

# Illumined by Faith

WRITING ONLINE CURRICULUM  
FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS





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# Introduction

Online learning has been part of publicly funded Catholic education in Ontario for over 20 years now. Online learning, often referred to as e-learning is meant to supplement not replace the in-person, gathered learning experience so essential to the character of Catholic education.

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*We affirm at the outset, the task must be defined as:  
Catholic curriculum, written and taught by Catholic teachers,  
delivered in the heart of the local community that is the Catholic  
school supported by the local community that is the Catholic  
school board.*

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E-learning has been and is now valued for its capacity to create connections over space and time and provide equity of learning opportunities for students across the Province with a variety of needs and interests. Beyond geographical and technical access, however, we know that Catholic education provides education for all children in our community regardless of learning styles or ability levels. This must be woven into the fabric on any e-learning offering to our students.

Communication and communication technology has always been an interest of the Church. We are commissioned by Christ to communicate the Good News far and wide.

As we move forward in a more intentional and focused way to online learning seen in its proper context in Catholic education, as yet another means of encountering Christ, let us consider what is distinctive in this work of writing online curriculum in our Catholic context. Just as the disciples meet Christ on the road to Emmaus, may we facilitate the meeting with Christ on new roads - information highways - that become the sacred ground where we continue to form joyful disciples deeply rooted in their communities.

The Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association and the Institute for Catholic Education are proud to offer this collaboration called:

**Illuminated by Faith ~Writing Online  
Curriculum for Catholic Schools**

# Building Blocks

The Catholic education community in Ontario has been considering what makes Catholic curriculum distinctive since its inception. Particularly since the creation of the Institute for Catholic Education and the curriculum cooperatives across the Province there have been a variety of foundational documents that help refine the thinking of system and school leaders, curriculum developers, and classroom teachers regarding the importance of Catholic curriculum to the life and mission of the Catholic school.

Concepts such as the infusion of Gospel values in education, a Catholic worldview, and a Christian anthropology have permeated these documents. All those involved in thinking about, creating, supporting and delivering Catholic curriculum in Catholic schools across Ontario will be familiar with these foundational documents:

[Curriculum Matters, ICE -1996](#)

[Curriculum STILL Matters, ICE -2021](#)

[Writing Catholic Curriculum, ICE -1996](#)

[Educating the Soul, ICE -1998](#)

[Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations, ICE – latest edition 2019](#)

[Writing Catholic Curriculum Course, ICE - 2006](#)

Curriculum writers in the Catholic education system in Ontario are, of course, well versed in the requirements of curriculum and assessment policies of the Ministry of Education in *Growing Success (2010)*.

We will not repeat the good work of these documents but build upon their insights.

As a system of education, we have long recognized the need to offer online learning experiences to our students. We have embraced the best pedagogical practices incorporating technology into classroom learning as well as offering a variety of courses online in order to offer flexibility and choice as well as equity of opportunity across the Province to quality Catholic education.

This present framework asks, for a people deeply rooted in encounter and accompaniment, as a community who gathers and is gathered, and as believers in the Incarnate Word of God – ‘God made flesh’ – how will we now articulate what is essential when developing and writing Catholic curriculum online?

# Before You Begin: Naming the Challenges of Online Learning for Catholic Education

The questions we must face in the creation of authentic Catholic curriculum for e-learning touch what is most fundamental regarding the broader project of Catholic education. Let us consider the specific challenges of e-learning or learning in a virtual setting.

The fundamental challenges center on our understanding of ourselves as a community that encounters and accompanies.

These reflections will be helpful for curriculum developers at the outset of their work.

## ENCOUNTER - BELIEVERS IN THE WORD OF GOD MADE FLESH

We meet the person of Christ, encounter the truth of our faith, through the encounter with one another. The promise of Catholic education is that the true encounter with Christ can and does take place every day in our Catholic schools. (RTP, p. 15)

Our sacred scripture describes the Incarnation in the poetry of the Gospel of John,

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”*

(John 1: 1,14)

In his becoming flesh, we understand that Christ touches us in our concrete, earthly, physical life, not just in a spiritual sense. This is how and why we believe that we can encounter the Lord in the here and now. Teresa of Avila, a great saint from the 16th century explains, “Christ has no body now but yours.” The embodiment or enfleshing of our faith is a key element of Catholic education.

**How does the online curriculum allow for the truth of the Incarnation to permeate the learning?**

**How does the learner see the faith enfleshed in the curriculum?**

**How do they see the curriculum as touching the concreteness of their lives?**

## ACCOMPANIMENT - A COMMUNITY WHO GATHERS AND IS GATHERED

The Catholic understanding of community is that we are not merely a group of like-minded or purpose-sharing persons. We understand ourselves as the very Body of Christ.

In *Renewing the Promise*, the Bishops often locate this experience of community as taking place “within the school”. What is the importance of being “within the school”? We do not merely gather ourselves in buildings but we are gathered together by God to form the Body of our Lord. It is in the physical gathering, modelled on the gathering of God’s people in the Eucharist, that we become who we most are. Community is a deep reality of real presence to one another for Catholics and the physical places in which we gather bear witness to this understanding.

We see this in every Elementary School’s classroom prayer center where our sacred scriptures and symbols are held and shared. We see this in the chapel at the heart of every Catholic Secondary School in the Province. The means of teaching, sharing and celebrating our faith, while deeply personal to each individual, is never a private matter in the Catholic Tradition. We cannot remain remote from one another.

Gathering together in education within our schools is not merely what we are used to, or what we have done in the past, it is quite literally constitutive of who we are in Catholic education.

**How does the online curriculum afford opportunities to form community?**

**How does it acknowledge the real places learners will need to gather even when they are learning online?**

**How does the suggested assessment and evaluation honour the individual giftedness of the learner?**

**How are all learners supported in this online environment so that the curriculum allows for participation of all learners?**

Using the philosophy and fundamentals of Catholic curriculum design as a foundation, and incorporating the pedagogical and technical developments of the past decade into the work, we can build online curriculum for Ontario's Catholic schools which reflect the hope and promise expressed by the Bishops in *Renewing the Promise*.

In the constantly shifting educational and cultural landscape, we must enthusiastically harness and exert our pioneering spirit and collective Catholic imagination to meet these challenges. The winds of change are howling all around us once again. Illumined by faith, we can see every new technology and opportunity before us blaze with hope and holy fire. On holy ground, we take off our sandals and know again – the Lord is near. If, as those who have gone before us in Catholic education, we roll up our sleeves, boldly shape our dreams, join arms and continue to faithfully work together in these changing times, we will indeed flourish and endure.

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## Understanding the Adolescent Learner

The *Adolescent Literacy Guide* (updated 2016) produced by Ontario's Ministry of Education lists five components of adolescent literacy. In teacher-ready language, it explains the physical development, cognitive development, emotional development, and social development that students are likely experiencing. These insights, combined with our understanding of the spiritual development of the learner can provide necessary background for curriculum designers.

The reality that the learners we plan for are digital natives while the curriculum planners are largely digital immigrants is another important consideration. The new Directory for Catechesis offers the following insights in terms of how the Church sees the impact of digital culture on the learner.

*"Digital natives", meaning persons born and raised with digital technologies in a multi-screen society, consider technologies as a natural element, feeling no discomfort in manipulating and interacting with them."*

*"Digital immigrants" ... were not born into a digital world but entered it later."*

*"The fundamental difference between these participants is the different mental approach that they have toward the new technologies and their use. A digital native seems to privilege the image over listening. ... language that has the greatest hold on the digital generation is that of the story, rather than that of argumentation."*

(362-363)

# Digital Citizenship and Discipleship

Our work will reflect on issues such as what instruction and supports students will need in order to become more effective online communicators and collaborators. Although an important question for the teacher of the online course, it is also a question for the curriculum developer in terms of how this support can be embedded in the suggested learning activities.

*“It is important to help people not to confuse the means with the end, to discern ... how to grow as subjects and not as objects and to go beyond technology in order to recover a humanity renewed in the relationship with Christ.”*

*Directory for Catechesis on Digital Language and Tools, 372*

Today’s educators have 24/7 access to a plethora of digital learning tools that are transforming the way they teach and how students learn. In a growing number of school districts, the global village has morphed into a brave new borderless classroom. Video-streaming technologies allow teachers and virtual guests to engage with a hyper-connected generation of students, weaned on ubiquitous smart phones, computer tablets, social media and Wi-Fi networks.

*It is no longer merely a question of ‘using’ instruments of communication, but of living in a highly digitalized culture that has had a profound impact on ideas of time and space, on our self-understanding, our understanding of others and the world, and our ability to communicate, learn, be informed and enter into relationship with others.*

*Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Christus Vivit, of the Holy Father Francis, 2019.*

We must help guide our students so they can effectively use these digital tools and virtual worlds to help shape the common good, uplift the dignity of the human person and create a culture of respect within and, ultimately, far beyond their more immediate communities of care.

*The real question is not how to use the new technologies to evangelize but how to become an evangelizing presence on the digital continent.*

*(371) Catechism of the Catholic Church*

In integrating technology into learning environments, it is critical that Catholic educators authentically practice, model and instill in their students a healthy sense of balance and ‘media ecology’. Rather than allowing their digital devices and media content to shape and wash over them, students need to learn how to cultivate, self-regulate and proactively form their own uplifting media identities and behaviors. See the ICE resources for [Digital Citizenship](#) for classroom use and the monograph for adult reflection called [Our Online Witness](#).

Just as we have slowly learned how to become more conscientious caretakers of the natural environment, we must also teach our youth how to become better stewards of the technological devices and virtual settings in which they are deeply immersed, and by which they are continually and profoundly impacted.

## **Christ Has No Online Presence but Yours**

*Christ has no online presence but yours,*

*No blog, no Facebook page but yours,*

*Yours are the tweets through which love touches this world,*

*Yours are the posts through which the Gospel is shared,*

*Yours are the updates through which hope is revealed.*

*Christ has no online presence but yours,*

*No blog, no Facebook page but yours.*

**by Meredith Gould (Adapted from St. Teresa of Avila’s Christ has no body)**

# Illumined by Faith: Elements of Online Catholic Curriculum

*The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God.*

Message of Pope Francis for World Communications Day, 2014

*“Catholic schools have a unique opportunity ... to accompany students in the search for truth; to foster in them a thirst for justice and an appreciation of the goodness of God, leading them patiently and lovingly in their journey of faith.” (Renewing the Promise, p. 4)*

Accomplishing this goal is an interplay between the course curriculum and the art of teaching which is used to “uncover” the overall goals with the students.

*Educating the Soul* states, “for Catholic secondary schools, curriculum is best described, in its broadest sense, as a worldview shaped by the Catholic conversation about life’s meaning and purpose. It is a distinctive worldview committed to the enterprise of educating the soul.”

One of the fundamental ideas developed in these various documents concerns the difference between the concepts of Catholic content and Catholic context.

## CATHOLIC CONTENT

Catholic content can be understood in the following examples:

- Church teaching
- Lives of the saints
- Events in Church history
- Catholic views on scientific discoveries
- Scripture connections to academic topic
- Prayers
- Exposure to Catholic art, music, architecture, poetry, literature, etc.
- Catholic Social Teachings and their application
- Understanding and making links to the liturgical calendar
- Exploring the sacraments

Catholic content is an important piece in forming our students. It is relevant throughout all curriculum areas, not only in Religious Education. It needs to be infused in an authentic way and not forced or seen as an “add-on” or afterthought.

Curriculum designers are encouraged to find the natural connections between course expectations and Catholic content so that the knowledge and skills presented can truly be seen as illumined by faith.

## CATHOLIC CONTEXT

Equally as important, yet more difficult to pin down is the idea of a Catholic context or “worldview” and how to incorporate it into a Catholic curriculum. It is important to recognize that there is no such thing as a “neutral worldview”. Every single subject is taught from a certain perspective. *Educating the Soul* explains that “this worldview recognizes that the divine is at work in all that surrounds us and attention to this sacred order is critical to the Catholic ethos.” Going further, it says:

*...to be Catholic is to be open to truth and grace wherever it may be found. Of equal significance is the importance of human reason as a means of understanding reality in all its forms. The mind and its capacity for rational analysis are seen as gifts by which reality can be scrutinized and the divine and human more deeply understood.* (p. 12 – 13)

Exactly how this will be embedded in each course will vary from class to class and teacher to teacher. However, there are ways to anchor these concepts when writing curriculum. For example, in a Physical Education or Health class, where teachers strive to teach students how to be “well”, it is important to discuss how we see the concepts of “wellness” and “wholeness” in our Catholic worldview as deeply related finding their meaning in the healing ministry of Christ. In Science, we can see the Catholic context in discussions about the orderliness of the universe. Becoming aware of how our learning about the universe is a means to know God through His creation can point to our worldview deeply shaped by wonder. Even in a wood-shop class, ideas of a sacramental worldview can be highlighted – encountering the divine in the everyday “stuff” that surrounds us, and how we interact with it.

Every subject area provides an opportunity to explore its content through a Catholic lens - a lens of faith. Again, this is how we create curriculum that is illumined by faith. It is incumbent on each curriculum writer and teacher to familiarize themselves with these considerations of Catholic content and context.



# Curriculum Design

Good design for online learning will share many of the basics of good design for all curriculum planning. We offer this outline to affirm what we already know about curriculum design.

## THE PLAN

1. A good plan begins with a clear vision of the desired outcomes. What is it the students ought to learn and be able to do?

These Learning Goals are shared with students so that all partners in the learning process have a clear vision of the desired outcomes. Learning Goals are often a re-wording of the overall or specific curriculum expectations as laid out by the Ministry of Education, but they can be combined or broken down into smaller sub-goals, if warranted, by a course designer. It's important to recall that while the specific expectations are to be accounted for in instruction and assessment, it is the achievement of the overall expectations that teachers are to focus on in evaluation.

It is in the crafting of these Learning Goals that the first opportunity is seen to ensure a Catholic perspective of curriculum.

2. The next step is to map out *how* the students will demonstrate their understanding of those Learning Goals.

A variety of assessment types (observations, conversations, products) is essential - particularly in an online learning environment. Also necessary in an online circumstance is the need to consider the method by which students will demonstrate their understanding - ie, Will they upload a document? Will they record some audio? Will they engage in a live call with the teacher to explain what they know? Will they participate in an online discussion forum?

When developing online curriculum for Catholic schools, assessment methods need to be designed and administered in ways that reveal and celebrate each student's learning with dignity and fairness, while nurturing the development of Catholic values.

3. Finally, the curriculum writer needs to build the lessons that will engage students in the content, skills, and perspectives that will get them to the point where they can be assessed on their understanding. Again, special consideration of the course expectations, Catholic content, and Catholic context are vital here.

## THE LEARNER

Central to Catholic education is a vision of the learner as uniquely gifted by God. We are called to welcome each one into our online learning community. We do so when we provide appropriate variety in the task, the topic, the length and/or complexity, the method of completing it, the amount of time to complete it, etc., as needed. This will vary depending on the type of course (open, destreamed, university, college, etc.). Variety is always important in an online environment. The uniqueness of each student's life experiences also needs to be considered as we design learning activities for students from various backgrounds. Online learning environments can provide many opportunities for a varied approach to learning and assessment with the appropriate planning.

# Considerations for Online Curriculum

It is important to highlight that “e-learning” here refers to the offering of a secondary course electronically. This is typically done using a Learning Management System, or “LMS” (also often called a Virtual Learning Environment, or “VLE”) which is software that houses the course content and facilitates all communication and interaction between course participants.

The current LMS used in the province of Ontario is Brightspace by D2L. These courses are asynchronous, meaning there is typically no “live” video requirement. As such, they provide a lot of flexibility to students as they plan their schedules. This method, however, could potentially foster an impersonal learning environment if care is not taken. Although classmates are not logging in simultaneously, they are engaging in the same learning at roughly the same time which affords opportunities for collaboration and community that must be intentionally emphasized.

There are immense opportunities that present themselves when teaching and learning is done through an e-learning format. However, there are some clear challenges that are inherent while learning asynchronously from a distance. With close attention, though, many of these hurdles can be mitigated.

## ONLINE COMMUNITY

Learning is social. Surveys of students who have withdrawn from an online course show that a lack of “online community” and connection with the teacher can play a significant role in the student’s decision to leave.

Learning online requires very deliberate planning on the part of the curriculum designers and teachers to create the conditions that foster community, connection, and student engagement. This is especially important when designing a Catholic course in which students are learning about the Catholic faith alongside and through other curriculum goals.

Catholic educators are tasked to create virtual Catholic learning communities where the encounter with Christ can and does take place.

This means:

- creating welcoming spaces;
- providing a safe and loving classroom environment, rooted in our faith story through ritual;
- fostering a sense of belonging, where all learners see themselves in the curriculum.

*Digital media can expose people to the risk of blocking the development of authentic interpersonal relationships...online relationships can become inhuman. Digital spaces blind to the world of vulnerability of another human being and prevent us from our own self-reflection.*

*Christus Vivit, 88*

## STRATEGIES

- Build opportunities for teachers to create a welcoming space for students
- Use rituals (like prayer and reflection) to anchor the learning environment
- Provide opportunities for the teacher and students to get to know one another. This should be built into the first parts of each course with deliberate “get to know you” activities.
- Celebrate the co-curricular and outside-school successes of students
- Encourage teachers to use audio and video whenever possible when communicating with students for daily instructions, explanations of assignments, feedback on submitted work
- Provide learning opportunities for students that require them to interact and collaborate with each other on a regular basis
- Include students in co-construction of success criteria and use their feedback in the planning and implementation of the course. Access student-voice as often as possible in the planning and rollout of the course. This can be done using surveys or discussion forums.

Although most of these strategies are largely enacted by the teacher of the course, curriculum writers should look for opportunities to embed meaningful suggestions in their material.

### STYLE OF CONTENT

Curriculum developers should create an appropriate balance between the amount of text-based information that students will be required to read and audio/image-based information such as short podcasts, video clips, photographs, diagrams, tables, charts, graphs, etc.

Compared to face-to-face classes, the amount of time a student will “hear” their teacher is significantly reduced in an online environment, and therefore attention needs to be paid to the amount of written material students are required to read. Variety of both content and instruction is essential.

Additionally, the method in which students engage in the content can be differentiated. Content can be explored in small groups, through online discussions, and even through live video “drop-in” calls. Promoting collaborative learning can be a powerful strategy; even when students are not logging in at the same time.

Content can be organized in a way that makes it easy for students to find what they need. Most learning management systems, including Brightspace, allow for the creation of folders and lessons so the curriculum designer can be deliberate in how they organize information. Students often identify their inability to find material as a barrier in poorly designed courses.

It is also important that the content be visually appealing and be laid-out in ways that do not distract the reader.

### DIFFERENTIATION IN INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT

A further fundamental concept necessary for the design and implementation of an online Catholic curriculum in Ontario is differentiation. Often this term will refer to both differentiated instruction as well as differentiated assessment.

A curriculum designer needs to include opportunities for the teacher to address a concept in more than one modality in their instruction and ensure students have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of expectations in a variety of ways. This will be especially important and valuable for teachers as they work with students with special needs in accordance with their IEP.

Teachers can assess a student’s understanding through a product, a conversation, or an observation. Assessment tools must be created to foster a balanced approach to assessment of the curriculum, so that the teacher can differentiate how they assess a particular piece of evidence when needed. These tools do not need to be overly complicated.

As in all learning, students should be involved in self and peer assessment.

Special attention should also be paid to the types of activities students are asked to engage in. Early iterations of e-learning required students to mostly read content and respond with written text - without much variation. Now, however, the technology has advanced where many more opportunities are available to students. Again, this is an important consideration for special needs learners.

Brightspace allows for file uploads, text box submissions, discussion forums, quizzes (which can be used for non-assessment purposes), portfolio work, video recording, audio recording, etc. Students can upload photos of their work, link to externally hosted content (YouTube, Google Drive / OneDrive, screencast recordings), or host live video discussions.

Providing engaging and meaningful opportunities like this also facilitates differentiation when needed. Curriculum writers may also suggest several modes of assessment for any given topic, where the teacher can decide which is most appropriate in any given context.

Options like these, with particular attention to special needs learners, can be communicated to the teacher in a dedicated “Notes to the Teacher” sections of content that are hidden from the students.

# Further Technical Considerations

## TEACHER NOTES

It can be extremely useful to provide “Notes to the Teacher” as pieces of content. These notes, set as hidden from students, can provide insight into the intentions of the assignment, some background for Catholic context, and suggestions for assessment, differentiation, or modification.

## 3RD PARTY TOOLS

Care must be taken when building content that relies on a 3rd party external tool. While the tool may provide some functionality missing from the LMS, it may also be blocked in certain school boards, may not have been vetted for privacy, and may even not exist in the future.

## ACCESSIBILITY

Each LMS will likely have published a guide to help ensure your content is AODA compliant and is accessible to every learner. It’s important to follow these recommendations. Further, it’s also important to test your content on a variety of platforms (including mobile) to ensure it displays properly.

## SUGGESTED TOOLS

There are many tools found inside Brightspace that can help any course be engaging, informative, and a place where community is fostered.

For example, the **discussion** tool is a place where students can interact with each other. It can be extended with the use of **Video Note**, so both the teacher and students can leave short video clips of themselves explaining a concept. Embedded in areas where teachers can leave feedback for students is the ability to give **audio or video feedback**. This can be an extremely valuable tool - as the teacher can give a lot of feedback to students in a short amount of time. Students can go back and listen again when needed, as well.

The quiz tool is very powerful when used well. Not only can it be used for summative assessments, but it makes for a great “exit ticket” or “check your understanding” style of formative assessments.

**Portfolio** is another tool that can be used to support good pedagogy, and should be considered. This can allow students to easily submit evidence of their learning, reflect on it, and receive feedback from the teacher.

Lastly, the **rubric** tool allows teachers to quickly and easily assess student work. Course writers should consider including pre-built rubrics for the major assignments in their course. All LMS providers continually update their tools to provide a better experience for teachers and students.

It is vital that curriculum writers are familiar with the tools available to ensure their content and assessment strategy can take advantage of available functionality.

# Checklist: Building the Course

*As reflective practitioners and professionals, we encourage Catholic educators and teams of educators to create their online curriculum with this checklist in mind. **We strongly recommend printing this checklist and including your responses with your curriculum writing project as part of the review process.***

*The overarching question in every Catholic curriculum design project is:*

**What makes this curriculum distinctly Catholic for your students?**

## **BUILDING THE COURSE**

**What Ministry of Education documents underpin this work? (list all relevant re: curriculum, assessment, EDI, etc.)**

- What other documents – from your board or the Catholic Curriculum cooperatives -have you incorporated?
- What Catholic documents or resources have you incorporated?

**Who are the current students?**

- Where have you provided opportunities for the teacher to get to know their students and build community?
  - Interests, hobbies, future plans, any personal circumstances that may be relevant
  - Specific learning circumstances, special education needs, ELL/MLL, etc.
  - Opportunities for students to get to know one another
  - Diagnostic activities to gauge the prior knowledge of students

**What do our students need to learn? What lessons /opportunities can you design to bring students to be able to demonstrate understanding of course goals?**

- What are the curriculum goals?
- How can these understandings be “illuminated by faith”?
- How can these learning goals be organized?
- Where and in what ways have these lessons be infused with both Catholic content and Catholic context? (eg. Where have you connected with Church teaching on a particular topic? How have you embedded a Catholic worldview in the learning?)
- Where are the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations embedded in the planning?
- Is there a good balance of the variety of media types available in the LMS to present information to students?

**What assessments will be utilized to help students demonstrate their understanding?**

- Does it balance observations, conversations, and products?
- Does it take advantage of the many digital opportunities for submission of assignments?
- Does it allow for differentiation and support of special needs learners?
- Is there an appropriate balance of assessment types, with clear ability for differentiation - both student-to-student and assignment-to-assignment?

**How have you embedded opportunity for encounter and accompaniment?**

- What has been envisioned as opportunities for students to be part of the online community?
- Where have you suggested opportunities for the teacher to be “present” to the students?
- Where have you provided opportunities for ritual and encounter in the course?



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