

EVANGELIZING

New Vision - New Directions

CATECHESIS

A SERIES OF ARTICLES ON THEMES FROM THE GENERAL DIRECTORY FOR CATECHESIS

*"Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it in many ways."
(GDC, #105)*

*"The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ."
(CT5) All evangelizing activity is understood as promoting communion with Jesus Christ."
(GDC, #80)*

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NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR CATECHETICAL LEADERSHIP

Opening Prayer

Take a moment to place yourself in the presence of God's Spirit, then prayerfully read and reflect on the following passage:

"Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

(Philippians 2:9-11)

Article 3

The Tasks of Catechesis

by Marilyn Kerber, S.N.D. de N.

Based on paragraphs 85-87 in the *General Directory for Catechesis*

Preparing to Read

In preparing to read the following article, reflect on and discuss with others the following:

1. How did you come to the Catholic faith?
2. How would people in your parish define catechesis? What would they say are the tasks and purpose of catechesis?

The Enterprise

With its front and back covers missing and its pages yellow with age, a *Baltimore Catechism* sits on my overcrowded bookcase among other treasured catechetical documents. Why? Because I carried this book from home to school and back, memorizing word for word the answers to the questions assigned for homework. Because my mouth went dry and my knees shook when it was my turn to answer the questions put to me in religion class. Because I can still answer today some of those questions word for word. Because the fundamentals of the faith I hold today are contained in this book—a book, however, that I never taught from myself and never even wanted to use with my students! A line from the poem, "A Prayer of Inheritance," from *The God Who Fell From Heaven* by John Shea, says it all for me: "I laugh to remember but I wonder how to pass on" the faith that is mine, that is ours.

The doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation, and Resurrection remain essential teachings. Catholics attach considerable importance to the belief that Mary is the Mother of God; that Jesus is completely divine and completely human; that in Mass, the bread and wine actually become the Body and Blood of Christ. These central faith issues are the areas of greatest unity among pre-Vatican II, Vatican II, and post-Vatican II Catholics. These issues are the glue that holds Catholics together. They are the reason why Catholics remain loyal to the Church, even when they disagree with it on other matters [see Davidson et al, *The Search for Common Ground*, Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1997, pp. 42, 43, 55]. Why might this be so? Perhaps this is because when we contemplate these beliefs and celebrate these mysteries, we touch into God's love for us and God's overwhelming goodness. And is there not something very compelling about this Jesus, both God and human, who offers us his very self in the bread and wine of Eucharist become his Body and Blood?

We have come to know that this enterprise called catechesis is the totality of our efforts to make disciples who believe in Jesus, the Son of God, so that in believing they might have life in him [see *Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]*, #4]. A faith confessed, celebrated, and lived is our enterprise.

The *General Directory for Catechesis (GDC)* delineates the tasks of catechesis in paragraphs #85-87, along with other references. What follows is a reflection on these tasks and how together they constitute the totality of catechesis.

To Promote Knowledge of the Faith

There are so many wonderful stories in the Scriptures and in the Church's tradition of how people come to know Jesus. The stories continue to this day: Women and men meet Christ in and through you and me. If the encounter leads to further interest and love, there also comes the desire to know Christ all the more. Believers are invited into an ongoing relationship with the Trinity in which knowledge and love continue to grow. We are invited into a process of ongoing conversion, a process of being continually evangelized ourselves even as we evangelize.

It is the task of catechesis to teach inquirers and believers—adults, youth, and children—the essential beliefs of the Catholic Christian faith. Ours is a rich and complex tradition, one that needs to be shared lovingly, systematically, and appropriately with believers of all ages. We do this not only to nourish their life of faith but also to enable them to share its wondrous good news with others.

To Educate for Full, Conscious, and Active Participation in the Liturgical Life of the Church

The liturgy and sacraments of our Church are so rich in meaning! In our rituals, the signs and symbols

of water, oil, bread, wine, light, incense, gesture, and song connect us deeply with the mysteries celebrated. Whether we call it the Mass, the Lord's Supper or the celebration of the Eucharist, it is an experience that intimately connects us with our Catholic identity. Each celebration of the Eucharist is set within the Church's liturgical year. From Advent through the feast of the reign of God in and through Jesus, we celebrate the mysteries of Christ and the lives of the faithful witnesses.

In the celebration of the sacraments, the presence of Jesus, the Christ, is brought to key events and desires in our lives and the lives of our sisters and brothers. The longing

From the *General Directory for Catechesis*

"All of these tasks are necessary. As the vitality of the human body depends on the proper function of all of its organs, so also the maturation of the Christian life requires that it be cultivated in all its dimensions: knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, moral formation, prayer, belonging to community, missionary spirit. When catechesis omits one of these elements, the Christian faith does not attain full development."
(GDC, #87)



for God and belonging, the celebration of call, the forgiving and nourishing we need throughout our lives, the strengthening and comfort needed as sickness or age and death come, are experiences and longings celebrated in the sacraments. Participating in the well-celebrated liturgical and sacramental life of the Church prompts us to want to know more about what it is we are celebrating.

For this reason, a central task of catechesis is to guide the faithful to full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgical life of the Church through a deeper understanding of its sacred mysteries. In this all-important aspect of faith life, catechesis helps believers not only to receive from its treasures but also to add to its power and beauty through the contributions of their own devotion and prayer.

To Promote Moral Formation

"Conversion to Jesus Christ implies walking in his footsteps" (*GDC*, #85). Those footsteps, however, can seem quite daunting. The *CCC* says, "Christ Jesus always did what was pleasing to the *Father*, and always lived in perfect communion with him. Likewise Christ's disciples are invited to live in the sight of the *Father* 'who sees in secret' (Matthew 6:6) in order to become 'perfect as your heavenly *Father* is perfect' (Matthew 5:48)" (#1693).

What was foundational to Jesus in his relationships with people? It was the dignity bestowed on each human person by God. And it is this dignity that we carry when we walk in Christ's footsteps.

At the same time, our walk of discipleship necessitates a journey of conversion, a passing from the old self to the new, to a self in whom others see more clearly the image of Christ. The tools that catechists use for aiding this ongoing conversion are an understanding of sin and grace, and a prayerful study of the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes.

A catechesis for moral conversion is also important for evangelization, which is always a task of discipleship. Evangelization must not only offer a proclaimed Word but a lived one as well. We must live in a way that clearly demonstrates our response to the social consequences of the Gospel's demands. It is the task of catechesis "to reveal in all clarity the joy

and the demands of the way of Christ" (*CCC*, #1697). It will be a catechesis for the "newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

To Teach to Pray

Prayer is the raising of the mind to God, a surge of the heart, a look of love. Our tradition offers us myriad ways to pray, both personally and communally: the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Rosary, the Psalms, the Liturgy of the Hours, liturgical and sacramental celebrations, and meditation and contemplation in the tradition of the mystics. As a key aspect of our relationship with God, prayer grows and develops over time and with attention.

Catechesis helps bring meaning and understanding to prayer, to its words, its silence, its singing; to its memorization or spontaneity. Research tells us that the importance of prayer and ritual in children's lives makes it more likely that they will have a close, personal relationship with God later in life. Childhood religiosity promotes Catholic identity and investment in the Church (see *Common Ground*, p. 210). Prayer, including the celebration of the liturgy and sacraments, connects us as adults and children to God and to the Christian community.

Catechesis helps believers to assume the same attitude of prayer and contemplation that Jesus had. It empowers them to voice similar longings, adoration, and thanksgiving, especially in the form of the Our Father, which is a summary of the entire Gospel (see *CCC*, #2761).

To Educate for Community Life

The faith that is mine, that is ours, will grow and endure in and through community. Together we are in conversation with the Scriptures and tradition, with the Church's magisterium, with the saints of the past and the theologians of today, within our own tradition and with those of other Christian Churches, as well as with women and men of other religions.

To catechize for community life is to help believers learn to live well in community, to develop a genuine sense of belonging and caring responsibility for one another. Catechesis fosters a communal spirit of simplicity and humility so that the needs of the community can be served.

Reflection Questions for Individuals and Groups

Select some of the following questions to help you assimilate your understanding of this article.

1. What are some of your initial insights or reactions to this article?
2. "Faith confessed, celebrated, and lived is our enterprise." What does this statement mean to you?
3. How does an understanding of symbols and their relation to life foster a richer celebration of the liturgy?
4. What are the essentials of the faith that need to be passed on to future generations?
5. Why is building community a task of catechesis?
6. Which task of catechesis is your parish's greatest strength? What could you do to strengthen the other tasks in your parish?
7. How might these tasks serve as a means of evaluation for your parish programs of catechesis?

Catechesis must also look to the wider community, to those who are members of other Christian Churches. A complete catechesis seeks to instill in believers a genuine longing for unity.

Being a member of a truly Christian community is a joy, and nothing is more supportive to being a disciple of Jesus than the good example of our sisters and brothers in the faith. Building community is not separate from the other tasks of catechesis, but rather, is foundational to them.

To Educate to a Missionary Dimension

Whether it is good news or something that makes my heart ache, I am moved to share it with others. When I know God loves me, when I reflect on God's goodness to me, when I have come to know and love Jesus, I want to share this good news with others. Before Jesus took leave of the disciples, after the

Resurrection, he gave them the commission to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). Age, circumstances, and call make how we do this unique to each person. It is the task of catechesis to instill a true sense of mission in believers and to equip them to be faithful witnesses to the Good News in all aspects of their social, professional, and cultural lives. Indeed, wherever Christians are, there should be the unmistakable presence of Christ.

Just as catechesis for community life inspires a desire for unity within the body of Christ, so, too,

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catechesis for mission promotes interreligious dialogue. Catechesis seeks to help believers engage in meaningful communication with men and women of other religions while at the same time remaining missionary witnesses for Christ.

Totality of the Tasks

The *GDC* makes the observation that the tasks of catechesis constitute a totality; they are rich and varied, interdependent, and develop together. In the Emmaus story in the Gospel of Luke (24:13-35), Jesus, the preeminent catechist, models for us how the tasks of catechesis come together in life. Jesus joins the disciples along the road and gets them to talk about what is going on in their lives. Jesus then shares from the Scriptures with them, connecting the truths therein to their experience. It is only in the breaking of the bread, however, that they recognize Jesus and in reflection realize how their hearts burned within them as Jesus talked to them

along the road and explained the Scriptures. In turn they were compelled to return to Jerusalem and share their experience with the community. Simple, yet profound, catechesis is an art.

What a graced privilege and responsibility is this catechetical enterprise to which we are invited!

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Closing Prayer

Good and gracious God, you call us to be your people, echoing your Word and presence through our ordinary lives as we strive to bring about your reign in our world today. We pray that we will continue to recognize and respond to your presence as we go forth to evangelize our world with your good news and promote a new vision and new direction for the catechetical ministry of all people. We ask for your blessing and intimate presence on our ongoing journey of conversion, becoming disciples who will transform the world through proclaiming and living Gospel values. We ask this in your name. Amen.

For Further Reading

Connell, Martin, Ed. *The Catechetical Documents: A Parish Resource*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996.

Davidson, James A., et al. *The Search for Common Ground*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1997.

Gallagher, Maureen. *The Art of Catechesis*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998.

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become better acquainted with the key themes presented in the *General Directory for Catechesis*. Produced by the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership with the aid and cooperation of the Department of Education of the United States Catholic Conference.



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