



Catechesis and Culture

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West Virginia: Multicultural Communities

Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me. (Mt 25:34b-38)

The United States has always been a nation of immigrants. Except for Native Americans, all Americans trace their ancestry to another land.

The U.S. Bishops addressed this fact in their 2000 pastoral plan *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*. "The call to communion goes out to all members of the Church—bishops, priests, deacons, religious, lay leaders, and parishioners—to prepare themselves to receive the newcomers with a genuine spirit of welcome," the bishops write. "The new immigrants call most of us back to our ancestral heritage as descendants of immigrants and to our baptismal heritage as members of the body of Christ."

The bishops go on to call for a comprehensive approach to working with immigrants that begins with basic hospitality. The attitude and virtue of hospitality is at the very heart of what it means to be Christian. Jesus taught us to feed, clothe, and care for the stranger, with no hope of return or being paid back. In fact, as Matthew 25 clearly states, our salvation depends upon it.

Hospitality is more than offering coffee and doughnuts on Sunday morning—it is paying pure attention to another person. This implies an openness to receiving "the other" with no exceptions or expectations. To receive another is to hear another's stories, invite him or her into our lives, and discern another's needs. Hospitality is a way of evangelizing, a way of being Christ to others.

America's history of immigration has produced in West Virginia a veritable multicultural mosaic. In a mosaic each piece is unique but at the same time filled with its own variety. So, too, the various cultures and groups that call West Virginia home are not monolithic in and of themselves. Each group boasts its own diversity. This is a good reason to be aware of stereotypes and prejudgments.

There is a natural human response to fear what we do not know or understand about other people. What if they speak a different language? What of their strange customs? Perhaps a better way to approach another person lies in the ancient African tradition of anticipating the unique gifts every person brings to an encounter. This does not necessarily mean material gifts, although sometimes this is the case, but the experiences, wisdom, humor, and stories the person has to share. There are universal ways of communicating that say "I honor your dignity as a person created in God's image."

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Learning styles, ways of communicating, customs, traditions, and values vary between individuals and also among cultures. The best practice for any catechist is to get to know the students well, so as to “meet them where they are,” in terms of discerning and discovering *what they know, do not know, and how they best learn*. Opportunities to meet with the entire family also contribute to fuller knowledge of the person.


Here are some tips for catechists:

- Try to avoid stereotyping people from other ethnic groups or cultures.
- Make efforts to welcome, celebrate, and give voice to the cultural richness found in our faith communities.
- Be open to, and edified, by a re-reading of Scripture and the Christian tradition through the eyes and experience of various cultures.
- Beware of ethnic and cultural labels. Most people simply want to be called by their name, and only secondly as a citizen of their country of origin or citizenship.
- In your ministry, focus on giving people the opportunity, training, and resources to minister to themselves.
- Avoid the practice of having separate churches under one roof. While a parish may have a Mass in Spanish, for example, it should also work to help people form relationships in other ways. The goal is unity in diversity.

Catechesis in Rural Areas and in Small Parishes

Appalachia is a place, a state of mind, a way of life, and its people define themselves in ways uniquely tied to their culture. The history of the region has been dramatic, and the rugged mountainous terrain has contributed greatly to its past. Coal is not the king that it once was, but its legacy still reverberates in these hills. Faith and a deep sense of spirituality are at the heart of those who define themselves as Appalachians. Though Roman Catholics are in the minority in the region (about 5% of West Virginians), Catholic parishes, in the very heart of rural Appalachia, are a powerful presence in most aspects of life here.

Catechesis takes on a special flavor in rural areas. Parishes are smaller, sometimes fewer than 50 people, which presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. In small parishes, everyone knows everyone else, leading to a sense of community and closeness. On the other hand, people sometimes know *too much* about each other, which can lead to awkwardness in faith sharing. One authority on the RCIA in rural communities cautions about how the Scrutinies are celebrated during Lent for this reason; confessing one's weaknesses in public may not be accepted in a small faith community.²



Just as one-room schoolhouses once served rural areas, so intergenerational catechesis and family-centered catechesis naturally find a home in a small parish. These approaches may work better than attempting to organize traditional religious education sessions.

Rural parishes typically are far apart, making it difficult to share resources. High-speed Internet service may be hard to come by, limiting the potential for online learning.

² Michael Clay, *A Harvest for God: Christian Initiation in the Rural and Small Town Parish*, Liturgy Training Publications

Oral Storytelling

Critical to the development of ministry is the social and cultural context of the communities in which we live and minister. Inculturating faith formation is one of the guiding principles of the church's catechetical documents. The people of West Virginia are strong, rugged individuals. The Appalachian Pastoral Letter, *This Land is Home to Me*, captures this sense of people observing: "Their struggles and their poetry together keep alive a dream, a tradition, a longing, a promise that is not just their dream, but the voiceless vision buried beneath life's bitterness wherever it is found. They sing of a life free and simple, with time for one another, and for people's needs, based on dignity of the human person, at one with nature's beauty, crowned by poetry. If that dream dies, all our struggles die with it."³

The people of West Virginia are marked by the adaptability, imagination, story, homespun wisdom, and the love of place that characterize Appalachia. The Jesus of the Gospels would be very much at home in this land and among its people. His parables have the same literary qualities: colorful expressions, down-to-earth wisdom, and a forthright earthiness. Mountain folk are storytellers. For them to tell a story is to relive the story and to invite you to enter into it and experience it for yourself.⁴ These traits form an oral culture that can affect the way in which one ministers and teaches. For example, *writing a critique* defies the non-critical nature of traditional/oral people because they think in proverbs, stories, and relationships.

Telling stories has a powerful role for catechesis—the story of people's lives through the generations interwoven with the Good News of Jesus Christ provides an opportunity for faith formation. People connect with stories. The story often becomes the curriculum for faith formation. People in the oral/traditional culture think in terms of relationships. When a question is asked or when an issue is posed, relational thinking begins to function in terms of how the response will affect those in the communal web of relationship. It is a whole way of framing life and its form.⁵

A wise catechist needs to understand role and power of story. To the extent that catechetical leaders think in linear terms about how to get things done, they will have difficulty understanding the complex multidimensional and lateral thinking of traditional people. In assessing a community situation, people in the oral/traditional culture will find it necessary to think about the extended communal web of relationships. What happens to relatives and friends when a certain action is taken? How will this affect the feeling tone of the communal web of relations?"⁶

The role of facilitator or catechist often becomes one of weaving the threads of participant's stories into another story as a lesson or catechetical moment. The

³ *This Land is Home to Me*, 74-76


⁴ Eugene S. Ostrowski, *Mountain Spirit: Cultural Adaptation in Appalachia* (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1985), 24-25

⁵ Tex Sample, *Ministry in the Oral Culture*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, 36

⁶ Sample, 54

roles of participant/facilitator/catechist as storyteller are often reversed again and again as the ripple of meaning emerges in the shared life of the community of faith. In the oral/traditional culture; knowing and empathy typically develops through communal relationships rather than through cognitive and reasoning processes.⁷ The story becomes an entry point to bring understanding to the catechetical topic. Mary Boys writes:

To make accessible is the primary description of religious education. Access is given in numerous ways. To provide access means to erect bridges, to make metaphors, to build highways, to provide introductions and commentaries, to translate foreign terms, to remove barriers, to make maps, to demolish blockages, to demonstrate effects, to energize and sustain participation, and to be hospitable.⁸



Cultural context will shape the ministry of faith formation. Our catechetical plans, programs and curriculum often appear naked and cold until they are dressed in story. The curriculum needs to educate intentionally for mission in light of the cultural context of West Virginia, including the unique characteristics, the geography, the struggles of the people, family-oriented systems, and the implicit character of parishioners' faith—strong individuals and fiercely loyal to their heritage.⁹

⁷ Tex Sample in his work on the oral tradition and social ethics challenges Kohlberg's "universal" stages of moral development stating that moral development theorists like Kohlberg have focused too much on cognitive and reasoning processes and have ignored feelings. He writes that the form of morality used by oral/traditional culture is not second rate. Using Martin Hoffman's work in moral development, describes mature empathy, as an advanced level that is subtle, complex, and capable of sensitive, affective distinctions that can contribute to informed moral judgment. Sample writes that empathy and knowing develop together and that knowing develops through communal relationships.

⁸ Mary Boys, "Access to Traditions and Transformation," *Tradition and Transformation in Religious Education*, Ed: Padraic O'Hare (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1979), 15

⁹ An excellent discussion of storytelling in the Catholic tradition can be found in Robert J. Hater, *Tell Me a Story: The Role of Narrative in the Faith Life of Catholics*, Twenty-Third Publications

The American Family Today

American society has changed tremendously over the past 30 years, and the rate of change seems to be accelerating rapidly. Meanwhile the family continues to be the most important institution in our society. Catholic families today are faced with both opportunities and risks, among them:

- The number of Catholics who are separated or divorced is on the rise.
- About one-half of the children born today will experience multiple divorces and family break-ups.
- A notably smaller percentage of traditional nuclear families make up the total of all families with children living at home.
- More persons of both sexes are choosing to remain single.
- More than one-half of couples asking the Church for marriage are cohabiting, and many of these couples already have children.
- The number of single-parent households is escalating, and nearly half of these individuals have never been married.¹⁰

In a 1999 journal article, two leading family researchers discuss the differences between the American “cultural” tradition and the Christian “theological” tradition of family life.¹¹ Reviewing the social-scientific research, they describe a serious crisis in the American family evident in: the high divorce rate, and the negative effect of divorce on spouses and children; the increasing social phenomena of single motherhood and the absence of fathers from the home; and the increase in the percentage of women and children living in poverty. Inspired by the words of Pope John Paul II, these authors suggest that Christians living the covenant of marriage within a community of faith hold the promise of resolving the crisis of the American family.

In West Virginia, the family situation is complicated by the fact that 48.5% of families live in remote rural areas and only 29% of households are considered middle-American families.¹² A number of social maladies also afflict our children:

- 13% live in extreme poverty.
- 25% live in poverty.
- 28% live in poor working families.
- 34% receive food stamps.
- 27% live in single-parent households.
- 37% have parents who lack full-time employment.¹³

¹⁰ NDC, nos. 36, 38

¹¹ Lawler, Michael G. and Gail S Risch, “Covenant Generativity: Towards a Theology of Christian Marriage,” *Horizons* 26:7-30, 1999

¹² Percept data

¹³ Kids Count Data Book

Despite this sobering portrait, we know that one essential and distinguishing feature of family life is the experience of intimacy. Even the most challenged families experience intimacy in many ways. In particular, family life is the privileged place where people find God, that most intensely intimate of relationships. The experience of God is mediated mostly by the seemingly ordinary events and circumstances that take place within families. Regardless of the family's degree of health or dysfunction, it is home to the birth and the growth of our spirituality. While Mary, Joseph and Jesus are rightly revered as the "Holy Family," in truth, all families can be founts of holiness. We struggle with this truth because the holiness of our everyday lives does not bear a great resemblance to the "churchy" practices that may make the holy more recognizable.

Our most powerful "faithing" happens in the chaos of family or in the midst of our relationship with family members, the "domestic church." This catechesis, while not formal or crafted into a curriculum, is very powerful. When the meaning of these events is opened up through personal and communal reflection, God's gracious and persistent love can be made evident. Children hold up a mirror challenging parents along with the rest of us to live with integrity the values and precepts we teach. Teens in the stormy quest for fairness challenge everyone in their path to live justly. Together the family experiences forgiveness and reconciliation. While not sacramental with a capital "S," these are channels of family spirituality and disciple-making. *The common task of the church and the family is Christian formation, disciple-making to socialize its members to maturity in Christ.*

Parish ministry has within itself the capacity to support or diminish the effectiveness and integrity of the family. The challenge is to enable families to create an atmosphere in which they can discover God's presence. The parish should help families live in a more deliberate, intentional way, choosing to express their Christian faith and values in the home.

The great need of families is not so much in program after program that takes them out of their home but rather offering them help in making deliberate connections between what happens around their family table and what happens around the Eucharistic table, and everything in between. The unfolding of the liturgical and academic calendars offers many opportunities for families to encounter the divine. The time-honored symbols of our faith—crucifixes, rosaries, religious art—help create a Catholic culture in the home.

The changing dynamics of families today have implications for all those who engage in ministry. Catechists in particular should keep in mind the following.

- Make every effort to involve the learner's family, however it is constituted. This is an excellent way to involve parents, other adults, and siblings in the household.
- Make resources readily available to families through such means as bulletin inserts, adult education centers, and websites.

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- Develop and distribute simple methods to help families reflect more deeply on the presence of God in their everyday lives.
- Encourage families to participate in rituals at home, such as daily prayer.
- Encourage parents to have Catholic Bibles, crucifixes, religious statues, and rosaries in their homes. Provide these to parents if they are uncertain about how to obtain them on their own, or cannot afford them.
- Understand that some students may only attend scheduled religious formation events sporadically if they are dividing time between separated parents. Do your best to accommodate those with this special need.
- Be careful how you and your catechists speak about “family” during catechesis. Not every family comprises a husband, wife and children.

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Hispanic Catechesis/Catequesis Hispano

- The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston is dedicated to assisting those who speak another language in making every attempt to locate catechetical materials in that language as needed.
- The Martinsburg Vicariate has the largest percentage of persons who speak Spanish in the diocese. The Martinsburg Vicariate office offers a large resource library of materials in both English and Spanish.
- Working as a team, the faith formation consultants and pastoral services liaisons will make every attempt to collaborate across the state in order to support Hispanic catechetical efforts as needed.
- There is presently a Coordinator of Hispanic Pastoral Services for the Martinsburg Vicariate. Fr. Carl Vacek, TOR.
- Help with Hispanic Catechetical issues can also be obtained by calling the Martinsburg Vicariate Faith Formation Consultant.
- Both of these persons have offices at Priest Field Pastoral Center in Kearneysville, WV, and can be reached at 304-724-7074 Extensions 239 and/or 240.
- La Diócesis de Wheeling-Charleston, WV, esta dedicada a ayudar las personas que hablan una otra lengua, y va a hacer cada intento a localizar los materiales catequéticos en la lengua propia.
- La Vicaría Martinsburg tiene las más grande por ciento de gente que hablan español en esta diócesis. La Oficina de Vicaría Martinsburg ofrece una muy grande biblioteca de los recursos en Inglés y español.
- Trabajando como un equipo, las asesoras de la formación de la fe y las de enlace de servicios pastorales van a hacer cada intento a trabajar con otros a través del estado por el apoyo de los esfuerzos españoles catequéticos como necesitados.
- En este momento hay un coordinador de Servicios Pastorales Hispanos en la Vicaría Martinsburg, Padre Carlos Vacek, TOR.
- También, la ayuda con asuntos catequéticos hispanos puede a obtener por llamar la asesora de la formación de la fe en la Vicaría Martinsburg.
- Las dos personas tienen oficinas en el Centro Pastoral de Priest Field en Kearneysville, WV. Puede llamarse a 304-724-7074 Extensiones 239 Y 240.

