

The Sixth Task of Catechesis: Promoting a Missionary Spirit

Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Central to Catholic identity is the belief that Jesus' disciples are called to be leaven for transforming the world, agents for bringing about a kingdom of love and justice. When Catholic Christians pray, "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," they are praying for God's kingdom of justice and peace and committing themselves to breaking down the barriers that obstruct the coming of the kingdom and to working to bring about a world more respectful of human life and dignity.¹

Infancy

Most families begin the faith journey with their child when they bring him or her to the font for the Sacrament of Baptism. Ideally, the family has been involved in faith formation with the parish community to prepare for the Sacrament, and to understand the question the Church will be asking them at the font:

"You have asked to have your children baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring them up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?"²

Even in this very beginning, this Sacrament of Initiation, the loving of neighbor is part of what Catholics are commanded to make part of their commitment to the faith, to God. And here, in this encountering of Christ in Baptism, parents, godparents, and parish assembly speak for the Church at large, that they will join together to accept the responsibility of raising this child to keep the commandments of God, given us by Christ, to love God and our neighbor. This is promoting a missionary spirit.

For an infant, the "family offers an immediate context for establishing and testing Christian love. Families engender the values and teach the skills that are so necessary to the process of becoming Christ's disciples."³ Families can carry out the mission of the Church of the home in many ordinary ways:

- believing in God
- modeling love
- fostering intimacy
- evangelization
- education

¹ SCST p. 4

² RBC

³ FC, p. 3




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- prayer
- service to one another
- forgiveness and reconciliation
- celebration of life
- welcoming the stranger¹
- acting justly in the community
- affirming life, and
- raising up vocations.”⁴

“Christian life includes obligations beyond the family circle. For children to learn the true meaning of abundant life in Christ, they need to know the joy of contributing to the common good: in the home, in the neighborhood, in the Church, and in society. Duty is an anchor in what seems to be an ocean of chaos.”⁵

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops made a pledge in 1994 “to continue support for families organizing to help one another . . . in taking action to serve the poor and remedy injustice, in forming communities of families who walk the way of love together.”⁶ Children who are raised in families who live a life of helping others become imbued with a missionary spirit from the time before they can remember.



“Each generation of a family is challenged to leave the world a more beautiful and beneficial place than it inherited. You can do this, for example, when you deliberately pass on your wisdom and the faith of the Church, providing countercultural messages about poverty, consumerism, sexuality, and racial injustice, to name a few.

“You also give life as a family by doing such simple things as taking a grandparent out of a nursing home for a ride, bringing a meal to a sick neighbor, helping to build homes for poor people, working in a soup kitchen, recycling your goods, working to improve the schools, or joining political action on behalf of those treated unjustly. Such activity builds stronger family bonds. It enriches both the receiver and the giver. . . . As a family becomes a community of faith and love, it simultaneously becomes a center of evangelization.”⁷

For a parish to fulfill the catechetical task of promoting a missionary spirit for the youngest parishioners, it is necessary to enrich all parish outreach with a family perspective, including ways for all to participate in all social justice and evangelization activities. The lived faith of the primary people in a young child’s life, their attitude towards others, and their trust in a loving God strongly influence the development of the child’s faith.

⁴ FTWL, p. 7-9

⁵ FTWL, p. 32

⁶ FTWL, p. 29

⁷ FTWL, p.20-21

Preschool Children

"Catechetical programs for children in daycare and preschool seek to foster their growth in a wider community. They should always be suited to the age, circumstances, and learning capacity of young children and be designed to reinforce the primary human and Christian values present in the family. . . Catechesis that involves the whole family is a particularly effective method of catechesis for young children because it helps parents to become more confident in sharing their faith with their children and encouraging their children's emerging faith."⁸

The most important task of the catechesis of children is to provide, through the witness of adults, an environment in which young people can grow in faith. Pastoral directives that lay the groundwork for promoting a missionary spirit include ones that guide the catechists to encourage children to know and respect other

- cultural groups
- religious group
- racial groups
- ethnic groups, and
- persons with special needs.

Catechists need to present religious truths in greater depth and propose more mature challenges as the capacity for understanding and growth in faith increases. Fostering a sense of community is an important part of education for social life and justice.⁹

It is essential to allow and welcome children into the assembly at liturgy and to encourage their inclusion and participation. The promotion of a missionary spirit is enhanced by the concluding rite, the sending forth, at every liturgy. Catechists and parents can help children understand this command to take the love of Jesus with them to share with others to help shape a better world. Young children can learn that when they:

- give a drink of water to someone who is thirsty
- share food with someone who is hungry
- say "hello" to someone who is feeling left out, or
- give clothes to the needy, knowing they are doing it for Jesus.¹⁰

In promoting a missionary spirit through catechesis, seven of the eight elements of "human methodology" presented in the NDC are engaged:

⁸ NDC, no. 48E2

⁹ NDC, no. 48E2

¹⁰ CGGFT, Ages 4-5, p. 28-29



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- learning through human experience
- learning by discipleship
- learning within the Christian community
- learning within the Christian family
- learning through the witness of the catechist
- making a commitment to live the Christian life, and
- learning by apprenticeship.¹¹

Children in Elementary School

As children grow older and interact on a daily basis with the world outside of the family, they need catechesis that “assists them

- in the praxis of observing, exploring, interpreting, and evaluating their experiences;
- in learning to ascribe a Christian meaning to their lives; and
- in learning to act according to the norms of faith and love.

The presence in today’s society of many conflicting values makes it all the more important to help young people to interiorize authentic values.”¹²



As the families of children are prepared for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and the Sacrament of Eucharist, they can be helped to understand that Jesus came back to life to nourish his followers to carry on his work in the world, loving and helping people. The word *apostle* means “one who is sent.” Jesus sends his people from the Eucharistic Liturgy to take God to the world.¹³

As children grow older, they become more aware of needs in the community, in the country, and in the world, such as homelessness, hunger, illness, racism, natural disasters, war, and famine. Helping children learn to pray for the needs of others is an important part of strengthening their missionary spirit. They learn that the world badly needs to know about Jesus Christ and his love for all humanity. That message, the Good News, is part of what children bring with them when they are sent forth from the liturgy. Children learn that they become the eyes, ears, hands, and voice of Jesus for those in need. Christ nourishes his people in the liturgy with his Body and Blood to continue his work in the world. Catechists need to help children identify people who they could help, such as

- the sick or elderly of the parish
- children at school who are lonely at lunch or on the playground
- parents who are tired or sad

¹¹ NDC, no. 29

¹² NDC, no. 48

¹³ CGGFT, Ages 6-8, p. 29

- brothers or sisters with concerns.¹⁴

Children in Middle School

Catechesis with middle school youths emphasizes that growth in faith includes growth in the desire for a deeper, more mature knowledge of the truths of faith.¹⁵ Youth of this age can begin to be involved in comprehensive youth ministry. Youth ministry has three essential goals:

1. empowering young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world;
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.¹⁶

The ministry of catechesis fosters growth in Catholic faith in three dimensions: trusting (heart), knowing and believing (mind), and doing (will).¹⁷

The ministry of justice and service empowers young people to work for justice by concrete efforts to address the causes of human suffering and infuses the concepts of justice, peace and human dignity into all ministry efforts. Justice and service with adolescents involves adolescents, their families, and parish communities in actions of direct service to those in need. Direct service needs to be coupled with action for justice so that adolescents experience the benefits of working directly with those in need and learn to change the system that keeps people in need. Four elements guide adolescents in moving from awareness to action on issues of justice:

- involvement,
- exploration,
- reflection
- action.¹⁸

Young adolescents can help discover and plan ways to bring the presence of Jesus into their households, friends, neighbors, and communities. They can be challenged to become aware of the presence of Christ in the poor, the hungry, the weak, and the oppressed. With adults in the parish, they can help draft action plans for social action.¹⁹

¹⁴ CGGFT, Ages 9-11, p. 29

¹⁵ NDC, no. 48

¹⁶ RTV, p. 2

¹⁷ RTV, p. 29

¹⁸ RTV, p. 38-39


¹⁹ CGGFT, ages 12-14, p. 29.

High School Adolescents

Many youth develop an appreciation for the power of liturgy by encountering Christ in those with needs and confronting social issues. In acts of Christian service and working for justice, youth can experience the paschal mystery in deeper ways. Working for justice is a response to the beliefs:

- that God cares enough about the world to enter into it and redeem it
- that God has a passion for justice and building right relationships, and
- that God calls all believers to share and to participate in this passion.

The Eucharist draws believers into right relationship and sends them forth to establish right relationships through justice. Jesus shows that this requires “particular attention to the needs and requirements of the poor and the vulnerable”. Injustice can be obvious, but more often it is deceptive and not easily noticed. It is always evident from its effects: violence, disrespect, poverty, hunger, drugs, alcoholism, crime, death. Adolescents must first learn to recognize injustice, including ways it is portrayed and nourished by the media that saturate their lives. Catechists can help older adolescents take on more mature and independent responsibilities in the family, parish, community, and workplace.²⁰



Adolescents need to feel part of a supportive community that works together for service and justice. A lifelong commitment of responding to a missionary spirit takes place when one is surrounded by adult role models who live out an enthusiastic commitment to this call to discipleship and invite and empower others to join them. Active and involved older adolescents soon become role models for those younger than them, as they model ways to respond to the call of a missionary spirit.

Young Adults

In *Sons and Daughters of the Light: a Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults*, goal three of A Plan for Ministry is “Connecting Young Adults with the Mission of the Church in the World.” Objectives are given for this invitation of young adults to be a part of the transformation of society by the building of the kingdom of God:

- forming a Christian conscience
- educating and working for justice
- developing leaders for the present and the future.

Young adults have many opportunities to evangelize society through the home and workplace. Many have the desire to learn more about Church teachings in order to make sound moral decisions. Some strategies include:

²⁰ CGGFT, Ages 15-18, p. 29




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- Offer adult religious education programs that connect contemporary life issues to the teachings and traditions of the Church.
- Provide opportunities to examine the relationship of faith to work, including ethics in the workplace.
- Make use of homilies and celebrations to discuss roles of the laity as evangelizers of society.
- Support scripture study groups and small groups for married couples, and
- Support formation of ongoing, intergenerational small faith communities.²¹

Young adults share the desire of the larger Church to care for the least among us. This ministry includes both educating and working for justice. Programs, homilies and retreats can help educate to the demands of the Gospel toward our neighbor. Some suggestions for action include:

- Motivate young adults through catechesis, homilies and music to work for peace in their relationships with others, especially in their jobs and community.
- Invite young adults to be members of parish or campus social justice committees or other social action organizations.
- Identify opportunities for immersion experiences during academic breaks or vacations, and
- Invite young adults individually, through the workplace or through the Church community, to donate services to social service agencies.



Mentoring relationships are a significant way in which young adults can strengthen the values, beliefs, ideas, and learning necessary to be mature Christians. Young adults can benefit from mentoring relationships connected with their career and jobs, especially ones sharing values and wisdom that spring from belief in the Gospel. To develop mentoring relationships:

- Connect younger and older adults in like professions.
- Reinforce the leadership role that each Christian is asked to undertake as a citizen through catechetical opportunities and homilies.
- Form discussion, support or prayer groups for those in like professions and trades, and
- Ask young adults to be mentors for adolescents, especially in Confirmation programs, and for those in different ethnic groups, especially immigrants who need help to succeed in a new and different culture.²²

Adults

When Jesus told his followers to “do this” in his memory, he was telling them to do much more than simply perform the ritual now known as the Mass. Jesus was telling

²¹ SDL, p. 36.

²² SDL, p. 37.

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his disciples throughout time not only to break bread, but to give themselves to others as he gave himself. Mass is not something that Catholics “attend,” but is something that they “do” and something that prepares them to go forth and do what Jesus asks of them.²³ The word “liturgy” means “work of the people” and is a more appropriate description of this command of Jesus.

Through Baptism, Christians make a commitment to do certain things as a follower of Jesus. Each Christian is anointed priest, prophet, and king, and is called:

- As priest, to make Jesus present to others; praise and worship God through their lives; offer themselves and their lives in sacrifice; help others gain access to God; intercede for the needs of the world; and act as part of God’s response to those needs.
- As prophet, to speak on behalf of the oppressed; speak God’s word, bear witness, evangelize, and catechize; bring hope to those in despair; challenge people and institutions to be faithful; and fearlessly speak out about injustice; and
- As king, to serve and protect the vulnerable; provide for those unable to provide for themselves; love enemies, lay down their lives for others; work for justice; live with dignity and respect others’ dignity; restore lives that are broken; and respect God’s will.²⁴

Adult catechesis should recognize the specific conditions of lay Catholics and consistently call them to holiness and seeking the “Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God.”²⁵

Senior Adults

The practical experience, wisdom, attitude, and example of many older adults make them especially valued gifts to the life of the Church. Christ calls the elderly to proclaim the Gospel, which enhances the richness of intergenerational catechesis. The catechesis of senior adults notes the contributions they make to the community through their wisdom and witness. “Older persons have a responsibility, commensurate with health, abilities, and other obligations, to undertake some form of service to others.”²⁶

- Older adults are providers, not just recipients of pastoral care.
- Older adults themselves should help to identify their needs and decide how they are met.
- Older adults are at least as diverse as other generational groups.
- Older adults need a mix of activities that connect them with each other as well as the larger faith community.²⁷

²³ LTM, p. xv.

²⁴ LTM, p. xvii.

²⁵ CL, no. 9.

²⁶ BA, 13.

²⁷ BA, 23.