

# 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:

*But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring [the] good news!"*

(Romans 10:14-15)

# Article 6

## The Person of the Catechist

by Jeanne D. Schrempf

Based on paragraphs 156 and 231-232 of 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 and when were you called to be a catechist?
2. Is being a catechist a volunteer position or a vocation in the Church? What might the differences be?
3. What are your concerns and questions about the role of the catechist in the parish/Church today?
4. "At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, . . . To catechize is 'to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God's eternal design reaching fulfillment in that Person.' . . . Catechesis aims at putting 'people . . . in communion . . . with Jesus Christ' " (*Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], #426*). What does this quote mean for the ministry of the catechist?

On an ordinary day, an extraordinary event happened that in time touched the lives of hundreds of persons and continues to mold and shape them into a community of faith today. Charlie Moore and his wife Kay walked into my office and asked to speak to me about becoming catechists. Charlie had recently retired from a long and fulfilling career, and they wanted to return to God some of the gifts given to them throughout their lives. Of all the ministries in the parish that could have been chosen, they both felt called to be catechists. Their first question to me was, "Are we too old?" I still smile when I think of their question today.

Charlie and Kay spent that first summer studying texts and manuals, looking at resources, and participating in the parish orientation and formation process for new catechists. They chose to join a team of sixth grade catechists because they loved Scripture, wanted to learn more about it, and loved children. It was always a joy to walk into their classroom filled with eleven-year-olds alive with energy and creativity. Charlie and Kay became masterful storytellers of the prophets and kings, hosted seder meals and trips to a nearby temple, invited their classes to join them at liturgy and special parish celebrations, and were models and mentors for children and their families. They taught as a team for several years until Kay became seriously ill, and Charlie stayed home to care for her. Kay died shortly after her illness was diagnosed, and Charlie died about two years later.

When I walked into the wake for Charlie, one of his sons asked me if I would like to see the scrapbook that Charlie's grandchildren had helped him put together when he was ill. It was filled with many accomplishments in all the phases of his life: family photos, college degrees, awards and documents from prestigious military and business careers, and personal mementos. I do not know how I saw the other pages—the unfolding story of his life—because tears filled my eyes and streamed down my face. There on the very first page of the story of this husband, father, grandfather, military officer, scholar, and business executive was his catechist formation certification, signed by the bishop of the Diocese of Albany. Of all the many accomplishments in his life, Charlie had placed his recognition as a catechist on the first page of his memoirs.

We all know people like Charlie and Kay. They are parents and grandparents, high school- and college-age students, young

adults and senior adults, laity, religious, and clergy. They are the people who live next door, the daycare worker, the grocery clerk, the business woman, the teacher, the accountant, the nurse, the soccer mom. They serve in our parish and school catechetical programs as catechists to children, youth, and adults. They teach in parish halls and school classrooms, at kitchen tables and in living rooms, in storefronts and choir lofts—anywhere there are people, a need, and a bit of space. If we allow ourselves to step into the great commissioning scene at the close of Matthew's Gospel, we can see them all at Jesus' feet and hear him say, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (28:19-20).

### From the *General Directory for Catechesis*

"The Christian faith is, above all, conversion to Jesus Christ, full and sincere adherence to his person and the decision to walk in his footsteps. Faith is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, making of oneself a disciple of him. This demands a permanent commitment to think like him, to judge like him and to live as he lived. In this way the believer unites himself to the community of disciples and appropriates the faith of the Church." (CCC 166-167) (*GDC*, #53)

### The Call

The ministry of the catechist has been shaped by the tradition and teaching of the Church. The call to become a catechist springs first from the sacrament of Baptism and is strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation. Through these sacraments, catechists, as all the faithful, participate in the "priestly, prophetic and kingly ministry of Christ" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium]*, #31). Within that common vocation of all the faithful, some of us are called specifically to be catechists. The recent catechetical documents affirm that the vocational call of the catechist "is a specific call from the Holy Spirit" (*Guide for*

*Catechists*, #2) through which "the Church awakens and discerns this divine vocation and confers the mission to catechize" (*General Directory for Catechesis [GDC]*, #231).

The word "catechist" is a rich, descriptive word derived from the ancient Greek word meaning "to echo or resound." The catechist is called to echo faithfully the Word of God to a new generation in a new place and in new times. Persons called to be catechists need to develop and possess the spiritual and human qualities necessary for this ministry. As a public minister in the Church, the catechist must possess a real and vital Catholic Christian faith based on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that is nourished in and through the Church. The catechist is called to develop a spirituality that includes a commitment to the Eucharist, liturgy, and prayer, and a love for Scripture, faithfulness to the tradition and teachings of the Church, and the willingness to live a Gospel lifestyle (see



*Sharing the Light of Faith*, #205-211). Those called from the community to be catechists must demonstrate patience, openness, the ability to listen, a spirit of generosity, a sense of humor, a healthy self esteem, and the heart of a minister. They must genuinely love people and develop an aptitude to minister to particular age groups. All these spiritual and human qualities are essential to the ministry of the catechist. It is important to note, however, that no one called to this or any other ministry possesses all of these completely, and no one comes to ministry as a finished product. The invitation to become a catechist is an invitation to grow in grace, wisdom, skills, and relationship with God.

The vision of the *GDC* calls the Church to see the call of the catechist as a vocation and not just an aspect of volunteerism. For some members of the community, this vocation may well be a lifetime commitment, a vocation within a primary lifestyle vocation. Others will serve as catechists for a specific or limited time due to family or personal needs and circumstances. The community that they serve—for a lifetime or a year—will always be blessed and enriched by their ministry. The gifts of generosity and commitment given by catechists are always returned in abundance in the deepening relationship with God, the opportunity to grow in knowledge of their faith, in a sense of belonging to the catechetical community, and in a realization that they have been given the privilege of being God's instrument of love, healing, and presence (see *GDC*, #231). The task of the catechist is to make known "the Person of Jesus of Nazareth" and lead "people . . . in communion . . . with Jesus Christ" (*CCC*, #426). In their teaching and witnessing, catechists will likewise grow in knowledge and relationship with Jesus. The gift given is always returned one hundred fold.

*Reflection question: How can the parish community move the vision of the catechist as minister from volunteer to vocation and still maintain sufficient numbers of catechists to serve diverse and growing needs?*

### The Mission

The call of the catechist is recognized by both the local community and the bishop. The catechist must be willing to both accept the responsibilities of this public ministry

and fulfill them to the best of his or her ability. The mission of the catechist includes:

- striving to be a model of Catholic Christian faith and lifestyle;
- deepening one's own knowledge and understanding of the truths of our faith;
- making Jesus Christ the center of all teaching and the center of one's own life personally;
- teaching intentionally for discipleship;
- developing the skills and methodology to communicate the faith clearly, authentically, and appropriately to the age group to whom the catechist ministers;
- assisting those they teach to connect their faith to life and their lives to faith;
- leading persons to prayer, worship, community, and mission;
- developing the skills to be both an evangelizer and a catechist;
- participating in formation opportunities and certification processes provided by the parish, school, and diocese;
- knowing and abiding by the parish, school, and diocesan guidelines and policies promoting effective catechesis and administration (New York State Roman Catholic Bishops et al, *The Catechist in the Third Millennium: Call, Mission, and Formation*, p. 5).

Father Thomas DeVries names the catechist as "the critical link" in the mission of the Church. It is the person of the cate-

chist who is able to connect the experience of the learner with the essence of our faith tradition (Heralds of Faith Convention, 1998). No text or method or resource, no matter how well tested, can dispense with the person of the catechist in every step of the catechetical process. The stories of prophets and kings would have remained tales from long ago if Charlie and Kay had not brought them to life and connected them to the real life of their sixth grade children. Perhaps this has never been more critical than today when so many children and youth are not supported by the lived faith of family members and spend their formative years in a culture that does not reflect the love of God. Many of the children

## Reflection Questions for Individuals and Groups

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

1. What is your initial reaction to the article? What did you find most affirming or challenging for your ministry as a catechist?
2. In the *GDC* the vision is to see the ministry of the catechist as a vocation and not just as a volunteer. What are the implications of this for your parish/diocese?
3. The catechist is called to develop a spirituality that includes a commitment to the Eucharist, liturgy, and prayer; a love for Scripture; faithfulness to the tradition and teachings of the Church; and the willingness to live a Gospel lifestyle (see *Sharing the Light of Faith*, #205-211). How would catechists in your parish/diocese react to this statement? How would you discern these commitments in your catechists?
4. What would help catechists in your parish/diocese to understand that being a catechist is a vocation that demands formation and enrichment? Give practical suggestions.
5. Read paragraph 156 in the *GDC* on the role of the catechist. What are the implications and challenges for your parish or diocesan programs?

who gather in parish settings today need to be both evangelized and catechized. The rich legacy of our faith—our stories, doctrine, values, prayer, rituals, sacraments, and traditions—will not be known and cherished without the generosity and commitment of the Charlie and Kays of our communities.

The mission of the catechist today goes far beyond the sharing of the story and the tradition. Catechists teach and witness by what they say, how they pray, and how they live their lives. They do this to enable all those to whom they are sent to know Jesus the Christ. The catechist in partnership with God becomes the potter molding firmly and gently, the farmer sowing and nurturing, the shepherd guiding and gathering, the teacher sharing and clarifying, and the parent loving unconditionally and unceasingly. In many situations today catechists become the primary nurturer of faith for children and youth whose awakening faith is not supported by the environment in which they live. The catechist is given the charism to be "a mediator . . . [who] facilitates communication between the people and the mystery of God, between subjects among themselves, as well as with the community" (GDC, #156). Charlie and Kay Moore lived this

out for their sixth grade class and their parish community. We knew God more fully and intimately because we knew them.

The person of the catechist has never been more important and more critical. We are entering a "new missionary age" (*On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate [Redemptoris Missio]*, #92) that calls the catechist to a spirit of being, knowing, and "savoir-faire" (GDC, #238). This spirited language of the GDC calls the catechist to formation on a personal, spiritual, theological, and ministerial level. It calls the catechist to be the message and the messenger in a world that longs to

know and hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. Our hope and confidence for the fulfillment of our ministry comes from our faith that the Holy Spirit will gift us with the wisdom, passion, generosity, and commitment for this mission.

*Reflection questions: How am I affirmed by this mission of the catechist? How am I challenged? What concrete steps can the parish/school and diocese take to support and nurture the ministry of the catechist in this new millennium?*

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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.*

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### For Further Reading

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