

Effective Witness Formation: Developing Catechists for the New Evangelization

Jared Dees



One of the most frequently used words during the Year of Faith, besides “new evangelization,” was the descriptive title “witness.” In the context of catechesis, it is a word that is best described by Pope Paul VI in his letter on evangelization. “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41).

This challenge is just as relevant today as it was when these words were written. For sustainable evangelization and catechesis in our culture, we need more witnesses, yet our catechetical formation approaches tend to be structured toward developing teachers more than witnesses. As we continue to work toward a new evangelization, it is crucial that we continually reevaluate our approach to forming catechists and teachers.

This should not come as a surprise, but for the most part children do not like school. Just the day before I wrote this, I had a second grade girl in my CCD class tell me how school was so boring (to which I immediately felt self-conscious about the school-like activities I had planned for the day). With such a strong emphasis on external motivators like test scores, grades, and college acceptance rate, it is difficult to inspire intrinsic motivation in schools. Yet, intrinsic motivation is required for effective evangelization and catechesis.

At the same time, if we look to our exemplary models of faith over the years, we find that there have been more saints who were witnesses than those who were teachers. The word martyr means witness. The martyrs who sacrificed their lives for God, were called witnesses. People listened to them and remember them because of the sacrifice they made with their lives more than the lessons they taught with their words or writings. Even those who were not killed on account of their faith gave up their entire lives to follow Jesus and lived what they taught.

SIGNS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHER FORMATION

If our goal is to develop catechists who are effective teachers, we might observe some of the following in a successful teacher formation program:

- * Children quietly work at their desks.

- * Children participate in class discussions.
- * Children clearly understand instructions and work diligently on task.
- * Children score well on tests and quizzes.
- * Children can articulate doctrines of the faith accurately.

All of these things are desirable outcomes. In fact, I’ve spent most of my teaching career in pursuit of strategies and resources that will create these kinds of student behaviors. The truth is, however, these outcomes are just not enough to make a long-term impact on individual’s faith lives. We are called to do more than just teach children to know *about* God, we must teach them to *know* God.

Pope Francis, when writing about the creed, articulated this point clearly in his encyclical *Lumen Fidei*:

“The creed does not only involve giving one’s assent to a body of abstract truths; rather, when it is recited the whole of life is drawn into a journey towards full communion with the living God. We can say that in the creed believers are invited to enter into the mystery which they profess and to be transformed by it.” (*Lumen Fidei*, 45)

If, therefore, we do more than pass on a body of abstract truths and instead invite children on a journey towards communion, what should the results of our catechist formation be instead?

SIGNS OF EFFECTIVE WITNESS FORMATION

In a classroom led by a witness, we might observe the following:

- * Children quietly (or vocally) focused in prayer.
- * Class discussions that include personal stories and the experience of God.
- * Children consider what they are learning to be relevant to their lives.
- * Children can articulate, but more importantly profess, a belief in the lessons they have learned about faith.
- * Catechists who share their faith and failures willingly and appropriately.

Essentially, classes led by witnesses lead children on a path to be what John Paul II hoped we would all become: “not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ”

(*Catechesi Tradendae*, 5). This requires a different set of skills than teachers are typically asked to develop and it calls for a different approach to their formation.

EFFECTIVE WITNESS FORMATION: GOALS AND APPROACHES

So how do we develop formation opportunities that inspire catechists to be witnesses more than teachers? First, it requires different intentions and different goals. If we are going to form true witnesses, we have to focus more on developing the whole person than training them in teaching skills. Consider developing religious educators into witnesses using the formation approaches below.

Goal: Witnesses recognize their work as a calling.

If God has called us to become catechists, then he has also called us with a purpose. Every vocation is developed with our unique interests and skills in mind. The same goes for the call to be a catechist. Whether it is a particular interest in the sacraments or in a devotional prayer like the Rosary or even a love of music, we are all pulled towards certain aspects of the Christian faith that we know, love, and can't help but share.

Formation approach: Catechists can get in touch with their unique calling to the classroom by making a list of all the aspects of their own faith lives or faith formation that interest them the most. What aspects of their faith are they excited to share? What have been the most profound lessons in their own faith formation? They might also make a list of the things that they see missing in the faith lives of the children and parents they teach or the biggest challenges they see facing the church today. With this list in mind, they can make a commitment to sharing this passion and calling with the students that they teach.

Goal: Witnesses have an intimate relationship with Christ.

Let's look briefly at the meaning of the words teacher and witness. *Teacher* implies sharing lessons and ideas objectively. *Witness* implies sharing a personal experience, something that has been seen. For Christians, that personal experience is always an encounter with Christ. As witnesses, catechists do more than share lessons; they share their own experience and relationship with Christ.

Formation approach: Help catechists get in touch with their relationships with Christ by giving them time to remember how that relationship began and developed over time. What were the key moments and stories that relate to their faith journey? Who were the people that helped them come to know Jesus? How do they continue to encounter God (through prayer, Scripture, sacraments, family, etc.)?

Remembering these encounters is an important exercise for all of us to do. It helps us recommit ourselves to Christ because we are able to remember all the great things he has done for

us. Remembering those encounters is an essential first step in being able to share these experiences with others.

Goal: Witnesses have a habitual prayer life.

Witnesses maintain an intimate relationship with Christ by constantly and habitually developing that relationship through prayer. There is an important distinction between praying when one feels like it and praying at dedicated times and places each day. Just as relationships develop over time through conversations and shared experiences, so does our relationship with God. The more we can spend time with God in prayer, realizing his love for us, the more we will feel compelled to share that love with others.

Formation approach: Directly ask catechists about their prayer life. If they feel they could do more, give them some suggestions for what you do or what others do. You might suggest that they dedicate daily time to reading the Bible, praying the Rosary, or reading a devotional or spiritual book.

If they don't already have a daily prayer practice help them select a specific time each day and carve out a few minutes at that time to spend in prayer. Check in with them periodically throughout the year to see how their prayer lives are doing. If this feels uncomfortable for you to do this as a catechetical leader, good. You are a witness too, and one of the best ways you can be a witness is to share your prayer life and the challenges you have experienced in developing one.

Goal: Witnesses are able to share their personal stories.

As Catholics, we don't share our personal testimony or spiritual conversion stories enough. We are all called, as St. Francis of Assisi once said, to "preach the gospel always, but sometimes use words." Unfortunately, too many of us use this quote as an excuse to never use words at all.

Witnesses share their faith. It isn't awkward or pushy; it is just real stories and real life experiences that have helped them grow and overcome challenges in their lives. In the classroom, witnesses present more than the content of the faith; they share their own life experiences and how they have been able to integrate the doctrines of the faith into their own lives.

Formation approach: Give catechists the opportunity to prepare and share a short testimony either to fellow catechists or to their students. Encourage them to think of one moment when an encounter with God changed them in some way. Assure them that it does not have to be a life-changing event from their past. It can simply be an experience in prayer, at Mass, or in conversation with a family or friend that led them along a new path toward the Lord.

Goal: Witnesses live and share their faith outside of the classroom.

What does Pope Francis have to say about the vocation of a catechist?



Photo by Moyan Brenn

“Being a catechist means witnessing to the faith, being consistent in our personal life. This is not easy! We help, we lead others to Jesus with our words and our lives, with our witness. I like to recall what Saint Francis of Assisi used to say to his friars: ‘Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.’ Words come... but witness comes first: people should see the Gospel, read the Gospel, in our lives” (Address to Catechists on the Occasion of the Year of Faith, September 27, 2013).

Not only do witnesses share their personal faith experiences in the classroom, they share it with family, friends, and acquaintances in their everyday lives as well. Being a witness is not just about teaching in a classroom, it is about living a different life.

This was Pope Francis’s advice to catechists at the close of the Year of Faith. But before we go calling our friends and pouring out our Christian testimonies, look closely at the Holy Father’s words. Before the words, come the actions. We live our faith first and then the Spirit will give us the opportunities to share our faith with words.

Witnesses live their faith. They let their light shine before others so that they see good deeds and glorify God in heaven (Mt 5:16). When people see that light shining, they will ask for help when they need it. Thankfully, witnesses have the courage to meet them in their pain and bring with them God’s mercy.

Formation approach: When communicating with catechists, share the Holy Father’s advice with them. Challenge them to see their vocation as catechists as something that extends beyond the classroom and beyond their students. In particular, challenge them to develop relationships with the parents of their students so that they can see how their faith as catechists overflows into their everyday lives.

Spend some time getting to know your catechists. When you see them at parish events, develop a relationship with them that extends beyond the catechetical leader-catechist relationship. If they are not at these parish events, be sure to invite them. The more you get to know them and show them how

your faith is influencing or has influenced your life, the more likely they are to show others their faith with their personal life.

Goal: Witnesses support other witnesses in a common mission.

The Lord Jesus appointed 72 disciples whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit (Lk 10:1). Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs because discipleship is not meant to be lived out alone. In order to serve God, we need partners to help us. Being a catechist can be a lonely endeavor. Whether they have classroom aides or not, standing in front of a room full of kids and planning weekly lessons is not something they often get to share with others.

Formation approach: In order to sustain their role as witnesses, they need continuous support from their catechetical leaders and their colleagues. It is vitally important that you provide your catechists with opportunities to share stories, challenges, successes, and ideas that have worked best for them. Whether you do this digitally or with in-person meetings, do not overlook the importance of building a community of disciples.

If I had to select one virtue that separates witnesses from teachers, it would be the virtue so clearly exhibited by the martyrs and witnesses who gave up their lives for their faith: courage. Witnesses have courage. It takes courage to live out your faith beyond the classroom and even more courage to humbly ask others for help along the way. If we can instill this virtue of courage and help lead our religious educators to be more focused on developing the confidence they need to be witnesses more than teachers, we will be able to develop a much more vibrant church for the middle of the 21st century. ■

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