

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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Opening Prayer

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

*"Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing. For we know partially and we prophesy partially, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things"
(1 Corinthians 13: 4-11).*

Article 8

Adult Faith Formation

by Daniel Luby, Ph.D.

Based on paragraphs #172-176 and #186-188 in the *General Directory for Catechesis*

Preparing to Read

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

1. Have you grown more in your faith as an adult than you did as a child? Explain.
2. What circumstances and situations have most helped or challenged faith growth for you as an adult?



NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR CATECHETICAL LEADERSHIP

Imagine a family with a passion for gardening. They collaborate about the garden's layout, arranging flowers and vegetables with an eye towards beauty as well as production. They sharpen tools and chart weather, and prepare the plot to plant at precisely the right moment. Their hearts soar at the sight of green sprouts, tiny plants, and buds that betoken fruits and flowers.

Now imagine that the family, following long-established custom, stops tending the garden and leaves the plants to raise themselves. They're disappointed when the flowers are spindly and pale, frustrated with the meager squashes and flavorless tomatoes. But the next year they follow the same pattern: planting the seeds and helping them sprout but leaving them to mature on their own.

As crucial to a bountiful harvest as initial steps are—cultivation, planting, watering—the ultimate goal is beautiful flowers and nourishing food.

It's an obvious point but one worth repeating when thinking about adult faith formation and the *General Directory for Catechesis (GDC)*. The goal of catechesis, the *GDC* says, is deep, personal, conversion: "The Christian faith is, above all, conversion to Jesus Christ (see AG 13a), full and sincere adherence to his person and the decision to walk in his footsteps" (see CT 5b) (*GDC*, #53; see also, e.g., 54-57, 61-63, 80, 82, 102, 204, 283).

By pointing to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as the model for catechesis, the *GDC* underscores the gradual, progressive nature of conversion: "Adhering to Jesus Christ, in fact, sets in motion a process of continuing conversion, which lasts for the whole of life" (see RM 46b) (*GDC*, #56; see also 63-69).

Unstated here, but permeating the *GDC*, is the conviction that it is *adult* conversion and discipleship to which our efforts should be directed. Indeed, the first striking thing about the *GDC's* vision of adult formation is the persistence and clarity with which adults are held up as the standard for all catechesis.

This focus is not new, of course, but it is instructive to observe the shifting place given it in Church documents. Vatican II speaks of catechetical instruction for adults almost

offhandedly: "It should be carefully imparted, not only to children and adolescents but . . . even to adults" (*Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church [Christus Dominus, CD]*, #14). The *General Catechetical Directory* (1971) breaks new ground by stating that "catechesis for adults . . . must be considered the chief form of catechesis. All the other forms . . . are in some way oriented to it" (#20). John Paul II reaffirms this view in *On Catechesis in Our Time (Catechesi Tradendae)*, calling adult catechesis "the principal form of catechesis" (#43).

When the *GDC* expresses the same thought, however (see #59), it makes a noteworthy shift of emphasis. Where the 1971 document begins a discussion of age-appropriate catechesis with infants, working up the developmental ladder to adulthood, the *GDC* begins its discussion with adults. This textual pride of place gives significant reinforcement to the

primacy of adult catechesis in the Church's vision and ministry of faith formation. Adult formation, dealing as it does with our "right" and "duty" to "bring to maturity the seed of faith sowed in them by God" (see 1Cor 13:11; Ep 14:13) (*GDC*, #173), can no longer be viewed as an optional luxury.

This shift is encouraging, but resistance to change in priorities remains strong. *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, the U. S. bishops' pastoral plan for adult faith formation, notes that "while most Catholic parishes place a high priority on the faith formation of children and youth, far fewer treat adult faith formation as a priority" (p. 13). This "vision gap" is both a daunting challenge and an opportunity for growth.

A second important facet of the *GDC's* treatment of adult faith formation is its stress on understanding the adult context. The model of the Good Shepherd comes to mind here: "I know mine and mine know me" (John 10:14). All catechesis is essentially conversational (*GDC*, #143). With adults this means taking seriously lived experience (*GDC*, #176), valuing and prizing stories of faith.

Effective leaders must overcome the conviction of many adults that their role in faith formation is essentially passive and their contribution negligible. This requires invitational strategies and structures for dialogue, engaging participants in

From the General Directory for Catechesis

"Adult catechesis concerns person who have a right and a duty to bring to maturity the seed of faith sown in them by God. It is addressed to individuals who are charged to fulfill social responsibilities of various types and to those who are also prey to all kinds of changes and crises, sometimes profound. The faith of adults, therefore, must be continually enlightened, developed and protected, so that it may acquire that Christian wisdom which gives sense, unity, and hope to the many experiences of personal, social, and spiritual life." (*GDC*, #173)



reflection and sharing from experience, not only of extraordinary spiritual moments but also of day-to-day life as well.

The power of such reflection, in dialogue with the wisdom of the Church and the person of Jesus, is transformative, for it opens people to new possibilities for discovering God's presence in their ordinary, workaday lives (see *GDC*, #173). For most people, it is precisely here, in family and work and civic responsibility and commerce and leisure that the fundamental task of proclaiming Christ's Gospel occurs.

Knowing the context of learners means recognizing the rich diversity of adult experience. Some diversity stems from personal and social circumstances: age, marital status, economic condition, education, cultural setting—even in a relatively homogeneous parish the possibilities are endless. And these differences exist within a kind of spiritual diversity, so that in one community we find people with deeply appropriated faith, embodied in sacramental celebration and charitable actions; others as yet untouched by living contact with Christ and his Gospel; and still others in between:

adults who have been baptized but who have not been sufficiently catechized, or have not brought to fulfillment the journey begun at Christian initiation, or who have fallen away from the faith, to such a degree that they may be called 'quasi catechumens.' (CT, #44) (*GDC*, #172)

Further, the *GDC* challenges us to treat with special care those who are in any way marginalized, especially the poor and the aged, whose wisdom and experience should be given particular honor and weight (*GDC*, #196-188).

"One size fits all" does not work. A myriad of methods is required for assisting the development of "living, explicit, and active faith" (CD, #14). Creative approaches, however, work only when joined to clear tasks. The *GDC* lists six for adult formation.

Without the first task, promoting "formation and development of life in the Risen Christ" (*GDC*, #175), none of the others makes sense. Whatever the agenda, the person of Jesus must be

present and accessible, lest our dialogue become abstract and impersonal.

The second task is to educate "toward a correct evaluation of the socio-cultural changes of our societies in the light of faith" (*GDC*, #175). This echoes papal teaching about the need to view the surrounding culture critically, embracing its authentic values while confronting its blind spots.

From this comes the third task: "to clarify current religious and moral questions" (*GDC*, #175). Rather than pose *a priori* questions that adults *should* be asking, effective adult formation helps people to address questions that people really have in the present and to engage in intelligent dialogue with the world around them.

Societal concerns play a role in the fourth task: "to clarify the relationship between temporal action and ecclesial action" (*GDC*, #175). This task is challenging, for it implies that, while distinctions exist between the temporal and ecclesial spheres, there is also an appropriate level of interaction between them. This demands a thorough appropriation of Catholic social teaching, not as an "add on" but as integral to Catholic life.

The fifth task calls to mind the admonition from 1 Peter 3:15 to "always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope." We are, the *GDC* says, "to develop the rational foundations of the faith" (*GDC*, #175) thus avoiding textual fundamentalism on the one hand, and over-subjective personalizing of the tradition on the other.

The final task is "to encourage adults to assume responsibility for the church's mission and to be able to give Christian witness in society" (*GDC*, #175). In the end, this is the task we are all set, to proclaim the Good News of God's love with such power and conviction that as Paul VI says, humankind is transformed "from within . . . making it new" (*On Evangelization in the Modern World* [*Evangelii Nuntiandi*], #18).

Reflection Questions for Individuals and Groups



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

1. What new insights about adult faith formation did you gain from this article?
2. Do most adult Catholics believe that faith growth is lifelong? Why or why not?
3. What challenges would you encounter in your parish for establishing adult catechesis as a priority? What would be some implications if adult catechesis was a priority in your parish?
4. What does it mean to know the context of catechesis for adult learners? What unique challenges does this present to the parish?
5. In looking at the specific tasks of adult catechesis mentioned in *GDC*, #175, which are you doing, which would be do-able, and which would you find most challenging?
6. How does the experience of the Christian initiation of adults, conversion, and biblical stories provide inspiration for how to approach adult catechesis?

The breadth of these tasks reflects an expansive vision of adult formation. While the *GDC* describes as irreplaceable "the ongoing, systematic, catechetical courses which every ecclesial community must provide for all adults" (*GDC*, #176), it throws open the field to many other activities, including retreats, spiritual direction, small Christian communities, Bible study, prayer groups, etc.

In dialogue with Scripture, theological tradition, and the Church's Magisterium, any circumstance or custom in the life of the Church can become a setting for adult formation. Sacramental preparation (in particular, the RCIA and parent programs), liturgical seasons, ministry formation, social or ecclesial rites of passage, community or individual crises, leisure, work, even tragedy and loss—all can be grist for the mill of adult formation, because all can be liminal moments in which life becomes a transparent threshold to God's presence.

The sweeping vision of adult formation presented in the *GDC* invites a kind of Paschal response. There is Good Friday darkness in

its demand for serious re-thinking of long cherished ways of doing things. In many places the struggle to improve catechetical programs for children has been long and hard fought. To add substantive adult formation to already overburdened schedules will likely seem overwhelming to many.

Easter light, however, resides in the possibilities that broader, more intentional efforts for adult formation hold for catechesis across the board.

Rather than enriching adult formation by impoverishing the formation of children, implementing the *GDC*'s vision can become a catalyst for renewing all formational efforts.

Much is already happening. Parishes that might describe themselves as having no adult formation program often provide parent classes, RCIA, ministry training, small communities, retreats, missions, and other resources for enlivening and deepening the faith of adults.

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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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