual direction has always understood that what appears on the surface of a person's behavior—reactivity, harshness, avoidance, anxiety—is rooted in deeper patterns that the tradition variously calls wounds, disordered attachments, or (in Paul's sense) 'the flesh' (Romans 8:5–8). Sacred Noticing does not merely modify behavior; it brings these deeper patterns into conscious awareness where they can be surrendered to grace. Contemporary psychology offers a resonant description of this same terrain. Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy speaks of 'parts'—sub-personalities shaped by experience and wounding that generate reactive behavior below the level of conscious choice. Sacred Noticing does not derive from this framework, but the resonance is instructive: the tradition's own language describes the same interior landscape. What Reformed theology calls the 'old nature' and Catholic theology calls concupiscence⁵—the habitual inclinations that remain in the believer and are progressively healed through sanctification—is precisely the territory that both contemplative practice and contemporary psychology are mapping, each in its own idiom.

From Technique to Disposition: The Formation of Virtue

Sacred Noticing is not quick-fix spirituality. The practice will feel mechanical at first—practitioners are building what the author calls 'spiritual muscle memory.' The goal is not proficiency in a technique but the development of a 'relational disposition'—an abiding orientation of the whole person toward attentiveness, receptivity, and wise love.

This is precisely what Thomas Aquinas called virtue: a stable, habitual disposition that enables a person to act well more consistently, not through extraordinary effort but through the gradual transformation of character. Catholic tradition speaks of infused virtue⁶—character formed not merely through practice but through grace working through practice. Protestant traditions speak

⁵ Concupiscence (Latin: *concupiscentia*): In Catholic moral theology, the disordered inclination toward sin that remains in the baptized believer even after the forgiveness of original sin (Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§405, 2515). It is not sin itself but the habitual tendency toward disordered desires that must be progressively ordered through grace and discipline. The Reformed tradition employs parallel language of the 'old nature' or 'flesh' (Romans 7–8). Both traditions understand sanctification as the lifelong healing of these deep patterns—the interior territory Sacred Noticing directly engages.

⁶ Infused virtue: Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between acquired virtues—developed through human effort and habituation—and infused virtues, which are directly given by God and orient the person toward a supernatural end (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 63). The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity are always infused. The relevance for Sacred Noticing: the practice is not merely a self-improvement technique (which would produce acquired virtue at most) but a posture of receptivity that creates conditions for God to work the deeper transformation of infused virtue. This is why Cunningham insists that the change the practice enables is 'a matter of love transforming love'—not willpower or method.

similarly of progressive sanctification (Philippians 1:6: 'he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion').

"The transformation Sacred Noticing offers is irreversible. Once you begin truly seeing, you cannot unsee. Once you taste the wisdom available in the pause, reactivity loses its grip. Once you experience the freedom of conscious response, automatic patterns lose their power. This is both the promise and the challenge of contemplative awareness." — The Practice of Sacred Noticing

Lived Fruit as the Marker of Transformation

The author proposes 'lived fruit' as the most faithful measure of the practice: a calmer presence, clearer speech, wiser timing—noticed first in small ways, then more consistently. These align with what Jesus himself identified as the criterion of authentic transformation: "By their fruit you will recognize them" (Matthew 7:16). The most faithful measure of sanctification is not subjective spiritual feeling but observable transformation in ordinary life.

VII. Imago Dei and the Spiritual Footprint

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. — Genesis 1:27 (NIV)

The doctrine of the Imago Dei—that human beings are created in the image of God—is the anthropological foundation of Christian spirituality. Eastern theology calls the recovery of this image *theosis*⁷; Western mysticism calls it union with God; Pauline theology describes it as being 'conformed to the image of his Son' (Romans 8:29). All point to the same reality: the Christian life is the progressive restoration of the divine image that sin obscures.

The 'spiritual footprint' that lies at the heart of Sacred Noticing is a contemporary expression of this ancient theological reality. Central to Sacred Noticing is the conviction that every person leaves a spiritual footprint in every encounter—a lasting trace of their presence that either reflects or obscures the Imago Dei in them.

"Once you develop these spiritual antennae, once you recognize your essence, your footprint, and its trace, you cannot return to unconscious living. The light of awareness, once turned on, can't be turned off." — The Practice of Sacred Noticing

⁷ Theosis (Greek: θεώσις): Also rendered as deification or divinization. The Eastern Orthodox theological understanding of salvation as the progressive participation of the human person in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). Athanasius of Alexandria stated the principle classically: 'God became human so that humans might become God' (On the Incarnation, 54). The Western tradition employs different vocabulary—union with God, transformation in Christ, sanctification—but points toward the same telos: the full restoration of the divine image in the human person.

Unconscious vs. Conscious Spiritual Impact

Most people move through their days leaving a spiritual footprint they have never consciously considered. They affect others—for good or ill—through their tone, their attention, their reactivity, their presence or absence of peace. Sacred Noticing does not create this reality; it brings it into awareness. From a theological perspective, this awareness is itself an act of moral responsibility. To know that we have spiritual impact—that our presence either witnesses to the love of God or contradicts it—is to understand the vocation of the Christian life in concrete, daily terms. This is being 'a light in the world' (Matthew 5:14) and 'the aroma of Christ' (2 Corinthians 2:15) not as inspirational metaphor but as moment-by-moment practice.

The Restoration of the Image

When practitioners bring Sacred Noticing to bear consistently in daily life, they are engaging in what the tradition calls *askesis*⁸—spiritual discipline oriented toward the restoration of the *Imago Dei*. The practice creates the conditions in which the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work can proceed. Paul's command in Romans 12:2 to "*be transformed by the renewing of your mind*" is not merely cognitive but contemplative—it requires exactly the quality of attention and interior freedom that Sacred Noticing cultivates.

VIII. What Is Missing in Contemporary Christian Formation?

This section steps back from catechetical analysis to address a broader diagnostic question: where are the gaps in how the contemporary Church is forming people? Identifying these gaps helps clarify why Sacred Noticing is particularly timely—and what it offers that much existing formation programming does not.

The Gap Between Knowledge and Embodied Practice

Contemporary Christian formation—across traditions—tends toward the cognitive: biblical literacy programs, doctrinal studies, sermon series, small group curricula. These are genuinely valuable. But they share a common limitation: they deliver knowledge about the faith without

⁸ *Askesis* (Greek: ἄσκησις): Literally 'training' or 'exercise,' from the same root as the English 'ascetic.' Adopted by early Christian writers, particularly the Desert tradition, for the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, vigil, and watchfulness. In the contemplative tradition, *askesis* is not self-punishment but the creation of interior conditions in which grace can work more freely. The *Philokalia*—the foundational anthology of Eastern Christian contemplative texts—is substantially a manual of *askesis* understood as preparation for divine encounter.

sufficient attention to how that knowledge becomes embodied in the automatic, unreflective patterns of daily life.

The gap is not in what Christians know. It is in how they live in the three seconds between receiving a difficult email and pressing reply. In that moment, the sermon is unavailable. What is available is whatever has been formed in the body, the nervous system, the habitual dispositions of the heart. Sacred Noticing works precisely here—forming the contemplative reflexes that make wise response possible in real time.

“Sacred Noticing doesn’t make life easier. It makes you more present to life as it is—with all its beauty and pain, challenge and grace. It’s not another self-improvement technique to master but a relational disposition that may permeate how you inhabit your days.” — The Practice of Sacred Noticing

The Privatization of Spirituality

A second gap is the cultural drift toward privatized, individualized spirituality. Many contemporary Christians have come to understand their spiritual lives as an interior, personal affair—between themselves and God—with limited connection to the relational and communal dimensions of formation. This is understandable given cultural pressures, but it contradicts the fundamentally relational character of biblical faith. We are the Body of Christ.

The New Testament knows nothing of a privatized spirituality. Formation happens in community, through the body (Romans 12:4–5), through 'one another' practices (Ephesians 4:25–32), through the visible witness of a people transformed together. The spiritual footprint concept speaks directly to this: we are affecting one another by participating in a shared spiritual environment. The question Sacred Noticing presses is not 'how is my private spiritual life?' but 'what am I leaving behind in every encounter?'

The Missing Link: Interior Life and Ethical Action

A third gap involves the disconnect between interior transformation and ethical behavior. Christian ethics—how we treat others, steward creation, pursue justice, care for the vulnerable—has often been presented as a matter of instruction, decision, and will. The implicit model is: teach people the right thing, help them decide to do it, and then hold them accountable.

But the contemplative tradition—and now contemporary psychology—understands that this model is insufficient. Moral failure is rarely a matter of ignorance or weak will alone; it is far more often the result of automated, reactive patterns operating below the level of conscious choice. Sacred Noticing addresses this directly by inserting conscious awareness and discernment into the space where habit and reactivity would otherwise rule.

James 1:22 presses the same point: *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."* But 'doing the word' requires more than good intentions; it requires a formed interiority. This is the missing link that Sacred Noticing supplies.

The Common Good and Personal Formation

The interior transformation Sacred Noticing cultivates is not merely personal. The Christian tradition across its breadth—Catholic, Reformed, and ecumenical—has consistently insisted that personal formation and the common good are inseparable. *Gaudium et Spes* defines the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily”—and grounds it explicitly in the dignity of the human person.¹⁰ The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church makes the connection more direct: interior conversion is the necessary precondition of genuine social transformation.¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, approaching the same question from within the Reformed tradition, argued that personal moral formation is the indispensable foundation of social ethics—that structural injustice is sustained precisely by the unreformed reactive patterns of individuals within institutions.¹² Augustine’s account of the two loves in the City of God names the same dynamic at its root: the disordered love of self over God and neighbor is both the source of personal sin and the engine of social disorder.¹³ Sacred Noticing addresses this at the point of formation. Every spiritual footprint is a contribution to or a subtraction from the common good. The Respond movement—asking what love requires in this moment—is not merely a personal ethical question but a social one: what kind of shared environment am I building with this response? Formation that cultivates this awareness does not merely improve individuals; it shapes communities.

The Absence of Practices That Travel

A fourth gap is practical: most formation practices do not travel well. Centering Prayer happens in a designated time and place. Bible study occurs in a group setting on a weekly basis. Worship is bounded by Sunday morning. These are essential practices, and their value is not in question. But the Christian life is not lived in those designated spaces; it is lived in the kitchen, the boardroom, the hospital waiting room, the argument that erupts at dinner.

Sacred Noticing is explicitly designed to travel. It does not require solitude, silence, a prayer book, or any external resource. It requires only the willingness to notice, pause, and respond—practices that can be applied in any moment, in any context, without any special condition being met. This portability is not a concession to modernity but an expression of the Franciscan conviction that the sacred is everywhere and the contemplative life belongs in every corner of daily existence.

The Need for a Formation Anthropology

Finally, many contemporary formation programs lack a coherent anthropology—a clear account of the whole human person (body, soul, habit, emotion, will, imagination) that can guide how formation is designed and delivered. Without this, formation tends to focus only on the mind (information) or the will (decision), neglecting the body and the habitual patterns that govern most of human behavior.

Sacred Noticing implicitly operates from a richer anthropology. It addresses the mind through awareness, the will through the choice to pause, the body through the Pause, the imagination through contemplative attention to the ordinary, and the habitual through consistent daily practice. It recognizes that formation is not primarily an intellectual event but a gradual reorientation of the whole person—body, soul, and spirit—toward God.

“The internal journey, the mystical journey, changes our spiritual disposition in a way that has a tendency to stick and not go backward. When we encounter the divine within us, when we touch that place where God dwells in our soul, transformation happens from the inside out. It’s not a matter of willpower or technique—it’s a matter of love transforming love.” — The Spiritual Footprint

IX. Ecumenical Accessibility: Speaking Across Traditions

A significant pastoral strength of Sacred Noticing is its ability to speak authentically within multiple Christian traditions without compromising its theological integrity or becoming theologically vague.

For Catholic and Orthodox Christians

Sacred Noticing is rooted in Franciscan spirituality and draws explicitly on Centering Prayer, Lectio Divina, and the Desert tradition—all recognized and valued within the Catholic and Orthodox contemplative inheritance. The language of Gifts and Fruits of the Spirit, sanctification, and the Imago Dei is native to these traditions. The practice's emphasis on the sacramentality of ordinary life resonates with Catholic sacramental theology and Orthodox theosis.

For Mainline Protestant Christians

The practice's emphasis on biblical themes—the Great Commandment, the Beatitudes, transformation into the image of Christ—provides solid biblical grounding for mainline

Protestant communities. The focus on whole-life formation resonates with Reformed and Methodist emphases on sanctification as a reality that encompasses every dimension of life.

For Evangelical Christians

The practice's explicit grounding in Scripture, its emphasis on transformation of character rather than mere behavioral modification, and its understanding of the spiritual footprint as a form of witness all resonate with evangelical concerns. Sacred Noticing can be presented as a practical means of 'walking in the Spirit' (Galatians 5:25) and embodying the love of neighbor that Jesus commands.

For Charismatic Christians

The framework of Gifts and Fruits of the Holy Spirit, the understanding of the Pause as creating space for Spirit-led discernment, and the emphasis on transformation rather than technique resonate with charismatic emphases on the Spirit's active work in the believer's daily life. The practice can be presented as cultivating the interior attentiveness that makes promptings of the Spirit recognizable.

For the Christian in the Threshold

A fifth audience deserves explicit naming: those who remain formed by the Christian tradition but are no longer nourished by its institutional structures. These are not secular seekers; they carry decades of prayer, Scripture, and sacrament within them. But their practice has become airless, their formation programs have not addressed the texture of their daily lives, and they are searching—not for a new theology, but for a way to make the theology they already hold real in the moments where they most need it. Sacred Noticing speaks directly to this reader. It does not require leaving or returning to any particular institutional form; it offers a practice that works with what is already present and invites it into conscious, daily life.

X. Conclusion: Ancient Practice, Contemporary Gift

Sacred Noticing is not a new theology. It does not propose any innovation in Christian doctrine or depart from the long lineage of contemplative Christian practice. What it offers is something more modest and more needed: a synthesis of ancient wisdom that makes the deepest themes of Christian catechesis available as daily, embodied practice.

The Great Commandment becomes not merely an aspiration but a rhythm: notice, pause, respond—attentive to God, receptive to grace, loving in action. The Beatitudes become not a distant ideal but a description of what the practice is gradually forming. The Fruits of the Spirit become not achievements to perform but the natural evidence of a life increasingly surrendered

to the Spirit's work. Sanctification becomes not an abstract theological category but the lived experience of genuine transformation over time.

At the center of all of this is the spiritual footprint—the recognition that every person, in every encounter, leaves a lasting trace of their presence. Sacred Noticing invites Christians of every tradition to become conscious of this reality and to take responsibility for it: to choose, as best they can, to leave behind more peace and wisdom than disturbance and reactivity.

This is, in the end, nothing other than the ancient Christian calling: to be transformed into the image of Christ, and to be, in the world, a place where God's love can be experienced.

The sacred is scattered throughout our hours—not as a test or a challenge, but as a quiet gift for anyone who happens to be looking when life gently signals: here's something worth noticing. — Michael J. Cunningham, OFS

Appendix: Catechetical Themes and Sacred Noticing at a Glance

Catechetical Theme	Biblical Foundation	Sacred Noticing Connection
The Great Commandment	Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31; John 13:35	Notice (Love God with mind), Pause (Love God with soul), Respond (Love neighbor as yourself)
The Beatitudes	Matthew 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-22	Poverty of spirit (Notice), Mourning and deepened sensitivity, Kingdom consciousness (Pause), Peacemaking (Respond)
Fruits of the Holy Spirit	Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 3:12-17	Peace/Patience (Pause), Love/Gentleness/Kindness (Respond), Faithfulness in ordinary life (full practice)
Gifts of the Holy Spirit	Isaiah 11:2-3; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11	Wisdom/Counsel (Pause-Respond), Knowledge/Understanding (Notice), Fortitude (full practice), Piety (Franciscan reverence)
Sanctification	2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 8:29; Philippians 1:6; Matthew 7:16	Ongoing transformation; from reactive patterns to Spirit-led response; formation of virtue and spiritual character
Imago Dei	Genesis 1:27; Colossians 3:10; Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 2:15	Spiritual footprint as daily expression of God's image; restoration of the image through conscious, loving presence
Presence of God	Psalm 46:10; Romans 1:20; 1 Kings 19:12; Colossians 3:17	Thin places in ordinary life; every moment as potential encounter with God; Franciscan sacramentality of creation
Discipleship	Matthew 7:16; James 1:22; Ephesians 4:15; Galatians 5:25	Daily, whole-life practice; transformation of character, not merely behavior; the ordinary as the arena of spiritual formation

About the Author

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