

What's Your Story?

It is a common question: What's your story? While a person may ask it simply to find out what someone is doing or why they are behaving in a certain way, it can be a profound question too. The stories of our lives, like the stories of Scripture and God's people who have gone before us, are sacred stories. They embody us, who are children of God.

What's your story? We can have a "story of the moment" that explains our joy or anxiety. We can have a "story of this time in my life" that reflects our current hopes or our work or what our family is going through these days. We may have a "story of my life so far," an autobiographical tale that includes our life decisions, choices, key relationships, and events.

Our stories may be sometimes happy, sometimes sad, sometimes funny. But they are all sacred stories because they are stories of people of faith. Whether we see it when a story is happening or only when we look back, Jesus is in our stories too. By knowing the stories of Scripture, we get to know Jesus better, and then we can recognize his presence in our lives.

The aim of catechesis is to "put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ"

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(*Catechesi Tradendae* 5). Storytelling in catechesis presents the stories in the word of God—sacred Scripture, the main source of catechesis—as that is where we come to know Jesus. The purpose of telling these sacred stories is that they help us to learn who Jesus is so we begin to form or deepen our relationship with him. The stories of Tradition found in Church history and in the lives of the saints enable us to understand how disciples of Jesus lived his teachings and help us to imagine our own discipleship.

Our catechetical storytelling has a dual purpose: to see ourselves in the stories of faith and to see stories of faith in our own lives. The catechist is critical in accomplishing these purposes. First, the catechist must be wise in choosing Scripture stories and stories from Church history or the saints' lives that are appropriate for those being catechized.

What's your story? To assist those we catechize, we need to recognize ourselves in the Gospel stories. What Gospel story is like your life today? Maybe it's the one about the disciples on the stormy sea, or perhaps it's the healing of the blind man. How does your story parallel a Gospel story?

What's your story? Jesus calmed the sea when the disciples were afraid; Jesus healed the blind man, and he could see. How is Jesus in your story? Has he calmed you amid upsets? Has he helped you to see someone or some situation in a new way? What Scripture story speaks to your life today?

Getting in touch with what our story is, how we are part of Jesus' story, and how he is present in our stories today is a first step in being catechetical storytellers. This is how we "present salvation history in a vital way so that persons may feel a part of it" (*Directory for Catechesis* 149b).

What's Their Story?

The stories of those we catechize are sacred, too, since God inhabits them. Our task is threefold: to learn their stories, to connect their stories to God's story through the Scriptures, and to enable them to be aware of God's ongoing presence in their lives.

Learning their stories is key to making the connections and helping them to see God's presence and grace in their lives each day. One way to learn what is important to them is to invite prayer intentions at the opening prayer of the session. Whether they pray for a person who is ill or to be chosen for a sports team or for healing of a scraped knee, it is a clue to what they are dealing with. It's a clue to their life story today.

Another way to learn their stories is to use a Scripture passage such as Mark 10:46–52. In this passage, Bartimaeus, a blind man, calls out to Jesus. He asks Jesus to have pity on him. Jesus calls him forward and then asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" Stop the reading there and have each person consider that Jesus is asking them that question. Invite sharing and you will learn their needs. Continue reading the passage to share how Jesus heals Bartimaeus's sight. Bartimaeus then follows Jesus. How can we follow Jesus today? Again, attend to their answers. Through a prayerful exercise like this, you will have connected their stories to a Jesus story in Scripture.

Another way to learn their stories is simply to ask. You might have on hand paper copies of emojis that show happiness, sadness, joy, anger, fear, and so on. Have them choose an emoji and share what may make them feel that way. "When

I am left out, I feel sad.” “Whenever we visit my grandma, I feel really happy.”

Jesus had human emotions too. Have them recall times when he showed his emotions or point out times when Jesus must have felt as they do. He wept when his friend Lazarus died. He was angry when the money changers were using the temple as a marketplace. Read a passage from Scripture. It could be the Lazarus story (John 11:17–34), or the cleansing of the Temple (John 2:13–16), or the story of the rich young man for whom Jesus felt love (Mark 10:17–22).

Whatever Scripture you choose, ask students if they have ever felt the way Jesus did in the story. Ask: When did you feel that way? Jesus shared our human feelings, and we can be sure that he is with us no matter what we are feeling. Jesus understands our feelings, whatever they are.

You might ask, “When have you felt happy? When have you felt sad? When have you felt frustrated?” These will give you further insights into their stories. Assure them that no matter what they are feeling, Jesus is always with them. Keep a mental note of, or jot down after class, the feelings they describe and what makes them feel that way. These will help you connect their stories with the stories of Jesus in the Scriptures throughout the year.

The Art of Listening

Listening is a critical skill for all of us. We listen to directions, to warnings, and, hopefully, to each other. As people of faith, we attend as well to what God may be saying to us, where Jesus calls us, and how the inspirations of the Holy Spirit can guide us.

How do we teach the skill of listening so the stories of Scripture and Tradition, the lives of saints, and the Church's mission can touch those we catechize?

One way to begin is through a modified *Lectio Divina*. This ancient prayer form is about listening to God's word in Scripture. A modified version can enable those we catechize to focus and to share how God's word is speaking to them.

Read a passage aloud, asking that everyone listen carefully. Then read the passage again slowly. With younger children, you might ask them to write down a word or phrase to help them focus and remember. Then read the passage again, asking them to pick a word or phrase that strikes them. Encourage them to share the word or phrase that struck them and to tell the others why it stood out for them. Invite them to pray with the line they chose. For example, if I chose "hopes all things," I might pray, "Jesus, help me to bring hope to others."

You might read 1 Corinthians 13:1–7 from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The beautiful statements on love might have those you catechize writing down one of Paul's thoughts about love. For example, "Love is kind." You might ask, "When have you experienced kindness? Is there someone who needs kindness from you?"

This listening exercise helps us to really hear what is being proclaimed. The stories we hear, the prayers we hear at Mass, and those we pray together require listening so that the words touch our lives. Much of our participation at Mass is done through listening, and so to listen is an essential skill for discipleship.

Tell a story that is in next Sunday's readings. Ask them to listen carefully when they hear the story again on Sunday and to choose one word or line to remember for the next session. Or you might ask them to listen to the prayers the priest prays at Mass. Which prayer did they like? Why?

Stories are meant to be told and to be listened to. Have partners work together, with each telling the other a story about something that happened to them. When both have told their story, invite some or all of them to tell their partner's story. The one who originally told the story can then say whether anything was left out or something was wrong in the retelling. Ask: "What did you learn about listening?"

The sacred stories of the lives of the saints can be sources for listening too. Saint stories are widely available in print or online. Find a saint whose feast will be celebrated soon and, rather than read the story to those you catechize, tell it. Invite them to share how they see Jesus in this saint. Ask: "How do you see Jesus in your life story?"