

Evangelizing the Parking Lot Parent

A CATECHIST'S GUIDE
TO "CASUAL-CATECHESIS"
FOR FAMILIES

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Introduction

What do catechists, catechetical leaders, midwives, spiritual directors, and Saint Joseph have in common? Each is an agent that accompanies another person through a season of growth. As such, each coaches a birthing process by guiding another person toward naming and claiming new life. They accompany the other through unknown territory. They mediate fears and uncertainties. They give words to the person's experiences. Often, they awaken the person to possibilities previously unanticipated. Though not responsible for creating the life that others carry within themselves, each is a catalyst for helping new life emerge.

In the case of catechists and ministers of parish faith formation programs, I am speaking of spiritual life and the process of awakening others to the person of Jesus Christ, who dwells within them and invites them into personal relationship. This is the essence of evangelization—bringing Jesus to others and bringing others to Jesus.

Where does evangelization begin? In the home! The Christian home is the privileged first place for initial evangelization. But today many parents, even churchgoing parents, voice feeling inadequate in leading their children toward intimacy with Jesus. Countless parents acknowledge a spiri-

tual vacuum in their own lives. For a variety of reasons, some parents are unfamiliar with Church beliefs and the customs, rituals, practices, and prayer expressions that might feed the hunger of their hearts and lead them to intimacy with Jesus.

Other parents do know and practice time-honored traditions but have never transitioned from experiences of tradition to personal conviction. Catholic traditions like eucharistic devotions, Scripture prayer, varied prayer styles, Marian devotions, and the sacraments can serve as catalysts of conviction. Traditions practiced with understanding, reverence, attention, and devotion can lead to deep intimacy, encounter, and personal relationship with Jesus. Scores of adult Catholics, however, have no experience of these spiritual treasures.

Many catechists bemoan the perception that large numbers of baptized Catholic parents are disaffiliated from the Church or, at the very least, minimally, marginally, or insufficiently involved in the faith formation of their children and are themselves in need of evangelization. Reasons for this contemporary phenomenon of spiritual emptiness within adults were addressed in my previous book, *Engaging the Parking Lot Parent*. It offered a multitude of creative strategies for “backdoor evangelizing” to help parents focus on their children’s faith formation while tutoring their own parent hearts in the process.

This book focuses on equipping catechists to be agents of evangelization to parents. In three significant ways, it takes parent evangelization beyond “backdoor” efforts. First, it suggests ways that catechists can meet parents where they are and function as the catalyst or midwife who brings them into an encounter with Jesus. Second, it provides experiences and material that parents can adapt to family living, thereby making home a place of spiritual richness, and faith an integral part of

family life. Third, it establishes a platform for parents to be in-serviced by other parents and to build supportive networks.

Evangelization—the act of bringing the good news/the gospel—is an intentional effort to lead a person to encounter Jesus. Meeting Jesus incites a desire to know him. Knowing leads to affection. Such love spontaneously and casually overflows into passionate accompaniment, imitation, discipleship, service, and zeal to reveal Jesus in all circumstances—at home, workplace, recreational settings, prisons, shelters, and wherever two or three are gathered! “These places, which are often more loosely focused than those of the Christian community, are suitable for casual catechesis because they create more familiar relationships, and in this more visible connection with everyday life catechesis can turn out to be more compelling” (*Directory for Catechesis* 223).

Today, catechetical ministers are called to serve as agents of evangelization to parents as well as to children. Jesus is calling us to more vigorously support parents in their own faith formation. That effort implies an openness and untiring effort to be a catalyst of grace for the spiritual development of parents while facilitating faith formation programs for children. I like to think of the process as a “two-for”—“two for the price of one”; we are leading both parent and child to experiences of Jesus.

This effort challenges catechetical ministers to support, affirm, and provide resources for parents without antagonizing, offending, embarrassing, patronizing, adding stress, or implying guilt. Our goal is to energize, not to add to parent burdens or feelings of inadequacy.

St. Teresa of Calcutta said: “Very often I feel like a little pencil in God’s hands. He does the writing. He does the

thinking. He does the movement. I have only to be the pencil.” Consider how you might become an instrument in God’s hands for the benefit and encouragement of parents. Build them up. Support their efforts. Be patient with what may seem as resistance. Show the way by personal example. Let actions speak. Take things slow. Avoid overwhelming parents. Meet each parent where he/she is and respect that reality.

Engaging the Parking Lot Parent emphasized “backdoor evangelization.” Rather than direct, face-to-face, adult-level sharing (“front door”) the book aimed at tutoring parent hearts indirectly. It was suggested that while parents participated in activities geared to fostering faith within their children, they would encounter Jesus in the process, as a by-product so to speak. Dozens of activities provided easy-on-the-nerves, safe, face-saving, enjoyable, life-giving events.

This book focuses on direct adult evangelization. It gives catechists tools to function as effective instruments of adult evangelization in two specific ways. In part one, we look at how to engage faith-disconnected adults by providing experiences of encounter with other parents and by testifying to the ways that God has touched your life and desires to touch theirs. In part two, we look at how you can function as an agent of family evangelization by affirming parents in their role as “first heralds of the gospel”—integrating spiritual practices that complement today’s family dynamics, nurturing the affective (heart) aspect of family spirituality, and celebrating the mystery and grace of the parenting vocation.

This book offers formation and information for both catechist and parent. Use the ideas as a springboard for discussion. Adapt them to suit the needs and circumstances of the families in your parish. Follow the advice of St. Teresa of Calcutta: be an instrument in God’s hands.

SECTION 1

Engage the Dis-Engaged

*“The Lord God has given me a well-trained
tongue, that I might know how to answer
the weary a word that will waken them.
Morning after morning he wakens
my ear to hear as disciples do.”*

ISAIAH 50:4

Catechists, hear the call of Isaiah! It is as necessary today as it was when he proclaimed it. Adopt his perspective to “speak a word to the weary that will waken them.”

There are a number of legitimate reasons many adults today are disconnected from the faith into which they were baptized and the Church from which they received Eucharist and confirmation. St. John Paul II voiced his concern about this. He said: “Entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a ‘new evangelization’ or a ‘re-evangelization’” (*Redemptoris missio* 33). That was 1990. The number of absentee Catholics continued to increase rapidly in the years that followed.

Pope Francis speaks of accompaniment. He urges us to go to the margins, to the outskirts, to any person in need of the redeeming, freeing, revitalizing message of the gospel. Catechists need not look very far. Adults within the boundaries of your parish need to hear a word that will waken them, comfort them, and reconnect them to themselves, to their God, and to each other. Scores of adults need to meet Jesus, to encounter him, and to be encountered by him.

Catechetical leaders are uniquely positioned to provide opportunities of formation and information that help par-

ents (and all adults) to get in touch with their own inner wisdom, to cultivate their own spirituality, to strengthen their self-confidence, and to deepen their God-relationship.

Be an Isaiah catechist! Be an evangelizing agent for parents in your catechetical community. Speak the words that touch parents in their places of need. Meet them where they are. Lead them to experiences of encounter with Jesus. Give personal testimony of how God has touched your life throughout the years, and provide exercises that will open parent eyes to how God has been present and lovingly provident in their own past histories, even though they may have been totally unaware.

The following chapters will equip you with the tools to be an Isaiah catechist.

Chapter 1

ENGAGE PARENTS IN EXPERIENCES OF ENCOUNTER

Mobility and career changes are characteristics of our times. Inherent to both is the possibility of exciting growth and surprise graces but also separation from family roots. Relocating evokes the need for new connections and expanded support systems.

In times past, a family lived close enough to grandparents, aunts, and uncles to be in frequent contact and within earshot of advice—whether it was sought or imposed. Support systems were built into the family system. Furthermore, in many neighborhoods a large majority attended the parish church and the Catholic school or the parish faith formation program. Folks crossed paths on social occasions and for school/parish events as they worked together on committees and other neighborhood projects. For most families, connection just happened.

For any number of reasons, particularly because of mobility, young parents can feel alone, lonely, and disconnected. These perceptions extend to many facets of their lives, including parenting. Folks who live close to their extended family or who live in a tight-knit community observe the parenting approaches of others and can learn vicariously which approaches are more effective than others. But those who live at a distance or in a neighborhood where families are generally private and disconnected from each other can feel as though they are parenting in a vacuum.

Here is how the parish can assist parents in encountering other parents:

- Establish a “meet and greet” program that includes visiting the home, blessing the house, and gifting the family with a faith formation “seed gift” like a prayer bowl or crucifix, or a meaningful plaque like, “Bidden or unbidden, God is present” (Carl Jung). Or, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15). Or, “Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10). Or, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:11).
- Pair new families with veteran families to walk through “a year in the parish” together. Together, both families might attend the fall festival, the parish carol night or Christmas activity, the Advent and Lenten reconciliation services, and the parish picnic.
- Go beyond bulletin announcements and media messages about parish events. Plan instead to make a

personal phone call or write a personal note—via email or snail mail—to invite the new family to join in.

- Promote a “Sunshine Club.” (1) Arrange to send a “pick me up” card at specific times. (2) Host a morning coffee and/or midday snack gathering a few times during the year. Choose a timely parent topic. Provide an article to read ahead of the meeting. At the gathering discuss the article and share support. (3) Occasionally send an inspirational thought or parenting tip via text or email.
- Launch a parent book club focused on books geared to parenting support and family faith formation. Accommodate the complicated schedules of parents by eliciting sufficient volunteers to host sessions at various times.
- Set up Facebook groups and other social media sites that are more likely to invite younger parents to share ideas, information, and practices. Be intentional about setting up social media, opening up sharing and commenting permissions, and learning more about how to encourage interaction online. Post a thought, question, or article to which parents can respond and share wisdom. You might set up a group text to remind parents about upcoming events, to post a quick prayer or inspirational thought, or to refer to student assignments.

- Cultivate “vicarious learning.” It is possible for parents to learn from other parents vicariously, to imagine parenting possibilities by reading the thoughts of other parents or hearing other parents share insights. Arrange a gathering—in person or online—to share the wisdom of parents. Follow the sharing with a period for silent reflection before inviting participants to share thoughts either aloud in the general assembly or within small talk groups.

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SECTION 2

Evangelizing the Family

*“As for me and my house,
we will serve the Lord.”*

JOSHUA 24:15

Section One addressed ways that catechists can adopt the perspective of the prophet Isaiah, who heard God’s call to “speak a word to the weary that will waken them” (Isaiah 50:4). Section Two intends to help parents feel at ease in functioning as the spiritual leaders in their family. The goal is to foster the Joshua perspective within parents.

Catechetical leaders are positioned to assist parents to feel adequate, effective, creative, and comfortable in expressing their faith. Then the efforts to transmit faith to their children as well as witnessing it to others will be second nature. In short, the catechist evangelizes the parent and the parent evangelizes his/her family and community.

Be an agent of the Joshua perspective process for the parents in your parish community. Embrace the attitude of St. John Paul II, who proclaimed that “by virtue of their ministry of educating, parents are, through the witness of their lives, the first heralds of the Gospel for their children” (*Familiaris Consortio* 39). Orchestrate ways for parents to share wisdom with each other directly and vicariously via stories, suggestions, memories, and best practices. Share classroom spiritual practices that easily transfer into household practices. Spotlight family spirituality traditions, customs, and rituals that lead to a state of awareness of God’s constant presence and tender love. Foster a family spirituality that nurtures habits of the heart like love for God and

each other, sharing, empathy, compassion, self-control, appreciation, sensitivity, remorse, and emotional responsiveness. Be a parent cheerleader! Celebrate the vocation of Christian parenting.

The following chapters will equip parents with tools to adapt the Joshua perspective to their leadership style.

Chapter 3

AFFIRM PARENTS AS FIRST HERALDS OF THE GOSPEL

Primary Educator... First Herald of the Gospel... The hands and feet of Jesus on earth... In Loco Jesu (in the place of Jesus)... Each of these titles summarizes the vocation of Christian parenting. And each title represents merely the tip of the iceberg. What parent would not feel overwhelmed by the responsibility implied in such terms? Nevertheless, these terms identify the central role of Christian parents: to lead their child through word and example to know, love, and serve God.

There is no one way to engage parents. Nor is there assurance that every attempt will meet the need or inclination of every parent. But we can trust that the Holy Spirit will work through our good will and effort. Relax in the assurance that God began the good work of parenting and God will see to its completion (Philippians 1:6). Catechists can be the instruments, the catalysts, of encounter.

Catechetical leaders can provide opportunities of formation and information that help parent-participants get in touch with their own inner wisdom, cultivate their own spirituality, and strengthen their self-confidence. To this end I offer seven suggestions. Orchestrate each in and through non-threatening environments and exercises in which parents learn by listening to each other. View these suggestions as springboard ideas that might incite further development or adaptation.

1. In one-to-one situations informally share about your faith journey, or a time of doubt, or a marker moment from your life, etc. In other words, model how simple it may be to give faith witness. Do the same within a group gathering. State a focus (like “name a marker moment in your faith life”). Then invite parents to verbalize their response to another parent-participant. Perhaps change dyads a few times. Use opportunities with parents to encourage them to share their own faith stories with their children.

2. Host a pre-planned/pre-practiced panel discussion where parents speak to a given topic like: how they try to foster a spiritual culture in the home; how they approach teaching prayer; approaches to preparing their child for meaningful participation at Mass; how they spiritualize their home through the liturgical seasons like Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter; or sharing examples of “God Winks”—moments when they recognized Divine Providence at work within them, or challenges they’ve encountered in the role of parent. Prior to another session elicit from the participants topics that they wish to experience.

3. *Create a script (a dialogue scenario) or invite parents to create one that illustrates parent-child marker moments.* Or, after modeling the script idea, divide parent-participants into groups of three or four and assign a topic for which they will create a script. For example, parent reviewing schoolwork with a child, correcting a child, blessing a child at wakeup, bedtime, or when leaving the house, praying before the Blessed Sacrament, sacramental preparation discussion, or issues of common interest within your community. Then engage parents and children to act out the parts for a live audience or in the form of digital media. If preferred, have students play both the role of parent and child.

IHM Sister Danielle Truex advises that creating digital media with the use of photos, video, and audio recordings can be done using a variety of platforms depending upon your technology background, available resources, and purpose. Podcasting using platforms like Adobe Spark or Canva (both have free versions) to create presentations, videos, and social media posts are ways to do this.

4. *In a large space set up a Liturgical Seasons Fair.* Establish sections for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Marian Feasts, Ordinary Time, and a section for family traditions. Engage parent volunteers to staff the sections and to provide illustrations, make-and-take crafts, ideas for home décor, cultural expressions for the season, etc. Or engage catechists from your own programs as well as catechists from nearby parishes to lead each booth.

5. *Spotlight family customs.* Around a theme like Christmas rituals or Lenten practices, invite parents and children to create a liturgical environment for their dinner table or a designated space in the home. Ask them to take photos and submit them to you with the understanding that you will create a digital presentation and post it on the parish website.

6. *Orchestrate a Words of Wisdom event that highlights multi-generational best practices.* Within a room, perhaps the church, stagger parents at various spots. One at a time spotlight a speaker who will proclaim one parent practice designed to pass on the faith to children. For example, *Whenever my children leave the house I make a sign of the cross on their forehead and I say, "I call upon the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to protect you in all your ways."* Or, *Our family prays a meal blessing even when we are in a restaurant.*

Within the event incorporate guided reflection, small group sharing, and inspirational music like: "Ordinary Holiness" (Kurt & Julie Carrick, *A Couple's Rosary*); "May I Be His Love" (Kathy Troccoli, *Sounds of Heaven*); "He Who Began a Good Work in You" (Steve Green, *Find Us Faithful*); "Children Learn What They Live" (Les Crane; *Desiderata*); "Find Us Faithful" (Steve Green, *Find Us Faithful*); "My Own Backyard" (Sarah Bauer, *Radiance*), "Children Need Heroes" (Renee Bondi, *Strength for the Journey*); "An Advent Home" (Tim & Julie Smith, *Altared*—www.timandjuliesmith.com).

7. *Sponsor a Parent Fair Saturday or a Parent Retreat Day that incorporates several of these six ideas and/or additional practices.* Include a light lunch and conclude the day by celebrating the vigil Mass followed by dinner.

A major event like this requires time to develop. Share the preparation. Perhaps catechetical leaders from various parishes would each assume responsibility for one of the suggestions, offer it in his/her own parish, tweak it, and then make the program available to other parish leaders. Eventually an individual parish could combine several mini-events into a gala day. Or, designate a day to offer a **Progressive Party** where three parishes each offer a one-hour event that they repeat three times. Parents then would rotate/travel from one parish to another. Or, **Rotate Events**—Coordinate with other parishes to host one mini-event a year that draws parents from the participating parishes. Create a common calendar in order to offer these mini-events throughout the year.

Research reveals that many parents, perhaps most, second-guess themselves. Many perceive themselves inadequate to form faith (and other formation matters) within their child. They view other parents as more capable. Too many believe that faith-based education classes can fill in the gap and that catechists can do a better job in forming a child's faith than the parent can. To that conclusion I think of what my Dad would say: "Actions speak louder than words." Actions and attitudes, particularly those of a parent, speak louder than books, media, classroom activities, or the latest products of technology.

Recall for parents the power-packed promises that they made when they brought their child to baptism:

- to make it a “constant care” to train the child in the practice of the faith;
- to bring the child to keep the commandments by loving God and neighbor;
- to keep the child safe from the poison of sin;
- to help the child grow always stronger in his/her heart;
- by word and example to bring baptismal dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven;
- to keep the light of Christ burning brightly.

In gentle, persistent ways encourage parents to recognize and embrace the unique role they play in the spiritual formation of their children. Assure them that “God’s love does not call where God’s grace cannot keep.” God called them to the vocation. Assure parents that God will give the graces needed to fulfill their vocation and that you, the catechist, desire to be a formative support for them.