


The First Task of Catechesis—Promoting Knowledge of the Faith

*May grace and peace in abundance be yours
through knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. (2 Pt 1:2)*

The initial proclamation of the Gospel introduces the hearers to Christ for the first time and invites conversion to him. By the action of the Holy Spirit such encounter engenders in the hearers a desire to know about Christ, his life, and the context of his message. Catechesis responds to this desire by giving the believers a knowledge of the content of God's self-revelation, which is found in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, and by introducing them to the meaning of the Creed. Creeds and doctrinal formulas that state the Church's belief are expressions of the Church's living tradition, which from the time of the apostles has developed "in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit."²



The NDC asserts that there are four "normative" instruments for use by catechists in passing on the faith of the Church. They are Sacred Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the General Directory for Catechesis (GDC), and the NDC itself.³ These complementary sources form a "symphony of the faith."

There are nine criteria for the authentic presentation of the Christian message. Such a presentation:

1. Centers on Jesus Christ
2. Introduces the Trinitarian dimension of the Gospel message
3. Proclaims the Good News of salvation and liberation
4. Comes from and leads to the Church
5. Has a historical character
6. Seeks inculturation and preserves the integrity and purity of the message
7. Offers the comprehensive message of the Gospel and respects its inherent hierarchy of truths
8. Communicates the profound dignity of the human person
9. Fosters a common language of the faith⁴

² NDC, no. 20

³ NDC, no. 24

⁴ NDC, no. 25


Infancy

In a child's earliest years, most of the catechesis will be done with the child's parents. Parish preparation for the sacrament of Baptism, for example, will better enable the parents and godparents to understand both the Rite of Baptism itself and their responsibility to raise the child in the Catholic faith.

But even before the child is born, parents can do much to prepare for their role as "first catechists" of their child. They can ensure that their home reflects their faith by displaying crucifixes, religious art, Bibles, and other Catholic symbols. Playing religious music in the home—both music heard at Mass and classical sacred music—can also create the kind of atmosphere conducive to passing on the faith.

Educators encourage parents to begin reading to their children from their earliest days, and bright, colorful religious books written for children should be included.

Preschool Children



The Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles believes that even very young children are capable of having highly-developed understandings of God and sophisticated questions about the meaning of life.⁵ Parents as well as parish staffs should provide a rich catechetical environment for preschoolers. In the preschool years, children learn their first prayers (the Our Father and Hail Mary, the Guardian Angel prayer, grace before meals, morning and bedtime prayers) and form habits that can last a lifetime. Children's Bibles expose preschoolers to important lessons in the faith. Even when young preschoolers are placed in a nursery setting during Mass, the nursery staff can play religious songs and read from religious books for children.

Ordinarily, children should accompany their parents to Mass each week beginning no later than kindergarten age. Parents with young children often head immediately for the "cry room," if available, or the very back of church so they can make a quick exit with a fussy child. In fact, bringing a small child to the front pews where he or she can easily see the action in the sanctuary is often a better solution. Even very young children will watch and listen attentively to the Mass when given the opportunity to do so.

Children can relate to the care and love of God through the love and trust they experience from adults. They can be guided to experience God in everyday life through stories, songs, activities, conversation, and prayer. They can develop and be awakened to a life of faith and are open to a community of prayer through ritual.



⁵ Coles, Robert. *The Spiritual Lives of Children*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1990

Children in Elementary School

School-age children begin their more formal introduction to the Catholic faith, either through parish religious education or enrollment in a parochial school. It is critical that parents reinforce at home the lessons learned in religious education classes.

Children should be enrolled in a comprehensive sacramental preparation program for First Penance and First Communion (see Sacramental Preparation in the Catechesis section) in which parents play a significant role.

The NDC contains eight pastoral directives for the catechists of young children.⁶ Catechists should:

1. Be able to understand children, communicate with them, listen to them with respect, be sensitive to their circumstances, and be aware of their current values.
2. Recognize that children have a dignity of their own and that they are important not only for what they will do in the future but for who they are now.
3. Encourage them to know and respect other cultural, religious, racial, and ethnic groups, and use catechetical materials that are adapted to accommodate cultural, racial and ethnic pluralism; the concerns of particular groups; and persons with special needs.
4. Understand that the child's comprehension and other powers develop gradually, and present religious truths in greater depth and propose more mature challenges as the capacity for understanding and growth in faith increases.
5. Provide experiences in which they can live their faith and apply the message of salvation to real-life situations; encourage the use of imagination, as well as intelligence and memory.
6. Provide experiences that link liturgy and catechesis and promote appreciation for the community celebration of the Eucharist.
7. Stimulate not only exterior but interior activity—a prayerful response from the heart.
8. Foster a sense of community that is an important part of education for social life.

⁶ NDC, no. 48E2

Children in Middle School


Youth of this age can begin to be involved in comprehensive youth ministry. Youth ministry has three essential goals⁷:

1. Empowering young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in our world today;
2. Drawing young people to responsible participation in the life, mission and work of the faith community; and
3. Fostering the personal and spiritual growth of each young person.

The ministry of catechesis fosters growth in Catholic faith in three dimensions—trusting (heart), knowing and believing (mind), and doing (will).⁸

Early adolescence is a time of rapid and uneven change for young people. Maturity levels and growth can vary significantly from youth to youth.

This is a good time to introduce new program approaches that encourage the thought processes and stimulate the senses. “Head” (content) knowledge should be accompanied by “heart” (belief) and “hand” (action) knowledge.



Peer influence on attitudes, values and behaviors at this stage of life becomes more apparent and grows stronger into later adolescence. Early adolescents are capable of engaging with peers, when led by older adolescents or adults, in significant dialog on faith and life issues. This is an ideal time to introduce them to small group Scripture study.

These young people are also influenced by role models and heroes. Parents are still their primary role models and hero figures. As their world views expand, they find new heroes as well; sports figures, music idols, movie stars, favorite teachers and coaches, and even possibly a catechist or youth minister. Through teaching the life of Jesus and the words and the deeds of the saints⁹, young people can learn to emulate higher ideals and beliefs.

High School Adolescents

All Catholic youth should be involved in some program of catechesis that is responsive to age-appropriate needs, interests and concerns.¹⁰ In a national study on youth and religion conducted by the University of North Carolina, most U.S. youth were

⁷ RTV, p. 2

⁸ RTV p. 29

⁹ NDC, no. 48D

¹⁰ RTV, p. 29




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found to be very inarticulate about the beliefs and teachings of their religious traditions, with Catholic youth among the most inarticulate.¹¹

There are many challenges in passing on the faith to youth. One such challenge is the over-scheduling of today's youth in after-school and weekend activities, and the general "busyness" of family life today. There is a great need to explore new approaches to catechize youth in nontraditional ways to reach them in the busyness of their lives.

The most effective catechetical programs for adolescents are integrated into a comprehensive program of pastoral ministry for youth that includes catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care, and prayer and worship.¹² Effective catechesis has many qualities and dynamics, including this list from a national research project:¹³

- It most often begins with real-life issues and connects faith to life.
- It is facilitated by open-minded, authentic and faith-filled adults.
- It includes community building.
- It includes peer sharing, youth witness and youth leadership.
- It teaches about Catholic identity.
- It is experiential, active and innovative.
- It is supported by parish staff, families and parish communities.
- It doesn't feel like school, that is, it doesn't involve long lectures or too much focus on textbooks.



In addition to these qualities, effective adolescent catechesis is in sync with the lifelong learning program for the parish community. Adolescent catechesis can and *should* operate in unison with any intergenerational catechesis in the parish. Parish leaders need to keep in mind the catechetical and pastoral needs of parents of adolescents. The National Study on Youth and Religion¹⁴ clearly states that teens are on par in religious belief and knowledge with their parents. And, finally, all catechesis needs to be culturally and pastorally sensitive to the makeup of the faith community.

Methods should be varied and creative. Here are a few ideas: small group discussion (Scripture study), simulation and games (food fasts, hunger banquets), role-playing and drama, movies and media, Bible search, personal sharing, non-gathered methods (letters to teens with inspirational and faith-based stories or thoughts, web or e-mail reflections), and youth rallies and conferences.

¹¹ Smith, Christian, et al. *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 262

¹² NDC, no. 48D

¹³ East, Thomas, et al. *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*, St. Mary's Press, 2004, p.6

¹⁴ *Soul Searching*, p. 261

Young Adults

In their pastoral plan for young adults, the U.S. bishops state that the objective for parishes is "to help young adults appreciate the teachings and traditions of the Church through catechesis, religious education and pastoral care."¹⁵

A successful young adult ministry employs a number of strategies to reach this age group.¹⁶ They include:

- Offering a variety of programs such as evening presentations, discussion groups, and Theology on Tap.
- Form Scripture study groups.
- Provide information and catechetical resources through the use of technology such as email and the Internet.
- Prepare young adults who have not received their First Communion or Confirmation through an effective RCIA program.
- Use marriage preparation to educate and connect young adults with the Church.
- Provide annual retreat opportunities for young adults throughout the Diocese.

Adults

A mature adult faith is one that is living, explicit and fruitful.¹⁷ A living faith grows and develops as the Christian matures and learns new things. It is a faith that seeks to understand more and grow more in union with Christ. This is why the Church has declared on many occasions that the Baptismal Catechumenate is to be the model for all catechesis, especially that of adults.¹⁸ An explicit faith is rooted in Christ, radically Trinitarian in nature, and closely linked to the Church. A fruitful faith is reflected in works of mercy and justice. It bears witness to the faith through appropriate efforts to evangelize. It acknowledges that God's favor and promise of salvation are always gifts that cannot be earned.

There are countless ways to promote knowledge of the faith in adults. Some of the more popular are:

- Classes on doctrine, sacraments, Church history, and Scripture
- Scripture study groups
- Bulletin inserts and website articles
- Online learning and distance learning
- Small faith communities

¹⁵ *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults*, Washington, USCCB, 1996, p. 28

¹⁶ *Sons and Daughters*, p. 29 & 30

¹⁷ OHWB, p. 16

¹⁸ OHWB, p. 26



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- Membership in such groups as RENEW, the Christian Family Movement, or Marriage Encounter
- Lecture series by experts¹⁹

Senior adults

Senior adults may be in particular need of an “updating” in the truths of the faith. Many Catholics end their formal education in the faith following the reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation and, thus, have an incomplete understanding of what Catholics believe. This may be especially true in Catholic moral teaching in areas of rapid technological change, such as stem-cell research, reproductive methods, and end-of-life issues.

As the U.S. bishops have noted, senior adults often are looked upon as recipients of pastoral care rather than as providers of care and active members of the parish community.²⁰ But as they also note, many seniors have the time and the interest to attend Bible study groups and other adult faith formation efforts. Parish staffs should take care to schedule such efforts during the daytime—when seniors are more likely to attend—and to combine catechetical efforts with time for socializing.



¹⁹ For more information, see Riley, David & McBride, Jack, *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation: A National Study*, Washington, NCCL, 2006

²⁰ *Blessings of Age: A Pastoral Message on Growing Older Within the Faith Community*, Washington, USCCB, 1999