

The Fifth Task of Catechesis: Preparing Christians for Active Participation in the Life and Mission of the Church

*I give you a new commandment: love one another.
As I have loved you, so you should also love one another. (Jn 13:34)*

Catechesis encourages an apprenticeship in Christian living that is based on Christ's teachings about community life. It should encourage a spirit of simplicity and humility, a special concern for the poor, particular care for the alienated, a sense of fraternal correction, common prayer, mutual forgiveness, and a fraternal love that embraces all these attitudes. . . . Catechesis will have an ecumenical dimension as it prepares the faithful to live in contact with persons of other Christian traditions, "affirming their Catholic identity while respecting the faith of others."¹

Men and women are not created to live in isolation. We are by nature social animals. We create numerous kinds of organizations to find fellowship, support and meaning. Christians are called to community in a special way: to live as members of the Church. The Greek word from which we get the word Church is *ekklesia*, meaning assembly. Thus the Church fundamentally is the gathering of all the baptized who come together to worship and further their lives of discipleship. In this fifth task from the NDC, catechists are called to invite the faithful to become active, full members of both the local and universal Church, advancing her mission in the world and becoming living icons of the Christ.

Infancy

In the Rite of Baptism, the priest-presider meets the parents and their infant at the door of the Church to ask the child's name and invite the family into the celebration. In this action, the presider represents the local community, the family of faith, that gathers there and welcomes this child. During the Rite, it is this same community that pledges its support and prayers as the parents lead this infant along the way of faith.

Before and after the celebration of Baptism, parents of young children should be provided with suitable catechetical and liturgical resources to help equip them to grow into their truest vocation as leaders in the domestic church, the church of the home.

¹ NDC, no. 20: 5




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The environment of the parish can give young families a clear message that the community is committed to surrounding them with care. For example, a parish can provide:

- restrooms with changing tables and a rocking chair
- a high chair and booster seat in the parish hall
- interactive toys, games, and movies in the parish hall
- childcare with appropriately screened and trained caregivers for all major parish events, adult classes, RCIA etc.

Providing opportunities for parents to gather and minister to one another (for example, the Ministry of Mothers Sharing² or the National Fellowship of Catholic Men³), enables young parents to find a more active place in the Church. In this way young families feel a genuine sense of hospitality and are better able to take their place in a reciprocal commitment of responsibility to the community's life and mission. Other ideas include:

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- Baptized toddlers should be welcomed as part of the Sunday assembly. Despite their occasional fussiness, they enrich the assembly by their presence.
 - Before or after Mass, toddlers can be taken on a tour of the Church, familiarizing them with the building and building a foundation for their later understanding of their "ownership" of the Church.
 - Many parish events can include an activity for young children. Parishes need not always segregate activities for adults.
 - Today's families are busier than ever. Catechists should consider offering flexible schedules and repeating special events, such as intergenerational and seasonal offerings, at different times to accommodate family needs.

Preschool Children

Children in preschool and the early primary years are able to find their own place in the community through opportunities that animate their sense of wonder and awe. They are drawn into the stories of their family as well as those of their family of faith. When provided opportunities of play and interactive experiences they are able to interiorize the symbol system and religious ideas of the community. This happens best through *Intergenerational Catechesis* that engages the imagination of the entire community within the context of the family.

Set as a box: Intergenerational Catechesis, also called Whole Community Catechesis, is a movement toward catechesis that involves the entire parish community in lifelong faith formation and that necessitates the coordination and collaboration of catechetical and liturgical ministries. This approach should supplement, not replace, the ongoing systematic catechesis offered in the Parish School of Religion. For examples of popular

² See <http://www.stpaulsmonastery.org/6-moms/introduction.html>


³ See <http://www.catholicmensresources.org/>

national efforts, see the following websites: <http://www.generationsofffaith.org/> or http://your.harcourtreligion.com/home/pof_bridge.html

In time young families begin to look forward to the day when their child will receive the Holy Eucharist for the first time. This is an opportunity for the community to provide these families with catechesis that will deepen their child's experience of forgiveness and reconciliation as well as the intimate relationship between their family table and the Eucharistic table. Through this work, the community extends an invitation to these young families into the apostolic activity of the Church. Other ideas include:

- Providing opportunities such as retreat days for young families.
- Linking young families, especially newcomers, to older families who can serve as mentors.
- Inviting young families to serve in all the ministries of the parish. Baptism preparation ministry is especially appropriate as parents who have recently celebrated the Rite of Baptism can make excellent peer ministers for others.

Children in Elementary School



Up until the age of 9 or 10 children have a great capacity for fantasizing and continue to be filled with awe and wonder at simple things like the flickering of a lighted candle. The symbols of the community life and their family take on a deeper meaning to them. They look to their parents, extended family and the faith community to live with integrity. They watch closely for clues of what it means to live what they are learning.

As the community continues to bring them into intergenerational gatherings they have a capacity to engage in ritual prayer more deeply. Community devotions such as the Stations of the Cross become much more meaningful. Children at this age are drawn into the apostolic activity of the church not only to participate but to explore the meaning of these activities in their own lives.

As children move toward their pre-teen years they develop a capacity to understand competing social and religious perspectives. As *spiritual inquirers* they look to the community to provide ecumenical and inter-church experiences, learning and prayer.

Other suggestions include:

- Inviting families to be responsible for leading public rosaries, Stations of the Cross, and other devotions in the parish.
- Encourage the development of Small Christian Communities, RENEW, and other groups that can include children in some of their activities. When parents open their homes for religious activities, young children learn the value their parents place on their faith.

Children in Middle School

The ministry of community life builds an environment of love, support, appreciation for diversity, and judicious acceptance that models Catholic principles; develops meaningful relationships; and nurtures Catholic faith. The content of our message will be heard only when it is lived in our relationships and community life.⁴

It is imperative that young people be made to feel welcomed, loved, important, needed and wanted in our faith communities. Relationship-building is crucial to the process of evangelizing and catechizing the young. Early adolescents especially need the opportunities to grow in their faith while building meaningful relationships in the faith community. Effective youth ministry is marked by generous hospitality and intentional relationship building.⁵ A genuinely welcoming community will:

- Offer young adolescents activities and events with a positive environment to encourage their interaction with peers. Some ideas include: a junior-high youth group, retreats, game and fun nights, lock-ins, social outings like skating and bowling, and service opportunities in the community.
- Invite and encourage youth participation in liturgy and prayer, especially in ministerial roles within their capacity to perform.
- Reach out to the less active and involved youth by constantly inviting them and gently encouraging their involvement. It is the duty of the leadership to know everyone in the parish and let no one fall through the cracks for lack of invitation. A "birthday card ministry" says, "We know you by name and we care."

In the midst of these activities, there is a great need for the community to offer both middle school and high school youth opportunities to learn skills of discernment within a communal context as well as skill building in the art of intimate friendships in an environment of trust and acceptance.

High School Adolescents

High school students are too busy! There are many demands on their time, and studies of young people tell us definitively that they are forced to pick and choose how they will use their time. So what place is religion able to secure among these vying institutions and activities? Religion simply occupies a largely losing structural position when it comes to most adolescents' obligations, schedules, routines, and habits.⁶

The "youth group"/CYO model no longer is the primary vehicle for ministering to high schoolers. The starting point in youth ministry is building authentic relationships; adult youth ministers to teens and their parents, and teens to teens. Relationship

⁴ RTV, p. 34

⁵ East, Thomas, Ann Marie Eckert, Dennis Kurtz, and Brian Singer-Towns, *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*, 2004. p. 9

⁶ Smith, Christian and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Oxford University Press, Inc., NY, 2005. p. 161



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building often takes place on their “turf.” Many parishes across the nation have found that teens don’t always have the time or the interest level to participate in a large group activity, like the traditional youth group. Many young people will, however, respond to specific types of programming that might interest them:

- Small group Bible studies offered at a convenient time
- Service opportunities
- Retreats
- Discussion groups on topics of particular interest
- Extended service opportunities like work camps or mission trips
- Projects promoting a particular social justice theme like Respect Life or Peace

Contemporary youth ministry is called to become more eclectic in its programming and to offer young people more choices. The traditional youth group format simply cannot meet the needs of most teens today. A youth minister needs to:

- Build authentic relationships with young people one by one.
- Offer a variety of options for teens to satisfy their hunger for faith and meaning and to challenge their spiritual growth.
- Recognize that youth are not passive receivers of ministry. They need to have ownership and share leadership in the programming and the wider community life.
- Provide opportunities where youth can witness to their faith with their peers.⁷

Finally, young people need to learn what Catholic Identity is about and how they are called to live as Catholic Christians in the world in relation to other faith traditions and other belief systems.

Young Adults

Young adults are persons in their late teens, twenties, and thirties who represent a broad diversity. “They are college and university students, workers, and professionals; they are persons in military service; they are single, married, divorced or widowed; they are with or without children; they are newcomers in search of a better life.”⁸ Given this portrait, it is a challenge to discern how to assist them to take their rightful place in the life and mission of the community.

It is essential that the Church raise up the unique gifts of young adults and the extraordinary difference they can make. They possess:

- Lively faith and hope
- A deep hunger for social justice and to serve
- A spirit of optimism and idealism

⁷ *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*, p. 74.

⁸ NDC, no. 195




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- Wisdom borne of their experience of diversity
- A yearning for deepened spirituality⁹

The Church must provide a persistent invitation to bring these gifts into ministries where they are sorely needed, such as marriage preparation, preparation for the Sacrament of Baptism, career discernment, and so forth. Making room for their voice in an authentic and meaningful way will allow their passions to animate the life of the community.

Adults

In order for the Good News of the Kingdom to penetrate all the various layers of the human family, it is crucial that every Christian play an active part in the coming of the Kingdom. . . All of this naturally requires adults to play a primary role. Hence it is not only legitimate, but also necessary to acknowledge that a fully Christian community can only exist when a systematic catechesis of all its members takes place, and when an effective and well-developed catechesis of adults is regarded as the central task in the catechetical enterprise.¹⁰



All adult catechesis, in whatever form it takes, supports the fifth task of catechesis. It “fosters active participation in the Church as she is realized in families, small faith-based communities, parishes, dioceses, and the communion of saints. It helps adults to develop a deeper sense of their cooperation with the Holy Spirit for the mission of the Church in the world and for her internal life as well.”¹¹

Parish leaders should find a variety of ways to catechize adults in the roles they fulfill in the life of the community, including:

- Liturgical ministries
- Parish Finance Councils, which are mandated both by Canon Law and the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston
- Parish Pastoral Councils, mandated by the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston under the new guidelines for Pastoral Councils [now in development]
- Catechetical ministries
- Ministries of justice and direct service to the poor and marginalized
- Peer ministries to those dealing with grief and loss; midlife issues; loss of employment; parenting of adolescents; care of aging parents; and so forth

⁹ NDC, no. 48C

¹⁰ ACCC, no. 25

¹¹ NDC, no. 48A, 1:2

The National Conference for Catechetical Leadership has published a national study of adult education practices that would be a good resource for planning programs in this area.¹²

Senior Adults

Pope John Paul II, in his 1999 *Letter to the Elderly* calls seniors the “guardians of our collective memory”.¹³ As such, they bring to the community the rich story of our inherited history as a Church as well as a society. “To exclude the elderly,” the Pope writes, “is in a sense to deny the past, in which the present is firmly rooted, in the name of a modernity without memory. Precisely because of their mature experience, the elderly are able to offer young people precious advice and guidance.”

The NDC reminds parish leaders that “older people are providers, not simply recipients, of pastoral care.”¹⁴ The U.S. Bishops note that “older persons have a responsibility, commensurate with health, abilities, and other obligations, to undertake some sort of service to others”¹⁵ Some ideas include:

- Encourage seniors to become sponsors for RCIA or for candidates for the Sacrament of Confirmation and to assist with other sacramental preparation programs.
- Develop peer-ministry efforts such as grieving groups and grandparent groups.
- Invite elders into prayer groups; those who are homebound can pray for the needs of the parish on a regular basis. (see *Ministry of Praise* in Appendix)

¹² Riley David and McBride, Jack, *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation: a National Study*, NCCL, Washington, DC, 2006

¹³ Pope John Paul II, *Letter to the Elderly*, 1999. no. 10

¹⁴ NDC, no. 48B

¹⁵ *Blessings of Age: A Pastoral Message on Growing Older Within the Faith Community*, pp. 22-24