



Called to Be a Catechist

The ROLE *of the*
CATECHIST

Inspiration and Professional Growth



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+ Most Reverend
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INTRODUCTION

One of the first questions any new catechist asks is, “What’s my role?” In 2005 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published the *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC) to help answer that question. This document offers catechists a compass to encourage, support, and enhance the meaning, direction, and impact of the Church’s catechetical ministry.

Our vocation as catechists is to deepen our personal relationship with Jesus Christ by growing in holiness and knowledge of our faith. Accepting our catechetical vocation is an intentional act or confirmation that we are willing to stay the course and to open ourselves to God’s self-communication. The NDC states: “The object of catechesis is communion with Jesus Christ. Catechesis leads people to enter the mystery of Christ, to encounter him, and to discover themselves and the meaning of their lives in him” (n. 19 B).

Our vocation as catechists is a “pivotal dimension of the Church’s pastoral activity and a significant element in all the Church does to hand on the faith” (NDC, n. 19C). This is an awesome responsibility and a task in which we are privileged to participate. Thus it is imperative that we prayerfully reflect on the vision the bishops have set for us.

To further aid in defining the role of the catechist, the NDC outlines six important tasks. The catechist is invited to participate in each of these tasks. So, in this book about the catechist’s role, the chapters highlight those tasks. You are encouraged to read, reflect on, and dialogue with other catechists about the insights you gain from your reading.

This book is written by leaders/practitioners who are or have been engaged in the formation of catechists. Because they have spent quality time studying the direction, meaning, and impact of the NDC, you can enrich your experience by holding the NDC in one hand and this book in the other to discern how to become more effective as a catechist.

CATECHESIS: SOURCES, NATURE, *and* PURPOSE

SUE GRENOUGH

*Christ
yesterday and today;
the Beginning and the End;
the Alpha; and the Omega.
All time belongs to him;
and all the ages.
To him be glory and power;
through every age
and forever.*

The priest proclaims these words as he carves the alpha, the omega, and the year on the new paschal candle at the Easter Vigil. This proclamation defines the heart of our faith, the person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of all that exists. Sacred Scripture and the documents of the Church affirm the centrality of Jesus Christ. He is source and center of a catechist's faith. He is the heart of all catechetical efforts.

There are two dimensions of a catechist: development as a person and growth as a minister. On a personal level, catechists can be assured of help in developing their own spirituality and in living as disciples of Christ. For the ministry, catechists can anticipate formation in the knowledge and skills of transmitting the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Wise Guidance

At the direction of the Second Vatican Council, universal and national directories have been published and revised to give vision and direction to catechetical ministry in the universal and national churches.

The revised *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC) outlines the source and goal of all catechesis in the United States. “The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity” (NDC, n. 19B).

“In touch,” “in communion,” “in intimacy with Jesus Christ”: these powerful words provide a glimpse into the lifelong journey for all Christians—to know and recognize Jesus Christ. As the relationship with Christ unfolds, the believer seeks to follow him more closely by becoming his disciple. The life of the disciple proclaims Jesus Christ in all aspects of life, as Christ is proclaimed at the Easter Vigil every year.

To develop and nourish this relationship with Jesus is a theme firmly rooted in the experiences of the covenants of the Old and New Testaments. Gradually, God sought over and over again a deepening relationship with the Jewish people through various covenants, especially the one at Mt. Sinai through Moses (see Exodus 19).

In all these covenants, God assures the people that he will be their God and they are his chosen ones. The covenants of the Old Testament found fulfillment in the new covenant of Jesus, where divinity and humanity were perfectly expressed: “He is the new and eternal covenant whose blood ‘will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins’ so that humanity may be redeemed and restored to communion with God” (NDC, n. 34).

So this is the vision! The task and work of catechesis is to align the practices of catechesis with this vision. Yet, in the midst of schedules, lesson plans, notes to parents, etc., is this goal of catechesis obvious? How does a catechist grow personally in the knowledge of Christ to the point of communion and intimacy? What are those efforts that best make Christ visible, known, and followed? What are those efforts that make this conversion, this turning to Christ as the center of life, into a living, explicit, and fruitful confession of faith?

Growing in Faith and Discipleship

This task of putting the vision into practice could seem overwhelming if it were not for all the supports at the disposal of the catechist. For the personal faith life of the catechist, the community of believers provides prayer and liturgy, witness as disciples, insights of theology, and moral values evident in Church and society.

In the liturgy, Christ is present and experienced in word, in community, in the Body of Christ, and in the priest. By immersing oneself in this mystery regularly, the catechist receives the nourishment to know Christ more fully and to find ways to live as his disciple. Also, the community, through its witness of living the word of God, gives strength to one another as they strive to know Christ in ever new ways. Many parish communities are composed of smaller communities organized around prayer and study, peer ministry, or life issues. These groups strive to make more evident the connection between faith and life.

Through their own life of witness, catechists become the “echo of the Good News,” which the word “catechesis” originally signifies in Greek.

The catechist also has rich resources in Scripture and prayer. Prayer “expresses the covenant relationship that binds God to the person and the person to God” (NDC, n. 34). Various prayer forms combine prayer

with Scripture. Many communities are praying together using *lectio divina*, which is a meditative form of reading and listening to Scripture. The tradition of the Catholic Church has a treasury of prayer forms which can nurture the faith at any stage of life.

Through their own personal witness, catechists give meaning and expression to the message they communicate. Through their own life of witness, catechists become the “echo of the Good News,” which the word “catechesis” originally signifies in Greek.

Growing in Knowledge and Skill

In the exercise of their ministry, catechists simultaneously grow as they call other believers to grow in faith. While catechists grow in knowledge of their faith in their personal faith experience, they also seek the knowledge that is specific to their area of catechesis.

If a catechist is serving in the catechumenate, for example, the focus will be the basics of the Catholic faith, the elements of the initiation process, the learning styles of the learners, and even knowledge about the faith traditions of the candidates and catechumens. Catechists preparing believers for the first reception of Eucharist will steep themselves in the mystery of Eucharist.

Communicating the Faith

Catechesis is about communication of the faith in Jesus Christ, either as beginning faith or deepening faith. Catechists, then, need to become skilled in divine and human methodology, in constructing learning experiences appropriate to the age of the learners, in assessing individual learning styles, in catechetical process, and in blending all of this to achieve the goal of faith in a Person.

With the assurance of the call to ministry, the catechist has rich traditions and resources in the Church, and particularly from within their contemporary faith community, from which to draw.

There is a difference between an information-centered program and a discipleship-centered program. Perhaps a blend of the two is possible

where discipleship, a way of life, is learned and practiced with supportive learning. While discipleship includes affective learning, one needs the informed wisdom of the past and present Church for living authentic faith. Periodic reviews of catechetical efforts are in order to assure that the desired result is, in fact, the actual result.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter we remembered the Easter proclamation of Jesus Christ, the beginning and end for all ages. Jesus Christ, as the Word of God, is the source for all catechesis. This Word of God is celebrated in the community of believers in prayer, service, and the personal and communal lives of the members. Developing a relationship with Jesus Christ throughout one's life is the object of all catechesis.

For catechists, this vision provides both direction and challenge for their ministry. Catechists focus their efforts on providing the means to nurture a relationship with Jesus Christ and live as his disciple. Catechetical plans and activities are chosen and evaluated in terms of this goal.

To do this, catechists use the knowledge and skills they acquire as ministers of the Word of God as well as the grace that accompanies their vocation. Then they can truly say with Paul, "For to me, life is Christ" (Philippians 1:21).

Your Thoughts

1 What steps have I taken to nurture or deepen my relationship with Jesus? (Be specific.)

2 What “covenant” biblical narratives can I recall? What meaning do they have for my spiritual life?

Try This

Fold an 8½" X 11" sheet of paper in thirds. Position the paper horizontally so that the folds indicate columns. In the first column, list all the resources you have to support your catechetical ministry. In the second (middle) column, list the resources you need but do not have (your dream list). In the third column, design a plan of action to acquire these resources.

PROMOTING KNOWLEDGE *of the* FAITH

ROSE L. BENNETT

When Catholics profess the Creed during Mass, we proclaim the core beliefs that form the context of our actions, decisions, and attitudes: We believe in one God: God the Father, God the Son incarnate in Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Spirit, who enlightens, guides, strengthens, and consoles us.

For some of us, these beliefs were part of our Catholic upbringing; others of us came to faith as adults through the witness of believers. Our faith, too, is influenced by life events, and shapes the directions of our lives.

Our Creed is brief, but the truths it contains warrant a lifetime of reflection and study so that the “We believe” of the gathered community is an “I believe” for each disciple.

Catechists as Witnesses of Faith

The role of catechists is to guide children, youth, and adults on their journeys of faith. We consider our call a privilege and an obligation that flows from our baptismal mission to continue the work of Jesus Christ.