

Preschool Unit

Song of the Swallows **A Missionary Primer** *by Maureen Wittmann*

Internationally known writer and artist, Leo Politi died at 87 years of age on March 25, 1999. A California native, Politi was known for his gentle disposition and soothing watercolors. His work encompassed much of California, and his honors included the prestigious Caldecott Medal for *Song of the Swallows*. This delightful children's book was written in 1948 and is still popular today. It is the story of the cliff swallows that return to the San Juan mission in Capistrano, California each year on the Feast of St. Joseph (March 19th).

This unit study encompasses the language arts, Bible study, health, history, social studies, the arts, and science. You may skip or lighten up on these subjects as you and your children work through this two-week course. A resource list for the upper grade level is included at the end for older children you may wish to include. Older children can also participate by reading aloud to the younger children as well as assisting you in some of the special projects suggested.

Allow two weeks to gather resources before beginning the unit. To save money in purchasing new books, first check with your library. Ask your librarian if she recommends any resources not listed here. Don't forget to ask friends and family for resource suggestions!

Day One:

Begin by reading *Song of the Swallows* to your children. Point out the pretty illustrations. Most of the pictures include the graceful swallows in them. Simply enjoy the story and illustrations together. A young child sharing a story with a parent creates a bond of togetherness that can't be broken. Allow this first sitting to be time of sharing. If your child stops the story with a question, be patient and answer as best as you can. Do not put the book back on the bookshelf; leave it out in a prominent place so that it will invite your child to pick it up on his own.

Day Two:

Upon a second reading take time to explore all the underlying lessons presented in the story. Talk about Julian's love for the plants and how one can take pride when they work hard to make God's world a more beautiful place. Find the nests hidden in the pictures; ask how their shape helps in keeping the eggs warm. The old swallows giving flying lessons to the younger swallows provides the opportunity to talk about the lessons that we can learn from older people. Discuss compassion for God's creatures when you come upon Juan picking up the fallen baby swallow. Imagine the wonderful sound that the mission bells must have made upon the swallows' return. The swallows come back to the mission on the feast day of St. Joseph. Ask your child what is special about St. Joseph. There is a joyful fiesta upon the swallows' return. Think about the great celebration and joy in our hearts that we experience because of Christ's resurrection. On the final page Juan is serenaded by the birds. This is a lovely reward for his hard work throughout the winter in preparing his home to greet the returning swallows.

Language:

On the first page and throughout the book we are introduced to the Spanish language. Ask your children to repeat the Spanish words and their English meanings -- buenos dias (bway nohs dee us), good morning. The book makes this simple for you, as the English translations often follow the Spanish phrases.

Introduce other popular Spanish words or phrases. Pick up a children's Spanish dictionary at the library or purchase Dover's coloring book, *Spanish Alphabet*. Children love to color and this book introduces a multitude of Spanish words.

Day Three:

On the next pages we are told about a Franciscan priest by the name of Father Junipero Serra, the founder of the San Juan mission in the story. In fact, Father Serra founded nine missions from San Diego to San Francisco. He was drawn by his desire to baptize the Indians into the Christian faith. In addition, he struggled to teach them farming and trade skills. This is an opportunity to talk to your child about missionaries of yesteryear and of today. Talk about the importance of teaching others about Jesus and His saving grace. Children are delighted to find out that they can be missionaries in their own backyard. Ask your child if he spreads the word of Jesus through his own words and actions.

Bible study:

Memorize and reflect on the following Bible verses:

- Matthew 28:19-22 -- All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.
- Psalm 24:1 -- The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.
- Matthew 25:40 -- Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.

Write the verses on index cards so that you can review them daily.

Prayer:

Give God thanks for knowing him.

Day Four:

A millstone to ground corn and wheat is introduced at the beginning of the story. How fascinating to a little one to find out that there were days when flour could not simply be bought at the store. Read Eric Carle's *Pancakes, Pancakes* to see how flour is made from wheat.

Health:

When the Indians went to live in the missions many died as a result of being exposed to European diseases. They had not been exposed to these illnesses before and therefore did not have strong immune systems to fight off the European diseases. Read *Germs Make Me Sick* and talk about how disease is kept from spreading. Remind children that this is why we teach them to cover their mouths when we cough and wash our hands when we sneeze.

Day Five

Church History:

Franciscans follow a way of Christian life set forth by the example of St. Francis. Born Francis Bernadone, he was the son of a wealthy merchant who expected him to win honor and glory at war, then join his father in a life of pleasure and as his father's business partner. However, it was not to be; instead, Francis fell in love with God and gave up all his earthly riches to become a beggar for Christ. He is known for preaching peace, for his love of God's creatures, and for his denial of material belongings so that he could give all to Christ.

Franciscans are known by their brown or black habits, sandals, and a rope in place of a belt. This is significant as St. Francis would not even allow himself the pleasure of a warm pair of shoes or a leather

belt. If you have the opportunity to meet a Franciscan priest, sister, or brother you will notice that the rope has three knots in it. The knots remind them of their vow to poverty, obedience, and celibacy.

Read a story about St. Francis. Tomie dePaola's *Francis: The Poor Man of Assisi* is a beautifully illustrated book. Father Lovasik's *St. Francis of Assisi* is inexpensive and packed with information about this man's life.

Day Six

Social Studies:

Study the geography of California. Find the location of the mission on a map. The Hispanic influence of the area is more evident when you see the nearness of Mexico.

Father Serra traveled by donkey and by foot all the way from Baja to San Diego to begin his missionary work. Locate these areas on the map and discuss the strength of the Holy Spirit that Father Serra must have had to travel so far, especially at 55 years of age and with a bad leg.

Discuss the differing cultures between the Indians and the Spanish missionaries. Dover and Bellerphone coloring books on the California missions give some insight into the Spanish culture. Dr. James Leek's textbook *The Evangelization of the New World* (a Catholic text) tells of the Indian's way of life before the missions. Dr. Leek's book has Christian social principles woven throughout and provides a nice balance to the overly politically correct coloring books by Dover.

The missions brought incredible technological changes as well as cultural. The mission built furnaces for metalworking, for example. Industrial progress took inhabitants from the stone age to the bronze/iron age in a very short time. Much criticism surrounds the California missions, yet the missions ushered in modern civilization and technology. Discuss the implications with your child.

Day Seven

Architecture:

The Bellerphone book, *California Missions to Cut Out*, provides models that can be colored, cut out, and displayed in your classroom. The inside cover of the book provides definitions of architectural words associated with the mission designs. Let your children know that the style in which the missions were built, is still popular today. Many of the homes, malls, and office buildings in Capistrano are built in the same design.

Music:

The book includes two songs and music. If your child plays a recorder or other musical instrument, then have him learn how to play these songs.

Art:

Have your child draw a map, decorating it with pictures of swallows, missions, or Father Serra riding his donkey north.

A craft related to birds would be fun. If you like plaster of paris, you and your child can sculpt and paint your own swallow.

Note the sculpture of Fr. Junipero in Song of the Swallows.

Leo Politi also published adult art books, most notably *Bunker Hill* (out of print), a series of paintings of the stately Victorian houses which populated that section of downtown Los Angeles before the skyscrapers changed the landscape. See if your library has any of his art books in stock.

Day Eight

Language Arts:

Read books that are related to the topics discussed thus far. One book to read is *Never Turn Back: Father Serra's Mission* by Jim Rawls. If the story is too long for your young listener, read the four chapters throughout the day.

Discuss new vocabulary words as the stories are read.

Have your child create a book. Pages can be stapled together by mom and the child can tell the story in pictures. If your child writes well, after reading *Never Turn Back*, have the child retell the story in a book of his own, along with illustrations. If the child is not yet writing, he can dictate the story as Mom or Dad writes.

Day Nine

Science:

Use this day to learn more about swallows and birds in general. Find swallows in the Audubon Society's *Master Guide to Birding, Book 2*. The swallows of Capistrano are cliff swallows; Look for differences between the various species of swallows and their cousins, the marlins. Read about the habits of the birds and look on the maps provided in the book to see where the birds live. See if they are native to your part of the country. Scholastic's A First Discovery Book series on birds and eggs are inviting to young children as well as informative.

Sit outside (or visit the zoo) with a pair of binoculars and keep a journal of birds sighted. This can be a fun experience. The journal should be filled with pictures (drawn or taken with a camera) of the children's sightings and writings of their impressions. Later, look up more information in the Audubon Society's *Master Guide to Birding* or on the Internet.

The birds in *Song of the Swallows* migrate to the mission every year. Ask your children why the birds return every spring. Talk about migration and the birds need to travel south in the winter to find food.

Day Ten

Field trip:

A field trip is a wonderful way to end your unit study. Check with local history and science museums for displays of California missions, Indians, or birds (swallows in particular). Keep a field trip journal made up of pictures taken, brochures, and materials collected. If you take a tour, have your child write a thank you note upon your return home.

Finally, read *Song of the Swallows* again. This time you and your children should have a new and different perspective as you share this lovely picture book together.

Resources

Preschool/Elementary:

[*Pancakes, Pancakes*](#) by Eric Carle (Aladdin)

[*Germ's Make Me Sick*](#) by Melvin Berger (Harper Trophy)

[*Song of the Swallows*](#) by Leo Politi (Aladdin)

[*Never Turn Back: Father Serra's Mission*](#) by Jim Rawls, edited by Alex Haley (Raintree Steck-Vaughn)

Dover Coloring Books: [*California Missions*](#), and [*Spanish Alphabet*](#)

Bellerophon Coloring Books: [*The Decoration of the California Missions*](#), [*Great Indians of California*](#),

[*Saints of the California Missions*](#), and [*Birds of California*](#)

[*California Missions To Cut Out, Book I*](#) and [*Book II*](#) (Bellerophon Books)

A First Discovery Books (Scholastic): [*Birds*](#) and [*The Egg*](#)

[*Francis: The Poor Man of Assisi*](#) by Tomie DePaola (Holiday House)

[*St. Francis of Assisi*](#) (St. Joseph Children's Picture Book Series) by Lawrence G. Lovasik, SVD (Catholic Book Publishing)

Upper level

The Evangelization of the New World: Hispanic Influence in American History by Dr. James R. Leek ([St. Paul's Publishing Co.](http://www.stpauls.pub.com)), Text and Teacher's Manual available from www.stpauls.pub.com or 14780 W. 159th St., Olathe, KS 66062.

The Audubon Society's *Master Guide to Birding, Book 2* (Knopf)

The Joyful Beggar: St. Francis of Assisi by Louis de Wohl (Ignatius)

St. Francis Assisi by G. K. Chesterton (Image)

These books are out of print, but worth the effort to find:

Westward the Bells: A Biography of Junipero Serra by Marion F. Sullivan (St. Paul Books and Media) 1988

The Cross and the Sword by Jonreed Lauritzen (Doubleday) 1965

Junipero Serra: The Illustrated Story of the Franciscan Founder of California's Missions by Don DeNevi and Noel Francis Moholy (Harper and Row)

Magazines:

Heart and Mind has several articles/units on California missions found at their website: www.heart-and-mind.com

Web sites:**Spanish Language:**

Little Explorers - Spanish Dictionary for children

(www.littleexplorers.com/languages/Spanishdictionary.html)

Indians:

Indians of California (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10369a.htm>)

Birds:

The Story of the Swallows (www.sjc.net/swallows/goya.html)

Audubon Society (www.audubon.org)

California Missions:

Junipero Serra and the California Missions (<http://www.geocities.com/thefoghorn>)

Mission of San Juan Capistrano (<http://www.missionsjc.com/>)

Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, let me sow pardon.

Where there is friction, let me sow union.

Where there is error, let me sow truth.

Where there is doubt, let me sow faith.

Where there is despair, let me sow hope.

Where there is darkness, let me sow light.

Where there is sadness, let me sow joy.

O Divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

Maureen Wittmann and her husband homeschool their seven children in Michigan. Mrs. Wittmann is a contributing editor to Heart and Mind (www.heart-and-mind.com), as well as the author of For the Love of Literature: Using Living Books in the Classroom and Home [[Ecce Homo Press](#)] and The Catholic Homeschool Companion [[Sophia Institute Press](#)].

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