



SENSE ABILITY

Spiritual Renewal
Through Your Five Senses

Fr. Byron Miller, CSSR



Liguori
PUBLICATIONS
A Redemptorist Ministry

CATHOLIC.
PASTORAL.
TRUSTED.

By weaving together many strands of sound spiritual wisdom, secular literature, and scientific facts, Fr. Byron Miller, CSsR, has created an informative and enjoyable compendium of reflections on drawing closer to God via our five senses. I came away with a newfound appreciation of God's amazingly creative gift of the human body as an instrument of the Creator's deep love of humanity.

—Loretta L. Gallagher, OCDS, administrator,
OCDS Main Office of the Washington Province of the Immaculate Heart of Mary

Finding God in the ordinary is the path to eternal life. How much more ordinary can one get than to use the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch? ***Sense Ability*** is a richly textured tapestry that artfully invites the reader to experience God through these senses. In a multi-layered approach, Byron Miller, CSsR, presents an intricate balance of scientific information, Christian spirituality, prayer, sacred Scripture, and Tradition. He encourages the employment of memory, imagination, intuition, reflection, experience, wisdom, and insight as tools for spiritual growth. Let this work guide you to a deeper, more intimate encounter with God through your ability to engage the senses.

—Bonnie LeMelle Abadie, D. Min., associate professor of pastoral studies,
Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas

Sense Ability is a real gift! Father Byron Miller, CSsR, gives us an opportunity to slow down, take a few moments throughout the day, and appreciate the presence of our loving God through each of our senses. Take time to read, reflect on, and—most of all—enjoy this fine work!

—Rev. John Ardis, CSP, vice president, Paulist Fathers, New York

In ***Sense Ability***, Byron Miller, CSsR, dispels the erroneous notion that our physical senses are an impediment to the spiritual journey. By artfully weaving words from Scripture with those of artists, mystics, and others, he draws readers toward a deep appreciation for the senses as conduits that awaken the soul to the sacred within the ordinary human experience. Seeing and recognizing, hearing and listening, are not the same, and, as the author points out, being mindful of the full potential of our senses sets the stage for a sacramental theology that takes believers from the visible to the invisible.

—Barbara Hughes, author, *Mary the Perfect Contemplative*

Imprimi Potest:

Kevin Zubel, CSsR, Provincial
Denver Province, The Redemptorists

Published by Liguori Publications
Liguori, Missouri 63057

Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists (Redemptorists.com).

To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521

Copyright © 2026 Byron Miller, CSsR

ISBN 978-0-7648-2891-1

E-ISBN 978-0-7648-7271-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Miller, Byron, Fr. author

Title: Sense ability : spiritual renewal through your five senses / Fr.
Byron Miller, CSsR.

Description: First edition. | Liguori, MO : Liguori Publications, [2026] |
Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "An in-depth look at the
five senses and their connection to spirituality to help readers explore
their faith and deepen their relationship with God. Meditations,
prayers, and reflection questions are included"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026028861 (print) | LCCN 2026028862 (ebook)
| ISBN 9780764828911 paperback | ISBN 9780764872716 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Spiritual life--Christianity | Senses and
sensation--Religious aspects--Christianity

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .M5572 2026 (print) | LCC BV4501.3 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2026028861>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2026028862>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of Liguori Publications.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture texts in this work are taken from *The New American Bible, Revised Edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C., and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of *The New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Excerpts from the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for use in the United States of America © 1994, United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used with permission. English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Modifications from the Editio Typica* copyright © 1997, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops—Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Excerpts from documents of the Second Vatican Council are from *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations—The Basic Sixteen Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery, OP, © 1996. Used with permission from Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota.

Printed in the United States of America

30 29 28 27 26 / 5 4 3 2 1

First edition

Cover artwork © FaithArtCreation: *Jesus Hugging a Woman*

Contents

Preface: Come to Your Senses!.....	9
Introduction:	
A Lamp for My Feet, A Light on My Path.....	12
About Spiritual Journaling:	
What is Spiritual Journaling?	15
One: A Sensory Orientation	20
Two: Scents and Sensibility:	
The Power of Smell in Our Spiritual Life.....	36
Three: Eat, Drink, and Be Holy—Sensibly:	
The Power of Taste in Our Spiritual Life	50
Four: I Once Was Blind, But Now I See:	
The Power of Sight in Our Spiritual Life.....	63
Five: A Sacred Symphony of Sound:	
The Power of Hearing in Our Spiritual Life.....	73
Six: Skin In the Game:	
The Power of Touch in Our Spiritual Life.....	88
Seven: Your Sensational Life in Christ!:	
A Multisensory Integration	100
Acknowledgments	107
Bibliography and Further Reading.....	109
About the Author	112



Preface

Come to Your Senses!

Do you want to revitalize and enhance your faith, but you're not sure how? Begin by using what you already have! In your spiritual tool kit are five (or however many of the five you possess) essential instruments: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. Because these tools can easily grow dull over time, the purpose of this book is to help you sharpen them to strengthen your relationship with the Lord.

Why is it all about you in relationship to Christ? Because, foremost, Jesus Christ desires a personal encounter with his followers "so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

In 2025, a survey from the Pew Research Center asked US Catholics what "being Catholic" meant to them. Sixty-nine percent of Catholics in the United States said that having a personal relationship with Jesus was an essential part of their Catholic identity. It was the top response in the survey. Remarkably, of the Catholics who went to Mass weekly, 91 percent said a relationship with Christ was key to their faith.

Such research only confirms what we know from experience: a fundamental aim of Christ's Church on earth is to foster this personal encounter with the Divine. To that end, the Church invites you to use your sensory instruments to feel Jesus' presence intensely. After all, if God's gift of the senses connects you to others and to your surroundings in the most expressive way possible, then surely they can bring you closer to the Gift Giver, as well!

Moreover, to have an intimate encounter with the Lord today, the Church not only wants you to remember the events and teachings in the life of Christ from 2,000 years ago, it also wants to make them as real to you today as they were to those who first experienced them.

Consider, for example, the Eucharist—our high point of Catholic worship. All other sacred actions and activities of the Christian life "are bound up with it, flow from it, and are ordered to it" (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 16). At Mass, the dignity and importance of worshipping the Father in and through Christ is optimally expressed by way of a full sensory experience with all of our heart, mind, and soul. The mystery of God's presence is opened to us by what we see, smell, touch, taste, and hear. "In the liturgy, the sanctification of [humans] is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way proper to each of these signs" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*], 7).

It matters not whether the Mass warrants all the “smells, bells, toots, and flutes,” or if the occasion is less resplendent and more low-key. Either way, the visual beauty of the sacred surroundings, the melodious sound of liturgical music, and the reverent words and actions that connect us to Christ’s memorial institution are all intended for the same purpose: to facilitate a deeper relationship with our living God through communal worship and elevate us in a sublime experience of the transcendent.

Yet, for some people in the Church today, recurring participation in the Eucharist often feels routine, perfunctory, and lifeless, and biblical passages at Mass can feel less enriching over the years after hearing them repeatedly. This reality calls forth Daniel Hornsby’s quip about dutiful but lackluster Catholics in his 2020 novel, *Via Negativa*: “People who regularly attend Saturday evening Mass are the most dull and mechanical Catholics and should technically be considered Presbyterians.” Like mediocre workers on a monotonous assembly line, “mechanical Catholics” are numerous in the Church. Their kind isn’t limited to only the Saturday Vigil Mass.

The five senses are tools from our Creator to help transform the “mechanically inclined” practitioner of the faith! Or, to express it in biblical terms, getting in touch with our senses provides a refreshing approach to Scripture and the sacraments that can infuse “new wine into old wineskins” (Luke 5:37).

Admittedly, this invitation to strengthen your relationship with Christ through the five senses you already possess may sound too simplistic. Are you wondering, *Doesn’t Christ deserve more than this? Wouldn’t my participation in a professional workshop, online blog, or guided retreat convince him (and me) that I’m making a greater effort?*

A sensory approach to spirituality is not meant to replace all your other efforts to grow closer to the Lord. On the contrary, it’s meant to complement them! It’s also meant to dispel the notion that building your relationship with Jesus Christ needs to be overly complicated. By keeping things simple and making a concerted effort in this endeavor, you can accomplish what you set out to do.

This approach is a win-win situation that offers you greater appreciation of your Catholic religion while reawakening your senses in relationship to God. Not to be overlooked is an additional benefit: because God lavishes more on us than we can ever imagine and doesn’t abandon the one who truly seeks him (See Luke 11:5-13.), your Creator is already pleased with you for your desire to embark on this interior pilgrimage of faith!

Are you ready to begin the journey?

Introduction

A Lamp for My Feet, a Light on My Path

Dante's epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, begins with these familiar lines that are among the most recited in Western literature:

*Midway upon the journey of our life I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.*

Despite uphill climbs, wayward paths, and darkened divergences, life is a continuous journey toward the Father, who sent his Son to us so that we can experience the total depth of God's unconditional love. Each of us is a work in progress, moving toward final completion in the embrace of our Creator.

In *Stories of God*, theologian John Shea writes, "It is not an exaggeration to say that no two people travel the same path. Yet Simone Weil's observation might apply: we travel different paths through the forest but come upon the same clearing. An old man sits by the sea and knows that the waves he watches will crash on those shores long after he is gone. He is triggered into an awareness of the Mystery within which both he and the waves dwell."

Recently, while walking on a path that overlooks an ocean, I noticed a hardcover book propped against a lamppost. It was *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl's classic account of his struggle to find meaning in life despite his years in a Nazi concentration camp. I recalled my first and only encounter with this book, a mandatory reading assignment during my Catholic high school years. But, in my adolescence, I had lacked the maturity to ponder deep existential questions, and my search for meaning was sophomoric, at best.

Nevertheless, as I continued my journey on the seaside path, my mind wandered: *Did the reader of this book simply forget to retrieve it before departing? Did this person find deeper meaning in reading the book while overlooking the sea? Consequently, was it left there intentionally to benefit another reader?*

The book you are reading now is intentionally meant to benefit the reader—you! It's intended to accompany you on your sacred pathway with the Lord, a journey that preferably

will be more like a steady walk than a rapid sprint to the finish line. Your even-paced steps on this spiritual journey should take place at a regular time each day, ideally without interruption—early in the morning, at the end of the day, before the Blessed Sacrament during Holy Hour, or in some favorite sanctum, like an outdoor porch, where your senses are heightened.

You're encouraged to pack lightly on this trip. A few useful provisions include your Bible, a journal or notebook to record your private reflections, and this book. Think of your Bible as a compass to point you in the direction of Christ, the North Star. Think of your personal journal as being handier than luggage with rollers on this trip! It will help you unpack your introspective search for meaning—not only to know yourself better but also to illuminate God more fully as you ponder the awareness of Mystery in your life. Finally, think of this book simply as a road map with helpful directions and words of encouragement to accompany wayfarers like you as you navigate your path. And remember to persevere! As the saying goes, "A bend in the road is not the end of the road...unless you fail to make the turn."

"All you need is the plan, the road map, and the courage to press on to your destination," wrote motivational author Earl Nightingale. Of course, that final destination of our lifelong pilgrimage is heaven: "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). While our eternal destination is the end point, the quest to get there matters, too: "All the way to heaven is heaven," wrote St. Catherine of Siena.

How to make the best of life's journey? Watch your step. Tread carefully. Kristine Malins offers sound advice: "Ours is the pain of constantly pitching a tent and folding it up again, of befriending strangers and bidding them goodbye, of loving the world but never being truly satisfied with it, of pouring our heart and soul into a project others have begun and still others will finish.... We must learn to live provisionally—to measure the road well. We need to make the most of occasions when we gather by the roadside to break bread together and compare directions. Joy must be discovered in the going, as we never really arrive, not even in a lifetime."

One way to "measure the road well" on our journey is to discern God's will. It provides confidence that we're on the right path. Discernment offers us an inner peace when we desire to live our life according to the will of God; this, in turn, encourages us onward to our final pursuit. Saint Paul wrote, "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

Hence, an appropriate way to begin this spiritual expedition is to acknowledge the presence of your divine traveling companion. Recall what medieval Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart said in one of his sermons: "God is nearer to me than I am to myself." As you enter this "holy of holies"—a grace-filled time and space in union with your Creator—pause now

and reverence God with a prayer to help you discern his will. Consider Thomas Merton's Prayer of Unknowing from his book *Thoughts in Solitude*:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that, if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

About Spiritual Journaling

What Is Spiritual Journaling?

At its heart, spiritual journaling is the practice of writing to deepen your relationship with God. It's not merely about putting words on a page, but engaging your mind, heart, and soul in response to God's presence and revelation in your life. Through reflection, prayerful writing, and honesty, you create space for God to speak and for you to listen, remember, and respond.

For centuries, spiritual seekers—from biblical figures to modern-day saints—have written down their prayers, struggles, questions, insights, and hopes. This practice helps us integrate what we hear, learn, and experience in our faith journey.

Think of your journal as a sacred space on paper—one that no one else needs to see but God and you. It is a place where you can be real, vulnerable, and authentic. As you write, your pen becomes a tool of prayer, and your journal becomes a record of grace. Spiritual journaling allows you to reflect on your personal experience as you begin to articulate what faith means for you. The intention is not academic mastery but transformation. By writing regularly, you allow the Holy Spirit to work deeply and personally in you.

Who Is This Book For?

Whether you are brand new to the faith or longing to grow in your spiritual life, this book with its thought-provoking journal prompts welcomes you as you are. You don't need to be a skilled writer or a theologian. All you need is to be open to letting God meet you on these pages.

Theological Foundations for Journaling

Faith Seeks Understanding (St. Anselm)

The Catholic faith is not just received—it is lived in. Saint Anselm described theology as “faith seeking understanding.” Journaling is one way to seek understanding—not just intellectually, but also emotionally and spiritually.

The Example of the Saints

Many saints practiced spiritual journaling. Consider:

- St. Augustine, whose *Confessions* remains one of the most profound journals of the soul ever written.
- St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who wrote her *Story of a Soul* as a spiritual memoir filled with simple honesty and deep insight.
- St. Alphonsus Liguori, who taught that spiritual exercises—including writing—help root us in God’s will and love.

Writing is a way of praying, thinking, and listening all at once.

How to Use This Sacred Pathways Book

Think of this book as a companion on *your* Sacred Pathway. You are free to write as much or as little as you like. What matters is that you return to it regularly.

You’ll find:

- Journaling prompts throughout this book.
- Scripture references and prayers to inspire reflection.
- Space to write freely, doodle, paste, or draw if you’d like.

Establish a rhythm:

- Read the prompt.
- Reflect quietly.
- Write from the heart. Don’t worry about grammar or form.
- Revisit your writing later for further insight.

Five Tips for Journaling Spiritually

1. Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts.
2. Be honest. This is your space. You can wrestle with questions, express doubts, and record joys.
3. Use Scripture. Let a Bible verse spark your reflection. Many prompts will include Scripture references.
4. Be consistent. A few lines in response to each prompt build a powerful record of your faith.
5. Review often. Flip back through previous pages. Notice how your understanding and relationship with God is growing.

Journaling as Transformation

Writing is not simply remembering—it is forming. It integrates:

- The mind (understanding and concepts).
- The heart (prayer and feeling).
- The will (commitment and action).

Through journaling, faith becomes more than ideas—it becomes a lived experience.

Your journal will become:

- A mirror for self-discovery.
- A repository of insights and prayers.
- A map of your spiritual journey.

In moments of dryness or doubt, you can look back and remember how God has led you thus far.

A Word from the Tradition

“The one who desires to be saved must continually examine the state of his soul, and journaling is a most useful exercise for such reflection.”

ST. ALPHONSUS LIGUORI

The Church invites us not just to learn the faith but to live and embody it. Writing brings this invitation to life. It enables you to pause amid the rush of new information and hear what God is saying personally to you.

Your Journey Starts Here

Let this journaling be a space of:

- Stillness in a noisy world,
- Clarity in a confusing time,
- Faith in the midst of questions.

Each page is a step in your walk with God.

Welcome to the journey. Welcome home.

Rev. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR
Liguori Publications

A Sensory Orientation

*Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion*

T.S. ELIOT, “FOUR QUARTETS”

The five senses are like stepping stones on your path to “a further union, a deeper communion” with the Lord. Before we examine each sense separately in the following chapters, this chapter provides a five-point sensory orientation and self-assessment. It includes basic preparatory information, useful tips, and reflection questions (in italics) for you to journal.

I. Steer Clear of Obstacles

From the outset on this sacred journey, identify any forces that might prevent you from making a change in your spiritual practice and perspective. Here are a few potential hazards to avoid along the way:

The obstacle of being reluctant to change. “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often,” wrote St. John Henry Newman, a convert to Catholicism. Change—one of the few constants in life—gives you the opportunity to become a better version of yourself! Nevertheless, it requires deliberate intentionality to pursue something you find desirable—in this case, a more meaningful existence in relationship to Christ. Be aware that factors such as comfort in the status quo and procrastination are powerful forces that can paralyze you, preventing you from taking steps toward making any substantial life changes.

How resistant are you to change? On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the least resistant to change, where do you place yourself? Identify the potential hindrances that may prevent you from becoming a better version of yourself in relationship to Christ at this time in your life.

The obstacle of limiting holiness to the saints. “The world needs more than social reformers. It needs saints!” said Pope St. John Paul II during a 1987 visit to New Orleans. “Holiness is not the privilege of a few; it is a gift offered to all.” Yet, despite the universal call to holiness by our baptism, we tend to associate sanctity exclusively with canonization: like the statues of our saintly heroes placed atop pedestals holiness often appears too lofty for us to attain.

A reason for this narrow understanding is the assumption that saints were prohibited from enjoying life—even though biographical accounts, from Saint Teresa of Ávila to Saint Philip Neri, suggest otherwise. “Holiness brings us to life,” wrote Matthew Kelly in *Rediscover Catholicism*. “Those who respond to God’s call...enjoy life, all of life.” Your five senses not only add to your quality of life, they can help you lead a virtuous life, too.



What does holiness look like to you? How important is your own edification? Reflect on these words of Thomas Merton from New Seeds of Contemplation: “For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore, the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.”

Another “problem” of ordinary sanctity is that it can easily go unnoticed. George Eliot in *Middlemarch* writes about our debt to “the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”



Name the holy people who fit this description who personally stand out to you.

For mothers: Author Agnes R. Howard, in her book Showing, refers to a Christian prenatal care manual that advises women to “feel pride that God has chosen [them] to participate with him in creating a human being with the potentialities of sainthood.” Every mother collaborates with God in the miracle of childbirth, and every child born is a potential saint in the making! Have you ever viewed yourself and your children in this way? Journal your thoughts.

The obstacle of taking your five senses for granted. We are seldom conscious of how heavily we depend on our senses to help us navigate life on a moment-by-moment basis. Consider, for example, our ability to touch. According to April Levin, a Harvard professor of neurology, “Most people don’t think about touch very much until there’s something wrong with it. It’s something we take for granted because we can’t shut it off, so we don’t know what it’s like to not have it.”



Recall the widespread social-distancing measures put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Describe what it felt like to you when social contact was restored in churches and elsewhere. Likewise, if you were one of the many people who experienced a temporary loss of taste (agusia) and smell (anosmia) as symptoms of long COVID, describe what the return of these senses felt like.

The obstacle of taking your Catholic faith for granted. There are more than 1.4 billion Catholics worldwide; approximately 69 million of whom are in the United States. According to the same 2025 study by the Pew Research Center cited earlier, “Catholicism’s roots in the United States run deep.” One-fifth of the people in our nation are Catholic, but, strikingly, nearly half (47 percent) of US adults have some connection to the Church. This widespread affiliation with Catholicism includes 20 percent of US adults who say they’re Catholic when asked about their present religion; 9 percent who are former Catholics; 9 percent who have a Catholic parent, spouse, or partner; and another 9 percent who are “cultural Catholics”—meaning they don’t identify with Catholicism religiously, but they consider themselves Catholic ethnically, culturally, or because of family background, etc.

This Catholic faith that unites so many people is expressed not only in dogmas and propositions but also through rites and rituals, signs and symbols, sacraments and sacramentals that fully involve our senses. Indeed, the Catholic Church is a virtual sensory tour de force in drawing us closer to God. Yet, Catholics—especially cradle Catholics—can be so immersed in our own distinct religious culture that it’s often easy to overlook how pervasively it shapes our worldview and identity.

“Catholics imagine both God and the world somewhat differently from others,” wrote Fr. Andrew Greeley, a professor of social science, in his 2000 book *The Catholic Imagination*. “They tend to see the Ultimate as lurking in the commonplace.... Simply put, Catholics have (or at least had) angels and saints, the souls in purgatory and the Mother of Jesus, statues, paintings, and stained-glass windows, and rich rituals—an elaborate sacramental system. Protestants, by and large and often as a matter of principle, do not.”