

Catechesis

Section Three: Methodology

Catechesis and Methodology, p. 2

Divine Methodology, p. 3

Human Methodology, p. 4, 5

The Five Approaches, p. 6, 7

Multiple Intelligences Across the Lifecycle, p. 8, 9

Shared Christian Praxis, p. 10



Catechesis and Methodology

For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, so shall my be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.
(Is 55:10-11)

God's own methodology inspires a plurality of methods in contemporary catechesis. Catechetical methodology must be faithful to God and to revelation and it must respect the liberty and promote the active participation of those being catechized. "This implies for catechesis the never-ending task of finding a language capable of communicating the Word of God and the creed of the Church, which is its development, in the various circumstances of those who hear it."¹ Genuine catechesis employs methodology that:

- Emphasizes God's loving initiative and the person's free response
- Accepts the progressive nature of revelation, the transcendence and mysterious nature of the Word of God, and the Word's adaptation to different persons and cultures
- Recognizes the centrality of Jesus Christ
- Values the community experience of faith
- Is rooted in interpersonal relations and dialogue
- Utilizes signs, which link words and deeds, teaching and experience
- Draws its power of truth, and its task to bear witness to the truth, from the Holy Spirit ²


¹ GDC, no. 146

² GDC, no. 143

Divine Methodology

God engages persons and communities in light of their circumstances and their capacity to accept and interpret revelation, God's self-communication in Jesus, through the Spirit. His divine plan and ultimate purpose is the salvation of the human person. For example, in the RCIA, we believe that each catechumen and candidate is *called by name by God*, exactly at the right time for each person. God calls and reveals himself in many ways, including creation, the covenant with his people, the Law given to Moses, and the giving of his Son, Jesus, the Incarnation, God becoming human to dwell among us.

"As the Word of God made flesh, Jesus is the Sacrament of God and the preeminent model for the communication of faith and the formation of believers. The way Jesus related to his disciples as well as to the crowds whom he addressed reveals God's own methodology as the model for all catechetical methods. Jesus often began with an experience familiar to his listeners, questioned their assumptions, and finally challenged them to make a decision. His methodology was multidimensional and included words, signs and the wonders that he worked."³



The Holy Spirit was first given to us when Jesus was no longer among his people in the flesh. The action of the Holy Spirit continues the methodology of God, opening our hearts to new life in Christ and opening our minds to understanding the death and resurrection of Jesus (Paschal Mystery) as the pattern of our own lives. "Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church continues to catechize her members in a way that reflects and relies upon God's own methodology."⁴

³ Summary of the NDC, p. 16

⁴ Summary of the NDC, p. 16

Human Methodology

*My teaching is not my own but is from the one who sent me. (Jn 7:16)
For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received. (1 Cor 15:3)*

The communication of faith in catechesis is an event of grace under the action of the Holy Spirit, realized in the encounter of the Word of God with the experience of the person. The method chosen depends on the age and the ability of the learner. There should be interaction and harmony between the content of faith and the method. "A variety of methods is required in order to ensure that the Gospel is proclaimed 'to all the nations.' The variety in the methods used is a sign of life and a resource."⁵ We learn:

- Through Human Experience—Human experience provides a starting point that must be linked to the revealed Word of God to help learners explore, interpret, and judge their experiences in the light of the Gospel. Human experience provides the signs that lead the learner by the grace of the Holy Spirit to understand the truths of the faith.
- By Discipleship—Christian discipleship means following Jesus Christ in one's own time, place and circumstances. Ongoing formation, which includes learning the basic truths of the Christian faith, increases the learner's capacity to understand and articulate those truths more deeply in life and disposes one to live Christ's message more faithfully.
- Through the Witness of the Christian Community—Effective catechesis depends upon the vitality of the parish and the extent to which it is a clear, living and authentic Sacrament of Christ. Catechesis is the responsibility of every member of the Church. In the parish the faithful are nourished by the Word of God and by the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. From the parish the faithful are sent on their apostolic mission in the world.
- Within the Christian Family and Home—It is within the Christian family that members are awakened to the presence of God and learn to pray and to form their consciences in light of the teachings of Christ and of the Church. Family members learn by the witness of their parents and extended family. The parish needs to do all it can to nourish and strengthen the domestic Church of the home.
- Through the Witness of the Catechist—Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, catechists powerfully influence those being catechized by their proclamation of the Gospel and the transparent example of their Christian lives.
- By Heart—For centuries the living tradition of the faith was handed on principally through the oral tradition. Receiving the formulations of the faith, professing and


⁵ NDC, no. 29



INTERIM

internalizing them, and sharing them with the community encourage the learner's participation in the received truth. Memorization is an essential aspect of the teaching of faith because it fosters a common language of faith and an identity among the faithful.

- By Christian Living—The faithful learn as they respond to God's initiative through praying, celebrating the liturgy and Sacraments, living the Christian life, doing works of charity and of justice, and addressing injustices that exist in society. Living an active Christian life becomes a crucial element in effective catechesis.
- By Apprenticeship—The relationship that grows between a catechist and a catechumen provides a model of learning by apprenticeship. This catechesis is a guided initiation into the whole of Christian life, not just the sharing of instruction.⁶



⁶ NDC, no. 29

The Five Approaches, a Variety of Learning Activities and Resources for Adults

*(From Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation
in the United States)*

Ongoing faith formation can be “accomplished through a great variety of forms: systematic and occasional, individual and community, organized and spontaneous.”⁷ Parishes need to provide a variety of activities and resources to meet the needs of adults.

- 1) **Liturgy:** Sunday Eucharist is the center of the Church’s life. Active participation in the liturgy “is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit”⁸ and deepen their conversion to God. Each aspect of worship—homily, physical environment, hospitality, liturgical ministries, congregational participation, appropriate music, the Sunday bulletin—has the potential to foster adult faith. Daily Mass and communal prayer services provide additional formation opportunities.
- 2) **Family-centered or home-centered activities:** Catechetical opportunities that take place in family settings foster both adult and family faith development, without forcing participants to spend time away from their families. Diocesan newspapers, Catholic magazines, seasonal booklets, monthly calendars, newsletters, mailings, pastoral visits, family prayer, Scripture sharing, home blessings, family-to-family ministry, videos that promote family faith-sharing, Catholic websites, and a home-based component in catechetical programs can all provide adults and families with meaningful faith formation experiences.
- 3) **Small groups:** Many Catholic adults meet regularly in a variety of small groups for faith sharing and to build community. Small groups are powerful vehicles for adult faith formation, providing opportunities for learning, prayer, mutual support, and the shared experience of Christian living and service to Church and society.
- 4) **Large groups:** Some adults prefer to learn in large group settings, such as lectures, panel presentations, discussions, group service projects, social events with a prayer or learning component, and ecumenical activities.
- 5) **Individual activities:** Materials for personal study, prayer, and reflection can be provided for adults to use alone. Parish bulletins, newspapers, books, websites, libraries of tapes, DVDs, and videos can assist in the faith formation of adults.

Every aspect and event in parish life can be intentionally fashioned as an occasion for adult faith formation. For example, every parish gathering can begin with a

⁷ GDC, no. 51

⁸ OHWB, no. 100



INTERIM

reading of the upcoming Sunday's Gospel, followed by a time of reflection and faith sharing. Being intentional about catechetical opportunities can significantly enhance adult faith formation in every community.

Multiple Intelligences Across the Lifecycle

People learn in different ways. As a catechist, *the more senses you engage in your teaching, the more sense you will make and the better your students will learn and remember.* Such experiential and interactive methods often prevent or preclude discipline problems as well. Some people learn best by seeing, others hearing, others smelling, others touching, and others tasting. The combination and engagement of all these senses increases retention and facilitates effective learning.

Another good teaching rule of thumb highlights effective progression of activities. *Tell, show, do, and review.* This pattern in training another to do something applies to all learning. Introduce or tell students about something, demonstrate it, let them practice, demonstrate it themselves, and evaluate with them what they have done.

Another formula associated with Christian education is *hook, look, book, took.* This describes a teaching method of introducing something in a very attention-getting way (hook), applying this to our own lives (look), finding Scripture that speaks to the topic (book), and making something to synthesize the learning experience which one can take with them (took).

Of the various theories on learning styles, Howard Gardner's theory of *Multiple Intelligences* adds new depth to learning style particularities. He cites nine *intelligences* which reflect various aspects of intelligence.⁹

- *Linguistic intelligence*, which includes the abilities to read and write
- *Logical-mathematical intelligence*, which exercises capability in solving problems and reasoning
- *Spatial intelligence*, which engages the capacity visualize, create, draw, and design in three dimensions
- *Musical intelligence*, which helps one to learn through song, music, and/or instruments
- *Kinesthetic intelligence*, which involves movement, dancing or sports in the learning process
- *Naturalist intelligence* describes a way of learning which employs experiences in the outdoors or with the things of nature
- *Existential intelligence* is manifested by a desire and proclivity to ponder the deep and profound questions of life
- *Interpersonal intelligence*, the ability to learn from and in communication with one or more other people
- *Intrapersonal intelligence*, uses personal reflection to learn

The theory is that people learn best in various ways, and this varies from person to person, perhaps even to a degree from culture to culture. These intelligences are not exhaustive, there are likely many more. The task of the catechist is to mix up one's methods in order to include learning activities which appeal to a variety of different intelligences in lesson planning. This applies across the life cycle, with children, youth, and adults.

⁹ Gardner, Howard, *Frames of Mind*. (New York: Basic Books, 1993)



INTERIM

How Adults Learn

In working with adults it is important to remember that they bring a unique set of needs and contributions to a learning environment.

- Adults prefer self direction, they are “take charge learners.”
- Individual experiences of adult learners are a rich resource for learning. Participants can often aid and supplement the facilitator and class learning.
- Adults are aware of their learning needs generated by real experiences such as marriage or divorce, parenting, a new job, losing a job, and other transitional events. Adult learners' needs and interests serve well as starting points for learning.
- Adults want to learn practical skills or acquire knowledge that they can apply directly to their lives. Life or work-related situations present a more appropriate framework for adult learning than academic or theoretical approaches.

Suggested Resources:



Stankard, Bernadette T., *How Each Child Learns: Using Multiple Intelligence in Faith Formation*, Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT, 2003.

Lowe, Edmunds, C., K., M. Murray, and A. Seymour, *The Ultimate Educator*, National Victim Assistance Academy (Advanced), Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime, 1999.

Shared Christian Praxis

*"Adult catechesis should respect the experience of adults and make use of their personal experiences, skills and talents."*¹⁰

"Shared Christian praxis" is a term coined by the noted American religious educator Thomas H. Groome, currently on the faculty of Boston College. The fullest explication of the term can be found in the 1998 revised edition of Groome's book *Sharing Faith*.¹¹ Since the book was first published in 1991, shared praxis has become a widely used and accepted method of faith formation. It often is taught in undergraduate and graduate religious education programs and in programs to certify catechists for parishes and schools.

Briefly, there are five components or "movements" in shared praxis. They are 1) present action, 2) critical reflection, 3) dialogue, 4) the Christian story, and 5) the Vision that arises from the Story. The goal is to bring the Christian story (preserved in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition) into dialogue with the individual's own lived experience. The hope is that this dialogue results in a Vision that deeply inculcates the values of the faith in the individual and brings about action that furthers discipleship. Groome puts it this way: "Christian religious education by shared praxis can be described as a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their critical reflection on present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith." (p.184)

What does this look like in practice? While shared praxis will look different depending on the age, culture, social setting, and so forth of each group, there will also be some commonalities. Here is one such classroom approach: Generally, the lesson will begin with a Focusing Task (e.g., an open-ended question, a small-group discussion) on the topic of the lesson. Next comes Life Experience, in which the learners name how they experience the topic in everyday life. This is followed by Shared Reflection on the topic and the Presentation of the Christian Story, in which the teacher presents the topic in light of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. In the final movements, Owning the Faith and Response, the learners see how their own story intersects with the Christian story and then decide on how the message of Christ demands a change on their part.

Catechists who make use of the shared praxis approach find it a reliable and effective way to bring about the primary goal of catechesis: "to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ."¹²

¹⁰ NDC, no. 48

¹¹ *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry; The Way of Shared Praxis* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998)

¹² CT, no. 5