

INTRODUCTION

In bike rides around my neighborhood, I often pass a church with interesting quotes posted on its welcoming signage. The current one says: “Every neighbor is a teacher.” It is true. We are all catechists.

The word catechist comes from a Greek term meaning “to echo.” For us it means to reiterate and copy Jesus Christ and the Good News Jesus taught and lived. Within this description, everyone is called to be a catechist. Our very lives echo—reverberate and resound—the person and message of Jesus. One of the emphases of the Second Vatican Council was that the entire People of God are called to the service of Jesus Christ by embodying his caring presence and continuing his ministry of proclaiming Good News to the world.

Within that truth, God also calls, through the Church, specific people within each (arch)diocese, within each parish, to specifically dedicate their gifts to the ministry of faith formation.

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS, A division of Bayard, Inc.

One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200, New London, CT 06320

(860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411; www.twentythirdpublications.com

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ISBN: 978-1-62785-573-0 • Cover photo: Alain PINOGES/CIRIC

Printed in the U.S.A.

With the publication of the new *Directory for Catechesis* to guide us, this booklet is for those people, for all catechists:

- catechists for adult formation
- RCIA catechists
- catechists for RCIA with children
- Youth ministry team and catechists
- Young adult formation teams
- Catholic school principal, staff, and teachers
- Catechists for young children
- Catechists for youngsters
- Catechists in whole community catechesis programs
- Catechists in family faith formation programs
- Scripture study leaders
- Marriage preparation team
- Baptismal preparation team
- Family life ministers
- Leaders and facilitators of small faith communities
- Leaders of social justice study and action programs
- Retreat facilitators

This booklet is for all catechists—those responding to the call for the first time and those who have faithfully lived their vocation for many years, those filled with enthusiasm and those who feel they're in a slump, those who feel confident (at the moment) and those who have questions.

It is also for parish catechetical leaders, since they are certainly catechists in all they say and do. Fr. Michael Himes, SJ, theology professor at Boston College, often talks with his students about vocational discernment. In his delightful way (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-4IKCENdnw>) he suggests that young people ask themselves three questions to listen to and discern their call from God:

- What brings me joy?
- Am I good at it?
- Does anybody need me to do it?

Those questions echo the words of theologian Frederick Buechner: “Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” He was talking of all vocations and each specific vocation to which people respond. His words are certainly true for catechetical leaders (and catechists). The world is yearning for the comforting and challenging message of the gospel. Within our catechetical ministry, even though there certainly will be days of disappointment, worry, and frustration, there is also a joy, the joy of having continually experienced God in new and energizing ways.

Parish catechetical leaders (and catechists) have answered Himes’ three questions and embody Buechner’s description as they have responded to and live their vocation as faithful catechists, as vibrant parish catechetical leaders.

During your reading of this booklet, your reflections, and your conversations with others, dear catechists and catechetical leaders, may you realize once again your call from God, may you celebrate how you have generously responded, may you deepen your gratitude and your dedication to echoing the overwhelming love of God for each and every person, and may you live the summons from God to build the Reign of God in all the places we find ourselves.

The Person of the Catechist

The pastor called the young children forward to be close to him during the homily. The pastor invited the children to look for some things. He asked, “Where is the Paschal candle?” The children looked around. One sharp-eyed boy said, “There it is.” The pastor replied, “Do you want to go over to it so everyone can see where it is?” The young boy eagerly walked (almost ran) to the candle.

“Where is the holy water with which we bless ourselves?” he then asked. As several children excitedly raised their hands, the pastor asked one little girl to go to the holy water font and point it out for everyone.

The pastor then asked, “Where are the hosts that will be blessed today to become the Body of Christ for us?” Many children pointed to the gift table; the pastor asked one ten-year-old to go and reverently bring them to the altar.

Finally, he asked, “Where is God?” The children looked all around. A few bewildered stares, some shrugged shoulders. Then a young boy in a plaid shirt, about six years old, said, “I know!” The pastor said, “You do?” The little boy looked excited insisting, “Yes, yes!”

Then the pastor said, “Where?” And the little boy replied, “I’ll go get God!”

He jumped up and ran down the center aisle. His father, obviously a bit worried about the open doors at the back of the church, leaped out of his pew to fetch his son. Before he got very far, however, the little boy had stopped and was beginning his way back up the aisle.

He was holding the hand of a kind-looking woman, literally pulling her down the aisle. “Here!” he cried, “Here’s God! She’s here!” The pastor looked puzzled: “Miss Jean?” And the boy pointed, “There she is! God! God!”

Jean was the young boy’s catechist.

As catechists who are baptized, called, and sent, we are the face of God to our learners, whether they are children, youth, or adults. It is our privilege and our responsibility.

The Church values catechists for who they are. Back on October 28, 1977, there was an article in the Los Angeles archdiocesan newspaper titled “Bishops Take Persons Over Methods, Tools.” The article summarized that the U.S bishops, during a synod, emphasized that who catechists are is more important than the books, resources, and approaches they use. A friend of mine (a publisher of catechetical textbooks) used to say, “Books don’t teach people. People teach people.” Since the reason for all we do is a person—the person of Christ—the person of the catechist is pivotal.

The Church’s new *Directory for Catechesis* once again affirms and celebrates the vocation of the catechist.

To reflect on the vocation of the catechist, it helps to dispel two myths that sometimes creep into our thinking and speaking. An accurate understanding of these realities is essential for valuing the critical role of catechists within our Church today.

Myth 1: Vocation is a call that only priests and religious receive. Wrong! In the past, there was a belief that the role of the laity

was “to pray, pay, and obey.” Within that thinking, unfortunately often the idea of vocation seemed an alien concept. Yet we know that since God created each of us, God never leaves us alone. Vocation—a call—is one of the distinct ways God continues to work in our lives. God calls all of us to holiness—to live our lives reflecting the holiness, goodness, and love of God in all of our everyday circumstances.

Our lives don’t just belong to us. Jesus calls, “Come, follow me” with your gifts, your questions, your talents, your passions. Within the call to holiness, people live out their vocation as a single person, within marriage, or as a religious or clergy. Within each of these vocations, people—sharing their love and commitment for others—usually live other vocations: teacher, medical professional, caregiver, social worker, and many others, including catechist. What I find so fascinating and reassuring—as well as challenging—is that each of these vocations—vocations within a vocation—deepens our response to God and magnifies and multiplies the way we use the gifts we have been given.

Myth 2: I’m not holy; that’s for someone else. Wrong! Too often, again, we think holiness is for those who are clergy or religious, certainly not ourselves. Depending on your age, you might remember the *Baltimore Catechism* illustration of a couple getting married with the caption above it: “This is good.” Right next to it appeared a photo of a nun praying. The caption read: “This is better.” The Second Vatican Council emphatically reminded us this is incorrect. Rediscovering the call of Scripture to each and every one us—for example, “Be perfect as God is perfect” (Matthew 5:48) and “This is the will of God, your holiness” (1 Thessalonians 4:3)—reminds that we are all called to holiness.

Pope John Paul II’s saying: “The true missionary is the saint,” can be applied without hesitation to the catechist. Like every mem-

ber of the faithful, catechists are “called to holiness and to mission,” i.e. to live out their own vocation “with the fervour of the saints” (*People’s Guide for Catechists*, Vatican City, 1993, par. 6).

The new *Directory for Catechesis*

- Reminds us of our vocation: “In the multiplicity of ministries and services with which the Church realizes her mission of evangelization, the ‘ministry of catechesis’ occupies a significant place, indispensable for the growth of the faith.... The specific vocation of the catechist...has its root in the common vocation of the people of God, called to serve God’s plan of salvation on behalf of humanity” (110).
- Calls us to holiness: “Holiness is the crucial word that can be pronounced in presenting a new Directory for Catechesis. It is the herald of a way of life that catechists are also called to follow with constancy and fidelity” (Preface).

For Reflection

CATECHISTS

- *We find initials after the names of people in religious communities (OP for Dominicans [Order of Preachers], SJ for Jesuits [Society of Jesus]. It tells us something about their distinct vocation. As you think about your vocation, what might your initials be (e.g., FDC [father, doctor, catechist], PGC [protector, grandma, catechist])?*
- *How would you feel if someone told you you were holy?*

CATECHETICAL LEADERS

- *How does your vocation as a catechetical leader deepen your holiness?*
- *How do you affirm the holiness and the vocation of your catechists?*