

The Third Task of Catechesis—Promoting Moral Formation in Jesus Christ

Therefore, gird up the loins of your mind, live soberly, and set your hopes completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Like obedient children, do not act in compliance with the desires of your former ignorance but, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, for it is written, "Be holy because I (am) holy." (1 Pt 1:13-16)

Catechesis promotes moral formation in Jesus Christ. Jesus' moral teaching is an integral part of his message. Catechesis must transmit both the content of Christ's moral teachings as well as their implications for Christian living. Moral catechesis aims to conform the believer to Christ—to bring out personal transformation and conversion. It should encourage the faithful to give witness—both in their private lives and in the public arena—to Christ's teaching in everyday life. Such testimony demonstrates the social consequences of the demands of the Gospel.¹

Moral Formation and Catechesis

The CCC identifies eight kinds of catechesis necessary to bring learners to "newness of life" in Christ:

1. *A catechesis of the Holy Spirit*, the interior Master of life according to Christ, a gentle guest and friend who inspires, guides, corrects, and strengthens this life;
2. *A catechesis of grace*, for it is by grace that we are saved and again it is by grace that our works can bear fruit for eternal life;
3. *A catechesis of the Beatitudes*, for the way of Christ is summed up in the beatitudes, the only path that leads to the eternal beatitude for which the human heart longs;
4. *A catechesis of sin and forgiveness*, for unless man acknowledges that he is a sinner he cannot know the truth about himself, which is a condition for acting justly; and without the offer of forgiveness he would not be able to bear this truth;
5. *A catechesis of the human virtues* which causes one to grasp the beauty and attraction of right dispositions towards goodness;
6. *A catechesis of the Christian virtues* of faith, hope, and charity, generously inspired by the example of the saints;

¹ NDC, no. 20

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7. *A catechesis of the twofold commandment of charity* set forth in the Decalogue; and
8. *An ecclesial catechesis*, for it is through the manifold exchanges of "spiritual goods" in the "communion of saints" that Christian life can grow, develop, and be communicated.²

The sixth chapter of the NDC outlines a catechesis for "life in Christ." The NDC clearly views moral formation in the context of the Sacrament of Baptism and that graces that flow from Baptism. While not ignoring the need to teach about sin, the NDC first emphasizes the role of grace and the Beatitudes in teaching about the moral life. "It is a catechesis of grace, the love of God, which prompts our good works and by which we are saved. It is a catechesis of the Beatitudes, the blessings that anticipate the eternal beatitude of life in communion with God."³

Some other basic principles from the NDC on catechesis for the moral life include:

- The dignity of men and women is rooted in their creation in the image and likeness of God.
- Virtue is the habit of choosing the good in concrete daily situations. The cardinal virtues are: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. The theological virtues are: faith, hope and charity.
- The formation of a moral conscience, guided by the teachings of the Magisterium, is crucial.
- Sin is an offense against God that turns the human heart away from love.
- Because people are social beings by nature, the Church has a special obligation to seek justice and harmony in society. Catholic social teaching seeks to form a more just society and to remedy the effects of social sin.⁴

The chapter also contains an extensive catechesis on the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes.

Infancy and Preschool children

Formation in the moral life begins even before the child is born. Baptism preparation for parents and godparents should stress the role of family members in shaping the child's attitudes toward right and wrong. The home life of the family will profoundly affect the child's moral formation. Parents (and siblings) can influence this formation in a number of ways, including:

- The ways in which family members speak to one another and resolve conflict.
- The reverence (or lack of it) for God's name.

² CCC, n. 1697

³ NDC, no. 40

⁴ NDC, nos. 42, 43




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- The behavior and language modeled when interacting with neighbors, persons in stores and businesses, and towards other drivers in traffic and in parking lots.
- Participation in acts of service in the parish and in the community, and the ways that recipients of service are treated and spoken to.

Children in Elementary School

Although values are unconsciously absorbed from those loved and respected, values can also be taught and consciously claimed. Children need help understanding personal and religious values, help internalizing what is understood, and help learning specific skills to translate the values into behaviors. Children need help with learning how to make decisions based on shared values, and how to carry out the decisions, especially in difficult situations. On a daily basis most children are faced with how to treat companions on the playground and in the lunch room, and often have to do so in the face of some very inappropriate role models.



In a culture of diverse moral values, children who are struggling to make Christian moral decisions need support and encouragement from friends, family, community and parish members. Though usually less prejudiced than adults, young people still tend to reflect the attitudes of their parents and significant adults; hence, conscious efforts are needed to create the sensitivities that characterize a loving and understanding attitude towards people different from oneself. Children need to be encouraged to learn about and respect other cultural, religious, racial, and ethnic groups. Catechetical materials should be chosen that are adapted to accommodate cultural, racial, and ethnic pluralism, and the concerns of particular groups and persons with special needs.⁵

Children in Middle School

It is this task of catechesis that deals with conversion: helping young people make the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes the guiding values of their lives. Young people and their parents are bombarded with many competing value systems and must come to terms with how they will make decisions compatible with Gospel living. The catechesis of children, youth and adults has given rise to a type of Christian who is conscious of his faith and who acts consistently with it in his life.⁶

Contemporary U.S. culture makes it harder for young people to make good moral decisions. The all-pervasive media and other societal influences can negatively affect what young people perceive as right and wrong, and, thus, impair their conscience formation. The role of the Church is to assist parents in equipping their young people with good information and knowledge of Scripture and Church teachings so that they can make informed decisions. Some of the areas in which young people need formation are:⁷

⁵ NDC, no. 48E2

⁶ GDC, no. 24

⁷ RTV, p. 31-32

- *The dignity of the human person*—recognizing the divine image present in every human person;
- *Morality and living a virtuous life*—assimilating Catholic moral principles;
- *Personal growth*—discerning the Spirit at work in their lives and incorporating the Catholic vision of life into personal identity;
- *Relationships*—developing and maintaining relationships based on Catholic values;
- *Sexuality*—understanding the Church’s teaching on sexual morality, the Church’s positive view of sexuality as a gift, and the importance of valuing chastity and sexual restraint;
- *Grace as gift*—recognizing God’s indwelling spirit in our lives and responding to this gift;
- *Lifestyles and vocation*—Discerning how to live the Christian vocation in the world, in the workplace, and in marriage, single life, ministerial priesthood, permanent diaconate, or consecrated life.

High School Adolescents

A popular movement in recent years has been “WWJD” (What Would Jesus Do?). Before young people can make moral decisions based on the Gospel, they need to know who Jesus is and what he stands for. Essentially young people need to hear the message of Jesus in new ways that are understandable to them. They need to test the teachings of Jesus against the messages of the popular culture to determine how to live as a Christian.

Any catechetical experiences with young people should afford the opportunity for honest dialog. Young people are learning analytical skills and beginning to question previously taught truths and morals. Questioning is good as long as they have the information to process the questions. *It is absolutely crucial that the Church provide a safe place for young people to ask questions on faith and morals and it is vital that caring, listening adults are available to field their questions and help them grapple with answers.* Young people need youth ministers and adult mentors to help them at this stage of life.

All of the areas or faith themes mentioned in the previous section for young adolescents apply here as well, with the addition of the following:⁸

- *Conscience, virtue and sin*—understanding and uncovering the desire to turn toward God, to do good, and to act in accordance with God’s grace; understanding the meaning and impact of sin; and learning to make decisions in accordance with one’s rightly formed conscience;

⁸ RTV, p. 33




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- *Catholic morality*—applying Catholic moral teachings to contemporary life situations as one encounters the many complexities in our world.

Dialog is very important in bringing these faith themes to a deeper level of understanding with teens. It is also important to talk about current events or moral issues in the news (war, abortion, immigration, domestic violence, etc) by allowing young people to share their thoughts and ideas and also giving them concise and relevant Church teaching or insight to help inform their conscience on these topics.

Prayerful discernment is a gift that the Church can offer to young people. Offering young people the opportunity to develop the skill and the heart for prayerful discernment can make a big difference in the lives of youth. The Church's ministry with adolescents seeks to guide young people in the call to holiness by developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ by meeting him in the Scriptures, in the life and teachings of the Catholic Church, and in their own prayer lives.⁹

Young Adults



As with all adults, the primary object with young adults is to assist them in forming their consciences so that, throughout their lives, they are prepared to make good moral judgments according to Gospel values.¹⁰ Young people today need considerable help, support and guidance as they enter into romantic relationships; move away from home, friends and their faith communities; and enter the workforce.

All of the adult faith formation strategies discussed elsewhere in these guidelines are appropriate for helping young adults learn about the moral life. Some specific strategies include:

- Use the Ten Commandments, Beatitudes, Catholic Social Teaching, and the moral teaching of the Church as a way of promoting conscience formation.
- Provide opportunities for pastoral counseling and/or spiritual direction.
- Influence conscience formation in young adults by lived example.
- Encourage frequent use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Adults

The U.S. Bishops have identified seven content areas for adult faith formation in the moral life:

- Understand how the “entire Law of the Gospel is contained in the ‘*new commandment*’ of Jesus, to love one another as he has loved us, and promote each disciple’s formation in the life of the risen Christ.

⁹ RTV, p. 16

¹⁰ Empowered By the Spirit: Campus Ministry Faces the Future, p. 63

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- Study the *Ten Commandments*, the *Beatitudes*, and the moral catechesis of the apostolic teachings, and live in accord with them.
- Appreciate the *dignity, destiny, freedom, and responsibility* of the human person, together with the reality of *sin* and the power of God's *grace* to overcome it.
- Learn how to acquire and follow a *well-formed conscience* in personal and social life, clarifying current *religious and moral questions* in the life of faith, and cultivating a Christian discernment of the *ethical implications* of developments in the socio-cultural order.
- Recognize, defend, and live by the truth of *objective moral norms* as taught by the Church's Magisterium in its moral and social teaching.
- Promote a thorough catechesis on *the Gospel of life* so that *respect for life* from conception until natural death is honored in personal behavior, in public policy, and in the expressed values and attitudes of our society.
- Live a *lifestyle reflecting scriptural values* of holiness, simplicity, and compassion.¹¹

By the time an individual reaches adulthood, he or she will have strong opinions on some moral issues and ambivalent feelings about others. Most will be unfamiliar with much of Church teaching on moral issues. In particular, adults who stopped their formal formation in the faith early in life will lack understanding of the *reasons behind Church teaching*.

Pastoral experience has shown that adults learn best when they are given the opportunity in small groups to discuss Church teaching on moral issues in light of their own lived experience. They are especially interested in knowing and struggling with the Church's teaching on such "hot button" issues as:

- Stem-cell research and its possible applications
- End-of-life issues, including the use of artificial feeding and ventilation
- Human cloning
- Human sexuality, including issues surrounding divorce and remarriage
- "Just war" theology as it applies to the various wars and conflicts in the world today

The catechist should encourage an atmosphere in which adults are free to express their opinions, even to disagree openly on issues. A stance of respectful listening while challenging the learner to new insights can be an important tool in conversion of heart and mind. It is useful, too, to have on hand a list of local spiritual directors who can assist the adult who is struggling to live the Gospel life more fully.

¹¹ OHWB, p. 31

Senior Adults

Like all adults, seniors will have extensive experience in facing moral issues. In particular, they likely will have survived the death of a spouse, child or other loved one. They may also have needed to make difficult decisions regarding medical care and end-of-life issues. Seniors who have faced such difficult issues may be a good resource for others. They can be especially effective in organizing grief groups, family support groups, and other ministries.

In his 1999 *Letter to the Elderly*, Pope John Paul II “The signs of human frailty which are clearly connected with advanced age become a summons to the mutual dependence and indispensable solidarity which link the different generations, inasmuch as every person needs others and draws enrichment from the gifts and charisms of all.” (n. 10)

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